



The Faith We Keep

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: angst

Spoilers: "A Tangled Webb II," "Shifting Sands," "Secret Agent Man"

Disclaimer: If I owned these characters, the "banter" (read: sniping) from "ATW II" would've been cut in half. At least. Starting with Mac's side of the conversation.

Author's Notes: As will be obvious, I'm still pretty annoyed with the season premiere, as well as the whole arc of the beginning of the season. But I have more hope for the future than I did when I wrote "Simple," so I hope this will reflect that. After I finish making Mac suffer a little, of course. This won't actually resolve much of anything, and it also may or may not stick to show canon precisely, because I'm writing it before I've seen all the events that will be taking place in this storyline. I'm also using some information from spoilers of upcoming episodes. Just give me the benefit of the doubt.

1426 EDT

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

Nine weeks after Paraguay

Mac pushed aside the stack of files and rested her head in her hands. "Bud, I'm done," she announced, her voice bone-weary. "This is as far as I'm going to get today without losing my mind. Can we finish up tomorrow?"

"No problem, ma'am. I'm free until court at 1300." Bud watched her with concern glowing in his hazel eyes. "If you don't mind me saying so, you look pretty beat."

Mac lifted her head enough to raise one eyebrow at him. "Coming from a man with a newborn at home, that's a depressing statement."

"I'm sorry, ma'am - I didn't mean anything by it. But I'm sure all the leave I've taken hasn't helped with the workload around here."

He didn't comment on the reason for their staff shortfall, but she knew it was at the forefront of his mind. The last time he'd mentioned it, she'd dismissed it, all the while waiting for him to call her bluff. Her? Miss Harm? She still couldn't believe he hadn't protested when she'd said no ... she still couldn't believe she'd actually said it.

When Harm had walked out of his office over a month ago, she'd been surprised at how quickly he'd been able to pack up his personal effects. Sturgis had later explained to her that Harm had never fully unpacked after NCIS's raid on his office. That had only intensified the guilt that already hung heavy on her shoulders. Just like that, her partner was gone. He'd walked out that door without looking back, just as he'd done four years ago.

Only this time, he'd left very little in the way of a trail. Four years ago, she'd known exactly where he was, but she'd kept her distance out of hurt. He'd left for very personal reasons, reasons that she'd deemed selfish, at least at the time. Now, he'd left a reason that, while still personal, couldn't possibly be considered selfish -- because he'd done it for her.

In a perfect world, that would have served as the push they needed to finally decipher their enigmatic relationship. But extreme stress, and maybe conflicting expectations, had worn away any possibility of a Hollywood ending to this disaster. By the time their plane had touched down in Washington, they'd practically stopped speaking to each other, neither one able to conjure up a topic with no potential for further damage. At the airport, she'd offered to share a cab, and had been shocked at the look of dismay that had immediately sprung into his eyes. With a silent shake of his head, he'd simply turned and walked away from her, and

she'd begun to realize just how much of a toll their little adventure had taken, on each of them and on their friendship.

Of course, she'd still believed that he'd be returning to JAG at that point. After all, he'd left before, only to return with a medal on his chest. And she'd left the service altogether, and had been grudgingly allowed back with a token punishment. Surely the successful rescue of a fellow officer merited some additional consideration. But no, this resignation was final, somehow. If he'd had just two more years in, they'd have given him a flag and lauded him for his faithful service. Instead, there was only a departure in disgrace, with a stark cardboard box.

Apparently saving her life was a career-ending offense.

Since that day, she'd called him more than once, but had met up with his answering machine each time. An overheard conversation with Clay had informed her that her flyboy ex-partner had returned to his roots, after a fashion; he'd accepted a position with the air wing of the Central Intelligence Agency. Special Agent Rabb, she supposed. The words left an odd taste in her mouth. That was all she knew of him, though. He hadn't called her or anyone else in over a month, and all Clay could -- or would -- tell her was that he was fine and working on an assignment. The Agency already seemed to have a tight leash on him. But she was convinced that his lack of communication had little to do with his new job. They'd hurt each other in Paraguay, and she was beginning to suspect that she'd landed more blows than she'd first realized.

"Colonel?" Bud's questioning voice pulled her back from her thoughts. "With your permission, I'm going to file these and go work on the Moore case."

"Sure, go ahead." As he stood up and moved toward the door, Mac was seized by an impulse, and she called him back. "Bud?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

She drew a slow breath. "When Comm- *Shit*. "When Harm had you playacting his wedding to that CIA officer ..."

"Ms. Gale, you mean?"

"Ms. Gale?"

"From the Angel Shark investigation, ma'am. She was the legal representative for the Agency?"

A memory began to take shape in Mac's mind, of a pretty, young, blonde lawyer. The pretty, young, blonde lawyer who'd been in Clay's hospital room with him and Harm that day, in fact. Well, didn't that just figure? "Right. I was, ah, just blanking on her name for a minute. Thank you, Lieutenant. That'll be all."

Bud hesitated. "Permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

"Are you and Comm- Harm okay, ma'am? I mean, have you -- "

"No, Bud, we haven't. And while I don't know exactly where we stand, I'm fairly certain that 'okay' doesn't describe it. Thank you. That'll be all." When Bud had gone, she flipped through a large file of contacts and picked up the phone to dial.

**Same afternoon
CIA Headquarters
Langley, Virginia**

"I really appreciate you seeing me on such short notice." Mac took a seat in front of the desk and smoothed out her skirt, mainly to keep her hands busy a moment longer. "I'm sure your schedule doesn't allow for too many drop-ins."

Catherine Gale stepped around the desk and sat down as well, her expression cool. "It's no trouble," she assured, with a dismissive wave. "I'm glad to see that you haven't suffered any long-term effects from your exploits in Paraguay."

"Don't be so sure." Mac heard the rueful note in her own voice almost before she

realized that she'd spoken. Catherine noticed as well, and her features softened somewhat.

"Harm, I'm assuming?"

Mac had already come to the conclusion that this woman might be closer to Harm than she was at the moment; it was the reason she'd come, after all. Now that they were face to face, however, the concept was starting to grate on her mind. She offered a tight smile, hoping that it looked more genuine than it felt. "I haven't been able to reach him for a few weeks now. I guess I was holding out some faint hope that you'd be able to help me track him down."

