



Graphic by [Steph](#)

**Rating: PG-13**

Classification: Story, Romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Nobody's Child," "Goodbyes", "Answered Prayers"

Author's Notes: This story is set mid-season seven, and although it's certainly not critical, it might help if you've read my story "And Miles to Go" to understand where exactly Harm and Mac are in their relationship. (Cliffs Notes version: They know how they feel about each other, but they're not really 'together' while they quietly look for a career option that would work a little more smoothly.) For the sake of continuity, this takes place before Bud gets deployed to the Seahawk. Also, I personally don't know a thing about ASL, so any details, specific signs, etc. contained herein are either from a little bit of online research or figments of my imagination. I leave it to you to decide which is which. This one is admittedly something that will never, ever happen on the show, but hey, I've never let that stop me before.

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**1003 EST**

**JAG Headquarters**

**Falls Church, Virginia**

"Incoming!"

Sarah Mackenzie instinctively ducked as a projectile whizzed by her head. "What the hell was that?" she demanded, startled. Against the far wall, a small balsawood airplane had embedded its nose into the bulletin board. Petty Officer Tiner poked his head out into the bullpen, looking faintly guilty. "What's wrong, Tiner? Law classes so boring you had to take up aerodynamics on the side?"

"No, ma'am - sorry, ma'am. It'll never happen again, ma'am."

Mac raised an eyebrow, already suspicious. Three "ma'am"s was overkill, even for Tiner. "Who are you covering for, Petty Officer?"

Just then, another office door opened, confirming her theory. "What did I tell you?" Harm called to the embarrassed Tiner, retrieving the toy airplane from the wall. "Vertical stabilizer. Works every time."

"You win, sir," admitted Tiner, handing over a five-dollar bill and scurrying back to his desk before he could get yelled at. Mac only shook her head.

"How can you take his money? You have an unfair advantage."

"Hey, I don't build 'em - I just fly 'em. And it's his fault for challenging me."

The colonel rolled her eyes at her best friend. "You're a detriment to good order and discipline, flyboy."

"Don't I know it."

"Commander, Colonel," summoned the admiral from the entrance to his office. Harm straightened, hiding the little airplane behind his back. "Got a minute?"

It wasn't really a question. Things like that never were when asked by a two-star admiral. "Aye, sir," they replied in unison, moving to follow him. As they passed through the outer office, Harm swiftly tossed the airplane back onto Tiner's desk, and the yeoman hurriedly stuck it in a drawer before their C.O. could notice. Mac swallowed a grin and came to attention beside her partner in front of the wide oak desk.

"As you were. Commander Rabb, Colonel Mackenzie, meet Agents Holstrom and Faulkner from NCIS."

The attorneys turned to shake hands with the visitors, noticing a young girl sitting in the corner of the office. She looked up at the uniformed newcomers for a moment, then returned her attention to the book in her lap. Agent Holstrom gestured toward her. "The little girl is with us for the moment. Her name is Rachel Marks, and her mother was Lieutenant Commander Alison Marks, from the J-2 office at the Pentagon."

His use of the past tense didn't escape the notice of either officer. "What happened to Commander Marks?" Mac inquired carefully.

"She was killed early yesterday morning at her home in Arlington. Two shots to the chest, point-blank range, and no evidence of a robbery. Our assumption is that her death has something to do with her work."

J-2 referred to the intelligence division of the joint services directorate, as all those present were well aware. Murdered for an intelligence operation, in her own home? Mac's eyes strayed back to the girl, hoping she wasn't listening, but she hadn't even glanced up. There was something in her bearing that was oddly familiar to the Marine, something that brought back memories of her own less-than-perfect childhood. This girl was shutting herself away.

"The commander's husband died four years ago in a flight-deck accident on the *Kennedy*. The daughter is the only witness to the incident yesterday, and we're not entirely sure what she saw," Holstrom continued. "Obviously, we'll have to keep a close watch on her, in case whoever did this knows about her. We'd like to request JAG assistance with the case, especially with this deposition. Questioning seven-year-olds isn't something we've done a lot of, and there's a complicating factor."

Harm spoke up. "Agent, would you mind not talking about the girl as if she weren't here?"

Mac glanced over at him, wondering if visions of Annie and Darlyn Lewis were flashing before his eyes. Oblivious, Agent Faulkner entered the conversation. "That's the complicating

factor. Rachel Marks is almost completely deaf, and has been since birth. She reads lips moderately well, but she mainly uses sign language.”

Admiral Chegwiddden sighed. “That’ll make this harder. Where do we find ourselves an interpreter?”

“We were told you had someone with signing experience,” Faulkner queried.

The admiral immediately looked to Mac, who shook her head. “Not me, sir. I know a few languages, but this definitely isn’t one of them.”

“Don’t worry, Mac,” Harm said simply. “I’ll take it.” As the others watched, he crossed the room to kneel by the girl’s chair. She raised her head, faint distrust in her eyes.

“Harm,” Mac began quietly, “I don’t think this is something you can fake your way through...”

Surprising her, he began to form the words with his hands, slowly but carefully. “Hi, Rachel,” he said aloud, partly for the others’ benefit and partly because he wanted to make sure he was being clear. Signing the letters of his name, he continued, “My name is Harmon. I’m going to help you. Do you understand?”

Rachel looked at him, her blue eyes wide, and started to sign back rapidly. Harm smiled, overwhelmed. “Easy, honey,” he answered, still signing. “I’m a little out of practice. Can you try to slow down for me?”

She signed again, more deliberately, and his heart ached at the earnest fear that lingered on her delicate face. “No, honey,” he said firmly. “No one’s going to hurt you. I promise.” When he’d finished the signs, he laid his hand on top of hers, and she almost - almost - smiled back.

Fascinated, Mac turned back to the admiral. Although he made it a policy never to be shocked by anything in this job, especially anything done by one or both of his senior attorneys, he was nearly as surprised as she was. “Commander, Colonel, can I infer that you’d like to take this case?”

“Yes, sir,” Mac replied smoothly, seeing that Harm’s opinion was already clear. “Agents, if you’d like to move into the conference room, we can get started on planning the investigation. We’ll just grab some files on the way and join you in a minute.”

Harm stood up and followed the others to the door, looking back to see his partner watching him with new interest. The two of them hung back from the group for a moment. “What’s that look for? Some people know Farsi and Russian. I know ASL. So what?”

“Sailor, I have no doubt that you have many, many hidden talents,” she replied sweetly, “but face facts. Sign language is not something the average citizen has the means or motive to learn. So spill it.”

He shrugged. “I had a friend in junior high and high school who was deaf. It’s a fantastic way to keep nosy classmates from eavesdropping on your conversations. Anyway, I haven’t used it in twenty years, so I’m going to have to brush up a little. Anything else,

Curious Jarhead?"

She shot him a dirty look. "Now that you mention it, yes. Why'd you tell her your name was Harmon? It's kind of long to spell out like that."

"I though 'Harm' might confuse her too much. Typically you end up abbreviating names to the first letter, though, so it probably won't matter for long. Come on, we've got work to do."

"Right behind you." After a moment, though, she called after him again. "Hey, Harm?"

"Hmm?"

"Must have been a good friend."

Harm's eyes darkened for a moment, but he nodded. "Yeah, he was."

Deciding she'd have the opportunity to further question him later, she simply offered a smile and ducked into her office to grab a pad of paper.

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Lieutenant Commander Alison Marks had been, by all accounts, an outstanding officer. A ROTC graduate of the University of Illinois, she had been selected for intelligence work after her first tour as a cryptologist on the USS *Leyte Gulf*. She'd been at the Pentagon ever since, analyzing satellite data for the general staff. Rachel was her only child; also her only family following the death of Lieutenant Stephen Marks four years earlier.

Alison Marks was as clean as they came - there wasn't a black mark of any kind on her record. Yet someone had walked into her home and shot her through the heart. Had she discovered something, as part of her duties, that she wasn't supposed to have seen? What else could possibly have been worth killing for?

Before joining the group in the conference room, Harm had sent Harriet out on a shopping mission to locate a sign-language dictionary. He'd been relatively fluent back in school, but this was a far cry from the teenage-flavored conversations he'd had with J.J. all those years ago. While Mac and the NCIS agents discussed the evidence already collected, he took a seat next to Rachel.

The girl pushed locks of light-brown hair out of her eyes and stared back at him curiously. She was afraid of some things, certainly, but apparently he wasn't one of them. He offered another smile. Rachel put down her book and started to sign.

[Do you fly planes?] she asked.

Surprised that she'd noticed and identified his wings, Harm nodded. "Sometimes," he answered. "Do you like planes?"

She shrugged. [Mom said my dad liked them. I've only ever been in a plane once.]

"Well, I have a plane of my own," he told her, both aloud and with his hands. "Maybe,

if you want, you could come flying with me sometime.”

[Cool,] she signed simply, which was about as far as he could have hoped to get.

Mac watched them from the other side of the room, wishing they didn't have to make this poor girl relive the nightmare of her mother's death. So far, Rachel had been calm, if a little wary of her surroundings. But children could react in so many different ways. Being calm meant next to nothing in terms of her true emotional state. They'd learned that much from Darlyn Lewis. Rachel Marks was fragile, and what they were about to do would undoubtedly hurt her.

But there really wasn't any other choice.

“Is she ready to talk to us?” Holstrom asked. Harm translated the request, and Rachel nodded, looking anxious. The commander squeezed her hand briefly, then turned to the agents so that she wouldn't be able to read his lips.

“She's right here, guys. She knows you're talking to her, so do me a favor and actually talk to her, all right? And take it easy.”

Mac hid a smile at seeing her partner in ultra-protective mode. It wasn't a trait he had the opportunity to use very often, but when he did, it made him deliciously attractive.

“You got it.” Holstrom looked directly at the little girl and softened his tone: a useless gesture to her, maybe, but Harm understood and appreciated it. “Rachel, can you tell us what you remember about that night?”

Rachel looked to Harm as he carefully signed the words. While she replied, he concentrated on her rapidly-moving hands and worked through the signs as quickly as he could. “I was sleep - asleep in my room,” he began tentatively. “When I woke up, I got up to get a ... a drink, and I saw the man come in.”

“How did he come in?” Faulkner interjected. “Did he break in, or was the door unlocked?”

Rachel thought for a moment, then responded. Harm translated, “I don't know. He just walked through the door. He went into the living room, and I saw he had a gun.”

“Did he see you?” Mac asked gently.

Rachel shook her head. “I was on the stairs,” Harm said, following the signs more easily now. “I went to warn Mom, but she wasn't in her room. Then I heard the - ” he faltered briefly on an unfamiliar word “ - the shots.”

The adults exchanged surprised glances. “You could hear them?” Holstrom asked.

“A little, because they were so loud. I could feel them in my head ...” Harm trailed off as Rachel's eyes filled with tears. Immediately he started signing to her. “Sweetheart, we can take this as slow as you want. I know you don't want to think about this. You're being very brave.”

She nodded, and started again. “I hid on the stairs until he left, and then I went to

look for Mom,' ” he continued. “ ‘When I saw her in the kitchen, with all the - the blood, I called 911, like she always said to do. They can find you even if you can’t talk to them.’ ”

Mac couldn’t help being impressed at the way she was holding it together. The agents were uncomfortable as well, but they pressed ahead. “Can you describe the man you saw, Rachel?”

The girl paused, and only Harm noticed the slight tremble in her fingers. “Use me as a comparison,” he suggested to her. “Was he shorter or taller than me?”

At her response, he laughed out loud. The others looked at him quizzically, and he related. “She says everyone’s shorter than me.” Some of the tension dissipated, and she moved on. “ ‘A little shorter, and a little heavier. He had dark hair ... that’s all I saw.’ ” She turned away quickly.

This was the hard part, Harm suddenly realized. Trying to picture the face of her mother’s killer, a face she never wanted to see again - reliving the evil this man had brought upon her...

Instinctively he reached a hand out to her, but she jerked back and tore out of the chair. Sinking to the floor in the corner of the room, she hugged her knees to her chest, and her muffled crying was the first sound any of them had heard from her.

Harm took a deep breath and dropped to one knee beside her, waiting quietly until she looked up with red, bleary eyes. [She’s gone forever,] she signed through the tears. [I can’t see her anymore.]

*God, I hope I get this right,* he begged silently, and very deliberately began to respond. “Rachel, I know we can’t make this okay. Your mom was a very special person, and it’s not fair that someone took her away. But I promise you that we’ll find this man so that no one else gets hurt like this. And I promise that someday, it won’t hurt so much. We’ll help you, honey. You’re going to be all right.”

The little girl searched his blue eyes for some kind of understanding. After a long minute, she leaned forward and put her arms around his neck. He felt a few tears fall on his collar, and held her with as much reassurance as he could put into a simple hug.

Holstrom sighed. “I hate cases like this. We can end here for now - it’s not worth upsetting her any more. If you two want to go pick up the ballistics report while we drop her off, we can meet up at the crime scene.”

“Where’s she staying?” Mac asked, her gaze still on the small figure in her partner’s embrace.

“She doesn’t have any family to speak of - at least none that we’ve been able to find. Social Services temporarily set her up with a couple in Rosslyn. They’re both cops, so it’s safe enough, but she has to write things down for them instead of signing. She goes to a school for the hearing-impaired, but it’s not exactly a secure environment, so we’re keeping her out. Best we could do for the moment.”

“All right. We can work out of JAG for the duration of the investigation, so I guess you’d better bring her back here tomorrow morning.”

Harm gently disengaged himself from Rachel once the tears stopped, and he walked with her to the door. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" he told her kindly. "Don't worry about a thing."

In response, she signed his name, then touched her hand to her lips and tipped her fingers toward him, palm upward. He smiled. "You're welcome. Bye, Rachel."

Once they'd gone, he rose slowly to his feet, and Mac stepped closer, laying a hand on his shoulder. "It's awful, isn't it," she said quietly.

"Yes, it is. But I think she'll be all right, eventually. She seems pretty strong. I mean, it seems like she's starting to trust me."

"Sailor, you're half a mile tall and you wear a uniform. What seven-year-old girl wouldn't feel safe with you around?" She smiled up at him and gathered up the files on the table. "We have some reports to pick up before going over to Arlington."

"Lead on, Marine."

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#### **1402 Hickory Drive Arlington**

Mac looked around the first floor of the small house with a critical gaze. "I hate to say it, but as witnesses go, Rachel's not much of one."

"I know. For all we know, Alison Marks could have had an entire conversation with the guy before he shot her." Harm bent down to examine the kitchen floor, marked with the traditional body outline. "But I doubt it. There wasn't much time. No signs of struggle, either. You think he caught her by surprise?"

"Or maybe she knew him," she suggested, moving to the doorway. "Why would the door have been unlocked at that time of night? Maybe he had a key?"

"I'd vote no on both of those," Agent Faulkner surmised as he and Holstrom entered the house. "The lock was picked. With a pretty slick tool, too. The scratches were barely detectable." He handed over a set of photographs, which Mac scanned. "You got something in trade?"

Harm held up the ballistics report. "Nine-millimeter, nothing special. Unless your crew finds a weapon around here, this won't be much help."

"We're still searching dumpsters and such around the neighborhood, but I doubt we'd be that lucky. This was awfully damned clean. Which brings us back to motive. Either of you have security clearance?"

"We've both got low-level," Mac replied. "Anything beyond that ... well, there are people we can ask."

"Then you can be the ones to check into the victim's work. Defense Intelligence is scanning the hard drive of her home computer, just in case she brought home something she

shouldn't have. They'll eventually give us the cleaned-up version, for what it's worth."

"Satellite data," Harm mused thoughtfully. "Even if you needed to keep something quiet, what good does it do to kill the analyst? Nobody's reported any missing or doctored files, right?"

"You'd have to check with the J-2 office, but I don't think so." Holstrom waved a hand around the room. "If you need us, just yell."

Harm nodded absently and started up the stairs, trying to put himself in Rachel's place that night. From the top of the staircase, about half of the front door was visible, along with part of the entryway that led into the kitchen. She would have had only a few seconds to see the intruder, and then she'd gone into her mother's room...

Mac followed him into Rachel's room: a perfect little girl's bedroom, with lavender walls and rainbow curtains. He looked around at the scores of books that filled her shelves, the plush teddy bear lying on her still-unmade bed ... the picture frame on her dresser. Apparently Rachel had gotten her hair and eyes from her mother. By the time she was old enough to realize it, that picture might be her only link to the blissful life they'd once shared.

