



Graphic

by [Abby O.](#)

Rating: **PG-13 (mild violence and language)**

Classification: Action story

Spoilers: "Drop Zone," "Touch and Go," & various seventh-season eps

Summary: Written for the 2002 Virtual Season. Lauren Singer was fairly sure she had it all figured out. But an adventurous investigation and a 'force of nature' named Harmon Rabb are about to change it all in the span of three days.

Author's Notes: Okay, pop quiz. Who referred to Harm as a 'force of nature,' and in what ep? All right, that's irrelevant, so here's the part that matters. I know we're not all great fans of the scheming, brown-nosing Lieutenant Singer - believe me, I'm just as suspicious of her as anyone. But for a while, it seemed like TPTB were trying to tell us that there's more to her than meets the eye, so I thought I'd give this a shot. Don't worry - I won't hook her up with Harm or anything. There are limits to my insanity.

Also, for those who haven't read the rest of the 2002 Virtual Season, there are references in here to some events in Nancy Torre's "Downtime," so if there's something you don't understand (like, for instance, the reason Harm's limping), check out the VS for enlightenment.

(P.S. It was Bud, in "The Adversaries." Man, I'm pathetic.)

Disclaimer: I have the right to free speech, the right to vote, and sometimes the right of way. I have a right hand, although I don't use it nearly as much as my left. But I do NOT have any rights to these characters. Sorry.

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1043 EDT

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

Harriet Sims hummed quietly as she moved across the bullpen toward the conference room. As she neared the closed doors, a hand shot out to slow her down. Harriet frowned. "Ma'am?"

Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie shook her head. "You don't want to go in there right now."

"But Commander Rabb asked for these files -- "

"Harriet, trust me. You take those in there, and they'll just end up all over the floor."

"Ma'am, I don't think I understand."

Mac tilted her head toward the doors as two voices sounded from somewhere within, each growing in volume and intensity. A few seconds later, there was the distinctive *thud* of a book hitting the table with force, and Mac smiled sympathetically. "Pre-trial with Chief Hayes.

Guess who's prosecuting."

"I see. How long have they been at it?"

"At least half an hour, but the yelling just started. Sometimes I really have to wonder what goes on in that girl's head. Harm's going to have her ass in a sling by lunch."

"If she doesn't claw his eyes out first," Harriet pointed out grimly.

Both women jumped back as the door banged open. Harm stalked out and headed for his office at a rapid, if limping, pace, followed closely by a flustered but insistent Lieutenant Singer. "Sir, I really feel that we could resolve this if your client were willing to listen to reason..."

"Later, Lieutenant. We've got to go see the admiral in five." His door swung shut before she could protest further, and she shrugged, heading instead for the coffee machine. Mac waited precisely thirty seconds before crossing the bullpen and knocking on her partner's door. The response to her knock was delivered in a decidedly annoyed voice. "I said *later*, Lieut -- "

"So the Hayes case is going well?" she interrupted him calmly, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation.

Harm tried not to grimace as he stretched his leg out, instead fixing her with a look of consternation. "I'm going to kill her, Mac. I swear, if I have to face off with her again, one of us is going home in a body bag."

"If you're looking for sympathy, look elsewhere. You didn't have to sit second chair to her during the whole McBride fiasco, and neither of us had to take all the crap that she gave Harriet during the tribunal." Mac folded her arms. "What's your meeting with the admiral about?"

"No idea. If he wants a report on our progress, he's in for a severe disappointment. Are you busy tonight? I may need someone to vent to after work."

She bit her lip, disappointed about having to say no. She was starting to rely on their occasional evenings together, and on the comfort they took in each other's presence. Although a small voice in the back of her mind still wondered where all of it was leading, it would have been nice to have him to herself again, to leave all this madness behind for a few hours. "I wish I could help, but I've got a stack of EPRs that I've been putting off for two weeks. Raincheck?"

"You bet. As long as I'm still sane." He sighed theatrically and headed for the JAG's office with the demeanor of a condemned man. Mac rolled her eyes and returned to her own office.

Harm and Singer didn't exchange a single word as they filed in and came to attention. Admiral Chegvidden may have noticed the tension, but he gave no sign of it. "Commander, Lieutenant," he greeted briskly. "What's the status of the Hayes case?"

"Sir, we've had a little trouble reaching a settlement," Harm replied carefully, but Singer hurried to jump in.

"Admiral, I believe we could dispose of the case if the commander were more open to an alternative strategy..."

Harm shot her a glare, not entirely surprised at her swift action in her own self-interest. Their commanding officer, however, cut her off. "Save it for Turner and Mattoni -- they'll be taking

over. Something else has come up.”

Singer immediately looked interested. “What is it, sir?”

The admiral handed each of them a file. “Petty Officer First Class Mark Williamson was found dead in his apartment in Norfolk yesterday, apparently from an overdose of prescription pain medication. NCIS has already submitted a preliminary finding of suicide.”

“Then where do we come into it, sir?” Harm inquired.

A.J. leaned back in his chair. “Williamson was a research assistant at Portsmouth Medical, in one of the labs. There’ve been some odd things occurring down there recently, according to the chief of research. Missing project notes, open medication lockers - enough for her to suspect that someone could be trying to get at some sensitive information. If this was self-inflicted, it could still be related to these other events, but especially if it was *not* self-inflicted...”

“I understand, sir,” Harm finished smoothly. “I can start as soon as you’d like.”

“Then you can both leave in the morning.”

Singer straightened up, surprised and pleased to be included. Harm, on the other hand, was just surprised. “Sir, the lieutenant has never handled a murder investigation -- ”

“We don’t know that that’s what this is,” she countered. “Admiral, I can assure you that I can be a great asset to this case.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Lieutenant,” A.J. warned. “Commander Rabb has been doing this a lot longer than you have, so when he says jump, I expect you to ask how high. That’ll be all. Good luck.”

Harm stared directly forward, his frustration tightly checked. “Admiral, may I speak to you on another matter?” A.J. waved a hand, and he waited for Singer to leave before turning back. “Sir, you can’t be serious about this. She knows nothing about investigations, and she’s consistently insubordinate -- ”

“Commander, you’ve worked with aviators, SeALs, and Recon Marines. Are you implying that Lieutenant Singer is too much for you to handle?”

Harm’s eyes narrowed. “Definitely not, sir.”

“Good. I would have been disappointed to hear otherwise.” The JAG leaned forward across the desk. “I know you’d rather have Colonel Mackenzie or Commander Turner, but they’re both working on important cases, and right now I can’t cut two of my senior attorneys loose at the same time. Consider this a test of the lieutenant. I’ll expect a full report on her performance when you wrap this up. I’m still on the fence about her fit-rep, and your opinion will most assuredly be noted. Does that make my reasoning clear enough?”

The commander nodded understanding: at least he wasn’t alone in noting Singer’s shortcomings. Still ... “Sir, with all due respect, this one sounds like it could be difficult. Is this really the best time to be giving Singer a first crack at investigating?”

“Suck it up, Mr. Rabb. She’s all you’ve got.”

He sighed. “Aye, sir.”

No sooner was he out the door than Singer was at his elbow. "Sir, I've got a lot of ideas about this case -- "

"One thing at a time, Lieutenant," Harm broke in, taking brisk strides toward his office. "Be here at seven hundred tomorrow morning. We'll have plenty of time to discuss strategy on the three-hour drive."

The idea of that much time in an enclosed space with his least favorite coworker was decidedly not thrilling, but he waited until he was safely inside his office before pounding his fist into his palm. It wasn't just his imagination, he reasoned: Singer really did have a habit of screwing with his friends. She'd undermined Bud more than once, and although he had no supporting evidence, he was pretty sure she'd set both Mac and Kate up for a fall in the past. But he'd have to get past it and find a way to work with her. He didn't have much choice.

Accepting defeat, he reached for the phone. "Sturgis? When you've got a minute, I need to bring you up to speed on Chief Hayes. I have to take Lieutenant Ambition on a field trip. Don't laugh -- I'm not kidding. I think I'm being punished for something..."

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**1340 EDT**  
**U.S. Naval Medical Center**  
**Portsmouth, Virginia**

Lauren Singer was using all of her formidable willpower to keep from throwing up. The noxious smell of the various chemicals used in the morgue was only part of the problem. She could handle anything that had ever come her way in a courtroom, but she'd never been this close to a dead body before. Of course, there was no way in hell that she'd admit that to the commander.

Harm was studying the late petty officer critically, seemingly unaware of her discomfort. "I don't see it," he commented, picking up one arm and examining the skin. "You found a needle puncture?"

The pathologist leaned in to point out the mark. "It's very high, under his armpit. Trust me, you do this job long enough, you find needle tracks in some really odd places."

"What drugs did you find in his system?"

He handed over a printout. "Zylecal is a pretty new development -- it blocks pain receptors better than morphine. That's the primary substance we found, but there's also some other stuff that we haven't traced yet. It's not heroin or any of the usual suspects."

"So he wasn't a closet junkie. Was the Zylecal administered intravenously?"

"That's the thing. It's only given in pill form. And somebody else might argue with me on this, but I don't think a bottle of Zylecal would cause the precise kind of reaction that killed this guy. I'd say it's more likely that an interaction with this other junk is what actually stopped his heart."

Harm frowned and turned to Lauren, who drew herself up and attempted to look nonchalant. "Does that suggest anything to you, Lieutenant?"