"As far as I know, he's in today. Isn't he answering his phone?"

"The air wing offices are among the many divisions not listed in the directory. Clay said I'd pretty much have to get the direct line from somewhere if I wanted to find him here."

Catherine's gaze remained inquisitive, but there was a firm set to her jaw, one that the Marine recognized as if she were looking in a mirror. "If Harm hasn't given you the number himself, I'm not sure it's my place to give it out."

Mac sighed. "I'm sure he's told you about what happened, and -- "

"Actually, he's told me very little. Just enough for me to understand why he's here and not breaking down every door at the Pentagon trying to get back to JAG." The blonde woman leaned forward on her desk. "The way I understand it, in the military, there are rules, and there is a code. Sometimes the two appear to conflict. The Navy wanted him to be faithful to the rules, and instead he chose the code. The Agency doesn't ask him to make that choice. The rules here are a little more flexible."

"So is the code," Mac couldn't help but retort. "Loyalty to fellow officers doesn't seem to rank very highly on that scale."

"I don't want to debate professional ethics with you, Colonel. We're on the same side. You came here to find Harm. I'm just trying to explain to you why you had to come to me."

"You're right. I'm sorry." Mac twisted her OCS ring around on her finger, purposely avoiding her gaze. "Do you mind if I ask what the fake wedding was meant to accomplish?"

"It made my dying mother happy. There was no prior intent to test his character, if that's what you're thinking. I might also add that it only came about because he was willing to do whatever it took to find you." Catherine cocked her head to the side. "And to be honest, I'm finding it hard to believe that he found you only to lose you again."

Mac sighed. "We lost each other."

The young lawyer nodded once, and reached for her phone. Setting it to speaker, she dialed a five-digit number.

"Air Wing, front office," answered a professional voice.

"Yes, this is Catherine Gale in Section Five, calling for Harmon Rabb."

"One moment."

There was a pause of a few seconds, and then a familiar voice came over the line.

"Rabb."

Mac willed herself not to react to the sound of his voice. Catherine smiled. "All right, hotshot, do you have any idea how much paperwork you created for me with that last stunt of yours?"

His answering smile was audible. "How dull would your life be if it weren't for me and my stunts?"

"You're a freak, Rabb, you really are." She pushed the jocularity aside. "Listen, I have a visitor up here who'd like to talk to you. Are you available?"

"Only for a little while. I've got a -- "

"I know," she interrupted before he could say anything not meant for Mac's ears. "I think she'll take whatever time she can get."

For a moment, there was silence, as he deduced the identity of the visitor. "Not today, Cath," he said quietly, and Mac could hear the note of resignation in his voice.

"Harm, I know, but just for a couple of minutes."

"No, you don't, and a 'couple of minutes' is not going to do it."

Catherine gave it one last shot. "Saving your courage for other areas this week, huh?"

His tone immediately grew sharp. "Cath, stay out of it. If she really needs to talk to

me, tell her to make an appointment. Right now I don't need the distraction."

Despite herself, Mac bristled. A distraction? That's how he saw her now?

Catherine shook her head. "Whatever you say. Talk to you later." She hit the release button and sat back. "That's as far as I go, Colonel. If you two need to work something out, it'll have to be in your off-hours."

"Does he have any off-hours?"

"I wouldn't really know."

Feeling defeat beginning to creep in, Mac stood up from the chair. "Well, it was worth a shot. Thank you." Then, without warning, some primal instinct took hold and ordered her to keep fighting. "I've got one last favor to ask. By any chance, could I have the phone number of the air wing receptionist?"

Two days later

1527 EDT

Hangar 3-A

CIA Headquarters

Langley, Virginia

Mac walked into the offices adjoining the hangar with a purposeful stride that belied her total discomfort with her surroundings. She'd only ever been inside two offices at Langley: Clay's, and now Catherine Gale's. Both of those had looked no different from some of the more upscale law firms she'd seen. Out here, however, it was clear that she'd entered the operational world, where field agents earned their keep.

The older woman at the front desk had pointed her back toward a corner of the expansive room, where a small group of people were standing around an empty desk. As Mac neared, she caught sight of her erstwhile partner, leaning against a file cabinet. His dress shirt was open at the collar, a jacket and tie were tossed over a nearby chair, and a double holster was fitted around his shoulders as if it had always belonged there. Only one of the holsters held a weapon; at least, until one of the other men tossed an automatic pistol in his direction.

Harm caught the gun with one hand and shot a reproachful look at the man who'd tossed it. "You said you were going to clean it."

"I did clean it."

"Martinez, 'clean' usually implies that I can work the slide without it sticking. Give me yours."

"Hey, man, come on -- that's my lucky weapon."

"Well, for this one occasion, it's going to be my lucky weapon, because if I went in with a gun that didn't work, I'd have to come back from the dead and haunt your ass. And that's just too damn much effort." Harm took the sidearm from Martinez and fitted it into his holster. As he reached for his jacket, his eyes came up and locked with Mac's.

His expression stayed more or less the same, but she could feel the chill even from across the room. "I'm your 1530 appointment," she announced calmly, waiting.

"I told Rose to cancel that. I can't believe you actually made an appointment."

"You're going to pretty great lengths just to avoid talking to me."

"I'm leaving on an assignment in an hour, Mac. As surprising as it may seem, this isn't about you." Harm picked up his tie and slung it around his neck, inclining his head toward an open office door. "You might as well come in."

She stepped into the office and looked around at all the mementos she'd once memorized. They'd been in different places before, of course, and in another place entirely. They belonged there, not here. But that wasn't really an option anymore. Returning her gaze to him, she commented, "You look like Elliot Ness."

He offered a crooked half-smile. "Thanks."

"You're going to take that as a compliment?"

"Sooner or later, something nice has got to come out of your mouth. I figured the law

of averages was on my side.”

On the surface, it sounded similar to the jabs they’d traded during the Paraguay debacle. That, in and of itself, would have been depressing. Now, however, there was something missing from his tone, as if he’d lost interest altogether.

“Was that really necessary?”

He paused midway through the motion of paging through a folder, and relented somewhat. “Probably not. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s ... understandable, I guess.” Mac moved over to the small bookshelf, running her finger along one wing of his Stearman model. “You’re doing all right over here?”

“It’s a living.”

