



# Clearing Skies

Rating: PG-13 (language, implied sexual situations)

Classification: crossover, romance

Spoilers:

for *The West Wing*: "Two Cathedrals," "The Indians in the Lobby," "Posse Comitatus"

for *JAG*: "Contemptuous Words," "Boomerang," "Enemy Below"

Summary: At a time when very little in her life makes sense, C.J. Cregg finds an unlikely yet powerful bond with a naval-aviator-turned-lawyer named Harmon Rabb.

Special thanks to Valerie, whose calm advice and expertise in matters both technical and literary pulled me through this whole mess. I owe you big time, hon.

Author's Notes: Dear God, I can't believe I actually wrote this story. The idea started as something of a whim, but after a couple of e-mail discussions, it began to monopolize my fanfic muses. (Thanks a lot, Celli.) It's my first voyage into the world of West Wing fic, and I realize how little that show has in common with JAG, so bear with me while I lay out some ground rules...

First off, this story is set in the summer of 2002, which puts it between West Wing's third and fourth seasons, and between JAG's seventh and eighth seasons. It's going to deal heavily in the events of both shows' season finales, so a passing familiarity with one or both might be helpful. As a warning to the dedicated JAG shippers out there: this story is not going to have that much actual Harm-and-Mac time. Yes, it's still shipper-friendly, but the primary interactions here will be between Harm and C.J., and there may be some elements of that relationship that you won't like. Just trust me and keep reading. In general, the format leans more toward West Wing than it does JAG - I'm trying to write Harm as he might appear in a West Wing-type world. It's something of an experiment, so if you don't adore it, don't be crushed. I'll return to my regularly-scheduled shipper fic soon enough. On with the show...

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**Monday**  
**June 17, 2002**  
**The West Wing**

There was someone standing in the doorway of her office.

C.J. was well aware of the fact, but she didn't immediately glance up from her computer. At five minutes before nine a.m., her schedule was already packed, and if this visitor had had something important to say, he or she would have already started talking. That was the way it worked around here. When approximately thirty seconds had passed with no announcement, C.J. finally looked over her glasses at the young woman. "Donna, I don't mean to be rude, but isn't Josh's doorway your normal hovering position?"

"He's on the Hill this morning. Besides, he wouldn't fully appreciate the kind of information I have to offer." Donna tossed her blond hair with a conspiratorial look. "There's a hot-looking sailor in the lobby."

C.J. looked at her impassively for about half a second, then shook her head. "Forget it."

This wasn't the response Donna had been expecting, so it threw her off stride. "Forget what?"

"The last time my day started out with a line about someone in the lobby, I ended up spending the day before Thanksgiving babysitting a pair of Indians."

"Ironic..."

"Don't start." C.J. stood up from her desk and began to search the shelf for a file. Donna wasn't dissuaded in the least.

"Anyway, I'm serious about this one."

"A sailor in the lobby?"

"A hot-looking one. Trust me, you'd agree."

"Because you and I always share the same taste in men," she suggested dryly.

Donna pouted. "You're ruining my fun. I don't have the guts to ask him why he's here."

C.J. gave up looking for the file and threw up her hands, mildly exasperated. "Donna, I don't have time for this. I have a meeting in five minutes."

"Who with?"

She racked her brain. If that damn file had been here like it was supposed to be, she'd have been able to prepare before now, and this wouldn't have felt like such a trick question. "With ... with..."

"With one of the Judge Advocates from the Navy's war crimes tribunal task force," Carol answered smoothly, entering the office and dropping the requisite file onto the desk. "Leo wanted a firsthand update before the President commented about it in his speech, remember?"

"Leo also wanted to display his Air Force feathers and bitch about the Navy some more." C.J. stopped herself as she made the connection. "Hold up. My meeting's with a naval officer?"

Her assistant glanced down at the file to confirm. "Commander Harmon Rabb."

"The hot-looking sailor in the lobby?" Donna asked hopefully.

"You thought so too?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Laverne and Shirley." C.J. rolled her eyes. "I'm not sure anyone with a name like 'Harmon Rabb' can be classified as hot."

"You haven't seen him yet, C.J." Carol smiled. "You'll like him. Trust me."

C.J. looked suspiciously from one to the other, mystified by their enthusiasm. "I don't know where you two got the idea that you know my type. I'm not sure I even have a type anymore."

"You want me to bring him back here?" Carol asked, making a few notes on her boss's blotter.

"No, I'll go get him. Cleaning drool off a uniform is tough." She brushed past the two assistants, shaking her head, and strode through the busy hallways toward the main lobby.

Finding a naval officer in a busy room was typically a simple task, one made even simpler in the summertime. C.J. idly wondered what genius had decided that white uniforms were a good idea. The Navy certainly seemed to have gotten the short end of the dress-code stick. When her gaze fell on the only man wearing such a uniform, however, she rapidly amended that opinion.

He was probably about her age, with dark hair cropped short and eyes that defined a new shade of blue-green. Sitting ramrod-straight in a chair against the wall, he looked both at ease and alert at the same time. Handsome, certainly, but she didn't immediately see what had turned Donna and Carol into instant groupies. She shrugged inwardly and started to cross the foyer.

"Commander Rabb?"

The commander stood up, moving to meet her - and suddenly she understood why the other women had been so insistent. She was quite accustomed to her role as the 'tall girl'. This was the first time in recent memory that she'd actually had to look *up* at someone.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered politely, shaking the hand she extended to him.

"I'm C.J. Cregg, White House press secretary. Thanks for coming."

"My pleasure." His impressive smile faded slightly as an expression of puzzlement flitted across her features. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm just surprised. You're a Judge Advocate -- that's code for lawyer, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She glanced down at the gold wings that gleamed over his breast pocket, hoping to keep from making a fool of herself. "And apparently a pilot, as well?"

A hint of the smile returned, and she found herself just a little dazzled. "It's a long story, ma'am."

"If we have time later, I'd like to hear it." The words were out of her mouth before she could rethink them, but she recovered quickly. Nobody, not even a hot-looking sailor, was

going to knock her off balance this early in the week. "Let's talk in the Roosevelt Room. If you'll follow me..."

She led him past the communications bullpen, surreptitiously watching his reactions to the controlled chaos around them. Visitors' impressions of the West Wing were fascinating to study: it was easy to tell a first-time visitor, just from the sheer awe that invariably radiated from the person. This particular visitor was hard to read -- his expression didn't change at all -- but eventually she caught his eyes flicking back and forth, taking in their surroundings. *Gotcha*, she thought.

"Have you ever been in the West Wing before?" she inquired pleasantly.

"No, ma'am. The closest I've been is the Rose Garden, for an awards ceremony."

"Then maybe we've crossed paths before?"

"Actually, it was during the previous administration. I wasn't able to stay for the reception, so I've probably seen less of the White House than the average tourist."

As they reached the Roosevelt Room, she opened the door and waved him in. "Who was getting the award?"

"I was." He was already moving into the room as he said it, so he didn't see her eyebrows rise in restrained disbelief.

"I think I'd like to hear that story, too," she commented, then briskly moved on to business, taking a seat at the table. "Listen, this isn't a big deal. It's really more of a formality than anything else. As you probably know, the President is addressing a joint session of Congress in two days, and one of the topics is the state of our detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Leo McGarry had a few questions about the upcoming tribunals that he'd like to have officially answered before the final draft of the speech is written."

"Well, I'll do my best to give you the most official-sounding answers I can," Commander Rabb replied with a smile, setting his briefcase and cover down on the table.

"I can tell you're going to fit in just fine around here. Okay, first off. What kind of progress has the task force made?"

"We've got a framework in place for the basic procedure. Preliminary hearings are still set for the beginning of October." He paused, noticing her slight wince. "Is there a problem?"

"Not with the actual hearings -- the DoD has our complete support on that front. It's just the timing." C.J. sighed, folding her hands atop her notebook. "I don't think there's way to put this delicately, so I'm just going to say it. This coming September is going to be a complicated time. The one-year anniversary of the attacks will bring to the surface a lot of emotion that people really haven't had time to bury yet. If an entire year passes and no one has been convicted..."

"Ma'am, none of the detainees at Gitmo was on board an airliner on September 11th," the commander pointed out quietly.

"I understand that, but there's a very real connection. We'd like to be able to have at least a start on the tribunals before September, so that the public can see that someone is being held accountable."

"I see." He watched her impassively. "May I ask a somewhat blunt question?"

A little surprised, she only shrugged. "Blunt questions are all I usually get."

"Is there a concern that starting the tribunals in October might be too late for any PR benefits to affect the November elections?"

C.J. narrowed her eyes. This guy played hardball. After three years in front of the press corps, though, she wasn't about to blink. "Well, that is blunt, so I'll respond in kind. I don't believe that the tribunals are likely to have an appreciable effect on the President's chances for reelection, but we'd certainly like to see some resolution on this issue while we're all still in the White House."

"You don't expect to win reelection?"

"Are you normally this aggressive, Commander, or am I just lucky?"

Abruptly he softened, offering a self-deprecating smile. "My apologies, ma'am. I guess you can take the lawyer out of the courtroom, but -- "

"I don't believe that for a minute. I think you say exactly what you want to say just about every day of your life. Thing is, my M.O. is awfully similar." She met his gaze, challenging. "I fully expect to not only win reelection, but to win it in a walk. If you repeat that to anyone with a microphone, I know many, many ways of making you very sorry. But that's not the topic at hand. Nine months ago, the American people got collectively sucker-punched, and we think it's time to start hitting back. So why can't we start holding these guys up to the law right now? Why do we have to wait until October? Why do we even have to wait until next week?"

"Well, quite frankly, because this is an entirely new procedure of unparalleled magnitude. We're racking our brains for precedent, and like usual, we're tripping over our own red tape. If we push to start the tribunals any earlier, Headquarters will have a hard time getting prepared, and something might get missed. We just want to make sure it's done right. That's my only objection."

"But will you raise our concerns with your superiors?"

He merely tipped his head in acknowledgement. "I never ignore a directive from the White House."

"All right. Then I suppose all I need is a way to argue that point and sound confident. There are a lot of people accusing us of stalling the issue, and they've got rather loud voices. What can the President tell Congress Wednesday night to reassure them?"

Rabb considered the question carefully. Finally, he replied, "He can tell them that the enemies of the United States will not now, nor will they ever, escape the reach of justice. The legal branch of the armed forces rarely gets the opportunity to directly act in defense of the country, but I can assure you that every one of us is more than ready to perform our duties. That much is a certainty."

Both the words and the fire behind them made an impact, and C.J. nodded resolutely. "Commander, your candor is refreshing, to say the least."

"That's probably the kindest possible way to put it, ma'am."

"The 'ma'am' thing really isn't necessary. Around here, we're lucky to get anything above 'hey, you.' "

"I doubt that, but I can be flexible. Would you prefer Ms. Cregg?"

"I'd prefer C.J., actually."

Instantly she regretted making the suggestion. What the hell was she trying to do here? Make friends? She wasn't likely to ever see him again. Fortunately, he wasn't put off. "Fair enough. I'm Harm."

"I think we're done here, but if you've got a few minutes, I could show you around."

Harm smiled again - and this time she felt that he was actually smiling *at* her, not just in her direction. "I'd like that."

They roamed the halls for a while, as C.J. offered her best account of the history of the building. The naval officer listened intently, with a kind of decorum born of years spent in the service. He wore the uniform for all the right reasons, she saw. He had a deep respect, almost a reverence, for this place and what it represented. She found herself feeling a touch of guilt for the indifference she so often displayed as she flew through six critical tasks at once. Her first reaction was to push it aside. Her second reaction was to decide that this man must have a fascinating history of his own.

"Thank you for the tour," Harm said as they returned to the lobby. "I'm sure you have a number of other important things you need to get to."

She glanced at her watch. "Yeah, like my morning briefing, unfortunately."

"Well, if you need to follow up on what we discussed, all my numbers are on here. The pager's been on the fritz lately, so if you can't find me at the office, your best bet is my cell phone." He held out a business card, and she was careful to take it without brushing his fingers.

"You do owe me a couple of stories," she reminded him, tilting her head toward his wings. In response, he gestured toward the card in her hand.

"That's an acceptable reason to call, too. But you're the one with the crazy schedule, so I'll leave it to you. It was a pleasure meeting you, C.J."

"You, too." She watched him put on his cover -- perfectly straight on the first try -- and stride through the doors. A Marine guard saluted as he passed, and he returned it automatically. So much of the military way of life seemed like that, she thought. Automatic, rigid, without a second thought. But he wasn't entirely like that. He'd spent most of their meeting arguing with her, which wasn't usually the way to get a free tour out of her. But she'd given it to him anyway. What was it about him?

It wasn't until she was most of the way back to her office that she was able to put a label on it, and when the realization came, it stopped her cold. The military posture, the sense of being calm yet alert at all times, the way that he challenged her at every turn ... hell, even his height ...

After a split-second, she resumed walking, setting a course for her assistant's desk.

Carol heard her approach, as she always did. "CBS wants a minute to talk about Wednesday after the briefing," she reported. Receiving no reply, she looked up. "What? Did the hunk turn out to be an idiot?"

"Hardly." C.J. folded her arms across her chest, shaking her head. "You were so sure I'd like him."

"Well, yeah."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Carol."

"I really don't."

"It didn't cross your mind at any point that the commander might remind me of someone?"

After a moment of bewilderment, understanding flooded Carol's features. "I didn't really think he looked that much like -- "

"He does to me. His entire bearing screams 'Simon' in flashing red letters, and I can't believe you don't see that."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"It's all right. Briefing starts in ten?"

"Yeah. I'm just pulling up the market summaries for you."

"Okay. Give me five minutes." C.J. stepped into her office and closed the door, attempting to regain her equilibrium. Carol was probably the only person on staff who had even an inkling of how deep her emotions ran on the subject of Simon Donovan. The Secret Service agent who'd protected her during the threats of the past spring had been well known among the staff. They'd all gotten accustomed to hearing his calm, wry voice in the halls, quietly taking all the misdirected frustration she'd thrown at him. They'd all expected him to leave as quietly as he'd come once the threat had passed. None of them had expected to be attending his funeral.

A robbery, Agent Butterfield had told her. A convenience store and a couple of scared, stupid kids. They'd found Simon with a rose lying next to his hand, a casualty of duty and a victim of being in the wrong place at the worst possible time. A few people had wondered who the rose might have been for, but she had no intention of enlightening them.

C.J. looked down at the business card in her hand, holding it over the wastebasket for a long minute. She didn't need to go through this. She didn't need to dredge up all the questions she'd buried over the past few weeks. There were too many other things to worry about.

*There are always too many other things to worry about, part of her mind pointed out. That's why you keep pushing it aside. It isn't going to go away on its own, no matter how long you avoid it.*

It had been most of four years since she last had a real friend - someone to talk to who didn't live and breathe this job the way she did. Maybe a Navy lawyer was as good a distraction as any.

Dropping the card into her desk drawer, she picked up her notebook and started toward the pressroom. Before anything else, she had an economic crisis, a new medical research bill, and a possible autoworkers' strike to brief.

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**Tuesday**  
**JAG Headquarters**

"You're looking awfully chipper today. What do you have up your sleeve?"

Harm raised his hands in surrender. "Not a thing. I'm just convinced of my client's innocence."

"Sure you are." Sarah Mackenzie folded her arms and stared her partner down as they crossed the bullpen. "Come on. Not even a clue? For your very best friend?"

"For my very best friend, certainly. Just not while she's also playing the role of lead prosecutor."

"Ah, well. I had to try." Undaunted, Mac breezed past him and into her office. Harm only shook his head and continued on to his own office.

The past few weeks had been a struggle for both of them, and for the entire staff. Once the immediate crisis in the Arabian Sea had passed, they'd all managed to relax -- perhaps too much. Certainly they hadn't been prepared for the bombshell that had shattered their dear friend's life only a few days later. Now that Bud was back at home, beginning an arduous rehabilitation process, everyone was going above and beyond to make everything appear normal -- whatever that word meant anymore.

One of the bastions of normalcy at JAG HQ, apparently, was the relationship between its top attorneys. It felt as if the rest of the staff was looking to Harm and Mac to maintain the expected balance in the office. As a result, despite the closeness they'd found during their time in Afghanistan, something seemed to be keeping them in a perpetual holding pattern, preventing any further evolution. And it was driving him nuts.

Harm sat down at his desk and attempted to focus on the report that Lieutenant Singer had recently delivered. It was obsessively detailed, as usual. He was still searching for actual evidence in the fourteen-page document when his phone rang, bringing a welcome distraction.

"Commander Rabb."

"Commander, this is C.J. Cregg. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Far from it, believe me," he responded, a little surprised. He hadn't really expected to hear from her again. "Looking for a reciprocal tour of our action-packed office?"

Her laugh was short, but genuine. "Thanks, but I'm fine."

"What can I do for you, then? If you need additional information for the speech, you're running short on time. It's tomorrow night, isn't it?"

"Actually, I wasn't calling about the speech. This is on another matter." There was a pause on the line as she considered her approach. "I realize that this may be a somewhat odd request, but I think I'd like to hear some of those stories you alluded to yesterday. I was wondering if, possibly, you'd be willing to meet after work to discuss them sometime."

There wasn't an immediate response, and she rushed ahead. "Of course, if you're uncomfortable with the idea -- "

"No, not at all. Would you hold on for just a moment?" Harm covered the receiver and called out to Singer as she passed by his door. "Lieutenant, a minute, please? This was supposed to be a summary, not the history of Western civilization. Could you clean it up so that I can find the ballistics report without a compass? Thank you. Dismissed." As the junior officer disappeared around the corner, he returned to the phone. "I'm sorry, I had to get some information."

