



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 for language

Classification: Vignette, Romance, Angst

Spoilers: "Answered Prayers", "Capitol Crime"

Author's Notes: Oh, come on. You didn't really think I'd be able to pass up a shipper opportunity like the softball Mac just lobbed over the plate, did you? But the premise here is fairly realistic, in that there are, as always, serious obstacles between our two favorite lawyers. The main one is this: TPTB still have places to take this show before they give us the 'happily ever after' we're begging for. I'm a true-blue shipper to the end, but even I fear the 'Moonlighting' curse of hooking up heroes too early. (No, I'm not old enough to have watched "Moonlighting". But I know my pop-culture.)

So in order to illustrate my point and explain the title, I'll throw in a little Robert Frost:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

But I have promises to keep -

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

- "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Every so often my title references get a little bizarre. Sorry. To prove that I'm not really a poetry snob, there's a line from "Clerks" in this story. (There is definitely nothing highbrow about "Clerks".) If you've seen the movie, you'll spot it immediately. On with the main event now ...

1412 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Please, in the name of all that's holy, can we wrap this up sometime today?"

Sarah Mackenzie flashed an innocent smile at her colleague across the conference room table. "What, nuclear arms agreements aren't exciting enough for you?"

Sturgis Turner shot her a look that left no room for interpretation. "Mac, this stuff wouldn't be interesting if I was writing it on a tropical island with a damn pina colada in my hand. As it is, three straight days of this is enough to make anybody cry 'uncle'. If we weren't a mere step away from being finished, I'd seriously consider taking a header through that window over there."

"Jeez, tell me how you really feel," she teased him good-naturedly. Sturgis had been pleasantly surprised at how well they'd been working together this week. He hadn't been entirely sure about her at first, despite the way Harm was continually - and unintentionally - singing her praises. But after the murder investigation, and the decidedly personal

conversation in Mac's office a couple of days ago, he was beginning to see what made her so well-liked. And so hard to figure out.

"Don't worry. We're done. Just mark those last three amendments so I can add them to the draft report later on."

"Hey, you don't have to do the report by yourself."

"No sweat. I don't have any major cases this week, and you have to sit in on that Congressional meeting on Friday." She lifted one eyebrow with a devilish glint in her dark eyes. "Besides, you'll owe me."

He shook his head and gathered his files as she sauntered toward the door, whistling. After a moment, he chuckled, recognizing 'Son of a Preacher Man'. "Boy, if I had a nickel for every time I heard that one..."

Entering the bullpen, he caught sight of Harm, stepping off the elevator in his informal khakis and leather flight jacket. Sturgis glanced back, but Mac was already in her office and hadn't noticed her partner's arrival. "Somebody forget to tell me it was dress-down day?" he inquired, earning a withering look.

"Cut me some slack, buddy. I just spent most of the last twenty hours on a Herc inbound from the Med. I'm not even supposed to be here today." Harm tucked his cover under his arm and leaned on the nearest desk. "Did I miss anything interesting?"

"Not unless you enjoy the finer points of international arms treaties."

"Definitely not. How's Mac?"

Somewhat surprised by the question, Sturgis's mind immediately went to that bizarre conversation, the one where Mac had blurted out her feelings for her longtime friend and then instantly sworn him to secrecy. "Fine. Why?" he answered, a little quickly.

Harm gave him a funny look. "Because when I called a couple days ago, it sounded like you two were driving each other up the wall. The investigation's over, right?"

"Sure. She nailed it pretty well. Yours?"

"Done. Just thought I'd come in and get a head start on my report. Besides, I'm not sure I want to know what my brother did to my apartment while I was gone."

Sturgis grinned and turned to head back to his office. Soon, however, the door to Mac's office opened, and he slowed up, curious despite himself. She'd been outright cheerful for the past couple of days, and some part of him wondered if she was simply glad to have gotten that weighty declaration off her chest. *So she's in love with Harm. Is that really so big a shock?* he asked himself. It wasn't as if he hadn't been wondering about that very concept from the first time he'd seen them together. He had a suspicion that she'd only recently been able to admit it to herself, but now that she'd told someone else - even a relatively new acquaintance like him - things were beginning to look a little clearer to her.