“Only if you do it right. If you don’t, and your friend’s gun isn’t any cleaner than yours -

”

“Little tip for you, Mac. Don’t remind a guy of his mortality right before he leaves on assignment.” In the dim light, Harm’s eyes were a flat gray as he watched her from behind his desk.

“Good point.” She rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. “I don’t suppose you could tell me where you’re going.”

In response, he merely tossed her a look of disbelief and snapped open the briefcase that lay on his desk.

“Didn’t think so.” Mac sighed. “So once again, when we finally connect, someone’s got one foot out the door.”

“You came here,” he reminded her coolly. “I tried to save you the trip, but you were determined.”

“And why aren’t you?” she demanded. “Come on, Harm -- do you really want to leave it like this? In some strange state of less-than-friendship? We haven’t really fallen that far, have we?”

Harm stared down at the desk for a long moment before answering. “Sure we have. We fell out of the damn sky, and impossible as it is to believe, we went downhill from there.”

Mac shook her head, disappointment evident in her features. “I’ve never known you to accept defeat so easily.”

With a swift motion that startled her, he slammed the briefcase shut. “God, you still don’t get it, do you? I never wanted to win anything from you, and I sure as hell never wanted to win anything from any of your various admirers. This was never about victory or defeat. Right now, for me, it’s about survival. I would like to find just one thing in my life that’s on solid ground, and as much as it kills me to say this, I don’t think that’s you. Am I wrong?”

Caught off-guard, she couldn’t come up with a suitable reply. Harm’s eyes flashed as he continued. “I can’t afford to have this conversation right now. But beyond that -- even if I wasn’t about to get on a plane, I still wouldn’t want to have this conversation. Every time we try, we create more problems than we solve. We can’t just agree to be friends and make it all magically work, because that only delays the inevitable.”

“Which is exactly what I’ve been saying! *You’re* the one who wanted to put it off in Ciudad del Este, not me.”

“Oh, right. Because the middle of a botched operation is the perfect time to give your partner an encrypted commitment quiz. Actually, you know what the best time is? The middle of the road, when said partner is still trying to figure out how many fingers you’re holding up.”

“You were lucid enough to hold up your end of the debate,” she fired back, incensed at his attitude.

Harm looked at her, all sarcasm gone as if it had never existed. “They kept me on ‘probation’ and off flight ops for an extended period when I first joined up,” he stated matter-of-factly. “Apparently, by the time the act of counting your concussions on your fingers starts to require the use of both hands, the aftereffects take a while to fully disappear.”

Mac hadn’t been expecting that. An image arose in her mind; of him, motionless amid the wreckage of the plane, head lolling limply. For a few terrible seconds, she hadn’t known whether he was alive or dead, and it had stopped time for her. How in a matter of hours had they devolved from true partners into bickering children?

"I shouldn't have left you," she said, her voice barely audible.

"It didn't end up mattering."

"Maybe it did. Maybe we would've avoided a few of those snipe-fests."

"Well, there's no point in rehashing it now, is there?" Harm retied his tie and slipped his jacket on, concealing the pair of very lethal weapons he carried. "I'm not going to make excuses for anything I said down there. Some of it was cheap. I admit that. But I didn't say any of it to gain some imaginary upper hand. I said it because I was being clumsy and stubborn. I have a lot of characteristics that don't exactly make me proud, but I'm not manipulative. Whereas I've never known *you* to stick your foot in your mouth, so that leads me to the conclusion that you meant pretty much all of what you said. So what am I supposed to take away from that?"

Mac swallowed more than once, careful to make sure that her voice wouldn't crack when she spoke. "You're right," she acknowledged softly. "I did mean to say a lot of those things. Mainly because I'd run out of ways to try and force you to feel something, something strong enough for you to actually admit to."

"It worked. Just not the way you hoped. Because right now, I'd do just about anything not to feel that way again." He picked up the briefcase and crossed over to the door. "I have a flight. I'd like it if you took some time to figure out what exactly it is you want from me -- whether or not we can figure out how to still be friends at this point. Otherwise I just don't see the point of continuing to do this. I'll see you around."

"No, you won't. I had to practically break down your door just to see you today. What makes you think you'll see me around?" Mac reached out to grab his wrist as he attempted to brush past, and was startled when he stiffened, wincing. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just -- I banged up my arm last week. I really have to go."

"Doing what?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You banged up your arm doing what?"

His face was expressionless as he replied. "I burned it, during an extraction that didn't go as planned. And before you ask, I can't tell you where or who."

She looked hard at him, trying to identify the spark of flyboy charm that had always been present in his eyes. She didn't find it. Instead, he seemed ... hardened.

Her dismay must have registered on her face, because he looked almost apologetic as he stepped out of her reach. "It's the job. I knew what I was getting into."

"It's not *you*, though. I mean, in one sense it is, but in another ..."

"Maybe not. But as someone pointed out to me a while ago, it's all I have."

As he walked across the floor to join his new colleagues, Mac could have sworn she actually felt something break within.

The following day

1753 EDT

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

"Colonel?"

She looked up from her computer to meet the anxious gaze of Jennifer Coates. Feeling somewhat bleary, she rolled her shoulders to stretch out of their previously hunched position. "Jen, what are you still doing here?"

"Leaving, ma'am," Jen replied politely, holding up her cover and purse. "May I ask the same question?"

Mac considered her answer. She'd made something of a resolution last night, after going home and watching some truly terrible TV movie with a bowl of fudge swirl ice cream. In the middle of that perfect feminine cliché, she'd come to the conclusion that she wasn't going to beat herself up over Harmon Rabb any longer. Yes, she'd handled a lot of things badly after

the rescue, but none of that could be solved by her guilt. Maybe they'd never fully work things out between them. Maybe there would always be some invisible line that they'd each have too much pride and trepidation to cross. And maybe not, of course. But this wasn't something she could work out alone, no matter how long and hard she thought it through.

Yes, she was the reason he'd left JAG, but it had been his decision, not hers, and regardless of anything else in this train wreck, he hadn't once expressed any regret over having made that choice. So why was she sitting here, throwing everything she had at a minor-in-possession case that would be handled in two minutes by an Article 15?

"I'm leaving, too," she answered, her voice resolute. "Thanks for snapping me out of my target fixation."

