



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: JAG story, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: 2005 Virtual Season

Disclaimer: Once more, for good measure - characters belong to Bellisarius Productions.

Author's Notes: Listen up; this is important. I want to make it abundantly clear that the chain of events described herein is NOT an actual mishap causal factor. I swiped details from a number of different places, most of them unrelated to the F/A-18, and crammed them all together. So please don't go thinking that something like this can make a Hornet fall out of the sky. It can't. That's why they pay us engineers.

Additional ANs: Well, gang, this is it. It's been an incredible five years. If you asked me, I'd do it all again tomorrow.

April 11, 2015

1427 EDT

USS Seahawk

Virginia Capes Operating Area

Aviation Mate Second Class Michael Ruglio paused under the wing of the waiting aircraft to adjust his helmet. Damn brain bucket made him sweat like crazy in this kind of sun. When the helmet was sitting more comfortably -- not comfortable, mind you, but closer to it -- he stepped up to the landing gear and inspected the aircraft handlers' work.

The 22-year-old catapult supervisor was counting the minutes until the end of his duty shift. He'd promised Lisa that he'd call tonight; it was her birthday, and until a couple of weeks ago she'd been expecting him to actually be home for it this year. But they'd stepped up the exercise schedule, and so he was at sea for two weeks. They were only fifty miles off the Virginia coast, but it might as well have been the other side of the earth for all the good it did him today.

Four more birds to launch, and he'd be done. Mike confirmed that the nose gear of this F/A-18E Super Hornet was secured to the 'cat' shuttle, then stepped back to the safe area and signaled 'go.' The pilot snapped off a return salute, and the catapult sent his aircraft rocketing down the deck and into the air.

Mike knew plenty of guys who didn't bother to watch the jets once they were off the deck and officially someone else's problem. He wasn't one of them. He'd picked this line of work for a reason; he still had a soft spot for anything that flew. Before the next Hornet could maneuver into position, he had maybe twenty seconds to watch his last customer depart the area.

So he had a front-row seat to observe as the Super Hornet briefly dipped below deck level before establishing a positive rate of climb ... then staggered, rolled to wings-vertical, and sank out of sight altogether.

A hundred thoughts raced through Mike's head, all coalescing into one primary mantra: "Oh, *crap.*"

Opening credits ... in which Harm is wearing a black T-shirt, for no other reason than because that's what I want to see.

Monday
June 8, 2015
0908 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, VA

He stared at the craft, power and grace intertwined in its unassuming lines, with a distinct sense of awe. He'd seen it a hundred times, watched it take off and land a hundred times more from the small county airport near his home. Today, he would finally get his chance.

Joe, the local flight instructor, noticed him standing very still, and grinned. "Not gonna back out on me, are you?"

His head whipped around. "Are you kidding?"

"Didn't think so. C'mon. She's preflighted and ready to go. Next time I'll show you how to do that part yourself, but for now, let's go fly."

Let's go fly. If those three words weren't the very definition of freedom, he didn't know what was.

He climbed into the left seat and strapped himself in, Joe settling in beside him. The older man talked him through the startup procedures and let him try taxiing to the end of the runway, gently correcting him when the foot-pedal steering got away from him. He waved at his mom, observing with a brave, false smile from the tower building.

And suddenly they were lined up on the runway centerline, and Joe was pushing the throttle in, and from that point on, he knew only the sensation of air under his wings and the pull of the sky.

The buzz of the intercom drew Rear Admiral Harmon Rabb, Jr., out of the memory, and he smiled wistfully at the photos on his desk. Mac had framed a smaller version of the Tico picture, of him and his father, in a double frame with a picture of him and Ben sitting on Sarah's wing. The picture was only a year old, and already Ben had changed so much. Time flies, or so the saying went -- and wasn't that an appropriate turn of phrase?

He reached over to toggle the intercom. "Yes, Gardner?"

"Sir, just a reminder of your conference call with General Harris at 0930," his yeoman responded. "I had to move it up a half-hour to accommodate your 1100 lunch meeting at the Pentagon."

"Ah, one last visit to the five-sided fun factory. Thank you, Petty Officer."

There was a smile in Gardner's voice. "Yes, sir."

Harm leaned back in his chair and surveyed his office, trying to decide how he felt about the increasingly bare walls and growing stack of boxes in the corner. One more week. After thirty years in uniformed service, he had five days left. Time flies, all right. He'd been fifteen when he took that first flight he recalled so romantically - and thirty-six years had passed since that day. At that time he'd known nothing of the future beyond three simple facts: he wanted to fly; he wanted to serve in the Navy; and he wanted -- no, needed -- to find his father.

Now, retiring as a two-star admiral and the Judge Advocate General, with his final flight scheduled for Wednesday afternoon, summing up his thoughts in a compact package was proving difficult. There was only one clear conclusion he'd found out of the whole tangled mess: *Dad, I hope to God you can see me now.*

The intercom buzzed again, and he lifted an eyebrow as he tapped the button. "Emma, if you're thinking about trying to get all your interruptions in now so you can take off early or something, think again."

"I'm sorry, sir. It's just that a message came into your public email box that I think you might be interested in."

Petty Officer Emma Gardner was a good aide, and she'd learned his command style early on. She often knew what his next order would be before he did, so if she thought he'd want to see this, she was probably right. "Come on in."

The young woman stepped into his office and deposited a file folder on his desk before coming to attention. It was another facet of his style she'd learned early: he was more likely to fully read something if it were printed out in front of him and not on a computer screen. Harm waved a hand as he picked up the folder. "At ease. What have we got here?"

"Sir, a lieutenant from VF-602 out of NAS Oceana has requested your attention to his case."

That was unusual. "This office does have oversight over all Navy cases, but the Atlantic Fleet has primary authority for Oceana."

"No, sir -- not Headquarters. He means you. Personally."

That made him glance up. Like those of all officers, his email address was publicly available, but like most flag officers, he had his email filters set so that unsolicited mail went through his yeoman first. Receiving messages from unknown members of the fleet was rare but not unheard of. Such messages getting past Gardner was unheard of.

“And this lieutenant’s case merits special priority, in your opinion?”