"No, it's all right. Like I said, I know this is an odd thing to ask."

"I was just thinking that it doesn't sound odd at all. It just sounds like a normal -- "

"Date? No, that's not where I was going with it. I mean, trust me, I'm not anywhere near prepared to do anything even resembling a date."

He blinked, starting to get confused. "Okay, I stand corrected."

"Wait, I didn't mean to be so vehement. What I mean is, this is a purely self-serving request. I could really use a few hours away from my job, and my job doesn't really allow for many opportunities to talk to anyone outside of ... well, my job. I would just like to have an evening of intelligent conversation with a person who doesn't live and die by the exit polls in Peoria. That's all I'm proposing. Take it or leave it."

Harm hesitated for a moment, trying to weigh the consequences of his answer. After tossing a brief glance in the direction of Mac's office, he replied finally, "All right. You've got a deal."

She hadn't really expected him to agree, so it took her a moment to decide how to proceed. "Okay, then. Are you free Thursday?"

"I am. Are you sure *you're* going to be?"

"I'm never sure, but since the speech will be over, I ought to be able to escape before too late. Say eight o'clock?"

"That ought to work. I don't suppose you've already thought of a location?"

"As a matter of fact, no, but thinking on my feet is one of the things I get paid to do. Do you know Café Maria on Columbus Avenue?"

"Sure, I used to live around there. I was addicted to their hazelnut coffee."

"It's their Thursday special. I told you I think on my feet."

"And you do it well. So, Café Maria on Thursday night?"

"Sounds good. I really appreciate this."

"I'll look forward to it as well. Good luck with the speech."

"Thanks. See you then."

Harm hung up the phone, then stared at it for a while. What exactly had he just agreed to? She'd gone out of her way to explain the non-date status of this meeting. Then what was it? Make new friends week? She was certainly an interesting person. Bold, but in a refreshing, non-threatening way. *So what the hell does she want with me?*

At last, he decided that it was nothing more than what they'd outlined: a friendly cup of coffee between adults who admittedly had next to nothing in common. If nothing else, it would be a break in his routine, and his routine could definitely use a break. Making a note in his weekly calendar, he turned his attention back to his computer.

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## Thursday Café Maria

C.J. swung her car into the first available parking space and hurried toward the door of the coffeehouse. Twenty-four minutes past eight. Damn. She'd been on her way out at seven forty-five, but Toby had cornered her with a 'quick' question about subsidies for soybean farmers, and Toby's questions were never quick. Now she was just hoping that her companion hadn't already given up on her and left.

When she reached for the door, though, another hand shot out to grab it - and she was greeted by a pair of piercing eyes that, once again, she had to look up to meet. "Good timing," Harm observed, tucking his cover under his arm and holding the door open. "I was just rehearsing my apology for being late."

"Looks like we can just chalk it up to demanding careers." C.J. stepped inside and located a suitable table near the corner. "I wouldn't have expected lawyers to have to work so late, though."

"I had to meet with a client. Trial's making him nervous, so I have to continually keep reassuring him that he's not screwed."

"What's the charge?"

"Murder."

She blinked. "Well, I can see why he might be nervous about that."

"Yeah. The kid's twenty-four years old, and the security report alleges that he got into an argument with a fellow squad member and attacked him outside their barracks."

"Did he do it?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "If I knew, do I you really think I'd tell you?"

"I don't think you'd tell me. But you do know, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

That line of conversation effectively ended as he ordered their coffees from a passing waiter. C.J. watched him for a moment, sizing him up again. "Law is probably one of the few professions I could never picture myself in."

"Really? I would've expected the West Wing to be full of lawyers."

"Oh, it is, but they're mostly former corporate types. I'd be surprised if any of them had ever been near a murder case. No, it's the whole concept of trying to defend a person whom you know is guilty. I couldn't handle that."

"I'm not too fond of it myself, but I understand the fundamental necessity of it. Fortunately, the situation doesn't come up all that often." Harm leaned back in his chair. "So what path does one take to get to the White House press secretary's office, if law school is out of the question?"

"A lot of luck, mostly. I escaped the Midwest to go to Berkeley, and I graduated with no clear idea of where I was going. I did a little work for some political action committees, but eventually I found myself doing PR for film studios in L.A., and although the money was good, I can't say I was too sorry to leave when the Bartlet campaign came calling."

He shook his head. "I'm having a hard time picturing you in the Hollywood lifestyle."

Instinctively, she bristled. Her PR work wasn't something she was particularly proud of, but it had been a part of her life, and she wasn't about to let anyone cut her down because of it. "Why's that? Do you have any firsthand experience with 'the Hollywood lifestyle?'"

In response, she received a sardonic grin. "Dated a director for a year and a half. You have about as much in common with her as I do with the Queen of England."

She began to relax. "I see. Directors are an interesting bunch."

"That's one way to put it." Their coffees arrived, and he took a sip of his before continuing. "It sounds like you escaped *to* California somewhere around the time I was escaping *from* it."

"You're from out west?"

He nodded. "Around San Diego. I went to high school in La Jolla."

"Nice area."

"Unless you're sixteen and can't wait to get out, sure." He smiled ruefully.

"You knew even then that you wanted to join the Navy?"

"I knew that from the time I was five. It's the family business, such as it is."

"So do you come from a line of Navy lawyers, or Navy fliers?"

He folded his arms and leaned on the table. "What do you think?"

"I'd say fliers."

"You'd be right."

She swirled the straw around in her coffee, idly wondering why he didn't volunteer any further information. "I feel like I don't understand the military perspective as well as maybe I should. We've had a fairly smooth ride with the Pentagon for most of the term, but sometimes I think your bosses' opinions about my boss are colored by the fact that he doesn't have a military background."

"I sense a personal question coming on."

"Wait for it." C.J. shot him a stern look, but her eyes twinkled. "Seriously. Does it bother you that the President never served?"

"Not particularly. I don't think everyone in this world is meant to wear a uniform."

"But he's your commander-in-chief," she persisted.

He shrugged. "Politics and the military don't always fit all that well together. I approve of the way he's handled the recent conflicts, and they couldn't have chosen a finer officer to advise him than Admiral Fitzwallace."

"Hypothetically, though, if he ordered you to do something that you thought was ill-advised ... you know, because of a lack of experience or understanding of the situation ..."

"I'd still do it. Orders are orders. That's the only way the whole thing works."

She had a hard time believing that anything this critical could be so black and white. "There's been a lot of concern about the direction of our efforts in Afghanistan," she said carefully. "People are afraid that the war on terror could turn into another Vietnam, that a conflict could arise between political and military objectives. Doesn't that worry you?"

When she looked up, the coldness in his eyes shocked her into silence. "You don't want me to start in on Vietnam right now," he replied quietly. "I'm not really into finger-pointing on

this topic, but whatever happened over there cost me my father. And I don't think you really want to go there tonight."

"I'm sorry," she said, not knowing how else to respond. "I'll back up a little. But I really am interested in what you think of the President."

"Why?"

"Because it's an election year," she shot back immediately. "No, really. I almost never talk to a person who doesn't have some kind of agenda, and I get the feeling that you might just be one of the few honest people left in Washington. So would you humor me?"

Harm spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "I have nothing but respect for the President."

"You didn't vote for him, did you?"

"Come on, how many card-carrying Democrats are there in the armed forces?"

She studied him, narrowing her eyes. She knew when she was getting the run-around. "You're not going to tell me, are you? Even if you hated everything about him, you'd just sit there and not say a word."

"I don't hate anything about him."

"But if you're as conservative as you claim, you must dislike some of his policies."

He merely fixed her with a cool expression and recited a well-worn phrase. "Public criticism of my commanding officers is prohibited under the Uniform Code of Military Justice." Almost as an afterthought, he rolled his eyes. "I should know, after my run-in with the last commander-in-chief."

She decided not to pursue that comment for the moment. "I'm sure the ACLU loves it when you guys prosecute that one."

"Depends on who's in the Oval Office at the time."

This was starting to get frustrating. The more he dodged, the greater her instinct to press the issue became. "Harm," she began, sharply catching his attention. "This isn't a state secret here, all right? I just want to know what you think. How wrong could that be? It's just you and me."

He looked at her in disbelief. "'Just' you? C.J., you're the press secretary. I can't imagine a more dangerous conversation."

"You don't think I can keep the opinions of a casual acquaintance to myself?" she demanded defensively. "You think I'm going to waltz into the briefing room tomorrow and give your sound bites to the New York Times? You have no idea how well I keep secrets, Commander."

"I'm sorry. That was uncalled for." He touched her arm, stalling some of her anger. "But I can't tell you what I think of your boss's defense budget or his stance on *Roe v. Wade*. Not because of who you are, but because of who I am. I really am sorry."

Something about those earnest yet unyielding eyes sent her into another maelstrom of memories, and she had to mentally shake herself out of it. "I'm sorry, too. I think some subconscious part of my brain is trying to sabotage this -- whatever it is -- because every so often, you remind me of someone. A lot, in some cases."

She half-expected that explanation to fall flat, but instead he nodded in understanding. "I know that feeling. Sometime I'll tell you how I met my partner -- "

"I got him killed," she blurted out, surprising both of them. "The person you remind me of. Indirectly, he's dead because of me."

Immediately she was horrified at herself for dropping that kind of news on a near-stranger. It wasn't even something that she'd consciously admitted to herself, but it was the way she felt. He would have been justified in running the other way after something like this ...

... but he didn't. Instead, there was something familiar in his expression. "Unfortunately, I know that feeling, too," he replied quietly.

She stared at him. "Are you serious?"

He sighed. "Maybe it's time I explained the story of why I'm a lawyer with wings."

She listened as he told her about the accident that had ended his flying career and the life of a fellow aviator, about how his search for a new life had eventually led him to his position at JAG. Somehow, as painful as it sounded, hearing that gave her comfort. If he could shoulder that kind of guilt and still move on, maybe there was some hope for her after all.

Abruptly, he pulled himself back to the present. "I apologize. I'm sure the last thing you were looking for tonight was a sob story. Especially since it sounds like you've got enough to deal with on your own."

"Actually, I was just thinking that it sounded more like a success story to me. And regardless of what I was looking for tonight, I think maybe this was exactly what I needed. Because of what I'm dealing with on my own."

"If you want to talk about it, it seems like we've already established a ground rule of nothing off-limits."

She drew a deep breath. "It's not a very complex issue. This spring I received a number of emails threatening my life. I had a Secret Service agent assigned to me for almost a month, and we got to be pretty close. Last month, we accompanied the President to New York City for an event, and that night they arrested the man who'd been threatening me. Unfortunately, Simon -- Agent Donovan -- walked into a convenience store holdup that same night, and the robbers shot him."

Once it was out, the tale lifted some of the weight from her shoulders. "Next to what you just told me, it's practically nothing, but that's what happened."

"It's not nothing," Harm told her, his voice gravely serious. "But I don't understand how it could be your fault."

"I tried to tell him not to come to New York. He wouldn't have been there at all if it hadn't been for me -- "

"You mean, if he hadn't been doing his job?" He shook his head. "C.J., I don't know if I'm qualified to comment on Secret Service procedure, but I can tell you what it means to have a duty to uphold. He would have been there no matter what, regardless of how close he did or didn't get to you. It has nothing to do with the reasons he was killed. I can promise you that."

"I know. I mean, on some level I know, but sometimes ..." She attempted a wan smile. "I don't know if I can believe all that just yet, but I appreciate you saying it nonetheless."

He drained his coffee cup before speaking again. "It seems to me that despite some rather impressive political divergences, the two of us might have more in common than I'd expected."

"How do you figure?"

"You drove up in a '65 Mustang, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I had to pay a fortune to get it shipped here from L.A., but I do love that car. Your point?"

"I was in love with my '68 Corvette -- drove it for almost ten years before it was stolen. I spent half of last year and a hell of a lot of money to restore another one." He flashed a grin, and she felt some of that tension she'd been unable to shake finally begin to ease. "Mac teased me mercilessly about it."

"Mac is?"

"My partner, Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie." He paused a moment, reconsidering. "It's funny. I always refer to her as my partner, even though we don't often work together anymore. I guess 'best friend' is probably a more accurate description. We've been getting each other in and out of trouble for almost six years now."

At her look of disbelief, his lips twisted wryly. "I know. It makes me feel old just to say it."

"No, I was just surprised to hear that anybody in the Navy stayed in one place for six years."

"Hey, I'm a lawyer, remember? I'm well-versed in the concept of rolling with the punches." He shrugged. "What about you? I know you expect your boss to win reelection, but if for some reason he doesn't, do you know what you'll do next?"

"I'm trying pretty hard not to think about it at the moment. Ask me again in a couple of months, after the convention."

"Whatever you say. At any rate, I imagine there are a number of groups out there who'd kill to have you running point for them."

"You don't know me well enough to mean that," she countered, daring him.

"No, I suppose I don't. But I tend to trust my first impressions."

"And your first impression of tonight is?"

"That you're an enjoyable conversationalist, and that I wouldn't mind repeating tonight in the future. Unless your Thursdays are booked up."

Strangely flattered, she only shook her head. "I think I could manage another jailbreak next week. Same time, same channel?"

"I'll be here. Hopefully closer to the actual specified time, but no promises."

"That goes for me as well. Have a good week."

"You, too."

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**Thursday**  
**June 27, 2002**  
**The West Wing**

"Josh!"

Josh's head swung around, attempting to locate the voice that had just yelled his name. "What?"

C.J. whacked him lightly with a folder, drawing his attention. "The natives are getting restless."

"Which ones? AP?"

"It doesn't matter which ones -- they'll all get on the scent eventually. You've got to let me tell them something."

"All right, tell them what you know."

"See, that would be the problem, because what I know is approximately nothing." She swiftly blocked his doorway before he could escape into his office. "The new Qumari defense minister isn't staying quiet. He's already told everyone who'll listen exactly how the attack on Shareef likely took place, and even though no one wants to be the first one to say anything, they're all going to assume we had something to do with it."

"You don't know that."

"Josh, give me some freaking credit here! It's been over a month, which is way longer than we could reasonably have hoped to keep this under wraps. But things are eventually going to get hot, and I'd like to be prepared."

"Look, when Leo tells me what our position is, I'll tell you, and then we'll go from there. I can't do any better than that. We're all set for the thing in Atlanta on Friday?"

"Yeah, yeah," she muttered, knowing she wouldn't get anything further out of him.

"This is what I love about you, C.J. You're such a ray of light in this office."

"Josh, if you don't drop the sarcasm right now, I'm going to tell Amy that you recommended the Families First Initiative."

"I'm impervious to threats, but I'll shut up anyway, just to be a nice guy." When she allowed him access to his office once again, Josh moved inside, but quickly stuck his head back out into the hallway. "Hey, C.J., what was the name of that officer you met with last week?"

She turned back, wary of the question. "About the Al-Qaeda tribunals? Rabb. Commander Harmon Rabb. Why?"

"No big deal. I just thought he was more of an admin-type officer."

"What makes you think otherwise now?"

"Well, for one thing, we're apparently giving him some kind of commendation for combat service." He tossed the file toward her, and she skimmed it.

*What the hell?*

"Do you need this?" she asked, waving toward the file.

He shrugged. "Nah, I don't know why I got it in the first place. Help yourself."

"Thanks. I'll be in my office if you need me."

"I always need you, C.J. ..."

Rolling her eyes, she strode toward her office and sat down at the computer. Clearly there was more to this particular commander than met the eye. Fortunately, information was her trade. She had most of four hours before their scheduled meeting, and she fully intended to use the time well.

When she arrived at the café that evening -- only eleven minutes late this time -- Harm was already seated, and there was a cup of coffee and a muffin waiting for her. "C.J.," he greeted pleasantly. "Hope you like blueberry. I took a guess."

It was a good guess, but she didn't dare let down her guard just yet. "So you're just another lawyer, huh?" she asked, leveling an accusatory stare on him as she took a seat. "Spend all your days in the courtroom and in that 'action-packed office' you spoke of?"

"Most of the time," he answered, unsure what to make of her demeanor. "Occasionally things get a little more exciting, but --"

"What would you call exciting? Say, for instance, allowing a nuclear missile to lock onto your aircraft engine in order to steer it away from a carrier? Would that qualify?"

He winced. "You heard about that, huh?"

"I briefed it five weeks ago. I just didn't realize until this afternoon that you were the pilot I'd been talking about. When I called up your service record, the file almost killed my computer." She folded her arms. "So were you going to tell me what you're really like at some point, or were you going to let me continue to believe that you're just another one of the guys?"

"I didn't realize I was keeping secrets," he replied coolly. "Did you find my service record to be a page-turner?"

"Well, the two Distinguished Flying Crosses were a good start, but I nodded off somewhere after the part where you saved the life of Vladimir Putin."

Mildly irritated, he met her gaze without flinching. "Was I supposed to list all that crap off as soon as we sat down last week? Sometimes I get into some weird situations. It's what I do. It doesn't define my existence."

"Okay, I'm sorry. That was a bad note to start out on. I just didn't expect to see your name jump off the page at me when I read about the Seahawk incident."

"I guess I did mislead you a little about that. I never mentioned the fact that I got my vision corrected and was reinstated on active flight duty, did I?"

"No, you missed that part. And I'm not sure I've quite figured out how you ended up chasing a missile, but now that I'm here, I'd sure like to hear you try and explain it."