Her mind raced. "Um, that it wasn't suicide after all?"

"Maybe. He could have taken both drugs himself. A hidden needle mark could still be unrelated, and other than that, suicide's plausible. So we're not totally set on either one, are we?"

"No, sir."

"Okay, it's a start. Thanks, Doctor. We'll be in touch." He turned to leave, and by the time they were in the hallway, the overpowering smell of death had faded, allowing her to think clearly again.

"Sir, do you really think it could still have been suicide?"

Harm waited until they were outside the building to answer. "Of course not. Why would Williamson take all that Zylecal if he was going to turn around and shoot up something else?"

"Then why did you say -- "

"Because whatever that as-yet-unidentified drug was, it was something exotic. So there's a good chance it came from the hospital or the labs. Maybe he swiped it himself, and maybe he didn't. But if there's someone in there we can't trust, I'm not going to give them any more information than I absolutely have to."

Even with his limp, he'd gotten most of the way to their car before her shorter legs could catch up. "You already suspect someone on staff?" she asked, somewhat in disbelief. "Isn't that a little paranoid, Commander?"

"I don't think so. And if you'd care to broadcast that fact to the entire Atlantic fleet, feel free to speak a little louder next time."

She knew better than to object to his incessant sarcasm. "Do you always form your opinions this fast?" she asked, climbing into the car.

"It's not an opinion yet. It's a possibility. Put your seatbelt on."

She was tempted to stick her tongue out at him, since he was effectively treating her like a child. But she refrained. She'd never let anything or anyone compromise her sense of order before, and she wasn't about to let him be the first. "So what next, sir?"

"We check out the scene."

...Lauren scribbled a few notes on her PDA, disguising the fact that she felt largely superfluous in this investigation. Harm had exhaustively discussed the position of the body with the NCIS agents, as well as the layout of Williamson's apartment. No fingerprints had been found besides the deceased's own, and nothing appeared to have been tampered with. What else was there to find?

Obviously the commander had no intention of letting her do any of the real work here. He'd been practically ignoring her every time they came across any information, all but sending her to the corner. She was halfway surprised that he hadn't yet asked her to get him a cup of coffee. Lauren was well aware that she wasn't likely to win any popularity contests among the JAG crew, but she'd never understood why the prodigal son of the office was everyone's favorite, either.

Maybe she could make her own opportunities here. As Harm examined the petty officer's medicine cabinet, she turned to the younger of the two NCIS agents and smiled innocently. "So what's your gut feeling here?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, you must have seen about a million crime scenes like this," she drawled, putting just the right amount of schoolgirl admiration into her voice. "You could probably have this thing nailed before we even get started. Don't you wonder if this might have been murder?"

She'd pegged the brash young investigator exactly: the ego-stroking worked like a charm. "Well, once you see your share of homicides, you do get a feel for them," he commented, shrugging not-so-modestly.

"It must be so exciting," she said, looking up at him with wide eyes. "Do you have any suspicions?"

The agent leaned in and spoke conspiratorially. "There's been some talk on the street about a new drug-smuggling ring. These guys have outgrown the usual coke and heroin types -- they're into nastier stuff. Some of our people think they might be dealing in biological weapons. A lab tech might be kinda useful for that sort of thing, you know?"

Lauren nodded, filing the information away in her brain for future use. This was starting to get interesting. Before long, though, she heard Harm call her name and turned to see him waiting at the door.

"If you're finished," he said coolly, "we can call it a day."

"Yes, sir," she replied smoothly, flashing a quick smile at the cocky agent before following the senior officer out. Harm inwardly cursed his luck yet again for getting stuck with her. What the hell had she been trying to pull in there?

"Doing your part to keep up inter-office relations?" he couldn't help remarking as they made their way down the stairs.

"I get my information any way I can, sir," she answered, noting that he seemed to be favoring his injured knee even more now.

"What kind of information did Dick Tracy Junior have to share?"

"Not much, but you never know. Would you like me to drive, sir?"

He fixed her with an icy stare, but managed to keep his cool. "Thank you, Lieutenant, but I can handle it."

The drive to the Norfolk VOQ passed in near silence, as much of their time had. As each of them grabbed their bags out of the trunk, Harm finally said, "We can meet up in the front lobby at 0800 tomorrow morning to figure out our plan of attack for the day. I think I want to talk to some of the other lab personnel."

"If you're up for it, sir, we could discuss the case over dinner at the O-club," she suggested, trying not to sound too eager. She wanted to make an impact on this case, but she didn't want to push her luck.

"I've got some other things I need to work on," he responded, somewhat dismissive. "If you

want to take the car anywhere tonight, just come get the keys from me. 0800 in the lobby, all right?"

Shut out again. She sighed impatiently and nodded. "Aye-aye, sir."

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Harm pushed aside the papers he'd had spread out all over the bed and leaned back, rubbing his eyes. Between Singer, his damn knee aching, and this case, he was close to his breaking point, and it was only their first day. Someone had gone to a fair amount of trouble to make this kid's death look like a suicide, but the pathologist had just faxed him the final toxicology analysis, and the cocktail of chemicals in Williamson's blood didn't look like anything he'd ever seen. He'd spent the better part of three hours online, researching each trace element and what marketed drugs it could be found in, and he'd started the arduous task of going down the list of lab personnel, but he hadn't gotten far. Who else but a member of the laboratory could have put together such a bizarre pharmaceutical concoction?

Eventually, he temporarily gave up and reached for the phone. After a couple of rings, the voice of his true partner answered, and already he felt some of the tension dissolve away. "Hi. It's just me, trying not to go insane down here."

"Listen to you," Mac chastised him with an almost audible smile. "It's like Norfolk turned into the seventh circle of hell or something."

"Come on, Mac, give a guy some sympathy, would you? This doesn't look like it's going to go quickly, and if Singer makes one more smart-mouthed comment, I just might snap." He filled her in on the basics of the case, and they briefly discussed the petty officer's background. "I can't come up with any reason why someone would want him dead. He looked clean."

"Maybe he looked at somebody's girlfriend wrong," she suggested reasonably. "You can't expect to come up with a motive before you even talk to his friends and coworkers."

"I know, I know. I just want this to be over." He rolled onto his back, trying vainly to find a position that wouldn't aggravate his still-healing knee. "Or at the very least, I wish you could ditch your case and come save me. You know I hate doing this kind of thing without you to back me up."

"I'm probably going to be down there tomorrow anyway -- some issue with the local staff judge advocate. I wish I really could come save you," she replied wistfully, grateful for the honesty and familiarity in his voice. "Listen, Harm, about last week -- I didn't say anything before, but ... I'm just glad you're okay. I do worry about you, you know."

"Thanks," he said quietly. "When did we get so comfortable with the touchy-feely stuff?"

"Damn it, flyboy, do you have to ruin every Hallmark moment like that?"

They both laughed a little, but a knock at Harm's door turned his chuckle into a muted curse. "That's probably Singer, looking for the car keys. I'll talk to you later, all right?"

"All right. Take care of yourself."

He climbed to his feet and made his way over to the door, opening it to reveal Lauren Singer as expected. Rather than being dressed to go out, however, she was wearing a T-shirt and jogging shorts. In her hand was a bottle of extra-strength Tylenol. "Thought you might be able to use these, sir."

He raised an eyebrow. "And what brought you to that conclusion?"

"You've been on your feet all day, and I figured you might not have brought any yourself. With all due respect, Commander, you pack like a guy." She smiled, with no apparent motive behind it, and he relaxed a little. Maybe she was trying to make peace.

"You're right, I didn't pack any. Thanks." He took the bottle from her and shook two capsules out into his hand, allowing her into the room. "I've been looking through the toxicology reports, trying to figure out what the hell they shot Williamson up with."

"You got the final analysis?" she asked, frowning slightly. When exactly had he intended to tell her all this? "Any leads?"

"Not really. But the branch of the lab where the victim worked dealt primarily with infectious diseases. They've been researching a lot of Mideast viral strains, trying to put together antigens to counteract the kinds of things our troops have run into in that part of the world. I'm wondering if the combination of drugs found in Williamson's blood was something they mixed up as part of their research."

"That's a good theory, sir," she admitted, "but it doesn't tell us whether the petty officer's death was suicide or murder."

"No, it doesn't. But this might." Harm reached into his duffel and retrieved a small plastic evidence bag, which he tossed to her. She examined the orange pill bottle, surprised. "I found it in Williamson's bathroom cabinet. The label says it's an allergy medication, but I want to get it independently tested for Zylecal, among other things. If this kid thought he was taking his allergy meds and got something else, it might have been enough to knock him out, so that someone else could shoot him up with whatever killed him. Of course, that would mean that the killer had access to the apartment and was extremely good at covering his or her tracks. So there are a lot of assumptions still to be checked out."

It wasn't a particularly strong argument - so far, there was nothing to support it. But Lauren's concerns were a little closer to home. She admired the way the senior officer worked: she always had, and she wanted to use this assignment to learn all she could from him. But he always seemed so damned convinced that no one could do the job better than he could, and she wasn't going to be left in the dust if she could help it.

"Sir," she began carefully, "if you'd called me earlier, I could have helped you with some of this."

He shrugged, taking a seat on the bed. "There wasn't much to go on. The research being done in the labs isn't exactly public information, and we won't be able to talk to anyone down there until tomorrow. I never sleep much on investigations -- no reason for you to pick up my bad habits."

