



## Conditional Surrender

**Rating: G**

Classification: Story, Romance (Renee/Harm/Mac/Brumby)

Spoilers: "Retreat, Hell," a little of "Ghost Ship," "Death Watch," and "Boomerang"

Author's Notes: After the severe disappointment that was "Retreat, Hell" (I should've known better than to get my hopes up, but hey), I took it upon myself to rationalize the ridiculous subplot and restore some tiny fragment of poor Harm's dignity. Or maybe I just made it all worse. I'm not sure which. But come on. I mean, "sweet thing"?? Give me a break ... Given the recent attempts to make Renee seem like a fairly decent individual, I chose not to beat up on her. As for Mic ... well, you be the judge. I have to admit, I didn't know where this one was going when I started it, and it seems to have taken on a life of its own. It doesn't really resolve anything, but hey, you can't always get what you want. (I think I heard that in a song somewhere.) I did make sure to wrap it up before the next new episode so that I wouldn't get mixed up with the 'real' storyline. And for those of you realists who are about to cry foul, saying that Harm couldn't possibly be this articulate, especially after yet another concussion ... this is my world, so take a seat.

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(directly after Mac leaves to meet Mic for lunch)

### **JAG Headquarters Falls Church, Virginia**

Finally alone in the expansive office, Harm dropped into the admiral's chair and buried his head in his hands. What the hell was happening to him? One lousy knock on the head, and his whole world was in upheaval. Every time he remembered the bizarre things he thought he'd seen, his head would just ache worse. Telling himself it was all psychosomatic didn't help: he was already afraid he was cracking up.

What had brought on this sudden introspection? Why was some part of him questioning the direction of his life? Sure, Mac was important to him - after everything they'd been through, there was no denying that. They didn't always see eye to eye; especially recently, it seemed, but he'd always cared about her. He'd just never had visions of her stepping out of his shower before.

*Liar, his conscience accused. You've thought about it. You just live in perpetual fear of being forced to admit it.* He knew it was true, but it didn't matter now. That ship had sailed nearly a year ago. When she'd confronted him on the ferry that night, he'd been caught so completely off guard that his cryptic response hadn't even made sense to himself. The only thing he remembered for sure - "not yet" - had apparently not been enough. He thought he needed more time, but in less than twenty-four hours, time had run out. So he'd held his head high, and done his best to move on with his life. There

had certainly been enough other distractions on hand.

So why was she suddenly taking up residence in his waking dreams?

Harm grabbed his cover and stood up, hoping some fresh air would help clear his mind. Mistake; he was barely out of the chair before the pounding in his head increased tenfold. He sank back into the chair and shut his eyes against the pain. *So much for flying today.* He'd been scheduled to renew his night-IFR qualifications over at Andrews that evening, but even in full fighter-jock mode, he wouldn't be stupid enough to fly like this. *Damn it.*

He reached for the phone. "Yes, may I speak to Commander Wilkins?" There was a knock at the door, and he covered the receiver. "Enter."

Bud came in and waited patiently for him to finish the call. "Hey, Wildcat - it's Hammer. Listen, I have to take a rain-check on tonight. I know, but I really can't. Can you find somebody else to chase around? I'll get you next week. Promise. Say hi to Denise for me." He hung up and rubbed his eyes wearily.

"How are you feeling, sir?"

"I just gave up two hours of flight time. What does that tell you?" He attempted to smile. "What can I do for you, Bud?"

"Just bringing by the daily status report for your signature." The younger officer studied him as he scrawled his name across the bottom without reading the form. "Commander, may I speak freely?"

"Always, Bud. You know that."

Bud hesitated. "Sir, you look awful. I mean, not awful, but you're obviously not yourself. It's been two days, sir. Don't you think you should see a doctor?"

The voice of reason. Harm sighed. "Yeah, I probably should."

The lieutenant hadn't expected him to give in so easily. That fact alone spoke volumes. Bud seized the opportunity. "After Taps, I'm going to take you over to Bethesda."

"You don't have to - "

"With all due respect, sir. If you can't fly, what makes you think you can drive?"

"Good point. Man, I thought I was over this - whatever it is."

"No, sir. You just thought you could ignore it until it went away."

Harm raised an eyebrow. "Were you this cocky the last time I kept this chair warm?"

"That was two years ago, and at that point you hadn't yet fallen out of it." Bud's eyes widened as he realized the insolent tone of his remark, but the acting JAG was trying to stifle an embarrassed grin.

"Not too many people get to watch their C.O. make a total fool of himself, I bet."

Bud gave up and smirked. "It was pretty funny. Your feet went flying over your head, and ..." They were both laughing now, and he struggled to compose himself. "It would've been funnier if you hadn't gotten hurt, sir."

"It's all right. Not like I haven't been there before. That time I went through the deck on the Hornet, I told Mac I'd hit harder landing a Tomcat."

"Did she believe you?"

"Probably until she found me six hours later, out cold on the deck." He offered a rueful shrug. "There were a lot of 'I told you so's on the ride home."

Despite himself, Bud smiled. "Don't ever change, Commander."