Harm offered a half-shrug, looking more uncertain than she'd yet seen him. "Right place, right time, I guess. It's a an exercise that all flight crews do, and since I still had the ship's record, they gave me a plane and said 'go to it.' There really isn't much more to it than that."

"From your perspective, maybe, but from where I sit, there has to be more to it. They're giving you a medal for it, aren't they?"

"Could we maybe find something else to talk about? That week wasn't one of the high points of my life. A good friend of mine was wounded in country, and ... I just don't really want to go back there, all right?"

"Sure, I understand. Well, no, I don't, but I can respect it." C.J. took a bite of her muffin. "Good choice, by the way. Since you got me food, maybe I should let you choose the discussion topic."

"I have to warn you that the topic on my mind at the moment might be something you wouldn't feel comfortable discussing."

She looked at him askance, trying to decide if that was supposed to be a hint, but he gazed back at her in total innocence. "Okay, I've been warned. Fire away."

"Are we going to war in the Middle East?"

"We're already at war in the Middle East, in a manner of speaking."

"I don't mean the war on terror. Does the administration foresee a conflict with Qumar on the horizon?"

That stopped her in her tracks. It was the question she'd been dreading for weeks, the question she'd begged Josh to answer just that afternoon. But she'd expected to get it from a reporter, one of the veterans of the press corps who'd been tracking these kinds of leads for years. She wasn't supposed to get it from this -- what was he, anyway? "Why would you say that?" she asked carefully.

He wasn't put off by the shield that seemed to lock into place with that comment. "Last month, Qumari defense minister Abdul Shareef was killed as he returned home from a 'goodwill' visit to the United States. I'm sure you know the details better than I do, but I do have a certain level of clearance, and there aren't many options for determining exactly where his plane may have been forced to land. Also, a midsize cargo ship was seized in the San Francisco Bay a few weeks ago, and two of its crew were found to have Qumari citizenship -- "

"They all held multiple passports," she broke in, narrowing her eyes. "All right, keep your damn voice down. If you know about the ship, then you probably know what it was carrying."

"Not specifically, but I'll assume it wasn't a shipment of teddy bears. And since I'm not the cynical type, I'm more than willing to believe that Shareef's assassination was only ordered because he was found to be part of some kind of plot. Hypothetically speaking."

"If such an act were to be undertaken by the U.S. government," she replied with the utmost caution, "it would only be in response to a heinous act against the citizens of this country."

"Of that I have no doubt. But if that's the case, then why stay quiet about it? Why not come out with an accusation against the Qumaris, if they tried to attack us?"

"Leaving aside Section 18 of the U.S. Code, you mean? Because 'they' is a tough concept to nail down. We don't know who in their regime is with us and who isn't. If we go public with the rationale behind the assassination -- and don't you dare take this as confirmation that we had anything to do with it -- tempers will start to flare, and pretty soon we really will be in a declared war with another country."

"Or five other countries," he agreed grimly. "All right, I appreciate the honesty, and I'm not going to run off to the press with it. It's a self-serving curiosity, since I tend to end up in war zones on a regular basis. I just like to know what I'm getting into, and these days I almost never know what I'm getting into until I'm already knee-deep in it."

"It must be hard, to follow whatever orders you're given without getting the reasons behind them."

"I usually get to see the reasons sooner or later."

"That's only because you're an officer."

Harm smiled a little at that, but it quickly faded. "Maybe so. At any rate, I can't say I'm thrilled to hear that there have been other plots against our own shores recently. I guess I thought that things would eventually calm down, or something. If you'd come to me this time

last year and told me that I'd still be flying civil air patrol every third weekend, I'd have sent you off to get your head examined."

"You patrol over the District?"

"And New York, occasionally, when their ANG units are stretched too thin. I even flew over the Superdome for the first half of the Super Bowl last year. I sure don't mind logging the flight hours, but at the same time ... It's been the first time in my life where the pure love of what I do hasn't been enough to outweigh the reasons for having to do it."

She had to stop and think about that statement for a minute. It seemed like a very telling insight into the mind of a combat aviator. These men and women truly loved to fly, yet they all had to know that any situation which would properly use their skills would be little more than a last resort. They trained endlessly for a day that everyone hoped would never come.

But of course, in spite of all the hopes, the day had come once again. She shook her head to clear it. "Well, speaking as someone who spends a lot of time in one of the biggest targets in Washington, I'm grateful for your services."

"All in a day's work, ma'am." He tipped an imaginary cowboy hat.

Just then, a sharp sound from just over her shoulder caught her off-guard, and she jumped, startled. With reflexes honed in the cockpit, Harm reached out to deflect the tray that was careening toward her, and it clattered to the floor. The waitress apologized profusely, cleaning up the spilled drinks as quickly as she could manage, and C.J. realized just how hard her heart was pounding. Embarrassed, she looked away from her companion.

"Thanks for the save."

"No problem. Are you all right?"

"Sure. I'm just -- jumpier than I used to be, I guess."

"Being stalked will do that to you," he observed.

"I don't think it all started with being stalked. I think it probably started when I heard gunshots over my head in Rosslyn a couple years ago, and it probably won't stop until I'm well and truly out of the public eye."

"That may be. But you handle it well, and I admire that."

She studied him critically. "You've got to know what it's like. You've been shot at, right?"

That earned a rueful smirk. "You don't want to know how many times."

"Well, imagine having it happen to you before you'd ever had any military training, and then you'll start to see why I can be such a wimp about it."

"C.J., you are many things, but wimpy is definitely not one of them."

Something about the casual sincerity in those words warmed her. "Thanks, I think, but do you understand what I mean? I wonder if maybe you don't see me as the same kind of person you are."

"What do you mean? We're both serving at the pleasure of the President, in one form or another."

"Yes, but I came to this job late, after ten years of selling shallow bullshit and making an obscene amount of money doing it. I was Hollywood, for God's sake. I'm not ashamed of it, but at the same time, I'm not really in a position to declare myself a patron saint of democracy. You, on the other hand, have been doing every single thing your country's asked of you since you were ... what?"

"Seventeen," he supplied matter-of-factly.

"Seventeen? You can join up that young?"

"I went to the Academy." He met her gaze with surprising gravity. "Don't put me up on any pedestals, C.J. I'm at least as flawed as anyone in this room."

"I guess I'll just have to take your word for it."

"For now. But don't sell yourself short, either. Not too many people can do what you do every day and maintain their sanity."

"I knew this was a good idea. Good coffee and free self-esteem therapy in one package." They shared a laugh, and she decided to charge ahead. "Listen, can I ask you for another somewhat strange favor?"

His eyes still flickered with amusement. "How well do we really know each other?"

"That's kind of my point. I was wondering, when we meet next week -- assuming that you still want to meet next week, since obviously you're under no obligation here -- "

"C.J.," he interrupted gently, ending her tangent. "Just say what you want to say, all right?"

She bit her lip. "Would you mind wearing something civilian? It's not that I mind the uniform, but I'd like to see you out of it -- " Abruptly she halted, flames shooting up her cheeks, as he lifted an eyebrow at her choice of words. "Oh, Jesus, you'd think I would've learned to express myself better by now."

"It's all right."

"What I meant was that I've only ever seen you like this, and I'm afraid I'll never be able to separate you as an officer from you as a person. There is more to you than the Navy, right?"

"I'd like to think so." He waved a listless hand. "Sometimes it's hard to be sure."

"I know what that's like."

"I'll ditch the uniform if you tell me what C.J. stands for."

She hadn't expected that. "You don't know? I'm sure you could have looked it up somewhere."

"I could have. I didn't."

"You really don't know that much about me, do you?"

He shrugged. "Only what you've told me. It didn't occur to me to check around."

"The last time I had coffee with a guy, he spent three days watching me on C-SPAN just to pretend he was in the know."

"I don't own a TV."

"Lucky you." She shook her head, incredulous. "My entire day revolves around presenting the right media image. And you just let it all go by."

"Well, I do read the *Post*."

"Claudia Jean," she informed him succinctly.

"Claudia Jean?"

"Yeah."

"It's nice." Their gazes locked, and once again she was impressed by his quiet intensity. "I guess I'll see you next week. Without the uniform."

"All right. Have a good evening."

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**Wednesday**  
**July 17, 2002**  
**The West Wing**

"What's this word?"

C.J. peered at the scrawled notes in front of her, then at the person holding the scrawled notes in front of her. "You think I read Ziegler-ese?"

"At the moment, that is in fact my fervent hope," Sam replied, sounding optimistic.

"He's *your* boss."

"And I can make out every word he writes, except this one." He pointed again. "I think it's either 'compensation' or 'competition'."

"The difference could be important, then, couldn't it?"

Sam stepped back from her desk and tilted his head to study her. "What's going on with you, anyway?"

"To my knowledge, nothing is going on with me," she answered breezily. "Why do you ask?"

"You're happy. You haven't been this consistently happy since before the reelection campaign kicked off."

C.J. propped her feet up on the lower shelf. "Well, gee-whiz, Sparky, do tell."

He lowered his voice. "I'm actually being serious. I know things haven't been easy lately, so I'm just saying that if you've found someone that -- "

"Sam, if you're trying in your own charming way to ask if I'm getting any, I'll just put your mind at ease with a *no*."

He closed his mouth for a moment. "Okay, then."

"I have a social life, you know, and on occasion I visit with people I find to be interesting. There's absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about it."

"This is about that Navy guy, isn't it?"

The innocent query caused her to swing around so fast that her glasses slipped off her nose and ended up dangling from their chain. "Ex-cuse me?"

"Carol mentioned how great she thought it was that you were seeing that officer from -  
- "

She cut him off a second time. "Okay, the wrath I suddenly have for Carol notwithstanding, I'm not 'seeing' anyone. This is not the Dating Game. He's a friend."

Sam raised his hands in surrender. "In that case, I'll make my exit before I get added to this wrath list of yours, which I've never heard of before but which scares the crap out of me just the same."

"You do that. Carol!"

Carol was away from her desk, so she unknowingly managed to escape a dire fate. C.J.'s ire faded quickly as she reflected on the past few weeks. She hadn't a clue how her weekly meetings with Harm had become common knowledge, but after all, it was a public coffeehouse. What did it matter? She was enjoying the hell out of herself. Harmon Rabb was an intriguing, engaging man, but more importantly, he was deeply real. They'd connected amazingly well, talking about everything and nothing, and it had truly been a calming influence in her chaotic life.

He'd told her about losing his father and finding his brother; about his enigmatic relationship with Sarah Mackenzie; about his frustration and admittedly misplaced guilt over the crippling injury suffered recently by a friend and fellow JAG attorney; and finally about some rather traumatic memories that still haunted him, related to an aircraft he'd been forced to ditch into the ocean just a year ago. In turn, she'd told him about her father's agonizing

decline into Alzheimer's dementia, and she'd managed to open up about what Simon had been -or could have been - to her. She found herself looking forward to Thursdays, all the while pushing aside a few nagging doubts about where it all was heading.

At last, she decided not to smack Carol around for having a big mouth. So what if half the building knew what she did with her Thursday nights? The staff rumor mill wasn't so terrible. If they got a little entertainment out of jumping to conclusions about her social life, let them have their fun.

Famous last words.

The following day, she realized just how badly she'd underestimated her colleagues. The rumor mill, it turned out, extended as far at the Oval Office.

"...Rankin's threatening to mobilize a whole slew of southern Democrats against the higher education bill," Josh was reporting as he paced behind the couch. "He says they weren't elected to support New England academic elitism."

"That's hysterical, coming from a Stanford graduate," President Bartlet commented dryly. "Leo?"

"I'll take care of it," the chief of staff promised. "Rankin will close up shop at the first hint of a discussion on health care reform."

"Dangle it in front of him, but don't get carried away. What's next?"

"That's it, sir."

"All right. Beat it, you slackers."

Amid the murmurs of "Thank you, Mr. President," Bartlet beckoned to C.J. with a finger. "Hold on a minute, C.J."

She paused in mid-stride, hoping his apparent good mood was genuine. "Yes, sir?"

He stood up from his chair, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Dare I believe the buzz around here? Have you gotten chummy with a Navy commander?"

C.J. resisted the immediate urge to shake her head in sheer amazement. "Sir, I'm not going to bother asking how you came by that information -- "

"Charlie, who else?"

" -- but I'm sure that whatever you heard was vastly overblown."

"Oh, I doubt that. I usually get pretty good intel in this line of work." The President regarded her calmly. "Harmon Rabb, Jr., of the JAG Corps and the naval aviation service, depending on the day. Annapolis graduate, veteran of combat missions over Libya, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, and apparently the savior of the USS Seahawk battle group last month. Did I hit the highlights?"

"Charlie again?"

"He's a diligent researcher."

She spread her hands. "Mr. President, it's nothing serious. We have fun together as friends, and that's it."

"Call it what you will," he said agreeably, tweaking her nerves. "What's he like?"

Either it was a slow day, she concluded, or the chief executive was feeling paternal all of a sudden. "He's smart," she answered honestly. "Very smart, in fact."

"Smarter than your average lawyer, or than your average sailor?"

"Both, probably. He's rather knowledgeable about foreign relations - he's got a number of opinions on the state of affairs in the Middle East that probably bear some resemblance to what you get in your briefings."

That earned a sharp look. "C.J., you haven't been telling tales out of school, have you?"

"Sir, I think you know that I haven't been read in on any of that stuff, but if I had, I wouldn't be passing that information along to my friends, even if they did have clearance."

"I know. I just had to ask." He drew a weary hand over his eyes, a gesture that didn't escape her notice.

"Sir, without getting too specific ... did we achieve our objective? Did we eliminate whatever threat existed within the Qumari government?"

"You can never really eliminate threats in this game. You can only reduce them, and I think we've done that. The head of this particular organization has been cut off. But that doesn't mean we're out of the woods." He sighed. "Never mind. Bring him in here, would you?"

She blinked, wondering if she'd misheard. "I'm sorry, sir?"

"This ubiquitous aviator of yours. I'd like to meet any man who can hold your attention like this."

As he meandered back around his desk, she folded her arms. "May I ask what you intend to do, besides possibly cleaning a shotgun in front of him?"

"Nobody likes a wiseass, C.J. Last I checked, I was still a member in good standing of the Democratic Party." Bartlet leaned forward on the desk. "You were going to see him tonight anyway, right? Haul him in here instead. It's shaping up to be an uneventful evening."

C.J. considered trying to refuse. It was a ridiculous request -- but then again, it wasn't really a request. He was the President of the United States, and if he wanted to meet with a particular officer for whatever reason, no discussion was necessary.

Harm had held his ground with the king of Romania and the presidents of Russia and Cuba. He could handle the Bartlet third degree. She sighed. "Yes, sir."

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**Thursday**  
**JAG Headquarters**

Mac watched her friend emerge from his office at 1915, and crossed the quiet bullpen to flag him down. "Hey. Have you been working on your closing this whole time?"

"Pretty much." Harm offered a shrug. "Arguing extenuating circumstance seems weak, but the corporal didn't give me much choice in the matter."

"It'll work out. You busy tonight? Sturgis and I were going to hassle each other about the Williams appeal in front of the Cubs-Diamondbacks game."

He hesitated slightly. "Sorry, I kinda have a standing coffee date."

Sturgis Turner wandered into at that point, briefcase in tow. "With the mysterious C.J. again? Buddy, are you ever going to clue us in on that?"

Mac cocked an eyebrow, waiting for his answer. She was at least as curious as Sturgis was, but on some level, she wasn't sure she really wanted to know.

"What's to clue in on? It's coffee. That's all." Harm recognized the defensive note in his voice and cursed inwardly. The last thing he wanted to do was give Mac the wrong impression.

"Coffee and civvies, apparently." Mac indicated the duffel in his hand. "Or is that an overnight bag?"

Sturgis shot her a look, shocked that she'd made such a brazen inquiry. Harm was thrown off stride -- he'd thought they were past this kind of thing -- and fumbled his response entirely.

"It is *not*. I've just gotten into the habit of changing. Originally she said something about wanting to see me out of uniform for a change -- " As his friends' eyebrows shot up, he stopped, mortified. "Oh, I don't *believe* I walked into that one. Never mind, all right? I just like not being a recruiting poster for one night a week."

His gaze strayed up to the bank of television monitors. One was re-broadcasting that afternoon's White House press conference, and when Mac put two and two together, her jaw dropped. "You're kidding. *That* C.J.?"

"And you call yourself a Republican?" Sturgis demanded, only half-joking.

Harm gave them both a hard look. "I call myself open-minded, thank you. Now scram."

"Oo-kay ..."

"Good *night*," he called over his shoulder, heading for the elevators.

Mac watched him go, her expression uncertain. "Sturgis," she began quietly, "do you think -- ?"

"Do I think the love of your life is sleeping with the White House press secretary?" he finished for her. She glared at him, but allowed him to continue. "No, I don't. But if you're really worried about it, it seems to me that the most direct course of action would be to talk to him."

"You've been saying that for six months."

"And you've been ignoring it for at least that long."

She picked up her cover and purse without giving him a direct response. "You're a big help, Sturgis, you know that?"

"I try. Come on, the game's starting."

As he drove into the District from Falls Church, Harm mulled over the conversation in the bullpen once again. For reasons he couldn't explain, the idea that Mac might see these coffee dates as actual *dates* worried him. It wasn't as if her owed her an explanation, but -- well, maybe he did. It was hard to be sure of anything on that subject. *So what else is new*, he thought ruefully.

Maybe he'd stop by Sturgis's place on the way home from Café Maria and watch the last couple of innings with them. At least then she'd know that he wasn't going home with C.J. Damn, was he turning this into a perfect military mess, or what? "Avoid even the appearance of impropriety..."