Of course, now that the source of the original confusion was back in town, there was no telling what would happen. Feeling slightly guilty for his curiosity, he lingered near the

doorway to witness this reunion of sorts.

Mac moved through the bullpen with an efficient stride, pulling up short when she noticed Harm's presence. For a moment she didn't say anything, a flush of six different emotions rising in her. Why did things feel different now? Was what she felt more real simply because she'd confessed it to Sturgis? *Oh, for God's sake, get a grip*, she told herself bluntly. "You're back," was all she could think of to say.

Harm turned and fixed her with an easy smile. "Hey. I hear you're starting to give the Psychic Friends Network a run for its money."

"Very funny. Everything go all right on the Henry?"

"Not bad, I guess. Considering they're fighting a war and all." He shrugged a little, but she recognized the wistfulness in his gaze. He wanted to be out there flying. Sometimes this man could be read like a book. Other times ... a battalion of code-breakers wouldn't be enough to crack him. He brought himself swiftly back to the present and smiled again. "Anyway, Sturgis said you - "

"Sturgis said what?" she asked defensively.

Harm narrowed his eyes at her, mystified. First Sturgis, now Mac. What exactly had he missed around here? "Just that you did a great job with the case. You guys are wound up tight today, you know that? There isn't an operational readiness review coming up or anything, is there?"

"Not that I know of." She deftly sidestepped the real question, cursing herself for being so jumpy. "Listen, I've got a report to do, but can we catch up sometime tomorrow?"

"How's lunch?"

"Sounds good. See you later..."

And she disappeared back into her office, leaving Harm mildly confused. He glanced back at Sturgis, who was intently studying a file all of a sudden. Rolling his eyes, he opened the door to his own office and set to work organizing the towering stack of papers in his inbox. Sometimes there was just no explaining this place.

The following day JAG Headquarters

"It took me forever to make the connection. At first I thought the horses in the dream had something to do with the horse sculpture, but - "

"What about the guy at the chess tables? The Russian?" Harm interrupted, causing both Mac and Sturgis to look at him in surprise. "What? There's a chess piece that looks like a horse."

Mac smacked him on the shoulder, nearly causing him to drop his sandwich. "Where the hell were you when we needed you? That little deduction would have saved us most of a

day!”

“Hey, what can I say? I know how your mind works.” He flashed a grin at her, oblivious to the fact that Sturgis was watching the two of them carefully. “So the Russian did it? Does that mean there was a connection to the commander’s work?”

“Right again. We got him to talk, and they recovered a stolen uranium shipment later that day.”

“Man, I miss all the fun.”

“Like you would have turned down a chance to visit the Henry?” Sturgis tossed in, but Harm only shrugged.

“Usually when I end up on a carrier, I have at least a slim chance of getting to fly. There’s no way that was going to happen on this trip. The air strikes notwithstanding, Captain Ingles keeps harassing me about losing one of his planes. But AIRLANT still calls me every so often to sub in at Pax and such, so you never know.” He leaned back and reached for one of Mac’s potato chips.

“Hey! Don’t tell me you’re losing your health-nut tendencies.”

“Well, when you’re rooming with a twenty-one-year-old kid who hasn’t seen junk food in a year, it’s hard to stay on the straight and narrow.” Eyes twinkling, he snatched another chip from under her protective hand.

“Come on, squid, get your own!”

Sturgis just shook his head. They were quite the puzzle, these two. They were as close as any friends could be, but after all this time, there was still some uncertainty just below the surface. “Mac, trust me, this guy hasn’t always been a health nut. I seem to remember him making a strong showing in the hot-dog eating contest during our second-year Army-Navy Week.”

“That’s low, Sturgis,” Harm warned, as Mac burst out laughing.

“Oh, my God!” she howled, holding a hand to her heart in mock-horror. “Hot dogs? My stick-boy?”