Harm looked up, surprised and touched. "Thanks, Bud. For everything."

"My pleasure, sir. Take it easy for the next couple of hours, okay?"

"Yes, mom."

When the junior attorney had gone, he leaned back and thought about that surreal day on the Hornet, the one that started the search for his father in earnest. Clearly there was precedent for him seeing things that weren't real after a head injury. The idea was strangely comforting - maybe he wasn't any less sane than usual. His next thought was more unsettling: before, the vision had led him, showed him which way to go. And as inexplicable as it seemed, it had been right.

What did that say about *this* vision?

He rested his elbows on the desk and returned his aching head to his hands.

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"Mic, what do you want me to say? I'm sorry I'm not in the most receptive mood, but this week has been hell, and your new venture isn't exactly helping matters."

"What, so fighting for a client's rights is only noble when you have ribbons on your chest?"

"That was *not* about rights. That was about money." Mac kept her voice low, since they were in the middle of a busy restaurant, but her eyes blazed. "Look, I tried not to feel completely sold out by this whole thing. And I do see your point. But I don't ever want to see you give anyone at JAG the runaround again."

"And how did I do that?" Mic protested.

"You know how. You waited until the admiral was gone, and you zeroed in on Bud because you thought he'd be easiest to steamroll. And you took advantage of Harm - "

"Now, hold on a minute. Last I checked, Harm and I were on a level playing field."

"Not right now, you're not. I don't know what the hell's wrong with him, but something is. And you couldn't pass up the chance to stick it to him."

"When did negotiating become a cheap rivalry stunt?" Mic shook his head, his eyes wounded. "Is that really what you think of me, Sarah? That I'd trample your friends to give myself a leg up?"

She winced inwardly at the ugly sound of her accusation flung back at her. But she just couldn't read him as well as she'd once thought ... "Bud is your friend, too," she said quietly. "And I don't think you gave him the respect he deserves."

"Maybe I didn't," he acquiesced. "For that, I should apologize. But don't tell me I wasn't playing fair - especially with Harm. I would have gotten half again as much out of anyone else, and you know it."

She glanced down at her plate, and he frowned. "Why are you so worried about him, love? He's pretty good at taking care of himself."

"I don't know. He's been acting so strange since ... Never mind. You're right. He's an adult, and I'm sorry I brought it up. I just wish everything wasn't so damn confrontational."

"I'm trying, Sarah, and he is, too. I hate to be the one to say it out loud, but the fact is, Harm and I are never going to be best pals. We come from very different worlds."

"Well, I come from a different world from either of you, and I care very much about you both." Mac spread her hands helplessly. "So tell me - what am I supposed to do?"

"Just keep playing peacemaker, I guess." He leaned over and kissed her forehead lightly. "I'll try harder. I promise."

"I suppose that's all I can ask." Still disconcerted, she picked up her fork. "Food's getting cold."

When they'd finished, they were no closer to setting a wedding date, and Mac found that she didn't feel like continuing the afternoon. Needing some time and space, she left a somewhat dejected Mic and went for a walk among the monuments.

She couldn't get that moment in the admiral's office out of her head. She'd wandered in to ask Harm for permission to send Gunny Galindez out to New Mexico. That was all. She'd expected a debate, or at the very least a smartass comment. She had definitely not expected what she got.

He'd looked up at her, first with surprise, then with a slow grin that she could only describe as sexy. In a voice more appropriate for the bedroom than JAG HQ, he'd said, "You ought to know, sweet thing."

In five years, she'd never been so stunned by anything said in that office. He'd answered a question she hadn't even asked, so he obviously hadn't been speaking to her. But it hadn't even sounded like *him*. Mac had never been witness to a true Harmon Rabb

seduction, but she knew him well enough to know that he was more the casual-flirt type than the your-place-or-mine type. It was one of his more endearing traits: there were times when he simply had no clue how charming he was.

Before she could sort it all out, the moment evaporated, and he was staring at her like he'd never seen her before. He'd shrugged off her questions and distractedly agreed to authorize Gunny's orders. His attitude had done a one-eighty, but this new one was no closer to the Harm she knew.

There had been other odd instances over the past two days, but none of them clawed at her mind the way that one did. She tried to tell herself that anyone's brain would be a little scrambled after the spill he'd taken, but there her logic failed. He'd had worse. Hadn't he?

Just who had he seen when she'd walked into that office?

Out of nowhere, a memory flashed in front of her; another full-power flyboy smile, sharply dampened as reality set in.

*"I keep forgetting that I don't really know you."*

She sat down hard on a bench as a bizarre thought struck her. Was that it? Had he looked at her and seen Diane?

The idea came almost as a physical blow. It had been so long, and they'd both worked so hard to distance her from the memory of the young lieutenant whose hold on Harm had lingered long after her murder. Mac had been sure that it was behind him, that he no longer saw the ghost of another woman when he looked at her. But it made sense, in a twisted way. Maybe the Harm she hadn't recognized had been a remnant of the dashing, cocky pilot he'd been ten years ago. Maybe that was the way he'd been with Diane. And maybe a good smack upside the head had only brought out what had been hovering in his subconscious all along.

