



Learning How to Fall

Rating: PG-13 for language

Classification: Story, Angst

Spoilers: pilot episode, and anything about Harm's pre-JAG life

Author's Notes: Okay, I confess - the setting of this story is a blatant homage to my alma mater, the University of Michigan. ("Oh, so that's where her e-mail address comes from ...") So sue me. While I realize that the chances of Harm having studied there are slim, we don't have any proof that he *didn't*, do we? Thought not. I know very little about law school, Michigan's or otherwise, so many details have been fudged. But I had to put him somewhere, and it's much easier to set a scene if you know the places actually exist. Besides, the intelligent folks at US News say Michigan Law is top ten, above our dear Mac's alma mater, Duke University. I'll try not to let my blind devotion dominate the story. That said ... Go Blue!

This is it.

My brain couldn't get much further than those three words. I'm not sure I've ever been quite as nervous, apprehensive, or - oh, hell with it - flat-out scared as I was on my first day of classes at Michigan Law. Sure, the campus practically felt like home after four years of undergrad there. Sure, I'd read every law-school prep book known to man. But this was the real thing. My grades and scores had been good: otherwise they never would have admitted me in the first place, right? Michigan alums traditionally had to bust ass to get in here, since the East Coast types tended to migrate out here and do their best to take over. If I could get this far, I figured, there had to be some hope for me.

On the other hand, 'getting this far' now meant exactly squat. Three hundred others had 'gotten this far' right along with me. Whether or not we could handle the next three years still remained to be seen. But I'd always been told that I could do whatever I set myself to, and this was it. So I took a deep breath and pushed open the classroom door.

When the professor, a graying, heavysset man with an air of indifference, arrived five minutes later, there were about forty students filling the room. Some of them looked to be fresh out of college, like me: others were older, more professional. Some looked confident and comfortable, but most looked a little wary. Good. Glad to see I wasn't alone.

"My name is Marcus Atkinson," the professor began sharply, without so much as a word of welcome. "I am a senior professor of Constitutional law. 'Senior' means that I have tenure, and as such am largely unaffected by student critiques. Therefore, if you have something to say to me, I suggest you do so face to face, rather than relying on those anonymous end-of-class reviews. That said, I do not punish students for voicing opinions. If your opinion is idiotic, however, I'm likely to tell you so. I am not here to think for you. If you can't do that for yourself, your time here will be brief."

Atkinson leaned on the podium and peered out at the class as a whole. "Let me make one thing absolutely clear. This is not like your undergraduate

career. You are not paying the big bucks to go to football games or do keg stands at the Alpha Delta house. You are here to earn the respect that accompanies the title of *juris doctorate*. Excuses will not be tolerated. Either you have what it takes, or you don't. No one will hold your hand while you determine which one you are."

Yikes. This was one serious hardass. Atkinson studied his class list and began calling off names. I glanced around at my peers, wondering which of us 'had what it takes'.

"Miss Nichols."

"Present," I answered automatically. The professor looked me over, committing my name to memory.

"I see you did your undergraduate work here at our fine institution. Perhaps you're already familiar with the exploits of the brothers of Alpha Delta?"

"I'm afraid not, sir." I knew damn well that the A-D-Phi house was just across the street, as well as a few things about what went on there, but I wasn't about to admit that I'd even heard of it.

"Good. Keep it that way. Mr. Rabb."

"Yes, sir," came the response from just behind and to the left of me. I turned slightly to put a face to the name. Two observations came to mind. One was that he looked fairly stiff, sitting ramrod straight in his chair, with perfect creases in his khaki slacks. The other was that he was incredibly good-looking. I shifted in my seat so that I wouldn't have to crane my neck.

"I don't have a record of your undergraduate school. I trust you attended one?"

"Yes, sir. The United States Naval Academy."

Well, that explained a few things. Atkinson narrowed his eyes. "You were in the Navy?"

"Still am, sir." Rabb was a little older than me, with piercing blue eyes and dark hair that was probably a shade too long for any military regulation. But hey, it wasn't as if he was in uniform. "I'm an active-duty lieutenant, on assignment for long-term training."

"I suppose that's one way of putting it. What was your major, or don't

they have them at the Naval Academy?”

The lieutenant stared forward, but took a moment to respond.
“Aeronautics, sir.”

The room was quiet, and I could tell that others were just as curious as I was. Atkinson continued to question. “Are you an engineer, Mr. Rabb?”

“No, sir. I spent the past five years on sea duty as an aviator.”

“You were a pilot,” the professor said, somewhat disdainfully.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then how did you end up here?”

Rabb didn’t flinch. “The same as everyone else, sir. I applied and was accepted.”

Seeing that he wasn’t going to get much further just then, Atkinson moved on to the next victim on his list. I kept wondering about this enigmatic student. He was reserved, but apparently fearless. I knew next to nothing about the military, but I couldn’t imagine that too many pilots jumped ship for law school. What was this guy’s story?

Atkinson didn’t waste any time. He launched into a description of our term project, which was to be a real-life case study that we would have to find, file, and argue ourselves. Civil suits, contract law, property, anything that required a Constitutional argument was fair game. I got the feeling that we’d already reached the sink-or-swim point. This was going to be one interesting year.

When class let out, I walked through the quad on autopilot, and nearly ran into someone standing on the path. Just my luck. The mystery man himself was studying a campus map and hadn’t even noticed my presence. I could see now that he was tall, well over six feet, and made a pretty impressive picture. *Oh, get a grip*, I chastised myself. The last thing I needed while starting out my first week was a date. But the guy was new in town. The least I could do was help him out.

I initiated the conversation with something less than a brilliant opener.
“You look lost.”

He glanced up with a hint of a smile. “What gave me away?”

“Sorry. Can I point you in the right direction?”

“Yeah, I’m just looking for the bookstore.”

“There are three. I’m actually headed to the closest one, in the basement of the Union, if you want to tag along. I’m Andrea Nichols.”

“Harmon Rabb.” We shook hands, and I led the way.

“I guess we’ll be suffering through Atkinson together, huh? I heard stories, but they don’t do him justice. I really enjoyed that crack about the Alpha Deltas. Somehow I get the feeling he doesn’t think too highly of any Michigan degree that doesn’t go through him.”

“You got off light. I don’t know which he thinks is worse, the fact that I’m Navy or the fact that I used to fly for a living. Either way, he’s convinced I’m a knuckle-dragging moron.”

“Well, look at it this way. You’ll be a trailblazer for Navy pilots everywhere.” I gave the traffic a cursory glance before starting across State Street. He looked a little surprised, but followed. “First rule of Ann Arbor. Pedestrians rule the streets.”

“Whatever you say.” Harmon Rabb shook his head, looking around at the chaotic rush of students and cars. “I am definitely not in Kansas anymore. At Annapolis, we were pretty secluded. And there were only about four thousand midshipmen - there are more sailors on a carrier than that.”

“Not this place. There are over thirty thousand students, plus the surrounding city. Peace and quiet’s kind of at a premium.” We headed down the Union steps to the bookstore, and the twice-annual search for textbooks began. I ducked down to check the lowest shelf. “What carrier did you serve on?”

“My last tour was on the *Seahawk*. I flew Tomcats - F-14s - with the Black Knights, Squadron three-seven.”

I did my best not to appear starstruck. This guy was a freaking Top Gun. “Were you in the Gulf War?” I asked, nonchalantly skimming the shelves.

“Technically, but we didn’t pull any actual combat sorties. We mainly did patrols for the battle group. Is this the right text for Criminal Procedures?”

“Is it the third edition? Should be right.” I was being nosy, but I

couldn't help myself. "What made you decide to give it up?"

"I didn't have much of a choice. I got sick last year, and it affected my night vision. Suddenly I was in the market for a new career field." He offered a rueful smile, but there was a trace of something darker behind his eyes. I wasn't sure what to make of him. He'd beaten out hundreds of other applicants to this school, and yet it was basically a fallback? But I told myself not to judge too quickly. Everybody had his or her own backstory.

"Can I ask you something personal?" he asked suddenly.

I looked up, startled. "I guess."

"How old are you, Andrea?"

"It's Andie. I just turned twenty-two. You?"

"Twenty-eight next month. And call me Harm."

"That's a dangerous nickname."

"It can be." Harm flashed a quick grin that would have knocked me to the floor a couple of years ago. Now, though, I was determined not to be so easily swayed. I simply smiled back, and we went to pay for our books. Two minutes later, I promptly broke my own resolution.

"Listen, this whole term is going to kick our asses if we're not careful. Maybe we could help each other out, team up to study or something."

The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to rethink them. Fortunately, he nodded. "Sounds like a good plan. Maybe you can show me around, since you're practically a native."

"Any time."

"Great. I'll see you in class, then. Thanks for the help."

We went our separate ways, and I walked back to my closet of an apartment to start the readings for the next day. Before long, my thoughts strayed back to him. He was gorgeous: there was no doubt about that. And friendly, it seemed. But there was something almost ... sad about him. Was it the fact that he'd been yanked out of the cockpit against his wishes? Somehow it felt more complex than that. I consciously forced myself to get over it and concentrate. I was likely to have plenty of other things to worry about.

"Are you sure about that one?"