“Hey, I was nineteen,” he groused, attempting to maintain his annoyance even after hearing her refer to him as ‘her stick-boy’. “Besides, if it’s Academy embarrassments you want, I’ve got better ones on him than he does on me.”

“Oh, no. You’re not thinking about telling her - ”

“Hell, yes, I am.” Harm folded his arms in satisfaction. “You want to tell it yourself, try to minimize the humiliation?”

“Don’t see any better alternatives.” Sturgis sighed. “Okay, here goes. It’s the middle of winter in Maryland, so there’s at least six inches of snow on the ground. My brilliant bunkmate here gets this idea from his friend at the University of Wisconsin - ”

"Washington," Harm corrected.

"Whatever. He says cafeteria trays make great sleds, so we swipe a few and decide to try them out on this hill behind the library. We wait until around midnight to keep from getting caught, and we meet up with..." At that point, he hesitated, glancing over at his friend. "... these girls we know from the other dorm."

"Hey, you don't have to edit," Harm said quietly. "I'm not going to fall to pieces if you say her name."

Sturgis dropped his gaze for a moment. "Sorry, buddy. I just didn't want to make things weird. Okay, let me try again. We meet up with Diane and her friend - Kelly, I think her name was. And for a while, things are great. The trays actually make pretty good sleds, so we're flying down the hill and having a grand old time. But then I get cocky and try something dumb. I aim down the other side of the hill, which is a lot steeper, and I end up sailing clear across the parking lot and wiping out in front of a parked car." Harm was smirking already, but kept his mouth shut. "It gets worse. The car belongs to the chaplain, who just happens to wander by at that exact moment. Of course, he knows my father, so I'm sure I'm about to be dead. But the guy just looks down at me, sprawled out in front of his car with a broken cafeteria tray, and says, 'Midshipman Turner, if you wanted to ski, you should have tried the Air Force.' "

Mac snorted in amusement. "And for weeks afterward," Harm continued, "we were calling him 'zoomie'. Di even got a hold of the Air Force song on tape, and we started waking him up in the morning with 'Off we go, into the wild blue yonder ...' "

"Never a dull moment with the dynamic duo of Turner and Rabb," Mac deadpanned, gathering her trash and tossing it in the can. "Ever thought about trying to sled on trays from *this* cafeteria?" The two commanders exchanged a look, pretending to ponder the concept, and she laughed all the way back to the bullpen.

About an hour later, as she was typing up the last of the recommendations for the nuclear arms proposal, Sturgis knocked on her door. "Come on in," she invited him. "What's up?"

"Not much. I just wanted to see how the report was coming."

"Almost done." She waved him toward a chair and smiled conspiratorially. "Seriously, did Harm really used to eat hot dogs?"

"On my honor as an officer," he replied solemnly. After a moment's pause, he spoke again. "You do realize that you referred to your partner and a commander in the U.S. Navy as 'your stick-boy', right?"

Her smile faltered slightly, but remained in place. "Sturgis, I started calling him 'stick-boy' years ago. Almost before I really knew him, actually. It's not what you think."

"What I think? Mac, you stood here and told me in no uncertain terms that you're in love with him. It's a little late to be getting cryptic, isn't it?"

"I'm not getting cryptic. So what if I'm in love with him? It's not like that changes anything. We're still in the same chain of command, and I still don't know - " Abruptly she

broke off, but the rest of the sentence wasn't difficult to guess.

"You still don't know how he feels?" Sturgis finished gently. "From where I sit, your attitude and his are basically mirror images. Maybe I'm not the best judge, but it seems to me like you two are pretty well connected on a lot of levels."

"Not this one. Believe me." She racked her brain for a way to explain. Then again, if she could explain it so easily, they wouldn't be in this mess. *When did I start thinking of this as a mess?* "Obviously each of us knows the other one cares, and that's about as far as it usually goes. We've tried, sort of, but we can't even get through a comprehensible discussion on the topic. We tap-dance around each other like a couple of eighth-graders. It would be a laugh riot if it wasn't my life."