Sitting alone, a few hundred yards from the Lincoln Memorial, she was faintly surprised to feel hot tears stinging her eyes. This was an altogether new kind of betrayal. Harm was her friend - her best friend, in spite of recent events. He'd stood by her during her darkest times, with no reservations. Now she had to wonder if he'd done those things out of devotion to her, Sarah Mackenzie, or out of an unwitting sense of guilt for the love he hadn't been able to protect.

If that's what it was, then she owed him nothing. She could fully commit to Mic and be no more than a friendly colleague to Harm. But some part of her refused to accept that explanation, and she knew that she wouldn't soon have peace without the truth. No riddles, no avoidance - just a brutally honest discussion of where they stood. It should have happened a long time ago, but she wasn't willing to put it off another minute.

Mac rose and strode purposefully toward a taxi stand, determined to catch him before he left for the day. *I hope you're ready for this, sailor.*

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From the admiral's second-floor window, Harm watched the Marine guards retire the colors for the night. He was grateful for relatively slow afternoon, since he already felt

miserable. The dull ache that he hadn't been able to lose now seemed to encompass his entire body. *Bud's right. You're an idiot*, he told himself. *If you'd just stayed in bed yesterday, you wouldn't be in this fix.*

He wasn't about to admit it to anyone, but he'd been reluctant to give up command. Once in a while, he actually enjoyed being in charge. He'd never been one to take sick leave, anyway: he always worried about what he was missing. On those occasions, Mac generally called him a control freak. She was probably right. All the more reason why he should have conceded and given her command. She'd been out with Mic all afternoon, though, so he'd decided to suck it up until the end of the day.

The speakerphone buzzed. "Sorry to be running behind, sir, but there's some stuff I really need to wrap up. It'll only be a few minutes."

"Don't worry about it, Bud. Just let me know when you're ready to get going."

Immediately the door opened, but it wasn't Bud Roberts. "Mind if I come in?" Admiral Chegwidden casually dropped his duffel bag on a chair, still in civilian dress.

"Admiral!" Harm leaped up instinctively, and his vision swam dangerously. It took all he had to remain upright at attention. "Sir, I thought you were still in New Mexico."

"Long story. I'd tell you, but I'm afraid you'll collapse first." The admiral had not gotten where he was without being perceptive, especially when it came to his own people. He'd seen the color drain from the senior attorney's face, and he'd noticed the lines of fatigue around his eyes. "Sit down, Commander. You look like hell."

"I've been told as much, sir," Harm admitted, taking a seat in front of the desk as the dizziness passed.

Chegwidden studied him briefly. "Was Gunny not exaggerating when he told me you fell on your head?"

"Fraid not, sir. I really thought I was fine."

"Don't you always?" The commanding officer folded his arms across his chest disapprovingly. "You should've given Mac the keys. It's not like she doesn't know how to steer this place."

"I know, sir, and I apologize. Bud's going to take me over to Bethesda as soon as he's done."

Chegwidden knew how hard it was for the proud commander to admit needing help. He wondered what he'd missed over the past few days. "I never thought of you as the clumsy type."

Harm grimaced. "Just don't lean too far back in that chair."

"That's what you get for having a high center of gravity."

He would have laughed at that - it was better than everyone else's constant concern - if

he didn't feel so sick.

"Harm, have you gotten any sleep since this happened?"

"I tried, sir. Didn't have much luck."

"Get out of here and get yourself checked out. I'll tell you about New Mexico tomorrow, and you can bring me up to speed before staff call."

"Aye, sir. Good night."

The bullpen was nearly empty at 1800, which suited him just fine. The fewer people that saw him right now, the better. "Bud," he called, cursing the weakness in his voice, "I'm going to head downstairs, all right?"

"Right behind you, sir."

Things were rapidly going from bad to worse. His vision was beginning to blur around the edges, and his body felt vaguely numb. As he picked up his briefcase and cover, heading for the stairwell, he tried to recall if his last concussion had been this bad. *My last concussion? When the hell did I become Evel Knievel?*

At the top of the stairs, he faltered and grabbed the railing for support. Bud, just making his way through the bullpen, saw him and frowned. "Sir, are you all right?"

*Obviously not*, he wanted to reply, but the words wouldn't come. Vertigo seized him, and as everything faded to gray around him, his hand slipped from the rail. Consciousness rushed away before he could even realize that he was falling.

"Commander!!"

Bud dashed forward, only in time to witness his friend's body tumbling limply down the stairs. Harm's head once again struck the floor, this time with a sickening crack. He lay unmoving in a thoroughly unnatural position on the landing.

Horrorified, the lieutenant just stared for a moment before springing into action. His cry had brought Admiral Chegwiddden out to investigate, and the two of them raced down the steps to the fallen officer's aid.

"Damn it, Rabb, this could get old rather quickly." The admiral located a steady pulse and examined the deep gash at his temple. "This is going to bleed like crazy. Lieut - "

"Got it, sir." Bud handed over the first-aid kit that had been hanging on the wall. His C.O. merely took it without comment and unwrapped a packet of sterile gauze.