"Yeah, I looked it up last night. Right here, under the section on amicus briefs." I handed the book over the table to Harm, who scanned the page with a frown. We'd taken over a corner of Espresso Royale Café on a Thursday night, trying to brush up for a rumored pop quiz. The term was now three weeks old, and so far no one had suffered a nervous breakdown. However, bets were being placed on who would be the first.

"Damn. Okay, you win." Harm stretched his long legs out and reached for his coffee. "Do you ever sleep, or do you just study?"

"Hey, I have no social life. All my friends graduated and left town. Besides, I'm afraid of falling behind and being royally screwed for the rest of the term." I nibbled on my biscotti, aware of his gaze on me.

"This is all you've ever wanted, isn't it? To be a lawyer?"

I felt myself flush a little, self-conscious. "Why do you say that?"

"You're so determined. When you crack a book, you tune the rest of the world out." He leaned forward, amused and curious. "Did you decide at five years old that you wanted to graduate in the top ten percent of your law school class, or something?"

"Or something." I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to confess my lifelong dreams to my study partner of two weeks, but he seemed trustworthy enough. "I'm not really in this to be a big-time trial lawyer. I want to get into children's advocacy - helping to improve the social services system. And yes, I have known all along that I wanted to do this. There are a lot of ways for kids to fall through the cracks, and I want to do something about that."

He nodded, with a touch of respect. "Doesn't look like either of us are going to be rich and famous, huh?"

"Not likely. What is it you'll be doing as a lawyer for the Navy?"

"If I survive this place, I'll be a JAG - a member of the Judge Advocate General corps. They investigate cases, prosecute and defend courts-martial, special hearings ..." He mumbled something that I didn't quite catch.

"I'm sorry?"

"Mishap investigations and review boards," he repeated, looking slightly uncomfortable. "They figure out what went wrong and how to assign legal responsibility. I had to go before a review board after my ramp strike."

The term was unfamiliar, but sounded ominous. "What's a ramp strike?" I asked tentatively.

"Nothing good," he replied, a hard edge in his voice. Quickly, though, it faded. "Anyway, that's what made me think I could handle being a JAG. I liked my military law classes at the Academy well enough, and there's something compelling about making sure the right thing happens. Justice, I guess. I don't really know how I made the decision to go for it, but now that I'm here ... I might as well try to be good at it, right?"

"Makes sense to me." Could the two of us be any more different? I flipped my book closed, suddenly inspired. "You know, you were right. If I study all weekend, I'll snap. You don't happen to like football, do you?"

Once again, I received a real, honest smile for my efforts. God, that was an incredible smile. Why wouldn't he use it more often? "I'm a red-blooded American male, aren't I?"

"Hey, don't get stereotypical. I'll have you know that I never missed a home game through all four years of undergrad."

"I stand corrected."

"So do you want to go to the game? I'm sure I can find us tickets. We're playing Indiana - it'll be a rout by the second quarter."

"All right, you're on."

I was fairly pleased with myself for dragging him out. He'd been pretty quiet in class, and I rarely saw him talking with anyone. I had a suspicion that I wasn't the only one hitting the books with a vengeance.

Saturday was beautiful, one of those perfect fall days that provide the ideal atmosphere for watching massive, hulking men try to maim each other. Oh, how I love college

football. I located Harm's place and knocked on the door around ten that morning. Answering immediately, he took in my somewhat-oversized jersey and "1989 Rose Bowl Champions" cap with a raised eyebrow. "That's a good look for you."

"Thanks. You're not half bad yourself."

He shrugged sheepishly in his obviously-new Michigan T-shirt. "When in Rome, and all that."

"I'll have you turned into a crazed Wolverine before you know it." I took a moment to glance around his apartment. "Nice. I guess having a steady income is good for something."

"Well, a lieutenant's pay sucks, but it's definitely better than nothing." He grabbed his own ball cap, black with a squadron patch, off the table. "I assume you were successful in scamming some tickets?"

"Of course I was. Come on, it's game day!"

'Game day' transforms a college campus. Of course, I don't have firsthand knowledge of any campus besides my own, but I'd like to think the effect is universal. There's a new energy, and a camaraderie that otherwise wouldn't be noticed. Where else in the world can you find a connection with a hundred thousand other people?

As we joined the throng walking down to the stadium, passing souvenir hawkers and ticket scalpers, I started filling Harm in on the appropriate traditions. "... the fight song's a snap. Just raise your right fist and say 'Hail' a lot."

"Thank God you don't do push-ups after touchdowns. I get the feeling they'll score a lot more than Navy usually does - " He broke off as his shoulder jostled an older man heading upstream in the crowd. "Oh, excuse me."

They stopped for just a second, long enough for me to realize that the man was probably homeless. His clothes and hair were unwashed, and there was an air of defeat that resonated from him. "Sorry," he mumbled, and hurried away.

"There are a lot of them, unfortunately," I explained quietly, but Harm was looking after him with a strange expression. "Harm? What's up?"

"Did you see ... forget it. Doesn't matter. Let's go find our seats."

It was an entertaining game, and we did win handily. Harm picked up on the players and even the fight song with ease. My most enduring memory of that day, though, was the national anthem. Crazy, but true. I took off my hat and stood respectfully with the rest of my fellow fans, but for Harm, it was different. He stood locked in at attention, his eyes boring a hole through the sky. At that moment, I realized something about Lieutenant Harmon Rabb. He hadn't joined up just to fly jets or get saluted all the time. He honestly believed in serving his country, in the ideals and principles it represented. And that, I reflected, would make him a pretty damn good lawyer.

As Harm slid into his usual seat for Tuesday's class, I couldn't help but do a double take. Instead of his typical polo shirt and jeans - he'd loosened up a bit since that first class - today he was in uniform. His white blouse, pants and shoes were immaculate: there was a neat row of ribbons over his left breast pocket, and two gold stripes gleamed on his shoulders. Wow, I thought. He was born to wear that thing.

Harm easily ignored the scattered murmurs that accompanied his arrival. He simply placed his hat on the desk in front of him and opened his notebook. Before I could lean over to quiz him on the new look, Atkinson walked in, and everyone settled down for the imminent tirade.

Today was the infamous First Amendment lecture. While I appreciated the importance of such a topic, I was having a hard time matching the professor's fervor, and I felt myself slipping into that semi-conscious state well known to students everywhere. This lasted only a few minutes, until I was jolted awake by a voice from the seat beside me.

"Excuse me, sir."

Atkinson glanced up, mildly annoyed at the interruption. "Do you disagree with my statement regarding the universality of free speech, Mr. Rabb, or are you simply exercising your right to it?"

"Sir, I'd just like to point out that there is in fact an exception to the amendment."

In a condescending tone, Atkinson replied. "Mr. Rabb - though it looks like it should be Lieutenant Rabb today - the entire point of having a Bill of Rights is that there are no exceptions. Freedom of speech is guaranteed to all citizens."

"Except those who waive certain aspects of it, sir." Harm's gaze was unwavering. "Members of the armed forces are prevented from publicly criticizing their commanders, up to and including the President. It is an offense under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, punishable by brig time or a dishonorable discharge."

The professor was surprised, but not about to back down. "One of the fundamental differences between our system and the fascist ones that dominated Eastern Europe is the fact that I am free to call the President of the United States a jackass without fear of punishment. Are you telling me that you willingly gave up that right?"

"Yes, sir. The military is not a democracy. It functions because of discipline, and such criticism is viewed as a detriment to good order."

"Do you and your comrades-in-arms take the Constitution that lightly, Mr. Rabb?"

It came off as a cheap, snobbish taunt, a last-ditch attempt to maintain the upper hand. But he'd underestimated the student before him. Harm's eyes flashed, and he spoke in a low voice that was somehow respectful and dangerous at the same time. "Sir, I swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution. I've dedicated my entire adult life to that task. I do *not* take our freedoms lightly. I value them so much that I am willing to give up some of my own to ensure that others will always have them."

The rest of us sat in stunned silence. If "America the Beautiful" had spontaneously started playing, we wouldn't have even blinked. There was nothing Atkinson could say to counteract the power of that statement, and he was wise enough not to try. Instead, he took a moment to regain his air of indifference. "We appreciate your insight. Moving on, to the right of peaceable assembly ..."

Class ended soon after that, and I hurried to catch up with Harm. I found him just outside, putting on his uniform hat. "You're my hero, you know that? You actually rattled the great Marcus Atkinson!"

"I wasn't looking for a fight - he just pissed me off. Where the hell does he get off questioning my patriotism?" He shook his head and forced a more pleasant expression. "Anyway, can you point me toward North Hall? I have to give a talk to some ROTC cadets this afternoon."

"Guess that explains the uniform. Sure, I'll walk with you. It's on my way." We crossed the street and walked through the Diag, dodging campus activists and evangelists of every flavor. Ah, Ann Arbor. Freedom of speech at its bizarre best.

"I shouldn't have gone off on a rant in the middle of class like that. But it drives me nuts when people assume I joined the Navy because I was too dumb to know what I was getting into. I mean, I didn't run out and enlist to ditch a juvenile record, or because I thought boats looked like fun. I went to the damn Academy, for Christ's sake. I know exactly what I'm doing, and I worked my six off for it. Why is it so hard for some people to get that?"

After this outburst, he looked faintly embarrassed. Seeing that he wasn't looking for an answer, I broke the silence. "You worked your *what* off?"