Gardner’s resolve flickered for an instant, but she held her ground. “Admiral, I can’t accurately comment on his case, but his letter ... it’s eloquent, respectful, and pretty impassioned. I know you have a limited amount of time in the office, sir, and if you decide that this is a waste of it, I sincerely apologize. I just thought ...”

She was starting to fumble for words, which was out of character for her. Harm decided to throw her a line. “Gut instinct?” he suggested.

Gardner nodded, the dark blond bun at the nape of her neck bouncing in syncopated rhythm. “Yes, sir.”

For the dozenth time, Harm tried not to think too hard about the fact that she was even younger than Mattie. “Don’t ever lose that, Emma,” he said quietly.

She blinked, and a hint of a pleased smile crept into her eyes. “No, sir.”

“Thank you, Petty Officer. Dismissed.”

He opened the folder as she departed and scanned the printed message inside.

> Sir,

>

> I apologize in advance for stepping outside my reporting chain and taking up your time. I have done so because Norfolk NLSO has not responded to my inquiries, and because I have hope that you, as a fellow aviator, will see something familiar in my situation.

> Until a few weeks ago, I was an F/A-18 driver with VF-602, getting ready to deploy on the Seahawk to support Operation Enduring Freedom. While practicing high-tempo carrier operations, I was involved in a Class A launch mishap, which destroyed my aircraft and triggered an accident investigation board.

> My cockpit indicators were all within normal ranges at the time I pushed power to launch. However, immediately after departing the deck, the jet experienced a flight control malfunction which caused a 90-degree bank angle and resulting loss of lift. I initiated the ejection sequence just prior to hitting the water, but the horizontal trajectory and low altitude prevented my chute from opening fully. I have since been released from Portsmouth Medical, but have been reclassified as non-flight status due to the spinal injuries I received.

> I recognize that my back won’t let me fly again, sir, and I’d be lying if I said that didn’t tear me up. But that isn’t my reason for writing. The accident investigation board had very little physical evidence to review because the Navy wasn’t able to recover all of my aircraft from the ocean. Even so, the board concluded that the cause of the mishap was pilot error. However, they did not recommend any disciplinary action against me, which may be why I have not been successful in getting the NLSO’s attention.

> Sir, there is very little in this world that I know to be an absolute truth, but this much I do know: I did not crash that jet.

> I’m sure you must see all kinds of blame-gamers from where you sit, but I would stake my commission on this. I love the Navy, and I will serve with pride wherever my new road takes me. I’m not asking this because I feel I’m being persecuted or because I can’t handle the black

mark in my file. I'm asking because, yes, I want to be able to hold my head up high, but also because whatever mechanical problem occurred in my jet may happen in others. The next pilot may not be lucky enough to escape with a bad back and a revoked flight status, and if the worst were to happen, the knowledge that it could have been prevented *would* be too much to handle.

>Sir, I understand that your time is valuable, and I apologize if I've wasted it. I simply don't know where else I can go at this point, having approached both the fleet JAGs and my own command with no results. I've heard so many instances of you going all-out to ensure that the truth comes to light, and I know you'd feel as sick as I would at the prospect of a fellow aviator paying the price for an incomplete investigation.

> Thank you again for your time.

> Very respectfully,

> LT Ryan Marshall

Harm stared at the letter for long minutes after he'd finished reading it. He could already hear all the reasons why he should put this aside and let the accident boards and fleet JAGs do their jobs. He'd certainly seen plenty of cases where the responsible parties were absolutely convinced of their own blamelessness right up until the moment they were proven wrong. And this wouldn't set a good precedent for following the chain of command.

Still ... what harm could it do to just look at the issue? His job didn't come without a few perks, after all. And whatever precedent he might set would only have a week to run, anyway.

He tapped the intercom. "Gardner, get a hold of the Safety Office and have them send the mishap report from the April Class A on the Seahawk. Also, call the Norfolk NLSO and get their investigator's report."

"Already working on it, Admiral," came the prompt response.

Harm shook his head; she definitely knew him way too well. "God help us all if you ever choose to use your psychic powers for evil rather than good, Petty Officer."

"Thank you, sir."

With a grin, he turned his attention to the calendar alert on his computer screen, helpfully supplying him with the phone number for his 0930 conference call.

Commercial break ...

Based on the surprise summer hit, "Dancing With the Stars," here comes "Dancing With the JAGs!" We know Webb knows how to waltz, but can Bud keep from tripping over his own two feet? Can Harm overcome that stilted form he displayed at the NATO ball? It's everything you love about JAG (or maybe not) -- but with sequins! Airing live right after the NHL playoffs on ABC.

1813 EDT
Rabb Residence
Washington, D.C.

"Mommm!!"

Mac folded her arms, not budging. "You can wait ten more minutes."

"But I'm starr-ving!"

"Benjamin, how many times are we going to go through this? On the rare occasions when Dad doesn't call and say he's going to be late, we wait for him and we all eat dinner together. Standard procedure. Got it?"

"Yes." That response was thrown off with the kind of long-suffering eye roll only an almost-eight-year-old could perform. Ben slunk off toward the couch, looking like he might just keel over from hunger. Soon, though, the sound of the garage door opening sent him off like a shot, eyes lighting up.

As Harm came through the door, he was accosted by a blur of dark hair and green fabric wrapped around his legs. "Nice to see you too, kiddo," he greeted, tousling his son's hair.

From the kitchen doorway, Mac cocked her head to the side, not letting on the fact that seeing those identical grins on the faces of the men in her life was a highlight of her daily routine. "Don't be too flattered. He's mostly excited because now we get to have dinner."

"Thanks for raining on my parade." Harm set down his briefcase and cover and shuffled across the room to kiss her, with Ben still attached to one leg. Glancing down, he smiled at Ben's brand-new soccer jersey, marked with black letters across the back: RABB 10. "Hey, the uniforms came in!" He turned to his wife. "Where's yours, Coach?"

Mac smiled and pointed toward the living room, where another jersey -- marked COACH RABB -- hung from the back of a chair. "And you, Number 10, need to take yours off before dinner," she instructed Ben, prying him off his father's leg. "There's no way you're going to get spaghetti sauce on it before the first game."