His easygoing manner didn't entirely fool her, and it certainly didn't dissuade her. "With all due respect, sir, I know I can be of help here if you keep me in the loop."

At that, his eyes narrowed. "Lieutenant, as a junior officer and a first-time investigator, you're in whatever loop I decide to put you in. I'm not going to leave you out, but if I say it can wait until morning, it can wait. All right?"

"Yes, sir," she replied frostily, playing her last card as she moved toward the door. "But it might interest you to know that NCIS believes there's a ring of drug dealers trying to get into



bioweapons smuggling.”

Bingo. His head whipped around, and he leaped to his feet, ignoring the twinge of protest from his knee. “And where did you get that little piece of information? The flirt-fest with Dick Tracy Junior?” She only cocked an eyebrow, suspecting that he’d probably used that tactic himself in the past. But if he’d been annoyed before, now he was honestly pissed off. “Did you intend to share that fact with me at some point?”

“I would have told you this evening, if you hadn’t been so eager to get rid of me,” she returned, keeping her voice controlled. “If your information could wait, I assumed mine could as well.”

“I was looking at what appeared to be an isolated homicide. You apparently were clued into something a hell of a lot bigger. You don’t have anywhere near the experience necessary to make that kind of call.”

“How do you expect me to gain any experience if I’m not allowed to do any of the investigative work?”

Harm bit back a groan, trying to get a grip on his frustration. “My responsibility here is to solve this thing, not to make sure you get your ticket punched. The fact is, Lieutenant, after two years, I still don’t know if I can trust you. And so far, you’re not doing anything to change my opinion.”

Lauren bristled at the implication. After all this time, he was still punishing her for that stupid report, wasn’t he? Colonel Mackenzie barely got a slap on the wrist out of it, but now *she* was branded for life? “Can *anybody* change your opinions?”

He threw up his hands, exasperated, and turned away. “God, I wish Mac were here,” he muttered under his breath.

“Oh, I’ll just bet you do, sir,” she fired back before fully thinking it through.

He whirled back. “Excuse me?”

She was losing control of this conversation, but there was no going back now. “I’m sure you and the colonel have a very ... *efficient* working relationship.”

That did it. Harm’s gaze turned to ice as he stalked up to her, his head towering above hers. “Lieutenant,” he said in a low, dangerous voice, “I’ve put up with a lot of insubordination today, but this is the end of the line. If you so much as breathe another word about my *relationship* with Colonel Mackenzie, I can guarantee that you will not be doing any more investigative work -- on this case or any other. Is that clear?”

There was no getting around it: she’d made a huge mistake. She wouldn’t be likely to get any closer to the case now. She’d have to step back and try her best to stay out of his line of fire for a while. “Perfectly, sir.”

“Then we’re done here. 0800 in the lobby. You’re dismissed.”

Lauren executed a perfect about-face, despite being absolutely out of uniform, and left the room. Once the door had closed behind her, Harm let loose with a string of curses that would have made even a hardened Marine blush. He didn’t have the time or the energy to properly deal with Singer here. When they got back to Washington, his report to the admiral would be lengthy and colorful, but right now there were more pressing issues. He had to figure out if a

twenty-seven-year-old petty officer from Indiana had been involved in a biological weapons deal, and if so, he had to find the rest of the parties to the crime.

He considered himself lucky that she'd brought the Tylenol. Based on recent events, it was safe to assume that the headache that was beginning to take hold behind his eyes would probably last a while.

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**1542 EDT**  
**Office of the Chief of Research**  
**Portsmouth Medical**

"This isn't what I wanted to hear, Commander," Captain Annalise Matthews informed him, folding her hands on top of her desk. "Not only do you suspect that one of my people was involved in a deal to sell black-market biotoxins, you suspect that *another* one of my people killed him for it?"

"Not necessarily, ma'am," Harm answered carefully. "But given the security problems you reported, we have to treat this as a real possibility. If someone were attempting to manufacture their own new type of drug, they'd need an extremely thorough knowledge of the materials and procedures. Can you tell us if any of the drugs listed here were reported missing recently?"

She scanned down the list of seven names and marked two with her pen. "Only these two, and not in large amounts. I was beginning to think that we had an addict on staff. Is this what was found in Williamson's tox-screen?"

"Yes, ma'am. The others don't look familiar to you?"

"Of course they look familiar. We work with every drug under the sun here. But most of these could be bought from any one of a dozen pharmaceutical companies. They're nothing special."

"With all due respect, ma'am, someone out there thinks they're something special when used in combination. They were injected in a very small dose into the petty officer's bloodstream and very efficiently stopped his heart."

Matthews sighed. "Point taken. Do what you have to do, Commander. I don't want to lose anyone else."

When he left the chief's office, Lauren was waiting for him in the hall. They'd gone their separate ways for most of the day, interviewing scientists and staff assistants, and although he'd been relieved to be away from her, he'd been reluctant to let her conduct interviews on her own. He could hear Mac's voice in his head, calling him a control freak, but he simply didn't trust the lieutenant to get it right. If she missed something, he'd have to go back and fill in the blanks himself.

"What did the captain have to say, sir?"

"She wasn't thrilled with our theory, but she's giving us the latitude to follow it up. Let's find a corner somewhere and compare notes."

They settled on a bench in the courtyard, out of earshot from any curious passers-by. "According to the lab techs, Williamson was a total loner," Lauren reported matter-of-factly. "The only time anyone ever saw him outside of work was when they went to this bar, the Flag

of the Fleet.”

“Try saying *that* three times fast when you’re drunk,” Harm couldn’t help remarking. Surprisingly, she actually cracked a smile at the comment.

“Anyway, he was in there a lot. One of the techs thought that maybe he had a thing for one of the bartenders, some woman named Kelli. Nobody else knew anything about it, though -- it wasn’t really their favorite hangout. They just remembered that every time they were in there, he was, too.”

“You didn’t say anything about the drugs?”

“No, sir. Just that he O.D’d on some stuff he swiped from the labs. As far as they know, we’re just trying to figure out why he might have killed himself.”

“Good. We’ll keep it that way as long as we can.” He reached into his briefcase and withdrew a file folder. “I called around to get some information on the bioterrorism market these days. The primary buyers are Middle East types, but there are some other players out there as well. The IRA, Basque separatists, even some Serbian extremists are interested. We can’t narrow it down without having a clear link from Williamson to one of these groups.”

Lauren thought for a second, formulating her question carefully before speaking. “Sir, is it possible that the killer isn’t on staff? Could someone else have used Williamson to gain access to sensitive material and then killed him to cover their tracks?”

She half-expected him to shoot down her theory in a millisecond, but he didn’t. “It could be,” he finally responded. “I guess we can’t assume that even Williamson was complicit in anything. But we still have to connect him to something, or we’re back at square one.” After pausing a moment, he glanced over at her with a spark of an idea in his eye. “Maybe we should visit the Flag of the Fleet.”

“Now?”

“No, not now. It’s mid-afternoon. We’ll go tonight, just to check it out. I don’t have any better leads -- do you?”

“No, sir.” She couldn’t quite dampen the flicker of excitement that the suggestion produced. Maybe she wasn’t entirely in the doghouse after all. “Will we be, um, undercover?”

He swallowed the urge to roll his eyes in exasperation. Rookies. Holding onto her leash was like having a nugget RIO on his first damned mission. “Something like that. I wasn’t planning on going in uniform, but I left my fake mustache at home.”

“Right. I just meant -- this is kind of new to me.” She hesitated. “Commander, about my inappropriate comments last night -- ”

“Let’s not rehash it,” he cut her off brusquely. “For the record, I’m including you on this little excursion only because I think I’d stick out if I went alone. So don’t think I forgive and forget that easily.”

So much for that. “Aye, sir. What should I wear?”

“Whatever you’d normally wear for a night off. Just try not to turn too many heads. We’re looking for low-profile here.”

That response surprised her a little: it was almost a compliment, in its own strange way. This was going to be one interesting night.

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2014 EDT

'Flag of the Fleet' Bar and Nightclub  
Norfolk

"Do you think we should really be drinking, sir?" Lauren said doubtfully, eyeing the bottles of beer he'd brought over. "I mean, we're not technically on duty, but..."

Harm was shaking his head even as he handed her one of the bottles. "I wasn't planning on drinking much of this, but if we just sit here all night without at least a drink in hand, we're going to be awfully conspicuous. Just fake it."

She obeyed, raising the bottle to her lips and taking the smallest sip she could manage. "So what's our plan?"

"For now, just relax and follow my lead." He leaned back and draped his arm over the back of the booth, causing her to tense slightly. He wasn't quite touching her, but they were definitely in closer proximity to each other than ever before. She clamped down on the flush of heat that rose to her cheeks and inwardly cursed herself for the reaction. Obviously this charade was all part of the 'blending in' strategy, but as much as she simultaneously respected and resented him, there was no denying that he was incredibly attractive. She'd always scoffed at the female junior officers who whispered dreamily about him in the cafeteria and the ladies' room, believing herself to be above such immature displays. The fact that she was being affected at all by his black civilian attire and his cologne was frustrating.

If he noticed any change in her normally self-assured outlook, he didn't let on. "Wait a few seconds, and then casually glance over toward the bar," he directed, leaning closer to her with a trace of a grin that belied his all-too-serious tone. "The one at the end with the dyed-red hair -- she's the one who gave me our drinks. She happens to be wearing one of those name bracelets that says 'Kelli'. And for God's sake, smile a little. You're a depressing date."

