



After Two

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: Vignette

Spoilers: pilot episode

Author's Notes: You don't have to be intimately familiar with the previous story to understand this one. Just recall that it's set during Harm's law school years, and that his best friend at the time is Andrea (Andie) Nichols. And if you don't get the Top Gun reference - please tell me everyone out there has seen Top Gun?? - just ignore it and move on.

"I can't take any more of this. Let's call it a night."

"No complaints from me." Andie flipped her criminal procedures textbook closed and sprawled out across my couch. "I'm fried. I didn't think anything could suck quite as much as Constitutional did last term, but Crim Pro is coming damn close."

"You want to crash here tonight?" I offered.

In a lot of guy-girl friendships, this would be a point of severe awkwardness. But Andie and I don't get hung up on things like that. We've been in too many far-stranger situations to take our sleeping arrangements that seriously.

She pretended to carefully ponder her options. "Do you have that sweatshirt handy?"

I shook my head and quickly ducked into the bedroom to retrieve the shirt in question. The expression of delight that lit her face when I returned was priceless. I have no idea what she sees in my old gray USS Midway sweatshirt, but she won't let me give it to her. She just commandeers it whenever our study sessions run late, puts it on and tucks her knees up so that it nearly surrounds her. I have to wonder what she'd do for a blanket if I didn't happen to be six foot four.

"Clue me in on this UCMJ thing," she suggested, curling up on the couch with a flicker of mischief. "If I were in the Navy, would you get tossed out on your ass for letting me sleep over like this?"

I shrugged, stretching out in the recliner across from her. "Depends on whether or not we were in the same chain of command. It's only against the rules if you work together."

"So all that time at sea, and you never met some hot lieutenant below decks?"

I met her laughing green eyes with as much innocence as I could muster. "Gosh, Andie, I never even thought about it."

"Bullshit! You probably had to beat them off with a stick." She tossed a pillow at me,

which I ducked easily.

"Jeez, new topic already. What time is it?"

"Umm ... one-thirty. Almost there."

"Almost where? Halfway to dawn?"

Andie smiled. "When I was a freshman in the dorms, there was nothing better than staying up late on a Saturday night with four or five of my hall mates, just talking about anything and everything. One of my friends determined that we never got to working on anything meaningful until after two a.m."

I lifted an eyebrow. "These conversations didn't involve a fair amount of alcohol, did they?"

"Gosh, Harm, I never even thought about it," she mimicked. In response, I chucked the pillow back at her. "Seriously, not very often. If we wanted to get blasted, we could have gone to a frat party. Usually we made do with milkshakes from Pizza House. They deliver until four a.m., and their shakes are to die for."

"And to think I missed out on all the joys of a major university."

"Well, when you're eighteen, you tend to think all your conversation topics are a lot more meaningful than they actually are." She hugged her knees close to her chest, and some of the playfulness faded from her gaze. "Do you ever feel that way? Like you missed out on something by going to the Academy, or by making that commitment to the Navy?"

Not quite two o'clock yet, but I'll give her a little leeway. "I don't know. I guess I wondered what it would be like to go to UCLA or something, but I never gave it any serious thought. Ever since I can remember, I've always known I wanted to be a pilot. It never registered in my mind that there might be something better for me out there. And I'm not just Navy - I'm third-generation Navy, and a third-generation pilot. It's just in me." I consciously steered the discussion back toward a lighter subject. "'Course, I'm not saying there haven't been days when I had doubts. The sorority girls up the road at U-Maryland made things at Annapolis look pretty bleak."

I flashed a quick grin at her, but she didn't entirely buy it. Andie Nichols isn't completely impervious to my smile, but she does do an excellent job of keeping my ego in check. And she's amazingly adept at picking up on my moods, no matter what I do to mask them. "What about after your crash?" she pressed gently. "I'd expect that to bring up a lot of doubts."

For a moment, I wasn't sure how to respond. She took the silence a little too much to heart and instantly backed off. "I'm sorry. If you don't want to get into it, I totally understand - "

"No, it's fine. I just - well ..." Oh, what the hell. "Strike that, actually. It's not fine. It's been a year, and sometimes I still wake up shaking. But I can talk about it. I think I have to be able to do that, or I won't ever have control over it."

"I guess that makes sense. But I don't want to drag you back through what happened. I

just wondered how much you thought about leaving.”

“The Navy? I didn’t. Next question?”

She fixed me with a skeptical look. “You never once considered going civilian, after everything you’d been through? Your six years were up. You didn’t owe the Navy anything.”

“Sure I did. I owe the Navy damn near everything, Andie. The education was one thing, but more important than that was the sense of purpose it gave me. I don’t measure that stuff by the months I spend in uniform. It’s more than that.”

“You really are a walking recruiting poster,” she responded with a knowing smile.

“Hey, if I got out, I’d have to pay all this tuition myself.”

“Good point.”

I considered for a moment, then decided that turnabout was definitely fair play. “What about you? Was there ever a time when you thought about blowing off the scales of justice and doing something else?”

“You mean, a time other than exam week every term?”

“You’re stalling,” I observed, watching her shift slightly. She may have me pegged, but I wasn’t born yesterday, either. “Come on. Out with it.”

“All right, all right, but don’t laugh.”

“No promises.”