He laughed out loud. "Sorry - slipped back into pilot-speak for a minute. 'Six' is six o'clock on a scope. In other words, directly behind you. It's a convenient way to avoid swearing."

"Ohh, I like it. I'll have to remember that." Hesitating slightly, I decided to continue. "Can I ask another stupid question?"

"I thought there was no such thing."

"Not according to Atkinson."

"Screw him. Ask anyway."

"Don't pilots usually wear wings on their uniforms?"

The smile faded a little. "That's not what I do anymore," he answered flatly. "I'm a law student now. Lawyers don't need wings."

The response puzzled me, but I didn't question. If he was trying to put that part of his life behind him, that was his business.

As we cut between buildings, Harm slowed up without warning. "Andie," he whispered, grabbing my arm. "That's the guy I bumped into on Saturday."

I followed his gaze to the side of the Chemistry building, where a bedraggled man was leaning against the red brick. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I remember that ribbon."

On the man's tattered jacket, a small rectangle of yellow, red and green ribbon was pinned. It was the size and shape of the ones that Harm wore. "What does it mean?"

"If it's his, it means he served in Vietnam." Before I could wonder about that, he approached the man and addressed him from a polite distance. "Soldier, sailor, or Marine?"

The man raised his head and took in the uniformed officer in front of him. Automatically, he straightened a little. "Why not airman, sir?"

"You don't look lazy enough."

A ghost of a smile flickered across his sunken features. "Marine, sir. Corporal Robert Hawkins."

"Lieutenant Harmon Rabb." Neither man moved to shake hands: despite the vast age difference, Hawkins still seemed to respect the decorum of his rank. I watched, fascinated. To Harm, the fact that this man was on the street hardly mattered. He was a fellow service member, and by treating him as such, he'd probably given him more dignity than he'd known in years. "You were in Vietnam, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir. Two tours, '69-71. Echo Company, Second Platoon, Eighth Infantry Battalion."

"My father was in country in '68-69," Harm remarked quietly, surprising me yet again. Slowly, I was beginning to see what made him tick. "He flew off the *Hornet* on his first tour, then the *Ticonderoga*."

Hawkins looked as though he knew the answer, but he asked the question anyway.

"Did he make it back, sir?"

The younger man's face was a guarded mask. "No, he didn't."

He nodded solemnly. "Lots of good men didn't, Lieutenant. Lots of good men."

"You're right about that." Harm glanced around, folding his arms. "It's none of my business, Corporal, but what are you doing out here?"

Hawkins shifted, his eyes downcast. "Don't really fit anyplace else, sir."

"You should be getting veteran's benefits," I interjected without thinking. Both turned a little, Harm looking vaguely amused.

"Wasn't sure you were ever going to speak up, ma'am."

I flushed, embarrassed. "I don't really rate a 'ma'am'. I'm just Andie."

"Well, Miss Andie, I do appreciate your concern. But I'm doing all right on my own." He lifted his chin stiffly, a shred of his pride still intact.

Harm studied him a moment. "She might be a civvie, but she's right," he pointed out. "We try to take care of our own. If all you need is a little help to get on your feet -"

"No, thank you, sir," Hawkins replied, his voice tight. "Tried it once. Don't want to waste any more of my time."

I wanted to push harder, but Harm had a better tactic. "All right, Corporal. But if I were to come by here about this time tomorrow, to talk shop, would you be here?"

He hesitated. "Might be, sir."

"All right, then. Semper fi, Marine." Harm nodded once and continued on his way. I followed, unsure what to say. Finally, as we crossed North University toward the ROTC hall, I opened my mouth.

"Harm, um - I'm sorry. I didn't know your father died in Vietnam."

"I don't know that, either. Not for sure. He's been listed as MIA for twenty-two years." He absently returned the salutes of a few cadets hurrying past. "We Rabbs have something of a love-hate relationship with our airplanes."

I knew this wasn't the time or place to pursue that cryptic response. "Well, I have to run. But listen - do you think I could come with you to talk to Hawkins tomorrow?"

The corner of his mouth curled up in a half-smile. "You really do think you can help him, don't you?"

"What if I do?"

"Andie, you can't fix the whole world just by trying hard."

"Come on, Harm. We're in law school. Are you telling me that navigating the intricacies of the Department of Veterans Affairs is beyond our capabilities?"

He shook his head. "All right, all right. But don't get your hopes up."

As I continued back to my apartment, an idea occurred to me, and I started walking faster so that I could get home to hammer it out.

I called Harm that evening and outlined the basic concept. He stalled for a while, but eventually agreed to give it a try. For all his reluctance, I knew he wanted to help this old Marine, too. The next day, we planned our approach carefully. On the corner of the Diag near the Chem building, we sat down on the grass and set out our textbooks, along with the two pizzas we'd bought at the MUG. After a few minutes, Harm noticed Corporal Hawkins peering out at us from around the bushes, and he tilted his head casually.

"Come join us, Corporal," he invited. "Want some lunch?"

"There's tons," I added, tucking my legs up and reaching for a slice of Hawaiian. "Two for one on Wednesdays, you know."

Hawkins looked wary, but took a seat. He didn't make a move toward the pizza.

"We've got a favor to ask," Harm began seriously. "We're first-year law students, and we have this killer term project where we have to research and file a motion on our own. We were hoping you'd let us take your case to the VA."

He was already shaking his head. "Sir, I told you - "

"I know, but look at it from our side. It doesn't matter for the project whether we get anywhere or not. We just have to go through the procedures. And if we do manage to make some progress, maybe they can get you started in a program that would help you out."

Hawkins still looked doubtful. I put on my best pleading face. "We could really use the chance, Corporal. Isn't it worth a shot?"

"You don't even know me," he mumbled, not looking at either of us. "You don't understand what I - why I'm here, like this."

Harm leaned forward with an earnest expression. "Why don't you tell us?"

After a moment, he relented. "Hard to say no to an officer, sir."

"Neither of us is in uniform, Corporal. You don't have to call me 'sir', and I'll call you whatever you'd like."

The older man smiled a little. "There are only three things we ever called our lieutenants over there. Sir, Lieutenant, or sometimes L.T. if he was decent to us."

"Well, I was going to suggest Harm, but it's your call."

Hawkins was beginning to relax, but the story he recalled was anything but calming.

"I was all set to be a Marine for life, sir. I went to 'Nam with all kinds of ideas about being a big war hero. But it didn't work out that way, for any of us. By the time I got home, was just trying to forget everything I saw over there. But how are you supposed to forget, when everyone around you is calling you a baby-killer? Myself, I tried to do it by drinking. It worked for a while, too. Until I got behind the wheel one night.

"Nobody died, thank God. I wasn't even hurt - funny how that works. But I hit another car, and the girl driving ... she almost lost her leg. I got two years and a dishonorable discharge. Technically I don't even deserve to be called a corporal. Brig time is a great way to get rid of a drinking problem, you know. When I got out, I didn't know what to do with myself. I've never been anything but a Marine, sir. I tried to keep a job - any job - but whenever anyone found out about my record ... it always ended up the same. After a while I just gave up trying.

"It's not so bad out here sometimes. I grew up in this city, and I always missed the autumns here when I was in the Corps. After a couple of years, you learn where to find stuff, and where you can catch a night's sleep when it's cold ..." His expression was resolute. "This is the way it is for me now. It doesn't work any other way, not anymore. Nothing you do or say to the VA is going to change that."

I was just staring at him, in utter astonishment. I'd never heard such an awful tale

told with such detachment. I hadn't the slightest idea how to react. But Harm seemed to comprehend, somehow. That was nearly as shocking as the corporal's account. What horrible things had he witnessed to harden him against a revelation like this?

"Sometimes life does give second chances, Corporal," he said very quietly, his blue eyes shrouded with some inexplicable grimace. "They don't come easily or often, but they do come. And this is a good one. The circumstances of your discharge don't necessarily disqualify you from veteran's status. You're a Marine, and you're always going to be a Marine. Don't let anyone deny you that. Let us at least try."

Their gazes locked, and each found something familiar in the other. At last, Hawkins gave a slow nod. "Okay. Do what you want to do."

He drew out a set of dog tags and handed them over so that I could copy down his full name and service number. My hand nearly shook as I handed them back. This wasn't an exercise for a class of bored, pampered students. This was a man's life. How the hell did I get here?

He studied me for a moment, and I wondered if he could see my mind churning. "You're a puzzle, Miss Andie," he said thoughtfully. "I understand why the lieutenant might care. But I'm not sure I understand why *you* would."

As I searched my brain for an answer, I realized that I might as well say what I was actually thinking, corny or not. "Because I'm starting to appreciate what it means to serve," I replied, casting a sideways glance at my friend. "And because you're not the only person in the world to ever make a mistake."

Harm nodded, with a hint of gratitude, and reached for his backpack. "Well, we've got some work to do. Can we find you here if we come up with anything?"

"Afternoons, usually. Sometimes I hang around down on East Washington."

"All right. Take care, Corporal. We'll be in touch."

We stood up and began to walk away, but his uncertain voice called out. "Hey, L.T.?"

Harm and I exchanged a small smile, and turned back. "Yeah?"

"Thanks. Whatever happens."

"You're welcome."