Ben dutifully ran off to his bedroom to change, and Harm took advantage of the opportunity to greet Mac properly. She snaked her arms around his neck. "So how was your fifth-to-last day in the office?" she inquired.

"It sounds like a countdown clock when you put it like that." They wandered into their bedroom, and Mac took a seat on the bed while Harm changed out of his uniform in favor of a T-shirt and jeans. "Something a little out-of-the-ordinary did happen, actually. A lieutenant requested that I look into the investigation of his flight mishap."

Mac listened as he elaborated, surprised that a two-stripe had had the guts to contact a two-star, but not surprised that Harm had chosen not to delegate it. Their lives had changed in many ways over the past few years, but the fundamental aspects of his character and hers remained unwavering.

"So what's your next move?" she asked.

"I had Gardner get the reports. I'll take a look at them after -"

"Mommm! Daaaad!"

"- dinner," he finished with a chuckle. "Never get between a growing boy and spaghetti night."

"He's going to be just like you -- six feet tall by twelve years old."

"God, I hope not. When I was a kid, clothes and shoes alone cost my mom a small fortune."

They made their way back to the kitchen, where Ben's animated description of his school picnic made dinner take twice as long as necessary, in spite of his earlier protestations of hunger. Mac cast the occasional glance at her husband across the table, observing as he and Ben batted questions and answers back and forth. Yes, the same man she'd first met nearly twenty years ago -- twenty? Could that be right? -- but different as well. More open, less guarded. Happier, she'd like to think. Noting the dusting of gray at his temples, beginning to creep slowly into the rest of his dark hair, she realized anew just how big a part of his life he would be leaving behind when he took off that uniform on Friday. Would he find it as difficult as she had to surrender that much of his identity?

Once Ben had gotten his cookie and scrambled off to the backyard to shoot at his mini-soccer goal, and after the table was cleared, Harm took his briefcase into the study. Mac followed him, settling into the overstuffed chair across from his desk with a book. "Mattie called earlier," she commented as she slid her reading glasses on. "She said she and Rob would be happy to watch Ben while we're in the Bahamas in September." It was a combination tenth-anniversary/retirement trip, one they'd both been anticipating for some time. The only substantial time Harm had been able to get away from JAG in the past two years had been a week spent at Disney World with Ben. Mac suspected that not a few sailors and Marines would dearly love to know that a photo existed of the renowned Admiral Rabb wearing Mickey Mouse ears.

Ten years. They'd now been married longer than they'd spent dancing around each other. There was a strange sense of security in that.

"Great," Harm responded, studying the file in front of him. "She'll be at the ceremony, right?"

"Said she wouldn't miss it for the world. She's going to pick up Jen Friday morning."

Just visible over the top of the file, Harm's eyes narrowed. "Tell Jen she is expressly forbidden from going into labor in the office."

"Harm, she's got four weeks until her due date, and Bethesda's right up the road."

"Did that stop Harriet?"

"Point taken."

They both read in companionable silence for a while, content to simply be near each other. Ben banged the door when he came back inside, heading for his bedroom and probably the video game console located there.

The crease in Harm's brow was deepening with every page he read, until Mac finally spoke up. "Hon? What've you got?"

"A lot of circumstantial evidence, I'd say, if this were a legal proceeding. Which it isn't, so that complicates matters." Harm rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Only about half of Lieutenant Marshall's aircraft was salvaged from the water. Since the point of impact was just barely out of the path of the Seahawk, some of the wreckage was pulled under by the ship as it passed. Fighters weren't designed to float. Without being able to look at the actual flight control systems themselves, the whole thing's a big game of 'what if.'"

She knew his expressions, though, and could see that he didn't consider this to be the end of the story. "But?"

He spread his hands. "But it cuts both ways, or at least it should. I don't see how the board had enough evidence to label it pilot error, either. I know they can't just leave an investigation open, but even with no disciplinary action recommended, placing it all on the pilot ..."

There was a distant glimmer in his eyes which Mac hadn't seen in a while, and it triggered a flare of concern. "Harm," she began cautiously, "is there any way this will get resolved in the next four days?"

He met her gaze, understanding the implication. "I'm not going to go Don Quixote on you. As of Friday, I'll no longer have any authority to pursue this, so one way or the other, it'll be over."

"Uh huh." She wasn't convinced. "Like everyone's just going to stop taking your calls the moment after you hand over the flag? If you wanted to continue pursuing it, I have no doubt that you could find a way."

"Such faith." He lifted an eyebrow.

"Experience is the best teacher. I know that this is what you do best. I just want to make sure that you're not taking this on as a way to hold on past Friday."

Harm nodded, conceding the point. "I won't keep dogging this all summer, Mac. I promise. Next week I start making up for all the late nights and the missed soccer games. I owe that to both you and Ben."

"It's not about owing us anything, Harm." Mac rose and crossed the room to perch one hip on the side of the desk. "I remember how hard it was for me to get used to the idea of defining myself by something other than my uniform. I know it's not quite the same situation, but I want to be sure you're really okay with taking this next step."

"Letting go, you mean?" It had been long enough, and they'd come to terms with enough of it, that phrases like that from their past no longer stung. Instead, they evoked memories of a winding but incredibly worthwhile journey. He reached over to capture her lithe fingers in his hand. "It's going to be an adjustment, and I'd be lying if I said I knew how I was going to feel about it all next week or next month. But we've both learned to do a fair bit of letting go and moving on over the years. I think we're getting the hang of it."

It was a good answer, one which she rewarded by leaning across the desk to deliver a sweet, simple kiss ... which was interrupted by a young voice exclaiming, "Ewww!"

Mac smiled against her husband's lips and, over her son's objections, proceeded on course.

Tuesday
1138 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, VA

The sun was brutally hot, beating down on the ranks of the newly-arrived officers in training, if they could call themselves that yet. He'd spent most of his previous summers on a Pennsylvania farm, in the Bahamas, and -- once -- in Southeast Asia. All of them had been hotter than this, most likely, but this one felt like a unique brand of torture.

