



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: R (language)

Classification: Story, Romance (H/M), Angst

Spoilers: "Goodbyes"

Author's Notes: Hey, A.J. fans! I'm finally hooking you guys up. This one's set mid-fifth season, pre-"Boomerang", and the somewhat tenuous relationship between our heroes is based on A.J.'s attitude toward Harm's leaving as shown in "Yeah Baby", "Goodbyes", and even "Rules of Engagement". I don't buy the 'all's forgiven' bit from "The Return". There's a weird twist on everyone's favorite scene from "Boomerang", but it's entirely Brumby-less and has a much more satisfying ending. I promise.

In other news, thanks go to Wendy for her concept suggestions and kind words oh so long ago. See, I didn't forget about this one!

A few notes about the title - the phrase "lessons learned" is something of an inside joke for anyone familiar with military and/or engineering guidance specifications. (In my office, MIL-SPEC might as well be a four-letter word.) Each 'requirement' in a spec has a 'lessons learned' section, for mistakes discovered the hard way. Sometimes they look ridiculously simple, but if they're there, it means some poor kid on the flight line didn't find it quite so simple. The point of the analogy is this: even hotshot commanders and two-star admirals can learn new things. Especially about each other. Now that we've gotten the boring philosophical issues out of the way, on to the fun part ...

1124 PST
Naval Surface Warfare Center
Corona, California

At least it had been a shorter flight this time.

Rear Admiral A.J. Chegwiddden adjusted his cover and stepped off the jetway into the bright California sun. The last time he'd been called out to rein in his firecracker attorneys had involved a trans-Pacific voyage. Japan, he recalled. Come to think of it, that one had been at least partially Rabb's fault as well. Some things were as constant as the stars.

Standing near the small hangar, the trio of JAG officers came to attention at his approach. "Admiral," greeted Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie politely. "How was your flight, sir?"

"Fine, Colonel, thank you. I need to be brought up to speed, and from this point on, I

want my questions answered by Commander Rabb and no one else. I'm curious to know how he managed to so thoroughly infuriate Admiral Plummer within the span of twenty-four hours."

He started inside, leaving Harm to share a 'get-out-while-you-still-can' look with Mac and Bud. They all fell into step behind their commanding officer.

"Sir, the admiral is, ah, unconvinced of the merits of our investigation," Harm began.

"That's putting it lightly. Start from the beginning, Commander ..."

The JAG team had been called out to look into the testing procedures of the Triton, a new type of sea-launched cruise missile currently in the later stages of development. A week earlier, a high-level engineer in the program had gone public with allegations of hazardous test conditions, and ZNN was spinning theories of 'mad scientists' who cared more about cost and schedule than safety. Because of the threat of a public relations disaster, JAG had sent its all-stars. However, the program director had been less than thrilled with Harm's investigative techniques.

"Sir, we can't afford to discount these claims. I've been talking to a lot of the techs, and - "

" - and the media is starting to notice that," A.J. cut him off. "I realize that maintaining impartiality is difficult, but it was Admiral Plummer's understanding that the Navy would be attempting to present a unified front on this. He's starting to believe you're here to crucify him."

"Not true, sir," Harm replied tightly. "But his efforts to contain the situation may be sending the message to his troops that being forthcoming isn't a wise career move."

A.J. stopped walking and faced the taller man. "Watch it, Mr. Rabb," he warned. "Dennis Plummer may be tight-lipped, but I've served with the man, and in case you haven't noticed, he's a couple of stripes up on you. So you *will* play by his rules."

Harm's situational awareness was usually fairly accurate. He knew how far he could safely push, even if he often pushed a little further. Right now, though, it was definitely time to stop pushing. "Aye, sir."

"As of now, Colonel Mackenzie is taking the lead. She and Lieutenant Roberts will conduct the remainder of the interviews, and you will get a head start on the hardware research. I trust there are no objections?"

"No, sir," three voices chorused.