He wasn't doing anything -- and even if he had been, it wouldn't be wrong. That was all there was to it. Then why did he always feel like even glancing at C.J.'s impressive legs was a betrayal?

Determined to push those doubts aside for the moment, he parked outside the café and reached into the backseat to retrieve his duffel. As he opened his door to climb out of the car, a figure appeared in his peripheral vision, and he swung quickly to his feet, instantly alert.

C.J. held up her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Whoa, tiger. Are you always this jumpy?"

"I live in a rough neighborhood and tend to have a number of people pissed off at me at any given time," he answered, relaxing. "Sorry. Why aren't you inside?"

"Because we're not staying. Get back in your car and follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"The staff entrance to the West Wing. It's convenient that you're still in uniform."

"Should I bother asking why?"

"Somebody wants to meet you."

She purposely avoided telling him who the 'somebody' was until they were through security and moving through the expansive lobby. When she finally confessed, it merely confirmed his suspicions, but it didn't dull the impact of the idea.

"You're telling me that we're just going to march down the hall, walk into the Oval Office, and say 'hi'?"

"Unless he's busy running the country or something, yes."

Harm narrowed his eyes at her as they stepped into her office. "You're not nearly as funny as you think you are."

"You'd see the humor in this situation if it were happening to someone other than you."

"Well, I'm not that lucky, am I?" He tossed his cover on her desk and gave her a pleading look. "Seriously, C.J., what in God's name could the President want with me? He doesn't call in all your friends for a meeting, right?"

"You're overestimating my social skill and underestimating the all-consuming nature of this job. The truth is, I don't have another friend like you in this entire time zone, and no matter how many times I try to tell people that, they all invariably assume that we're -- what do you Navy types call it?"

"Hot-bunking?" he supplied, a faint grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Exactly. I think the President just misses harassing his daughters' boyfriends. He won't tear you apart. I promise. And you'll be able to say you've actually met your commander in chief."

"I don't really have any choice here, do I?"

"Not that I've noticed." She smiled sweetly and extended a hand toward the door. "Shall we?"

They moved through the Communications offices, where Toby, Josh and Sam were huddling over a recent draft of the weekly radio address. C.J. was well aware that the guys had all been vocal participants in the speculation about her love life: nothing turned the three of them into frat boys faster than an opportunity to mess with the only female senior staffer. Now she had an opportunity to head some of it off. "Ah, the Three Musketeers. Harm, this is Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn, Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman, and Communications Director Toby Ziegler. Guys, my friend, Commander Harmon Rabb."

Harm shook their hands, easily ignoring the way the activity of the area seemed to have slowed upon his arrival. "It's a pleasure."

"Good to meet you," Sam responded, "and I for one would like to thank you for whatever you've done to make C.J. so much nicer to be around lately -- "

"Knock it off, Samuel," C.J. directed with a tight smile.

"Hey, let me ask you a question, Commander," Josh jumped in before Harm could react to the previous exchange. "Do you feel that this administration supports academic elitism?"

"Oh, we're not going to get into this again, are we?" Toby rolled his eyes.

"I want an outside opinion on this," Josh insisted. "Federal aid for higher education is getting hung up on about a million different issues, but the big ones are state-sponsored universities versus private institutions and merit-based versus need-based scholarships. We've got congressmen complaining that the President can't see the little people from his ivory tower, and I don't think the group of us here with our Ivy League diplomas can be totally objective."

"Hey, I went to a state school," C.J. objected.

"So did I," Toby chimed in, "and we're not going to have this discussion again, all right?"

"I don't know if I'm really the right person to weigh in on this, anyway," Harm added with a shrug.

But Sam was on the trail now, too. "Commander, you went to college, I assume?"

C.J. just looked at him, stunned and exasperated. That question summed up everything Sam -- and probably the rest of them -- didn't know about the military: a college degree was a requirement for commissioning as an officer. But Harm didn't even flinch. "Well, my law degree is from Georgetown," he replied smoothly, "but my graduating class at the Naval Academy was approximately nine hundred midshipmen. When it comes to elitism, I think we pretty much take the prize."

"And since there's no tuition, he can't help you with the scholarship issue, either," C.J. said curtly, taking his arm and pulling him away. "We're late. Say goodnight, boys."

As they disappeared down the corridor, Sam turned to the other two. "I just insulted him, didn't I?"

"Pretty effectively," was Toby's assessment.

Donna stepped out of Josh's office, where she'd been eavesdropping, and leveled an accusing stare on all of them. "That was brilliantly acted, you guys. Congratulations on perpetuating the stereotypical liberal anti-military bias. Did you actually think he could be a lawyer without going to college?"

"How was I supposed to know he was a lawyer?" Sam said defensively. "*I'm* a lawyer. Is he in any way like me?"

"Please tell me you don't want an answer to that."

Toby frowned. "He wears wings, like he's a pilot. Does the Navy let their people moonlight like that?"

"Maybe he got the wings from a flight attendant on Delta," Josh theorized, already harboring an instant dislike for anyone who could command so much of C.J.'s respect.

"He could get a lot of things from a flight attendant on Delta," Donna replied with a sly grin.

"Go -- fax something, would you?" Josh said irritably.

"Envy is unbecoming, Joshua ..."

Charlie Young glanced up when C.J. and Harm made their way into the outer office. "He said to go on in."

"Thanks." C.J. opened the door. Harm, drawing a deep breath, followed her inside and came to attention in front of the wide oak desk.

"Mr. President, may I present Commander Harmon Rabb, Junior."

Bartlet looked up at the officer standing in front of him and waved a hand. "At ease, relax." Harm eased into a parade-rest stance, still wary, as the President eyed him up and down. "So. You're the one who saved six thousand sailors from a nuclear blast, huh?"

Harm blinked, unsure how to answer. "In a manner of speaking, sir."

"'In a manner of speaking'? Did you or did you not allow a guided missile to lock onto your engine and lead it away from the Seahawk battle group?"

"I did, sir."

"Then drop the 'aw, shucks' routine, Commander." Bartlet's gray eyes were steely. "Pilots are seldom, if ever, truly humble, and I know this because I have one for my chief of staff."

"I apologize, sir. I'm also a lawyer, so that screws it up."

"I have a few of those skulking around, too, and they're worse."

C.J., hovering near the door, winced at that. *This really is just like bringing a prom date home to meet Dad*, she thought helplessly.

"C.J. says you're well-versed in foreign affairs, and that you're one of the smartest people she knows. I'm trying not to take offense at that, since she knows me, too, but let's stick with the first topic. I'm not sure I've ever met a military officer below the level of general staff who honestly cared about foreign policy. They always seem to want only as much information as they need to carry out their objectives. So is your interest connected to your legal responsibilities, or to your survival instinct as an aviator?"

"I don't think everything in my life falls neatly into one category or the other, sir. I'm a concerned citizen like anyone else. I just happen to have acquaintances in the intelligence business."

"I see." Bartlet leaned back in his chair. "I've never been under any illusions about the general opinion your brothers-in-arms have of me. I'm an economics professor who never spent a day in uniform. I don't give them enough money or freedom to fulfill their mission to the extent that they'd like. Would you call that a fair assessment?"

"Not entirely, sir. Yes, there were a number of officers who felt that way, but a lot of things changed when we went into Afghanistan. I think people started to take a different view of the military's role in the whole process, and part of that is understanding that we have to maintain a balance with our elected leadership."

“What a diplomatic response. I’m going to go ahead and cut right to it, okay? What I really want to know is what you think, not what the Navy tells you to think.”

Despite the intimidating locale, Harm felt a flash of anger, and he instinctively drew himself up even taller. “Mr. President, the Navy tells me many things, but what I think is still my choice.”

C.J. cringed in the background. She recognized that her boss had made the inflammatory comment deliberately, to goad the other man into fully speaking his mind. She just hoped that it wouldn’t blow up in their faces.

“Glad to hear it. See, I’m having a hard time reading you, Commander. You’re not falling all over yourself to impress me, which I like, but at the same time, I’m beginning to wonder whether gaining my respect means anything to you at all.”

Harm’s eyes widened slightly. “Sir, if I’ve been disrespectful, I -- ”

“That’s not what I said, so you can stop covering your ass. I’m going to present you with a hypothetical situation, in order to get around your innate apprehensions about criticizing your superiors. If you happened to agree with my politics, which I realize is doubtful, would you have voted for me?”

At that moment, Harm realized that Josiah Bartlet was, among other things, a brilliant judge of human behavior. He didn’t have a hard time reading anyone. Not only had he recognized his visitor’s hesitation, he’d most likely pinpointed the reasons for it, and now he was waiting to see whether this confident young officer had the guts to fess up to them.

Harmon Rabb, of course, had never in his life backed down from a challenge. Even one issued by the most powerful man in the world.

“Four years ago, yes, sir.”

“But not now,” the President pressed.

He tightened his hands into fists behind his back, wondering if he was about to scuttle his career. “Please understand, sir, I do admire your accomplishments -- ”

“But I lied.”

“You concealed the truth, sir. In my line of work, truth is the strongest -- and sometimes the only -- ally I’ve got.”

Bartlet stared impassively at him for an interminable moment. At last, he said simply, “Okay.”

“Sir?”

“Okay, you can keep seeing C.J.”

Harm shook his head, perplexed. “Mr. President, I’m not *seeing* C.J. She’s a good friend.”

"Whatever you two want to call it. Thanks for coming in on short notice."

C.J. stepped forward, relieved but also slightly unnerved by the exchange. "Just quit while you're ahead," she instructed Harm under her breath. "Thank you, Mr. President."

They were back in her office in seconds, and she shut the door securely before turning on him. "So that's your problem with him?" she asked bluntly. "Not welfare or gun control or the environment, but M.S.?"

Detecting a harsh note in her voice, Harm tensed. "My level of respect for a person isn't tied to politics, and his political ability has very little to do with having the disease. But that isn't what he asked, and for me, it all comes back to trust."

"You don't find him trustworthy?"

He sighed. This had the potential to get ugly. "C.J., I know you can't win at this game by being a perfect Boy Scout. I really do. But the fact is, he made a choice to conceal his state of health from the public. He decided that getting himself into that office was more important than being open and forthright with the people who elected him. I'm not condemning him for that -- I think there's a strong possibility that he may in fact be the best person to lead this country. But the image he presented to the American public for four years wasn't truthful, and I can't in good conscience reward a person for that."

"So that's it? End of story? You'd rather just give your vote to Ritchey, a man who probably had to lie about his IQ? You must really be a slave to your morals."

"Why are you getting so indignant about this? I'm not attacking you or anyone else. You didn't know. Did you?" She didn't respond right away, and he knew that he'd somehow hit close to home. "C.J.? Did you know the President had multiple sclerosis?"

She met his gaze, and there was a flicker of uncertainty there that he hadn't seen before. "Not until a couple of weeks before the announcement," she answered, her voice distant. "But as soon as he told us, we had to go right into damage control. We spent days figuring out the best possible way to break the news, and I had to talk to about a million lawyers, and ... I'd been an accomplice to something for years without even knowing it, but as soon as I did know, I had to defend every action we'd ever taken. And I needed -- I still need -- to believe that that was the right thing to do. So I have to believe in him. If I don't ... I might as well give up and go back to California."

He nodded, accepting that reasoning. But she wasn't finished. "And to tell you the truth, I'm getting a little tired of having to defend him on this issue. It's been a year since we owned up to this story, and if people haven't gotten the idea by now that he's perfectly fit to hold office, then I don't know what will convince them."

"I never questioned that."

"No, all you care about is the fact that he didn't elaborate on every detail of it before getting on the ballot four years ago."

"He didn't elaborate on *any* detail of it." Harm cut himself off before the discussion could get heated again. "Why are we going around in circles about this?"

"Because I can't convince myself that you have any respect for me if you don't have any respect for him!"

"I never said I didn't have any respect for him! C.J., people make mistakes in judgement. Big ones, sometimes. Believe me, I used up my quota of those a long time ago. It doesn't make them bad people. I do respect the President, but I respect you more, and one has nothing to do with the other. I don't know what else to tell you."

He picked up his cover and turned to leave, but her voice halted his action.

"Harm, wait. I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm so desperate for your approval, but thank you for not rescinding it based on this little neurotic episode. If it helps, I think you made a good impression. The President likes people who stand by their principles and don't give him any crap."

At that, he smiled, shaking his head. "How do you keep from freaking out on a daily basis? Just being in that room was worse than staring down a gun."

"You get used to it. Kind of." C.J. shrugged, returning the smile as an idea came to her. "Hey, I realize that this is short notice, but are you doing anything next Friday night?"

"Uh oh. Are you considering breaking our pattern of Thursdays?"

"Live a little. We've got a state dinner planned for the president of Brazil, and I was thinking that for once, it might be nice to actually have someone to dance with at one of these things."

His eyebrow arched. "I'm not sure your colleagues like me very much."

"They're social morons -- it's part of their charm. Are you busy, or not?"

"Unless I get sent out on a case at the last minute, I think I'm free. I'd better get my dress uniform cleaned, though."

"And polish your medals. I always wanted to have a date who clinks when he walks."

He rolled his eyes skyward. "You're still not funny."

"I know. I still want to do coffee next week, though."

"You'd better. I'm going to need an etiquette lesson. Can I leave now, or will security attack me if you don't walk me out?"

"You outrank most of our security," she pointed out.

"That's true, but I doubt it matters to them. They'll just call me 'sir' while they're pinning me against the wall."

She gave a dismissive wave. "You're fine. Get out of here."

After he'd vanished around the corner, she sat down at her desk and thought about what she'd just done. Now that they'd finally settled into the idea of being nothing more than

friends -- and after they'd both done everything in their power to convince the rest of the world of it -- she'd raised the stakes from weekly coffee to a formal date.

Well, would it be so terrible to give it -- them -- a try, just for an evening? She *liked* him, damn it. Was there anything wrong with that?

Sure, there was. In fact, there were two distinct pitfalls in that very idea, and she knew it. One was the possibility that they would be totally, utterly wrong for each other, and that their friendship would be ruined. The other, she was forced to admit, was a Marine colonel whom she'd never met but who seemed to have an inexplicable hold on the otherwise-unflappable Harmon Rabb.

She'd tried on more than one occasion to discern exactly what her friend felt for Sarah Mackenzie, but with no luck. Certainly there was a strong bond between the partners, evidenced simply by the way he spoke of her, but she'd learned early on that Harm was exceptionally good at shielding his true emotions. Still, he was a grown-up, and he could make his own decisions. Unless or until he told her otherwise, C.J. had no obligation to keep him at arm's length. When Friday night came, she'd just play it by ear and do what made sense at the time.

Abruptly she stood up and grabbed her purse. It was late, and she wanted to comb her closet for a suitable dress. After three years of formal functions, she had a rather impressive selection, but she couldn't help thinking about the black Vera Wang gown she'd banished to the back of the closet after that night in May, surely never to be worn again. Maybe it was time to look for another Vera Wang.

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**Friday**  
**July 26, 2002**  
**The West Wing**

"Come on, C.J., get the lead out. I hear there's food in the other room."

C.J. came to the door of her office in order to shoot Josh a dirty look, and he whistled. "Nice. New dress?"

"You say that every time. Do you really think I buy a new dress every time we do one of these things?"

Josh shrugged. "I don't know. But on the occasions that you do, I want to get points for noticing."

She shook her head and reached for her matching handbag, choosing not to inform him that this time, she had indeed bought a new dress. "Where's Amy?"

"She's already in there. Why do you think I'm in such a hurry?"

"Well, I'm not your babysitter. You can go ahead without me."

"Are you afraid I'm going to mess with your date?"

"I'm absolutely certain you're going to mess with my date, so I respectfully request that you get lost before I have to beat you over the head with one of these shoes." C.J. strode past him in her favorite pair of strappy sandals. This was quite possibly the first time she'd ever had a date whom she wouldn't tower over in heels, and she was going to milk the opportunity for all it was worth.

When she reached the lobby and caught sight of her friend, standing near one of the majestic marble pillars, she had to lock her knees to keep from falling over. Whatever the Navy lacked in terms of summer uniforms, they more than made up for it when it came to mess dress - and Harm looked better than anyone had a right to look in it. He was holding his cover in one white-gloved hand, and the crisp lines of his short white jacket and dark pants were flawless. A neat row of medals lay against his chest, and she sensed that his set of accolades would hold its own against the generals and admirals that were sure to be in attendance that evening.

For his part, Harm was effectively stunned by her sleek crimson dress, and when he recovered, he could only shake his head. "C.J., you look incredible," he said honestly. "There's no way you're going to need me around to have someone to dance with."

"Well, maybe I want you around," she responded with a smile. "I have to say, you do that uniform justice. Is the tie real, or is it the clip kind?"

He gave her a long-suffering look. "This is the most formal uniform we have. You think we don't wear real bow ties?"

"I'm just impressed that you can tie it. Josh has been trying to learn how for years."

"I'm a sailor. I can tie anything."

"Well, be still my heart," she drawled in a lousy Southern-belle accent, fluttering a hand to her chest. He only shook his head and offered his arm, leading her into the ballroom.

They were seated with the rest of the senior staff, and before dessert was served, Toby, Sam, Josh, and C.J. had each been called away at least twice to deal with some urgent issue. Just before the President was to give his remarks, all four of them disappeared at once, and Harm was almost relieved to have a moment of respite. The dinner conversation had been polite, but awkward -- he got the feeling they saw him as some kind of adversary, in spite of C.J.'s best efforts. Of course, he reflected, it wasn't just him: none of them, C.J. included, had been particularly friendly to Josh's girlfriend, either. Gaining entrance to this inner circle wasn't something that was easily accomplished, apparently.