He sighed, exasperated. "I really don't get it, Mac. If you honestly need to talk about this, why is it impossible to look him in the eye and go for it?"

"It's not just me, all right? It's him more than anything else. He's always been great at listening to my problems, but when it's his turn, he can't open up. It's like he wants me to lead him by the nose through this. And believe it or not, I understand that, at least a little." She walked over to the file cabinet, twisting a pen in her hands. "I mean -God, Sturgis, I know things have been rough for him, too. I know he has his reasons, but let's face it. Harmon Rabb is about as emotionally accessible as a brick wall."

A sound from the doorway made them both turn, and the color drained from her face.

Harm's expression was a calm as ever, but his ice-blue eyes made it clear that he'd heard that last remark. "Apparently I need to work on my timing," he said nonchalantly.

Mac stared at him, instantly gripped with guilt. "Harm," she whispered, taking a step toward him.

"No, you two finish your conversation. I know the way out."

And he was gone. She looked to Sturgis, who only gazed back, unable to assist. "Oh, Christ," she murmured. "Now what have I done?"

"Do these epic battles happen all the time, or am I just lucky that way?"

"Luck has nothing to do with it. You're the only one who keep harping on this," she snapped back, frustration getting the better of her.

"Mac, if you want me to never bring it up again, I can handle that. But denial's probably not your best strategy," he pointed out.

"I know. I'm sorry. And I do appreciate having a sounding board." She shook her head, raking her fingers through her hair. "I'll figure out some way to fix this. I swear. I just don't have any bright ideas yet."

"Would it help if I tested the waters for you?" He held up a hand to forestall her objections. "Don't worry. I have no intention of breaking our agreement. But sometimes guys will talk to other guys, you know? Not that I've been able to get much out of him on this

subject in the past, but..."

"I guess. But don't push it," she warned.

"I'll be the very model of discretion."

A trace of a grateful smile crept into her eyes. "You're a lifesaver, Sturgis," she said softly.

"Just trying to keep things running smoothly around here." He stood up, but paused by the door. "So what does he call you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You said you've been calling Harm 'stick-boy' for years."

"Along with flyboy, sailor, squid, and a few other things not fit for polite conversation," she added with a raised eyebrow.

"So what does he call you?"

Mac smiled a little. "Ninja-girl. Don't ask."

"Whatever you say." With a brief nod, Sturgis moved out into the bullpen. Harm's door was closed, so he decided to go get some actual work done before checking up on his friend. A few months ago, the soap opera storylines that seemed to characterize this office would have driven him crazy. Sometimes they still did, if he was honest with himself. But reestablishing his friendship with Harm had meant a lot to him, and developing this new one with Mac was important as well. There were worse things, he reasoned, than being a mediator.

When he knocked on Harm's door a while later, the curt 'enter' he received gave him some indication of the other man's mood. He stepped inside, leaving the door partially open. "I guess I don't need to ask how your day is going," he began.

Harm glanced up from his computer, and through a veil of annoyance, a flicker of hurt was just barely visible. "Oh, I'm peachy, Sturgis. How about you?"

"I'd suggest dropping the sarcasm before you talk to Mac again. It doesn't really work for you."

"Thanks for the pep talk." The phone rang then, and Harm grabbed for it. "Commander Rabb." He listened for a while, adding an occasional 'aye, sir', then hung up and checked his watch. "Damn." After scanning a couple of files, he cursed again. "Harriet! Are you busy right now?"

The lieutenant ducked her head in. "Not really, sir. What do you need?"

"I really hate to use you like this, but I'm in a major time crunch. Could you go out to my car and grab my flight gear out of the trunk?"

"No problem, sir." She caught the keys he tossed to her and was already on her way

out to the parking lot.

"What's going on?" Sturgis inquired.

"VF-84 is shipping out tonight on the Coral Sea, and one of her Tomcats didn't check out. AIRLANT needs a replacement ferried down to Norfolk from the reserve squadron up here. Guess I'm going flying." Harm said it with little enthusiasm.