"Good. I'll see you all in the conference center at 1600. Dismissed."

Harm had no desire to sulk over his slap on the wrist. Rather, there was a look in his blue eyes that his partner recognized as a very unique brand of determination. He'd walk the line, but he'd get to the bottom of these accusations if it killed him.

Mac sighed inwardly and spoke up. "Respectfully, Admiral, what exactly are your intentions here?"

"The same as yours," A.J. answered, his gaze fixed on the stoic commander. "To make sure that nothing goes off half-cocked."

0113 PST
Visiting Officers' Quarters
NSWC Corona

Mac tried once more to fluff up her cardboard-like pillow and turned her head toward the window. The building was L-shaped, such that she could see into the other wing, where only a few scattered lights were still on. One of them - third floor, two over from the stairwell ... sure enough. She shook her head, rolled out of bed, and grabbed her room key. She wasn't likely to fall asleep anytime soon anyway.

Harm answered after only a moment, coming to the door in a T-shirt and boxers. He raised an eyebrow at her similar attire. "We having a slumber party?"

"No, squid. I just came down to tell you to stop working and go to bed."

"How do you know I wasn't already in bed?"

She folded her arms. "Because your light was on, and also because there's a pen behind your ear."

He looked a little embarrassed, but shrugged it off. "Now that I've been exiled to tech-world, I figured I might as well get familiar with this motor everybody's so excited about. Care to join?"

"In your room? That's a huge, flashing red light, Commander."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Mac." He gestured toward the bed, which was strewn with files and technical manuals. "Does this look like a come-on?"

"All right, all right. But if anyone else comes knocking, I'm diving under the bed." She stepped inside the room and took the chair, tucking her feet up under her. "The admiral seems pretty pissed," she commented cautiously. "What's up with you two?"

"Probably the same thing that's up with us," he responded sharply, catching her off-guard. The distance between the two partners had certainly widened since his return from flight duty, but neither had made any mention of it recently ... probably because neither had any bright ideas about resolving it. "Sorry. Seriously, I don't know. We're always clashing these days. If I go after something, I'm too aggressive. If I back off, I'm neglecting my duty. I can't freaking win." Harm flopped down across the only open space on the bed and took the pen out from behind his ear. "Anyway, I'm not backing off this one. If there's a problem, we need to know about it, and if Chegwiddden boots my six back to Washington, so be it. Take a look at this."

Mac leaned over and studied the report he'd indicated. "The propulsion system?"

"That's what the good Dr. Garrison is so worked up over. It's a solid rocket motor, a smaller version of the boosters used on the space shuttle. The technology's not exactly new,

but it's new for this kind of application. The main propellant is solidified, instead of liquid like jet fuel. It burns straight up the column until it's used up. But Garrison says they've been having problems with the casing. He thinks it's not contained well enough, and if any of the seals were to fail - "

"*Challenger*, the sequel?" she suggested.

"You got it. But Plummer wants to keep up the test schedule. He's convinced that the risks are managed, and that they've taken appropriate precautions. I just don't know what constitutes 'appropriate'."

"What did the techs say?"

"That there have been incidents of burn-through, but nothing major enough to break the seal. They've adjusted the temperature in the test cell to compensate, but Garrison's afraid that changing the conditions will affect the material properties of the casing. I'm not a scientist, Mac. For all I know, this could be standard operating procedure around here."

"If you believed that," she pointed out, "you wouldn't be risking the wrath of two different admirals to investigate."

At that, he had to smile. Awkwardness notwithstanding, she knew him too well. "Well, sometimes even 'standard operating procedure' can be an accident waiting to happen."

"No offense, but I hope you're wrong."

"So do I." He opened up a diagram of the motor just as another knock sounded at the door. Mac jumped a little - she really shouldn't have been in here. As she slouched back around the corner, hoping that it was just Bud, Harm went to the door. "Admiral!"