Deciding that he had nothing to lose, he leaned over and spoke to the other abandoned escort left at the table. "Your date doesn't like me much, does he?"

Amy smiled a little. "If it makes you feel any better, yours isn't overly fond of me, either. Don't take it personally -- Josh has had a crazy couple of weeks, and besides, he and C.J. have this protective sibling thing going on."

"What about the others?"

"You probably challenge their masculinity."

He raised an eyebrow. "Then what's their excuse regarding you?"

She shrugged. "I make them nervous. I just got back on my feet after this little A-Team cost me my last job, and yet they all still think I'm working an angle."

"Are you?"

Amy narrowed her eyes at him. "Not at the moment, but check back later."

Before he could attempt to figure out her demeanor, the staffers returned, and Josh immediately whisked his girlfriend away. The vaguely suspicious look on his face mirrored C.J.'s as she pulled Harm to his feet, and Amy shot him a veiled glance that said *Told you so*. Harm sighed and decided to count his blessings that they all seemed to be going their separate ways for a while.

"This job of yours never takes a break, does it?" he asked as they made their way onto the dance floor.

"You're just now figuring that out?" C.J. responded lightly, enjoying the feel of his strong hand at her back. "You're a combat pilot. You have to know what it's like to be on alert, ready for anything."

"Sure, but our cruises end after six months, and your tours run for four years. I realize that every moment you spend in the White House is basically 'on duty', but do you ever get a chance to just forget about it all and relax?"

"Well, I always used to be one of those people who mentally took their work home with them every night. I'd be up in the middle of the night thinking about something I should have said differently in a briefing, things like that."

"What changed?"

"Truthfully?"

"Of course."

She looked up into his luminous blue eyes and said simply, "One morning, a few weeks ago, Donna Moss wandered into my office and told me that there was a hot-looking sailor in the lobby."

As her meaning became clear, he searched vainly for a response, surprised and flattered. She continued before she could lose her nerve. "I thought you were like Simon, but you aren't. Just his presence was a constant reminder of this place, even when he was just watching me go into my building at night. You, on the other hand, let me be just Claudia, rather than the press secretary. You're the first person in a long time who's allowed me to forget all the constant pressures that go along with being who and what I am for a while. I can't tell you how great it feels to be able to do that."

He tightened his hold on her waist, drawing her closer, and they danced in silence for a while. At last he replied, "If that was your way of calling me a distraction, it was the sweetest brush-off I've ever heard."

"You know damn well that wasn't a brush-off. And yes, you are a distraction, but you're the best possible kind. You're keeping me sane, and that isn't an easy task."

"Believe me, Claudia, I know exactly what you mean."

Hearing him say her given name like that sent an unexpected thrill through her, and she was almost embarrassed to discover just how high her emotions were running at that particular moment. If he had made even the slightest overture, she was fairly sure she would have dragged him out to the parking lot or her office -- hell, even the ladies' room would suffice in a pinch -- and taken great pleasure in undoing that perfectly knotted tie.

But he was a perfect gentleman, as always, and before long, she decided she needed a break to cool herself down before she did something stupid and irreversible. Scanning the room, she spotted a familiar face at an otherwise empty table, and an idea came to her. "I have a thing I have to do," she lied smoothly, slipping out of his arms with a conspiratorial smile. "But how would you like to make someone's day while simultaneously helping me annoy a coworker who really deserves it?"

Harm looked wary, but didn't shrink away from the concept. "You're a hard woman to say no to," he observed. "What do you want from me this time?"

Across the ballroom, Donna Moss was studying her fingernails, idly wondering if she should splurge on a manicure over the weekend. She wasn't required to attend this event, and she'd seriously considered ditching it a number of times, but Josh had wanted her within reach in case they had any last-minute problems with the House Appropriations vote that evening. In her estimation, it was better to sit through a hopelessly dull dinner for a few hours than to listen to Josh's whining for an entire week following.

"Ms. Moss?"

She glanced up to find a gorgeous naval officer standing in front of her. "I don't think we've been introduced," he said cordially. "We crossed paths in the lobby a few weeks ago. Harmon Rabb."

Donna blinked a few times, then stood up to shake his hand. "It's Commander Rabb, right? C.J.'s commander?"

He smiled. "For the evening, anyway. She had to head out for a while, and I'm afraid I don't really know anyone here. I was wondering if you'd be so kind as to dance with me and spare me from looking pathetic."

Somewhat starstruck, she allowed him to lead her onto the floor. Maybe tonight wasn't a total waste after all.

As it turned out, Harm had once spent a week backpacking in the Boundary Waters, not far from where Donna had grown up, and they chatted amiably for a few minutes about the best trails. Before long, though, he caught a glimpse of Josh Lyman entering the room, noticing the two of them, and abruptly leaving again. Harm began to suspect that this little escapade hadn't been such a great idea. When the song ended, he politely took his leave of Donna, then left the ballroom by the same route Josh had taken, finding him on the terrace outside with a stormy expression.

"Hope I'm not disturbing you."

Josh shrugged fractionally, not looking at him. "It's a free country, thanks to you and your friends."

"Okay, I can take a hint." Harm turned to leave.

"What were you dancing with my assistant for?"

He paused, choosing to go with the truth. "C.J. had to go off and do something, and she thought getting me to take Donna for a spin might piss you off."

"It worked."

"I sensed that, yeah."

Josh spun around, fed up with the other man's infinite calm. "Is there something I can help you with, Commander, or did you just come out here to bond with me?"

"I came out here to make sure you understood that I don't have any intention of letting C.J. get hurt. I figured that was your major problem with me. But I'm starting to realize that you've got things on your mind that are way more important than I am, so if it helps you out to take aim at me for a while, go for it. I know how it goes."

"You don't know how it goes around here."

"Probably not, but if what C.J. says is true, I can at least commiserate with you about being the office problem child."

Josh smirked, not buying it. "I can't see somebody like you pulling the kind of stunts I've pulled."

"Try me." Harm folded his arms.

"I once insulted a key member of the religious right on national television out of pure spite."

"I once fired an automatic weapon in the courtroom to prove a point."

The deputy chief of staff waited, expecting a punch line. When none came, he relented. "All right, you win."

"I'm not trying to win. I'm just saying that I'm not fundamentally different from you just because I put on a uniform every morning instead of a suit."

Josh hesitated. "Look, I don't resent you specifically. It's just that -- God, this is going to sound immature. When I started dating a major player in women's advocacy, the whole administration started looking at me cross-eyed. I took a lot of crap, from stupid jokes to outright accusations against my loyalty. Then C.J. brings you in, and everyone's hunky-dory with it because you're safe somehow ..."

" 'Everyone' meaning the President?"

He didn't allow his surprise at the accuracy of that observation to show. "He's been on my case ever since I let the House schedule a tight vote for the night he was going to be in New York. After that, nothing I do is good enough. I don't mean to sound like an ungrateful asshole

or anything, but the implication that I give something less than a hundred percent to this job is infuriating. I mean, I took a bullet for this job, for the love of -- ”

Quickly he turned away, not willing to let this stranger see the torrent of pain and frustration that he'd nearly allowed to escape. Harm recognized it, though, and the pieces began to fall into place. "It's still hard to think about what happened that night, isn't it?"

Josh dug his hands into the pockets of his tuxedo, focusing his gaze on a small corner of the terrace. "It's ancient history. It was two years ago."

"It's been twelve years since I put my F-14 into the deck of the Seahawk, but it still doesn't thrill me to talk about it."

At that, he turned back slightly. "You crashed?"

"Calling what I did 'crashing' would be an affront to crashes. When it was all over, the biggest remaining piece of my plane was my ejection seat." The commander spoke dispassionately, but he didn't attempt to disguise the shadow that fell across his features.

"And you didn't take the first chance you got to bail the hell out of the Navy?"

"Did you think about leaving the White House after Rosslyn?"

"No. Why would I? It's just something that happened. People don't go around shooting at me every day."

"I don't crash planes every day, either." Harm offered a sardonic grin. "Although with two Tomcats and a MiG to my record, one might be tempted to think otherwise."

"Do I even want to know?"

"I doubt it."

Josh shook his head, still dubious. "So despite that press release I saw earlier, you're really *not* the golden boy of the U.S. Navy?"

"God, no. I've given ulcers to more commanding officers and appointed officials than anyone since Patton. But I still have a job, so I guess that's the best proof I can offer for the idea that dedication matters above all. And I sincerely doubt that anyone in the West Wing is truly questioning your commitment."

"All right. Maybe we can get along after all."

"Glad to hear it." Harm held out his hand, and Josh shook it firmly. "But just for the record, I am a damn good pilot."

"Now that we've gotten that straight, are you going to tell me what exactly is going on with you and C.J.?"

"I would, if I understood it myself."

"Welcome to life in politics. Let's go track down our dates."

By the time they returned to the ballroom, the crowd was beginning to thin out. C.J. had been cornered by an eager reporter from the Chicago Sun-Times, and she was desperately looking for a way out. After explaining for the third time that no, there would be no policy announcements made tonight, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see a very welcome interruption.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry to interrupt, but you're needed in the Communications bullpen," Harm said solemnly, with only the slightest twinkle of amusement in his eye. C.J. inwardly breathed a sigh of relief and quickly followed him out of the room, heading toward her office.

"You have great instincts," she told him once they were out of sight from the crowd. "I swear, there are people who just can't take hints. It's practically midnight, everyone's going home, and this guy thinks he's going to witness some historic event and scoop the world."

"Gotta admire his tenacity, though."

"Not when it irritates me this much, I don't." She shut her office door behind them and leaned against it. "Sorry. This has just been a never-ending day."

"Well, I think you can probably relax now."

"Knock on wood when you say that." She rolled her neck around to stretch and promptly caught her earring on the strap of her dress. "Oww! Damn it ..."

"Don't move. I'll get it." He was at her shoulder in one stride, gently easing the long twist of gold out of her ear and disengaging it from the fabric.

"Thanks," she said apologetically, cursing her clumsiness -- until she became aware that his hand still lingered against the curve of her neck, and that he was close enough for her to sense the tension radiating from him.

"C.J.," he began hesitantly, "would it be completely out of line for me to -- "

"No," she replied emphatically. "However that sentence ends, the answer is no."

In response, he drew her in and captured her lips with a brief, burning kiss. "You sure about that answer?"

"I am now," she said, trying not to sound breathless. "We should, ah, probably discuss this someplace other than my office, though."

"I don't think this is a typical coffeehouse discussion topic."

"Whose apartment is closer?"

"Probably mine."

"Then lead on."

It was a relatively short drive, but as she forced herself to focus on the taillights of his SUV, it seemed positively interminable. When she finally swung her car into the alley, her pulse was racing so badly that she barely noticed how menacing his neighborhood looked. She

climbed out of the car as he stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame in a casual way that belied both his formal attire and the intense expression in his eyes.

They rode the elevator in near-silence until it came to a halt. "It's not as bad as it looks," Harm remarked, shoving the gates open with an embarrassed gesture at the dingy hallway. Within moments, though, he'd unlocked the door, and she understood what he meant. As she admired the sleek, open design of the apartment, he tossed his cover on a shelf and reached up to yank his tie loose. "So what exactly are we here to discuss?"

"I was more or less using the word 'discuss' as a euphemism." She stepped toward him and traced his medals with two long fingers. "You're as tired of wondering about us as I am, right? What else is there to talk about?"

"Maybe nothing. I don't know. I haven't been able to think straight since you walked into the foyer in that dress five hours ago."

"You did an admirable job of hiding it."

"Control is an aviator's lifeblood." The last word was almost swallowed as she returned the earlier kiss, pulling his jacket down from his shoulders at the same time. He responded by pulling her into his powerful embrace, his touch searing her bare shoulders. Yet she still sensed that he was reining himself in to a certain extent, and she couldn't truthfully say that it surprised her.

It was like a game of chicken: each seemed to be waiting to see whether the other would flinch. Predictably, it wasn't her. "C.J.," he managed to say, pulling away ever so slightly, "come on, we can't ..."

She stood her ground and studied the snug fit of his pants with a cocked eyebrow. "All evidence to the contrary," she replied calmly, watching the tips of his ears turn pink at her insinuation.

"Seriously. You're on the rebound."

"Explain to me how I can be on the rebound from someone I never had a chance to date."

"You cared about him."

"You care about your partner, too, but you don't see me putting on the brakes." The veiled horror that flickered across his features made her wince. "Shit. That was really the wrong topic to bring up right now, wasn't it?"

"I'll say." He turned away, trying to get a better hold on his emotions, and she steeled her nerves for the charge ahead.

"Harm, it's pretty obvious that we're both wondering about this, and if we don't do anything about it, there's always going to be these questions between us that we won't know how to answer. We're both responsible, unattached adults, so why can't we just treat this as an experiment? If it works, life is good, and if it doesn't, we go back to where we were - "

"That concept never turns out as well as it's supposed to."

"You know this from experience?"

He shot her a look that plainly said *Are you kidding?* But some part of him relented, and she seized the opportunity. "Look, I'm well aware that there's a very strong possibility of this not working. The odds of my life being able to accommodate you *and* yours being able to accommodate me are fantastically slim -- but right now, I'm willing to take the chance, just to finally *know*. I guess what I'm saying is, if you're still my friend tomorrow, that's all I need."

"And if it's just tonight?"

"Then it's just tonight. And I'll be able to say I banged a fighter pilot." He barely cracked a smile at the comment, but she stepped out of her heels and folded her arms under her breasts. "Take a break from being so noble. I'm a big girl."

They stared each other down for a long moment. Then, decisively, he reached for her --

-- and just before they could touch, the shrill whistle of a pager cut through the silence, sending whatever chance they'd had crashing to the floor.

"If that's not an omen, I don't know what is," Harm muttered under his breath as C.J. rifled through her purse. When she located the offending pager and checked the number, her face fell.

"It's Josh."

Reading the look on her face, he observed, "I'm guessing that this can't be good, coming at ten minutes after midnight."

"It could be any one of a half-dozen things."

"Are any of them good?"

"No." C.J. raked a hand through her hair. "I can't find my damn cell phone. Can I -- "

"Go ahead." He started to hand her his phone, but it rang, startling them again. Looking apologetic and anxious at the same time, he answered it while she resumed the search for her own phone.

"Rabb."

She heard only a couple of 'aye, sir's before she had to tune him out, putting her cell to her ear. "Josh? What's going on?"

Instantly, the deputy chief of staff's tone told her just how serious this call was. After the countless battles they'd fought together, she could read him like a book, and what she heard in his voice sent a spike of fear straight through her.

"There's a credible threat."

Later, she'd remember that she could actually feel the blood rushing away from her face at that moment. "What?" she whispered. "What kind of threat?"

"A Boeing 757 took off from Toronto approximately half an hour ago, heading for Paris. Sixteen minutes ago, it disappeared from radar after making a sharp southward turn. Nobody knows what's going on, but wherever it's headed, it's going there with an ocean's worth of fuel."

"Oh, Jesus ..."

"The NAOC plane is at Andrews. We're putting the President and whatever senior staff we can find on it. How fast can you get here?"

"To Andrews?" Her mind raced frantically, trying to recall exactly where she was. "Um, twenty minutes or so."

"Make it fifteen if you can."

"I can."

"C.J., this is for real. We won't wait."

"Then stop talking to me so I can get in the car, all right?"

"All right. I'll brief you once we're in the air."

She hit 'end' and turned back to Harm just as he did the same. Each recognized the other's expression as a mirror image, and she knew he'd just received the same news.

"I have to go to Andrews for emergency combat air patrol," he reported shortly, already heading for his closet.

"I have to go to Andrews to join the President."

"I suppose car-pooling is out of the question?"

She watched him for a few seconds, as he pulled a drab-green flight suit out of a drawer with one hand and deftly unbuttoned his dress shirt with the other. "Harm," she began slowly, "if all this turns out to be exactly what it sounds like ... you might have to shoot down an airliner tonight."

"Don't say that. I have to be able to think in terms of threat potential, or I'll never get through it. The Air Force is covering the District -- we're going to escort the NAOC plane, which I'm assuming you're going to be on."

"If I can get to Andrews in fifteen minutes, I am."

He was into the flight suit before she even realized he'd ever been undressed. The electricity that had existed between them only minutes before had dissipated, leaving only quiet shock in its place. "Come on," he told her, a mask of deadly calm overtaking his handsome features. "I can drive the fastest route from here to Andrews in my sleep. Just follow me."

Once they arrived at the gates of Andrews Air Force Base, she quickly lost sight of his car as he veered off toward Operations, and she realized belatedly that they hadn't said any kind

of goodbye. Shoving that bleak thought aside, she pulled into the restricted parking area near the flight line and hurried as fast as her heels would allow toward the passenger stairway.

Each of the four National Airborne Operations Center aircraft, designated E-4B by the U.S. Air Force, had begun its life as a Boeing 747, similar in many ways to the planes that often bore the call sign of Air Force One. These planes were not designed to comfortably transport dignitaries and legions of press, though. Instead, they were outfitted with enough intelligence-gathering sensors and communications equipment to run a theater-wide war. That was their purpose: to ensure that the government and military of the United States would continue to function even in the event of a major catastrophe or attack. Some of the staff had taken to calling them the WCS planes, short for "worst case scenario." No one would admit it, but the aircraft's mere existence gave most people the creeps. She was boarding one now for the very reason it existed, and it utterly terrified her.