"What happened this time?"

"I think he fainted at the top, sir." Bud shook his head helplessly. "We were just about to - if I'd known it was that serious - "

"Don't beat yourself up, Bud. I'm sure the commander was doing his best to convince

everyone otherwise, including himself.”

Mac had just pressed the call button for the elevator when she heard tense, familiar voices from the stairwell. She ducked her head through the door, and was confronted by the sight of her partner, lying unconscious, and the two men tending to him.

Even in heels, she made it up the stairs in three strides, kneeling by his side. “Sir, what happened? And - why are you here?”

“Tell you later. Apparently my acting was under the impression that he was invincible. If I’d thought he was going to pass out, I would have advised him to take the elevator.” Chegwidden studied the gauze he had pressed to the wound, rapidly darkening with blood.

“Have you called an ambulance?”

He shook his head. “I want to give him a chance to come out of it on his own. This looks ugly, but it might not be that severe. I think he’d just as soon be spared the additional embarrassment of being taken out of here on a stretcher, if possible.”

Bud hesitated. “Sir, that fall looked pretty bad.”

“Ten minutes. If he’s not awake and swearing by then, I’ll worry. But not before.” The admiral looked over her attire. “Did Commander Rabb authorize a new uniform policy?”

“No, sir, he authorized my afternoon off.”

“Then if you don’t mind my asking, Colonel, what are you doing back here?”

Mac sighed. “To be honest, Admiral, I was hoping to talk to Harm. I was concerned about him - not concerned enough, apparently.”

“Not you, too. I just talked Bud here out of a guilt trip.”

“Bud stayed, sir. I didn’t.”

“That’s enough,” Chegwidden said sharply. “When Rabb wakes up, he’s going to be irritated at both of you for trying to babysit him. Forget about it. Want to hear about my fishing trip?”

Mac had protectively taken hold of Harm’s hand, but she got the message, and dutifully gave the admiral her attention. Bud leaned back against the wall. “Did you catch anything, sir?”

“A couple of criminals, actually.” He went on to recount the whole adventure, leaving his subordinates in disbelief. “... the Gunny’s healing fine, so he’ll be back in Washington in a couple of days. Anyway, I figured I’d get more peace and quiet back here.”

Mac shook her head. It wasn’t enough that trouble seemed to follow her and Harm around: now Gunny seemed to have the curse. “Sir, I think it’s been about ten minutes.”

Both he and Bud looked at her askance. “Nine minutes and forty-two seconds,” she

amended.

The admiral checked the bleeding, which appeared to have slowed. "All right. Would you like to try and bring him around?"

"Aye, sir." She leaned over and gently shook Harm's shoulder, speaking into his ear. "Harm," she said sweetly but firmly, "wake up or I'm going to kick your ass into next week, okay?"

He remained motionless. "My turn." With all the authority of his two stars, Chegwidden barked, "Snap to, sailor, or I swear to God your sorry carcass is going to be floating home!"

No response. *Desperate times*, Mac thought bleakly. "Sir, I have one last idea, but you both have to promise you'll forget you ever saw this."

Bud's eyebrows shot up, but their C.O. silenced him with a look. "Our lips are sealed."

She nodded, then kissed Harm long and hard, trying not to think about the possible repercussions if he were to regain consciousness at that particular moment. Still, not even a flicker of movement.

"Wow," Bud said finally. "He's going to be ticked about missing *that*."

Her head jerked up. "Not a word, Lieutenant," she warned.

"Uh, no, ma'am, of course not."

"Right now he's got bigger problems." The admiral sighed and grimly drew his cell phone. "This is Admiral Chegwidden at JAG Headquarters. I need paramedics over here."

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Mac shifted uncomfortably in the molded plastic chair. She hated hospitals. It didn't matter what the circumstance: there was rarely even a glimmer of comfort to be found in such places. The admiral had half-persuaded, half-ordered Bud to go home, and the new addition to their tense trio was Renee. The slim blonde didn't make much attempt at conversation, for which Mac was grateful. Instead, she stared at a magazine, not really seeing the words. She hadn't turned a page in ten minutes.

Admiral Chegwidden had given up his idle pacing and wandered back to the ER desk in search of new information. Mac glanced over at Renee and decided to break the awkward silence. "You know, he's going to be fine," she began tentatively. "Harm's famous for being hard-headed."

"So I've noticed." Renee offered a brief, empty smile. "I'm guessing that this isn't a first, then?"

"For concussions? Hardly. Let's see, there was the time on the Hornet - that was pretty nasty. And once he got hit by a car, but that's another story entirely. And he took some plexi-glass to the face when a refueling hose shattered his canopy ... and according to Webb, Palmer knocked him out cold when they ..." Belatedly, she realized that Harm's

girlfriend was looking more shocked by the minute. "But all of those were ages ago," she backpedaled hastily. "I think he's finally mellowing out."