Oh, shit, was all she could think. *As if he wasn't in enough trouble already.*

A.J. stood there, still in uniform and looking almost uncomfortable. "Am I disturbing you, Commander?"

"No, sir - it's just that - "

"I'm sorry about the late hour. I saw your light and thought we might be able to discuss the investigation in a more civilized manner."

"Of course, sir." There was only one way out. They would have to suck it up and come clean. "Colonel Mackenzie and I were just comparing notes."

Mac stepped out as calmly as she could, painfully aware of her current state of dress. "Evening, sir."

The admiral's expression shifted between surprise and suspicion. After taking a moment to fully assess the situation, he spoke quietly. "Let me see if I've got this straight. Colonel, you came down to your partner's room in your pajamas to 'compare notes'?"

"That wasn't my original objective, sir - " They both winced, realizing how bad that sounded. "What I mean is, I noticed the commander's light as well, and I came down to tell

him to give it up and get some sleep. But then we started talking about the case, and ...”

“Admiral, I take full responsibility,” Harm broke in. “The colonel did remind me how this would look, but I asked her in. I needed a sounding board.”

A.J. watched him coldly, his voice low and dangerous. “Commander, I have always been more than patient with your incomprehensible behavior, but you’re coming extremely close to my breaking point. I don’t care what you think you needed - having a female colleague in your room after hours is a textbook example of the ‘appearance of impropriety’. If you’re in need of a refresher on certain aspects of the UCMJ, I can arrange it.”

“No, sir.”

“I’m not going to discuss this any further tonight,” he continued. “There is a test scheduled for 0830 tomorrow morning, and Commander, I expect you’ll want to observe. I want to see you at 0800 in the briefing room, and you’d better have a damn good apology worked out by then. Colonel, you’re not required to attend, but the next time your partner suggests anything this stupid, I recommend you think it over very carefully. Good night.”

He turned on his heel and stalked down the hall, the door swinging shut behind him. Harm leaned against it, rubbing his eyes wearily. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Looks like I just dragged you into my problems yet again.”

“Hey, it takes two to play this game. Besides, he’s so mad at you that I’m barely on his scope.” Mac shook her head. “I’d better get out of here. Good luck tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll check in at lunch time. If you don’t hear otherwise, you can assume the admiral killed me.”

**0758 PST
Test Facility 3
NSWC Corona**

When A.J. entered the briefing room, his senior attorney was already standing at attention, waiting for him. “As you were,” he snapped. Harm fell into parade rest, locking his hands behind his back without breaking focus for a second. “Commander, we’ve obviously got a problem here. I’m not sure where it started, but we’re going to deal with it before it gets any worse. Come with me.”

He started down the hall into the basement tunnels that connected the laboratory buildings, Harm following at a perfect two-step interval. Finding a conveniently deserted lab, he shut the door behind them and folded his arms across his chest. “All right. No distractions or interruptions. Tell me what you think is going on here.”

Still staring rigidly forward, Harm began, “Sir, I apologize for my lack of judgment last night - ”

“I’m not concerned about that right now. Obviously it was a massive breach of etiquette, but for the moment, let’s go with the no-blood-no-foul theory. I’m more interested in why the two of us seem to be butting heads at every available opportunity. So let’s start with this investigation. What is it that has you convinced that this Dr. Garrison isn’t just trying

to get some publicity?”

“Sir, I’ve been reading up on something called ‘normalization of deviance’. It’s a sociological phenomenon that’s fairly common in the military and in any large organization that deals with high-pressure situations. Basically, if a risk can’t be totally eliminated, the conditions surrounding it are adjusted so as to mitigate its effects. After a while, the risk is accepted as a fact of life, and the perceived magnitude is lessened. Sometimes these kinds of risks and adjustments magnify each other until the situation is unacceptable, but at that point it’s harder to notice because it’s been building so slowly. The space shuttle *Challenger* was a perfect example of this idea, and the actual technical issue is very similar to this one. The book I read used a metaphor with a frog - it sounds weird, but it makes sense. If you try to put a frog into a pot of boiling water, he’ll jump right out. But if you put him into cool water and turn the heat up slowly, he’ll sit there happily awaiting his fate. Sir, everyone is so used to the routine around here that they see their situation as manageable, no matter how far things drift from the original conditions. But a risk isn’t necessarily acceptable just because it’s been defined.”