"C.J.," called Josh as she climbed aboard, waving her toward a somewhat subdued area of the cabin. "You got something to change into?"

She found it odd that he would worry about her gown at a time like this, especially since he was still wearing the shirt and pants of his tuxedo. "Sure," she said absently, gesturing toward the duffel in her hand. "As long as you guys can deal with my gym clothes. Are we ready to go?"

"Just about." His gaze flicked toward the back of the plane, where a huddle of people surrounded a very tense-looking President Bartlet. "According to the Air Force and the FAA, we've still got most of an hour before they can reach us, even at a top speed of Mach 0.94."

"They?"

Josh rubbed at the back of his neck. "Oceanic Flight 419. Since it's a red-eye, it's not anywhere close to capacity, but it's still got sixty-one passengers and crew aboard."

"And they just disappeared off radar?"

"Not responding to hails, either. And the transponder's inoperative. CIA thinks it might be a Qumari response to Shareef's death, although nobody really has any clue yet. Justice is running the passenger list through their database right now, trying to come up with any known terror links or Qumari citizens, but the likelihood of that doing us any good in the next forty-five minutes isn't great. All the airports along the Eastern seaboard are quickly and quietly getting incoming flights down and holding their outgoing flights until we get this sorted out. Headquarters ACC has already put its entire inventory of F-16s in the air, and they're doing their damndest to cover the entire coast. We're getting a four-plane escort from the Navy -- "

"I know," she said quietly. He blinked at her, disbelieving.

"Rabb?"

"Yeah. Small world, huh?"

"Makes me feel pretty good about our chances, though."

"Where are we going, anyway?"

"We're not 'going' anywhere. We're just going to stay airborne as long as we have to. Ever seen an air-to-air refueling before?"

"No, and I'm hoping to keep it that way."

A low rumble from the engines encouraged them to find seats, and C.J. slid her pantyhose off without so much as a comment from the normally laconic Josh. After she'd wiggled her gym shorts on under her dress, she leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes until they'd lifted off the ground.

"Josh, what are the chances that this is just an airliner in distress? I mean, after everything that's happened, would somebody really be sick enough to try and crash another plane?"

"There are plenty of people out there who are sick enough," he responded grimly. "The question is, was someone smart enough and lucky enough, too -- and were they all of those things tonight?"

"I guess we'll know in an hour or so." She watched the lights of midnight D.C. grow smaller in the window and sighed. "Out of curiosity, what am I doing here? It's not as if I'm going to be holding any briefings from thirty thousand feet."

"You're part of this team, aren't you?"

She turned in her seat to face Leo McGarry, who looked as resolute as ever in his own rumpled tuxedo. No response was given or expected. "Then you belong here," he finished simply. "I can't believe they gave us a Navy escort, though ...."

"Don't sweat it, Leo," Josh suggested amiably. "If the guy can take out a nuclear missile, I think he can handle flying our wing."

The chief of staff looked from him to C.J. with curiosity. "Your guy?"

"For the sixty-eighth and final time, he is *not* my guy," she protested weakly, grateful for a momentary break from the situation around them.

"Oh, no? True or false -- you were with him when you got my page."

Josh had her trapped with that one: if she denied it, she'd have no credible way of explaining her awareness that Harm was flying that night. She rolled her eyes. "Wow, I can see why you were such a strong litigator in your day, Josh. The 'true or false' gambit must work on just about everyone."

"In my day? What am I, thirty-nine going on dead?"

The forced banter was silenced when a voice issued from the speakers in the center of the cabin. "Convoy, this is Cheyenne. We've got a blip, tracking south-southeast at altitude two-niner and five hundred knots. Confirm when you see it on your scope."

"Roger, Cheyenne, scanning now," replied an Air Force sergeant seated at one of the consoles, his fingers flying over the keyboard in front of him. "Confirmed at twenty-nine thousand feet. Sentry, do you have the bogey?"

"Convoy, Sentry Lead," radioed a familiar voice. "That's affirm. Possible target at three hundred miles and closing. Who wants to do the honors first?"

"It's all yours, Sentry. Give it a try."

"Will do." Harm's voice was cautiously neutral as he began to transmit over standard commercial channels. "Oceanic Four-One-Nine, this is the U.S. Navy. You are off course and being monitored. Please respond." Only silence answered him. "Four-One-Nine, respond or you will be classified a threat. This airspace is restricted."

Nothing. He repeated the warning numerous times on several frequencies, but with no success. "Is it possible we're not close enough for them to pick us up yet?" C.J. wondered aloud from her seat.

Josh shot her an incredulous look. "You want them to get closer? I was voting for farther, personally."

"Sentry Lead, Sentry Three," a younger voice called. "Awfully rude of them, huh, Hammer? What do you normally do when someone ignores your hail?"

"Last time the situation came up, I choked the guy's engine with a strategically timed fuel dump and sent him limping for home," Harm said wryly. "Given that we're dealing with a 757 and not a Learjet, however, I don't recommend that option here."

"Roger that, sir."

The apparent lightheartedness of their conversation was only the thinnest of facades. They were gravely serious about their mission tonight, and every second that passed brought them another second closer to a confrontation of some kind.

"Whoa," said the sergeant, frowning. "Sentry, Convoy -- you guys pick up that course change?"

"We saw it," Harm replied tersely. "Looks like they're coming our way after all."

One of the other pilots bit back a curse. "They're erratic as all hell. Whoever's flying that beast is either drunk or --"

"You're mike's all the way hot, Mustang," his leader warned. "Unless you want the President to hear it, I suggest not finishing that sentence."

"Um, sorry, sir." The younger man sounded properly abashed. "What next?"

"Well, there are two possibilities here. Either they know we're here and are heading for us on purpose, or it's just a really big coincidence. So how much are we willing to stake on it being the latter?"

"I'm sure as hell not taking those odds."

"Wise man. Two and Four, close up on Convoy's wing. Greenie and I are going hunting."

One fighter from each side of the aircraft peeled off and headed out, presumably toward the mystery airliner. C.J. busied herself by repeatedly disassembling and reassembling her pen, unnerved by the current plan. She didn't particularly care to continue the agonizing wait as the plane came ever closer, but the idea of her friend charging off to meet it wasn't any less worrying. How long could this awful silence go on? In her job, any information was available if you talked to the right person. Here, there was nothing. The idea that there was no possible way to acquire any information about this plane was both infuriating and frightening.

"How could they know we're here?" she heard Sam ask Toby from somewhere behind her. "Is a typical passenger jet equipped to monitor that kind of thing?"

"I doubt it, but I wouldn't rule out the possibility of someone sneaking some type of transmitter on board in a laptop or something," Toby replied. "Besides, we're not exactly running silent ourselves. Most 747s don't travel with a fighter escort."

"You make a good point."

"Convoy, Sentry Lead." Harm's static-dimmed voice filtered through the speakers. "We're almost in visual range, so if there are going to be any modifications to our rules of engagement, now's the time."

"Stand by, Lead." The sergeant looked up, somewhat anxiously, in the direction of the President. Bartlet had been quietly hovering in the background, and his only response was a slight nod toward Leo.

The former aviator leaned into the microphone. "Commander, this is Leo McGarry, White House Chief of Staff. Your ROE are as follows. Engage the airliner only if it takes a decisive and threatening action toward another aircraft of a clear target on the ground. Otherwise, you park on his wing and keep trying to hail him until you hit bingo fuel. Is that understood?"

"And acknowledged, sir. Moving to intercept."

*What a difference a year makes, C.J. thought bleakly as she shifted to gaze out the dark window. A year ago, this would have been handled like exactly what it is, not like what it could be. The FAA and NORAD would have done their usual aircraft-in-distress procedure, and we all would have heard about it in the morning. Now, we have to believe that disasters are possible, and act as though they're inevitable. God, I miss my ignorance.*

"Oceanic Four-One-Nine, this is the U.S. Navy at your one o'clock. Please respond or be classified as hostile."

Nothing. A nervous airman reported, "Sir, they're closing in on the metropolitan Philadelphia area."

"If we're gonna take it down, we can't wait until they're over Philly," Leo said under his breath. "Casualties on the ground -- "

"I know how gravity works," Bartlet replied tersely. "How long before they force our hand?"

"Seven minutes, sir, give or take."

"There's far too much 'give or take' in this whole situation for my liking."

"Four-One-Nine, please respond." Harm's voice was level, but there was an edge creeping through.

"You've got six and a half minutes, Sentry," stated Leo. "After that, we have to worry about population centers."

There was a pause, and the lead pilot's next transmission was tinged with suspicion. "Cheyenne or Convoy, can you give me a flight history on Four-One-Nine, from the time you first painted him?"

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant, puzzled but willing to obey. "Just give me a second."

"Hammer, where are you going with this?" his wingman, a lieutenant commander named Dave Greene, asked.

"Check your altimeter. We're down around angels two-seven, and our sink rate is pretty unstable."

"You think that means something?"

"Newer jets are fly-by-wire, but 757s still have reversible flight control systems. I'm wondering if they've had some kind of power loss and are flying blind."

At that, the mood inside the E-4B's cabin changed abruptly. "Is that possible?" Josh demanded.

He'd spoken to no one in particular, but the microphone was hot, so Harm decided to answer him. "I'm not sure. I don't fly airliners. But they're flying without wingtip lights, which is fairly nonstandard. If something knocked out their comm gear and their transponder, it might have knocked out some of their flight systems as well. They might not have any way to know what their altitude and heading are."

"Or they might have killed the lights on purpose, and they might be descending in order to locate a target," Leo warned.

"Also true, sir."

"Got that data, Lead," the sergeant came back. "They've been wandering between twenty-six and thirty-one thousand feet, but except for that one bank, their heading had been fairly constant."

"Heading's easier to maintain without indicators than altitude is," commented Greene, beginning to warm to the theory.

"Sentry Lead and Sentry Three, you're in Philadelphia regional airspace in four minutes," said a disembodied voice from the Cheyenne post.

"Stand by, Convoy. I've got an idea." Harm switched to his cockpit mike and spoke to his RIO. "Jake, how's your Morse code?"

"Passable, sir. Why?"

"Grab your flashlight and start blinking at them. I saw it work once -- maybe we'll get lucky."

"You got it." The lieutenant retrieved his emergency flashlight and aimed it out through the plexiglass canopy. "What should I say?"

"Um ... I guess there's nothing wrong with the direct approach. Send this: 'Oceanic Four-One-Nine, do you need assistance?' "

Jake complied, and they waited in tense silence to see if the message would be acknowledged.

"Ninety seconds, Sentry ..."

Finally, after three repeats and possibly the longest two minutes of his life, Harm saw a small, flashing light from the cockpit window of the jet. The sender was clearly not fluent in Morse code, but the simple message was clear:

S -- O -- S.

He sagged in momentary relief, then toggled his mike. "Cheyenne, Convoy, this is Sentry Lead. We have received a distress call from Four-One-Nine. Request permission from Washington Center to assist them in landing at Andrews."

C.J. closed her eyes with a silent prayer of thanks. "Granted, Convoy," responded a controller. "Did you receive a radio transmission?"

"Negative -- Morse code. We just asked the crew to locate a military passenger or someone with stronger code skills to help explain the situation. Hold on, I think they've got somebody." Harm watched the light and mentally translated the flashes. " 'On auxiliary electric power only ... lightning strike.' No kidding ..."

"Lightning can do *that*?"

"Not ordinarily, but I guess they'll have to figure the details out later. Convoy, do you intend to return to Andrews as well, or land elsewhere?"

"We'll take Andrews, Sentry. Looks like we can beat you there by enough time to be out of your way."

"Roger that. Jake, send Four-One-Nine two words: 'Follow us.' "

C.J.'s relief had drained all her earlier nervous energy right out of her, but she knew the ordeal wasn't entirely over. "So they're going to be able to guide this plane in with Morse code?" she asked Leo doubtfully.

"They'll fly his wing and keep in contact with the tower," Leo reassured her. "He just has to stay with them visually."

"Just like that?"

"Not just like that, obviously. If their avionics are really fried, it could get ugly." When she looked over at him, chagrined, he shot back a look that clearly said *What do you want from me?* "Hey, you asked."

"Leo, for Christ's sake."

"C.J., I really think it'll be fine. I'm just trying to get ready for the aftermath in case it isn't."

"Right." Her mind began to spin, putting together possible statements to give the press for each contingency. A heroic midair rescue by the President's own escorts, or a deadly crash not far from the ghosts of last September? Either way, she didn't dare tell the world how close Oceanic 419 had come to being shot down.

As the E-4B descended and executed a flawless landing on the main runway at Andrews Air Force Base, the crewmembers and assorted staffers all wore a seemingly identical expression. Relief, but not full release. No one made a move toward the aircraft's doors, even after it had taxied to its assigned place: they were all fixed in place at consoles or windows, expecting and dreading the events of the next few minutes.

At last, the trio of airplanes appeared from the northwest, the comparatively small Tomcats flanking the crippled jetliner. Only the fighters were visible at first, since the larger plane's landing lights were only partially operational. As they neared, one fighter pulled slightly ahead to make an initial pass of the runway, flicking his own landing lights to mark the desired touchdown point and then circling to rejoin his charge.

*Please, God, C.J. prayed, unable to tear her gaze from them. Don't make me tell the American, Canadian and French media that we couldn't save their countrymen.*

Then, as if in slow motion, the hulking airliner made its approach, and with an F-14 on each wingtip to guide its descent, it gingerly set itself down. The main landing gear overshot the optimal point of impact by only fifteen meters.

The fighters pulled up hard in a textbook touch-and-go, intending to circle once more before landing on an adjoining runway. The 757 jerked to an awkward stop near the end of the strip, wisely choosing not to taxi and take any further risks. An emergency team converged on the plane immediately, leaving the occupants of the idle E-4B to sit in stunned silence.

In the movies, this type of climactic event always seemed to end with an image of people exulting the success, cheering and clapping wildly from behind desks or consoles. That didn't happen this time. Instead, all quietly watched as the flight line personnel hurried to assist the shaken passengers away from the plane and into a nearby building. Eventually, the President was escorted down the stairs toward a waiting limousine, and C.J., feeling numb, descended behind him with the rest of the senior staff.

"Shit," Josh mumbled from just within earshot, noticing the small crowd of television cameras stationed beyond the barbed-wire fence. "We probably ought to let them in before they start broadcasting these pictures and drawing some bad conclusions about it all. You ready to deal with them?"

*Hell, no,* a voice in her head promptly replied, but it was overruled. "Yeah, I'll do the first briefing from here. The base public affairs office should be able to set it up."

"As soon as somebody wakes them all up." Josh waved a hand toward the first rays of sun creeping over the horizon. "So far, I'm not crazy about the way this weekend's going."

"Don't come crying to me. I'm the one who has to go on TV now. Tell base security to start allowing certified camera crews through the gate, and send Carol over here with the suit that's hanging in my office."

"You got it. Good luck."

As he disappeared with the rest of the motorcade, she turned her attention to the row of Tomcats that now sat serenely in front of the main hangar. Maintenance crews and flying officers were efficiently performing the usual post-flight checks and securing their aircraft without pause. Somehow they didn't look nearly as rattled as she felt, C.J. decided while scanning the throng for her friend.

Harm pulled off his helmet, grateful to feel the cool dawn air against his overheated skin. Running a gloved hand through sweat-soaked hair, he accepted a checklist from the young sergeant who'd inspected his bird. It was perversely fascinating to watch the pen tremble ever so slightly in his own hand as he signed the form and handed it back. Up there, he'd been as rock-steady as ever. Now that it was over, the magnitude of it all refused to remain ignored any longer.

"Commander."

He glanced up to see C.J. making her way toward him, a picture of incongruity in gym clothes and a diamond necklace left over from the previous evening. *Then again*, he reflected, *I'm a lawyer in a flight suit, so I probably shouldn't throw stones.* "Hey," he greeted tonelessly. "Are you trying to maintain decorum with the rank thing, or have I done something wrong?"

"Sorry. I guess there's no point in doing anything for appearances right now." She could see the faint creases of exhaustion around his eyes, and wondered again how he could willingly accept a role such as this. "Are you okay?"

He seemed to understand the context of the question, and shrugged. "I did my job, and we got a happy ending this time. Now you get to do yours."

She followed his gaze to the security-flanked news vans that were approaching the operations building. "Want to help me out? I bet they'd be way more excited to talk to you than me."

"Sorry, you're on your own. After I debrief, I doubt I'll even be coherent enough to drive home. I'll probably pass out in the ready room for a couple hours, until my CO hears about all this and tries to hunt me down ..." He paused in the motion of taking off his gloves, then looked up at her, shaking his head. "Jesus, C.J., that one was close," he breathed.

"I know."

The tension that had come to a head only a few hours earlier had vanished as if it had never existed. They would eventually have to talk about what had almost happened, of course. But not now.

"Will I see you Thursday night?" she asked finally, not knowing what else to say.

A hint of a smile flickered across his weary features. "Sure."

"Okay. And by the way -- nice job tonight."

He gave a brief nod of acknowledgement, and they started to go their separate ways. She walked back toward her car, wondering if she still had a curling iron stashed somewhere. God knew the Air Force people wouldn't be any help in that department. After she'd crossed the road, she heard a female voice call out: "Harm!"

Curious, C.J. turned, and saw a striking, dark-haired woman in a T-shirt and jeans moving quickly toward the hangar. She slowed, uncertain, as Harm turned toward her.

When their gazes locked, something inexplicable yet very real changed in him. He looked as though all his military focus was suddenly concentrated on holding back a flood of utter relief. It was as if the mere sight of her had done something to restore his soul.