"Listen, buddy, about what Mac said - "

"You're not going to try and tell me it was taken out of context, are you?"

"No."

"Good." Harriet reappeared with his gear bag, and he took it with a nod of thanks. "Look, I've got a whole bunch of things to get done before I have to leave, and I've only got - " he checked his watch again " - twenty-three minutes in which to do them. I'll try and get back in time for our game tonight, all right?"

"All right. Enjoy your ride."

Mac spent most of those twenty-three minutes testing out various ways to approach her apology. It was hardly the first time either of them had said something hurtful, but somehow she was having trouble formulating a strategy that didn't back one or both of them into a corner.

Harm, you're impossible, but I need you, she thought resignedly. You're arrogant and unyielding and yes, closed off from the world at times, but I can't stand the thought of not having you in my life.

"Maybe I won't open with that one," she said aloud.

Passing by the open door, Harriet paused. "Did you say something, ma'am?"

Mac sighed. "Nothing important. Do you know if Harm's in his office?"

"He is, but he's kind of stressed right now." Oblivious to the colonel's reaction, she continued. "I think AIRLANT must have come calling again, because he's trying to wrap up all his work for this afternoon. If you need a minute with him, I'd go now before he disappears for the day."

What I need will take far longer than a minute, but I'll take what I can get. "Thanks, Harriet." Mac stood up and stepped out of her office, heading for Harm's. Almost at the same moment, his door opened, and they came face to face.

"Do you have a sec - " She stopped, realizing that he was already in his flight suit and boots, his duffel slung over his shoulder. "You're going flying," she finished awkwardly.

"Nothing gets by you." Harm offered a smile, but it was empty. "Ferrying a Tomcat down to Norfolk. It was kind of short notice."

"Harm, listen. I'm sorry about earlier."

"Don't worry about it." Again that emptiness. He wasn't even trying very hard to convince her that it hadn't bothered him.

"Can I - I mean, sometime, can we ..."

"Mac, I have to be wheels-up at 1450."

"Later, then. But I want to talk to you," she said firmly.

"About what?" he asked without emotion, catching her off-guard. She fumbled for a response for a few seconds, but her hesitation seemed to answer his question.

"There's never a brick wall around when you need one," he stated quietly.

And he was gone again, leaving her to wonder where exactly she'd first lost control of the situation.

2013 EST Georgetown Heights Elementary gymnasium

"How is it that you're suddenly kicking my six?" Sturgis grumbled, slightly winded, as his friend dribbled the basketball toward the hoop.

"A number of reasons," Harm replied easily, posting left and setting up for a shot. The ball sailed in a perfect arc through the air and barely rattled the rim on its way in.

"Such as?"

"For starters, this is the first game in six months where my knee hasn't been aching from the get-go." He retrieved the ball and tossed it over. "Also, there's nothing better for a person's concentration than an afternoon of flying. Even a milk run like D.C. to Norfolk." Defending now, he reached in and attempted to slap the ball away, frustrating Sturgis further. "Last but not least, you're playing lousy defense, which makes me think that your head's not in the game. So if you're just stalling until you can come up with a way to ask me about Mac, you might as well get it over with."

"Why do you automatically assume that I want to get in the middle of that?"

"Because every time she and I even look at each other funny, you call us on it." This time, Harm succeeded in slapping the ball away. He spun around and took the shot himself. "But since we're on the subject, when did you become her Dear Abby, anyway? Or did she just suddenly decide that you looked 'accessible'?"

"Come on, Harm, don't take it so hard."

"No? How would you suggest I should take it?"

Sturgis took the ball and started back up the court. "How about the way she took it when *you* stuck *your* foot in your mouth a few weeks back? Based on my limited experience, I'd say that your little slip-up was worse, but she had the presence of mind to realize that you weren't thinking."