Impulsively, he picked up the teddy bear and chose a few books from the shelf. At Mac's inquiring glance, he explained. "It might be a long time before she can come back here. Maybe she'd like to have some of her own stuff."

His partner only smiled, keeping any other questions to herself for the moment. If he needed to do this, to try and help her, so be it. The way this case was shaping up, it might be as close as they'd get to making any difference at all.

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The following day

**0921 EST**  
**JAG Headquarters**

"Sir, I've got some files for you," Harriet announced, coming into Harm's office with a towering stack of folders. "Pentagon courier just dropped them off."

"Thanks, Harriet. If they'll fit on top of the cabinet, stash them over there for now." Harm pulled his attention away from the computer screen and rubbed his eyes. According to Commander Marks's superiors, her recent area of specialty had been North Africa. Getting any further information out of them, however, was beginning to resemble an exercise in futility. They intended to ask Rachel some more questions about her mother's work, but realistically, their best hope for a lead was probably buried in those files. "Have the NCIS guys shown up yet?"

"Haven't seen them - " The lieutenant stopped short as she noticed a young girl hovering patiently in the doorway. "On second thought, sir, does that answer your question?"

Harm followed her gaze and smiled. "Hi, Rachel," he signed. "You didn't sneak away from your new friends, did you?"

Rachel shrugged, looking only slightly guilty. [Talking to them is hard. I'd rather talk

to you.]

“Okay, but next time, tell someone where you’re going, okay?” As she nodded, he lifted his gaze. “That’ll be all, Harriet. Thank you.”

“Aye, sir.” Harriet stepped out into the bullpen, her initial amusement dampened by the onset of reality. She’d heard about the investigation, and she empathized with the child as only a mother could. But Commander Rabb had obviously begun to forge a tenuous bond with her. That was certainly a step in the right direction.

Inside the office, Harm split his morning bagel in half and offered one piece to Rachel. She smiled a little and munched contentedly on it for a while as he sent the email request he’d been writing. After a minute, she started wandering around the office, looking at the pictures on his desk and the walls. [Is your baby deaf, too?] she asked suddenly. [Is that why you understand me?]

Surprised, he looked up at the photo she’d spotted, of little A.J. on his first birthday. He shook his head. “No, I don’t have any children. That baby is my godson, A.J., and he can hear. I learned sign language because of a friend. A long, long time ago.” He didn’t add that he’d spent an hour and a half refreshing his memory the night before.

Rachel nodded, accepting that response, and continued to explore. She seemed to sense that Harm was watching her, but it didn’t bother her. She picked up a newspaper that lay on the corner of the desk and studied the picture on the front page. [That’s where my mom worked.]

“That’s the Pentagon,” Harm said simply. “They’re fixing it.”

[Because of the plane that hit it?]

“That’s right. Did your mom tell you about that?”

She nodded again. [She wasn’t there that day. She was going to go on a school trip with me. Instead we just stayed home, and she cried a lot. Her friends were in there.]

“I know how she felt,” he said quietly. Fate was a strange thing. Alison Marks might have sidestepped it when she missed work on that day in September, but it had come back for her just a few months later. “Rachel, I know this doesn’t mean much, but you should be very proud of your mom. She spent her life helping keep all of us safe.”

She looked at him with a kind of disbelief. [It’s easy for you to say that. You still have a mom. Don’t you?]

“So do you,” he countered firmly, wondering exactly how he’d gotten himself into this. “She’s always going to be your mom, no matter what. It’s just that you can’t be with her right now. And you’re right. I do still have a mom, but I lost my dad when I was a little younger than you are now. So I know that nothing I can tell you will help much. I just want to help however I can.”

Rachel played with her golden-brown braid for a second before replying. [I don’t remember my dad. There’s pictures, and letters, but ...] The signs melted into a small,

helpless shrug. [Who's going to take care of me?]

Harm had thirty years of life experience over her, and he felt every bit as helpless as she did. "I don't know, sweetheart," he told her honestly. "But whoever it is will love you just as much as your mom and dad did. And for now, you've at least got me. Okay?"

In response, she stepped around the desk and grabbed his hand for an exaggerated handshake. Despite himself, he laughed. "Deal. We'll stick together." Remembering the books he'd retrieved from her house, he reached under his desk. "I almost forgot. I brought you some things."

Rachel's eyes brightened as she reached for the books and the stuffed bear. Within moments, she had climbed atop his desk and was dangling her feet over the side, engrossed in a copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Satisfied, the attorney slid his chair back and started to skim through the files Harriet had delivered.

"Hey, Harm, have you seen..." Mac came through the doorway and trailed off upon seeing the little girl who'd taken over his desk. "Um, never mind."

Harm offered a sheepish grin. "Sorry. I was going to come find you guys in a minute. Really."

"Don't worry about it. I figured she'd track you down." Mac turned to Rachel, clutching her beloved bear under one arm, and smiled. "Good morning, Rachel," she said, being careful to enunciate clearly without overdoing it. "I see you found a friend."

Rachel glanced down at the bear, then up at Harm. [I think I found two.]

Mac looked to Harm for the translation and saw how his features instantly softened at Rachel's words. She'd thought that his days of impossible quests were over ... but then again, this wasn't like any other obsession she'd seen from him. Her partner was falling hard for this little girl.

"All right, let's get started. Down you go, Rach." He held out a hand, and Rachel dutifully took it, hopping down from the desk. As they started toward the conference room, Mac leaned in to talk to him more privately.

"You owe me a serious chat, flyboy. Think you'll be free for lunch?"

"The way this is going, I doubt it. How about dinner at my place? Nineteen hundred?"

Her heart sped up a little at the suggestion. They hadn't had many opportunities to meet outside of work much lately. But ever since the conversation that had redefined their relationship, they'd somehow been reaffirmed as the best of friends, and the promise of something more still lingered in the background. Timing, however, was still very much an issue. "What should I bring?" she asked in a low voice.

"Just yourself."

... It was precisely eighteen fifty-eight when she knocked on his apartment door, rubbing her hands together to warm them up. "It's open," called Harm's voice from inside,

and she let herself in, heading straight for the heating register.

"I thought winter was supposed to be almost over. It's below freezing out there," she informed him flatly, huddling as close as she could to the outflow of warm air. He rolled his eyes in agreement while stirring the pasta sauce.

"No kidding. Whenever it gets like this, I start wishing I'd stayed home."

"You *are* home, sailor."

"No, I mean twenty years ago, when I left California." He flashed a grin at her, and she had to laugh. "Did you come up with any brilliant leads this afternoon?"

"Not really. All I know is that Commander Marks was an authority on large-scale weapons activity in North Africa. We're talking missile tests, all kinds, by both government and non-governmental groups."

"Otherwise known as terrorist cells," Harm replied, understanding her meaning. "Somalia?"

"Not this time around. Everyone seems more concerned about certain areas of Libya."

"Them again?"

"Hey, maybe they want to get back at you for that little maneuver you pulled in their backyard all those years ago." Mac raised an eyebrow, continuing. "The thing is, the stuff that the J-2 office sent over has been scrubbed so clean that there's hardly anything left to read. I understand the need to take security seriously, but it still feels like we're banging our heads against a wall." Finally beginning to defrost, she took off her coat and laid it over the arm of the couch. "I'm tempted to call Webb and see if he can't pull some strings to let us take a peek at the uncensored version."

"I guess we've always got that as a last resort, but I already owe him for the rest of my life." Harm pulled the pot off the stove and began dishing up the linguine. Mac moved over to the kitchen island to assist.

"Speaking of which, how's Sergei doing?"

"Pretty well so far. He loves having Russian neighbors - says it's like having the best of both worlds. His apartment needs some work, so I promised I'd come over and help him out next weekend." He handed her a glass of mineral water with a smile. "It's been a long time since we did something like this," he pointed out softly.

"Too long," she agreed, clinking her glass to his. "Come on. I'm starved, and this smells wonderful."

Their dinner conversation was animated, as each recounted tales of trials and office gossip the other had missed while working separate cases. Mac nearly fell out of her chair in hysterics when Harm told her about Sergei's encounter with Lieutenant Singer.

"It's not funny, damn it! My little brother, with a crush on the ambition queen of the

Navy?"

"Of course it's funny. You're cursed, flyboy." Mac wiped tears from her cheeks and spoke dramatically. "Good news: you get your brother back. Bad news: you might end up with a really interesting sister-in-law!"

"Don't even joke about that! If I have to, I'll order her away from him, but there's no way in hell I'm letting *that* happen." He tossed a nearby dishtowel at her. "Just for that, you have to help with the dishes."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

After a few minutes of washing and drying in comfortable silence, she glanced over at him. "So," she began calmly. "Time for the full story. You learned sign language from a friend in school. Details?"

He shrugged, and she could see the light in his eyes fade ever so slightly. "The year I started eighth grade, everybody was making a big deal out of this deaf kid who was coming to our school. The teachers were falling all over themselves to try and help him, so all the kids automatically assumed he needed it, but he didn't. I mean, he needed a little help, but he was smarter than most of the class, and it took people a while to figure that out. Anyway, a couple of weeks after school started, I was in the locker room, and the fire alarm started going off. When I headed for the door, I saw J.J. just standing at his locker, because he had no idea anything was happening. I went over and tried to tell him what was going on, and it took a good five minutes of total confusion before I just went over to the wall and pointed at the alarm."

"That's why they have lighted alarms these days," Mac pointed out.

"Hey, it was the seventies. But you're getting me off track. After we finally got outside with the rest of the kids, J.J. started signing something to me, but I had no clue what he was trying to say. Eventually, he pulled out a pad of paper and wrote down, 'Next time, just do this.' He was showing me the sign for fire. After that, it just kind of grew from there. I helped him out with note-taking, because he'd occasionally miss words when he was lip-reading, and he helped me get through chemistry, which I absolutely sucked at. And once I got halfway decent at signing, we never had to worry about passing notes behind a teacher's back. We did occasionally get busted for 'talking' in class, though."

She smirked. "I'm trying to picture a fifteen-year-old Harmon Rabb, smiling his way out of trouble and practically getting away with murder in high school."

"I didn't get away with anything. Contrary to what you may think, I wasn't exactly the golden boy of East La Jolla High. Especially after everyone heard about my unauthorized summer field trip before senior year."

"Have you stayed in touch with your friend at all?"

He dropped his gaze to the sink. "Being deaf was far from being J.J.'s only obstacle in life. He died sometime during my second year at Annapolis. Heart failure, technically, but with his immune system, it could have been just about anything."

"I'm sorry. I should've left it alone."

"Not at all. He was a big part of how I got through high school. I had a lot of trouble staying motivated enough to keep up with the Academy's standards, but every time I wanted to give up and feel sorry for myself, I just looked at him. He could've gone to a private school and had life a lot easier, but he didn't want to. He had to work for things that came easily to me, but he always found a way." He turned slightly toward her, and was puzzled to see that the smirk had returned. "Now what?"

"I'm just surprised, that's all. I had this image in my head of you as the class president, star quarterback, and homecoming king all in one."

He only rolled his eyes. "Tried student council and hated it, rode the bench on the football team, and ... okay, so I was homecoming king, but - "

Anything else he might have said was drowned out by her triumphant laughter. "I knew it!" He responded by flicking soapy water in her direction, and she snapped the towel at him. Before she could wind up for another shot, however, he grabbed the end of the towel and yanked, throwing her off-balance and bringing her abruptly toward him. Just like that, they were only inches apart.

After a moment, Mac swallowed the flush of heat that had risen to her cheeks and spoke quietly. "This is getting harder and harder, isn't it?"

"If you mean it's getting harder to justify staying away from you, I agree wholeheartedly." The intensity of that comment, and of his gaze, startled her a little. She'd seen him in passionate moments before, times when he'd battled fiercely for justice ... but this clearly was no courtroom. For the first time, she could see that what he wanted so badly was *her*. If she'd been any less of a Marine, her knees might very well have buckled.

"You know what a bad idea this would be right now," she reminded him, her voice barely audible. "Two high-level officers who have to face off in court every other week ... adversarial by day, hot-bunking by night..."

"It screams 'appearance of impropriety'," he admitted, moving back by a fraction of a step. "I'm just not sure how long I can stand the idea of putting our lives on hold for a more convenient time. It seems - I don't know, it seems like maybe our priorities are out of whack."

"Harm, we're doing it this way *because* of how important it is, not in spite of it. If all I wanted out of you was a night or two in that bed over there, this wouldn't be nearly so complicated." His eyes widened at her casual tone - this wasn't exactly a topic they'd covered in depth - but she continued. "But it's not. If we want to be together, as in really together, we're going to have to figure out a better way to handle the office. That's all there is to it."

They just stood there for a minute or two, every ounce of willpower concentrated on keeping that small distance between them intact. Both somehow knew instinctively that if they surrendered just for an instant, just for a kiss, the floodgates would be opened, and there would be no going back. So they stood there, reading the same thoughts and hopes in each other's eyes.

Finally he spoke, a hint of humor creeping into his voice. "Times like this, Marine, are the times that make me seriously consider chucking it all and taking the first transfer I can get, just so we wouldn't have to keep this up."

"Careful what you wish for," she returned slyly. "You do that, you might end up a

cook on a frigate somewhere.”

“I’ll have to be a little more discriminating, then. Think the *Patrick Henry* would take me back?”

The teasing tone immediately vanished, and he regretted even making the comment. “That isn’t funny,” she said quietly.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Every time it seems like we’re getting somewhere, I manage to screw it up by throwing an airplane into the mix.”

“It’s all right. Just promise me you won’t leave again without a direct order from the Joint Chiefs.”

“As long as you do the same,” he replied solemnly.

The telephone interrupted them, and Harm cursed inwardly as he reached for the handset. “Hello?” The way he instantly paled at the response told her that this wasn’t a social call. “When? All right, give me the address, and we’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“What happened?” Mac asked, already on alert.

“That was Agent Faulkner. Someone just attempted to break into the home of Rosslyn police officers John and Lisa Harper.”

There was only one possible reason for that information to be at all relevant to them. “Rachel?”

Harm nodded grimly. “They’re all fine, but the intruder got away clean. What are the odds that this was a coincidence?”

“Not very good. We’d better get over there.” She picked up her coat, but his hand on her arm stalled the motion.

“We will be finishing that conversation eventually, won’t we?” he asked carefully.

“Sometime,” she promised with a soft smile. “Come on. We’d better take your car, in case the roads are icing up.”

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There was only one police cruiser in the Harpers’ driveway, and since it belonged to one of the home’s residents, its lights were decidedly not flashing. Despite the seemingly quiet street, however, there was plenty of activity inside the house. Two city police officers and two NCIS agents were already combing the first floor for evidence by the time the JAG officers arrived. Harm and Mac introduced themselves to Lisa Harper, who relayed the events of the evening.

“Rachel and I were watching ‘Cinderella’ in the living room when I heard a noise at the door to the garage. I called upstairs to John, just to be safe, but then I heard the door actually open. So I pulled Rachel down behind the couch, and John came down the stairs with

his weapon. As soon as the guy saw that, he took off like a bat out of hell.”

“Did either of you get a good look?”

She shook her head. “He was wearing a mask this time. Guess he’s not stupid.”

“Where’s Rachel?” Mac asked.

Lisa sighed. “She hasn’t come out of the bedroom since it happened. She couldn’t hear any of what was going on. All she knew was that I was pulling her down - and then she saw John with the gun, and...”

Harm nodded, comprehending. Guns were becoming a recurring theme in the poor girl’s life. “I think we can assume that no burglar in his right mind would try to rob a house with a police car in the driveway. Unless either of you has made some dangerous enemies lately, we’ve got to assume that whoever killed Commander Marks is trying to tie up loose ends.”

“We need to consider a safe house for Rachel,” Faulkner agreed. “Or at least some kind of stepped-up security.”

“Commander, maybe you could help calm Rachel down,” Lisa suggested tentatively. “It seems like you’re all she’s talked about since she got here.”

At that, Mac lifted an eyebrow, but Harm pretended not to notice and nodded. “I’ll do my best.” He crossed the living room to the bedroom door, where John Harper was silently keeping watch. The other man stepped aside to let him in.

Rachel was huddled on the floor next to the bed, her face buried in that treasured teddy bear. Harm knelt down next to her and gently touched her arm, trying not to startle her. When she looked up and recognized him, the sheer magnitude of desperate hope in her eyes was staggering. *She really thinks I can protect her*, he realized. *God, I hope she’s right.*

“It’s over now, Rachel,” he signed simply, just as she threw herself into his arms. He stayed there with her for a few minutes, stroking her soft hair and praying for some kind of guidance. When she finally pulled back, her hands were steady.