"If this is mellow, I don't know how he survived active duty." Renee shook her head. "I knew he wasn't a garden-variety lawyer, but - God, I had no idea about all of that."

It was clear that she was beginning to question some of what she knew, or thought she knew, about Harmon Rabb. Mac wanted to kick herself for forcing her into that realization, inevitable though it had been. "Renee, I'm sorry," she said suddenly. "I knew something was wrong, and I should have insisted that he get to a doctor. I don't know why I didn't."

"Same reason I didn't, probably. We trust him." She leaned her head back against the wall and turned toward the exhausted Marine. "Was he acting weird at work, too?"

"Only a couple of times." Mac's dark eyes were distant. "He looked at me with the strangest expression ... I'm not sure he even recognized me." She hesitated, reluctant to say more. Adding a dead girlfriend to the mix could only cause more confusion.

To her surprise, Renee gave a short, humorless laugh. "Oh, I think he'd recognize you anywhere."

Mac hadn't the first clue what to say to that, but the other woman soon spoke again, looking away.

"He called me Mac."

She froze, this revelation completely unexpected. "In - bed?" she stammered, a split-second before realizing exactly what she was saying.

"Technically. But not like that. I just ..." Renee stared directly forward. "I'm having a hard time believing that it didn't mean anything, you know?"

Suddenly Mac wasn't wondering about Diane anymore. Her mind was whirling. What was going on in that man's head?

Before she could put together a coherent response, Renee turned to her with wide eyes. "Oh, God. I shouldn't have told you that. I'm so sorry - the last thing you need is to hear that your partner may or may not have unresolved issues concerning you. I just made everything worse, didn't I?"

Still recovering from the shock, Mac shook her head, hoping that she sounded more confident than she felt. "Whatever issues we have - had - are long past resolved," she stated flatly.

Renee shook her head, and there was something very much like hurt in her graceful features. "Mac, I know we're not exactly destined to be good friends, but I do respect you. Please don't lie to me."

At that moment, Mac knew she'd underestimated Renee Peterson. She felt awful for it, but what could she say? All of them, even Mic, had been living in an odd state of denial for the past few weeks. They pretended not to notice the tension, the occasional

sideways glances, the unspoken questions. Instead, they chose to ignore it all, as if it would just go away. As if another day or week would change anything about the past five years.

The symmetry was ironic. Compared to their collective denial, Harm's earlier insistence that he was fine suddenly didn't seem so foolish.

At the end of the hall, the door opened, and a doctor with gold oak leaves on his collar emerged. "Are either of you here with Commander Rabb?"

"We both are." Mac spoke for them, not daring to look over at Renee. Admiral Chegvidden appeared next to her almost instantly. "How is he?"

"He's all right, but I'd like to keep him here for a couple of days. If only to make sure he actually rests this time." The doctor was clearly less than thrilled with his patient's track record, but he was also well aware of being outranked. "The first injury was a severe concussion, mainly due to its placement at the base of the skull. I'm surprised he could stay on his feet for two days. The second injury would have been fairly minor, but because his system was already depressed, it took him a while to regain consciousness. The head CT came back negative, so other than a bruised wrist and a wicked headache, the commander's going to be fine. They're moving him upstairs right now - room 410."

The two women exchanged a glance, knowing that their disrupted conversation was only the beginning. Now that it was all out in the open, there was no turning back. Without another word, they headed for the stairs.

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Harm had only been alone in the room for a few seconds before Renee appeared in the doorway. She did her best to smile bravely, despite the tremor that ran through her upon seeing him, pale and bandaged. This wasn't the way it was supposed to work. He was supposed to be the prototypical white knight, protecting truth and justice without breaking a sweat. He wasn't supposed to get hurt. But from what Mac had said, this was nearly a regular occurrence. "How are you feeling, flyboy?" she asked gently.

He barely looked up as she came around to sit by his bed. "Like a first-class moron, thanks."

"Don't say that. It's not your fault." She brushed her fingers over the bandage at his temple. "Are you in pain?"

"A little. The drugs are pretty good." He still hadn't met her gaze. "Did I give Bud a heart attack?"

"Bud's all right. The admiral sent him home. He's waiting outside - with Mac."

At her name, his eyes flashed. "What's she doing here?"

"She's worried about you, Harm. We all are. Why do you always find that so hard to believe?"

"I don't know. Forget it." Tiredly, he leaned back. "I've really been out of it for the last

couple of days, haven't I?"

"I thought you were doing pretty well until you called me by the wrong name." She kept her voice light, but he stiffened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to - you don't have anything to apologize for. That wasn't your fault, either."

"Sure it was. One way or another."

Exasperated, she sighed. "Look at me, Harmon. You need to stop trying to blame yourself for every stupid thing that goes wrong in this world. You had a concussion, and you got confused. I'm not going to throw it back in your face at every turn. Unless ..."

Her voice caught, and she dropped the facade. "Unless it meant more than you thought," she finished softly.

When she looked at him, the uncertainty in his blue eyes confirmed her fears. "You don't even know, do you?" she whispered. "You're not sure what it meant." Suddenly she was finding it hard to breathe. Had they been cursed from the start?