"Welcome to Plebe Summer, ladies!" bellowed the midshipman who sauntered up and down the ranks as the plebes struggled with push-up after push-up. "Here's where you find out that you're not half as tough or smart or cool as you thought. A lot of you won't make it through the summer, and plenty more will wash out before graduation. Look around -- who's it gonna be?"

"Do we get a vote?" muttered the plebe on Harm's right side, blond and stocky. "'Cause I'm voting for Midshipman Jackass here, personally."

There were a few snickers, which only grew as the daring plebe started whistling 'If I Only Had a Brain.' The middie -- now nicknamed Jackass for all eternity in Harm's mind -- heard enough of the mild commotion to make an example of it. "Right, this is all a big game, isn't it? Get off your asses and start running, punks!"

They dragged themselves up and headed for the track, where the whistler fell in alongside Harm. "John Keeter," he introduced himself. "Jack."

Harm nodded once as they continued. "Harmon Rabb. Harm."

"I've been told that should be my middle name." Jack flashed a grin. "Loosen up, man. It's gonna be a long four years--"

"No kidding."

"--but we get more senior every day, right? Next thing you know, the class of '85 will all be getting our bars and our wings."

Harm turned his head toward the other teen. "You want to fly?"

Jack's grin grew wider. "Doesn't everybody?"

On second thought, there was the possibility that this wouldn't be completely intolerable.

"Sir, I have COMNAVAIRLANT on line one for you."

"Thank you, Gardner." Harm punched the button to activate the speakerphone. "They keeping you busy down there, Keet?"

"What're you doing up so early, Rabb?" demanded Jack Keeter good-naturedly. "Don't you Beltway types sleep until noon?"

How a couple of goof-offs like them had ended up in positions of leadership in the Navy, Harm would never know. The current commander of the Naval Air Forces, Atlantic Fleet, Keeter had always had the look -- and the skill -- of a fast-burner, but on occasion he'd managed to make Harm look positively obedient by comparison. "Can't afford to miss a moment, my friend. I'm a short-timer, remember?"

"How could I forget? I'm planning on embarrassing the hell out of you at your retirement bash." Keeter intended to stick around in uniform for another couple of years; he'd cited alimony payments to his two ex-wives as his rationale, but Harm suspected that he just hadn't found anything else he'd rather be doing just yet. "What can I do for you this fine day?"

"You can tell me what you know about the Class A Super Hornet splash off the Seahawk in April."

He envisioned Keeter's brow furrowing. "How'd that cross your radar? It was wrapped up weeks ago with no judicial action."

"Humor me. I understand they couldn't salvage all of the aircraft?"

"There wasn't a lot to go on, no. The flight data recorder was damaged when the carrier ran into the wreckage, so the techs were only able to download data from the two sorties preceding the mishap sortie. That data showed nothing unusual, and the maintenance records show no flight control squawks during the two months leading up to the mishap."

"So the conclusion was pilot error?"

There was a hesitation on the line. "Harm, you know what the Hornet can and can't do."

"I know what the original Hornet can and can't do. I've never flown a Super Hornet, and despite what people say, it's not the same bird." "Yeah, yeah. My point is, there isn't a control failure mode that can produce the attitude that aircraft entered -- an immediate ninety-degree roll, unstable in both pitch and yaw."

"You mean there's no *known* failure mode," countered Harm. "Nothing against your investigators, Keet, because my JAGs obviously agreed with them, but this looks a lot like a declaration of guilty until proven innocent."

"Which would be more significant if the pilot had been disciplined for this, but he wasn't, and he's off flight status already. Do I like the idea that there could be a mechanical cause that we can't find? Of course not. But there's only so much you can do with a few pieces of twisted metal and some lines of data."

Harm rubbed at his jaw. "So Lieutenant Marshall takes one for the team?"

Keeter's voice lowered. "I saw the kid's X-rays, buddy. His flying days are over, no matter what the board says."

That tweaked a nerve Harm had been trying to ignore for a while now. “We can’t assume *that* kind of situation can never change, can we?” he remarked coolly.

That sobered the conversation quickly. “Marshall is not you. There was no medical reason why he should have lost control of that jet. I understand what you’re trying to do here, but we can’t just reopen investigations like this. The resources involved have to be drawn from somewhere, and pulling board members out of their jobs with the fleet so that they can stare at the same information all over again is not productive.”

“I’m not suggesting the investigation be reopened. What I am planning to do is advise Lieutenant Marshall that he has the right to appeal his punishment.”

His old friend sounded convinced that he’d lost his mind. “Did you miss the part where I said he wasn’t punished? Yes, there’s a note in his record, which could theoretically mess with his flying status, but isn’t that a moot point now?”

“Maybe. But if the case managed to bring a technical deficiency to light, that note would disappear, and you’d have an answer without having to preemptively ground any of your jets for an inspection.”

“And I suppose you know just the lawyer for the job?”

Harm smiled. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

He heard Keeter’s unenthusiastic sigh. “Do you have any idea what kind of image this would project? The JAG himself disputing the findings of an accident investigation board? It’d make the Navy look like a bunch of bickering kids.”

“It would, which is why I’m not talking about myself.”

There was a pause on the line while his meaning became clear. “Aha. Not a bad move, my friend.”

“I knew you’d think so.”

1427 EDT
Same location

Ryan Marshall stepped into the conference room cautiously, unsure what he would find or what his purpose there was to be. He’d gotten a call that morning from the Judge Advocate General’s yeoman, requesting his presence at JAG Headquarters to discuss the status of his case. That had sounded positive, but puzzling, since he wasn’t sure he technically had a case.

Or maybe Admiral Rabb had called him here to read him the riot act in person for so thoroughly overstepping his bounds.

The person sitting at the table, however, was not the admiral. Instead, it was a dark-haired woman in a tailored civilian suit. She stood up and extended her hand with a smile. “Lieutenant Marshall?”

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm Sarah Rabb. My husband suggested that you might need some outside legal counsel in order to appeal the report of the accident board."

Realization clicked in, a little belatedly. "You were a JAG too, right, ma'am?"