She chose not to respond to that comment right away, turning to scan the bar with an easy, almost bored expression. "Are your dates normally more exciting, Commander?" she shot back calmly, finally offering a tight, close-mouthed smile.

His pleasant demeanor never wavered, but he shook his head. "You really don't have any idea how to work and play well with others, do you?" he asked, sounding vaguely disgusted. "There are some things in this world that require teamwork, you know."

That stung a little, but she didn't dare admit it. "Whatever you say, sir."

"Stop calling me 'sir', Lauren, or there's really no point in trying to pretend we're socializing," he replied easily, his gaze following the motion at the bar. "Hmm. There are a couple of guys in the corner chatting with our friend Kelli now."

"Military types?"

"I'd vote no on the taller one. Too scruffy. The other one - maybe. There's definitely something familiar about him. Anyway, they don't look like they're here for the music. I'd like to get closer, but I don't see a way without ending up on the dance floor."

"So what's stopping us from going onto the dance floor?" she asked without really thinking it through. He lifted an eyebrow and shrugged.

"Other than the fact that I have a reconstructed knee and two left feet, not much." At that, she smiled a little, and he frowned suspiciously. "What?"

"I just didn't expect to hear you admit that there's something you're not good at."

She hadn't meant it to sound as cutting as it did, but explaining that wasn't likely to do much good. In response, he just rolled his eyes and grabbed her arm. "Come on, sunshine. Let's do something useful."

They found a place on the edge of the dance floor, near the bar, where they could comfortably observe the scene without having to really dance. Harm surreptitiously guided her to stand with her back to the wall, and he leaned one arm against it, briefly turning on a full-power grin. Lauren found herself having trouble adjusting to the rapid personality shifts. How did he do that? She knew intellectually that he couldn't stand her and that his focus was solely on those two men at the other end of the bar. But when he looked at her like *that*, like she was the only person in the room, her concentration wavered ... and she wasn't sure whether to admire or despise him for it.

After a moment, he turned fully toward her and spoke in a low voice. "I know I've seen the shorter guy before. Not on this case, but somewhere. If he recognizes me, we might be in some trouble, so I'm going to try not to turn their way again. You're going to have to tell me what you see, all right?"

She swallowed and obeyed. "The taller one's got a piece of paper in his hand," she reported tentatively. "I think he got it from Kelli. The shorter one's punching something into his cell phone."

Harm nodded, keeping his gaze locked on her. "Would you please try to relax? Nothing's wrong. We're just being careful."

Great. Now he was starting to doubt her capabilities. "I'm fine, Commander," she replied tightly.

"I wasn't kidding about ditching the rank, Lauren. Somebody might overhear. I have a name, and you'd better start using it."

While her attention had been focused on him, she'd lost track of her quarry, and was surprised to see that the men had started moving. "Damn. They're headed in this direction."

"Then we'd better look busy."

Without warning, he leaned in and pulled her close, startling the hell out of her. This was his plan? Instinctively, she protested, "Comm -- "

Before she could even get the word out, his mouth came crashing down on hers, and she was momentarily paralyzed with sheer astonishment. As soon as the two men had passed, he broke the contact and hissed angrily into her ear. "Call me 'Commander' or 'sir' one more time, and I'm going to ship you to Diego Garcia in an ammo crate. Get your head in the game. *Now.*"

Her head was spinning. If he could kiss like that with someone he hated, maybe the Rabb legend wasn't so far off after all. Somehow, though, she pulled her remaining wits together and fixed him with a cool smile: for the good of the case, and to prove that she could handle

whatever he could dish out. "You sure know how to have a good time, Harm," she said sweetly.

"That's more like it. Did our friends look this way when they walked by?"

"Only for a second."

"Good. Maybe we can use this time to go have a chat with Kelli." He slid an arm around her waist and started to move toward the young woman at the end of the bar.

"Excuse me," he called, leaning on the counter and flashing that grin. "I was wondering if you could help me out. I'm looking for an old shipmate of mine who used to come in here. Medium height, dark blond hair -- name of Mark Williamson. Have you seen him around lately?"

Kelli paled slightly at the mention of the name, but shrugged. "Sounds familiar, but I don't really keep track of the guys who come in. Maybe you ought to try the Navy directory?"

"Oh, hell, I don't even know if he's still in the Navy. You get a lot of sailors in here?"

She laughed, a little nervously. "This is Norfolk, mister. You can't walk a block without running into a sailor. Didn't you see the name on the sign out front?"

A movement across the room caught Lauren's eye, and she noticed the two men from earlier now returning to the main room. Quickly she tightened her hand around Harm's upper arm and broke in with a saccharine smile. "Come on, hon, forget about finding Mark for a while. We can think of better things to do."

She wondered for a fleeting moment if he would ignore her and continue with his own plan. But for some reason, for that moment, he trusted her. Offering a quick 'thanks' to the bartender, he sauntered away, back toward their original location. "What was that all about?"

"Our friends are back. And they're looking right at you."

Sure enough, the men were eyeing him suspiciously and starting over toward Kelli. It probably wouldn't be long before she told them what he'd been asking about. Harm cursed under his breath. "Okay, we're done for the night. I say we try for the back door -- it's closer. Don't look over at them again. Just stick to my six and don't get lost in the crowd."

They worked their way toward the rear exit as quickly as possible without attracting more attention, but the two men had apparently come with reinforcements. Another pair of men, more intimidating than their colleagues, appeared out of the back hallway and began to follow them. Harm picked up his pace and led them out into the alley, ducking behind a garbage dumpster and tossing her the car keys.

"Go around the long way and double-time it back to the car. I'm going to take the direct route, and hopefully take the goon squad with me. If anybody gets too close to you, don't wait around. I'll find my own way back."

"Is that such a great idea?" she asked dubiously.

"Maybe not, but it's an order. Go."

"Aye-aye," she muttered, wondering how he'd managed to live this long with such an attitude. They went their separate ways, and for a while, she didn't hear any footsteps behind her. Maybe it had worked. Then again, the definition of success for this plan involved her senior

officer acting as bait, and the possible outcomes of that scenario weren't altogether attractive.

She started to relax when she reached the car, parked a block away. Unfortunately, her timing wasn't very well honed, and she didn't see the shadow approaching from behind until it was too late.

One powerful arm pinned her arms to her sides, and the other held a rag over her nose and mouth. The sharp, stinging smell almost gagged her, and she inhaled before she could stop herself. Was this what chloroform felt like?

As a gray haze invaded her consciousness, Lauren Singer allowed herself to admit for the first time that she was well and truly in over her head.

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### Unknown time and location

Slowly, she began to be aware of her surroundings: a cold, hard floor and a damp, musty smell in the air. Lauren pushed her eyes open and was immediately assaulted by a dizzying headache. "Oww," she groaned, noticing for the first time that she wasn't alone.

Harm was sitting beside her, studying her with a mixture of concern and resignation. "Welcome back," he offered tiredly. "You okay?"

Disoriented and more than a little shaken, she didn't respond. He reached down to help her sit up against the wall, and she looked around at the small concrete room they occupied. "I don't know where we are," he answered before she could ask. "A warehouse, or something. It's only been an hour or so, so we're probably still in Norfolk. Just take it easy for a while, all right?"

She nodded gingerly, attempting to avoid generating any more pain. "What the hell happened?"

His expression was apologetic as he shrugged. "Maybe we won't split up next time," he suggested.

At that point, she began to realize that he looked about as good as she felt. His shirt was torn in one sleeve, and a couple of buttons were missing. His face was streaked with dirt and... "Commander, you're bleeding."

He touched the bruised cut at his temple and rolled his eyes ruefully. "Yeah, well, they used a different tactic on me. I think I have a reputation for not working and playing well with others."

"So that guy did recognize you?"

"Must have. Ironically, after they knocked me on the head, I remembered where I'd seen him. He's a security officer -- when I ran into him, he was the master-at-arms on the USS Pierce. Master Chief Rollins. It was a couple of years and about a million investigations ago, but he must have connected me with JAG as soon as he saw me. I ought to know better by now."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time." She laughed bitterly, the bleakness of their current situation beginning to take hold. They were trapped in some unknown place, because of some unknown crime, and they had no real options except to follow their captors' rules. Whatever they were.

Harm noticed the tension in her frame and decided to speak up. "Lieutenant?" When he saw the tears that she was trying desperately to hold back, his features softened, and he reached out a hand to her. "Hey, hey. Look, it's okay to be scared."

She jerked away, embarrassed at her reaction and angry that he felt she needed his comfort. "I didn't say I was scared."

"You're not scared? Why the hell not? I am."

"Respectfully, sir, spare me the bonding moment. You've been in plenty of these kinds of situations before, so there's no point in trying to convince me that we're in the same boat here."

"Hey, everybody's luck runs out sometime. Even mine." He leaned back against the other wall. "Believe me, nobody's more aware of that than me these days."

"You sure know how to cheer a girl up," she countered sarcastically, not meeting his gaze.

"I didn't say I was going to let it happen today."