As we rounded the corner of the Natural Science building, we ducked behind the steps to observe our handiwork. Hawkins soon noticed that we'd left one pizza behind, and after a second or two, he picked up the box and disappeared again. Satisfied, we traded a quick high five. "Come on. Let's get to work."

It wasn't long before we ran headlong into the brick wall known as government bureaucracy. Hours were spent talking in circles with various representatives of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Marine Corps, none of whom were particularly enthusiastic about tracking down the service records of an old corporal with a dishonorable discharge to his name. I had a suspicion that Harm wasn't quite prepared for the frustration associated with this task. Couldn't blame him, really: he was accustomed to action, in whatever form it might take. But the endless stalling was obviously getting to him. I could see that even before he hung up the phone and promptly hurled his notebook across his apartment.

From my place on the living room floor, I ducked slightly, though the projectile hadn't been aimed at me. "Guess it's break time," I suggested dryly.

"Andie, in my bottom drawer, there's a lockbox with my service weapon in it. Get it out and shoot me, will you?"

"Very funny." I shoved a pile of books aside as he flopped across the couch, his lanky frame nearly covering the entire length. "You actually keep a gun?"

"It's not loaded or anything." He twisted around to look at me. "Does that bother you?"

"No," I lied. I'd never been close to a real gun in my life, but I didn't really want to let him know just how sheltered I'd been. "I just wouldn't think a pilot or a lawyer would need one."

"I don't know about lawyers, but pilots carry a sidearm every time they fly a combat

sortie. Just in case they punch out over someplace unfriendly.” Harm sat up and retrieved his notebook. “Where are we on this, anyway?”

“Not very far, but at least his records came this afternoon. It’s all the way he said, but he left out a few things. Like the fact that he was decorated for valor during his first tour. How does this happen? Guys fight a war because their country tells them to, and then their country turns its back on them when they don’t come back all bright and shiny?”

“That’s the way it was. We can’t change it. I’m beginning to wonder if we can change a damn thing.”

“Don’t go that far. We’re going to get somewhere on Hawkins. They can’t just deny him his legal entitlements.”

“God, you are a Pollyanna, aren’t you?”

I turned to see that same dark expression lingering behind his eyes. “Hey, what’s the deal? Do you always give up this easily?”

“I didn’t say I was giving up,” he returned sharply. “I’m talking about you. It’s going to shake your whole freaking worldview if this doesn’t work out. Did it ever occur to you that sometimes things don’t follow the ‘happily ever after’ theme?”

“Well, you don’t know ‘til you try, do you?” I defended indignantly. “Aren’t we on the same side here? This is what we’re supposed to be learning - how to operate within the rules of the legal system. We can’t just assume they don’t function.”

“And here we go again with the ‘truth, justice and the American way’ crap. Why are so you sure that better laws and better lawyers can just solve everything?”

“Why are you so sure they can solve nothing? You fight for that ‘truth, justice and the American way’ crap! Is it hopelessly naïve for me to believe the system fundamentally works? If you don’t believe that, what the hell are you doing here in the first place?”

“I don’t know, all right? I don’t have a God-damned clue what I’m doing here!” He leaped up from the couch, hands tightened into fists. “You clearly have your life all figured out, so go ahead and keep the rose-colored glasses on. But don’t pretend you know the first thing about me, because your perfect little world would collapse if you could see what I’ve seen!”

I’d had enough. For weeks now, I’d been watching his scattered flickers of depression without ever pressing for answers. Now he decides to mock *my* outlook on life? “Fine! Waste away in self-pity if that’s what you want. But don’t expect anyone else to go along for the ride.” I snatched up my jacket and backpack before he could see my resolve crumbling. “I never did pretend to know the first thing about you, Lieutenant Rabb, because you never gave me that chance. But for some ridiculous reason, I like you anyway. If you want to deal with your issues alone, that’s your prerogative. If you decide you want to try having a friend for a change, you know where to find me.”

And I rushed out of the apartment without looking back.

If he’d been looking for a way to drag me down into his funk, he’d certainly succeeded. I knew damn well that I wasn’t exactly experienced in the ways of the world, but I’d never had it flung back in my face like that. And out of nowhere, too, which was why I’d chosen to say what I did on the way out. He had to be hurting somehow to react so strongly, and I wanted to help him with that. But maybe that was a naïve hope, as well.

In any case, I knew I wasn’t likely to get any more studying done that night. Instead, I sat down with a sizable bowl of cookie dough ice cream and clicked on the TV. Fate can be hilarious sometimes: the movie channel was showing *Top Gun*. I left it on, even though I’d seen it a dozen times. Maybe I’d get some insight into the mindset of a fighter pilot.

A knock at the door soon interrupted the dialogue, and I was pretty sure that only one person would be calling at eleven-thirty at night. I muted the TV and went to answer it.

Harm was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking almost nervous. “Hi,” he said

hesitantly. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." I stepped aside, and we stood awkwardly for a few seconds. Eventually, he cleared his throat and began to speak.

"First off, I'm sorry for sounding off on you. I was being an asshole, and I have no excuse. You've been way better to me than I deserve. More than that, you were right. I have issues to deal with, and a lot of them are related to why I'm here. And I think I owe you at least some explanation of that. Is that okay with you?"

I only nodded, gesturing toward the sofa. He started to move toward it, but paused when he caught sight of the TV, where Tom Cruise was silently battling for control of his aircraft. As they ejected, Anthony Edwards struck the canopy and plummeted into the ocean below. I watched Harm's eyes flash with an instant of unconcealed pain, and his handsome features went white.

And in that terrible moment, I knew what had happened to him. He hadn't just lost his flight status. He'd lost it the hard way.

I fumbled for the remote control and switched the movie off. "God, Harm, I'm sorry ..."

"It doesn't happen like that," he said faintly, his mind somewhere far distant. "There's a safety mechanism - it's timed so that you can't hit the canopy. But if you punch out at the wrong time ... There's a split-second between the rear-seat and the front-seat ejections, so the RIO doesn't get burned by the exhaust from the pilot's seat. That split-second can make all the difference."

He sat down mechanically, staring into nothing. "I still can't figure out how it happened," he mused. "One minute I could see fine, and the next ... I couldn't get a fix on the deck. Sure, it was dark, and raining, but that had never stopped me before. This time, somehow, I put my plane into the ramp instead of on it. We ejected low. And that was it."

He dispassionately unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a jagged scar under his rib cage. I stared at it, trying desperately to force back the tears that threatened to spill over. "I was the lucky one," he continued, not bothering to disguise the ache in his voice. "I got wrecked up, but at least I survived. Mace - my RIO - was dead before I even woke up in sickbay. It was my mistake, but he was the one who paid for it.

"I couldn't get off that ship fast enough. The inquiry cleared me of responsibility, but how could I not be responsible? I mean, how could it be anyone's fault but mine? The other pilots knew that. The looks I got from them - anywhere from pity to contempt and everything in between. I would have done anything to get away from that feeling, but - Christ, Andie, flying was my whole life. It's all I ever wanted. I've known that ever since my dad first put me in the cockpit, and for so long, it was all I had left of him. And I was *good* at it. I was so damn good ... Do you have any idea what it feels like

to know that you've destroyed the only thing you ever loved?"

Not expecting a reply, he leaned forward, raking his fingers through his unruly hair. "I know what everyone thinks of me, but I'm not here to do this halfway. I really do want to be a good lawyer. But I'm not like you. I don't have your strength of conviction. And I'll never be able to say I'm doing what I always wanted to do. I don't know what it'll be like five or ten years down the road, but right now, it hurts like hell."

His eyes glistened with tears he'd been carefully trained not to shed. His anguish felt so real to me, more so than even Hawkins's story had been. I tried to imagine what it must be like to have your dreams ripped away from you, and to have the death of a friend and colleague on your conscience. He'd never be able to leave that behind, but he *was* moving on, slowly yet steadily. And I realized that I admired him even more for it.

I sat down beside him on the sofa, unsure how - or if - I could help. "You were right, too," I said simply. "There are some things we can't fix just by trying hard. But you made it this far. You're here. That has to count for something."

Harm turned to face me, and I recognized a new emotion: fear. "Andie, if this law school thing doesn't work out, I honestly don't know what I'll do."

"You think you're the only one who's afraid of that? I'm terrified! This is all I've ever wanted - everything has been leading up to this, and I still don't know if I can make it. You say you're not like me, but why in God's name would you want to be like me? I've never done a single extraordinary thing in my life. But you ... Harm, you're amazing. You're so strong, and smart, and dedicated: I think you could do anything you tried. Every day, I'm so in awe of everything about you, and I can't believe you'd even give somebody like me a second thought - "

The words were tumbling out of my mouth faster than my brain could process them. But he cut me off by reaching out and gently tilting my head up to meet his gaze. "Do you really believe that?" he asked softly. "Don't you realize how amazing you are, too?"

My train of thought vanished into thin air as I began to lose myself in those deep azure eyes. He leaned in, and suddenly I was caught in possibly the most incredible kiss of my life. I closed my eyes and, just for an instant, let myself be swept up in the warmth of his lips, his powerful embrace ...

When we broke away, I could see the conflict in him. "This is a bad idea, isn't it," he whispered, his voice low and ragged. "Tell me this is a bad

idea, or I just might stay.”