Jen nodded, her lips tugging briefly into a closed-mouth smile. It wasn't her imagination, Mac decided; the staff was definitely walking on eggshells around her. She wished she could tell whether it was concern for her mental state or resentment over her perceived role in Harm's departure. Both were probably deserved.

Mac shut down her computer, picked up her own cover and briefcase, and started to follow the petty officer through the bullpen. As she crossed the threshold of her office, the phone behind her started to ring.

Normally, she would have let it go. It was past the end of the duty day, and if it had been an emergency, the watch officer downstairs would have called her on her cell phone. Something, though, compelled her to stop.

"Go on ahead," she told Coates. "I'll see you in the morning." Crossing back to her desk, she picked up the receiver. "JAG Headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie."

A burst of static greeted her, and then a tinny voice. "Ma'am! I'm glad I caught you -- this was the only number I could remember ..."

"Gunny!" A warning chime sounded in the back of her mind; the odds were good that Gunny was still working with the Agency in one form or another. "Where are you? What's going on?"

"I can't answer either of those questions, ma'am, other than to say I'm at a deployed location." The Marine's voice was edgy, rough. Mac immediately wondered when he'd last had any sleep, then wondered why such a question would be the first thing to come to mind. "To be honest, I'm not sure calling you was a very good idea, but I figured that either way I was going to be pissed at myself for something, and I'd rather be pissed at myself for breaking protocol than for *not* breaking it."

"Victor." It came out sounding like a plea. "You're not making any sense."

She could hear him draw a tense breath. "Ma'am, we've had someone go missing from an operation. We found his GPS locator a little ways from the plane. I can't tell you any more than that, but because this operative was once a close associate of yours, I thought you should know."

The vise closing around her throat made it difficult to speak. "Is something being done to locate him?" she forced out.

"Let's just say that we're not heading for home just yet." Gunny paused, and there was only static for a moment. "Ma'am, I hate having to tell you this, and I know you probably would have been better off not knowing about it until it was over, but I just -- "

"No," she interrupted, her fingers tightening around the edge of her desk as if that grip would keep her world from tilting off its axis. "You were right. Thank you. Can I ... can I do anything?"

"Nothing, ma'am. Just the opposite. It's critical that you don't tell anyone outside the Agency about this. Levels of deniability are going to be very important here. I'll be in touch, somehow. My word on that."

"Good luck," she whispered, even as the connection was broken. Placing the phone back on its cradle, she sank back into her chair, still struggling for breath. All her resolutions regarding her feelings and actions toward Harm were, at this moment, utterly and completely meaningless.

She'd been in this position once before. Tensions between them had come to a head, and before they could resolve them, something had come along to jeopardize both his life and

her sanity. But when he'd gone down in that storm two years ago, she'd at least had her friends around her to draw strength from. This time, in more ways than one, that support was something she wouldn't have.

This must have been how it felt for him, all those weeks ago, she realized. This is what you did to him.

Gathering herself, she stood up and left the building as fast as decorum would permit. This was a 'company' matter; therefore, the Company was the only logical place to go. Sort of.

Clay opened the door only a few seconds after her knock, his expression warming immediately at her presence. "I didn't expect you," he greeted. "My day is improving."

Mac stepped into the foyer of his townhouse, wondering if he could feel the anxiety radiating from her as he took her purse. She'd been here often enough during the last few weeks, though she couldn't have said how much of it was truly out of a desire to be with him, or out of a desire to simply be wanted by someone. It had been a depressingly long time since she'd felt wanted, and longer still since she'd actually felt good about it.

"I hate to use you like this," she began quietly. "But you have to help me get some information. I'm sure this is just about the last thing you want to hear from me, but ... it's about Harm."

Indecision flickered across his features, taking her by surprise. There was a time when Clayton Webb would have laid his cards on the table, stating his role without explanation or apology. Despite their newfound closeness, she could see that instinct still battling for control in his mind, and it made something clear to her that she didn't like at all.

"You know what's going on," she stated, realization setting in. "You're already in the loop on this. You just weren't going to tell me."

"What was I supposed to tell you?" Clay asked, ever the pragmatist. "That an operative you happen to know is currently on a mission? You had a pretty good idea of that already."

"Clay, he's *missing!*"

The longtime agent cocked an eyebrow at her, folding his arms to make sure his hands didn't tremble. "Do me a favor and don't tell me how you came by that information, even though I probably already know. There is an extremely small circle of people who know the particulars of this, and I'm not in that circle. I only know the basics, even though I have clearance that would make the entire U.S. Senate turn green. What makes you think that I could bring in someone else, even someone like you?"

"There's always a way," she insisted. "Christ, Harm found us in the middle of South America, and you can't even tell me he's missed a check-in?"

"Not if I want to play by the rules," he maintained. "And I need to keep those rules foremost in mind if I want to keep up the good fortune that allowed me to get my old job back."

"Which is more than we can say for Harm," she shot back, unable to stop herself.

Clay didn't outwardly flinch, but the remark hadn't merely glanced off his armor. "I have a question," he began in a low voice, "and I'd like you to answer it as honestly as you can. Are you just frustrated with the situation, or do you resent me for setting all this in motion?"

Mac opened her mouth to protest, but he shook his head and continued. "Because I can't blame you if it's the latter. But if it is, I don't know how to atone for that. I didn't ask Harm to throw his career on the fire to come after us. I didn't tell Chegwidden to close the door on him, and I sure as hell didn't convince Kershaw to take him in. So if you want to be mad at me for something, be mad at me for getting you involved in the first place. Be mad at me for doing my job badly then, not for doing my job correctly now."

They stared at each other for a long moment, looking into the chasm between them that they still hadn't been able to bridge. Finally, in a smaller voice, she said, "He wasn't meant for this. Somehow he's turned into one of you ..."

Clay's gray eyes flashed, and belatedly she realized what she'd said. She'd conveyed her distaste for Harm's new career, and by extension she'd disparaged Clay's as well. They didn't live in the same world. Maybe it was time she admitted that to herself.

"I'm sorry," she said simply. "I should have known better than to think that this could work."

"I'm sorry, too," he replied, bravely masking his regrets. "I should have known better than to think I could compete with him."

"That's not the issue."