"I teach these days, so I don't practice much anymore, but yes. I'll be blunt with you, Lieutenant: my husband is set to retire three days from now, and I don't want this hanging over his head after he hands over the flag Friday afternoon. I will say, though, that I don't just want this resolved -- I want it resolved correctly. From what Harm has been able to tell me, I believe culpability was misplaced in this investigation, but I don't have the clearance to look at the report unless or until I'm your attorney. And if you make the decision to go forward with this, I need to remind you that any new findings could hurt you just as easily as they could help you. You're risking disciplinary action if you decide to proceed."

Ryan set his jaw. "With all due respect, ma'am, that would only be true if I had done something wrong. I didn't."

"So you do want to appeal the finding against you."

"Yes, ma'am."

She nodded curtly. "Then have a seat, and let's start going through what happened."

He explained every detail he could remember about the day of the mishap, from the moment he started his preflight checks to the instant he felt the slap of the salt water against his face. Mrs. Rabb -- she told him to call her 'Mac,' but since she looked a little like his mom's younger sister, that wasn't likely to happen anytime soon -- asked all the right questions, and it was clear that she had a wealth of experience in similar cases.

A petty officer interrupted them briefly to drop off a stack of files: the maintenance reports on his aircraft and the board's report on the mishap. They'd only been exploring those for a few minutes when Mrs. Rabb pushed a file across the table at him.

"The Seahawk's maintenance database shows some work done on your aircraft a couple of weeks before the mishap. Do you recognize that name?"

Ryan squinted at the digitized signature. "Ma'am, that's Bradley, one of our environmental and electronics techs. I remember this -- they were messing with the ECS, the environmental control system."

"Messing with it how?"

"It wasn't anything out of the ordinary, ma'am. Are you familiar with aircraft ECS at all?"

Mrs. Rabb took off her reading glasses and tapped the frames against her notebook. "Air is bled off from the compressor stages of the engine and run through a heat exchanger to cool it down before it's sent on to cool the cockpit and the avionics. That's all I know."

It was more than most people knew, and he nodded, pleased. "Yes, ma'am. The heat exchangers tend to show their age after a while. They're hard to keep at peak effectiveness. The system diverts more air to the avionics than the cockpit, because although I can still fly when it's a little warm, the electronic equipment isn't as accommodating. I wasn't getting quite enough airflow in the cockpit, so they replaced some of the valves and the controller. That kind of thing happens a lot."

"The controller?" The lawyer pursed her lips, thinking. "If for some reason the avionics were getting too hot as well, is it possible that an overheat situation could have caused the flight control problems you encountered?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am, but I know we have overheat sensors in a lot of the equipment bays, so I should have gotten a caution light if that was the case."

"All right. I have a contact at NAVAIR who should be able to help me get some more information on the Hornet's flight systems. I'm going to spend the rest of today going over this with her. I'll keep you updated on what I find out."

Ryan took that as a subtle dismissal and rose from his chair. "Thank you, ma'am. I don't know what your normal rate is, but—"

"Consider this a pro bono case. I'm as interested in the truth as anyone."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you again."

She was already tapping keys on her cell phone as he neared the doors, and just before stepping out of the room, he heard her say, "Kara, it's Mac. I have a major favor to ask you..."

Commercial break ...

Public service announcement: Friends don't let friends marry Tom Cruise.

Wednesday
1244 EDT
Virginia Capes Operating Area

He clutched his helmet under one arm, surveying the controlled chaos of the flight deck with fresh eyes. This was what he'd come here to do; everything he'd done, everything he'd accomplished over the last decade or more, had been leading up to this.

"Try not to dump us in the drink, all right, Rabb?" One of the veteran RIOs of the squadron would be riding in his backseat for this first 'cat/trap'. He tossed a grin over his shoulder as they approached their aircraft.

"No sweat, sir -- I just hope my consummate skill won't ruin you for all other pilots."

The lieutenant commander scoffed. "Get your ass strapped in and let's do this thing."

He climbed up and swung himself into the cockpit, reading the checklist on his kneeboard with as much concentration as he could summon. Around him, dozens of crewmen were readying planes, running the catapult, supervising the deck; all doing their jobs so that a bunch of guys like him could do their job.

As the canopy locked into place over his head and the signalman cleared him to taxi to the waiting catapult, one simple thought echoed:

Don't let me screw this up.

"Ready for this, Admiral?" The young man grinned at him from across the locker room, and Harm returned it, zipping up his flight suit. Flying alongside a kid young enough to be his son was disconcerting stuff, but he'd get over it. It was the way of the world, after all.

"I'm always ready to fly, Lieutenant. I'm just not sure I'm ready to make this the last time."

"I know what you mean, sir."

Harm shook his head with a small smile. "No, you don't. And if you're lucky, you won't have to learn for a good long while."

He'd had precious few opportunities to fly over the past few years; he'd kept current, but the Navy tended to get nervous about letting its flag officers fly single-seat aircraft. They wouldn't dare try to stop him from taking his final flight, though.

He'd said goodbye to flying fighters once before. That time, however, he'd had no prior knowledge that his world was about to change. This time it had been marked on the calendar in glaring red letters for weeks, but it was just as inevitable.

They made their way up to the flight deck, and the baby-faced lieutenant who'd be flying his wing chatted along the way. "We're actually going to have a change of aircraft, sir, just so you know. The one you were originally slated to fly had to go to the hangar for maintenance."

"What was the problem?"

"I'm not sure, sir. The plane captain could tell you. Castleman! Got a sec?"

A maintainer jogged over to them as they stepped out onto the flight deck. "Sirs?"

"What was the squawk on 1176?"

"Flight controls, sir. We did the preflight checks, and the system kept kicking back an 'input disagree.' Probably a gyro issue."

The term triggered a spark in a corner of Harm's mind. The rate gyros were the aircraft's method of attitude control; they tracked its motion in the pitch, yaw, and roll directions. They were a redundant system, such that if one gyro failed, the other two would overrule its input. A problem with more than one gyro, though, might be just the kind of thing that could cause a significant control failure.

Like, for instance, the kind of failure that might cause a jet to roll itself into the ocean.