[I don’t want to stay here.]

“I know, sweetheart. We’ll figure something else out. Why don’t you gather up your things?” He got to his feet, but she grabbed at his sleeve.

[Can I go with you?]

Startled, he fumbled over the correct signs for a second. “Can you go where with me?”

[Wherever you live. Please? I promise I’ll be good.]

“I know you’ll be good. That’s not the problem. I just...” He stopped himself, taking a moment to think it through. What excuse did he intend to give her? That he didn’t have the first clue what to do with a seven-year-old? That he had enough else to worry about? Those answers weren’t good enough. She needed someone, and for once he’d simply have to put

someone other than himself first. "I'll go ask the agents, all right?"

Nodding vigorously, she leaped up and began to pull the few belongings she had into her small backpack. Harm sighed, already wondering how many ways he'd end up regretting this, and returned to the living room.

"We've contacted an FBI safe house just over the border in Maryland," Faulkner reported. "They can take Rachel for the time being."

"Agent Faulkner, I realize this would be extremely unorthodox, but what if I took her home with me?"

Mac's head swung around in surprise, but she said nothing. Holstrom was already shaking his head. "To D.C.? No way."

"We could arrange for a guard to keep an eye on the building, and she could stay at JAG during the day. No safe house is going to be as secure as a military installation."

"Commander, I appreciate that you've taken a personal interest in the case, but this is a bad idea. Let the Bureau take care of her. She won't be far."

"No!"

All motion in the room instantly ceased as the adults heard Rachel's voice for the first time. The word hadn't exactly been articulate, but her meaning was clear as she stood in the doorway with determination born of fear and hope. Even if she hadn't been able to read every word of their discussion, she could see where it was heading. [I'm not going with them. I don't care what they say.]

"Rachel, they just want to help," Harm tried to say, but she shook her head, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

[You promised, Harmon. You said we'd stick together. Please don't leave me.]

With that, his defenses crumbled, and he lifted her up into his arms. She settled against him, her head resting on his shoulder, and he turned back to the agents. "She's staying with me, guys. Either you can help me by calling the Marine detachment for a guard, or you can argue jurisdiction with my C.O. tomorrow morning. I doubt he'd be too happy if you called him right now."

With obvious reservation, the agents acquiesced, and began making arrangements for a round-the-clock security sweep of Harm's apartment building. Soon he and Mac were strapping Rachel into the backseat of his Lexus. Once they were on the road, and Rachel was staring out the window, Mac finally spoke up. "I didn't want to undermine you back there, but I might as well say it now. Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

"To be honest, not really. But - God, Mac, I couldn't let her go like that ... When I was working on the Lewis case three years ago, Jordan warned me about continually upsetting Darlyn's life, moving her from one place to the next."

"It's not the same. Rachel hasn't been abused the way Darlyn was. She's stronger."

“She’s also seven years old, and right now, nothing in her life makes her feel safe. Except me, for some bizarre reason. Somebody’s got to be the constant for her, Mac. Somebody has to care about her. Why shouldn’t it be me?”

“That’s not all this is. You realize the risk you’re bringing on yourself by keeping her with you, right? If this guy’s willing to kill a child, he’s sure as hell not going to lose sleep over killing another naval officer.”

“I know. But at least this time he’ll have a fair fight waiting for him.”

She sighed. “I’m still worried about you getting too close,” she replied, quietly yet seriously. “But you’re a big boy, and I’m willing to step back and let you do what you need to do. Just let me be a little paranoid, all right?”

With a brief smile of understanding, he reached over and touched her hand. “Mac, I can’t explain to you why I need to do this, or why I’m so sure that I can. I guess I just need you to trust me.”

“I always do, flyboy.”

When they arrived back at his apartment, she embraced him quickly and waved good night to Rachel. Then, efficiently, she moved across the street to instruct the recently-arrived Marine security officer. Rachel climbed down out of the SUV and slipped her small hand into Harm’s, content to follow wherever he led.

*Now what?* the attorney couldn’t help wondering as they took the elevator upstairs. His experience with children was limited at best: baby A.J. and Josh Pendry were the main highlights, and Josh could hardly be considered a stellar success. He was fully aware that his history didn’t really qualify him to take charge of anyone, let alone a seven-year-old with special needs. But he’d meant what he said to Mac. Something, somehow, was telling him that right now, this child needed him and only him.

Rachel cast a curious glance around the apartment, exploring a little as he hung up their coats. There was a giggle from the vicinity of his desk, and he looked over to see her holding up his new ASL dictionary. [Caught you.]

Harm shrugged, only mildly embarrassed. “Well, I don’t trust my memory. I wouldn’t want to make mistakes and have you laugh at me, would I?”

[You’ve already messed up a couple of times. But I knew what you meant. Besides, you’re the only one who tries.]

He ruffled her hair affectionately. “It’s late. Let’s get you ready for bed, okay?”

While she brushed her teeth and changed into her nightgown, he got out the extra blankets and pillows that had most recently been used by Sergei. Admittedly, it didn’t make a whole lot of sense to put a little girl in a queen-size bed while a six-foot-four man slept on the couch, but he wasn’t about to deprive her of a proper bed.

[Can I leave a light on?] Rachel asked timidly as she climbed into bed and pulled up the blanket.

"Sure, you can. How's this?" He clicked on the bathroom light and came back to sit next to her. "Everything okay?"

She nodded, settling into the pillow. [You and Mac are good together,] she informed him, so matter-of-factly that he had to mentally check his translation.

"You noticed I call her Mac, huh?"

[I notice lots of stuff. Like how you always stand real close to her when you think no one's looking.]

"You're pretty sneaky sometimes, you know that?" he teased, attempting to evade the topic.

[I'm not. I just see more things because I can't hear them. Is Mac your girlfriend?] she insisted.

Harm sighed. "It's kind of mixed-up at the moment," he told her honestly. "She's my best friend, and I'd like her to be my girlfriend, but it's hard because we work together."

[It's hard because you're officers? Mom said officers can't always do what they want, because of rules and stuff.]

"That's a big part of it. I think we'll make it work somehow. But right now, it's time for you to go to sleep." Almost on instinct, he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Good night, honey."

It was still only 2200, so he put on a pair of comfortable sweats and headed over to his desk to revisit the files he'd brought home. Commander Marks had been working on a handful of related projects, monitoring the movements and operations of a few specific groups with camps in the Sahara region. Most of them were relatively well-documented cells, groups that the Department of Defense had been tracking since long before the start of the 'war on terror'. A couple of them, however, were unfamiliar to him. There were very few clues to help him determine which of the cases had been Marks's highest priority: the intel community didn't dare spill that kind of information to a lowly JAG. Maybe he'd have to call Webb after all.

He leaned back in the chair, trying to piece together some kind of theory in his mind. First things first. Why kill someone? Besides money or anger, the most probable motive was to ensure silence. They needed to stop her from saying or doing something. What was the most dangerous thing that an intelligence analyst could do? Uncover a secret. And the most important question of all - whose secret could it have been? Someone involved with one or more of the terrorist groups, most likely...

A chilling possibility hit him then. Whoever had killed Lieutenant Commander Marks was *here*, not in the deserts of North Africa, and had had good enough information to track Rachel to the Harpers' home. A well-trained foreign operative could certainly have done it, but this didn't feel like a typical terrorist plot. What if the killer was American? Could the secret uncovered have been the existence of a traitor?

*Nice theory*, he thought with a tinge of sarcasm. *Totally out of the blue. Where the hell would I even begin to try and back it up?*

His train of thought sharply derailed at the sound of a few muffled wails from the bedroom. Harm crossed the apartment in long strides and found Rachel huddled up in a tight ball under the blanket. She looked up, feeling his weight next to her on the bed. "What is it, honey?" he asked, already aware of the answer.

[I'm sorry,] she signed halfheartedly, still sniffing. [I'm trying to be brave, I promise.]

"Don't be sorry," he told her firmly, lifting her chin so that her gaze met his. "Rachel, believe me. You don't ever have to apologize for what you're feeling. If you're sad, or scared, that's okay. You don't have to hide anything, especially from me. All right?"

She glanced down for a moment, then confessed, [I'm more sad than scared right now, I guess.]

"Come here, sweetheart." He gathered her up and rocked her protectively for a few minutes. As she rested her head in the crook of his arm, it occurred to him that there was something innately good about this feeling. He'd always kept the idea of having children in the back of his mind, but over the years it seemed to have been steadily pushed farther and farther back, displaced by his career or any number of uncertainties. Now, for the first time in his memory, he found that he could actually picture himself in the role.

Rachel twisted around and touched his cheek to get his attention. [I can ask you anything, right?]

"Sure," he answered, slightly bewildered.

She looked almost guilty. [Would you stay in here tonight?]

Looking into her earnest blue eyes, Harm quickly came to the conclusion that he could very easily end up wrapped around this girl's little finger.

"Of course I will."

He slid into bed beside her and lay down on his back. In response, she curled her small body around his arm, and he pulled the blanket back up to her chin. As he closed his eyes and attempted to find rest, the last remaining thought in his mind was that this was decidedly a new experience.

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The next morning, he awoke to the incessant buzzing of the alarm, and immediately realized how stiff he was. *This is what I get for being such a pushover*, he groused inwardly, leaning over to shut off the alarm. Rachel, of course, had slept right through the alarm, and any annoyance he'd initially felt dissipated as he looked down at her peaceful face. *Christ. I'm a lost cause already*. Being careful not to disturb her, he rolled out of bed and headed for the shower.

It was nearly twenty minutes later when she wandered out of the bedroom, rubbing her eyes sleepily. Harm smiled at her from over the stove and set down his coffee mug to greet her. "Good morning. I was going to let you sleep a little longer."

[I could smell the pancakes,] she replied shyly. [I love pancakes.]

“Well, you are in luck, because I happen to be a master at pancakes.” He lifted her onto one of the kitchen stools and set a plate in front of her with a flourish. Giving him the biggest smile he’d seen yet, she dug into her breakfast.

As he watched her and sipped his coffee, he wondered how long this arrangement would go on. He’d need to get more of Rachel’s clothes from her house, and maybe get her some new books - hanging around JAG headquarters all day would get old for her rather fast. Maybe his computer had some games on it, or something. Hadn’t he gotten on Bud’s case for playing solitaire once?

When she’d finished her pancakes, Rachel climbed down and obediently carried her plate to the sink. He gathered the files from his desk while she changed clothes and washed up, and within ten minutes she was back in the living room, holding her hairbrush and an elastic band. [Can you braid my hair?] she asked innocently.

Like any good sailor, Harm knew about a dozen different ways to tie a rope, but this wasn’t something they’d covered at Annapolis. “Sorry, Rach, I don’t know how. Can we do a ponytail today?” She shrugged, and he followed her back into the bathroom. Standing behind her in the mirror, he took the rubber band - what did they call those things, scrunchies? - from her, and began to pull her hair back into the neatest ponytail he could manage. His fingers caught slightly, and he tensed, hoping he hadn’t hurt her, but she only smiled.

[Mom usually pulls it way more than that.] The smile wavered instantly as she remembered exactly why her mother wasn’t here to do her hair or fix her breakfast. But this time, she didn’t break. She simply stared straight ahead, into the mirror.

Harm sighed and fixed the elastic around her hair. “I’ll get someone to show me how to braid later, okay?” She nodded and climbed up on the toilet seat to kiss his cheek. Surprised and more than a little touched, he hugged her and helped her down. “Rachel, you have got to be the sweetest, most well-behaved little girl I have ever met.”

Skipping over to pick up her jacket and shoes, she tossed off a response that stopped him in his tracks. [You make a pretty good dad, too.]

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“Good morning, Commander,” Harriet called to him cheerfully as he and Rachel made their way into the bullpen. “Colonel Mackenzie mentioned that you’d be bringing your guest in with you. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“As always, you’re a lifesaver. Harriet Sims, meet Rachel Marks. Rachel, this is Harriet. If I have to leave for a while, and you need something, you can ask her, all right?” He stopped and turned back to her. “Is it okay if she calls you Harriet?”

“Absolutely. Hi, Rachel.” The girl waved politely, hovering close to her caretaker, and Harriet smiled. “You know, there’s some chocolate donuts in the kitchen. Would you like one?”

Rachel’s eyes lit up, but Harm gave her a disapproving look. “Uh-uh. You just had pancakes for breakfast. You’re not going into sugar shock on me.” She rolled her eyes,

offering a sheepish grin. "Why don't you go read your book in my office, okay?"

Harriet watched her go and shook her head. "So how are you holding up, sir?"

Harm lifted an eyebrow. "Why, how do I look?"

"To be honest, sir, you look like Bud after the first time he watched A.J. by himself. Shell-shocked, but happy."

"I guess that about covers it. She's really amazing, Harriet."

"They always are, sir." The lieutenant flashed a knowing smile at him and went back to her work. She never would have guessed that Harmon Rabb, of all people, could do a half-decent ponytail.

Harm had taken approximately four steps toward his office when Mac strategically placed herself in his path. "Got some info to discuss," she reported, tilting her head toward her own office. "Five minutes?"

With a quick glance to ensure that Rachel was indeed sitting obediently at his desk, he followed his partner. "She really doesn't need to be involved in any of this," Mac explained. "But I gave Webb a call last night - "

Harm lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, you did, did you?"

She looked only slightly apologetic. "I know you didn't want to ask him yourself, since he did so much for Sergei. We just talked for a little while, and he unofficially pointed me toward one of the areas Commander Marks was monitoring. He says there is, and I quote, 'significant concern' about a group that calls themselves Kharasala."

"Libyan, like we thought?"

"They're based there, but they're kind of an amalgam of various nasty types. Some of the leadership has ties to the Qaddafi regime, which is probably how they're getting their weapons."

"What's their problem with us?"

"The usual fundamentalist stuff, probably, but who knows? We don't have much more than that, but it gives us some place to start, at least."

He nodded with a grateful half-smile. "Thanks. I probably should've called Webb earlier. Listen, I was thinking last night about what specifically could have made Marks a target, and I was wondering - do you think the killer could possibly be American?"

She blinked, but very little actually shocked this woman. "Working with these nutjobs? I guess anything's possible."

Meanwhile, Rachel had gotten restless and wandered out to observe the activity in the bullpen. She stood near the copy machine, watching curiously as a dozen different officers hurried about their duties.

Lauren Singer strode toward that same copy machine, a hundred thoughts flying through her head at once. She was already running behind, and this child blocking her path wasn't helping matters. "Excuse me," she snapped, her impatience growing as the girl didn't respond. "Hello? Excuse me!" Still nothing, and she reached out to shake her shoulder none too gently. "Hey! Didn't anyone teach you any manners?"

Startled, Rachel just stared up at the irritated officer with wide eyes. "Lieutenant!" Harm called sharply, his attention immediately diverted. "Did you stop to consider the fact that maybe she wasn't intentionally ignoring you?"

Rachel followed Singer's gaze and began to sign to Harm, who shook his head. "It's all right, Rachel," he signed back, leveling a disapproving glare on Singer. "Just pay more attention, all right?"

The surprised lieutenant mumbled a quick "sorry, sir" and decided to use the copy machine down the hall instead. Rachel made a face at her retreating back, and Harm rolled his eyes, expertly hiding a smile.

"Be nice, Rach."

She signed rapidly, commenting that Singer's bun might be too tight, and he responded with a gentle admonishment to mind her manners. His sign-language skills were coming back to him with ease now, and he almost didn't notice when he stopped speaking aloud. Mac stood in her doorway, observing with amusement and a little touch of pride. Her flyboy was pretty good at this.

Admiral Chegwidden wandered out of his inner office and noticed the silent conversation taking place in the corner. As he watched, the little girl grabbed the senior attorney's hand and pulled him back to his office. Harm only laughed as he was dragged along. The admiral joined Mac and folded his arms. "Colonel, does that look to you like the same person who walked in here two days ago?"

"Which one, sir? Rachel or Harm?"

"Take your pick. I was about to read him the riot act for taking her in and annoying NCIS the way he did, but I'm actually starting to reconsider."

She smiled. "If you want my opinion, Admiral, I think they're good for each other. I just hope he realizes what he's in for."

"If you want *my* opinion," he responded in kind, "Commander Rabb always knows what he's in for, and he damn near always decides to do it anyway."

"You make it sound like he needs a leash, sir."

"No, just someone to provide the voice of reason and the occasional smack upside the head. But then, that's what he has you for, isn't it?"