A.J. was a little surprised at the depth of the commander’s research. Rabb wasn’t normally the type to dive into psychobabble. Maybe there was more to this than Dennis Plummer had been willing to believe. Still, that didn’t excuse his behavior. “Do you have any technical data to support this theory?”

Harm hesitated. “Not yet, sir. I’m hoping that Lieutenant Roberts will find something when he gets the analysis of today’s test.”

“So on the basis of sociology, you’re willing to stir up the media and tick off the program director?”

“If it keeps the scientists and engineers here out of a dangerous situation, yes, sir.”

“Mr. Rabb, the Navy is not as black and white as you’d like to think. People notice when you pull stunts like this, and your track record is less than perfect on that front. Haven’t you figured out by now that you get farther when you work and play well with others?”

“With all due respect, Admiral, that’s precisely the attitude that leads to normalization of deviance.”

“You are not making this easy, Commander,” A.J. cautioned, his frustration beginning to get the better of him. “Do you know what Admiral Plummer thinks is going on here? He’s of the opinion that you’re angling to park your ass in my chair!”

“Then he’d be wrong again, sir,” Harm fired back without thinking.

That did it. The JAG got up into his face and yelled like only a SEAL could. “You’d better stand down right the hell now, Rabb, or you’re going to be heading right back to sea duty, and not to fly Tomcats!”

“Understood, sir,” he replied icily, his eyes burning through the steel wall in front of him. They stood there like that for an interminable moment, A.J. waiting to see whether his officer would give in. But Harmon Rabb was no ordinary lawyer. He was a combat-tested aviator and a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, where he’d learned, among other things, how to maintain attention for hours on end. If someone were to break this stalemate, it would

not be him.

Finally, the admiral sighed. "At ease. I didn't come here to pick another fight. I just want to figure this out."

"Admiral, may I speak freely?"

"I think we're past that point, wouldn't you say?"

Harm broke his unyielding stare and looked over at his commanding officer with a trace of wounded pride in his expression. "Sir, at one time, I had your trust. I'd like to know what I did to lose that."

The blunt honesty of that question shocked him into silence. Before he could come up with an adequate response, the room trembled slightly, and both men froze.

"Earthquake?" A.J. wondered aloud, but Harm shook his head.

"Didn't feel right. I think it came from inside the building - " He glanced down at his watch and cursed softly. "Sir, the test started four minutes ago."

They stared at each other, praying that what they suspected wasn't true. If there was a real problem with the motor ...

The thought was never completed. There was a huge, sudden *boom*, and Harm shouted, "Sir! Go!"

They dove for the door, but their reflexes weren't enough to beat the jolt that ripped through the room. Equipment crashed all around them, and then the world went black.

Unknown time Same location

A.J. slowly opened his eyes to more darkness. His head throbbed, unsurprisingly, but as awareness returned, he realized that he was on the floor of the basement lab. There were some dim emergency lights around, but hardly enough to allow him to focus on anything. With a flash, he remembered what had happened, and who'd been with him.

"Commander, report," he ordered, his voice far less steady than he would have liked. "Commander Rabb, are you all right?"

Chilling silence answered him. He dragged himself into a sitting position and glanced around the lab, which resembled a war zone. Equipment had come loose from the walls, and the floor was littered with warped metal and broken glass. As he scanned the room, his eyes came to rest on a large test bench that had been overturned, and his heart stopped. Underneath, a motionless arm was visible, and the hand wore an Academy ring.

A.J. quickly made his way through the debris and grasped the cool, limp hand, exhaling in relief when he located a pulse. "Commander, can you hear me?" he demanded, forcing back panic. "If you can, squeeze my hand, all right? Come on, Harm, show me you're still

with me.”