I can't deny that I did want him to stay - I wanted *him*. Right then and there, it would have been so easy to live in the moment. But I knew he wasn't thinking straight. He was searching for something to tell him things would be all right, grasping at any comfort within reach. Whether tomorrow or weeks from now, we'd realize all too soon that we weren't right for each other.

Damn my principles.

“This is a bad idea,” I echoed, almost inaudibly. He nodded, but didn't release his hold. I settled against him, resting my head on his shoulder, for a measureless time. At long last, I found the courage to pull back. “It's awfully late to walk home. If you want, you could sleep on the couch.”

A hint of his irresistible grin broke through. “Are you telling me the streets aren't safe?”

“I'm telling you that you don't have to be alone.”

Gratitude flickered across his face. “I think I'll take you up on that,” he said quietly. “Thank you.”

And that's how I ended up with a remarkably attractive Navy lieutenant stretched out on my sofa under my block-'M' stadium blanket. This wasn't quite what I expected when I showed up for orientation.

The next morning, I awoke before my alarm to the smell of fresh coffee brewing. Without bothering to drag a comb through my hair, I wandered out to the kitchen, where Harm was standing at the counter in his T-shirt and boxers. “Morning,” he smiled. “Hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all.” I accepted the mug he offered and climbed onto the stool across from him. “Sleep all right?”

“Pretty decent, considering my feet hung off the end of the couch.” He shrugged a little. “You?”

“Other than the occasional moment of wondering why I didn't sleep with you while I had the chance.”

He nearly choked on his coffee, but laughed it off. “Because you're a good friend,” he replied earnestly. “I owe you one, Andie.”

“I don't keep score. But you're welcome.”

We enjoyed our coffee together, and then Harm left to get a shower and a change of clothes before class. We had a meeting with Professors Atkinson and Messner to go over our 'case' regarding Corporal Hawkins. Every group had turned in a preliminary report on their project, outlining the steps that would need to be taken, and many students had come out of Atkinson's office looking thoroughly demoralized. We were determined not to let that happen to us.

At eleven o'clock, Harm and I were leaning against the wall outside the office, studying the old stone floors for lack of anything better to do. “Rabb, Nichols,” called the ever-intimidating voice from within. “You're up.”

The two old professors sat behind an expansive oak desk, conferring with each other as we entered. Harm stood proudly straight with his books at his side, a position I unconsciously copied. Atkinson looked us over with an expression that resembled scorn. "We're not on one of your ships, Mr. Rabb. I'm not expecting a salute."

"No, sir, just respect. This is the way I've been taught to demonstrate that."

"I see. In that case, I'll be completely honest. This prospectus of yours has no merit. It's a waste of your time and ours. Frankly, I expected better - at least of you, Miss Nichols."

I blinked, but controlled my surprise. "Why do you say that, Professor?"

"The object of this assignment is for you to gain an inside perspective of the workings of the law, something you're not likely to get by fighting red tape with Veterans Affairs. I can understand why our lieutenant here might have a soft spot for a fellow military man, but you should have no such bias."

"I don't consider it bias, sir," I replied tightly. "Equal protection under the law is guaranteed, whether the person in question is a veteran or a twelve-year-old child. Corporal Hawkins once applied for benefits that were denied to him unfairly. If that doesn't suggest a Constitutional argument, what does?"

"He's a drunk, Miss Nichols," responded Professor Messner, with less derision than his colleague. "He nearly got a young woman killed."

"Sir, he served his sentence and was released early for good behavior. He doesn't drink anymore, and even if he did, it wouldn't change his rights. The appeals process for VA cases is well-documented - "

"I don't care if it's paved in gold. This doesn't fit the intent of the assignment, and you both know it." Atkinson leaned forward, his stony features leaving no question as to his opinion. "There are plenty of good civil cases waiting on the circuit court docket. I suggest you avail yourselves of one of them. You will be much more satisfied with your final grade that way."

I closed my mouth, shocked into silence. Fortunately, Harm hadn't even gotten warmed up yet. "The 'intent of the assignment', sir? In the first week of class, you said that the intent of a document cannot be legally interpreted any further than the facts it contains. By the facts stated in the assignment, this appeal does fit. If you're suggesting that your subjective opinion of us or our case will be a factor in determining our grades, I have no problem with going to the dean and requesting an inquiry into your grading procedures. I'm sure that would give me a *very good* perspective on the workings of the law."

Atkinson's eyes turned to slits. "We're on to threats now? Where's that vaunted respect now, Mr. Rabb? You've got plenty for a pathetic old soldier on the street, but none for an institution of learning?"

"Oh, I have plenty of respect for this institution, sir. But you're tearing it down by the minute." For the first time, he broke that rock-hard forward stare and met the other man's gaze. "Where were you in 1969, Professor? I hear teach-ins were popular on this campus. Everyone was so concerned about the welfare of our troops then. What changed?"

"Don't pretend to understand that time," the professor hissed angrily. "You were a child. Just because you wear the uniform doesn't mean you know a damned thing about it."

"I know enough, *sir*," Harm countered. "Probably more than you'll ever realize. I know that my father believed in his duty enough to fight a war that he didn't really understand. I know that if he had been lucky enough to come home, he would have found himself betrayed by the same people he vowed to protect. And I know for an absolute certainty that combat can change a person forever. Some can handle it, but many can't. They've seen and done too much to ever go back. Sometimes they make mistakes, like getting drunk and running a car off the road. But they don't carry all of the blame. They didn't choose that war. As a society, we have to accept that we're the ones who put them there. They sacrificed, because they fought for us. If we refuse to fight for them, how can we even claim to be seeking justice?"

Atkinson stared long and hard at the younger man, waiting to see if he would back down. When it became clear that he wouldn't, there was an imperceptible shift in the room. "You do very well when you're waving the flag, Mr. Rabb. You'll make an impressive trial

lawyer, if you make it through my class. You and your case are on the thinnest of ice. I expect your final report to be letter-perfect, or you will not pass this course. As it would be with any other student. But I will be watching you. Count on that.”

“Understood,” he answered icily. “Thank you for your time.”

Once again, I was left to hurry after Harm as he strode out of the office and down the corridor. “God, slow down, will you? Your legs are twice as long as mine.”

Unexpectedly, he whirled back around, and I nearly smacked into him. “Andie, bail out of this case.”

“Excuse me?”

“Atkinson’s gunning for me now, but so far he’s not pissed at you. If you split off and do your own assignment, you might be able to save your grade.”

“No freaking way! I’ve come this far, haven’t I?”

“Look, you can still work on it if you want. But officially, you should get as far from this whole thing as possible. Those great dreams of yours are going to come crashing down if you fail Constitutional Law.”

“Hey.” I planted myself in his line of sight. “I know what’s at stake. But we’re in this together. If I back out of something because it has risks, what kind of lawyer will that make me?”

“One with survival instincts.”

I folded my arms. “Nice try.”

“Mr. Rabb.”

We both turned as Professor Messner approached. “That wasn’t the brightest move I’ve ever seen, son, but I admire your passion. If your final report follows the set guidelines, you won’t have to worry about passing the course. I’ll see to that.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harm replied automatically.

“Of course, actually winning the appeal would go a long way toward your cause.” He moved toward his office, and I couldn’t contain my curiosity.

“Professor? Begging your pardon, sir, but why do you want to help us?”

Messner turned back with the slightest trace of a smile. “Because before I debated legal precedents on paper - long before either of you were born - I spent two years as a ground-pounding private in Korea. Technically, I should be calling *you* ‘sir’.”

Go figure. He disappeared into his office, and we just shook our heads. Maybe it wasn’t us against the world after all.

The northeast corner of the Diag was beginning to feel as familiar as the halls of the Law Quad. This day, Harm and I had been milling around for fifteen minutes, waiting for Hawkins to appear. It was nearly the end of October, and the chill that would last for the next few months was just starting to descend on us. I jammed my hands into my coat pockets and glanced over at Harm. “How’s your beach-bum Californian ‘six’ going to handle a Michigan winter?”

“Hey, you forget that I spent four years in Maryland. I could take *your* snow-bunny Midwestern six in a snowball fight any day.”

“Oh, you’d best rethink that statement before December.” I raised an eyebrow in a mock challenge. “You think Hawkins is okay?”

“Sure. He’s probably just warming up in one of the buildings.”

As if on cue, the corporal emerged from around the corner. He looked to be wearing a few layers of clothing against the weather, and he slouched toward us with the hood of his sweatshirt up. “Hey, L.T., Miss Andie,” he greeted us. “How are things in the legal world?”

“Confrontational, like always.” I pulled my coat tighter as the wind picked up. “It’s freaking cold out here. You guys want to go get a cup of coffee?”

Hawkins hesitated. “They don’t usually like my type hanging around.”

“That’s just tough for them. It’s a free country, or so they keep telling me.” Harm shrugged. “Come on, I’ll buy. I got paid this week and everything.”

He still looked dubious, but walked with us down the block to Cava Java. Once inside, I began to understand his reticence. The café’s patrons, mostly students, shot him odd looks

and traded whispers across tables as the three of us stepped up to the counter. Ignoring them, Harm and I ordered oversized cups of hazelnut and mocha, respectively, and Hawkins tentatively followed Harm's lead. The girl behind the counter looked uncomfortable until Harm, exasperated, slapped a twenty-dollar bill down in front of her.