With that, he headed for the elevators, leaving a somewhat surprised Marine in his wake.

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Over the next couple of days, the partners pored over every scrap of information they could find on the secretive terrorist group known as Kharasala. By alternately begging, demanding, and screaming about national security implications, they managed to get the J-2 office to grant them access to the most recent reconnaissance data gathered on the group's supposed training grounds in North Africa. Still, there was little to suggest any major weapons were present there, or that some kind of attack was imminent, leaving them with no apparent motive for the analyst's murder.

Meanwhile, Mac was beginning to see the growing strain on her best friend, and she knew it wasn't just from sleeping on the couch all week. Harm was fighting to erase the threat to Rachel's life while attempting to keep her days as happy as possible, and it was a complex balance. She'd spent an evening with the two of them at Harm's apartment, and despite the initial awkwardness of the sign-language barrier, she'd found herself captivated by the little girl as well. Rachel was obviously very bright, and she'd adjusted remarkably well to her new surroundings. Every so often, though, something would happen to remind them of the reality she faced, and their hearts would break for her all over again.

Mac was chatting with Harriet one morning when a piercing shriek sounded from the vicinity of the ladies' room. Harriet hurried to open the door, and a sobbing seven-year-old all but fell out of the restroom, curling herself into a tiny ball against the wall.

"What do you think happened?" Mac asked, alarmed. The girl didn't look hurt, but...

Harriet knelt down by the still-hysterical Rachel, unsure how to comfort her. "Someone must not have realized she was in there and turned off the light."

Instantly, Mac understood. Not being able to hear *or* see, on top of everything else that had happened to her ... She realized that Rachel was signing something through her tears, touching her thumb to her temple repeatedly. Harriet shrugged helplessly. "Ma'am, do you think she might be asking for the commander?"

Mac raised her voice, choosing not to care if she interrupted anything. "Harm! ASAP!"

Harm ducked his head out of his office, and it didn't take long to recognize the situation. Without a second thought, he flew across the bullpen and swept Rachel up in his arms. "It's okay, sweetheart," he murmured over and over until the sobs finally slowed. "It's okay. I've got you."

The assembled staff merely watched, fascinated. "Sir, can she hear you?" Harriet asked doubtfully.

"She can feel it, I think." He nodded toward the child's head resting against his chest. "Anyway, it's the thought that counts."

He rose to his feet, lifting her effortlessly, and offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry for the disruption, everyone. We'll get out of the way for a while." And he disappeared with her back into his office, closing the door behind him.

Passing by, Singer raised an eyebrow. "When did they become a 'we'?" she inquired to no one in particular. A glare from the colonel sent her on her way without an answer, but it didn't dull the palpable astonishment in the room.

The others returned to their work, but through the half-open blinds, they could see Harm sitting at his desk, reading something on his computer while Rachel dozed in his lap. The scene was almost natural, in its own bizarre way. "Who knew he had it in him?" Harriet wondered aloud, stealing a glance at Mac.

"Yeah," she echoed distantly, questions and possibilities tumbling over each other in her mind. "Who knew?"

An hour or so later, she decided to get some of those questions answered. She went into the kitchen and waited, munching on a handful of crackers, until Harm wandered in to retrieve his and Rachel's lunches. Mac gave the sandwiches in his hand an exaggerated once-over. "Do I have to guess which one of you is getting the peanut butter and jelly?"

He looked faintly embarrassed. "Hey, she likes it. I wasn't about to tell her 'no', even if it meant a trip to the store for Creamy Jif."

"I'm not sure you could tell her 'no' even if you tried." She waited and listened, but he didn't respond to the comment. "She's okay now?"

"Yeah - she just got scared earlier. The dark really gets to her. She's been sleeping with the bathroom light on every night."

Mac hesitated briefly, then decided to ask the question that had been bugging her for an hour. "Earlier, she was doing this specific sign over and over. We thought maybe she was asking for you." She demonstrated, and to her surprise, he began to look uncomfortable.

"That's, ah, something she started calling me occasionally. Guess you were right."

"What does it mean?" she pressed, sensing trouble ahead.

"Does it matter? It's shorter than 'Harmon'." He signed the letters to illustrate his point, but she wasn't dissuaded.

"Har-mon, if you don't tell me, I'm going to start using it to refer to you."

"Believe me, that's a bad idea." He sighed, relenting, and prepared himself for the assault he knew was to come. "It means - 'dad'."

She just stared at him for a minute. This was far more serious than she'd imagined. "Please tell me that wasn't your idea."

"Of course it wasn't. But Mac, it's not like she believes it or anything. She knows full well that she had a real father, and a mother, but they're gone, and right now, all she's got is me. It's more like - a nickname, maybe." He looked away almost guiltily, knowing that even though it was the truth, neither of them completely believed it.

"Harm," she said slowly, "this is exactly what Jordan warned you about when you insisted on staying involved with the Lewis case."

"Well, Jordan's not here, is she?" Immediately he regretted the harsh tone. "I'm sorry. I know what you're trying to say, and I know I shouldn't let her get too attached, but - "

"I'm not just worried about her, Harm. When all this is over, Social Services is going to find her a new family, and you're both going to have to say goodbye. It's not going to hurt you any less than her simply because you're an adult."

"Then maybe I won't say goodbye," he said quietly, causing her to nearly drop her own lunch.

"Sailor, you're not actually thinking about...?"

"I'm thinking about a lot of things, Mac," he answered honestly. "Rachel's one of them, but you're another one. If you can come over for dinner again, I'll let you weigh in on both topics."

That particular comment blindsided her, and for a moment, she wasn't entirely sure how to respond. "I guess that's fair," she finally replied.

"Then I'll see you tonight?"

"You will. And you'd better be ready to talk."

"This time, believe it or not, I am."

---

Somehow, 1700 couldn't come fast enough that day. Mac had intended to leave work as per usual and head home to change, before going over to Harm's for an evening that would undoubtedly be very ... interesting, in one way or another. But she'd been halfway out the door when the phone on her desk rang, and when she recognized Clayton Webb's voice, she knew it was a call she'd have to take.

"All is not as it should be over in J-2," he reported tersely. "They won't tell you people, obviously, but they're conducting an internal review of some of their personnel. Apparently some data has been accessed without authorization, and they're starting to get suspicious."

"The data in question wouldn't happen to have anything to do with the Kharasala site, now would it?"

"Give the lady a gold star." She could hear the wry smile on the other end of the phone. "If somebody over there has been peeking at stuff they shouldn't be, and funneling information back to some not-so-reputable types, the Pentagon has a major problem on its hands."

"And so do you," she pointed out. "We all play for the same team, Webb."

"Yeah, but my guys aren't the ones causing trouble this week. I'll keep looking on my end, you keep looking on yours, and if we're lucky, we'll end up meeting in the middle. Keep in touch, Mac."

"Will do. Thanks."

As it turned out, she still had time to get out of her uniform and into a comfortable

sweater and leggings before dinner. When she knocked on Harm's door, Rachel was the one who answered: Harm must have clued her in to the fact that someone was there, she reasoned. Mac smiled and carefully signed the few words she'd taken the time to learn from her partner. "Hi, Rachel. How are you today?"

The girl beamed and turned back to Harm, her hands almost a blur of motion. From his place by the kitchen sink, he laughed and set down the knife he'd been using in order to reply. "She is pretty cool, isn't she?" he agreed. "I bet if we helped her, she'd be able to talk to you like I can in no time."

"Hey, one step at a time," Mac protested, taking off her jacket. "Learning a language is hard."

[I think you should marry her,] Rachel commented, with the simplicity only a child could provide. [Then she wouldn't have to keep coming over for dinner, because she'd already be here.]

Mac glanced to Harm for the translation, but this time, he didn't oblige. "I can't argue with your logic, Rach, but Mac's right. One step at a time."

Dinner conversation in sign language was a complicated process, since 'talking with your hands full' was more or less impossible. Still, they all managed to make themselves understood, and by mid-evening all three were sprawled out on the living room floor, playing some board games borrowed from a helpful JAG lieutenant with three kids.

[You let me win, didn't you?] Rachel accused Harm, her eyes narrowing.

He held up his hands in surrender. "I didn't. I swear. You're just better at Candy Land than we are."

She looked to Mac suspiciously, daring her to respond differently, but she only shook her head. "I would never do that. When I was a kid, I never wanted to win anything I didn't earn."

"Not much changes," Harm remarked with a smile.

There was a knock at the door, and a male voice called from the hallway. "It's Corporal Perkins, Commander. Just doing my 2100 check."

"Carry on, Corporal," Harm replied. "We're all set."

"Aye, sir." The Marine guard continued on his rounds, and the two lawyers exchanged a brief look, wondering how long this madness would have to go on. Rachel seemed to sense that the spell was broken, and she stood up with a somewhat dispirited expression on her face.

[I'm going to go get ready for bed.]

"All right, honey. I'll come tuck you in in a little while, okay?" Rachel nodded and signed good-night to Mac, who repeated the sign back to her. The girl smiled a little and reached out to give her a tentative hug, then disappeared back into the bedroom area, leaving the colonel a little dazzled.

"I'm starting to see what you mean," she said quietly. "She's a treasure."

"She's also a target. We're not getting anywhere fast enough on this case, and I'm starting to worry that this bastard might find a way to get to her before we can get to him."

"Webb called just before I left work. Apparently someone on the J-2 staff has been accessing the data on the Kharasala site. It's starting to sound like you might have been right about a double agent in the system. I asked Bud to track down the personnel records for J-2, so we should have somewhere to start tomorrow."

Harm put the board game up on the bookshelf and turned back to her with a gravely earnest expression. "Thank you," he said simply.

"For what?" she asked, a little surprised.

"Everything. For taking the lead on the investigation when I have trouble seeing past Rachel. For caring enough to worry about both of us, but understanding enough to let me do what I need to do. For being your usual incredible self, mostly." He glanced downward for a moment. "I guess sometimes I still get hung up on wondering what I ever did to deserve someone like you."

Her breath caught in her throat, startled by the genuine honesty in the words, the unabashed emotion in his voice. In the back of her mind, she'd always known that she had his respect, that what they shared wasn't based solely on some long-repressed physical attraction. Still, there had been very few men in her life who'd truly seen her for who she was, and even fewer who'd made her feel truly admired. The admiration of this man, in particular, meant more to her than just about anything in the world, and since it wasn't in his nature to be so open about it, having it laid out in front of her was fairly overwhelming.

"You certainly know how to open a dialogue," she said finally, sliding onto the couch and tilting her head toward the space beside her. "Earlier, you said you'd been thinking about Rachel, and about me. Which one do you want to start with?"

"You - or more accurately, us. Although both topics are likely to end up at the same destination eventually." He crossed the living room to sit down next to her, but before he could begin, a mild crash sounded from the bathroom. Apologetically, he rose again to check on Rachel. "Figures. Can I start my speech after I tuck her in for the night?"

"I intend to hold you to that," she answered lightly, not entirely joking.

On the bathroom floor, Rachel was gathering up an armful of items that she'd apparently knocked off the counter. Her hairbrush, toothpaste, shampoo bottle, and a half-dozen other things were scattered across the tile when Harm ducked his head in. "Everything all right?" he asked calmly.

She shrugged, turning away almost before she replied. It wasn't fast enough, though, to hide the stormy expression on her young face. [Sure. Sorry.]

Not satisfied with that answer, he bent down to pick up her purple plastic cup and touched her shoulder to get her full attention. "It's not always going to be like this, Rach. Someday soon, we're not going to have to worry anymore. You'll be able to go back to school, and I'll take you flying like I promised. We just have to be tough a little while longer, all

right?”

She nodded, keeping her eyes downcast as she followed him out into the bedroom. Her gaze fell on the guitar in the corner, and curiosity propelled her to examine it, touching the strings and the smooth maple body. [You like to play music?]

Harm sat down on the edge of the bed. “Sometimes. It makes me feel better when I’m sad.”

She picked up the instrument in both hands and offered it to him. [I wish it could make me feel better.]

After a moment’s thought, he pulled the little girl up onto the bed and motioned for her to put her ear against the guitar. He strummed a few gentle bars, and her eyes widened in surprise and delight. Her hearing loss wasn’t total; the faintest vibrations seemed to be registering in some way. As Mac listened, on the other side of the glass, he put the guitar aside and drew her up into his arms so that her head settled against his chest. Softly, tenderly, he began to sing to her.

“Goodnight, my angel, time to close your eyes  
And save these questions for another day  
I think I know what you’ve been asking me  
I think you know what I’ve been trying to say...”

In all likelihood, she couldn’t understand a word, but right then, it didn’t matter.

“I promised I would never leave you  
And you should always know  
Wherever you may go, no matter where you are  
I never will be far away...”

Abruptly, Mac stepped away from the glass dividers and went back to the couch, tears stinging her eyes. As the lullaby continued, she buried her face in her hands and let the tears fall without fully understanding why.

Soon, Rachel was fast asleep, and Harm gently eased her into bed and pulled up the blankets with the now-customary kiss. He stepped back into the living room and was immediately stunned by what he saw. “Mac? What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied, drying her eyes as best she could. “Lost chances, I guess. No memories of my father singing me to sleep ... no little girls of my own to sing to...”

“You haven’t lost that chance,” he reminded her firmly, returning to her side but resisting the urge to wrap his arms around her. She would decide for herself what she needed, not him. “But I think I know what you mean. We’re both starting to see a lot of things differently because of her.”

“Maybe.” She looked over at him with a wistful smile. “You look so right with her - it’s like this whole scene would be perfect if it were something else. If it were...”

“Us?”

Tentatively she nodded, and he took a deep breath, trying to prepare himself for a confession unlike any other. "That's sort of what I wanted to talk to you about. I've been thinking that I'd like it to be us, too. All of us."

She'd heard the words, but it was difficult to believe that he'd actually said them. Finding her voice, she said, "Harm, are you really suggesting what I think you are?"

"Mac, I swear to you I've thought this through. I love Rachel, and I want to keep her. But I love you, too, and if you're not looking for an instant family, all you have to do is say the word."

Only half that statement penetrated her consciousness - everything after 'I love you' was lost in a torrent of emotions. Struggling to maintain her composure, she forced herself to meet his gaze, and it was clear that he'd meant it. After all this time, and even after the new level they'd reached lately, it was still a shock to hear the words aloud.

"So you love me?" she whispered, wanting to make certain that she hadn't misheard.

At that, he smiled, and it was the most open, honest, amazing smile she'd ever seen. "Took me long enough to figure out how to say it, didn't it?"

"It sure did!" The force of her reply sent them both into unsteady laughter, giving them a much-needed release. The awkwardness of the past few weeks seemed to melt away in seconds as she fell into his arms, burying her nose in his collarbone. "I love you, too," she admitted, her voice muffled. "God, it feels so good to just get that out there."

"Easier than I thought it would be," he agreed, tightening his hold. "Everything else has basically been said before, but somehow I was still terrified of actually saying those words. Sometimes I really don't know how my mind works."

"That's all right. I usually do."

He glanced down at her and brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face. "Yeah, you do, don't you?"

After a moment, she pulled back to look at him carefully. "So why now? Was it Rachel?"

"Maybe. I guess I needed firsthand evidence that I could balance duty and a halfway-normal life without self-destructing. I know we've been saying for a while now that we would take the first chance that came up to change our status at JAG, so that being together wouldn't impact everything little thing we did, but I'm tired of waiting. I think it's time to make our own opportunities."

"What do you propose?"

"The special counsel to the AIRLANT staff is getting his eagles, and they're sending him out to Pearl to advise CINCPAC. I thought I'd ask the admiral to recommend me to AIRLANT."

"You'd transfer out of JAG completely?"

"I'd only be across the river at the Pentagon. I'd still get to do investigations, and

there would be plenty of airplanes to deal with. And I'm sure I'd end up back in Falls Church every once in a while." He flashed a smile, but the proposition was serious. "What do you think?"

Mac spread her hands in a shrug. "It would prevent a lot of sticky issues, and it seems perfect for a flyboy-lawyer like yourself. But I'd miss you like crazy."

"Only during the day. As soon as seventeen hundred hits, I'd be all yours."

She lifted an eyebrow at his choice of words. "And Rachel's?" she asked. "Do you really want to adopt her? Be a father to a seven-year-old child, out of nowhere?"

"I want to try. But only if you do, too. I wasn't kidding about that. I won't pursue this if it means losing what the two of us already have. We've been through far too much to let anything take that away. Even this."