"Renee ... I meant what I said. I know I have some things to work out, but I want you in my life. Please don't give up on me."

"I never could." Her eyes bright with tears, she attempted to smile. "But I meant what I said, too. You have to get her out of your dreams, and I'm starting to think that the only way to do that is to talk to her."

"I can't."

"You can, and you need to. And so does she. It's the only way to finally know for sure ... either way." She knew she had to get out of there, if only for a while. Otherwise she would most likely break down, and she didn't want to be that kind of woman. In more ways than one, she envied the strong-willed Sarah Mackenzie.

"Listen, I'm going to run back to your place and pick up some things for you. I'll be back in an hour or so, all right?" Without waiting for a response, she kissed him quickly and started toward the door.

"Renee, I ..." He trailed off, sounding lost.

"I know. You didn't mean for this to happen. I understand, Harm. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't want to give us every chance."

She squared her shoulders and walked into the hallway, leaving him with his thoughts.

"How's he doing?" Mac asked quietly, noticing her forced calm.

"Feeling embarrassed and a little pissed off, I think. I'm going to go grab him some clothes and stuff from home." She tipped her head in the direction of the closed door. "Go talk to him. If you have to, knock the sense back into him. But don't let him crawl back into that shell."

Mac hesitated, but she felt as if she owed them both that much. With a deep breath, she

pushed open the door.

Renee didn't watch: she was already moving toward the stairs. The admiral called out to her. "Renee, are you all right?"

She only paused for a moment. "It's not about me right now, Admiral. I'm not sure it ever was."

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Harm was staring sullenly at the ceiling when he heard the door open again, this time for Mac. She was still wearing that dress, he observed, but he knew from her expression that this was no daydream. "Hope I didn't ruin your date," he said tonelessly.

"No, we did that all by ourselves." She took the chair and studied the soft brace on his left wrist. "There goes your golf game for a while."

"Wasn't that great to begin with. Did Renee put you up to this?"

"Up to what? Making sure a friend is okay?"

He didn't seem to notice that she'd evaded the question. Almost inaudibly, he replied, "I wasn't sure we still fit that definition anymore."

If he'd slapped her in the face, she would have been less shocked. "What?" she whispered. "How can you say that?"

"How? Case in point. A few weeks ago, when you were acting JAG, I backed you up on something, and you got this look on your face, like I had two heads. And you said, 'Why are you being so nice to me?'" He turned his head, but his eyes were wounded. "That hurt. And it hurt more every time I thought about it. How did we end up like this, Mac? We used to tell each other everything - we practically finished each other's sentences. Now ... we still trust each other. At least, I'd like to think so. But we don't talk."

For a long time, she couldn't speak. It was true that they'd been growing apart. But she hadn't realized just how far they'd fallen - and she hadn't known just how much he'd felt it, too. "Of course I still trust you," she said softly. "Harm, your trust is one of the few constants in my life. Maybe that's part of the problem. Maybe we've been taking each other too much for granted lately, letting our friendship slide because of - other distractions. I don't know."

"Your fiancé and my girlfriend aren't 'distractions,' Mac. They deserve the same honesty that we expect from each other." A strange flash of regret flickered across his face. "But I'm starting to wonder if honesty's part of the problem, too."

She shook her head, unable to decipher his point. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I think I know when it all went to hell. A lot of it had to do with me leaving, but that's another subject. There was one specific conversation that changed things. And I think it basically comes down to misunderstandings." He prepared himself

for the leap. "For instance, the meaning of 'letting go.' Or 'not yet.'"

Her breath caught in her throat. "Are you sure you want to get into this right now?"

"Of course not. My head's killing me, and I have absolutely no idea what I'm getting myself into. But I'm afraid of what might happen if I don't. I'm afraid that I'll call Renee 'Mac' again, or I'll get in another fight with Mic, or ... or we'll keep going this way, and I'll lose the best friend I've ever had. However it goes, this needs to happen. It's already long overdue. Isn't it?"

This was the conversation she'd been looking for when she'd gone back to JAG to find him only hours ago. Why was she now terrified of having it? "I guess it is," she conceded hesitantly. "Okay, counselor, you first."

"Like I said, it's about misunderstandings." Carefully, he sat up in the bed and faced her. "That night in Australia, when you asked if I couldn't let go ... I answered you, but I'm not sure I ever really understood the question. What did you think I needed to let go of?"

Surprised, she just looked at him. How could he not know? Had she been reading him wrong all this time? Or was he merely confirming what he'd thought all along? *This is what the honesty's for*, she reminded herself, and plunged in.

"Diane."

He nodded, closing his eyes. "That's what I was afraid of."

Despite herself, her temper flared. "What, that's not a legitimate concern?" She calmed immediately. "I'm sorry, but - God, Harm, what was I supposed to think? I've never heard you admit to loving anyone but her. And six months after she died, I walked into your life, completely oblivious to being a mirror image of her. How could I possibly expect you to forget that?"