Right then, C.J. realized she'd just met Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a low voice. "How did you find out?"

Mac shrugged with a slight smile. "I always know where you are. The AIRLANT deputy called the admiral to let him know that one of his officers had been co-opted, and he figured he should tell somebody." She toyed with her car keys, biting her lip. "You all right, sailor?" she asked softly.

Immediately, he dropped his helmet to the ground and pulled her into his arms. They remained there for a few minutes, holding onto each other with no interference from the outside world, and the bond that radiated from the two of them put all the pieces together in C.J.'s mind. Surprisingly, she wasn't nearly as disappointed as she'd expected to be. Still unseen by either officer, she forced herself to move away and greet the approaching lieutenant from the PA office. For some twisted reason, out of this whole nightmarish experience, a few things were starting to make sense.

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**Thursday**  
**August 1, 2002**  
**Cafe Maria**

"You're in love with Mac, aren't you?"

Harm did his best not to choke on his hazelnut coffee as C.J. slid into the seat across from him. Recovering, he managed to look halfway indignant. "That's your opening line? What happened to 'Hi, how was your week?'"

She wasn't about to be deterred, though. "My week was a warp-speed blur, a fact of which I suspect you're well aware. Hence, my small-talk muscles have atrophied. Answer the question, Harmon."

*Harmon? Damn.* He took a measured sip of his coffee, then decided to answer as truthfully as possible. "I think I could very easily be in love with Mac."

"What precisely does *that* mean?"

He narrowed his eyes at her, mystified by her sudden fervor. "Is this about what happened Friday night?"

He didn't need to clarify: she knew he wasn't referring to their airborne escapade. "No, it's not. I know better than to try and stake a claim to you based on one isolated non-incident. I mean, I'm not apologizing for it, but in the light of day, aren't we both a little relieved that nothing happened?"

"Probably," he admitted. "We never would have worked."

"It would have been fun, though."

"Undoubtedly." His eyebrow quirked, but there was little humor in his expression. "I still don't see where you found this sudden interest in my relationship with Mac."

She shrugged. "Maybe because I finally know you well enough to know when you're happy, and right now, you're far from it."

With a look of exasperation, he pushed his chair back from the table. "Happy? C.J., last week I had a 757 full of innocent people in my scope, and my finger was on the missile-launch button. Did you expect comedy?"

"You didn't have to fire." Even as she said it, she was aware of how weak it sounded.

"But I had to be ready to. In our own airspace, for God's sake. I hate that. I hate that somebody even has to be in that position. Don't you? When you have to brief a news item about another airplane scare, doesn't it terrify you to see what the world's become?"

"The world is what it is. It's not the result of one person or event, no matter how much it may seem that way."

"The world as it is put my good friend in the hospital with a leg and a half." He gazed into his coffee cup with cold, sullen eyes. "The world sucks right now."

C.J. decided not to make any overt attempt to cheer him up. He'd probably resent it, and she might very well screw it up. Instead, she went for a different route. "Did you know people who were killed in the Pentagon?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point? That there are people out there who don't like us? That can't really be news to you, after everything you've done."

"Maybe not. But I didn't know that they could hit us the way they did ... I didn't know that they could hit us in a way that we couldn't defend against."

She heard 'I' in place of 'we' in that sentence, and that told her all she needed to know. He'd dedicated his life to protecting his country, and it cut him deeply to know that he'd been helpless to prevent the most devastating attack ever wrought on the continental United States. "We are defending against it. Now that we realize we have to, we are."

"Our defense looks a lot like paranoia. The world did change as a result of one event, at least for people in this country. Especially for people in uniform. Our mission changed, so our lives changed. It's not just something that happened almost a year ago. It's ongoing."

She thought about that for a moment, hearing the uncharacteristic tones of pessimism in his voice. Finally, she asked, "You know what people don't talk about enough when it comes to September 11th?"

Harm spread his hands wide. "Since it's getting close to the point where people have talked the whole thing into the ground, I'm not sure I even have a guess."

"I understand what you mean, but I'm not talking about the usual suspects. I'm talking about the air traffic controllers."

"The air traffic controllers?"

"Absolutely. Think about it. There are thousands of vehicles in U.S. airspace on any given day, and the moment there was an indication that something was wrong that morning, the ATCs locked it down. They'd never had to do anything like it before, but in two hours, all the controllers across the country and in Canada worked together to get every last commercial and civil aircraft down without a hitch. The logistics of that endeavor were staggering."

"I remember the days afterwards -- looking up at the sky and knowing that there wasn't a single plane up there. It was one of the most frustrating parts about it all, because it kept reminding me that those animals were preventing us from living our lives."

"I know, but you're missing my point. The ATCs were critical that day. They were the calm at the center of the storm, keeping an attack from escalating into an all-out cataclysm. If the system had failed even a little, even at the tiniest tower in the middle of nowhere, we could have had accidents all over the place. But it didn't. Even after learning about what had happened, no one in the control centers got a chance to feel or grieve like the rest of us. They just did what they had to do. They're a perfect example of something that really works about our system."

"I'll grant you that, but no ATC could have done a thing to prevent any of the hijackings or the crashes."

"No, but that wasn't what they were asked to do. Their job was to clear the skies so that for just a little while, we could have a measure of safety in a time of total desperation. And they did it. All I'm saying is that they should get some recognition for it."

He watched her for a long moment. "All right, the next time I'm up, I'll thank the guy who gives me landing clearance. Just for you, okay?"

Apparently that was all the progress she was going to make on that front. She'd shifted him from brooding mode into sarcastic mode. C.J. rolled her eyes. "If you're going to be like this all night, I might as well return to my original theory. You're in love with Mac because -- well, you just are, and you're spending all your time with me because I'm safe, and you're being pissy right now because you can't seem to convince her that you'd rather be with her than me. Refute that, counselor."

"Would you still be this snarky if we'd actually slept together?" he demanded.

"More so, without a doubt."

Abruptly, he surrendered, sensing that on this issue, she was an immovable object. "Mac and I are a very complicated idea."

"Are you confirming or denying my analysis?"

"Neither. I'm just trying to explain. We have this strange thing going on where we make sense on some levels, but clash on others. There are just too many questions still out there."

"Have you ever thought about actually trying to answer them?"

He rolled his eyes skyward, irritated. "What kind of sociological imbecile do you take me for? Of course I think about it. I just haven't gotten to the point where I'm willing to risk six years of friendship for it."

"Okay, so what makes it such a big risk? What exactly are the questions? Is it that you're not sure you want it to happen, or that you're not sure *she* wants it?" He only stared stonily at her, waiting, until she ventured an opinion. "Her, huh?"

In response, he offered a helpless half-shrug, and it seemed to her that for the first time, he looked a little lost. "She thought she wanted it, once," he said quietly. "Apparently that was my shot, and I missed it. I'm beginning to think I won't get another one."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know -- maybe the fact that she came within twelve hours of marrying someone else?"

"But she didn't, did she? And if I'm not mistaken, the reason for that had something to do with you."

"So your conclusion is that she must have really wanted to be with me the whole time?" He shook his head. "Seriously flawed logic. They only called it off the first time because I damn near killed myself that night, and then later it was because they had some problems communicating. Everyone wants to make it into more than it was, but as soon as he was gone, she took the first transport out of town. And for three months, she barely gave me the time of day, even when I flew halfway around the world to try and talk to her."

That piqued her interest. "You flew halfway around the world to see her?"

He fixed her with a look of consternation. "Stop doing that."

"What?"

"Stop filtering everything I say and latching onto each obscure detail you find romantic in some way."

"What do you want me to do, Harm? Commiserate and tell you that you're right, that she couldn't possibly still love you?"

"I don't know if she ever did in the first place, for Christ's sake!"

“Sure you do, but that’s beside the point. You’re dwelling on something that happened over a year ago, and like you said, the world has changed since then. There’s no reason to abandon all hope, so you don’t really have any defensible reason to be this negative about it.”

He reared back in his chair, rapidly nearing his boiling point. “Oh, really? I don’t have any reason to be negative? Would you care to live my life for a while and then make that assessment?”

She wasn’t put off in the least. “Trying to pick a fight with me is not going to change anything, and furthermore, it’s not going to work. I can be much more patient than you realize.”

“So no matter what I say, you’re going to keep coming back to this?”

“That’s the extent of my current plan.”

“Even if I try to talk about the Orioles’ pitching staff?”

“Especially if you try to talk about the Orioles’ pitching staff.”

He gazed at her impassively for a long moment, finally coming to the conclusion that she truly had no intention of letting up. “Well, I guess I don’t have much of a choice, then.”

And to her amazement, he stood up and tossed his empty cup into the trash. “Good night, C.J.”

By the time she recovered, he was gone. She stared at the door for a full minute in sheer disbelief. *I do not believe he actually walked out on me. Jesus.* Her initial hurt quickly cooled into annoyed determination. If he thought that he could avoid the issue by simply dodging her, then boy, was he in for a wake-up call.

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### **Wednesday** **JAG Headquarters**

Mac squinted at her computer screen, wondering bleakly if she was missing something. The after-action report sent over by CENTCOM didn’t appear to contain a single reference to the scouting mission in question. Her client, who’d sworn that his unit took fire in the Afghan brush the night before the disputed incident, was either lying, mistaken, or being hung out to dry.

There was a knock at her door, and she shook her head to clear it. “Enter.”

“Colonel Mackenzie, I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Mac blinked in surprise, then stood up to greet her visitor. “Ah, no, Ms. Cregg, of course not. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Yeah, you too,” C.J. said warmly. “This place is impressive.”

"I'm glad somebody thinks so." Mac smiled, but she wasn't entirely sure what to make of this woman. "I actually caught part of your briefing the other day. The Oceanic flight really took all that damage from a lightning strike?"

"More or less. The aircraft had had a hard landing a few days earlier, and a tiny crack in the shielding that grounds the communications gear propagated. The lightning cut right through the shielding. The plane was due for overhaul after about fifteen more flight hours, if you can believe that. Timing is everything."

"Guess so. Are you always this well-versed in the various subjects that you brief?"

"It all goes into short-term memory. Next week I won't even be able to tell you what kind of plane it was."

Mac hesitated, still trying to figure out the reason for this visit. "Listen, Harm's in court this morning, but they'll probably recess soon."

"Actually, I was hoping to talk to you first. Do you have a minute?"

"Um, sure. Have a seat."

"Thanks." C.J. studied the pictures that adorned the walls, an old Marine recruiting poster and a photo of a baby seal, and decided that the dichotomy was fitting. "I suspect that you have very little tolerance for crap, so I'm just going to cut right to it. There's nothing going on between Harm and me."

Mac was caught off-guard, but she was too well disciplined to let it show. "It's none of my business one way or the other," she replied coolly.

"That may be, but I'm telling you anyway. Frankly, at the moment, he probably isn't all that thrilled about even being my friend."

"He's been giving you attitude lately, too?"

C.J. had to chuckle at that. Under different circumstances, she might have been friends with Sarah Mackenzie. Maybe it wasn't yet out of the question. "Yeah, but he's specifically ticked at me because I called him out on the reason for it."

"You actually know the reason for it?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

"I'd be really grateful if you'd clue me in."

"By all means. He's convinced that he's missed his one and only chance to tell you he loves you, and he's decided to sulk about it."

Mac's reaction wasn't nearly as pronounced or as satisfying as Harm's had been. The flicker in her dark eyes, though, was enough to betray her feelings on the subject. Still, she simply gazed back at the other woman and asked, "Did he tell you that?"

"He sure as hell didn't deny it."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Is that the same thing in your world? Press conferences must be rather treacherous places if it is."

"Colonel, I wouldn't have come out here if I wasn't absolutely convinced. I'm not going to pretend that I understand everything that's happened between the two of you, but I've been listening pretty carefully to what he's said lately, and I'm telling you that I've never heard anyone so devoted in my life. He's being an idiot about it, but it's you he really wants. Believe me."

Mac shook her head with a sardonic smile. "It's funny. I can't even count the number of times people have tried to drop hints on this particular topic. You're the first one to come right out and say it, though."

"And that doesn't suggest to you that there may be some truth to it?"

She sighed, and C.J. saw some of her imperturbable exterior begin to wilt. "It's not a question of what he wants," she said softly. "It's a question of how far he's willing to go for it. As yet, the answer seems to be 'not very far'."

"I see. So what would he have to do to meet you halfway?"

"I don't know. Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do here, but -- "

Another knock at the door interrupted them, and Harm ducked in without waiting for an invitation. "Mac, I have to go down to Norfolk tomorrow ..."

He trailed off upon catching sight of C.J., and as the body language of the two women made their topic of conversation clear, his expression darkened into anger.

C.J. made a flimsy attempt to diffuse his ire. "Before you get pissed off -- "

"Oh, we're far past that point, I'd say," he replied, a hard edge to his carefully controlled voice. He jerked a thumb toward the door. "Come on."

Instinctively, she recoiled. "Excuse me? Since when have I joined the ranks of people you get to order around?"

"Either come with me right now, or this is the last conversation we ever have. Your choice." He spun on his heel and stormed across the bullpen, not bothering to wait and see if she would obey.

Seeing how deadly serious he was, she wisely chose to follow him. But she would be damned if she was going to go quietly. Once they were inside his office, the door slammed decisively behind them.

"How dare you?" he demanded furiously. "It really blows my mind to realize how ready and willing you seem to be to kiss restraint and maturity goodbye."

"I'm immature? Take cover, Ace, because your glass house is about to get a freaking JDAM through the front window." She stood her ground, ever defiant. "For the love of God, Harm, you're so deep in denial that you don't even recognize yourself. Given the

circumstances, and the way you essentially bolted on me the other night, I thought an intervention might be called for.”

“You did, did you? And did you assume you could just waltz in here and magically fix everything? You know what -- don’t answer that. Even if you did, if you honestly thought that was possible, you still had no right to do it. I don’t care how much you think you know about her and me. It’s still my life, and if I want to completely screw it up, that’s my prerogative.”

“Well, congratulations. You’ve certainly been doing a brilliant job of it lately.” Her eyes blazed. “Some people really do only get one shot at being happy, but you’re not one of them. You have had one chance after another, and as long as she’s still in that office two doors away, you’re continuing to get even more chances. Maybe they’re not perfectly gift-wrapped for you, but too bad. Take what you can get, ‘cause there are plenty of people who are worse off.”

He shook his head, disgusted with the entire situation. “You know, you were the one person whom I thought would never have expectations or make demands of me. I guess that was too much to hope for, huh?”

“Apparently so.” She folded her arms. “Don’t hold your breath waiting for me to apologize, either.”

“I won’t.” His voice could have sliced through steel. “Right now I’m going to go do some major damage control on my relationship with my best friend. Leave, or don’t. Either way, we’re done here.”

He moved to open the door, but it flew open, revealing a determined-looking Marine on the other side. “Let’s talk, Commander,” she suggested in a chilled tone.

Harm drew himself up and gave a short nod. “By all means, Colonel.”

As Harriet and the rest of the administrative staff watched, the two officers stalked into Mac’s office, accompanied by another slamming door. C.J. took a deep breath, then summoned her dignity and walked calmly to the elevators.

Sturgis wandered through a minute later, perplexed by the hushed bullpen. “Lieutenant Sims? Something going on?”

Harriet only shrugged helplessly. “I’d say so, sir, but for the life of me, I can’t figure out what it is.”

Inside the office, Mac sat down on the corner of her desk and faced her partner squarely. “I’m going to let you go first.”

“Thanks.” Harm raked a hand through his short hair. “Mac, I’m sorry for whatever awkward position C.J. put you in, and I don’t know where she got the idea that interfering would be acceptable behavior, but I’m sorry for that, too.”

“Do you even know what she said?”

“Do I need to?”

"I think maybe you do, before you immediately start issuing blanket apologies as if she were some loudmouth teenager. Deciding what information to pass on and what information to hold on to is what she does every day. Granted, she may have overstepped her bounds in this case, but do you really think she would have said anything without at least giving it a little bit of thought first?"

"She violated my trust," he insisted. "It wasn't her choice to make."

"Well, at least she actually made a decision on the matter. That's more than you've been able to manage so far."

Instantly, a deathly silence fell over the room, and he looked as though he'd been slapped in the face. She felt a twinge of remorse for that, but it wasn't enough to make her take it back.

"I see," he said flatly, fixing his gaze on a corner of her file cabinet. "So I have to make the decision, but it has to be on your terms? Sydney would have been acceptable, but not the Guadalcanal? Can you at least give me some kind of code book to work with, so I've at least got a fighting chance at figuring the timetable out?"

Mac stood up, surprised and disappointed in him. "Harm," she answered carefully, "you're the most amazing person I've ever met, but sometimes you're an asshole and a coward. If you honestly didn't want to confront this, you would have been better off telling your tales of woe to Sturgis instead of C.J. His legs aren't as pretty, but at least he would have kept your confidence. He's certainly had no problem keeping quiet about the time I told him I was in love with you."

Unwilling to deal with the stunned, wounded look in his expressive eyes, she rushed out, the door sounding one final slam behind her.

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## **Thursday**

### **The West Wing**

"Carol, if somebody from Justice calls, tell them to schedule a separate conference in the morning. I'll push mine back if necessary. Also, tell Martin to draft a piece on the fossil fuel reduction bill, and most importantly, don't let anyone bug me for a good long while."

"How long is a good long while?"

"Six to eight weeks. But I'll take half an hour if I can get it."

"It's yours."