Seeing the depth of feeling that radiated from his expressive eyes, she realized that what he was suggesting might in fact have been the single greatest sacrifice anyone had ever offered her. Mic had put his career on hold and left his home to be with her, but Harm was willing to give up the bond he'd forged with this precious little girl, because he honestly loved her that much.

And because she loved him just as much, she knew immediately that she could never ask him to make that sacrifice. "Then let's do it," she said quietly, causing him to blink a few times in pure shock. "But just for the record, when we made that deal to go halves on a kid, this isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"All in good time," he promised, almost in awe. "You mean it?"

"As long as you two start teaching me sign language for real, I think I can handle the rest. More importantly, I want to. But this might be harder than it looks. We're probably not quite what Social Services is looking for in an adoptive family. We're not even a family at all."

"That's something I'd be willing to remedy, but let's cross that bridge when we come to it. I don't even want to mention the idea of adoption to Rachel, in case she gets her hopes up for something that won't ever happen. Right now I just want to find whoever killed Alison Marks and finish this so that we can all move on. But I'm not averse to the concept of checking into the adoption process." Even as he said it, an idea lit up in his mind, and he snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute. Andie!"

"Andie? As in Law School Andie?"

"The only Andie I know. She specializes in children's advocacy, remember? I bet she could tell us a lot of what we need to know. Maybe I'll give her a call tomorrow, if we don't get too swamped."

She knew she should tell him to slow down, that they were dangerously close to going off half-cocked on something that would undoubtedly have far-reaching implications for all of them. But for once in her life, her faith - in him, in herself - won out, and she smiled. "We seem to have a knack for doing things rather differently. The entire JAG crew is going to wonder how we went from partners to parents in nothing flat."

"Forgive me if I'm not overly concerned with the opinions of the JAG crew at the

moment.” He leaned forward, and without either one knowing how, suddenly they were locked in a powerful kiss - one that seemed to mirror the critical transition they’d just chosen to make. It wasn’t just words, not just promises anymore. From here on, no matter what else happened, neither of them would face another day alone.

After a long, achingly-perfect moment spent memorizing every sensation of his embrace, she drew back. “I should probably go,” she said simply, resignation echoing in her voice. “I have this nagging feeling that if I stay any longer, Rachel will get up for a drink of water and find us doing something that won’t win us any points with Social Services.”

His response was a drawn-out sigh and a brief kiss placed on her temple. “We’re getting there,” he promised, standing up to help her with her coat. “One of these days we’re going to have our lives in order, and everything will finally make sense.”

“I’ll hold you to that, too.” She turned the doorknob and stepped out into the hall, the cooler air outside intensifying the feeling of loss that accompanied the action. “Good night,” she whispered.

Before she could turn to leave, he pulled her back against him and assailed her lips with a darker, deeper kiss than before. “Don’t forget about me,” he cautioned with a slow, sexy grin.

As if that were possible. As if she’d ever been able to fully extricate that grin and those eyes from her mind, even before all this began. Gathering her remaining wits, she fixed him with a look of mock-disapproval and headed for the elevator.

Harm watched her disappear behind the gate just as Corporal Perkins stepped out of the stairwell on his next set of rounds. The young Marine only smiled, having witnessed their farewell. “Guess I don’t need to ask how you’re doing, sir.”

“You’re sworn to secrecy, Corporal,” the senior officer warned, a faint smile creeping into his eyes.

“All due respect, sir, if I was seeing a woman like that, I wouldn’t keep it a secret.”

Harm shook his head. “She’s a Marine lieutenant colonel, Corporal, and that’s all you need to know.”

Perkins blinked, but if anything, his smile grew wider. “Yes, sir. Good night, Commander.”

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Harm’s first order of business the next morning was to check in with Bud and get an update on the personnel search. A number of other cases managed to work their way into his schedule as well, competing for his attention. As soon as he found a free moment, he sent Rachel off to ‘help’ Harriet, then flipped through his address book and dialed a number he hadn’t used in quite some time.

“Holland, Archer and McNeil,” a secretary’s voice answered.

"Yes, is Andrea Nichols available?"

"May I tell her who's calling?"

"This is Harmon Rabb."

After a brief pause, a familiar voice came on the line. "Harm, hon, is that you?"

"No, it's Marcus Atkinson," he replied sardonically, using the name of one of their most dreaded law professors. Her amused snort on the other end of the line made the somewhat lame joke worthwhile. "Of course it's me."

"Fantastic. I needed something to pick up my day, and talking to you definitely qualifies." He imagined her leaning back in her chair and playing with a pen: throughout the three years in which they'd been inseparable, she'd never been able to keep her hands still for long. "To what do I owe this singular honor?"

"Actually, I need to collect on a favor."

He could almost hear her arching an eyebrow. "Oh, you do? And what makes you think I owe you one? Come to think of it, don't you still owe *me* one?"

"How do you figure that?" he protested, enjoying the exchange.

"Oh, I don't know ... something about a night spent on my couch during first term ... and me not taking advantage of the opportunity you presented me."

He feigned an indignant attitude. "Oh, so *not* sleeping with me is supposed to be a big favor?"

"Harm, I was twenty-two, and you were the most gorgeous guy I'd ever laid eyes on. Trust me, it wasn't easy. But as tempting as you were, and still are, I'd have hated to destroy such a great friendship so early, wouldn't you agree?"

Typical Andie. They hadn't talked in six months, and already they'd managed to get onto a somewhat risqué topic. "Hey, I'll have you know that I am perfectly capable of maintaining friendships with women even after a brief intimate relationship. In fact, I can think of two examples right off the top of my head."

"Why didn't you say so before? I can be on a plane and out there in three hours," she teased.

"Very cute, smartass."

"Can't blame me for trying. So who were they?"

He rolled his eyes. "I don't believe I'm telling you this, but one was a woman I worked with, and the other was a congresswoman."

"Good lord. If I'd realized that was how Washington worked, I would've made a lot more phone calls the last time I was in town." The easy irreverence in her voice made him remember why they'd been such good friends all those years ago. "Are you going to tell me

which esteemed representative it was, or do I have to guess?"

Harm glanced through his office window to make sure Sturgis wasn't wandering by before answering. "Bobbi Latham."

Andie screeched into the phone. "Harmon Rabb! You slept with *my* congresswoman??"

"Why, is that going to affect your vote?"

"It damn well might!"

They both dissolved into laughter. "I miss you, Andie," he finally managed to say.

"Me, too. Seriously, what can I do for you?"

"You're my resident expert in child advocacy, and I've got a seven-year-old child on my hands. You're not by chance a member of the Virginia bar, are you?"

"Sorry, that's a little far afield for this Midwest girl. If it helps, I'm licensed in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois."

"Illinois doesn't border Michigan," he couldn't resist pointing out.

"Thanks for the geography lesson, but they have a little city over there where some important things happen. Maybe you've heard of Chicago?"

He was too preoccupied with a sudden thought to counter her sarcasm. "Commander Marks went to school at U of I. It's a long shot, but if Rachel was born in Illinois..."

"Harm, do you really need to pay long distance to have a conversation with yourself?"

"Hey, it's the taxpayers' dime."

"Thanks a lot."

"No, I swear, Andie, I need you. Rachel's mother, Alison Marks, was a Navy lieutenant commander. She was killed last week, and once we catch the son of a bitch who did it, Rachel's going to need an adoptive family. If she was born in Illinois, she might still technically be a resident there, since she's a military dependent. If that's the case, would you be willing to help me track down her records?"

"Of course," she replied easily, but she knew him well enough to catch the uncertainty in his voice. "What's the rest of the story?"

"Andie..."

"Harm. You don't need to be a member of the Illinois bar to scare up a few records. Whatever it is you need to say, just say it."

He sighed. "I could also use your help in court if this works out, to represent a

prospective adoptive party.”

There was a brief pause. “You’re kidding. *You?*”

“Andie - ”

“For Christ’s sake, will you stop with the ‘Andie’ thing already? I trust you. If you need me, I’m there. Just tell me where and when.”

The fact that she didn’t need any explanation from him, that she was immediately willing to suspend any disbelief about this sudden life detour, was a kind of affirmation of their bond. “You’re the best,” he said gratefully, exhaling in relief. “Since I’ve already shocked the hell out of you once, do you want to hear the full, unedited version of the story?”

“Can I guess? You and Sarah Mackenzie have finally worked things out, and she’s in on this with you?”

He couldn’t help it - his mouth dropped open. “Good God, am I that obvious?”

“You mean I was right?” she exclaimed, sounding about as surprised as him. “I thought I was just screwing with you. Wow ... way to go, Navy. You’ve got everything figured out now, don’t you?”

“Not quite,” he admitted, the humor fading. “I need to keep this little girl safe until we track down a possible double agent in the CIA or the military.”

“Never a dull moment with you around. Look, I’ll try to track down Alison and Rachel Marks with the Illinois Secretary of State’s office, and I’ll see who I can contact in the Virginia area, just in case. You just keep your head in the game and finish your case. I’ll make an attempt at taking care of the rest.”

“Andie, I’m going to find a way to make this up to you. I don’t know how, but I’m going to do it. Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure, hon. Talk to you soon.”

As he hung up the phone, Mac immediately appeared in his doorway, Rachel peeking out from behind her. “Was that Andie?” Mac inquired.

“Yep. She’s going to work her magic and see what she can find out. What are you two up to?”

“Bud’s got a pretty solid list ready for us, if you want to come look over the J-2 staff profiles.”

“Damn right I do. Let’s get this show on the road.” Picking up his notebook, he came around the desk and stopped, noticing Rachel’s hair for the first time. Amused, he signed to her, “Rach, did Mac braid your hair for you?”

Rachel nodded, linking her hand through the colonel’s. Mac shrugged with a self-conscious smile. “Sorry, flyboy, but there are some things that really need a woman’s touch.”

"Of that I have no doubt," he replied as Rachel reached out her other hand to grab his. The trio made their way through the bullpen toward the conference room, drawing curious glances from the officers present.

Harriet watched the reactions of the others and rolled her eyes. "As you were," she informed them calmly, expertly hiding her satisfaction. This was definitely starting to get interesting, but she couldn't truthfully call it a surprise. She went back to her desk, humming quietly. "C'est la vie, say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell..."

In the conference room, Rachel busied herself with a new coloring book in the corner while Bud launched into his summaries of the J-2 staff officers. "I've got twenty-one personnel files, and I'd call five of them real possibilities," he began, setting the records in question out on the table. "Even those are shaky, but you asked for chapter and verse, so here goes. Number one is Lieutenant Janet Torrance, operations. She spent a study-abroad year in Kenya in college, teaching English."

"It's a big leap from teaching in Africa to joining up with Islamic extremists," Mac observed doubtfully.

"But there's a possibility she could have gotten close to someone associated with Kharasala during that time," Harm pointed out. "Any lead, right? No matter how small?"

"I guess. But Rachel saw a man, not a woman. If Torrance is involved, we're looking for two people instead of one, and the whole thing gets harder. Next, Bud?"

"Right, ma'am - number two is Commander Jacob Silverman, staff XO. He's got a reprimand in his record for making public comments against the administration's policy in the Middle East. Apparently he was even involved in a protest at one point."

"What kind of protest, though?" Harm wanted to know. "The name sounds Jewish - he might have been advocating a *stronger* U.S. policy, not a more hands-off one."

Bud flipped a few pages and chewed his lip. "Sure enough, sir. He *is* Jewish. I should've caught that."

"Don't worry about it. We asked for everything, and you got it for us. Who's number three?"

"Um, that'd be Marine Captain Robert Mason - "

"Rule him out," Mac cut in facetiously. "Marines are made of harder stuff." Harm shot her a look.

"Not funny, jarhead. What's his story, Bud?"

"That's just it, sir. He doesn't really have a story *per se*. I mean, everything's clean, but ... he's *too* clean. He just rubs me wrong, somehow."

Mac lifted an eyebrow. After her recent sixth-sense experiences, she was hardly one to question this kind of approach. Still... "Back it up, Lieutenant," she instructed flatly. "Make your case."

There was a time when Bud Roberts would have cringed under the scrutiny of his two mentors and friends. Now, though, he met their gazes without so much as a blink. "Yes, ma'am. In 1994, Mason was stationed in the Philippines with MEU Two-One, and his fit-rep reads kind of strangely. There's a line about his stellar success in communicating with a local rebel faction. Apparently he received a commendation for his work bringing the involved parties to the bargaining table. The thing is, he was never trained as a negotiator, nor was that his official duty. He just somehow managed to gain their trust. There are other instances like that, too: comments from various superiors about how Mason went over and above his assigned duties to establish a rapport with the locals, wherever he was. Everyone seems to have regarded his singular talent as a good thing, but what if it wasn't? What if he had another agenda?"

Harm exchanged a glance with Mac, the wheels already turning in his mind. "Was he ever stationed in the Mideast?"

"Bahrain, sir. One tour, six months."

"And do we know anything about his current responsibilities with J-2?"

"He's their HUMINT specialist for North and East Africa, sir. That would give him a connection to Commander Marks, even though she worked the reconnaissance side and he works the human side."

Mac nodded slightly, almost reading her partner's thoughts. "Bud, you do good work."

"Thank you, ma'am. I take it you'll be needing a more in-depth look at Captain Mason?"

"You bet we will. This time, we need to get personal. Family situation, college buddies, anything that could even suggest a motive to sell out. And keep it quiet."

"Do you think you could track down a photograph?" Harm suddenly questioned. "I know the intel folks don't widely publish their pictures, but if we had something to show to Rachel, we might be able to get her to identify him."

"Also, we need to know who we're looking for, in case this guy gets brave and tries something here," Mac pointed out. "I know we don't want to tip anyone off, but if we're talking about someone with a military I.D., he could waltz on into this building right under our noses."

Bud nodded solemnly: the idea hadn't even occurred to him. From the look on the commander's face, it hadn't occurred to him, either. "I'll do my best. That said, I've got a pre-trial meeting with Commander Turner in a half-hour, so if you don't need me for the moment..."

"Go. And thanks again."

After Bud had left, Mac glanced back at Rachel, still engrossed in her coloring. "I hate this," she offered quietly. "We're treating everyone like a suspect."

"I know. But our choices are somewhat limited. At least we're making progress."

"Are we? Maybe this Captain Mason wasn't working an angle. Maybe he's just a regular guy with an aptitude for diplomacy."

"Maybe. But maybe not." Harm gathered the papers Bud had left and closed the folder. "Should we tell Webb where we are on this?"

"It can't hurt. His team isn't handling the murder at all - they're focusing on the supposed security breach. If they've come up with any ideas as to the larger plan in all of this, maybe we can establish a stronger motive."

"As long as he promises to keep his mouth shut about who we suspect."

Her lips quirked upward. "Harm, this is Clayton Webb we're talking about. I think the deputy director of counterintelligence probably knows how to keep a secret or two, don't you?"

"All right, all right." He stood up, drawing Rachel's attention. "Come on, Rach, let's take a walk."

The courtyard was bright but cool, a light breeze still keeping the fading effects of winter close at hand. A few strong-willed flowers, though, were beginning to push their way through the soil. Rachel took a seat on a bench, swinging her feet absently. Harm sat down next to her, unsure of what he really wanted to ask her.

"You miss school, don't you?" he began carefully.

She looked up at him and shrugged. [I miss my friends,] she signed in reply. [I miss having everybody understand me. I mean, you understand me, but ...]

"I know." He sighed. "This is all going to be over soon. I promise. But when it is, some things are going to change, and whatever happens, I want to make sure you'll be okay. So do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?"

She nodded, looking a little wary.

"Okay. Do you know where you were born? What state, I mean?"

She gave him a 'duh' look. [St. Mary's Hospital, Ash Park, Illinois. But we didn't live there very long. I only remember living in Virginia.]

"Then we might be able to choose where you go. You can keep living here, or you could go back to Illinois. Is there anyone back there, any relatives that you used to visit with your mom? Grandmas, aunts or uncles, anybody you might want to live with?"

It didn't take her long to start shaking her head. [My dad didn't have any brothers or sisters, and Mom was - ] She paused in mid-sign, trying to decide what the correct word was. [Like I am now, I guess. She didn't have a mom or a dad, so somebody else took care of her.]

"She was adopted?" Harm asked quietly, but the little girl shook her head. "A foster child?"

She nodded, and once again he was struck by the tragedy of it all. Alison Marks hadn't

exactly had it easy. She'd succeeded against the odds, and she'd given her daughter the home she'd never had. Now, because of some still-unknown plot, all that had been taken away. He didn't doubt that Rachel was every bit as strong as her mother had been, but he didn't want to see her resigned to that same path if he could help it.