"I'm rarely thinking. What's her excuse?" In response, he received an exasperated glare and a shoulder to the breastbone as his opponent went around him toward the basket. "Offensive foul, by the way."

"Your feet weren't planted. Nothing with you two is ever simple, is it?"

Harm sighed, letting him take the shot with little resistance. "I'm not mad at her or anything. I mean, she's essentially right. I just - I thought we were doing so well."

"Seems like 'doing well' is kind of a relative concept, anyway." Sturgis watched his shot bounce harmlessly off the rim and shook his head. "But think for a second. You're so pissed off that she said something less than complimentary about you that you're not thinking about why she might have said it."

"Didn't you hear me the first time? I said I'm not pissed off. And what the hell are you talking about, anyway?"

He shrugged. "You and Mac are close. God knows what precisely that means, but obviously she doesn't think you're a bad friend. What if she was just trying to say she wants to get closer, but you won't let her?"

Harm stopped dribbling the ball for a moment and turned to face him. "Sturgis," he warned, "if you know something I don't..."

"That, my friend, is a large category."

Sensing that this was as far as he was going to get for the moment, Harm resumed the game, once again taking a shot directly over Sturgis's head. The other man fixed him with a look of irritation. "Weren't you supposed to get shorter or something? You've punched out twice!"

"Three times, actually. And you just don't notice the difference, because like all good bubbleheads, you slouch."

Unseen, Mac entered the gym and leaned against the bleachers, watching their one-on-one. It was a side of Harm she'd rarely seen, but it was a perfect example of the change in him since Sturgis had joined JAG. For the first time in ages, he had a friend in the most classic, uncomplicated sense - someone with whom he could honestly identify. Maybe this was the type of support he needed to finally get things straight in his life.

Unaware of the visitor, Harm took the ball back, intent on getting his twenty-first point and finishing this game so that they could continue their earlier conversation more rationally. As Sturgis moved in to block, however, they collided awkwardly, sending Harm sprawling onto the floor.

"Owww! Damn it..." He clutched at his knee and glared up at his friend. "There are

easier ways to win at twenty-one, you know,” he grouched.

“Sorry, man. You faked me out.” Sturgis helped him to his feet, looking contrite. “That would be the knee that just stopped hurting, wouldn’t it?”

“Of course it would.” Harm turned toward the bench, but stopped, the surprise in his expression rapidly morphing into suspicion. “Mac?”

She hadn’t even realized that she’d stepped forward. Something about the way his handsome features had darkened in pain, though, had propelled her toward him. “You okay, sailor?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah, I just need to walk it off.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead, his gaze darting between her and Sturgis. “Are you two joined at the brain now, or what?”

“I said I wanted to talk to you,” Mac replied evenly. “Sturgis mentioned that you guys play here. It’s not a state secret.”

“Whatever.” Harm limped over to the bench and started to pull a pair of sweatpants on over his shorts. As he did so, she noted the faint scar along the inside of his leg, a reminder of the crash that had come so close to changing everything. She’d been gone for much of his recovery, admittedly, but it surprised her somewhat that it was still part of his life.

“I didn’t know you were still having problems with your knee,” she said, her concern tempered with uncertainty.

“I’m not, really. I’m just feeling my age.” He retrieved his jacket and stood up gingerly. “You gonna let me have this game, buddy, or do I have to take my foul shot to make it official?”

Sturgis shook his head. “I know when I’m beat. See you tomorrow.”

Harm nodded toward him and looked back at Mac, shrugging slightly. “So talk to me,” he invited, his face impassive.

They left the gym and wandered out across the school’s playground, taking the long route back to the parking lot. The weather was unseasonably warm, but there was enough of a chill in the air to make both partners jam their hands in their pockets. “I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry for what I said today,” she began without preamble.

“You already did that. And anyway, you don’t have to apologize. You called it like you saw it.”

“No, I didn’t. If you were really as...”

“Emotionally inaccessible?” he supplied for her.

She winced. “That really does sound harsh, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it really does.”