"We're not going to have a problem here, are we?" he asked quietly. She shook her head and began fixing our order. "Thank you. Three cinnamon rolls, too, please."

We took a booth in the corner, and I glared at a gawking undergraduate. "This city makes no sense. Nobody will blink at a nineteen-year-old with purple hair and a dog collar, but we get hassled."

"God bless America," Harm replied ruefully. "Anyway, here's where we stand. We submitted a request to the VA to have your case put on the appeals docket, based on unlawful denial of benefits. We intend to prove that your original application would now be approved under the new laws enacted in 1989, and that you are in fact eligible - not only to receive benefits, but also to be compensated for the past two years of denial."

Hawkins had been surreptitiously tearing into his cinnamon roll, but he stopped and looked up at us. "Do you really think that could work?"

"Well, we have to get our foot in the door," I jumped in. "The first step is getting on the docket, and we think we've got a pretty strong shot. But if we're granted a hearing, we won't be able to do it alone. You'll have to come with us. I just want to make sure you're ready for that."

His dark eyes flickered with uncertainty. "I don't know," he started to say, but didn't know how to finish.

Harm leaned in. "Look, Corporal, I'd like to think we can win this strictly on the merits, but the truth is, sometimes emotions can make a difference in these cases. We can tag-team them pretty well - Andie knows the precedents backwards and forwards, and I'm getting some experience at playing up the patriotic angle. But we'll need you to put a face to the file. The board will have to want to help you. If we practice with you, ask you some questions about your service, do you think you can do it?"

After a long moment, he nodded slowly. "I guess. If you think I have to."

"I do. But that's down the road. Right now we just have to keep our fingers crossed for a hearing."

"Right. And hope Professor Hitler doesn't find some new way to shut us down." I tore off a piece of my cinnamon roll and popped it in my mouth. "Jeez. Enough sugar in these things? Between that and the mocha, I'm going to go into diabetic shock. Either of you want the rest of this?"

I have a feeling they both saw right through the ploy, but Harm only shook his head. Hawkins accepted the pastry with a small smile. "You're a sweet girl, Miss Andie. I hope all this lawyer stuff doesn't change that."

"So do I," I said honestly.

We sipped our coffee in silence for a minute, and then he spoke up again. "So what did you fly, L.T.?"

Harm glanced over, caught off-guard. "How'd you know I was a pilot?"

"You wore a VF-37 shirt last week. Even an old Marine knows what a fighter designation looks like."

The young officer smiled in acknowledgement. "F-14s."

"Ever in combat?"

"Once. Two years ago, a couple of us were flying close air support for a limited strike on Qaddafi's operations center outside Tripoli. I wasn't looking for a fight, but a few MiGs had other ideas. We made it back to the boat, fortunately."

"And the other guys?" Hawkins questioned.

Harm seemed to be intently examining his coffee cup. "There were three MiGs. One went down, one was disabled, and one bugged out for home."

I wasn't sure what to make of his demeanor, but the corporal seemed to comprehend.

"Was that your doing?"

His head jerked up, but he nodded solemnly. "Yeah. Splashed him with a Phoenix

interceptor missile. We went to guns on the other one and took out his port engine.”

There was surprisingly little satisfaction in his voice. Weren't fighter jocks supposed to brag about their kills? Then I realized what he was actually saying. This wasn't a video game. He'd survived, which meant that someone else had not. *'Combat can change a person forever.'*

“Duty tends to get tough sometimes, doesn't it?”

He nodded again. “Don't misunderstand - if I had to do it again, I still wouldn't hesitate. I guess I had it easy, in a way. I didn't have to see my adversary's face. I got to pretend it was just a machine that fell into the Mediterranean. But still ...” His eyes were haunted. “There are times when I wonder whether there's any difference between being a killer and being a person who has killed.”

I looked to Hawkins and saw unabashed relief in his weathered features: relief that someone else understood. Quickly, though, Harm visibly forced it from his mind. There was no more that needed to be said.

“Anyway, on the relative scale, an appeals hearing ought to be a walk in the park. Right?”

“Whatever you say, L.T.”

For a while, there was nothing to do but wait and concentrate on our other classes. We'd done what we could, leaving it in the hands of the faceless organization that determined the appeals docket. Meanwhile, it got colder outside. We worried about Hawkins, but he continued to refuse our offers of help, insisting that he was fine. Less than satisfied with that answer, we checked around and discovered that he frequented a shelter downtown. We recorded some minor victories by getting him to accept some 'gifts' - a pair of my gloves and Harm's old hiking boots. I couldn't envision what it must be like to be in his place, defeated by circumstance yet determined to be independent. But he didn't want pity, so we continued with our lives as usual.

One day, I was holed up in a corner of the cavernous Law Library, doing my best to commit the finer points of civil procedure to memory. The reference text on punitive damages was beginning to fry my brain when a hand swiftly yanked the book out of my reach, replacing it with a thin white envelope marked with the seal of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I looked up into Harm's expectant face. “Is this what I think it is?”

“I don't know. I was too keyed up to open it alone.”

“So you're going to make me do it?”

“Come on, Andie, just open it, all right?”

I tried not to hold my breath as I tore the envelope open. We'd been trying so hard not to get our hopes up, but so much was riding on this ...

I scanned the paper silently and attempted to keep my reaction neutral. Before my friend could explode, I stated calmly, “We're in. Court date is a week from Tuesday.”

“Yes!” The exultant shout earned us a few annoyed glares, but neither of us was in the mood to care. I threw my arms around Harm's neck as he spun me around delightedly. One major hurdle cleared. But now we had a week and a half to decide exactly how to argue the case. Two first-year law students against a board of appeals. Almost immediately, we disengaged, and I started tossing my books haphazardly into my bag. “Let's get moving. We've got a ton of work to do.”

It took some time to track down Corporal Hawkins. I expect that we looked pretty strange, barreling into the shelter on Third Street and waving a slightly crinkled letter. The expression of hope that greeted us, though - not only from him, but from the half-dozen other homeless men and women in the room - made everything all right. I'd like to think we convinced a few people that there was still justice in the world that day.

We took Hawkins to Goodwill and found him a secondhand suit for the hearing: he wouldn't allow us to buy him anything new. He did agree to come to Harm's apartment in the evenings to prepare, and we spent hours hammering out our strategy over cartons of take-out food. Saturday night's session went particularly long, and around one in the morning, I realized I'd fallen asleep on top of a stack of books on the table. “Ah, hell,” I mumbled,

squinting up at an amused Harm. "How is it that you're so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed?"

"Used to fly most of my patrols on Charlie watch - late shift." He briefly rubbed my shoulders as I stretched, then wandered into the kitchen in search of a glass of water. I looked over at Corporal Hawkins, who was asleep against the side of the couch. Without thinking, I leaned over to shake him awake.

Right then, it didn't seem like much. In retrospect, though, it was a massive error in judgment: and it led to the longest, most frightening ten seconds of my life.

When my hand touched his shoulder, Hawkins reacted instinctively. With a wordless cry, he lunged at his perceived attacker, and suddenly there was an arm around my neck.

I couldn't move or think as his grip constricted. Surprise quickly changed into panic, accompanying the realization that I couldn't breathe. Dimly I heard the shattering of glass as Harm flew into the room and commanded with all the authority in his being: "Stand down, Marine!"

Hawkins didn't seem to hear, trapped in the throes of some nightmare from the past. Harm overpowered the older man quickly, all but throwing him onto the couch. He dropped to his knees and gathered me into his arms. "Breathe, Andie," he directed, his voice taut. "You're okay. Just breathe."

With a choked gasp, there was air in my lungs again. I sucked in a few shaky breaths, unable to stop myself from trembling. He drew me closer, stroking my hair protectively. "You're safe," he murmured over and over. "You're safe."

Hawkins had been jolted out of his inner world, and now he stared at us in utter shock at what he'd just done. "Oh, God," he whispered, rapidly going pale. "Miss Andie ..."

He backed away, toward the door. I wanted to say something, anything, but the paralyzing fear hadn't yet released its hold. Harm raised his head, and his eyes held more sadness than anger. "It's all right, Corporal. It's over."

"No, it's not - it's not all right - " Vehemently shaking his head, he fled the apartment.

At last, I regained a semblance of control. "Go after him," I struggled to say.

"Not yet."

"Harm - "

"No," he said firmly. "Not until I'm absolutely sure you're okay."

I wasn't okay, and we both knew it. I was upset that it had happened, and I was upset that it had turned me into a shivering mess, and I was upset that Hawkins had run, and ...

I wanted to be strong, but I just couldn't. With what little breathing ability I had, I started to cry into Harm's soft flannel shirt.

"I'm sorry," I gasped in between sobs, but he shook his head.

"Don't be sorry," he soothed. "You don't have anything to be sorry for. We're going to fix this. I promise."

Without another word, he swept me up and carried me into his bedroom. I was too flustered to question as he laid me down on the bed and brushed a few tears away with his hand. "Will you be all right on your own while I go track down Hawkins?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Harm smiled. "Thought so. I'll be back soon. Try to get some sleep, all right?"

With a gentle kiss on my forehead, he was gone. I rolled over and punched the pillow in frustration. While I couldn't imagine a better white knight than Harmon Rabb, I cursed myself for falling into the damsel-in-distress role. But there was nothing to be done about it now. I just had to hope that he'd find the tormented corporal and talk him out of hating himself.