"I didn't forget. But I haven't been dwelling on it, either. Mac, I let go of Diane the first day I woke up knowing that her killer was gone. I didn't have to wonder anymore, and for the first time I didn't feel like I'd let her down." There was still a lingering pain behind his blue eyes, but he met her gaze. "And because of you, I didn't make a huge mistake that night. I never really thanked you for that."

"Not in so many words. But you didn't have to."

"I should have. I should have found a way to tell you that I didn't see her when I looked at you anymore. I wish I had. Maybe that would have prevented this disaster."

She took a few seconds to absorb the impact of this confession, but there were more pieces that didn't quite fit. "So you didn't need to let her go," she said slowly, trying to keep her voice level. "But you still answered the question. What did you think you needed to let go of?"

He sighed. "A lot of things. If we were to explore ... whatever it was that we were thinking, there were really only two options. If we were to be open about any kind of relationship, it would force us to let go of our partnership. If we kept it secret, we would

have to let go of one of the principles we swore an oath to uphold. Right then, on the whim of one bizarre conversation, I wasn't ready to do either. And apparently, based on your decision the next day, neither were you."

That last comment stung a little: she remembered the look on his face when he first noticed Mic's ring. "Maybe you're right," she admitted, "but - "

"I know I am. What I don't know is ... whether I'm ready now."

Her head jerked up, thrown off-guard. "Oh, no. You can't do this to me now."

"Mac - "

"No, damn it! You can't just drop this on me out of nowhere! Do you really expect me to ditch my fiancé, the person who actually makes me feel good about myself, just because you've suddenly decided I'm worth a shot after all this time?"

"For Christ's sake, Mac, stand down. I didn't say that, did I? Believe it or not, Mic is the reason I haven't let myself think too hard about any of this. You know I can't stand the guy, but he makes you happy, and that's all I need to know." He stared down at his hands, fully aware that he was laying his heart out in front of her. "I've lived my entire adult life by the rules of the Navy, and those rules state unequivocally that an officer in my chain of command is off-limits. My own rules tell me that a ring on a woman's left hand makes her even more off-limits. Without one, the other would still keep me away. Believe me, I have no intention of disrupting your life any further with my problems. The only reason I tell you now is a promise of honesty to my best friend."

An awkward silence hung over the room for a full minute, as neither dared to look at the other. At last, she spoke. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. The important thing is to make sure that from here on out, we both have no regrets about the choices we make. If you don't feel the same anymore - if you really love Mic, what I feel or don't feel is irrelevant. I'll never stand in the way of your happiness: I think that's more important to me than anything. I just - I can't lose you, Mac. I've been trying so hard not to need you, but I do. Please don't be angry at me for that."

No one had ever said anything like that to her before, and it shook her to her very core. Was it possible that this man, who prided himself on never needing anyone, could truly need her? Was it possible that she might still need him?

"I'm not angry," she whispered. "I'm just confused. This morning, I thought I had my life figured out, and now ... no matter what I do, everything's so complicated. I don't know how I feel anymore. I - " She broke off and started over. "I guess the only thing I need to know is this: do you love me?"

He hesitated. "Does it matter anymore?"

"It does to me. I need to know, Harm. If I'm going to risk altering my entire worldview, I have to know everything."

Conflicting emotions raged across his handsome features, but when he began to speak, his

eyes were clear. "Sarah, you're the most amazing person I've ever known. I've never been able to trust anyone the way I do you. You're the one who makes me hold on when everything I have is screaming at me to give up. I can't imagine my life without you. I'm awful at defining these things, but - if that's love, then yes. I've loved you since that night at Norfolk. Maybe I always have."

She could feel the tears beginning to well up, and it seemed so right to fall into his arms and let the rest take care of itself. A thousand of Mic's passionate confessions couldn't match the depth of that one simple declaration. But as right as it felt, she knew she couldn't let herself be swept away. There was too much at stake. "I have to think about this," she managed to say. "I - I need some time to sort it all out."

She couldn't bring herself to look at him: the echo of defeat in his voice was enough to tear her heart open. "I understand," he said dully. "I'm sorry for doing this. You won't have to worry about things being awkward at work. I'll stay out of your way."

"Don't do that." She didn't want to let her emotions rule this moment, but he needed to know that he wasn't alone. "I need you in my way. When you're not there, everything just feels wrong. I realized that when you were gone, and I wish to God I'd found a better way to tell you than blindsiding you on that damn ferry. But so much has happened since then, and I don't know if I can let myself feel that anymore. And right now, I don't know how I'm going to figure it out. But I will, somehow. I promise." Tentatively, she touched his hand, and rose to leave. "Regardless of how or when, I need to do this on my own terms. So let's try to keep things the way they are for the time being. Can you accept that?"

"I've done it so far, haven't I?" His half-smile was rueful, but as she reached the door, it faded into regret. "Mac, I hate myself for doing this to you. I wanted to be the one person in your life who never hurt you. I don't care what I have to do, but I swear I'll never hurt you again."

"I believe you," she said softly. "I'll be okay, Harm. So will you. One way or another, we'll make things right. Now get some sleep. You're a mess."