“Like I was saying. If you were really as bad as all that, we wouldn’t be such good

friends, would we? I think what I meant was that there are certain subjects that you're unwilling or unable to touch, and that can be frustrating. That's all. I'm sorry if it looked like something more."

"You want to know what it looked like?" he asked honestly. "It looked to me like you were having an important conversation with a friend, which is perfectly reasonable. The thing is, this time you weren't talking to me - you were talking *about* me. To tell you the truth, I'm still not sure which part hurts more."

She averted her gaze as his words hit home.

"Look, Mac, I know we - what we are to each other defies description, and I know we haven't had many chances to connect lately, but give me the truth here. Am I failing you as a friend?"

Surprised, she just stopped walking and stared at him. After a moment, she found her voice. "Is that what you think?" she asked in amazement. "That I went looking to cry on Sturgis's shoulder? That I'm suddenly replacing you, because you did something to lose your 'most favored friend' status, or what?"

"I don't know, Mac. You tell me."

She sighed and began tentatively. "Harm, no matter what this looks like, I have never doubted our friendship like that. I would trust you with any and every last ridiculous problem of mine - "

"Except this one," he pointed out. "Whatever it is."

"There's a reason for that. Harm, I can talk to you about everything except ... well, you. And therein lies the whole problem."

The simple statement seemed to floor him. "What *about* me?" he asked finally, a little wary of the turn this was taking. "What have I done wrong?"

She wanted to laugh at that innocent question. *What have you done wrong? Nothing, and everything. You're the only person in this world I want to be with, and you're the one person I don't know if I can handle being with. You're hopelessly flawed and inexplicably perfect at the same time. I want to radically change half a dozen things about the way we are together, but I'm too terrified to alter a single thing for fear of destroying what we still have.*

But apart from the massive contradictions contained in that sentiment, there were hundreds of different warning bells screaming at her not to suddenly profess her undying love. It just wasn't her - it wasn't *them*. Still, if she didn't give him a straight answer, God only knew what he'd start to think ... "You didn't do anything wrong," she told him, getting herself ready for the leap. "Except for maybe giving up too easily."

After an interminable pause, he spoke up. "We're, ah, not talking about friendship anymore, are we?"

She'd been prepared for him to duck the issue, to toss out a flippant comment, but he didn't. The tense, hunted look that she'd expected never came. Instead, the flicker of emotion in his gaze looked almost like ... regret? She shook her head. "No, we're not. I asked

you once where we were, and you automatically said 'the end'."

"And you said 'back at the beginning'." Slowly, he resumed walking, and she joined him on the sidewalk. "So what exactly is the beginning, Mac? I thought it meant the beginning of us as friends. The way it used to be, before ... before a lot of things."

"Maybe that was what I meant. I'm not sure anymore. But we don't have a rewind button here. We can't just step back to where things were a year or two ago. Too much has happened."

"So what do you suggest?"

She looked up at him, a faint ray of hope in her dark eyes. "A different kind of beginning," she suggested. "The start of something new, where we're not held back by prior expectations or miscommunications. Where we can be free to make our own decisions without worrying about what either one of us has done in the past."

He hesitated, uncertain. "We're not that free, Mac," he said with grim resignation. "No matter what we think or feel, there are outside influences on us. The way things are now, we can't just drop everything and start a totally different kind of relationship."

"I know. But if we could ... would you want to?"

She dropped her gaze as she said it, as if after all this time, she was still afraid of what the answer might be. But he reached out and grasped her hand, ending all doubt. "You know I would," he said softly.

"Then that's the most important thing," she replied, determined not to let him see how much that four-word affirmation was affecting her. Regardless of how much they meant to each other, she still carried the scars from all the shattered loves long past, and opening her heart that completely just wasn't an option. But if anyone could ever understand that about her, it was this man. "It always was. Someday, tomorrow or next week or next month - things will line up, and we'll get our chance."

"What do you think it'll look like?" he asked, not releasing her hand. "Our chance? What has to happen to make this work? The Navy's not likely to relax its policy on fraternization anytime soon, and with everything so focused on the war effort, I very much doubt that the Personnel gods would transfer anyone, especially JAG's senior attorneys, without a serious fight."