After a moment of consideration, he deliberately put the Marshall case out of his mind. This was his last chance to walk across that deck and climb into a waiting bird of prey, poised to take to the sky. After today, the term 'naval aviator,' and the sense of identity associated with it, would be committed to his past.

"Control, Jumpers 1 and 2 requesting taxi."

"Jumpers 1 and 2 cleared to taxi. Have a good flight, Admiral."

They flew for about an hour, doing simulated engagements and midair refuelings. After all these years, the sensations were like a second skin to him, enough so that it was tough to keep in mind the permanence of this last flight. When he lined up that final approach, though, and the perfect three-wire trap slammed him back into his seat, it all came rushing in with smothering clarity, and he blinked a bit of moisture out of his eyes.

Rank had no privilege when it came to celebrating a fini flight, of course. As soon as he climbed down from the Hornet and removed his helmet, he was assaulted by the deck crew, armed with water guns and hoses. As the throng of people surrounded him, whooping and clapping him on the back, he spotted two visitors standing alongside the Seahawk's captain, a safe distance away from the commotion.

With a wide grin, he shook some of the water from his hair and motioned them over. Mac took firm hold of Ben's hand and guided him across the deck to greet his father.

"That was so cool, Dad!" The boy shouted over the deck noise, beaming. "When you hit that wire, it was like, bam! It was, like, a million miles an hour!"

Mac had stepped back to snap a couple of pictures, and Harm suddenly realized that there was one last thing he had to do, one last chance to keep an unspoken promise to his own father. "C'mere," he said to Ben, leading him over to the aircraft and helping him climb the ladder to the cockpit.

Ben settled into the seat, surveyed the controls in front of him, and turned back toward his father with an expression of pure awe. "Wow," he breathed.

Harm heard a soft click and looked down at Mac, who lowered the camera with shining eyes. If there was any way to quell the conflict he felt at leaving this life and bring it all full circle at the same time, he needed only to leave it to her to find it.

2124 EDT
Rabb Residence
Washington, D.C.

Mac glanced up as her husband stepped into their bedroom. "Ben asleep?"

"Went out like a light. I think we wore him out with the helicopter ride out to the carrier." Harm took a seat on the bed next to her.

"You should have seen his face when I told him where we were going. It hadn't occurred to him before that the ships Dad flies from aren't usually tied to a dock."

He nodded toward the open file in her lap. "You still looking for Marshall's smoking gun?"

"Yeah." She rubbed her eyes wearily. "I might be running out of rabbits to pull out of my hat, though. I'm concentrating on the possibility of an avionics overheat because of the ECS problems the jet had previously had. But I keep running into one rather large roadblock. If there was an overheat condition, it should have triggered the detector, and Marshall swears he didn't get any cockpit alarms."

"It is unlikely that there were failures in both the ECS and the overheat detection loop at the same time." Harm got up and began to unbutton his shirt. "I had a thought today while I was heading out to go fly. Have you looked into the operation of the rate gyros at all?"

"Flight controls give me a headache." Mac offered a smile. "In all seriousness, I did get the basic system description from Kara. There is a condition in which a gyro can be reset to give a zero output, which would give the flight computer inaccurate information. But that's why there are three of the damned things -- to prevent one bad output from causing a hazard."

Stripped down to his boxers now, he wandered into the bathroom to retrieve his toothbrush. "What if all three gyros gave a zero output?" he called back.

"They're on separate circuits so that power can't be interrupted to more than one at once."

"Right, but they're all in the same equipment bay, so presumably they could all overheat at once."

"And that just brings us back to the no-warning roadblock."

Harm sighed and continued brushing his teeth. As he did, a more detailed scenario began to take shape in his mind. Rinsing his mouth quickly, he headed back out into the bedroom. "What if it happened on the deck between flights? If they were doing a maintenance run and didn't have anyone monitoring the overheat detectors?"

Mac considered the possibility. "If it were just a transient condition, a quick temperature spike that caused the gyros to shut down to avoid burning themselves out--"

"--it's possible that the warning light was only on for a few seconds, and no one would have had a chance to notice."

"Could be." She closed the folder and put it on the bedside table. "Still just a theory, though. I don't know if there's enough physical evidence to tell us much about the gyros."

"That's what tomorrow is for." Harm eased across the bed and reached up to finger a few strands of her dark hair. "Did I mention that Ben is asleep?"

Mac lifted an eyebrow and leaned closer. "Do tell."

He pressed a row of kisses down her neck and across her shoulder, easing the strap of her nightgown down as he went. "Very—" kiss "--very—" kiss "--asleep."

"I like the way you choose your targets of opportunity, sailor."

Thursday
1352 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, VA

He closed the car door and looked up at the brick edifice that stretched out in front of him. Around him, a few officers greeted each other as they headed into the building to begin the day. They offered pleasant smiles when they caught his gaze, and he did his best to return them despite a vague gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach.

This wasn't what he'd signed up for -- not by a long shot. He'd had another path all laid out for him from the start, but he'd screwed it up, and now this was what remained. The best of a field of diminishing options.

It was an office building, for God's sake. He hadn't joined the Navy to work in a damned office.

But there were worse things in life, and there were worse things that weren't life at all -- at that, his gut twisted, remembering Mace's goofy grin -- so he owed it to just about everyone he knew to suck it up and give this a try.

The yeoman at the front desk directed him to the admiral's office, where he waited tensely in an anteroom until he heard a voice boom through the door. "Enter!"

He stepped into the expansive office and came to attention in front of the desk. "Lieutenant Rabb reporting as ordered, sir."

"At ease." To his surprise, the admiral stood up and extended his hand. "I'm Admiral Brovo. You'll be working for me."

"Yes, sir."

Brovo took his seat and leaned forward on the desk. "I'm going to get straight to the point, Lieutenant. I've read your records, and I see you're not wearing your wings. That's your business and I don't care how you handle it. I also suspect you don't really want to be here. I don't care about that, either. What I do care about is you doing your job. Am I being clear?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good. Petty Officer Kent will direct you to your office, and Commander Lindsey will show you the ropes. You've got approximately two minutes to settle in, because there's a case waiting on your desk. You'll be defending a master chief accused of disobeying a direct order. Watch out for the prosecutor, Lieutenant Pike. She's a j.g., but she's been known to go to town on the unprepared."