At long last, Harm’s fingers tightened imperceptibly, and a weak voice from somewhere within answered. “Admiral?”

“Right here,” he reassured.

“What ... happened?”

“There was an explosion of some kind. I’m afraid it may have been the test motor.” The backup power generators kicked in then, and A.J. studied their situation with growing dread. With the added light, he could see the commander’s long, lean frame twisted awkwardly under the heavy metal bench, and he knew the pain had to be intense. “Can you move at all?”

“Don’t know ... my legs are free ... sort of ...”

That meant the full weight was pressing on his chest. Not good. “I’m going to see if I can get help down here. Will you be all right on your own for a minute?”

If he’d been able, Harm would have laughed. “I’m not ... going anywhere, sir.”

“Thought so. Hang in there, Commander.” A.J. carefully stepped back through the wreckage toward the door and attempted to push it open. The thick steel hatch didn’t budge. After a few more failed attempts, he gave up and returned to his injured officer, trying to keep his voice level. “Well, the bad news is that the door is jammed.”

“Is there ... good news?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’ll get back to you.” He tested his grip on the bench experimentally. “I could try to move it, but I’m not sure how far I’d get. What do you think?”

“Can’t get ... much worse, sir.”

“All right, here goes.” Gathering his strength, he pushed up on the bench. The cry of pure agony that the action produced would reverberate in his memory for days to come. Immediately, he stopped, cursing himself for having caused it. “Commander?”

“Guess ... I was wrong,” Harm gasped, his features a terrifying white.

“I’m sorry, Harm ...” Fear and frustration stung at his eyes. A two-star admiral and a decorated SEAL, and he couldn’t figure out how to help a fellow officer in need. “I guess we need to regroup.”

“Sir ... if you can just ... lift it a little ... I might be able to ... get clear ... I can use my legs ...”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. You’re more likely to hurt yourself worse by trying.”

“Admiral, I’m ... having a hard time ... breathing down here ... I don’t think ... we can

wait.”

He was probably right, A.J. was forced to admit. Time was an issue, and if Harm lost consciousness, there was no way he'd be able to free him on his own. “Okay, let's give it a shot. On three, I'll lift, you move. One, two - three!”

He poured everything he had into the lift, muscles screaming in protest. Harm pushed with his legs and wrenched himself clear before the bench could come crashing down. He landed hard on his side and lay still.

A.J. leaned back against the wall for a moment, catching his breath. “Nicely done, Commander ... Harm? Harm, talk to me.” He gently rolled the younger man's unmoving form over, and what he saw tore at his soul.

Harm's left arm hung at a grotesque angle, and there was a gash over his right eye. His uniform blouse was nearly destroyed, and the white shirt underneath was stained with dirt and blood. A.J. lifted the shirt to examine the wound and nearly recoiled at the ravaged skin and ugly bruises over his abdomen. Internal injuries, he guessed. This was rapidly going from bad to worse.

A memory surfaced unbidden in his mind: an endless night, nearly thirty years in the past, where the acrid smell of weapons-fire had hung in the dense jungle air ...

“Don't let me die, LT... please don't let me die ...”

He shook it off and concentrated on the situation at hand. His piercing eyes swept over the rubble of the lab, searching for something he could use. In a corner cabinet whose door had come loose, there was a small first-aid kit and some towels, which he rapidly snatched up. No radios, and the phones were dead. One thing at a time, though. He dropped to one knee beside Harm and began to clean and bandage his wounds as best he could. Folding up one of the towels, he placed it under the fallen officer's head. Then it hit him - his cell phone. He fumbled in his back pocket and promised himself never to gripe about carrying the damn thing again. But there was another obstacle: the small plastic phone had broken in the fall. Muttering a string of curses, he located Harm's and unclipped it from his belt. Amazingly, it was still intact. With a fervent prayer, he skimmed through the memory list. As he might have expected, Sarah Mackenzie's cell phone was the second number on the list, behind only JAG Headquarters.