"It's one of the issues. Give me some credit for knowing the both of you at least a little." Clayton Webb had spent a lifetime projecting an image of control. Even in the Chaco Boreal, he had always looked more defiant than defeated. Tonight, he allowed that façade to slip. "I'll make sure someone contacts you the moment we get him back. That's all I can do."

"Thank you."

She took her purse back from him -- he hadn't had time to do more than put it on the hallway table. As she turned toward the door, his hesitant query made her pause.

"Do you still love him?"

Without turning back, she smiled a little. "Presumptuous of you to assume I ever did."

"The question still stands."

She sighed. "Yes. But that's never been enough before. I don't have any reason to believe that it ever will be."

The following night

0231 EDT

Mac's Apartment

Georgetown

She had stuffed herself into one corner of the sofa, knees tucked up to her chest. Attempting to sleep would be utterly futile, as she'd discovered the previous night. Her brain simply wouldn't shut down. It kept spinning endlessly, getting no closer to any workable solutions to the problem. None of her precious few contacts at Langley would tell her anything. She's spent most of the day in her office, slowly shredding her patience, until the admiral had made the mistake of demanding to know what was distracting her.

"It's of no concern to you, sir," she'd told him through gritted teeth, and though he'd hadn't fully understood the implications of that statement, he'd been wise enough not to push further.

Damn it. Harm had made this grand gesture in order to chase after her. He'd probably torn off his wings and thrown them down on the admiral's desk, or something with a similar dramatic flourish. Now that the positions were reversed, she had no way of doing the same.

One of her bleakest thoughts had surfaced just a couple of hours ago. If Paraguay had never happened -- if Harm hadn't made that sacrifice -- would she even be considering making it herself now? Would it have even occurred to her to go so far outside the established guidelines? Or would she just be waiting to hear from him, and hoping for the best?

Did it even matter? She was helpless, no matter how aware of that fact she might be.

Yes, it mattered. It illustrated just what a monumental thing he'd done. He'd succeeded in bringing them home, regardless of the odds or the consequences. And she'd thanked him by throwing up a wall and instead opening herself up to Clay.

That thought suddenly paralyzed her. Had he never seen her gratitude? Had she been too off-balance and defensive to actually say the words 'thank you' to him?

Oh, Jesus ...

Even as the tears welled up, the phone rang, sending her pulse racing. With an unsteady hand, she reached for the handset. "Mackenzie."

At first, all she could hear was distant chaos, mild clanging and voices conversing in the background. Then, faintly, a weak voice filtered through.

“Mac ...”

She sucked in a sharp breath, afraid to get her hopes up. “Harm?”

More background noise. Then, almost in a whisper: “I’m okay, Mac.”

There was a clatter, as if the phone had slipped out of his hand, and then the line went dead. He’d sounded anything but okay, but it was all she needed at that point. Mac fell back against the cushions, completely drained. “Thank you,” she breathed, just before the floodgates opened, and she wept; both for herself and for her dearest friend.

Another phone call had come a few hours later, this time from Catherine Gale. She’d informed Mac that Harm had been taken to a small, Agency-run medical facility near Langley, and that he was in serious but stable condition. No explanation was given for his injuries, nor had one been expected. But Catherine was a compassionate person, and had been willing to get his former partner in to see him, if only for a few minutes.

It had taken no small amount of courage for her to push open those doors. Catherine had been standing by the small window into his room, looking only slightly more composed than Mac. Without a word, she’d gestured toward the man who lay on the other side of the glass.

His face had been marred by cuts and bruises, a thin blanket keeping his body from view. An IV tree had stood watch beside him, completing a blood transfusion that would eventually bring the life back to his ashen features. More surreal than these was the manner of the nurse who’d tended to him. Though no major wounds were outwardly visible, she’d touched him as if she were afraid he might shatter.

Absolutely out of her depth, Mac had opened her mouth a few times, no sound coming out. By the time she’d finally mustered the wherewithal to ask permission to go in, an uncivilized chirp from her cell phone had made her jump. The admiral, none too pleased at her for not being at work, was sending her out on a case. Her semi-comprehensible attempts to defer had made no impact, until she finally blurted out, “Harm’s hurt, sir.”

There had been a long, cool silence, ending at last with the admiral’s quiet “How bad?”

“They say he’s stable, but ... it’s bad.”

“On a mission?”

“Yes, sir.”

Another silence had been followed by a drawn-out sigh. “Mac, I’m not immune to the situation, but I need you to take this investigation. The powers that be across the Potomac are not going to be deterred by any injuries suffered by a former crewmember of ours. Hate me if it helps, but write him a note and get on that plane in two hours.”

And she’d obeyed, because that was her role. She was the straight-laced one, the one who saluted smartly and followed, even when the order wasn’t an order but a request. She did what was expected of her, what was asked of her. She’d accepted Clay’s assignment, she’d accepted Mic’s ring, she’d accepted Dalton’s offers ... there were other examples, but they all pointed toward the same disastrous result. Even Harm, though he’d been the only one not to offer anything of that nature. He’d offered nothing but his undeclared loyalty, and in pressing him for terms, she’d demonstrated that acceptance wasn’t a foregone conclusion after all.

She’d asked more of him than anyone else in her life. She recognized that. But he held a higher place than anyone else in her life, too. It had all seemed so logical at one point. Had he lived up to the standard she’d put to him? What standard *had* she put to him, anyway?

His unflinching devotion reminded her of John Farrow. His stunning, impetuous display of that devotion reminded her of Mic Brumby. And, whether directly or indirectly, she’d sent him straight into the Agency’s firm grip, to step into their spy games and remind her of Clay ever more with each passing day.

Everything she’d ever accepted from others had been quietly present in him all along. His only mistake had been in not highlighting that for her. It had taken far too long for her to put the pieces together this way, and in the meantime, he’d started to slip away from her.

The note she'd left at his bedside had been written in haste, but with care:

Harm -

I'm starting to see a lot of things more clearly now. What I want may be very little, but I know that doesn't make it easy. I'm sorry it took all this to straighten me out, and I'd like to talk to you. As soon as you're ready, you know where to find me.

Always, Mac.

The investigation had been closed in four days. She'd given him five days beyond that, and then decided not to wait for an offer to be extended to her this time. He'd been released from the medical center sometime in the interim, but fortunately, Catherine had once again pointed her in the correct direction.