"Aye, sir."

The admiral gave the slightest hint of a smile. "Welcome to JAG, Rabb."

There was a knock at the office door, and Harm called "Enter" without a second thought. Everyone else was announced by Gardner; only his wife could bypass her.

Mac closed the door behind her and looked around the office. "It looks so empty."

"Tell me about it. I thought you were going to be over at NAVAIR today."

"I was. I found something interesting in the maintenance records on Marshall's jet. Take a look." She set a stack of paper down in front of him. "This is from the Seahawk's shipwide maintenance database. Lieutenant Marshall told me that environmental systems don't age well, and you can see on here that a lot of aircraft have had work done on the system. The database is broken down by aircraft tail number, date, and part number of the item replaced."

Harm scanned the list of part numbers, where two specific numbers were repeated throughout the record. Mac had highlighted them in different colors. "What do the two numbers signify?"

"One is the environmental sensor controller for the F/A-18C/D -- the original Hornet. The other is the controller for the F/A-18E/F -- the Super Hornet."

He looked up, brows knit. "They're not the same?"

"Almost none of the parts are common between the two aircraft types, Harm. The fact that they outwardly look the same and have the same name was really an end-run by the Navy to convince Congress that it would be a more cost-effective program than a 'new' design."

"You've been listening to Kara again, haven't you?"

"Bet your ass, but my point is that people think the Hornet and the Super Hornet are more alike than they actually are. For instance, the Super Hornet's avionics are more complicated and require more cooling air than the original Hornet."

Harm met his wife's gaze, comprehension suddenly dawning, and was met by a fractional nod. "You're kidding."

"Nope." She pointed to a database entry marked with a star. "This is Lieutenant Marshall's aircraft. Look what part number they installed when they replaced the ECS controller."

"The wrong damn one." He shook his head, disbelieving.

"The two boxes look the same and operate almost identically. It's just that this one thought it only had to cool down the instrumentation of an original Hornet, when in fact it needed to be working hard enough for a Super Hornet. Hence, the overheat scenario that we were looking at was almost inevitable."

"We're going to have to tell the Seahawk's skipper. I'm not sure the maintainers deserve to be brought up on charges -- they're working on both kinds of jets, and something as small as a part number doesn't necessarily rise to the level of negligence. But it's up to their convening authority to make that call."

Mac was smiling. "Meanwhile, we also get to tell Lieutenant Marshall that no one will ever fault him for the mishap again. Do you want to do the honors, or should I?"

In characteristic fashion, they did it together.

Commercial break ...

At a loss as to what to do with your Friday nights now that JAG is over?

Might I suggest a double dose of sci-fi snark, followed by one of the most well-crafted shows on TV?

Sci-Fi Fridays (check it out at Scifi.com) ... because flyboys come in other flavors besides Navy.

Friday
1032 EDT
Aviation Review Board
NAS Patuxent River, Maryland

The president of the review board raised his voice. "On the subject of causal factors for this mishap, we find that the installation of an improper ECS controller almost certainly caused an overheat condition which reset the directional gyros and provided inaccurate information to the flight control computer. Lieutenant Marshall was in no way responsible for the chain of events that led to the loss of his aircraft, and any references to pilot error are to be removed from both the mishap report and the lieutenant's personnel record. This hearing is adjourned."

Harm watched as Mac rose from her chair and shook Marshall's hand. He made his way up to the table to congratulate the lieutenant.

"Ma'am, sir, I can't thank you enough," Marshall said sincerely. "What you did to make this happen was really above and beyond the call."

"A lot of good will come of this," Mac assured him. "The supply center will be updating the way they mark equipment to make sure this kind of mix-up can't happen again. The maintenance troops and the supervisor who signed off on the work will be getting letters of reprimand."

The former aviator nodded, his expression faltering slightly. "I'm trying not to blame anyone for what happened," he confessed. "It was just one of those freak things ... Still, even though I know that, I'm finished flying no matter what, and now I have to figure out how I'm going to deal with that."

"That won't be easy," Harm admitted. "But if there's one thing I know to be a fact, it's that none of us was meant for one and only one path in life. You'll land on your feet."

"I'll do my best." Marshall offered his hand, which Harm firmly shook. "Any advice you might have in that area would be appreciated, sir."

Harm quirked an eyebrow. "Well, I'm probably not an unbiased source, but you could always try law school."

Two hours later, he and Mac were walking into his office for the last time. In just a few minutes, he would be handing the flag to JAG's new commanding officer, and this office, the bullpen, even the glorified broom closet he'd once worked in would be chapters in a closed book.

Three personal items were left on the desk, the rest having been packed up days ago: a framed picture of Mac, Mattie, and Ben; the nameplate which had been a gift from Bud and Harriet when he assumed command; and his favorite pen, a law-school graduation gift from his mom and Frank. He picked up the pen and signed the bottom of the form that sat alone in the center of the desk.

Mac leaned over to take a look, but had forgotten her reading glasses. Sometimes he suspected she forgot them on purpose. "What's your last official duty?"

"Authorizing travel orders. Possible negligence case on a ship in the North Pacific. I'm sending Davis and Gomez."

She smiled at the mention of those names. The officers who'd been a constant thorn in her side during her brief stint in San Diego had developed into JAG's premier investigating team. "They've come a long way since the Gloom and Doom days, haven't they?"

"In some ways. Not so much in others."

Catching his meaning, Mac shot him her patented long-suffering look. "Harm, they're good lawyers and intelligent adults. You can't force them together. Can you imagine the disaster that would have resulted if someone had tried to force us together?"

He did his best to look mildly offended. "Give me some credit, Mac. I'm their CO, not a matchmaker. It's just an assignment."

She didn't look convinced. "Where?"

Uh oh. "The Watertown."

Her eyes went wide, but quickly narrowed into a secretive grin. "You are far more devious than people give you credit for, you know that?"

"I've had my share of practice." Harm sat down on the corner of the desk and pulled her in for a quick kiss. She shifted in his arms and settled back against him.

"So," she asked, "are you ready to say goodbye to this place?"