The door of their makeshift cell swung open, and both officers squinted in the sudden light. Master Chief Rollins stood in the doorway, flanked by two of the men from earlier. He tossed their wallets on the floor in front of them and stared both of them up and down for a moment, his gaze lingering longer on Lauren. "I don't think we've met, Lieutenant, but you made a big mistake hooking up with this guy. How's your head, Commander?" he asked unkindly, a faint smirk twisting his features.

Harm made a noncommittal noise, a measure of defiance creeping into his voice. "You hit like a girl, Rollins."

"Careful, Rabb. Your little friend here might get offended and call the harassment hotline."

He shrugged. "Okay, you hit like a zoomie."

Rollins laughed, a deep, throaty sound. "That's right, you've always got an answer to everything, don't you? Let me clue you in on something, *sir*. If you'd had all the answers eighteen months ago, you wouldn't have let me off with just a formal reprimand."

"So you really were dealing back then? You didn't get into the fight because of a woman?"

"Oh, a woman was definitely involved. But Petty Officer Carroll was more pissed off about me raising prices on him than about me taking Shannon out on liberty."

"And now you're branching out into harder stuff?"

"Well, it pays a hell of a lot better." The master chief folded his arms over his chest. "I've got an idea. Why don't you tell me how much you two have figured out, and if you're good, I'll fill in the blanks for you?"

"Why would you want to do that?" The words were out of Lauren's mouth before she'd even had a chance to think them through. In return, Rollins offered a dismissive gesture.

"Because it might be fun, and because you won't have a chance to tell anyone." The implication rattled her: until this point, she'd been able to hope that these people might have



some reason to keep them alive. Rollins noticed the reaction and rolled his eyes. "Come on, Lieutenant. You didn't really think we'd just turn you loose after we went to all this trouble, did you? This is big business here. Having a couple of JAGs running around really messes up our day, you know?"

"We don't know much, Rollins," Harm broke in, temporarily rescuing Lauren from the man's sneering gaze. "But I can guess at a few things. You've been getting supplies from the labs and from mail-order chemical companies, and information about the drugs' effects from Williamson. He probably had an attack of conscience and threatened to turn you in, so you got rid of him. But I'm surprised that you've only been swiping the counteragents, not the actual viruses. What kind of a weapon can you make from a cure?"

"You're right. You don't know much. Williamson thought he was some kind of Robin Hood. He had it bad for Kelli. We had her convince him that the government was denying medical treatment to poor little sick kids in Africa, so he agreed to 'liberate' some supplies for us. He helped conduct experiments, mixing and matching some things, but when he figured out what we were really trying to create, he freaked out, and he wouldn't stay quiet for love or money. So we used his own work on him."

"What was his work?"

Rollins tilted his head toward one of the other men. "Tell 'em, brainiac. This ain't my department."

The man answered matter-of-factly. "That lab was working on an antidote to this chemical agent the Iraqis cooked up a few years back. It causes seizures so bad that the victims tend to snap their own necks before anybody can get to them. The counteragent works on the nervous system, slowing transmission of the conflicting electrical signals. We figured that anything that could paralyze nerves could be pretty useful. So we started trying to punch it up, make it stronger and faster."

"And this uber-drug, you're going to sell it as a weapon?"

"You got it. You wouldn't believe how many interested buyers are out there right now. The world is unstable as hell, and everybody wants a little insurance policy." Rollins cocked an eyebrow, looking Lauren up and down, and it took all of her willpower not to flinch. "Thing is, Williamson was our only test case, and we had to use a couple different things on him to make it look convincing. We could sure use another guinea pig. It's awfully convenient that you two happened along."

Lauren focused her gaze on her superior officer: his carefully-enforced calm was the only thing keeping her sane. Harm looked almost unimpressed. "That's your plan? How do you propose to make our deaths look 'convincing'?"

"That's my problem, not yours."

Inexplicably, Harm turned to her at the moment, a strange mix of compassion and determination in his eyes. "It's okay, Lauren," he reassured her in a low voice. "These bastards won't lay a finger on you."

She just stared back at him, not comprehending. What kind of stupid, macho thing to say was that? Was she really projecting her fears that much? Or was he trying to tell her something? "Sir," she began, unable to control the quaver in her voice, "I wish I could believe you."

Rollins looked from one to the other, sensing an almost arrogant demeanor radiating from the

commander, and jerked a thumb toward the door. "Come on, Rabb. I think I might enjoy wiping that smug look off your face. Let's talk."

Harm stood up and immediately stumbled, falling to one knee next to Lauren. "Okay, maybe you do hit harder than a zoomie," he amended with a rueful smile, putting a hand to his aching head. Straightening, he followed the other men, glancing back toward her for a brief second. "You know, Lieutenant, I really am starting to wish Mac were here."

Then, quickly, he was gone, and the door slammed shut with a metallic thud. Lauren scrubbed a few fearful tears from her eyes and desperately tried to figure out what had just happened. She shifted her legs slightly, and her knee came into contact with something lying on the floor, near where Harm had just stumbled. In the dim light, it took her a moment to realize that it was his cell phone, one of those funky new models that was hardly bigger than a credit card. Either Rollins's goons were lousy at searching their captives, or he'd been hiding this in some place that she really didn't want to know about. Right now, all that mattered was that they had a glimmer of a chance. She couldn't help being a little impressed. So he'd fallen on purpose. Harmon Rabb was far sneakier than she'd realized.

She inhaled a deep, shaky breath and turned the phone on. That comment about Colonel Mackenzie had seemed awfully out of place. Was he trying to tell her who to call for help? It wasn't as if 911 would do any good -- they didn't know where they were. Scanning the memory list, she pressed the buttons and prayed fervently for a savior.

"Hi, this is Sarah. I'm not home right now..."

Damn. She hit 'end' and tried the colonel's cell phone next. Another message. This time, Lauren waited impatiently for the beep and started talking at a rapid-fire pace. "Colonel, this is Lieutenant Singer. The commander and I are in serious trouble down here. We've been taken prisoner, and we don't know where we are, but it's probably a warehouse somewhere in Norfolk ... There's a Master Chief Rollins involved, and he's going to kill us both if we don't find a way out of here ... I don't know what to do -- they just took Commander Rabb, and I don't know how much time we've got -- "

Another beep signaled the end of the available recording time, and she cursed. That hadn't helped much. What could Colonel Mackenzie really do, anyway? Send a team of Marines in to scour the city for them? Maybe if she could actually get her on the line, they could get the cell phone's signal traced back through the relay stations -- at least they'd have an idea where to start looking. Since no other options readily presented themselves, she continued trying to call the colonel every few minutes. Engrossed in the dogged pursuit, she didn't hear the door opening again until it was too late for her to hide the phone from view.

"What've you got there, Lieutenant?" One of the men grabbed her arm and wrenched the phone from her grip, shoving her roughly back to the wall. "Sneaky little bitch. I don't suppose you got through to anyone, did you?"

"I don't know where we are, asshole," she spat back at him. "Who the hell would I call?" His response was a backhanded slap across her face, sending her sprawling.

"Rollins! We'd better think about changing locations for a while..."

His voice faded as he disappeared through the doorway, and after a moment, Harm was shoved back inside, the door swinging shut behind him. He glanced over at Lauren, holding one hand to her stinging cheek. "They hit you?"

"Not as hard as Lieutenant Sims did," she replied wearily, disappointed and frustrated with

herself for letting them discover the phone. Harm lifted an eyebrow, and despite their dire circumstances, there was a hint of amusement in his voice.

"So it really was her, huh?" She didn't reply, and he pressed harder. "Spill it, Lieutenant. What in God's name did you do to get Harriet mad enough to hit you?"

She tensed, not thrilled about having to answer, but at this point it all seemed unimportant. "I delivered the news to the admiral that you and the colonel were unaccounted for in Afghanistan. She seemed to think I wasn't upset enough that our colleagues were missing."

"You didn't get up on a table and dance the Macarena or anything, did you?"

Lauren glared at him, not understanding how he could be so glib. "Is that really what you think of me, sir? That I'd want my superiors dead just so they'd be out of my way?"

"Never mind. Did you get through to Mac?"

"I left a message on her cell phone. She wasn't at home."

"She wouldn't be. Unless plans changed, she's down here, on another case. I'm glad you picked up on the suggestion to try her first, but I wonder why her cell wasn't on. Who else did you try?"

She looked back at him blankly. "Who else should I have tried?"

"Gee, I don't know, Lieutenant. NCIS, Norfolk police, anybody. You're saying you didn't call anyone but Mac?"

He was keeping his impatience in check, but she already felt like an idiot for not trying harder. "What could I have told them?" she asked unsteadily. "I don't know where we are -- "

"Tell them anything. That we were taken from outside the bar, that we have to be close to the water..." When she looked surprised, he threw up his hands. "For Christ's sake. Don't tell me you haven't noticed the fog horns, the gulls, the saltwater smell?"

"I, ah, haven't spent much time at sea..."

"You need to learn to pay attention to your surroundings, Lieutenant."

"Well, with all due respect, sir, your pearls of wisdom aren't going to help much if we don't get out of here," she snapped back, and for the first time since this wretched night began, his eyes darkened to an angry gray.

"Listen up, sailor. I don't care how much you think our situation sucks. You're still talking to a senior officer. That oh-so-polite tone of voice and that 'with all due respect' line haven't fooled anybody for a long time. Even if you hate my guts, the cold, hard truth is that I earned my three stripes, so you're going to have to lock it up and give me some respect."