And so, on this comfortable August evening, she stood in the office doorway of a small airport in Blacksburg, Virginia, gazing at an old yellow Stearman with an unfamiliar tightness in her chest. His SUV and Corvette were both absent from the small parking lot, which had made her doubt the reliability of her information for a moment. But that was before she caught sight of 'Sarah.'

Inside the hangar, a young woman of high-school age was perched on the seat of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle in the front corner, balancing a textbook and a notebook on her lap. A pair of denim-clad legs was visible under the fuselage of the Stearman, which had one of the panels near its engine removed.

"C'mon, please?" the girl begged from her place on the Harley, pouting energetically despite the fact that her face was blocked from her companion's view by the airplane. "I've been helping you with your stuff, haven't I?"

"I don't see you helping right now," pointed out a familiar voice from somewhere near the engine cowling. "Matter of fact, I *hear* you attempting to do your physics homework while sitting on my bike, which I asked you to get off once already."

A little bewildered by the idea that Harm now owned a motorcycle, Mac watched as the girl pretended to get down from the Harley, then silently climbed back on.

"And here I thought you were telling the truth about having been an honors graduate in aeronautical engineering."

After a pause, he relented. "Check the signs on your stress-strain matrix. Nine times out of ten, your mistake's in one of the epsilon values."

Her eyes lit as she located the error, and she immediately started scribbling in her notebook. A moment later, Harm called out from behind his plane again.

"Look alive, Mattie. There's someone at the desk."

Mattie swiveled as best she could on the motorcycle's seat, catching sight of Mac across the hangar. "How would you know?" she tossed back at Harm.

"The same way I know you're still sitting on my bike."

She didn't seem bothered. "I love this bike, Harm. This is my kind of bike."

"Actually, it's *my* kind of bike, and the way I know that is that it *is* my bike. So knock it off and go talk to your guest, squirt."

Climbing down once more, Mattie stuck her tongue out at his partially-obscured form as she complied.

"I heard that, too ..."

Mac tried to smile at the young woman as she approached. Late high school, she estimated, but obviously not intimidated by much. "Hi," she said pleasantly, deciding to pretend that she hadn't overheard any of their conversation. "I'm looking for Harmon Rabb."

Immediately, a look of mild suspicion flared in Mattie's eyes. Mac got the impression that this girl was somehow aware of the awkwardness that was imminent. "He expecting you?"

"Probably not, but --"

"I only ask because I think he's had a rough couple of weeks."

"I know. It's actually been a good deal longer than a couple of weeks."

Mattie's surprisingly intense gaze remained on Mac, but she called back into the hangar, "It's for you, Harm." Then she tipped her head toward Sarah. "Go on back."

Feeling her heartbeat quicken, Mac walked across the immaculate concrete floor, glad she'd changed out of her uniform. Her regulation black pumps would have given her away long

before she reached him. Then again, based on his conversation with Mattie, it was a good bet that he'd recognized her presence the moment she'd arrived.

As if to confirm, he stepped out from behind the airplane with a mask of cool control already firmly affixed. The sight of it caused her to pull up short, and for a moment they just sized each other up. A fading scar was visible along his jawline, and he held his left arm closer to his body in a way that suggested that it wasn't entirely functional.

The silence was palpable, twisting and warping the air between them until there was little left to breathe. Standing there, she realized that she had absolutely no idea how to begin, and that he had no intention of doing it for her. So she reached for the closest thought.

"It didn't take you too long to develop your surveillance skills," she commented. "You had your head inside an airplane, and you could tell exactly where she was, what she was doing, where I was, and it appears you could also tell *who* I was."

Harm gave a half-shrug, his left shoulder not moving. "I'm not trained as a dedicated field agent. When you spend eight years with diminished night vision, you start to figure out what things sound like."

His voice was guarded, his eyes a duller gray-blue than she'd ever seen. Mac nodded once in understanding, a little too jerkily for her liking. "The admiral ordered me out on a case," she offered, by way of explanation. "I didn't want to stay away."

He tossed it off, moving over to the nearby toolbox. "You don't need to apologize for that. You had no obligation to sit by my bed and look distraught. You never did, but you certainly don't now."

She watched him select a wrench and apply it to a hydraulic connector. "Is that what you think I feel?" she asked. "An obligation? It can't be just that, or you wouldn't have bothered to call me."

"Gunny said he'd called you earlier. If you knew when it started, it just made sense to tell you when it ended." Concentrating on the connector under his oil-streaked hands, he yanked the wrench hard over.

"I tried to get Clay to let me in. I couldn't get anyone to even tell me where the assignment was, let alone what it was. If I could have, I wouldn't have been just sitting here."

"You want a merit badge for that?" he asked, impassively.

"Don't get all superior on me. I'm trying to tell you that I wanted to come after you. That ought to mean something."

"It does. But this isn't about having each other's backs in the clutch. We've never had a problem with that. It's all those not-so-clutch times that are so damn destructive."

He turned back to Sarah, and she noticed that he leaned on the fuselage a little more heavily than she would have expected. "What happened?" she asked softly. "Wherever it was you were, whatever you were doing -- can you tell me about what happened?"

"Why does it matter? It's over."

"Of course it matters. Did you think that everyone stopped caring about you the moment you left?"

His features darkened. "You really want me to answer that?"

"Harm, for Christ's sake!"

"I wasn't talking about you." With a quick shake of his head, he backed down. "Never mind. I was ferrying supplies, and on one of our runs, I ran into some trouble with the locals."

"If you'd just been 'ferrying supplies,' you wouldn't have needed a personal GPS tracker, which Gunny said you had."

He gave a snort of exasperation. "Mac, if you want to do this, you're going to have to accept the fact that there'll be some holes in the story."

His gaze bored into her, and she had to look away.

"I got made early on in the mission, so I hid the tracker. The aforementioned locals caught up to me and my contact, and they tried to get any information they could out of us."

"Your contact?" she asked; somewhat rhetorically, since she didn't know what kind of response she was looking for. Harm chose not to respond at all, continuing.

"They were in the process of cutting her blouse into shreds when I decided to knock the knife away. The leader grabbed my arm and started -- getting artistic."

Dispassionately, he slipped his left arm out of his shirt and held it out for her to see. Bile rose in her throat as she stared at the long continuous cut spiraling all the way around and up his arm, carefully placed so as to open his vein at its most exposed points. The wound was closed and healing now, with a few well-positioned stitches to speed the process. Less than two weeks ago, though ...