With a withering glare in my direction, she confessed. “I used to sing. A lot. In junior high and high school, I did all the musicals and stuff - I couldn’t act my way out of a paper bag unless there was music behind me. It was just something I did for fun, but I really liked it. The directors used to nag me about majoring in music, and I thought about it for a while, but I never would have done it. I didn’t want to teach, and everything else is so hard ... I mean, can you see me doing the lounge-singer thing, hoping the tips will cover the rent? Not exactly the positive contribution to society that I was hoping for.”

“I don’t know. You’d get to wear sexy dresses and drape yourself across a piano,” I suggested slyly. No sooner had the words left my mouth than that same damned pillow came flying back at my head. Okay, I deserved that one. “Sheesh, truce. I don’t think it’s dumb at all. But you’re right, it’d be a tough life, and you’ll be doing a lot of important things as a lawyer that you wouldn’t be able to do as an artist. So we’re happy with who and what we are, right?”

“Absolutely. But I’m still going to complain about Crim Pro until I turn blue.”

I looked sideways at her for a minute, trying to determine how far I was going to follow my curiosity. In the end, I figured that the worst she could do was smack me. “So what

would I have to do to convince you to sing something?"

At that, she looked surprised, but not completely uncomfortable. "Here and now? You'd have to offer up some blackmail material of your own. I don't come cheap."

"All right, I've got an idea. Hang on a sec." I headed for the bedroom again and returned with the old, scratched-up guitar that I'd been carting along with me ever since Grandma told me how much my dad had loved it. Andie blinked, and a slow grin crept across her face.

"You little sneak! Where the hell have you been hiding this? You never told me you could play."

"You never asked," I returned smugly, sitting cross-legged on the floor. "So what do you say? If I provide accompaniment, can I drag a song or two out of you?"

She bit her lip in an incredibly endearing fashion. "Harm, honestly, I haven't even tried to sing anything in years. I'll probably crack on the first note."

"I don't care if you do. I just thought it might be nice to try it. I mean, you've been up in a plane with me. You know what I love to do. Can you show me what it is you love to do?"

Immune to the smile she may be. She's not, however, immune to the puppy-dog eyes. Spreading her hands in a helpless shrug, she surrendered. "I suppose it can't kill me. But I'm guessing you don't have a whole lot of show tunes filed away in your mental database. Any other brilliant ideas?"

It took a while to rack my brain for something suitable that I could actually remember how to play. "Okay, how's your knowledge of Beatles lyrics?"

She looked at me askance until I managed to find the first few notes of 'In My Life'. Finally, some of the tension ebbed, and she tentatively began to sing.

"There are places I remember, all my life - though some have changed
Some forever, not for better - some have gone, and some remain ..."

There was a kind of simplicity, a purity in her soft, clear voice that was spellbinding. I got the feeling that she could sing a gorilla off to sleep if she tried. As we both eased into our roles, I took a moment just to watch her. Somewhere between verses, her eyes had fallen closed, and it's possible she'd halfway forgotten that there was anyone else in the room. Slowly, I started to remember why this particular song was imprinted on my memory, and I drifted a little as well. Soon, though, it was over, and we were both looking at each other in serene silence.

"Thanks," she said simply. "That felt good."

"You're amazing," I replied honestly.

She didn't respond to that, looking intently at me. "Why do you look so sad?" she

whispered.

"I forgot how much my mom liked that song. When my dad used to call home, from the Tico, she'd make him sing it to her over the phone. His buddies gave him a hard time about it, so he put it on a tape and sent it to her so he wouldn't have to sing anymore. I figured out how to play it from listening to that tape, years later, and when Mom heard it ..."

Andie silently climbed down from the couch to join me on the floor. From behind, she wrapped her arms around me and rested her cheek against my shoulder. She's magic that way: somehow, during all the madness that was our fall term, she discovered that just sitting here, connected like this, can soothe away some of that pain I've carried with me for so long. When all this is over, and I get my new assignment, my enduring memory of law school won't be of the endless studying, or even the people we helped along the way. It will be of Andie in all her pillow-tossing, football-loving, precedent-memorizing glory. That idea alone is enough to make me smile.

I swiveled around and dropped a light kiss on her forehead, letting her know that I was okay. "You're the best," I murmured softly. "You know that, right?"

"I'm in good company."

After a moment, I reached for the guitar again. She eyed me with a devilish sparkle in her gaze. "You know, Tom Cruise and that whole gang really gave naval aviators a bad name in terms of singing ability. You're not all as clueless as they were, right?"

"Not all of us, at least. Some of us do know how to pick a key and stick with it." I hit a chord and leaned back against the couch. "You never close your eyes anymore when I kiss your lips ..."

She dissolved into giggles, but eventually recovered enough to join in. Between bouts of contagious laughter, we managed to get through the song, even finding the harmonies on the chorus.

"You've lost that loving feeling, now it's gone, gone, gone ..."

By the end, we were both curled up on the floor, brushing tears away. We lay there for a while, regaining some semblance of control, and I turned my head to look over at her. "I wish I'd been able to see you perform sometime," I told her sincerely. "I bet you were really something up there."

"I wish I'd been able to see you pull five Gs over the Gulf," she responded with a small smile. "But we're something down here, too."

"Yeah. What time is it?"

"I don't know. Well after two by now."

Maybe it's not the important conversations that make the lasting impressions. Maybe it's the everyday conversations with the important people.

I propped myself up on one elbow and smiled. "I could really go for a milkshake right about now."

*** THE END ***