A.J. had already pressed the buttons before a terrible thought occurred to him. *Please, God, tell me Mac and Bud weren't in the building, too ...*

0846 PST

Test Division Headquarters

From the building next door, Mac had felt the tremor and heard the explosion. She and Bud exchanged a look of grim understanding, then took off down the hall at a dead run. Reaching the HQ offices, they came upon a scene of controlled chaos. Officers were shouting directives into phones and passing information across the room to each other, trying to get a handle on the situation. Sirens wailed outside as emergency response teams arrived in record time.

In the middle of it all, Admiral Dennis Plummer watched with a look of defeat and disbelief. Mac made her way over to him and said calmly, "Sir, can we assist at all?"

"Not unless you can turn back time," he mused distantly. Then, abruptly, he straightened, and was once again in control. "The blast was fairly contained - there are reports of a few men injured, but most had time to take emergency positions. The fire will be out within minutes. The problem is ... the labs directly below the test cell were rocked pretty hard. Some of the tunnels have collapsed, and we won't know until everyone's reported in if there was anyone down there. You and your colleagues should be thanking God you didn't make it to the test."

A chill ran through Mac as the awful realization struck her. "Sir," she said slowly, "Admiral Chegwiddden and Commander Rabb were meeting in the basement briefing room this morning before the test."

The program director paled slightly. "Oh, Christ." Raising his voice, he called, "Schaefer, any word on the JAGs?"

"Haven't reported in, sir," answered a lieutenant promptly. Before Mac could even reach for her cell phone, it rang, and she seized it as if it were a direct line to God himself.

"Mackenzie."

"Good to hear your voice, Colonel," came A.J.'s weary response. "You and Lieutenant Roberts are all right?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, relief flooding her features. "Where are you, Admiral?"

"Stuck in lab section 4-Delta with a jammed hatch. This place is wrecked."

"I'd imagine so, sir. Commander Rabb is with you, then?"

"He is, but ..." There was a brief pause, and he continued quietly. "Mac, he's in rough shape. He was pinned by some debris. We got him out of it, but he's unconscious, and I think there's some internal damage. We could really use some help down here."

He'd said it evenly, but the news came almost as a blow. She took a few breaths to regain her composure. Harm was as strong and determined as anyone she'd ever known. He'd find a way to get through, just like always. *Then again*, she thought bleakly, *this doesn't sound at all like 'always'*. "Understood, sir. We'll have someone down there ASAP. Lieutenant Roberts and I will keep our phones on, and we'll contact you with any updates."

"That's what I wanted to hear, Colonel. I'm on the commander's phone - mine's broken. Hope to see you soon."

Almost before she'd hung up, Mac was turning to Admiral Plummer. "Sir, our people are trapped in section four. With your permission, I'd like to go with whatever team you send down there."

Bud frowned. "Ma'am, are you sure - "

"Bud, Harm's hurt."

One look in her dark eyes told him exactly how serious it was. His eyes widened, but he nodded solemnly. "Then I'm requesting to go too, sir."

The admiral nodded agreement. "Take a detachment from the maintenance division - Lieutenant Schaefer will assist you. And get a corpsman to go with you, to see what he can do for Commander Rabb."

"Aye-aye, sir. Thank you, Admiral." They turned to leave, but his voice made them pause.

"And Colonel - tell the commander I'm sorry."

Mac shook her head. "No one is blaming you, sir."

"Well, I sure as hell am."

0904 PST Section 4-Delta

"You think you're gonna die out here, LT?"

Lieutenant A.J. Chegwiddden glanced over at Chief Petty Officer Marks with surprise. Marks was typically the smartass of the squad, cracking jokes at even the most inopportune moments. Tonight, though, he was gravely serious. Maybe it was a result of the hellish firefight they'd battled through just to get here. For all their specialized SEAL training, they'd been spending an awful lot of time working like the Army lately. But as the squad liked to say, they'd been doing the job of a whole infantry company.