"Steady blood loss is a real bitch, especially when you're cuffed to a wall. They wanted me to die slowly." As he readjusted his shirt, his lips twisted humorlessly into an expression she didn't even recognize. "They might have gotten their way, if they hadn't wanted me to hear my contact screaming as they assaulted her in the next room. It's a miscalculation to try and get into the head of someone you've already left for dead. They got into my head, all right -- bad enough that I yanked the chain right off the rotting wall. When they finally tossed her back in with me, I got the drop on them. By the time we got out of the village and anywhere near where I'd left the tracker, I couldn't even stand up. She was dragging me along ... She didn't even know me, really, and my shirt was the only piece of real clothing she had, but she was pulling me along. Fortunately, Gunny and his team were ready for us."

Mac closed her eyes. Parts of that scene were too horrific to imagine; others were all too familiar. "What kind of man slices up another man in some kind of killing ritual?"

"This kind. I got lucky. The mission pre-brief said that they sometimes do both arms, depending on how significant the prisoner is."

Her head snapped up. "You *knew* they did things like this?"

Harm looked back at her, unblinking. "Why do you think they went for my left arm?"

As soon as he asked the question, the answer became clear. "Because you made sure to use that arm to strike in the first place," she breathed, a little awed by his foresight. That simple decision had allowed him to keep his dominant hand undamaged, and might have saved both his life and the life of his contact. "Wow, flyboy."

The nickname slipped out unintentionally, and he seemed to pull away from it. "Anyway, you asked." He gestured toward the open hangar doors, and without discussion, they moved out onto the tarmac.

Sunset had painted the vast stretch of asphalt in streaks of peach and amber. The airfield was quiet on this weeknight, allowing them plenty of space. Somehow space seemed integral to this conversation.

Harm took a seat on the tailgate of a parked pickup truck as Mac leaned on a nearby ground cart. "It's sick and depressing how many people seem to get off on causing pain," she stated simply. "Or on making others witness them causing pain."

He looked out over the runway at the distant tree line. "You'd know something about that, I suppose."

"Yeah. We really switched places, didn't we?" She hugged her arms tight around her rib cage. "Only when it was me, you did something about it. I didn't."

"We're back to that? The circumstances were different, Mac. Hard as it may be to envision, my paychecks are signed by the Central Intelligence Agency now. I had a fully authorized assignment to complete, and a team to help me complete it." He glanced over at her, honestly surprised. "Why do you think I'd resent you for not riding to my rescue?"

She didn't have a good answer for that. "I don't know. Maybe I'm projecting. Partners or not, we've always been a little bit competitive with each other. Maybe I feel like you've gotten one up on me in the hero department somehow. I don't know -- I didn't claim to have a rational reason."

That response clearly hadn't won her any points. He turned back toward the empty runway, and she charged ahead. "You do resent me for something, though."

"Yes, I do."

She fought back the indignation that instantly flared up. "May I ask why?"

"In order of importance, or alphabetized?"

"For the love of -- " Mac shoved herself away from the cart, forcing her hands not to clench into fists. "I'm here, aren't I? I'm trying -- I'm at least making an effort."

"An effort to do what?" he demanded. "Make me see your side of this whole disaster? I don't think that's the problem here."

"Oh, so you've got me all figured out, then?"

He gave a short, harsh laugh. "Not by a long shot. No, I think the problem is that you don't even know for sure what your side is. You want us to hash things out, then you want to throw in the towel. You want to call a truce in public, then you conveniently forget that I'm even in the room. You're with Webb now, yet you still keep showing up to start in on this all over again. Is that what wanting to be on top is all about? If it is, I'm not going to fight you for that spot. I'm too busy recovering from whiplash."

Her throat burned from the force it took to keep her boiling tears from view. "Excuse me for trying to salvage a friendship that used to mean something."

"This isn't about friendship. Maybe it will be again someday, but that isn't what's killing us now. At least give me the courtesy of admitting that."

"Give you the *courtesy*? As if you've been absolutely wide open about your feelings up to this point?"

He rose to his full height, his gaze steely. "I may not have spelled things out for you in the most ideal manner, but at least my actions were consistent. I didn't pull a U-turn. What I felt didn't change, until ..."

His use of the past tense struck her, but she didn't dare knuckle under. Then again, refusing to surrender an inch had been part of the problem all along.

"Until?"

He met her eyes, unblinking. "Until you sat down next to Webb and thanked him for trying to protect you. Dumbass that I am, I thought that maybe that would make something click in your head, and that you might actually show some gratitude to me. But that's not what happened, is it?"

"Harm, you *know* I was grateful - "

He held up a hand. "I do know that. I'm not so literal-minded that I need to hear the words to recognize the emotion." She flinched visibly, understanding his implication. "But I would have appreciated some gesture as confirmation. Instead, you and Webb decided to play footsie right in front of me. Now, I can only think of three explanations for that, and none of them are very appealing. Did you forget I was even there? Did you honestly think that it wouldn't affect me? Or did you just want to stick the knife in a little deeper?"

As valiantly as he'd tried to keep his voice cold, there was no disguising the pain in his eyes. Mac's jaw trembled as she realized anew how badly she'd erred. She'd come to apologize to him and ended up here -- how had they managed to fall into this trap again?

"I'm not sure I understood how much power I had to hurt you," she replied softly. "You have a tendency to hide things like that very well."

"So you thought it would all just roll off harmlessly?"

"No, not really. I can't really explain it, other than to say that I was hurting, too."

He sighed. "I know. I just can't decide whether that's supposed to be a reason to give up, or a reason to keep trying."

Mac scuffed her toe along a seam in the pavement, not knowing what else to do with her hands and feet. "Are we talking about friendship again, or something else?"

That seemed to catch him off-guard. "I was under the impression that the words 'there will never be an us' made that distinction pretty clear a few weeks ago."

"I shouldn't have said that. It was a heat of the moment thing -- the adrenaline was talking."

"Then what was talking when you decided Webb had jumped through enough hoops to merit a chance with you?"

That stung badly, but mostly because she knew it to be accurate. Taking a moment to gather herself, she offered up a difficult admission. "The side of my brain that wants the same thing as everybody else - to be cared for, in a way that needs no explanations or qualifications."