"Rach, if you want to stay here, where your school and your friends are, I'm going to try to make that happen. I want you to have a real home, and a family that loves you - "

[Like you?] Her innocent question left him momentarily struggling for a response.  
[You love me, right?]

How long had it been since someone had told this child that she was loved?

"Of course I do, baby," he whispered, reaching out to stroke her cheek with a gentle finger. "You're perfect. How could I not love you?"

Her blue eyes brimmed with tears. [If I were perfect, I'd be able to hear,] she answered haltingly. [Why would anyone want me if they could have a normal kid instead?]

With that, he promptly broke any resolution he'd once had to keep his intentions secret from her. "I want you, Rachel," he said firmly, making certain that she saw and understood. "If you want me, and if everybody says it's okay, you're going to be my little girl. Would that be all right? You think you could love me, too?"

There was a brief moment of surprise, as if she was putting the idea together in her head. Then, just as quickly, she surged forward and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, crying softly. And for only the second time in the week since they'd met, he heard her voice.

"I love you," she mumbled into his shoulder over and over, the words indistinct but utterly sincere. "I love you."

The phrase couldn't have been more meaningful even if she'd truly been his daughter. Tears stung at his eyes as well, and he held her even tighter, amazed at how easily his entire life had been turned around.

They remained there for a few minutes, until he heard a polite cough from a few yards away and glanced up. "I thought you'd want to see this, sir," Bud said calmly, giving Rachel a reassuring smile. "It's a press-release photo of Captain Mason from a few years ago."

"How'd you find this so fast?" Harm asked with mild disbelief. The younger officer offered a wry grin.

"I don't think you want to know that. Let's just say that if I get written up for threatening a PA officer over at the Pentagon, I'll be coming to you to back me up."

"You really are a wonder, Bud." He carefully disengaged from Rachel, not willing to risk her seeing the picture before she absolutely had to. Opening the file Bud offered, he took a long look at the photo inside. A Marine lieutenant in Class-A uniform was receiving a medal from a one-star general, and they'd posed for the customary picture. He frowned slightly. "He's blond."

"Yes, sir. Rachel saw a man with dark hair, didn't she?"

"Right, but that in and of itself doesn't mean much. I guess there's only one way to find out." Pausing a moment to collect himself, he turned to her and signed deliberately. "Rach, I have a picture here, of a man that worked with your mom. If it's okay with you, I'd like you to look at it and tell me whether he's the man you saw that night. Are you ready?"

Fear flickered in her eyes, but she nodded gravely. He opened the folder, and she stared at the photo for a long time, her gaze betraying no sign of recognition. [He looks familiar,] she finally answered. [But it wasn't him.]

Harm let out a long breath, both relieved and disappointed. He'd wanted to nail the guy and get it over with, but he'd also dreaded the idea of terrifying her all over again. "Maybe you saw him another time, or your mom mentioned him? His name is Captain Mason."

She shook her head. [I don't know. Maybe he came to our house once?]

"But he wasn't a friend of your mom's?"

[I don't think so.]

Bud watched her reactions and sighed. "So much for my intuition."

"Hang on, you've got me curious too. This guy may not have pulled the trigger, but that doesn't mean he's free and clear. What reason would he have to come to their house?" Harm studied the picture again. "We're still waiting on his personal data?"

"Yes, sir - the network over at BuPers is having a fit, so it might not be until tomorrow."

"Typical. Bud, you once again have my complete and total admiration. And not just because you threatened the Public Affairs office."

Bud glanced down at the little girl clinging to the commander's arm and began to understand. There weren't too many areas of life in which he had more experience than his senior officer, but family was one of them. "It's worth it, isn't it, sir?" he asked knowingly. "All the chaos and the worrying and everything?"

"Never have truer words been spoken," Harm replied honestly.

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"Rach, it's eight-thirty," he said patiently later that evening, as she folded herself up into the corner of the couch. "Last I checked, that was bedtime."

[I just want to finish this book.] If sign language could take on a tone, hers was dangerously close to whining. [Why can't I stay up just a few more minutes?]

"Because the last time you asked for 'just a few more minutes', it turned into forty minutes, and we were late the next morning. Come on. Time for bed."

She looked down at her book, pretending not to have seen the directive. Harm swiftly

closed the book on her bookmark, and when she glanced up, the expression on his face left no room for debate. [Rachel Anne. Bed. Now.]

With a sulky demeanor, she stalked off toward the bedroom, and he sighed. It was damned hard not to let her do whatever she pleased, after all she'd been through. But giving in wouldn't help her. It wouldn't give her back her old life, and in the long run, it would only make it harder to establish any kind of normalcy.

Right then, though, her typically-childlike behavior was making him question whether her earlier reactions might have been colored by that same young temperament. Had he been foolish to take her display of love at face value? Could she really accept him that completely so soon?

The nagging doubts were put aside when he stepped into the bedroom to tuck her in, and she promptly lifted her arms for a hug. Breathing a short prayer of gratitude, he hurried to comply. He held up a hand, extending his thumb, index and pinky fingers in the universal 'I love you' symbol. Rachel repeated it, touching her hand to his. [Someday I'll get a bed of my own, so you can have yours back.]

"And if we're lucky, we'll still be just down the hall from each other," he told her, ruffling her hair. "Good night, sweetheart."

Still a little unnerved by the mild confrontation, however brief it had been, he crossed the apartment and slid onto the couch, reaching for the phone. Precisely two rings later, his saving grace answered. "Hello?"

"Hi," he said quietly. "It's just me, looking for affirmation that I'm not losing my mind."

"If you've still got it after all this time, I very much doubt you'd lose it now," Mac replied easily. "What's wrong? Rachel give you trouble?"

"Nothing major, but when it comes to her, just about everything shakes me up." He rubbed his eyes wearily. "I guess it just hits me every so often, the staggering amount of responsibility I'm looking at."

"We're looking at it," she reminded him gently. "Together. We've always done okay with issues of national security. I think we can handle a seven-year-old."

"So you're not the least bit afraid?"

"I didn't say *that*."

He smiled wistfully. Just talking to her was enough to lift his mood. How on earth had it taken them so long to get to this point? "So what did Webb have to say this afternoon?"

"He sounded a little dubious about our theory of Mason being involved, but he's going to check on the Agency's own system to see if there's any mention of him or any of the events Bud mentioned. Maybe we can establish some kind of link."

"A link is one thing, but concrete evidence is something else. We can't accuse anyone if we're just going to have to turn them loose again. Hell, if Mason is involved, any kind of hint

that we're even on this track might set off something we'd really rather avoid."

"I know. This whole thing just doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere." Mac sighed. "We still haven't answered the first question. Why Commander Marks? Even if we're right, and Mason's hooked up with some extremists, what reason would he have to kill her?"

"I still don't have a clue. If she found something dangerous, she sure kept quiet about it. I don't know - it just feels wrong, somehow, like this whole thing was a huge snafu. Do you think that's possible? That it was a case of mistaken identity or something, and now someone's just trying to cover his tracks?"

"But somebody got into the Kharasala data. I doubt that's just a coincidence."

Harm's attention had been diverted, though: his mind was racing. "Mac, I need to think something through," he said suddenly. "Can I call you back in a few minutes?"

"You promise?"

"Fifteen minutes. I promise."

"All right. Bye."

After hanging up, he reached for his briefcase and opened Mason's file yet again, determined to see it with different eyes. There was a glimmer of something in the back of his mind, a faint voice telling him that reconnaissance data hadn't been the motive for this murder. If the accessed files were simply a distraction, or a deliberate trap ... maybe they were dealing with a smarter, more difficult adversary than they'd thought.

A knock sounded at the door, sharply breaking his train of thought. He opened it to reveal a Marine guard, standing in the hall with a slightly nervous expression. "Evening, sir. I'm Corporal Monroe - I'm your security guy tonight. I, uh ... I wondered if I could get a cup of coffee."

Harm smiled. "I guess that's the least I can do. Come on in." The corporal looked relieved, closing the door behind him. "Where's Perkins?"

"Uh, he's off tonight, sir. You're stuck with me." As the senior officer started the coffeemaker, Monroe jammed his hands in the pockets of his fatigues, embarrassed. "Listen, Commander, it's not like I'm gonna fall asleep on my watch or anything. I could just use the caffeine, you know?"

"Relax, Corporal. I feel your pain." Harm retrieved a pair of mugs from the cupboard. "This can't be the most exciting duty you've ever pulled."

"Hey, I can't complain, sir. It beats scrubbing the head." Monroe shrugged. "The little girl, is she doing all right?"

"I think so. We all just want this to be over." Harm poured the coffee and handed the guard a mug. When the phone rang, he rolled his eyes: it was probably his infuriatingly-punctual partner. "Excuse me a sec." He left the kitchen briefly to pick up the receiver, but by the time he did so, there was only a dial tone on the other end. Or maybe it wasn't Mac.

“Whatever. You all set?”

“You bet, sir. Thanks again.” Monroe picked up his mug and headed for the door. “I’ll be skulking around out front if you need me.”

When he’d gone, Harm took his own mug back to his desk and stared long and hard at the command structure of the Joint Services Intelligence Office. There could still be another connection, something besides satellite data. No one outside of that office could have gotten access to that data, right? Was there another avenue they’d overlooked? Somewhere, somehow...

Mac’s call was temporarily forgotten as he went back through the files of the J-2 staff. Before long, the repeated cross-referencing started to wear him down, and the text began to blur before his eyes. *Damn, I’m old. It’s not even twenty-two hundred. Maybe Monroe wasn’t the only one who could use some caffeine.*

As he stood up to refill his coffee mug, the room tilted dangerously, and he grabbed the desk for support. *Okay, what the hell?* Despite his sudden inability to think clearly, it was now obvious that something was very wrong. He stumbled and fell to one knee, dizziness overtaking him. The mug slipped out of his hand and cracked on the hardwood floor; and at that moment, he remembered through the encroaching haze that Rachel was still sleeping, oblivious, in the next room.

He tried to reach up toward the phone, but his body refused to obey his commands. As the darkness closed in, the last coherent thought in his mind was a fearful, desperate prayer that she would somehow be safe.

... Rachel awoke to the faint glow of the bathroom light, and took a moment to recognize her surroundings, as she’d often had to do during the past week. She climbed out of bed, in search of a glass of water, and was struck by a chilling feeling. If she’d been familiar with the term ‘*déjà vu*’, she would have been able to identify it. However, the only idea that registered in her young mind was that something wasn’t right.

Where was Harmon? Across the apartment, she could see the desk lamp still lit, and the empty couch, but her caretaker was nowhere in sight. She wasn’t immediately frightened: she trusted him, and she knew with a child’s certainty that he’d never leave her. But now she needed reassurance, and she crept down the steps, hoping for a simple hug.

A wordless cry escaped her lips when she caught sight of his motionless form, sprawled out on the floor. All the memories of that other, hideous night assaulted her, and she trembled violently, tears slipping from her eyes. He couldn’t be dead - he couldn’t be...

The little girl hurried over and laid her head against his chest, feeling the slow but steady rhythm of his heart. There wasn’t any blood: he hadn’t shared her mother’s fate. Still, she knew he needed help, and she immediately reached for the phone.

As her finger hovered over the ‘9’, another idea came to her, and she changed her mind. 911 would help, but there was someone else who might know better than they would about what to do. She looked at the memory list for a familiar name, pressed the button, and began to repeat one word over and over: “Help.”

She didn’t know if anyone had answered on the other end, and she didn’t know what her own voice sounded like, but she’d seen the word formed enough times. Maybe it would be

enough to make her plea understood. A growing patch of light appeared against the wall as the front door began to open, and she dropped the phone, shaking with abject fear. The man who stood there wore Marine-issue fatigues, and his hair was much shorter, but seeing him instantly transported her back to the house in Arlington, where she'd stood at the top of the stairs and watched him take her mother away forever.

He closed the door and bent down to pick up the phone, clicking it off. "What were you going to do with this, Rachel?" Corporal Monroe asked unkindly. "Who'd you think would help you if you couldn't tell them what was wrong? Your fairy godmother?"

... Mac tapped her fingers on the arm of the couch, getting impatient. Maybe she should just call him back herself. He'd said fifteen minutes, and now it was going on thirty-eight. If he was in the middle of something, she didn't want to disturb him, but it was getting late, and after all, he had promised.

As she stretched a hand out toward the phone, it rang, surprising her slightly. Figures. "I'd almost given up on you, flyboy," she answered, but the voice on the other end wasn't Harm's. It was a scared little girl, repeating a word she couldn't quite understand. "Rachel? What's wrong?" she asked instinctively. A split-second later, her brain caught up to her mouth. Rachel couldn't hear her. If the girl was using the phone at all, it meant that Harm wasn't there or wasn't able to do it himself.

*Oh, God...*

There was an abrupt click as the phone was hung up, and Mac leapt to her feet, heading for the lockbox she kept in her closet. As she opened the lock with one hand, the other dialed the number of the local Marine security detachment. "Yes, my name is Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, JAG HQ. I need a response team ASAP to this location..." She dictated Harm's address while pulling her service weapon and a spare clip out of the lockbox. "I'm well aware that you already have a man over there. Send more. Now."

Her heart thudding against her chest, she stuck the gun into the waistband of her jeans and grabbed her car keys, suddenly grateful to have a Corvette at her disposal. All their efforts to find this killer may have been wasted if *he'd* already found *them*. Trying not to think about the morbid possibilities of what might be happening across town, she flew out the door. *Hang on, you two.*

... Monroe nudged Harm's body with his foot, a satisfied smirk creasing his features. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Commander," he informed the unconscious officer airily. "You didn't even ask to see my I.D. before you let me in. See, the thing about coffee is, it tastes so strong that you can slip just about anything into it without anyone noticing. Good thing you're a lawyer - you wouldn't have lasted a week in spec-ops or intel."

He opened the small duffel he'd brought with him and pulled out a custom-built silencer, which he fitted over the barrel of his sidearm. "This ought to put you on a level playing field," he told Rachel, who'd backed up against the kitchen counter. "This way, if I end up having to shoot you, nobody'll hear it. Doesn't that make you feel good?" His cruel chuckle echoed in the expansive room.

Rachel's thoughts were conflicted, caught between terror and hatred. She'd never experienced evil in the world before this man had burst into her life. She didn't have any understanding of why he'd want to hurt her and everyone she cared about. But as he reached into his bag again, she noticed a shadow crossing the sliver of light under the door, and she

held her breath, hoping for a savior.

The door banged open, and Monroe whirled, coming face to face with a Beretta and its steely-eyed owner. Mac instantly took in the situation, forcing herself not to visibly react at seeing the still form of the man she loved lying on the floor. "We haven't met," she said coolly. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me who the hell you are?"

Unfortunately, he had reacted quickly, and even as he turned to face her, his weapon jerked toward Harm. "I'd think very carefully about your next move if I were you," he replied, just as calmly. "The commander's not dead yet, but I could fix that real quick."

"Is that what you came here to do? Put bullets in a couple more people?"

"No, I came here to set an electrical short and burn the building. Bullets are Plan B."

"Neither of those is going to cover your tracks forever. We have friends who don't give up easily."

"Don't waste your time trying to scare me, Colonel. I've been doing this a while now." A flicker in her eyes betrayed her surprise, and he shook his head. "Do you think I'm stupid? I know who you are. I also know that it'd be perfectly believable for you to be visiting your 'partner' late at night. Hell, maybe I'll make the fire out to be your fault."

In response, Mac clicked back the hammer. "You really think you're going to get that chance?"

"Oh, I sure do. See, I learn from my mistakes, Colonel Mackenzie. I was sloppy last time - I didn't check my info like I should have, so I didn't deal with the girl then and there. But I did my homework on Commander Rabb, and all your little adventures together. And I'm willing to bet that you won't be able to stand there and watch me shoot him." He took careful aim at Harm's head, his eyes cold. "Want to take me up on it?"

Somehow, seeing that spurred Rachel into action. With childlike short-sightedness - or perhaps idealism - she ran to Harm and threw her small body across his, as if she believed she could actually shield him. Monroe chuckled. "That's so cute I might puke. Drop it, Colonel. Or they're both done right here."

She could see that he'd do it: even if she fired, he'd still get that shot off. Losing her weapon would give him what he wanted, but maybe she'd be able to buy enough time to think of something. "All right," she said, slowly bending to lay down the gun. "You win."