"I don't know. It's not like I've stopped believing in 'service before self' or anything. I just know that I can't spend another year or more on this mental tightrope we've got strung between our duty and our lives. I'm tired of trying to define us by some odd modification of the term 'friends', because we both know that that doesn't cover it. I just want to be able to take some small amount of comfort from the idea that work is all that stands between us now, and that when we can find an opportunity to change that, we will. That's all."

There was a strange, faraway look in his eyes as she finished, tinged with something very close to sadness. "Harm?" she asked gently, beginning to worry that she'd dragged him over a line that he wasn't ready to cross. "Flyboy, are you still with me?"

At the use of the nickname, he came back to reality and smiled a little. "I wish I really was 'with you'," he replied wistfully, and the words warmed her soul. "You're right - I do give

up too easily. I always have, haven't I?"

"Not when it comes to your job, and not when it comes to your family," she contended, unsure what he was referring to.

"I give up on myself, though. I let people walk away from me, so that I don't have to make the decisions myself. I'll fight for someone else's happiness, but not my own."

"What are you talking about, Harm?"

He met her gaze, a long-standing ache creeping through in his voice. "Mac, I'm screwed up. You know I am. Hell, I know I am, and I don't do anything about it. We could have been at this point two years ago if I wasn't so screwed up ... Why in God's name would you want to get anywhere near me?"

Shocked, she reacted without thinking, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding onto him with all the power in her being. After a moment of surprise, he returned the embrace, first with trepidation, then with relief. "If I knew that, this wouldn't be so complicated," she answered, choking back a nervous laugh. "Harm, you've hardly got the exclusive rights to being screwed up. I think that might be why we need each other."

They didn't move for a while, desperate to memorize this feeling, knowing that it could be some time before anything more was possible. "This is bizarre," he said at last. "I've managed to stop being afraid of a few things, but now I'm afraid of some others."

"Like what?" she asked, her voice partially muffled by his jacket.

"Like ... I want more than anything to kiss you right now, but I'm afraid that if I do, I won't be able to stop."

She pulled back slightly to look up at him and realized that it wasn't a line: he was deadly serious. When she stopped to think about it, she realized that she felt the same way. "We have to keep things the way they are for now," she said, with less than inspiring conviction. "Until we figure out how to work everything out without giving up one or both of our careers, we can't."

"As long as you promise not to avoid me entirely," he begged. "I don't think I could take that."

"Hey, we're professionals. You fly a forty-million-dollar aircraft, and I've taken fire in combat. I think we can handle the high-stress environment of JAG Headquarters without cracking." Her eyes twinkled, but she soon sobered. "Things will be better now," she promised sincerely. "There won't be any more questions about what either one of us is thinking."

"You always had an unfair advantage on that front, anyway. You're beginning to make a living from knowing what other people are thinking."

She smacked his arm in mock-annoyance, and he caught her in another embrace. Immediately she relaxed against him, deciding that it was the most natural feeling in the world. Someday soon, she felt sure, it would be their turn.

Across the parking lot, Sturgis caught sight of his friends as he climbed into his car. Determined not to invade their obviously private moment, he started the engine and left for home without so much as another glance in their direction. Once in the safety of his living room, however, he opened up his organizer to the 'contacts' section and reached for his cell phone.

"Hello, has the congresswoman left for the day yet? Then please tell her Commander Turner is calling ... You're working awfully late, Congresswoman. Yes, my job is the same way most of the time. Listen, I have a favor to ask, concerning a couple of my colleagues. Oh, I think you know which ones I'm talking about. If you could make some inquiries, see what options are available ... You're a class act, Bobbi. Now go home for once, all right?"

He hung up the phone with a small amount of satisfaction. If all those two needed was an opportunity, it couldn't hurt to provide them with one. Now all he needed was someone to help him figure out *his* life.

**** THE END ****