"You clearly don't have any respect for me," she returned sharply, not backing down. "What was all that condescending crap earlier? 'Don't worry, I won't let them hurt you', or whatever? What do you think I am, a twelve-year-old?"

"There was a reason I said that," Harm fired back. "It's to our advantage for them to underestimate you. Rollins already knows something about me, but if he doesn't see you as a threat, he might leave you alone for a while."

"What good does that do? Why is it so important that they see you as more of a threat than me? Because I'm a woman?"

"Yes, damn it! At least partly," he amended quickly, as she opened her mouth for a heated protest. "It's because I have close to a hundred pounds on you, and they can only have so much of their wonder-drug to go around. Maybe it won't affect me as much as it would you. You knew that's what they were going to do, didn't you?"

With a jolt of shock, she understood. "That's why they took you just now," she whispered, her fury dissipating. "You knew they were going to use one of us, and you wanted to make sure they gave it to you and not me."

In response, he pushed up his sleeve and showed her the needle's mark. "We've got a bit of a time limit now," he said quietly.

Lauren forced herself not to react visibly to this new revelation. After all their contempt for one another, he might very well have just bought her life with his own. "What's going to happen to you?" she whispered.

"They seemed to think I'll start to lose feeling in my arms and legs before too long. I don't think they really know how effective it is."

"Could it be -- fatal?"

"That's what they're hoping. If it paralyzes all the nerves, including cardiopulmonary ones ... yeah, probably. So you can see why I'd rather not hang around here for long." Harm studied the thick metal door for a moment, avoiding her horrified gaze. "I don't think we can do much about this door, and I don't see any other access. We might have to wait until somebody comes back, and then try to make a break for it. The sooner the better."

Still trying to grasp the magnitude of their predicament, it took her a while to respond. "The guy that took the phone - he said something about changing locations. If they think I got through to someone with any kind of information on where we are, they might try to move us soon."

"That might give us the kind of opportunity we need. How's your self-defense?"

"I-I've taken a couple of karate classes, but I've never had to use it on anyone."

"Well, deception is your best friend. Let 'em think you're helpless right up until the point you hit 'em in the face. Disarm anybody with a weapon as fast as possible. We've only seen four or five guys so far -- hopefully there aren't too many more out there." She was staring at the wall with a strange expression that he couldn't quite read. "Lieutenant ... Lauren? What's up?"

She looked up at him, troubled. "You protected me," she stated, disbelief in her voice. "You let them do God-knows-what to you, in the hope that they'd spare me. And you don't even like me."

"We don't have to like the people we serve with. We wear the same uniform: that's all that matters." He watched her, amazed by how little she seemed to understand. "Lauren, if we couldn't depend on anyone we personally disliked, you can be assured that the Navy would be missing a lot of aviators by now. I wanted to drop-kick half the guys in my last squadron, but sometimes you can't choose who you fight alongside. You have to be able to put differences aside and focus on the common goal. You can't be loyal to the principles without being loyal to

each other. Otherwise, what's the point?"

Somehow, from the confusion in her eyes, he could tell that she didn't really have a grasp on the concept of loyalty. It surprised him even more to discover that his own reaction was one of pity. What kind of a life had she led to make her so detached from the world?

"How is it that you've managed to get this far without figuring that out?"

She jerked upright, defenses immediately in place. "You're going to analyze me now?"

"Deal with it. You know what I'm talking about. It's obvious that you don't get along with the majority of the staff."

"Do you think I don't realize that, sir? I'm well aware that I'm the single most reviled person at JAG. You're not doing me any favors by pointing that out."

"I'm not finished. What I was going to say was that I could almost understand this better if I thought you were a truly horrible person -- that you had no respect for the rules of the Navy, or that you honestly wanted to hurt people. But that's not the case, is it? You don't go out looking for a fight. You just take every advantage you can find, and you want to get to the top no matter who you step on along the way. Doesn't it ever enter your mind that you might get a lot farther if you actually tried to work *with* people, rather than against them?"

She was silent for a long moment, staring into the floor with piercing eyes. "I don't rely on other people to get what I want," she said with a quiet yet fierce determination. "I've never been able to rely on a single person in my life for help, so I really don't see the point in starting now."

"Is that it?" he asked, leaning forward. "Is that really the reason?"

"What do you want to hear from me, Commander?" she demanded. "What would I have to say to make you understand the way I am? Do you want to know how much I hated my life growing up? Fine. I had parents who didn't want me but weren't bright enough to give me to someone else. We weren't hurting, but my father practically lived at his job, and my mother was one of those people who thinks they're a social elite but doesn't realize they're just a joke to the rest of the world. I never got a thing from them besides room and board. They didn't even notice I was there most of the time, and when they did, it was only to complain about how I made them miserable. I was fifteen before I even realized that there were kids out there whose parents actually cared about them. Nobody at school paid any attention -- they didn't see how there could be any problem, since we had money. Well, my parents had money, but I sure as hell didn't. I had to get a part-time job to pay for calculus tutoring in high school, because they thought it was a waste of time for someone as obviously stupid as me. They didn't see how I could possibly want to be something more than what they were."

She met his gaze for a moment, then looked away. "I didn't join the Navy to be a lawyer. I joined because it was the only way I was going to get to college, and because I wanted to succeed at something, whatever it was. And I'm doing it, regardless of what you may think of my methods. But I'd be surprised if anyone in my family even knows what rank I hold. I've had to fight for everything I've ever gotten, sir. I thought if anyone were to understand that, it would be you."

Harm wasn't quite sure how to respond. "What do you mean?"

"You wanted to be like your father, but he wasn't there when you needed him. Your mother went off and married some rich corporate type, and I can't imagine that they were all that

supportive when you decided to try for the Academy.”

“You think that makes us the same? Maybe I didn’t have a letter-perfect childhood, but I do my damndest to keep from using that as an excuse for anything.” Surprised, he shook his head. “Is that why you never did anything to specifically undermine me? You thought I was some sort of kindred spirit?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not the one you should be trying to identify with. My mother always made sure I knew that she loved me, and my stepfather put up with far more resentment from me than he deserved. But there are other people we know that weren’t so lucky, and you’ve done plenty to make them miserable.”

“Who -- ”

“Bud Roberts, for one. His father used to beat on him and Mikey all the time. It got so bad that Bud would automatically take the blame for anything that pissed the master chief off, just so his little brother wouldn’t get hit any more. Colonel Mackenzie’s father was a raging alcoholic who abused his wife so badly that she eventually got on a bus and just left. Mac was thirteen at the time, and she was alone with him until she finally ran away, too. There are worse things than simply being neglected.”

Lauren stared at him, stunned. “I didn’t know,” she said softly. “They both seemed so normal, and -- happy...”

“It never occurred to you to find out,” he countered, without malice. “And they are happy. Primarily because they’ve tried to move past that part of their lives. I’m sure it wasn’t easy, but they found a way to trust other people, and I think you’ll be happier if you find a way to do that, too. You can’t tell me that you go home at night and feel good about the things you’ve done.”

For the first time, he caught a flicker of remorse in her expression. But there was something else there, as well: a trace of hurt. Not the righteous indignation that she often projected, but real pain. “I have a feeling that I didn’t do all of the awful things you suspect of me,” she stated, lifting her chin firmly.

Harm watched her for a moment, then said honestly, “Lauren, if you tell me right here and now that you didn’t put that classified report in Colonel Mackenzie’s car all those months ago, I’ll believe you.”

She sighed, and as her shoulders slumped, she began to look surprisingly young. “I can’t do that, sir,” she replied in a small voice. “I did put it there. But I only wanted to win the case. I thought we could get the relevant testimony excluded...” She trailed off. “I guess that doesn’t matter much anymore. I didn’t report Commander Pike’s harassment charge to the press, though. I did overhear you talking to her, but whoever told the Post didn’t hear it from me. That much I’ll swear to.”

“All right. I’ll accept that. But someday you’re going to have to trust someone other than yourself.”

“Based on recent events, sir, I’m ready to put in a vote for today.”

“Good point.” He winced momentarily, and the conversation temporarily fell by the wayside.

"What is it? Your knee?"

He shook his head slowly. "Can't feel the knee. My head's just reminding me that it doesn't like meeting up with the sidewalk." There was a brief pause as he realized what he'd just said, and he experimentally attempted to flex his legs. They didn't respond to his commands, and there was frighteningly little sensation left. "Well, the wonder drug works fast," he offered with a shaky, humorless laugh.

He could see the fear in her eyes, and despite his own growing apprehension, he forced himself to speak with confidence. "Don't you give up on us yet. Mac's going to get that message, and she's going to tear the coast to shreds until she finds this place. You really don't want to get between her and a friend in trouble."

"If she's anything like you in that regard, I can imagine." Lauren chewed on her lower lip, debating whether or not to ask him for a measure of honesty in return. Finally, she decided that it couldn't really hurt her at this point. "Sir, I know how out of line I was to say what I did about you and the colonel ... but was I really that far off?"

He met her gaze without flinching, but didn't entirely answer the question. "Nobody's ever been able to put a label on what Mac and I are to each other," he replied finally. "Not even us. But she won't let me down. I can promise you that."

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**2251 EDT**  
**Visiting Officers' Quarters**  
**Norfolk Naval Station**

"Hi, I'm looking for a colleague of mine -- Commander Harmon Rabb. Can you tell me what room he's in?"