"I usually do." He motioned for her to sit down beside the desk, near where Harm had fallen. After confirming that Harm was, indeed, alive, she kissed Rachel's forehead for reassurance and scanned the area for something she could use as a weapon. The broken pieces of the coffee mug were strewn nearby, but they didn't look sharp enough to be useful. She sighed and watched their captor move to the fuse box, his aim never wavering from them.

"So why Alison Marks?" she asked matter-of-factly. "Did she find out about your buddies in Africa, or what?"

"I don't have 'buddies', Colonel. I'm not in this for the glory of Allah or any of those

ideological wackos. I just look for the highest bidder, and this week, Habr Gidr was it.”

Mac kept her expression carefully neutral as her mind whirled. He hadn't mentioned Kharasala at all. Habr Gidr was one of the ruling clans of Somalia, a corrupt and unstable group once led by the warlord Aidid. Since the debacle of Mogadishu in 1993, American forces had been steering clear of the region, but the recent battles against terrorism had brought Somalia once again under the global microscope.

It didn't make sense. If this guy wasn't the one poking around in the Kharasala files, who was?

“And Marks knew about that?”

“I don't know what she knew, and I don't care. Fact is, she was talking to the wrong people, and I wasn't about to get ratted out to the Agency boys if I could help it.”

At that moment, there was so much rage boiling inside her that there was no room for anything else. This man believed in nothing. He sold information, the kind of information that put his countrymen's lives in danger. And when one person had come within shouting distance of discovering his treason, he'd simply gotten rid of her without so much as a blink.

*I should have shot you when I had the chance*, she thought murderously in his direction.

Monroe - or whoever he was - crossed the room to stand over the three of them. From a pocket in his utilities, he withdrew a hypodermic needle and raised an eyebrow challengingly. “So here's how this works. You get a dose of the same stuff that put the good commander under, and you take it like a Marine or else the girl gets to follow in mommy's footsteps. Simple enough?”

“You don't know the first thing about what it means to be a Marine,” she seethed quietly.

“Yeah, yeah, *semper fi*. You're really breaking my heart.” He knelt next to Rachel and lifted the gun to her, and Mac held out her arm, her eyes glittering with defiance. “That's better. Good night, Colonel.”

Sarah Mackenzie had always had great timing.

As he put the needle to her skin, she brought her arm and leg up together in a warped version of a favorite kickboxing move. Her forearm knocked his gun hand aside, and her foot caught him squarely under the chin. The weapon fired harmlessly into the wall, and he fell backward as she rolled to one knee and jammed the needle into his own arm. His eyes bugged wide as he realized what had happened, but the fast-acting drug was already in his bloodstream, and none of his limbs seemed to be working.

Holding him down with one arm across his neck and a knee in his ribs, Mac looked up at a stunned Rachel. “Rach, please go to the other room,” she requested calmly. The little girl obeyed, scrambling to her feet and hurrying to bury her face in her favorite teddy bear. Mac leaned down and spoke into the man's ear with a tone that would cut glass. “I didn't want her to see what I'm about to do to you, you miserable little shit. She's had enough trauma because of you. But right now, I'm pissed off, and since there's no one around to stop me,

you're going to find out just how pissed off I am."

He was still conscious, and the terror in his eyes was perversely satisfying. She had no intention of killing him: although it would have been frighteningly easy to let that dark urge take hold, she knew she was better than that. Still ... She picked up his gun and studied it for a second, letting him sweat. Then, swiftly, she brought it down against the side of his head with a force born of pure anger.

"Good night yourself, asshole," she spit out, voice dripping with contempt.

The whole ordeal had taken less than half an hour, but it felt as though she'd been running on adrenaline for days. Mac sagged back for a moment, closing her eyes. Then she shoved Monroe's body aside and gathered Harm, still unmoving, into her arms. "Come on, flyboy," she whispered, tracing his pale features with a gentle hand. "Fun's over. Come on back, okay?"

She kissed his cheek, but he didn't stir. Whatever that drug was, it must've been some pretty good stuff. A commotion in the hallway signaled the arrival of the Marine response team, and Mac shook her head, not bothering to leave her current post. "You're a little late, guys. But do me a favor and cut the power to this floor. That bastard's been screwing with the wiring."

As the Marines secured the building, Clayton Webb made his way into the apartment and surveyed the mess around him. "Is he okay?" he asked with a frown, studying the naval officer lying limply across her lap.

"I think he will be once he gets the drugs out of his system. What are you doing here, Webb?"

"You called the Marines, the Marines called J-2, J-2 called me." The CIA deputy stood over the subdued traitor. "Shit. I owe you twenty bucks, Captain."

Mac looked up to see another officer entering the room, a man in Marine Class-A uniform with a nametag that read 'Mason'. She narrowed her eyes. "Somebody had better tell me what the hell's going on here."

"Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, Captain Robert Mason."

Mason bent to shake her hand. "Ma'am, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am that things turned out this way. We'd hoped to smoke him out before he could do something like this."

She accepted his hand somewhat warily: until an hour ago, this man had been their prime suspect. "Webb. Start talking."

Webb took a deep breath. "Captain Mason pulls double duty. He works for J-2, but he's also on our payroll. We've suspected for a while that someone in J-2 was selling intel, but we didn't have any evidence. Then Commander Marks turned up dead, and you guys started asking questions about the staff ... we didn't want to tip off our seller, so we had Mason access some locked files and generally try to look suspicious so that the real seller would relax."

"All right, I can buy that. But did you have to let us believe it, too?"

"Sorry about that. I did try to warn you that Captain Mason was a dead end."

Mac shook her head tiredly. "So who is this guy, anyway?"

"His name is Anthony Laskin," Mason supplied. "He's a petty officer first class, working as an admin officer in J-2. Before that, he did a couple of tours on the CENTCOM staff. Our guess is that he picked up some friends in the Gulf who showed him how lucrative the intelligence trade can be."

"And I had my money on one of the other satellite techs," Webb grumbled. "Apparently Marks had scheduled a meeting with her C.O. for the day after her death, to discuss some personnel issues. Some high-level people were to be present as well. Laskin probably got jittery and thought she might have something on him."

"Did she?"

He sighed. "I doubt we'll ever know."

As a pair of EMTs moved in to assess Harm's condition, Mac stood up and moved to the bedroom. She found Rachel curled up on the bed, her head under the pillows. Mac sat down beside her and touched her shoulder gently, and the little girl looked up at her with equal parts fear and hope. "It's over, sweetheart. Really over. No one's going to hurt you or chase you ever again."

Rachel touched her thumb to her temple, fingers outstretched, and Mac recalled the meaning of the sign. "He's going to be fine. The doctors are going to check him out, and they said we could go with them, so we'll be there when he wakes up. Is that okay?"

She nodded, then laid her head on the colonel's shoulder. Mac wrapped her arms around her, and all the tension and madness of the past few days melted away as they held on to each other. For Rachel, the nightmare wasn't entirely over. It never would be, because the woman who'd brought her into the world was never coming back to her. But now, at last, there would be no more looking over her shoulder. As Mac looked down at her angelic face, she wondered if maybe the healing had already begun.

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His head hurt like hell. For a while, that was all Harm was aware of. Slowly, a scrap of memory returned, of those last few minutes before he'd passed out, and sheer desperation allowed him to force his eyes open.

"Relax, relax," Mac soothed, immediately sensing his fear. "Everything's fine."

He nodded weakly, swallowing a few times in an attempt to regain some functionality to his voice. Turning his head slightly, he could see that she was sitting by his bed - definitely a hospital. "What's ... going on?" he rasped.

She squeezed his hand reassuringly. "You were drugged, by your so-called Marine guard. Rachel found you and called me. I showed up just in time to find the guy preparing to torch the place with you two inside. I'll tell you the rest later, but suffice it to say that he's

probably feeling a lot like you are right now.”

“She ... called you?”

“Yeah, she did. Smart girl, isn’t she? They’re running some bloodwork on you, just as a precaution, and they want to keep you for the night. Tomorrow, though, we’re going to have a metric ton of paperwork to do.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, wishing vainly that his head would stop pounding. “Why can’t I ... move my arm?”

Mac smiled. “Because Rachel’s sleeping on it.”

Shifting, he looked down at the little girl, still in her nightgown, curled up next to him on the bed. Any pain was immediately forgotten as he reached over to stroke her tousled hair. “So it’s over?”

“It is. Now we can start thinking about how the hell we’re going to handle everything else.”

Rachel stirred, and her eyes lit up at seeing Harm awake. “Hi, honey,” he said with a smile, working his hand free in order to talk to her. “Sorry about all the excitement.”

Her hands were flying, and it took all his concentration to interpret her words. “Yeah, I know,” he answered softly, stealing a glance at his partner. “Miss Mac’s my hero, too.”

Mac flushed at the child’s praise. “Just lucky, that’s all,” she said simply. “I thought I’d take Rachel back to your place tonight, provided the Agency and NCIS guys are done with it. I figured we’d both stay there and come back to get you first thing in the morning. Is that all right?”

“Sure. Just don’t drink the coffee.”

“I never drink your coffee. It’s weak.”

He fixed her with a look of mock-annoyance, but when she leaned down to kiss him, it immediately dissipated. Rachel watched them for a moment, and when they broke apart, her hands were moving again.

[You said once the bad guy was gone, I’d get my new family. Is that going to happen now?]

Harm wasn’t sure he was up to having this conversation, but he took a deep breath and nodded. “Soon, Rach. Have you changed your mind about what you want?”

She shook her head. [I want you ... but that’s not all. Would you be mad if I asked for someone else, too?]

As she explained, he was faintly surprised to discover tears forming in his eyes. If there was a way to make his life any more perfect at that moment, he didn’t know what it could possibly be. Mac hesitated, looking uncertain, but he shook his head. “It’s okay. More than okay, actually. Rachel has something she wants to ask you. Go ahead, Rach. I’ll

translate.”

Rachel sat on the bed and faced Mac directly. “ ‘Miss Mac, Harmon said that if everybody says it’s okay, like the court people and stuff, he wants to take care of me and be my new dad. If the court people say it’s okay, would you take care of me too?’ ”

A small sob was her first reply, as the magnitude of the request began to register. It had been nearly a year since the willful Marine had last allowed herself to break down completely, and she’d only done so when faced with the possibility of losing the most important person in her life. Now, within the span of a few days, that same person had offered her the future she desperately wanted, and an amazing little girl had asked to be a part of it. “Honey,” she answered tearfully, “there is nothing in the world that I’d like more.”

Harm grasped her hand, and the three of them embraced, sealing the pact. They’d come from such vastly different places, but all of them had weathered the strongest of storms and survived. Perhaps it was that common thread that had allowed them to come together.

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“Sir, Commander Rabb and Colonel Mackenzie are here to see you.”

“Send them in, Tiner.” Admiral Chegwidden put aside the equipment requisition he’d been reading and waved his senior attorneys toward the chairs. “Have a seat. You two had a hell of a night, I understand. Commander, I trust you’re all right?”

“Yes, sir, aside from feeling more than a little dumb.”

“I think we’ve all been there. But you were warned about taking responsibility for the child, if I remember correctly.”

“Sir, on that point I have no regrets.” Harm’s gaze was unwavering, and the admiral lifted an eyebrow.

“Very well. Speaking of which, I haven’t seen the young Miss Marks around the office today. Are we finished running a day care service here?”

“I took her back to school this morning, sir, since the threat was past.” He didn’t elaborate for the moment, but their C.O. caught the glance he exchanged with his partner. “Are you ready for our report, Admiral?”

“By all means.”

Mac outlined the events of the previous evening, giving a detailed account of Laskin’s records as supplied by Webb and Mason. “We were on the wrong track, sir,” she finished honestly. “Webb’s team let us pursue Mason, because the Agency and the higher-ups at the Joint Services Directorate felt that finding their mole took precedence over finding our killer.”

“Even though they had a damned good reason to believe that we were all looking for the same guy.” Admiral Chegwidden folded his arms. “And you’re not the slightest bit pissed off at Webb for snowing you?”

“A little, sir, but they had more to go on than we did. The only problem now is

determining jurisdiction on prosecuting Laskin. DOJ wants him in federal court on a half-dozen counts of espionage, but NCIS wants him court-martialed, for murder and attempted murder.”

“He’s Navy, and that means he’s ours. That’s the beginning and end of it.” The JAG’s tone effectively ended the discussion. “We can handle the espionage charges just as well as Justice could. As much as I’d like to put one or both of you on the case, I think I’d better give it to Commander Turner. Any objections?”

“No, sir,” both officers chorused.

“Good. You did well on this one. Laskin making the first move shouldn’t diminish that fact. We’ve got him, and that’s all that matters. Anything else?”

Harm clenched a fist at his side, summoning the courage to broach this next subject. “Admiral, if you have a moment, there’s a separate matter that I’d like to discuss with you.”

Sensing the tentative note in his voice, the admiral paused. Harmon Rabb was rarely tentative about anything. Before he could respond, Mac rose from her chair. “Sir, if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’m expecting a call...”

Chegwidden waved agreement, despite suspecting a set-up of some sort, and she disappeared through the door. “What’s on your mind, Commander?” he asked neutrally.

“Sir, I’m not sure how exactly to put this, so I think I’m just going to come out and say it straight. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking over the past few days, and having Rachel around has helped me to clarify some of the things I want, for myself and for her.” He stood up, squared his shoulders and spoke directly. “Admiral, I know you’ll be involved in the selection of the new AIRLANT special counsel next month. I’d like to request that I be considered for the position.”

The admiral stared at him long and hard for a moment, not entirely sure how to react. “Where is this coming from?” he asked finally, not disguising his surprise or disappointment. “Are you unsatisfied with your duties here?”

“No, sir - certainly not. Truthfully, I don’t really want to leave JAG, but I feel it would be the best choice all around. Sir, I ... I want to adopt Rachel, and I think that balancing her needs with my duties would be difficult if I were to remain senior attorney here. I know I have no right to ask for any special consideration...”

“Time out, Commander. Give me a second to process this.” A.J. Chegwidden wasn’t a man who could easily be caught speechless, but he could truthfully say that this was the last thing he’d expected to hear from this particular officer. “You want to do *what?*?”

Harm offered a half-hearted smile. “I know this looks like an about-face in attitude, sir. Believe me, before this week, I would’ve been just as surprised as you are. But it feels like the right thing to do.”

A.J. sighed and leaned forward on his desk. “Harm, if I hadn’t seen you and that girl together this past week, I’d be doing my damndest to talk you out of this. I’m not going to do that, but I am going to warn you that you have no idea what a massive responsibility you’re talking about. Even if you did get the AIRLANT post, you’d still be juggling duty with your role as a parent. Are you sure that’s something you want to do on your own?”

"He wouldn't be alone, sir."

Mac re-entered the office, and her eyes locked with Harm's. A silent agreement passed between them, and she moved to stand beside him, effectively conveying their message without a word.

A.J. narrowed his eyes. "You've got to be kidding me. After all this time, a seven-year-old girl was what finally woke you two up?"

Now it was their turn to be surprised. This wasn't quite the reaction they'd anticipated. Mac blinked a few times, then finally replied, "Well, it was a little more complicated than that, sir..." She trailed off, unsure how to explain, but he waved her silent.

"Never mind. I'm starting to get the picture." He fixed a piercing look on Harm, who was trying not to look guilty. "You don't really want the transfer because of Rachel. You want it because of this."

"It's really the combination of factors, Admiral," Harm answered. "If we continue to work together while pursuing a relationship, everything will get more complex - for us, and for everyone around us. If we opposed each other in court, no one would take either of us seriously. If we worked on separate cases, opposing counsel would never feel comfortable talking to us about each other's cases. You'd spend half your time explaining away perceptions of improper conduct to the SECNAV."

The admiral nodded thoughtfully. "You're right about that. And don't think I haven't had similar ideas about what the hell I'd do with you if it ever came to this. I'm assuming you're both entirely serious about this relationship? Because if there's going to be a young child involved, you'd better be. In fact, the Social Services system may be a bit of a hurdle if you intend to petition as a single parent."

Mac hesitated, understanding his meaning, and began to speak. "Sir, we haven't finalized any long-term plans, but - "

"But we intend to," Harm cut in smoothly, catching her off-guard. She stared at him for a moment, wondering precisely what that meant, but he was already moving on. "And I have a friend from law school who's a very successful child advocate in the Detroit area. She's going to assist us in the process."