C.J. shut her office door and collapsed into her chair, laying her head down on the desk. Everything about this week was getting on her last nerve. Usually, she'd be looking forward to this evening as a chance to get away from it all for a few hours. After what had happened yesterday, however, she wasn't sure if she should go anywhere near Café Maria.

Within three minutes, the door opened, and she swore softly without looking up. "Carol, when I said half an hour, I -- "

"I pulled rank. I have a tendency to do that."

She straightened immediately. "I'm sorry, Mr. President. I, ah, wasn't paying attention."

"I've noticed that about you lately." Bartlet stepped into her office and quietly shut the door. "Not that there have been any problems, mind you, but you know I don't often wander through here for no reason. Anyway, it's Thursday. Don't you have a standing date?"

"Sir, there's a strong possibility that I shot that entire thing to hell earlier this week."

He lifted an eyebrow. "That clears a few things up. Otherwise, I can't imagine why you would have tried to skip out on the ceremony tomorrow."

"I'm not needed at the ceremony, and I don't think it's much of a stretch to assume that it'll be just as boring as the first fifteen thousand award ceremonies we've done. I haven't seen Hogan in a while, and I wanted to take her to lunch, so I asked Leo if he could spare me for the afternoon. That's all."

"Right. Because taking your niece out to lunch certainly has to take precedence over watching your boyfriend receive the Navy Cross."

C.J. felt tears of frustration swelling in her eyes, and she hated herself for it. "Sir, is it too much to ask for you, of all people, to take my word to mean something? I wouldn't lie to you just to keep my personal life secret. He really, truly isn't my boyfriend. I don't love him, and he doesn't love me, and no matter what anybody says or believes, neither of those things is going to change. Can you just trust me on that?"

In the silence that followed, her mind raced to come up with an adequate apology. "Mr. President, I shouldn't have said any of that."

"Don't worry about it." He watched her with fatherly eyes. "Just reassure me that he didn't drop you for someone else, or I may have to have a little chat with Ron Butterfield's team."

For some reason, the idea of sending the Secret Service out after Harm finally brought a small smile to her face. "It's all right. He didn't drop me, since we were never involved. But he was in love with someone else the whole time, and I think I knew it the whole time."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe it. He's absolutely head over heels for his partner at JAG."

The President frowned slightly. "C.J., I'm not the world's strongest advocate of 'don't ask, don't tell,' but it is the law."

She smirked, partially to cover her sense of unease. "His very female, very beautiful partner, sir. I made the mistake of getting a little too involved with the situation, and there were some fireworks."

"I see. So no coffee tonight?"

"I very much doubt it, sir."

Bartlet studied her carefully, a little unsure of his footing. "C.J... you're okay, right? You'd say something if you weren't?"

"Yes, sir. I appreciate your concern, though."

"All right. But you're coming to the ceremony tomorrow. Bring Hogan if you have to, but you're coming."

She sighed. "Yes, sir."

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## **Friday White House Rose Garden**

"... Commander Rabb's actions reflect great credit upon himself, the naval aviation service, and the United States Navy."

Harm stood locked in at attention as President Bartlet pinned the medal to his uniform amid the polite applause. "Congratulations, Commander," the older man formally, shaking his hand. "We really are in your debt."

"Thank you, sir."

As the military band played a spirited march, the ceremony concluded, and the half-dozen award recipients dispersed to enjoy the reception. Harm had noticed C.J. hovering near the back of the crowd earlier, doing her best to be invisible, and he made his way through the crowd with only a few stops to accept well wishes from other officers.

"I missed you at the coffee shop yesterday."

She stiffened at the sound of his voice, but by the time she turned to face him, a cool expression was firmly in place. "I didn't think you'd come, so I didn't bother."

"I figured as much. But I decided to give it a try anyway. At least for an hour or so."

"You could have called."

"I realize that. I don't think I can explain why I didn't. I'm beginning to think that Mac was more accurate than even she knew when she called me a coward."

They moved away from the gathering, toward a quieter corner of the garden. "She didn't really say that, did she?"

"Oh, she most certainly did. And I deserved it, much like I deserved most of what you threw at me. So I'm sorry for jumping on you."

"I'm sorry for forcing your hand." C.J. dropped her gaze to the new medal gleaming against his dress white tunic. "This changes things, you know. From here on out, whenever your

name is mentioned, you won't just be Harmon Rabb, Jr. or even Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr. You'll be Navy Cross recipient Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr."

"Somehow that sounds a lot more impressive than it feels." His eyes swept over the open area. "You wouldn't think I could be this mixed up right now, would you? They don't give out too many medals for thoroughly alienating two of your best friends with one blow."

"You haven't done that. I'm here talking to you, aren't I?" She followed his gaze long enough to confirm her suspicions. "And Mac at least came to the ceremony."

He immediately pulled his gaze away from Mac, who was standing with the admiral and studiously examining her shoes. "She had to come. It was required."

"You are still in denial. God."

When she didn't volunteer anything further, he tentatively decided to shift the topic. "So I've been theorizing as to the reasons behind your dogged persistence about all this, and I wonder if I'm on the right track."

The uneasiness she'd been stubbornly ignoring began to resurface. "What does it matter? I got a little overzealous. Do we have to relive it?"

"No, we probably don't. But to quote a friend of mine, 'I finally know you well enough to know when you're happy, and right now you're not.' " He kept his voice even. "You were right. I've had plenty of chances, and I guess that must look pretty horrible to someone whose chance was stolen from her."

"Don't try to draw parallels that don't exist. Simon wasn't anything like Mac is to you."

"I understand that. But you'll never know if that's what he could have been, and I'm sure that still hurts."

She swallowed hard around the lump forming in her throat. She wanted to be angry at him for dredging all this up, but it didn't work. He was right, and at some point, she'd have to admit it.

"Do we have to do this right now?" she whispered.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to offer up my own experience as living proof that there will be other chances. And now that I have, I'll shut up and leave you alone for a while."

He turned to leave, but she called after him. "So what are you going to do?"

"Now, you mean?"

"Yeah. Are you going to walk over there and kiss the hell out of her, or what?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, please," she said politely, earning a full-power grin. "Seriously. I think that seeing all this actually work out for you would go a long way toward improving my current outlook on the world. Isn't that a good enough reason?"

His smile faded slightly. "Not today, C.J.," he said quietly. "I will tell her everything -- I promise -- but after yesterday, I think I'd better tread carefully for a while."

"I guess I can live with that." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Charlie signaling to her, and she looked apologetic. "That's my cue. I'll try to catch up to you later, all right?"

"All right. And C.J.?"

She glanced back, questioning.

"Thanks."

"For kicking your ass?"

"Among other things."

"My pleasure."

She made her way over to the veranda, where President Bartlet was watching the reception in relative privacy. "You called, sir?"

"I did indeed," he replied, in a pleasant tone that immediately made her suspicious. "Come people-watch with me, Claudia. It's fascinating to observe human behavior. For example, I observe that Commander Rabb looks rather depressed for a man who just received the second-highest decoration this country can bestow. Care to comment?"

"You're really getting into this little melodrama, aren't you?"

"Well, they say people in high-stress vocations should have hobbies, and since no one wants to play chess with me anymore ..."

"All right, I give. Remember what I said about his partner?"

"I do. And just for the record, I took you entirely at your word, because you asked me to."

C.J. just shook her head, not bothering to wonder what had put her boss in such a capricious mood. When he got like this, it was usually best to just ride it out. "She's standing over there. The dark-haired Marine. Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie."

"Ah. She doesn't look overly happy, either."

"I think they're having a slight disagreement."

"What makes you think that?"

She considered trying to stall or sidetrack him, but thought better of it. "Possibly the fact that I inadvertently caused it." And with the skills learned over three years in the pressroom, she summarized her knowledge of Harm and Mac together, ending with her argument with Harm on the matter. The President listened thoughtfully.

"You shifted your attack from him to her, and it blew up."

"Well, to be fair, I'm not sure I was doing anyone any favors with my first approach, either."

He nodded sagely. "You tried him alone, and you tried her alone. Seems to me that there's an obvious next step here. Come on."

He moved toward the steps, and as his intentions became clear to C.J., her eyes grew huge. "Sir, you're not serious."

"Watch and learn, grasshopper ..."

*Oh, shit. Harm's gonna kill me.* Praying for a lightning bolt from the sky, she hurried after him.

Harm, meanwhile, was about six seconds away from banging his head against a wall. All he wanted to do was find Mac and apologize, but every time he took a step, some general or senator always waylaid him. He was well aware that their interest in him extended no further than the medal he now wore, but he also knew how the game was to be played, so he suffered through the interminable, self-serving chats with a tight smile.

Every delay chipped away at his resolve until he honestly wasn't even sure what to say to Mac anymore. He'd already screwed up by not going after her yesterday and sorting the whole thing out right then and there. In his defense, her last comment had knocked him back about a mile, but that was hardly an acceptable excuse. For the past day or so, they'd found ways to avoid speaking to each other directly, and although he was fairly convinced that the blame once again lay with him, he couldn't shake some nagging doubts.

What had her exact wording been? "He's certainly had no problem keeping quiet about the time I told him I was in love with you." Jesus. If she'd been aiming to make an impact, she'd done it with style. But what did it really mean, once all the smoke cleared? Did her use of the word 'was' imply that she'd previously been in love with him -- but no longer was -- or did it simply refer to her previous conversation with Sturgis? Never before had he been so exceptionally frustrated with the limitations of the English language.

Either way, he at least had to talk to her. The silence, the absence of their usual comfortable interactions, was driving him insane.

When he finally reached her, the instant tension prompted Sturgis and the admiral to offer their congratulations and quickly take their leave. Mac faced him calmly, and it struck him once again how magnificent she looked in her dress blues. "I hope you haven't come looking for your kiss."

He flinched inwardly at that, but only lifted an eyebrow. "An asshole and a coward I may be, but no one has ever accused me of being dumb."

A faint look of guilt flitted across her graceful features. "That was probably a little harsher than necessary, I'll admit."

"Understandable, though."

She sighed. "That makes one of us."

"Mac, I'm trying to apologize here."

"And then what? We go back to the way things were, like always? I don't know if you've noticed this, Harm, but every time we go through this routine, we slip a little further away from 'the way things were.' " It broke her heart to have to continue, but she forced herself to meet his gaze. "And I realize now that I've been hoping for more than you're willing to give, so -- "

"I never said that," he protested reflexively, shocked that she'd come to that conclusion.

Her response was quiet and tinged with sadness. "I know. But you can't seem to make yourself say anything else, either."

As she turned away, his mind went into a full-blown panic. This was it. He was really going to lose her if he didn't find some way to shake off his long-standing verbal and emotional paralysis. The balance of his life might very well hang on the words he chose next.

"Commander Rabb. I haven't yet had the chance to offer my personal congratulations."

Both officers froze as their commander in chief approached. "Thank you, sir," Harm said awkwardly, feeling trapped. "It's a great honor."

"Yeah, I can see how thrilled you are." As the younger man blinked, C.J. mouthed the words *I'm so sorry* from her place behind the President. "Colonel Mackenzie, I presume?"

Mac recovered from her surprise enough to answer, "Yes, sir. How did you -- "

"I'm well informed. Walk with me, you two."

Utterly confused, they fell into step behind him, casting wary glances at a helpless C.J. Bartlet stopped near the terrace steps and leveled a piercing stare on Harm. "Now then. Commander, I asked you once before to give me honest answers to some blunt questions, and you did very well. Can I rely on you to do the same here?"

"I very much doubt that I have a choice, sir, so yes."

"Fair enough. C.J.'s been taking a bit of a beating from the boys' club around here lately. Nobody will believe her when she insists that you and she are not in fact dating. As proof, she informed me that you're in love with Colonel Mackenzie. Is that the case?"

Mac looked stunned, while C.J. looked mortified. Somehow, though, in that moment, a bizarre sense of calm overtook Harmon Rabb, and it compelled him to answer with only the slightest pause.

"Yes, sir, it is."

Mac stood very still, as if afraid of doing something to shatter what must certainly have been an illusion. But Bartlet wasn't finished. "I'm assuming, based on reactions, that you haven't seen fit to mention this to her before today?"

"Not as such, sir."

"Any particular reason why?"

Harm stared straight ahead, conscious of the scrutiny he faced from all sides. "Fear, Mr. President."

"Fear?"

"Yes, sir. I've been afraid of destroying the truest, deepest kind of friendship that exists. I've been afraid of being separated by duty, and even of leaving her in the way servicemen in my family typically do. Mainly, though, I've been afraid that she might not need me as desperately as I need her, and I've held back from ever knowing for sure because I do know that I'd be completely lost without her in my life."

The sounds of the reception still lingered in the background, but right there on the steps of the White House, there was absolute silence. He summoned his courage and looked over at Mac, surprised to see tears glistening in her eyes. Bartlet watched both of them for a moment, bemused. "Okay," he said finally. "To be honest, C.J., I still didn't entirely believe you until just now. Colonel, may we infer from your expression that you view the commander's fears as baseless?"

Her voice trembled ever so slightly as she replied. "Not baseless, sir. In fact, they make a lot of sense. But that last one ... I'd be willing to spend some time proving that one wrong."

They continued to stare at each other, while C.J. slowly recovered her dignity. "Harm, I swear to God that all I was trying to do was show them you weren't my boyfriend -- "

"I don't think that's his primary concern right now," the President commented wryly. "Commander, Colonel, it's been a delight. I suggest, for the sake of decorum, that you wait until about ten seconds after I leave to start climbing down each other's throats. Come, C.J., our revels here are ended ..."

They moved away with as much speed as the President of the United States could publicly display, leaving Harm and Mac effectively alone. Attempting a mischievous grin, Mac began to count aloud. "One, two -- "

The rest vanished as he swept her into her arms and silenced her with a world-altering kiss. "Ten," he said breathlessly when they broke for air at last.

"Nobody's going to believe us if we try to tell this story."

"No kidding. I can hear it now: 'How did you two finally get together?' 'Oh, by executive order.' "

"Hey, whatever works."

"You've got that right." He gently brushed an errant tear from her cheek with his thumb. "We've still got some topics to cover, of course."

"Can you give me a preview?"

"I suppose so." Leaning in, he spoke softly into her ear. "How about 'I love you'?"

She laughed a little, choked off by a barely-suppressed snuffle. "That's a pretty good start. You think we could sneak out of here without the admiral catching us?"

"Lead on, Marine."

A few yards away, C.J. sneaked a discreet glance in their direction and had to smile. As bizarre as it was, there was something adorable in that scene, and it gave her a kind of optimism she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

"C.J., c'mere," Toby's voice beckoned from behind her. "We need you to settle a bet."

"She's gonna side with me," Sam insisted.

"She's an educated, worldly woman, so I find that unlikely ..."

She shook her head and went to join her coworkers. There was nothing even remotely normal about her life at the moment, but at the same time, she was pretty satisfied with it.

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#### A few months later, on a Thursday ...

"For the last time, Josh, I'm dealing with it first thing in the morning, all right? We just won an election, for God's sake. I think the party leadership will sleep fine tonight without me calling the entire press corps back in to announce a new fuel-cell initiative." C.J. sipped her coffee and listened patiently to the perpetually high-strung voice coming through her cell phone. "Josh, the only comment anyone is going to get out of me right now is 'Good night.' So listen to me very carefully: good night."

With a small amount of satisfaction, she clicked the phone off and tossed it into her bag. Café Maria was getting more and more crowded every time she came in here. And they'd changed their Thursday special a few weeks back, but she and Harm had gotten so comfortable with their routine that they hadn't had the heart to switch nights. The routine got broken frequently, of course: they both traveled enough to throw it out of whack on a regular basis. But when they did find time to connect, it was time extremely well spent.

And tonight he was late. By a good twenty minutes, which wasn't his style - he usually called to give her a heads-up if he'd been detained. With a mixture of annoyance and amusement, she retrieved her phone and dialed a familiar number. Receiving only the answering machine, she said, "Harm, if you're at home playing 'storm the beaches' with Mac, you are really in for it ..."

A shadow fell across her table, so she quickly ended the call before glancing up - and practically did a double take. The man who stood there was definitely not Harm, but he was tall, strikingly attractive, and wearing a Navy uniform. *Hello*, she nearly said aloud. *What have we here?*

"Ms. Cregg? I'm sorry to bother you. Commander Rabb had to go TDY at the last minute and couldn't find your cell phone number, so he asked me to stop by and express his apologies."

C.J. found that her throat had gone dry, so she quickly took another sip of coffee. "Ah, thank you, Commander -- ?"

"Hancock, ma'am. Lieutenant Commander Peter Hancock. Harm and I were shipmates about a century and a half ago." Hancock flashed a smile that was shadowed by nervousness. "If you don't mind me saying so, Ms. Cregg, it's a real pleasure to meet you. I'm a public affairs officer by trade, and I've been stationed at the Pentagon for a while, so I have a great deal of respect for what you do."

"Compliments are something I don't mind in the slightest, Commander." She returned the smile. "Listen, since you're here, would you like to join me for a cup of coffee?"

"I'd like that very much, ma'am."

"Call me C.J. Have a seat. There's just one thing I have to do first."

She excused herself and went over to one of the café's computers, set up along the far wall. Addressing an email to Harmon Rabb, CDR, Headquarters JAG, she typed:

*You sneaky son of a bitch -- don't think I'm not on to you. I know you're not TDY, and that bit about losing my cell phone number was just sad. I'm willing to forgive you for this little setup, because I think Commander Hancock might be worth it. But your ass had better be here next week. Tell Mac I said hi.*

She hit 'send' and walked back to her companion.

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