The young man at the front desk scanned his computer screen and replied dutifully. "Room 304, ma'am."

"Thanks." Mac headed for the stairs, wondering why he hadn't called her yet this evening. He'd known she was coming into town, but she hadn't heard from him all day. Idly she wondered if he and Singer had come to blows yet, and if so, which one had struck first. Probably Singer. Harm had just enough of a chauvinistic streak to shy away from hitting a woman.

There was no answer at his room, and she frowned. It was late, and she couldn't imagine him spending any more time with the infuriating lieutenant than absolutely necessary. She felt around in her purse for her cell phone, and swore faintly upon seeing the 'low battery' light. *Figures*. He'd probably left four messages already.

She took the stairs two at a time up to her own room and plugged in the phone charger, noting the message signal. Two buttons later, an unexpected voice filtered through the small speaker. "Colonel, this is Lieutenant Singer..."

As she listened, Mac grew tenser by the second. She forced herself to listen critically to the message, trying to glean any scrap of information she could from it. Unfortunately, there was precious little to go on. The time stamp was 9:44 p.m. -- only an hour ago. Immediately she dove for the room phone and called base information. "I need the security division. Yes, the

emergency number. Does this not sound urgent enough for you? ... This is Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie, JAG Corps. I have reason to believe my colleagues are being held captive by Navy personnel somewhere in the city. I need a team to meet me outside the VOQ in ten minutes, and I need someone to look up the current billet of a master chief named Rollins..."

After retrieving her sidearm and snapping the holster to her belt, she skidded back down the stairs and struggled with the lock on Harm's door. When all this was over, she'd have to get him to teach her his lock-picking skills. Giving up, she braced herself and kicked at the lock, causing the door to give way with a loud crack. Without stopping to wonder about how her partner might get charged for this particular incident, she scanned the room for any clue to where they might have gone. The phone book was open to a page of bars and restaurants, with a rough circle drawn around one name. Mac immediately tore out the page and located Harm's suitcase, reaching into the correct pocket on the first try and pulling out his sidearm as well. *I know you too well, flyboy*, she thought wryly.

On her way out, a housekeeper wandered by, shocked to see the door partially off its hinges. "Better get maintenance up here to fix that," Mac offered matter-of-factly, not breaking stride. The woman just stared after her until she disappeared through the far door. This was going to be a long, long night.

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### Unknown location

"You know who used to have a severe crush on you?"

Lauren glanced up, caught off-guard. "I thought we'd just established that no one even likes me."

"Apparently that's not entirely true."

"Who was it? Tiner?"

Harm snorted derisively, his inclination to maintain politeness fading along with the feeling in his extremities. "Tiner instinctively goes on an aspirin hunt whenever you round the corner."

"Who, then?"

"My little brother."

She just blinked at him, wondering whether or not he was kidding. "Your brother Sergei?"

"Did I pick up another Russian half-brother somewhere? Yes, Sergei. After you stopped by my apartment that one time, he asked about you every couple days for a good two months."

Her shock was immediately put aside as she realized what the senior officer had just said. So he knew she'd been in his apartment. "I, ah..."

"Did you think he wouldn't tell me? I just couldn't figure out what you'd be looking for -- either in my mail or in my bedroom."

*Leverage*, she almost replied, but that level of honesty wasn't quite within her grasp yet. "I wasn't really looking for anything," she claimed, but his skeptical expression didn't change. "Fortunately, I didn't find anything, either."



"Whatever. The next day, Sergei went through my hard drive and my Rolodex just to find out your first name." He smiled a little at the memory of his brother's youthful enthusiasm, and she couldn't help following suit.

"He probably just thought I'd be the most painless way to a green card."

Harm smirked. "Doubt it. Besides, who knows how his mind works? Last week he asked out my nurse at Bethesda, and we all know how that turned out." They fell silent as a muffled sound filtered through from beyond the door. Someone was coming toward them. Maybe this was their chance? "If they take us outside, don't make a move until you're actually out of the building," he directed in a low voice. "Unless they try to cuff us or something. Then you might as well go for it."

She nodded tensely, noting his pallor with a twinge of fear. "Are you going to be okay?"

In truth, he didn't know the answer to that. The numbness that was creeping through his body was scaring the hell out of him. It wasn't just his legs anymore: even breathing was beginning to require effort, and he seriously doubted that he'd be able to put up much of a fight if that's what it all came down to. But if she tried to help him, it would slow her own escape, and these guys obviously didn't mess around. "Sure," he said brusquely. "But if we get split up, don't wait around. Go as far and as fast as you can."

"But if you -- "

"Don't make me turn it into an order," he warned. "If neither of us makes it out, the whole thing's wasted. I can take care of myself. Just go."

The door banged open then, and Rollins hauled Lauren to her feet with a rough jerk. "Come on, kids. Break time. How you doing, Commander?"

"Peachy," Harm grumbled, attempting to stand and failing. One of the other men seized his arm and pulled him upright, all but dragging him along the dim corridor after the others. Harm used the opportunity to study their captors' weapons. Each had a handgun of some type, holstered at the shoulder or tucked into a belt. One man at the end of the hall carried a high-powered rifle: that would make their attempted jailbreak a little more difficult.

"We're just going for a little ride," Rollins informed them when they reached a set of double doors. "Just in case any of your friends come snooping around."

There was a passenger van waiting outside, and three of Rollins's associates were loading their equipment into the back. For the first time, the officers had a faint idea of where they were: back on post at Norfolk Naval Station, in one of the disposition warehouses. One of their captors produced a set of handcuffs, and Harm decided it was now or never. He allowed himself to stagger, falling against the man who'd been supporting him, and reached for the weapon even as he fell. By the time they'd both hit the ground, the gun was in his weakened grip, and he fired one shot into the man's leg.

In response, another two or three shots sounded from somewhere beyond the warehouse. "Security! Drop 'em!" yelled a voice, and Rollins's men instantly panicked. They started shooting wildly, ducking behind the van and various crates of equipment and leaving their hostages a chance to make their break.

Harm stumbled as best he could toward a large metal container car and slid down against it, trying to force himself to concentrate through the clouds that seemed to be invading his mind. Base security? Thank God for happy coincidences. Unless...

"Don't shoot, I come in peace." Mac dropped down beside him, putting another clip in her own weapon. "I brought you your own sidearm, but it looks like you don't need it."

"Give it to Singer," he managed to reply faintly, hoping he looked appropriately grateful. "If you can find her. How did you --?"

"Rollins is assigned to Property Dispo, so we figured we'd try this end of town first. Didn't mean for it to turn into the shootout at O.K. Corral." She studied her partner with a frown: he was paler than she'd seen him in a long time, and even the slightest movements appeared difficult for him. "Are you all right?"

"No," he answered honestly, frightening her even more. "They synthesized a neurotoxin ... that's what all this is about..."

"Oh, God," she breathed. "Is there an antidote?"

"You'd have to ask Rollins." Harm met her gaze amid the sharp cracks of gunfire. "Seriously, Mac. Go find Singer. She's unarmed, and she's not used to this kind of thing."

"You swear to me that you're going to be okay on your own?" He nodded weakly, and despite every fiber of her soul screaming at her to stay with him, she squeezed his hand once and ducked behind a row of crates toward Singer's last known heading. Harm watched her go, then tried to focus on the van. Three men had already been hit, but the bullets continued to rain down from all sides. The sounds were dimming in his mind, though -- everything seemed to be fading. He barely noticed when the gun slipped out of his faltering hands.

Lauren had taken cover behind a dumpster and was desperately trying to slow her racing heart. What the hell could she do now, other than keep low and wait for the shooting to stop? After a moment, she spotted a figure making its way toward her, and she edged herself back into a dark corner, hoping it wasn't one of Rollins's goons --

"Relax, Lieutenant. It's just me." Colonel Mackenzie crouched down next to her and held out a service pistol. "You ordered a jailbreak?"

Lauren sagged against the wall in relief. "Colonel, I can honestly say that I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

"You're welcome. They can't win this one. There are at least twelve Marines and a few NCIS agents surrounding the area. We just have to be patient and wait for them to either wise up or run out of bullets." Mac barely flinched as a shot zinged into the bricks above their heads. "You should've stayed with Commander Rabb," she continued impassively, still scanning the open alley for targets. The younger woman blinked, disoriented and surprised.

"He said not to wait for him. He said it was more important that at least one of us got out."

"I don't care what he said. We don't leave people behind, remember? Tell me you've at least heard that somewhere before."

Lauren just looked back at her helplessly. "I thought he'd be okay..."

"Well, he's not!" Mac snapped impatiently, fear for her friend overtaking her usual calm demeanor. "He needs help, and if this doesn't end soon, you might have one less person between you and the admiral's job. So help me out and tell me which one of those bastards is Rollins."

She swallowed hard and pointed an unsteady finger at one of the three men still firing. "That one."

"All right. We might need him." Mac took careful aim and put a bullet directly into the chief's right shoulder, dropping him to the ground with an incapacitating but not serious wound. There was a pause in the shooting, as the remaining criminals hesitated over their next move, and the Marine security team took the opportunity to move in, rifles trained. Seeing no alternative, the men finally laid their weapons on the ground and allowed themselves to be taken.

Mac stepped out from behind the dumpster, heading toward the injured Rollins with a determined gleam in her dark eyes. Lauren started to follow, but halted when she caught sight of a motionless figure slumped against a container car, a sidearm lying forgotten next to his limp hand. "Oh, God," she whispered, all the color rushing away from her face. "Colonel Mackenzie!"