He could have given a canned response, but she would have seen through it in a heartbeat. "I don't know. I think wrapping up the Marshall case and realizing that I didn't have anything left to do finally made it hit home. This is it. From here on out, everything's different."

"Not everything. Not us. Not your kids."

"Very true. You have no idea how thankful I am for that."

"I think maybe I do." She leaned in for another kiss. "It's 1256. Best not to be late for your own retirement ceremony."

"All right." Hand in hand, they moved to the door, where Petty Officer Gardner waited dutifully on the other side, Ben standing beside her desk. "Let's get this show on the road."

"Sir, I didn't have a chance to tell you earlier," Gardner began as they started walking. "We had to move the ceremony to Courtroom One."

Harm frowned. "What was wrong with the conference room?"

"Ran out of room, sir."

Courtroom One was the main chamber, large enough to accommodate trials with media participation. He hadn't wanted to make his retirement ceremony a big deal, but the change of command part was significant, and he couldn't get around the link between the two.

Upon reaching the doors to the courtroom, he suddenly understood why the room change had been necessary. Courtroom One was filled to capacity, with people standing around the back as if in the cheap seats at a basketball game. Taken aback, he scanned the room and found a number of familiar faces. A.J. Chegwidden, Tom Boone, Jack Keeter, Terri Coulter, Skates and half the pilots from VF-218 ...

It was overwhelming. All these people had traveled here, in some cases over long distances, for the express purpose of wishing him well. If he'd needed any reassurance that what he'd chosen to do with his life had made a difference, the proof was here in front of him.

They made their way up to the front as a family, accepting a few handshakes on the way in. Mac and Ben took seats next to Mattie and Rob, and Harm assumed his place next to his successor, between his two-starred flag and the flag of the Judge Advocate General.

The Chief of Naval Operations stepped to the podium. There was a brief speech, about the profession of law and the importance of justice in the military and elsewhere, but Harm only halfway listened to it. As he looked out over the crowd, voices swirled in his mind and blocked out the pomp and circumstance. Other places, other times, both good memories and bad. Through it all, one voice was his anchor, returning again and again. He focused his gaze on its owner, sitting in the front row with their son, pride and love evident in her warm brown eyes.

The time came for the official change of command, and he closed his hands around the flagpole, lifting it out of its base and presenting it to Admiral Whitman precisely as General Cresswell had presented it to him five years before. He felt her take hold of it, bearing its weight both literally and symbolically, and he released his grip.

There was more fanfare, a few words of praise for the first female JAG in the Navy's history, but before long, Whitman had stepped back, and the CNO was speaking about him. He figured it would be impolite to daydream through his own retirement ceremony, and returned his attention to the man who would only be his boss for a few minutes longer.

"...Admiral Rabb has distinguished himself time and time again by his allegiance to justice and to his fellow Sailors and Marines. A staggering number of people owe their careers and even their lives to his determination and courage in the face of unimaginable odds. It is my honor to be here today to thank him, on behalf of the President, the United States Navy, and a grateful nation, for three decades of faithful service."

The orders were read, one final decoration for meritorious service was presented, and at the end of it all were the words he'd heard and said a dozen times before, this time meant for him: "Shipmate, you stand relieved ... we have the watch."

Then the floor was his, and he looked out at the assembled crewmates, friends, and family with a hint of an embarrassed smile. "A lot of you won't believe this, because you remember how I used to practice my closing statements obsessively, but I didn't prepare a speech for today," he admitted. "I gave it a try a couple of times, but it ended up sounding forced, and this needs to be genuine. I have a lot of people to thank for their support over the past thirty years. I could read their names, but you know who you are, and if I haven't made my gratitude known well enough by now, rest assured that I'll remedy that in the very near future.

"I do need to thank a few people by name. I wouldn't be here without the guidance of Admiral A.J. Chegwiddden and General Gordon Cresswell, or without the trust and loyalty of Captain Bud Roberts, his wife Harriet, and Senior Chief Petty Officer Jennifer Coates. And I wouldn't be anywhere without the love of my amazing family: my mom and stepdad, who couldn't make the trip to be here today but who have always been there for me; my children, who have taught me more about being a good person than they'll ever know; and my wife, who makes every day more special than the last."

He met her gaze, and saw her mouth I love you with brimming eyes. With a newfound resolve, he continued. "I've wondered for a long time how I'd feel when this moment arrived. I'm surprised to find that I have no regrets. I'm leaving this command and this Navy in extremely capable hands, and I have nothing but confidence in what the future will bring.

"My career has been anything but ordinary. There have been a lot of bumps in the road. But if I got the chance to do it all again, knowing what I do now, I wouldn't dare change a thing, because I wouldn't give up what I have for all the wonders of the world."

Some months later
5:30 p.m. Saturday
Blacksburg, VA

His first student was a seventeen-year-old boy, a high school senior with an air of seriousness that felt familiar. Harm watched him for a moment as he studied the Piper Arrow waiting for them by the fuel stand, looking as if he feared it might vanish if his concentration wavered.

"Go ahead and check it out," he called as he approached. "Kick the tires if you're so inclined."

The kid looked a little startled, then offered a sheepish smile. "Never been this close to anything but an airliner before."

"This is a lot simpler, and more fun." Harm stuck out his hand. "Harmon Rabb - call me Harm."

"Jeff Pierce."

"Jeff, I've been flying since I was about your age, but this is my first time instructing. We're going to be doing some learning together. But I promise you that I'll never let you get in trouble up there, and come hell or high water, I'm going to make you a good pilot. Deal?"

"Deal."

He showed Jeff the preflight walkaround procedures, and before long they were strapping themselves into the seats. "What did you do before getting your CFI certificate?" the teenager asked.

"I just retired from the Navy a few weeks ago. I do a little bit of a few different things these days."

Jeff's eyes widened in awe. "You flew for the Navy? That must've been incredible."

As Harm gazed out at the sun, lined up above the end of the runway as if on final approach, he thought about the twists and turns of his life and career, how he'd thought many times that happiness was out of reach and had at last been proven entirely wrong.

"I wouldn't trade a minute of it." He smiled. "Let's go fly."

*** THE END ***