As I began to calm down, I looked around Harm's bedroom for the first time. It was sparsely decorated, but there were a handful of picture frames on the table. One was of a middle-aged woman whom I guessed was his mother: another was of him and some buddies in their flight suits. I briefly wondered if one of them was Mace. Yet another showed him at his Academy graduation, grinning blindingly with his arms draped over the shoulders of two fellow cadets. He'd been just about my age, I noticed, and yet I still couldn't see the innocence I'd expected to find there. Had he really lost that innocence so young? The last picture gave me

my answer.

It was black and white photo of a young boy, in the cockpit of a plane with his father leaning over his shoulder. God, he looked just like his father ... I stared at it for a minute, trying to understand just what it was that drove my friend. Yes, he'd suffered, but he'd survived. More than that, he still believed - in himself, in justice, in the basic decency of the world. If he could believe, how could I or anyone else dare to doubt?

With a flicker of hope, I pulled up the blanket and allowed myself to doze off. When I awoke some time later, disoriented, I realized I wasn't alone. Harm was sleeping next to me, still fully dressed and lying on top of the covers. After a moment, he stirred and opened his eyes. "Sorry," he mumbled drowsily, pushing his tousled hair back from his forehead. "Did I overstep the bounds of friendship here?"

"Not at all. It's your bed." I propped myself up on one elbow. "Besides, after what happened earlier, you're entitled."

"Feeling better?"

"Yeah. Did you find him?"

He shook his head. "We'll try again tomorrow. Now that we've come this far, there's no way I'm giving up this easily." He brushed my collarbone with a finger. "You're getting a bruise. Does it hurt?"

"Just my self-respect. I can't believe I fell to pieces like that."

"Hey, life-threatening situations tend to do that to people."

"I guess. Thank you for handling it so well. I don't know how you did it." I drew the blanket a little tighter. "I should have known better than to startle him. The things he must have seen ..."

"I know. But it's not your fault. It's not really his, either. It's just the way things are. All we can do is try to help where we can." He settled back against the pillow. "Give me some of that blanket, will you?"

"Okay, but you'd better not be a covers hog."

"Can I help it if I'm absurdly tall?"

"No, but you're just the type to abuse it ... Night, Harm."

"Night, Andie."

We didn't search for Hawkins the next day. Harm thought it might be best to give him a little space, but we were running out of time. With less than forty-eight hours before the hearing, we still had no idea where our petitioner was. On Monday afternoon, we canvassed the city for three hours in the bitter cold with no luck. Finally out of ideas and energy, we returned yet again to the place we'd first found him, outside the Chem building. Out of that, one last idea arose.

"We didn't look inside, did we?"

"In the building? Why would he be in there?"

"Why not? It's warm, and there's not a lot of traffic through it."

Harm shrugged, and for lack of a better plan, we went inside. The expansive atrium was quiet, and he followed me down the stairs to the lab rooms in the basement. Not a soul was roaming the halls, and most of the rooms were dark. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a flicker of motion, and I crept around the corner to investigate.

There was nothing in the hallway except a set of restrooms. I shared a glance with Harm, and we each pushed open a door. Only silence greeted me in the women's restroom, but I heard Harm's voice echoing out from the men's. "You're a tough man to find, Corporal."

"That's 'cause I didn't want to be found, sir."

"Well, too bad. Why don't you come outside and talk to us?"

There was a pause. "I can't, L.T. I can't look at her after what I did."

The shame in his voice tore at my heart, but I resisted the urge to walk in there and confront it. This was a choice he needed to make alone.

"She doesn't blame you, Corporal. Neither do I. I'm not going to stand here and pretend I know what it's like for you. But your best chance to do something about it is to stick with us just a little a while longer. Please."

After an interminable moment, they emerged together. It was another few seconds before Hawkins gathered the courage to meet my gaze. "I'm so sorry, Miss Andie," he whispered painfully. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I just ..."

"It's all right, Corporal. I'm fine, and I want us all to stand together before the appeals board tomorrow. What do you say?"

"You still want to go through with this, after - ?"

"We don't quit on each other," Harm said firmly. "Look, there are two possible outcomes to this. One is that things stay exactly the way they are. The other is that things get a whole lot better. There's a VA center right here in town. They can help you deal with all of this. It won't make all your problems go away, but it'll be a damn good start. You just have to get through tomorrow. Can you do that?"

He lifted his chin proudly. "Guess I'll try anything once, sir."

"That's a Marine statement if I ever heard one. Come on. I want to nail the procedure cold and then rub it in Atkinson's face."

We completed the transformation of Corporal Robert Hawkins that afternoon. It didn't take much - just a shower and a haircut, and he looked like an entirely different person. Except, of course, for the lingering look of unease in his eyes.

Harm gave him a once-over and snapped his fingers. "Hey, I almost forgot. Just a sec." He rummaged around in his coat pocket for a minute, finally coming up with a small object that he handed to Hawkins. "For good luck."

The corporal looked down at the emblem of the eagle, globe and anchor in his hand, and I swear there were tears in his eyes. "Thanks, L.T.," he said softly, affixing the gold insignia to the lapel of his jacket. "If anyone can pull this off, I think it's gotta be you two." *God, I hope so, I didn't say aloud.*

"Case number 65941, Robert Hawkins."

With a deep breath, we rose and moved to the table facing the board. My nerves on the first day of classes were nothing compared to this. Five older men and women sat on the imposing bench in front of us, looking neither friendly nor unfriendly. They simply watched us coolly as Harm, projecting a flawless image in his blue dress uniform, addressed them.

"Members of the board, my name is Lieutenant Harmon Rabb, Junior. My colleague is Ms. Andrea Nichols. We will be representing Mr. Hawkins in these proceedings."

"Are you a member of the bar, Mr. Rabb?" inquired one man placidly.

"Neither of us is, sir. We're first-year law students, which is sufficient for this type of hearing."

"That remains to be seen," he responded, but nodded. "Continue."

Harm stepped out from behind the table. "Sirs, ma'am, our request is simple. We seek to prove that former Corporal Robert Hawkins is eligible for compensation under the new rules established by the reorganization of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Hawkins served with honor in Vietnam, and was decorated for an incident in which he rescued two commissioned officers from a damaged vehicle. He deeply regrets the actions that led to his discharge and does not wish to deny responsibility for them. He is prepared to undergo readjustment counseling if admitted to the program. This organization exists for the purpose of helping people like Mr. Hawkins - people who want to make it, but just need a second chance. Not only can we give him that chance, I believe it is our duty to do so, as citizens of the country he served. Thank you."

I rose from my chair and shared a brief glance with my partner. *Please don't let me screw this up*, I prayed silently. "Sirs, ma'am, if you'll turn to the fourth page of our report, the precedent set by last year's Cartwright decision ..."

For three hours, it went on, and I barely absorbed a word of it. I was too busy firing responses back at the incessant questions from the panel. What were the circumstances of the original application? Had we submitted our request through the Marine Corps for their concurrence? Why hadn't the petitioner applied for welfare? When we'd sufficiently withstood the barrage, we moved on to our main event. All motion seemed to stop as Hawkins recalled stories of endless firefights and long nights in the jungle. He told of a protester who'd

spit on his uniform in Washington, D.C. He told of the day he'd been forced to sell his Silver Star to pay rent. He understood why the Corps had taken away his rank, but they hadn't taken his experiences as a Marine. Their effect on him could not be denied.

When all was said and done, the three of us were instructed to wait outside while the board deliberated. We thanked the members for their time, gathered our briefcases, and turned to leave. When Harm noticed the man sitting in the back, near the door, he pulled up short. I followed his gaze, and my jaw dropped.

"Professor," Harm greeted him warily. "What brings you down here?"

Atkinson lifted an eyebrow, and we went out into the hallway. "Sadistic curiosity, perhaps. I wanted to see for myself if your verbal warfare would play as well in that room as it did in my office."

"Sir, I - "

"Relax, Mr. Rabb. You deserve credit for your courage, at least."

Harm allowed himself to smile a little. "We didn't need much in the way of warfare today, sir. Just someone to tell it like it was, and a thorough understanding of the process. Fortunately, our coursework provided us with that part."

It wasn't presented as a compliment, nor was it acknowledged as such. Somehow, though, the tension between them eased. Atkinson shook his head, a trace of wonder in his voice. "You did all this just to help one man."

"Well, if there's one thing I do know about the law, it's that one person can do just about anything with the truth on his side. It was the right thing to do, sir. Regardless of the outcome."

"Yes, I suppose it was. But not many people would have done it." He turned to leave, and I spoke up.

"Professor ... don't you want to wait and see what the ruling will be?"

Atkinson paused and fixed me with a Cheshire-cat smile. "I've been doing this a while, Miss Nichols. I know what the ruling will be." And he continued down the corridor, leaving us to wait and hope.

Harm paced the width of the hallway, his shoes clicking on the polished floor. Seven steps, about face, seven steps back. Hawkins watched from his place against the wall, and I tried to concentrate on the daily crossword. Finally, I couldn't take it any more. "For Christ's sake, Harm, knock it off."

"Can't help it. I don't wait well."

"Noticed, thanks."

The door opened then, and the sarcasm instantly died. We filed back into the room silently and stood before the bench to accept their decision. As I stood there, I wondered if I'd ever get used to the simultaneous thrill and terror of it all. Then again, maybe 'getting used to it' wasn't what I needed.