She rushed over to Harm's side, Mac right on her heels. The colonel recovered more quickly from her initial shock and dropped to her knees, expertly locating her partner's thready pulse. "Harm, this isn't funny," she rebuked him tensely, laying his body flat on the pavement and searching desperately for any sign that he was able to draw breath on his own. "Harmon Rabb, damn you, breathe!"

As she tilted his head back and lowered her lips to his, breathing life into him, Lauren just watched, paralyzed by a deluge of unfamiliar emotions. She'd always fought so hard to maintain control of her surroundings, but the chaos around her at that moment struck at the very heart of her defenses, and she couldn't forestall the tears that slipped from her eyes. That might have been her lying there, if it weren't for his quick action to protect her. Much of her outlook on life had been shaken to the core tonight, and she simply didn't know how to react.

"Lieutenant!" Mac shouted between breaths. "Get help!"

Jarred out of her thoughts, she hurried to where the security team was rounding up the uninjured shooters and patching up the wounded ones. The corpsman only partially understood her gasping, stuttering directive, but he immediately followed her and took over for the colonel with an oxygen mask.

"Do you know what exactly they gave him, ma'am?"

With a start, Lauren realized he was talking to her, and she frantically tried to recall the complicated names of all the assorted drugs on their evidence list. While she struggled, Mac stood up, and the cold expression she wore was something the junior officer had never seen before. "I bet I can find out."

She stalked over to the restrained Chief Rollins and seized his right arm. "Tell me how to counteract your little moneymaker, Chief," she demanded in a low voice. When he didn't respond, she wrenched his arm back, and he grimaced in pain. "Does that hurt? I'm the one who did that to you, asshole. I'm going to ask again, and then I'm going to get angry. How do you counteract the toxin?"

Grudgingly, he replied. "There's a metal case in the van. Use one of the three smaller vials in the bottom."

"If you're lying, and my partner dies -- "

"I'm not."

"-- so help me God, there won't be enough left of you to court-martial." With one last shove, she strode toward the van, retrieved the case, and sprinted back to the fallen commander.

"How far do you trust Rollins's word?" she asked curtly as she readied a needle with the supposed counteragent. "Would he lie about this to screw with us right now?"

Lauren looked back at the subdued criminal, then down at the man whose life hung on the decision. "No," she declared. "Do it. We don't have much choice."

Mac handed the syringe to the corpsman with a slight tremble in her fingers, and for the first time, Lauren could sense the other woman's fear. Whatever else the bond between Harmon Rabb and Sarah Mackenzie might be, it was strong.

Mac grasped Harm's cool hand as the corpsman slid the needle into his arm. She was silent, but the lieutenant saw her mouth the word 'please' as they anxiously watched for any change.

"Come on, Commander," Lauren whispered, tears stinging at her eyes. "You're not allowed to die. Not for anyone, but especially not for me."

After a few agonizing minutes, Harm's body convulsed, and he instinctively gasped for breath. The corpsman held him firmly until the spasms subsided and his breathing returned to normal. Mac closed her eyes in sheer relief. "Stop scaring me, you jerk," she told him softly, leaning down to brush a light kiss against his temple.

Harm managed to focus on her for a brief moment before his eyes slid shut again. The corpsman signaled for a stretcher and offered a weary smile. "We got lucky just now," he informed the other two officers. "We still need to run a whole battery of tests to figure out just what the hell is in his bloodstream, but he's stable. As long as there are no unexpected side effects, a day and a night at Portsmouth ought to do it."

Lauren stepped back from them, taking in the sum total of this bizarre night for the first time. In mere seconds, the full impact of their hit-and-miss investigation came crashing down on her, and she leaned heavily against a wall and cried helplessly for a good five minutes. Never before had she felt so utterly out of control.

Mac watched without a word, and allowed the younger woman some time to gather herself before speaking up. "Lieutenant, I know NCIS is going to want your statement at some point, but they can probably wait until morning. If you'd like to join me, I'm heading over to the medical center."

Lauren blinked a few times and scrubbed at her eyes. "Are you sure I'm the kind of company you really want tonight, ma'am?"

"We're still a team, Lieutenant," Mac reminded quietly. "Let's close this out the right way."

---

Early the next morning, Admiral Chegvidden strode through the corridors of the Portsmouth med center, drained of energy. He'd already spent an hour with Captain Matthews and NCIS this morning, getting the story of what exactly his lawyers had stumbled into. The incident had the potential to be quite an intelligence coup: a few of Webb's colleagues had suddenly materialized at the brig at 0400, curious about Rollins's potential buyers, and the would-be bioweapons dealers were beginning to realize that cooperating was in their best interests.

At the moment, all the JAG wanted to do was talk to his people. He hadn't heard from a single one of them yet, and since the commander had been admitted to the medical center for observation, he had a pretty good idea where to find at least two of them. He stepped up to the doorway of Harm's room, and was only slightly surprised by what he saw.

All three of his officers were dead asleep: Harm in the bed, Mac in the chair beside him, and Lauren on a bench under the window. Harm stirred first, opening his eyes a crack and recognizing the figure of his commanding officer in the doorway. "Morning, sir," he offered faintly. "This is turning into something of a habit. Sorry you had to drive so far this time."

"I'll get over it." The admiral stepped into the room, noting with some amusement that neither of the other two had moved a muscle. "How are you feeling, Commander?"

"I'm really, really tired of hospitals, for one thing." Harm rolled his eyes. "I understand that they want to test my blood to figure out exactly what happened, but it'd be nice if they left at least a little of it for me."

"They're going to release you today, though?"

"Yes, sir. Hopefully I haven't ruined all the work my physical therapist put in last week." The senior attorney turned his head slightly, and the other man followed his gaze to the sleeping lieutenant. This didn't look quite like the Lauren Singer who'd left Falls Church at the beginning of the week. She looked less austere, less cold ... more like the other officers in the room. Maybe there would be a few benefits to this investigation, after all.

"Would you care to give me a preview of your report on Lieutenant Singer's performance?" Admiral Chegwiddden asked quietly, attempting to remain out of earshot.

Harm paused a moment, considering all they'd experienced over the last few hours. Finally, he nodded. "She still wouldn't be my first choice of partners, sir -- "

"That much is obvious," the admiral remarked mildly, cocking an eyebrow and regarding Mac's somnolent form with a trace of amusement.

Harm chose not to acknowledge that comment. " -- but she earned her fives this week. I don't know if anything I said or did made much of a long-term impact on her, but ... She has the potential to be a very good officer, Admiral. It just depends on the choices she makes."

"All right. Considering the way you two left the office on Monday, I'd consider that just about the best possible response. Rest up, Commander. More cases are coming into the office even as we speak."

"Aye, sir."

After the JAG had left, Mac began to waken slowly, stretching out her arms gracefully. "What time is it?" she mumbled drowsily.

"Give yourself another second or two to wake up, and you'll answer that on your own," Harm responded with a gentle smile.

Mac blinked at him for a moment, then returned the smile. "0927. Can we get out of here yet? I'm sick of hospitals..."

"Cry me a river. I'm the one who keeps getting stuck in them." His laughing eyes soon grew

serious. "You really worked some magic this time, Marine. I don't know how you got to us as fast as you did."

"Instinct," she replied lightly, letting her hand come to rest on top of his.

"I thought you said lo..." Immediately he cut himself off before he could go any further. Those damned drugs were messing with his head. Mac stared at him, waiting for him to finish, and he wondered if she'd realized what he'd intended to say.

*...Love is an antidote to instinct...*

"What, Harm?"

He fixed a somewhat insincere grin onto his face and shook his head. "Nothing. Singer's really down for the count, isn't she?"

Mac narrowed her eyes at him, knowing that there was more to that aborted statement, but she glanced over to the window and shrugged. "I'm surprised you both came out of this thing relatively unscathed. I'd have expected the two of you to devote more energy to fighting each other than Rollins."

"Yeah, well. Life's weird that way." He lowered his gaze to their entwined fingers. "Sometimes things change when you're not looking."

"Sometimes things change even when you're looking right at them," she countered gently. "We just have to be prepared to let them change, as much as it might scare us."

"It doesn't scare me half as much as it once did," he admitted honestly, and as their gazes locked, neither one had to ask what they were talking about.

"I'm glad."

From her corner of the room, Lauren remained entirely still, her eyes closed as if still asleep. In truth, she'd halfway woken up a few seconds ago, but she could sense the weight behind her superiors' conversation, and interrupting them hardly seemed like a good idea. Instinctively her mind began to put possibilities together, listening for signs that the commander and the colonel might in fact be partners in more than just an official capacity. Soon, though, she stopped herself. What did she intend to do with that information, anyway? Use it to her advantage, like always? Try to tarnish the names of officers who had only hours ago saved her life? Words about loyalty echoed in her mind, speaking in Harm's voice, and she forced herself to tune out their conversation. She owed it to him to at least try things his way. If it didn't work out ... well, her instincts for self-preservation had always been fairly good. There was no doubt in her mind that someday, if she had cause to look for it, she'd be able to find out exactly how the senior attorneys defined their relationship. Maybe that information would be useful.

Someday, perhaps. But not today. Lauren shifted slightly on her makeshift bed and allowed herself to fall back to sleep.

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