"So he was just more articulate than I was?"

She wanted to fight that remark, but it just didn't seem worthwhile. "It doesn't matter at this point. Whatever Clay and I were trying to do, it's over. When he wouldn't help me find you, we had a collective wake-up call. He and I see a lot of things differently, and that's never

going to change.”

He watched her, his expression unreadable. She should have known better than to expect an overt reaction. Finally, he said, “Once again, your attempt at a stable relationship is thwarted by me almost getting myself killed. Huh. You’d think I planned it or something.”

Oh, no, you don’t. He wasn’t going to start that up again. “I’m not holding you responsible for that. Or the other time, for that matter. Your actions didn’t do the damage; my reactions and my realizations did. Your trophy room of noble suffering is big enough -- you don’t get to add that to it.”

“So why do you get to feel guilty about anything I do with the Agency? I signed the letter. I walked away. Why is all that somehow about you?”

“Because, somehow, it *is* about me! The same way everything I do seems to be about you!”

There was a pause, as they stared each other down.

“Yeah. Well, I think we pretty effectively put an end to that streak.”

Harm moved back toward the hangar, and for a moment, Mac was frozen by the very real fear that this might be the last conversation of any substance that they ever had.

“Harm, please.”

Somehow, the level of desperation in her voice must have registered with him, because he stopped. “What did you expect to gain by coming here, Mac?” he asked, not turning around. “Did you think we could magically fix things? We’re beating our heads against a wall here. If you ever wanted me at all, it was only because you thought you’d be able to change the parts of me you didn’t like. I think it’s fairly clear at this point that I won’t change.”

“You keep saying that, but you already have. The Agency took care of that.”

“I suppose so. I guess I’m starting to look a lot more like Webb right now, aren’t I? The irony just knocks me over.”

Mac’s hands clenched at her sides as she tried to hold on to some tiny scrap of the connection they’d once shared. “So do you want me to feel guilty about what you gave up for me, or don’t you? God, Harm, tell me what to do here! I’ll do it -- I just don’t want to leave it like this ...”

He’d never been able to simply walk away from her pain. She knew it as well as he did. “I don’t want your guilt. I will, however, take whatever acknowledgement of my efforts you’re willing to give.”

At last, the crushing weight of her helplessness broke down the dam, and tears slipped from her eyes. “Thank you for coming after me,” she whispered, afraid to make any move toward him. “Just because that kind of act seems second nature to you doesn’t mean that I had any right to take it for granted. It was a sacrifice none of us could have accurately imagined, and you deserved better than the attitude I gave you.”

He turned back to face her, poised to accept her thanks, but she wasn’t finished. “We’re never going to be able to stop caring about each other,” she asserted, a tremor in her voice. “No matter what we do, no matter how badly we hurt each other, we’re always going to have that. Seven years of history can’t be wiped clean that easily. When Gunny called me two weeks ago, I didn’t take a real breath for more than twenty-hour hours. If you think we’re better off not speaking, seeing each other only when civility demands it, then I’m willing to go along, at least for now. But I think we’ll both be miserable.”

Harm closed his eyes, and for the first time he looked defeated. “I’ve always been proud to call you a friend,” he stated with quiet decorum. “I’d like to be able to continue to do so. It’s just ... it’s hard, after this. But you’re right.”

“Which part am I right about?”

“The part about us still caring about each other. So ... I guess what I’m saying is that I’m willing to try.”

Somehow, even that thin gesture filled her with relief. “I’m glad.” She waved a hand at the hangar. “I think that before your last mission, I’d been having trouble getting myself to believe that you’d really left. I’m still not sure I believe it entirely. If Admiral Chegwidden were to ask you back -- ”

His tone grew sharp. “Mac, don’t start on that. I don’t have any intention of coming

back to JAG with my tail between my legs.”

“But you haven’t seen the way things have been for the past few weeks. When it’s quiet, it’s too quiet. When it’s not, it’s chaos. The admiral’s getting pressure from somewhere, and none of us can tell where it’s coming from. We all contributed to keeping that place in balance, and without you, we’re off-center.”

“Seems like everybody should be used to that already, since you got a taste of it while I was sitting in the brig.”

Startled, she wasn’t sure how to respond. He fixed her with a near-smile of grim resignation. “Think about the way the last year has gone for me, Mac. I had my judgment and my ethics questioned on any number of occasions. I was accused of murder. I left to do something I believed was right -- a belief I still hold, by the way -- and came back to find that everything I’d worked for, the eighteen years I’d spent serving in uniform, had been deemed a waste. None of the things I’d done right seemed to matter -- all that counted was the rules I’d bent. Why in God’s name would I want to come back to that?”

She swallowed a hard lump in her throat. “Because you believe in serving justice,” she answered simply. “Come on, Harm, you can’t tell me that you’ve been happy playing spy games these past few weeks. That isn’t the way you were put together. You belong with us.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” he replied honestly. As she followed his gaze down to his hand, she realized that he was no longer wearing his Naval Academy ring, and it tore at her heart.

“I am. I’m not asking for you to come back on your knees. But if the opportunity were to present itself, somehow, would you consider it?”

He looked as though he wanted to refuse. But something in her expression must have convinced him otherwise, because he dropped his head and gave another half-shrug. “I make it a policy to avoid saying ‘never’ whenever possible.”

Mac kept her smile in check, surprised to find that the ‘never’ comment didn’t bother her. Rather, it gave her an opportunity. “I’ve been known to say the word, but I’ve regretted it almost every time. I always end up finding a possibility I hadn’t seen before.”

A spark of doubt flickered in his eyes, but he took a self-conscious step toward her. “Thanks for coming out here. I’m not sure I would have had the guts.”

“You’re welcome. Will I, um, see you around?”

“I expect I’ll see you first.”

As he turned and started back toward his plane, a hint of his old confidence present in his step, she frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He turned back, and her heart soared as she caught a flash of that familiar grin. “I’m a spook now, remember? You have no idea the things I can do ...”

Mac shook her head, and as the last rays of sunlight vanished over the horizon, she started for the parking lot, feeling lighter than she had in some time. It wasn’t a miracle cure; far from it, in fact. But it was a step. Right now, that was the best she could hope for, and it was enough to make tomorrow look just a little brighter than today.

*** THE END ***