"In the case of Robert Hawkins, we find that the petitioner is indeed eligible for compensation and vocational assistance under the Veterans' Benefits Act of 1989, due to the change in legislation at that time. The petitioner will receive twenty-eight months of restitution payments, and will be admitted to the readjustment program at the Ann Arbor Veterans Center at his earliest convenience. We are adjourned."

As the members left the room, I resisted the urge to jump in the air. Harm hugged me, his brilliant smile at full power, and shook Hawkins's hand firmly.

"Thank you, sir," the older man beamed, swiping at moisture in his eyes. "I don't know how I can ever say that enough."

"Hey, we don't need thanks," I flashed a smile. "We just aced Constitutional Law!"

He turned to me, hesitation in his stance. "I'd sure like to give you a hug, Miss Andie," he said, almost shyly. "But ..."

"But nothing." I opened my arms, and we embraced warmly. I placed a light kiss on his cheek. "Congratulations, Corporal. The future's wide open."

The following day, after helping Hawkins get set up at the Veterans Center, Harm and I got into his Corvette and just sat there for a moment. "Wow," I said finally, letting out a long

breath. "It's been a crazy term, hasn't it?"

"You can say that again." Without warning, he reached over and started to tie his scarf over my eyes.

"Harm! What the hell??"

"I'm taking you somewhere to celebrate," he informed me matter-of-factly. "And it's a surprise. At least for a while."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I know this city better than you do, hotshot." As we drove, I attempted to keep my sense of direction in the darkness. "Okay, that's a right turn on Fuller ... another right on Huron Parkway ... maybe ... "

After a few minutes, I gave up. "All right, I surrender already. Where are you taking me? I hope dinner's involved."

"It is. We're going to Chicago."

I laughed in disbelief. "By dinner time? Not unless you had afterburners installed in this thing." The comment was met by silence. "Seriously, Harm, even in your precious Vette, it's still a four-hour trip." More silence, and soon the car stopped. "What, you know a shortcut?"

"Something like that." He removed the blindfold and I recognized the local airport, Willow Run. Near the hangar, a Cessna sat, and I began to understand.

"Is *that* our ride?"

Harm nodded with a grin. "Rented her for the night. We can start back at first light and be home by breakfast. You like?"

"Are you kidding?" I jumped out of the car and ran over to the small plane in awe. "I'm actually going flying with you!"

"Well, it doesn't have afterburners, but it'll do." He came up beside me and took my gloved hand. "It's my way of saying thanks."

"For what?"

"For helping me figure myself out. I knew I could do this job, but I didn't think I'd ever be able to take much pride in it. Some of that came from the fact that for the first time in my life, I wasn't following in my father's footsteps. But I think if he saw what we did yesterday, he'd understand." The onetime aviator looked up at the sky with clear eyes, and then smiled back at me. "Finally, I know what I'm doing here."

Hand in hand, we walked up to the plane, and soon we were chasing the sunset.

(Epilogue)

Ten years. How could it possibly have been that long? I didn't feel ten years older than that idealistic first-year law student, but at the same time, I felt a million miles away from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Perhaps that was because Washington, D.C. felt very much like another world at that moment. I clipped the visitor's tag to my jacket and followed the guard's directions down the hall, passing harried officers left and right. So this was the renowned JAG Headquarters. From the looks of the place, I got the feeling that Harmon Rabb's life hadn't been entirely devoid of the action he was used to.

The two of us had stayed close throughout law school, and remained in touch over the years through Christmas cards and the occasional letter. I knew he'd briefly returned to a fighter squadron, and I'd gotten tales of some of his more adventurous cases. His idea of practicing law was certainly a far cry from mine these days.

I quietly opened the door to the main courtroom and took a seat in the back. Harm was in the middle of his closing argument for the defense, and I took a moment to let it all sink in. His hair was much shorter, and there were a few lines around his eyes, but damn if he wasn't as good-looking as ever. There were three full stripes on his sleeve now - that's right, he'd made commander a couple of years ago. If he was still the passionate, determined man I'd known, selection for captain couldn't be out of reach.

And he still had it. Lord, did he ever. He stood in front of the jury, reaching into their souls with words about honor and loyalty, and basically defied them to react any differently than his client had. I didn't know if the young officer in the defendant's chair was guilty or not, but I sure wouldn't bet against him with Harm on his side. When he returned to his seat,

the judge ordered a recess for deliberations, and court adjourned for the day.

"Pretty strong stuff, Commander," commented the prosecutor, a striking brunette in Marine green. "I'm waiting for the day when you break into the 'I Have a Dream' speech."

"Don't hate me 'cause I'm good, Mac," he shot back good-naturedly, gathering his files from the table. "Hate me 'cause I'm right."

"Well, that's why we have juries."

Harm was about to respond when he caught sight of me standing at the back of the room. For a second, he just stared. "Good God, Andie, is that you?"

I smiled. "None other."

Ignoring the decorum reserved for the courtroom, he crossed the aisle and pulled me into his embrace. "I don't believe it. How long has it been?"

"Since we've been in the same room? Most of seven years."

"Incredible. You look great."

"You, too. That was a hell of a closing."

Harm stepped back to introduce his associate. "Andie, this is Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie. Mac, meet Andrea Nichols."

"Ah, the legendary 'Law School Andie'." Mac smiled and extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Same here. I've heard wonderful things about you."

"Really? That would be out of character for him."

"Don't I know it. I wasn't sure you were real."

"All right, ladies, ease up before you destroy what's left of my dignity." Harm picked up his briefcase, and we stepped into the hall. "Congratulations, by the way. I hear there's a wedding on the horizon?"

"Actually, that info's a little out of date." I held up my recently-bare left hand with a rueful grin. "It's all right. We both realized fairly early on that it was for the wrong reasons."

Harm and his partner exchanged an awkward glance that I couldn't decipher. She wasn't wearing a ring, either, but hadn't he mentioned something a few months ago ... In case I'd just opened up a new can of worms, I changed the subject. "But what about you? What's this I hear about you having to ditch a Tomcat into the Atlantic?"

He shrugged a little, avoiding Mac's gaze. "No permanent damage," he offered unconvincingly. "Except to the plane, of course."

The graceful colonel took the unspoken cue and turned to me. "Well, I've got an appeal to prep, and Bud's probably up to his ears in the Michalek case by now. It was great to finally meet you, Andie."

"You, too. Maybe we'll have time to meet up for coffee before I leave town?"

"I'd like that. I'll take any blackmail material I can get on him." She flashed a devious smile, and Harm rolled his eyes.

"Beat it, Marine." As she walked away, he shook his head. "It's been an interesting year, Andie."

"I can see that. Are you - and Mac - ?"

"We're working some things out. Right now, let's just leave it at that." He folded his arms over his chest. "So what brings you to D.C.?"

"Two things, actually. I went before the House subcommittee on youth welfare programs yesterday. They're considering new legislation similar to the foster-care improvement bill we introduced in Michigan last year."

"That's great," he said sincerely. "I know you worked hard for that."

"Then, there's the other reason. Do you have a minute?"

I led him out to the courtyard, where an older woman waited patiently on a bench. "Connie, this is Commander Harmon Rabb. Harm, I'd like you to meet Connie Warner, Robert Hawkins's sister."

"It's a pleasure, Commander. I can't thank you enough for what you did for my brother all those years ago."

Harm shook her hand with a broad smile. "We were glad to do it, ma'am. How is the corporal these days?"

Connie held her head high, but her voice was strained. "Robert was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in November. He passed away last week."

His smile faltered, and he lowered his voice. "I'm sorry, ma'am. He was a good man."

"Thank you, Commander. That's why I'm here. You and Andie were the first people in years who honestly believed that he was a good man." With bright eyes, she recalled. "We hadn't seen or heard from Robert since '83. But after you got him some help to get started, he finally found the courage to give me a call. It was difficult for a while, but he took a job at the hospital, and got his own place ... and one day the nightmares stopped. He got back ten years of his life because of you. I wanted to be able to tell you that in person."

For once in his life, Harm was caught speechless. Connie pressed a small object into his hand and closed his fingers around it. "He made me promise to give this back to you. He also said to tell you that no matter how many stars you end up wearing, he'll still be calling you 'L.T.' "

Harm looked down at the little gold Marine emblem in his hand and nodded, carefully keeping his own emotions in check. "It never meant half as much coming from anyone else, ma'am."

Connie reached up to embrace him briefly, and I did the same, with a promise to call him tonight to catch up. As we started back toward our car, I thought I heard him say softly, "It got me back my life, too."

Before we pulled out of the parking lot, I noticed Sarah Mackenzie come up behind him and place a hand on his arm. 'Working some things out', indeed. Good. Complicated though he was, he deserved someone strong and compassionate, and from everything I'd heard, she was that and more. I hoped they'd find some way to get through to each other.

There are still times when I wonder what direction my life would have taken if our paths hadn't crossed. I wonder how much of who I am was shaped by that first day ten years ago: by a fearsome professor, a quiet old man with a tattered service ribbon, and a young lieutenant with a heart-stopping smile. I learned the law, yes, but I also discovered that it is in fact possible to take on life without a safety net. As I look back, it's very clear which one was more important.

**** THE END ****