Closing the door behind her, she sank against the wall, incredibly grateful for the empty corridor. She couldn't face Renee or even the admiral just yet. Slowly, mechanically, she started toward the exit at the end of the hall, lost in a myriad of questions. There had been a time when she'd wanted nothing more than to hear him say exactly those words to her. She could freely admit that now, at least to herself. The million-dollar question was, did she still want that from him? Could two people this willful and ardently committed to their life's work really find happiness together? Could they set the cases and investigations aside at the end of the day and just be a normal couple? Or, more important - a normal family?

At the double doors, she suddenly stopped, laying her hand on the cool metal handle. Maybe that was it. Maybe she could make it just that simple. No one could ever guarantee happiness; so why take the safe road? What mattered was the fact that once upon a time, her day wouldn't start until she saw him breeze through the bullpen with that irrepressible smile. Once upon a time, she'd known no comfort like his calm voice in her ear. And despite all the changes in their lives, despite her best efforts to deny it, that much remained constant.

No matter where she went from here, some part of her would always believe that they

belonged together. All that really stood in their way was the fear, and unless they did something about it, the fear would continue to keep them apart. He'd done what he could: he'd acknowledged his feelings and his failures. Now it was up to her.

"Damn it," she whispered, and turned to go back to him.

After three steps, she pulled up short. Harm stood just outside his room, leaning heavily on the wall. He'd managed to find his uniform pants, and looked as if he'd thrown them on in seconds. Against his white T-shirt, his skin was an awful shade of gray, but he was determined to catch up to her. Even his feet were bare.

"Harm, what are you doing?"

"I changed my mind," he said weakly. "I wanted to believe I could live with whatever your decision was, but I can't. I can't go back to pretending I don't care ... I - " He swayed unsteadily on his feet, and she hurried to support him.

"Back to bed. Now." His lanky frame nearly enveloped her as she eased him back into the room and onto the bed. A little reluctantly, she released him from her arms, but he caught her wrist.

"Mac, every second that goes by is another one we can't get back. When you walked out that door, I was afraid I'd pushed you away for good, and I couldn't let ..." His expressive eyes implored her. "Please tell me there's still a chance."

With a small smile, she answered. "Why do you think I turned around, genius?"

A faint glimmer of hope crept through, but he was careful to keep it tightly controlled. "Don't play with my head right now, Mac. I don't think I could take it."

"I'm not kidding, Harm. I turned around with the intention of coming back in here and telling you that I need you, too ... and that I'm tired of trying to convince myself and everyone else that I'm not in love with you."

He lifted his gaze and saw that she meant it. With awe, he replied, "After everything I put you through, you still - ?"

"We made mistakes. Both of us. For now, let's just leave it at that."

He nodded, and his gratitude was evident. "So what now?" he asked quietly.

She sat down beside him on the bed. "Now, we still have a lot of things to figure out. Like what the hell I'm going to do about this - " She waved her left hand. " - and what we're going to do about work. I don't think it can all be fixed overnight."

"I know. I'm not sure I believe that we've gotten this far." Taking her hand in his, he spoke solemnly. "One step at a time. But before anything else, let's get our friendship back. Okay?"

Her eyes were bright with tears, and through the fatigue, she could see that his were,

too. "I'd like that."

Instinctively they came together and embraced, clinging to each other in a way that was unfamiliar yet somehow perfect. There was some cautious excitement, in anticipation of what was to come; but mainly there was an overwhelming sense of relief that the full truth had at last been shared, and also a comfort in the fact that, regardless of the battles ahead, they would stand together.

She didn't know how long they held each other like that. For once, her internal clock had failed her. When she finally raised her head from his shoulder, his exhaustion was palpable. "You need to rest, sailor," she said firmly.

"What I need is to not take a header down any more stairs." But he didn't resist as she gently helped him to lie back. "God, I'm losing it," he said uncertainly. "I'm afraid that I'm not going to remember any of this when I wake up. Or that this whole conversation will have been another twisted dream."

"Neither of those is going to happen," she assured him. "Because I'm going to be here to tell you otherwise."

"Mac, you don't have to -"

"Don't argue," she interrupted good-naturedly, "or I'll have the entire office calling you 'Twinkletoes' by Monday staff call."

"Ouch."

"See, you ought to know by now not to mess with me." She settled once again into the chair.

"Yes, ma'am ... Good night, ninja-girl."

As he drifted off to sleep, it occurred to her that their last exchange was exactly what they'd been missing for so long. With a contented smile, she curled up in the chair and closed her eyes. One step at a time.

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Safe in each other's arms, neither had noticed Renee Peterson step up to the window. She'd returned just in time to see Harm reach for his partner's hand, and in a brief, terrible instant, she knew that she'd lost him. Maybe it wouldn't end tonight, or tomorrow, but it would end all the same. There was no mistaking that scene: he'd finally faced the truth and made his choice. Maybe he'd never really been hers to lose.

*I do love you, Harm. I wish that had been enough.*

She silently dropped the duffel bag she'd brought by the door. Then she turned around and walked away, not looking back.

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