A.J. nodded again, considering the options. "So we're back to talking about this transfer, aren't we?" He sighed. "Harm, obviously you'd be an outstanding candidate for the AIRLANT post. You have the investigative experience, and you have more flight systems knowledge than any other lawyer on the planet. I have no doubt that if I put you on the table, Admiral Werner will snap you up without thinking twice. But I can't just think about what's best for you personally, and the fact is, you're too valuable to me here. I'm just not sure I can afford to let you go."

Harm opened his mouth to speak, but his C.O. continued. "The thing is, you're right. Having you two working together on a regular basis would probably create more problems than it would solve. So here's what I propose. You be officially assigned to AIRLANT, with additional duties as JAG as applicable. FENABs and such tend to occur on a somewhat odd schedule, so if Rick Werner doesn't have enough for you to do across the river, he can loan you back to me. I'm sure there'll always be a few cases around here that you could handle without

jeopardizing the good order of this office.”

Mac fought valiantly to contain a broad grin. This would make *everything* work. “Thank you, sir,” Harm said quietly, relief evident in his features. “I can’t even begin to tell you how much this means.”

“I understand.” A.J. reached across the desk to shake his hand, allowing himself an amused smile. “But just for the record, you would’ve shocked me less if you’d opened with the news about you and your partner, rather than the news about Rachel. Now get out of here and get some work done, while I still have you. And good luck.”

“Aye, sir.” Both of them came to attention, then moved to the door and headed out into the bullpen. Mac followed Harm into his office and closed the door, just in time for him to spin her around and place a kiss directly on her lips. “That wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it might be,” he commented calmly, as if they’d merely presented a report and nothing more. “Are you ready to go?”

“Go?” she repeated distractedly. He glanced over at her and frowned.

“Yeah, to lunch. Remember? I promised you a burger?”

“Oh. Right.” She twisted her Marine Corps ring around on her finger, feeling suddenly awkward. “Can I ask you something first?”

“Of course.”

“In there, when I said we didn’t have any firm long-term plans, you said...”

He smiled wryly. “I was afraid you were going to pick up on that.” At her hurt look, he rushed to explain. “That was a joke. I’m sorry. I do want to have that discussion - I’m just being a wuss about it. Whenever you want to talk about it, we will.”

Regaining her confidence, she folded her arms. “How about now?”

“Right this minute?”

“It shouldn’t be too difficult, Harm. We’ve already decided that we want to be a family. It seems like the dreaded ‘M’ word is the only thing left to talk about.” Realizing just how weighty a topic this was, she began to retreat slightly. “But it’s not like we really have to put a time frame on it. I mean, I’m not trying to drag you down the aisle or anything. I guess we don’t really even have to do it at all, if you don’t want - ”

She was so intent on her backpedaling that it took her a few seconds to notice his embarrassed grin. “What? Is this funny?”

He shook his head and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a small box. “What’s funny is the fact that I’ve been carrying this around for weeks now. It’s a good thing you have such great timing, because mine’s flat-out lousy.”

He flipped the box to her, and she opened it to reveal a simple, elegant diamond solitaire ring. Unable to speak, she just stared up at him, tears welling up in her eyes.

"It was my mom's - it's the one my dad gave her. You should have heard her when I asked her to send it - I thought she was going to hop on the next plane just to make sure I actually gave it to you." He moved in front of her and brushed away a stray tear, lowering his voice. "When and how is up to you. All I care about is being with you."

It was hardly a Shakespearean set-up, but there was something singularly perfect about it, just because it was so ... *him*. After everything they'd been through, separately and together, the simplicity of it all was like stepping out into the open air on the first day of spring. Carefully, she moved her Marine Corps ring to the other hand and slipped the new ring onto her finger, not surprised to discover that it fit easily. "You really know how to sweep a girl off her feet, sailor," she said softly, grabbing a hold of his tie and pulling him down to meet her waiting lips. True, he'd promised her a hamburger for lunch, and that was no small effort coming from him. But when held up next to the promise he'd just made ... the burger could definitely wait.

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**Three weeks later**  
**Municipal Building**  
**Cook County, Illinois**

Harm paused on the top step of the imposing building and looked back at the two women in his life. "Everybody ready for this?"

"As ready as I'm going to be," Mac replied, forcing a smile. Rachel merely nodded, linking her hand through theirs as she'd done many times before. Together, the trio walked through the double doors.

In the long marble lobby, a young woman in a sleek gray suit immediately approached them. "Harm, you're on time," Andie Nichols greeted them lightly, receiving a mock glare in return. "I hope your flight was better than mine?"

"As good as can be expected, considering it was sub-sonic."

"Easy, flyboy," Mac admonished, rolling her eyes. "It's good to see you again, Andie. Just ignore him."

"No sweat. I'm good at that." She flashed a grin at her longtime friend, reminding him just how dangerous it could be to have her and Mac in the same room. Or in the same state, even. "And this must be Rachel. Wow, has anyone ever told you that you have really pretty hair?"

Rachel managed to look shy and proud at the same time. "Rach, this is Andie," Harm introduced them. "She's going to help us today."

The girl signed a polite 'hello', and Harm smiled. "That's a blast from the past. She called you Miss Andie."

"Sure is. I don't think I've heard that since Corporal Hawkins." Andie smiled wistfully, but quickly turned serious. "We've got a good, fair judge in Garrett Sanders. He has a reputation for being blunt, though, so I hope you're ready to discuss any and all of the topics I laid out in my last email. As far as I know, the circumstances of both of your Article 32 hearings shouldn't come into play, but Mac, the admiral's mast you stood is on your service

record, so it could come up. All in all, though, I don't expect there to be any strong challenges to your petition. You're both decorated officers and compassionate people, and you love her. That really ought to be enough."

Harm exchanged a hopeful glance with Mac. "All right," he said quietly. "Let's get to it."

Andie was as good as her word. She took charge of the proceedings from the moment they all sat down to the table. "Your Honor, my name is Andrea Nichols. I'll be representing Mr. Rabb and Ms. Mackenzie in this hearing, since this is my area of specialty, but they are both attorneys in the Navy's JAG Corps, so you don't have to worry about trying to use small words."

"Well, that's refreshing to hear," the judge replied dryly. "Let me make sure I have the facts straight before we get started. Mr. Rabb, you took temporary custody of Rachel during the course of an investigation you were conducting?"

"Yes, sir. Since I had a background in sign language, and because she felt comfortable with me, I requested that she be allowed to stay with me." Mac remained expressionless, but inwardly she was amused at his somewhat simplified explanation.

"But you have no previous experience with children?"

"No more so than any other first-time parent, Your Honor," Andie countered smoothly. "Mr. Rabb and Ms. Mackenzie have a godson, though - A.J. Roberts. He'll be three years old in May. Also, Ms. Mackenzie is close to Chloe Madison, a girl she mentored through the Big Sister program. Chloe has since moved away from the Washington area, but they've maintained a relationship for over three years."

"The two of you intend to get married in the near future?"

"Yes, Your Honor." Mac answered for both of them, reaching over to place her hand on top of Harm's. Though the motion occurred under the table, out of the judge's sight, the look that passed between them was not lost on him. "At the end of the summer."

"And you're both attorneys for the Navy. According to the information I pulled off the JAG website, you prosecute and defend courts-martial, and you conduct investigations. What kind of investigations are we talking about here? Criminal cases, mishaps aboard ship?"

"A little of both, sir."

"And your duties require you to travel extensively?" Mac hesitated, but Judge Sanders lifted an eyebrow. "I've got a record of some of your cases for the past year. Italy, Saudi Arabia, China, Afghanistan... You ended up in a war zone."

"To be fair, Your Honor, we were only aboard a carrier in the region, never on the ground," she clarified, but Harm stepped in.

"Sir, we understand that leaving town on a moment's notice isn't exactly a stable environment for a child. In a few weeks, I'll be transferring to a new post under the Commander of the Naval Air Force Atlantic Fleet. I'll be assigned to the Pentagon, and I'll be working primarily on issues relating to aircraft and air personnel, which ought to keep me in town more. Also, our commanding officer has been very understanding of our situation, and he

intends to assign Colonel Mackenzie's cases with that in mind."

Judge Sanders nodded, placing his folded hands on the table. "I'll jump right to the point here. Based on your records, I'm satisfied that you're capable of taking custody of Rachel. My main concern, however, is that as military officers, you don't always have control over your 'situation'. You could both be ordered to the Middle East tomorrow, and there isn't a thing you could do about it. Where would that leave Rachel?"

"Sir, the likelihood of something like that happening is - "

"It doesn't matter. It's a real possibility. Mr. Rabb, you're an aviator by training, and you maintain an active flight status. Only a year ago you were almost killed in an accident at sea. This child's birth parents were naval officers, and that is the primary reason that they're both gone. I certainly don't mean to sound ungrateful for your service, but I'm concerned about opening Rachel up to another loss as great as the one she recently suffered. It could be crippling to her."

Harm and Mac just looked at each other for a moment, temporarily lost. Neither of them had voiced this particular fear before, although it had crossed both their minds at some point, and neither of them knew what to say to alleviate it.

Fortunately, they had another person at their back. Andie leaned forward, her expression incredulous. "I'm sorry, Your Honor, I think I've missed something. Are you saying that your objection to this proceeding is based on the possibility that one or both of the petitioners could be killed in the line of duty?"

"Frankly, yes."

"That possibility wouldn't enter into your thinking if these two people were civilians? The world is unpredictable, Your Honor. The cab drivers around here can be pretty reckless. Would you block an adoption if you feared the parties involved might get hit by a cab on their way out of the courthouse?"

"Ms. Nichols, I think you know as well as I do that the risk for service members is substantially higher. And I don't like the idea of absentee parenting, even if the parents are defending the country. Particularly with a special-needs child. I'd be afraid it might hinder her development."

"Respectfully, sir, I disagree. Commander Rabb and Colonel Mackenzie have seen and done things that you and I can't even begin to envision, and they're still here. They've had training and experience far beyond anything a typical enlisted member would get, and those things help them in all parts of their lives. Sir, the prevailing wisdom in our society is that the first, best role model for a child should be the parents. I can't tell you how many cases I've taken where a child was utterly failed by the adults in his or her life. We keep screaming at the top of our lungs that parents need to teach their children right from wrong, and that they need to be involved in shaping their children's outlook on life. Well, here's what thirty-one combined years in the armed forces gets you - integrity, discipline, a desire to excel, and a fundamental belief in doing the right thing. You've seen the commendations. These two people are the genuine article. If they were to impart even a fraction of their own principles to Rachel ... I can't imagine a better kind of role model in all the world."

Andie's gaze was unwavering, almost defiant. Harm watched her and once again saw the intensity that he'd admired in her so many years ago. Mac blinked away a stray tear and

glanced over at Rachel, reading a book at the far end of the table. The girl didn't look up, but the tension in her small shoulders betrayed the fact that she knew her life was being decided right in front of her. Judge Sanders paused a moment, following Mac's gaze.

"All right. I'd like to talk to Rachel alone for a few minutes. She's not old enough to be allowed to make any official decisions for herself, so tell her not to worry about anything. I'll write down my questions, and she can write down her answers. She does write, doesn't she?"

"Yes, sir. Very well." Harm signed the instructions to Rachel, who nodded somewhat anxiously. They left the room, and he immediately started pacing the hallway outside the closed door.

Andie shook her head. "Some things really never change. Seven steps forward, about face, seven steps back." Harm glanced up at her, confused, but she explained. "Remember waiting for the VA Appeals Board to rule? Those immaculate uniform shoes you had on were clicking on the floor, and you were driving me up a wall."

"Sorry," he answered, still distracted. "At least these shoes are rubber-soled."

"Don't worry so much. She'll be fine, and he'll eventually admit reality. Even if he has a bias against the military way of life, he's got to realize that it's better than putting her in foster care until they can find another couple willing and equipped to take a deaf child."

"You're optimistic, then?"

"I'm confident. Confident is better."

Mac spoke up. "Andie ... thank you. For all of this, really, but mostly for what you said in there."

"It was the truth, Mac. I know you don't think of yourselves as anything special, but you are. In this line of work, I've seen a lot of different kinds of parents, and you can trust me when I say that Rachel is very, very lucky to have even one of you fighting for her." Andie's serious tone vanished as she turned a mischievous look toward Harm. "Out of curiosity, does your mom know about all this yet?"

"She knows. She just about had a heart attack when I explained it to her, but she knows. She and Frank are coming out to visit next month, and I was told in no uncertain terms that Rachel had better not be her only grandchild."

They spent a few restless minutes waiting there, and then after Rachel emerged from the room, the judge informed Andie that he'd return with his ruling in an hour. The four of them chose to take their frazzled nerves down to the coffee shop on the first floor.

"What's the sign for 'cookie'?" Mac asked, attempting to help Rachel order. She'd been learning a few basic signs over the past couple of weeks, but it was a slow process. Harm and Andie both responded in unison, surprising both officers.

"Where'd you learn to sign?" Harm asked his friend, who only shrugged.

"I've done more than a few special-needs cases. A lot of mentally-impaired children

are able to learn basic signs before spoken language, so sometimes even hearing kids use it. I guess I've picked up a few things along the way."

They managed to distract themselves for a while by playing "I Spy" with Rachel and snacking on lattes and biscotti. Eventually, Mac's internal clock informed her that fifty-four minutes had passed, and they climbed the stairs with no small amount of trepidation. They'd tried so hard not to get their hopes up, but if this didn't work out...

Judge Sanders was standing in the doorway of his office when they approached. He motioned to Andie, who immediately hurried over, and the two of them conversed for a moment. When she turned back to her friends, her expression was entirely unreadable.

Harm reached for Mac's hand, dimly aware that he was holding his breath. Good or bad, they both knew that this moment would define them. "Well?"

Andie smiled and signed a phrase that all three of them could understand.

[Congratulations, Mom and Dad.]

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## (Epilogue)

All About My Family  
By Rachel Rabb  
5th grade

My name is Rachel Anne Marks Rabb. I'm the only person I know with two middle names. My new parents told me I could decide what last name I wanted, and I picked both, so we made Marks my second middle name. Most of the time I'm just Rachel Rabb, though. My dad calls me R-2 sometimes, like in Star Wars, but my mom always makes fun of him when he does that.

My real mom and dad were in the Navy, but my dad died when I was little, and then my mom died later. After that, I went to live with my new mom and dad. They're in the Navy, too. Well, Dad is. Mom's a Marine, which is kind of different. I'm not sure what's different about it, but they always tease each other about it. Sometimes Dad takes me flying in his plane, which is the coolest thing ever. He's the coach on my soccer team, and Mom cheers really loud at all the games. It's weird to have two different moms and dads, but my new parents say they love me just the same as my real parents, and they say it's okay for me to love them just the same, too.

They saved my life, you know. Really, they did. The bad guy that killed my real mom was trying to kill me, too, but Mom and Dad protected me. I thought I was probably going to be sent away, but Mom learned sign language and Dad got a new job, just so they could keep me. And then I got to be in their wedding! I got to wear a beautiful blue dress and Grandma Trish's pearl necklace. Having a grandma and a grandpa is really cool, even though I don't get to see them that much. And I have an aunt named Chloe, and an uncle named Sergei. Sergei used to live in Russia, so sometimes it's hard to talk to him. But sometimes, when he can't think of a word in English, he remembers the sign first. Dad says we have more languages than the United Nations. Anyway, all of them were at the wedding, and we all got to dress up and stay up really late. Dad danced with me almost as much as he did with Mom, and I danced with Grandpa Frank, and Uncle Sergei, and Admiral Chegwidden, and Commander Turner. And

probably some other people, too, but I don't remember them all anymore.

Yesterday Mom and Dad told me that I'm going to get a little brother or sister. They were kind of scared about telling me - I think it was because the baby will be their real baby, not like me because I'm adopted. But I don't know why they were worried. I really want a little brother or sister. Well, maybe not a brother, because he might be icky like the boys in my class. I guess it'd be okay, though. I'm getting hearing aids soon, and maybe by the time I get to be a big sister, I'll be able to hear the baby a little. Mom says it's actually good that I won't be able to hear everything, because babies cry a lot. She's probably right.

Sometimes I remember my real mom, and I miss her. But Grandma Trish said I'm extra lucky, because I have twice as many people to love me. I have my real mom and dad up in heaven, and my new mom and dad down here. I told Dad what she said, and he said that he was lucky like that, too, because he has his real dad up in heaven and Grandpa Frank down here. He said that sometimes second chances are almost as good as first ones. I don't really know what he meant, but I guess I am pretty lucky.

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