"No way, Chief," he answered, taking a swig from his canteen. "I plan to live forever. How about you?"

"Dunno, sir. This shit we've been pulling lately don't feel right. I mean, why'd we spend all that time practicing shallow inland insertions if we're never gonna get near the river?" Marks leaned back against the tree root and shook his head. "Swear to God, LT, you're the only officer in this whole damn war that makes any fuckin' sense."

"Don't spread that around, Markie, or I'll lose my commission." He grinned, but a bizarre feeling swept over him: a premonition, almost. Things were about to go to hell, and Marks's days might just be numbered after all.

There was a faint moan of pain from somewhere nearby ... and A.J. jerked himself back to the present. He wasn't sitting in a foxhole in Vietnam - he was trapped in a demolished underground lab, and his junior officer was badly injured. *Come on, A.J.*, he ordered silently. *Get with it.* Harm stirred a little, and struggled to open his eyes halfway. "Admiral?" he murmured, disoriented. "What happened?"

Head injury, A.J. reminded himself. He did his best to keep his voice level. "There

was an explosion, Commander,” he replied simply. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Getting chewed out, sir,” Harm admitted, sounding slightly stronger. He attempted to sit up, but overwhelming dizziness immediately halted the motion. A.J. laid a restraining hand on his good arm.

“You’d better stay still, Harm,” he advised gently. “You were struck by some pretty heavy equipment. I don’t know how severe your injuries are.”

Sensing the uncharacteristic tone of his C.O.’s voice, Harm only nodded weakly. After a moment, he asked, “Sir, are *you* all right?”

Despite his determination to be unyielding, A.J. was touched. This man was very likely in the worst pain of his life, and still he found it within himself to be concerned for his comrade. “I’m fine, son,” he answered quietly. “I’m just sick of you being right, that’s all.”

“I’m starting to agree with you, sir.” Harm’s eyes were clearer now, and he looked around at their surroundings. Slowly, realization came to him. “Admiral, are we trapped in here?”

He hesitated. “Why do you think that?”

“Because you haven’t tried to tell me that help’s on the way, or that I’m going to be fine.”

Damn. “You’re awfully observant for a guy with a concussion.” The older man sighed. “At the moment, yes, we’re trapped. But help is in fact on the way. Colonel Mackenzie is seeing to it.”

“I’ll bet she is.” The barest hint of a smile crossed his face. It vanished as he began to cough violently, squeezing his eyes shut against the ache in his chest. A.J. grasped his hand tightly until the spasms subsided.

“Harm, I don’t make guarantees on this sort of thing anymore,” he stated soberly. “But I swear to you that I’m going to do whatever I have to do to get you out of here. You have a SEAL’s word on that.”

Harmon Rabb was gradually coming to the understanding that he could very well die in this awful place. He was accustomed to facing death; it was just that he usually had more of an active role in the battle. This time, he would have to wait and trust in his fellow officers. He gave a slight nod. “That’s good enough for me, sir.”

A.J. examined his ruined arm and chewed his lip thoughtfully. “I think I’d better set that arm straight before it gets any worse.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.” Harm closed his eyes and tightened his good right hand around a nearby table leg in anticipation of the incredible pain to come. “Just do it whenever you’re ready, sir.”

The admiral steeled himself, counted to three in his head, and wrenched the limb back into place with a sickening crack. Every muscle in the young commander’s body tensed with the split-second of agony, and for a second, A.J. was afraid that he’d passed out again. But

after a few long moments, he opened his eyes, and there was a trace of humor in his expression. "Can I assume you've wanted to break my arms yourself on occasion, sir?"

"Well, it's harder to stay mad at you when you look this pathetic." A.J. patted his shoulder once and moved away to salvage some supplies. Soon he'd located a short aluminum rod and some straps to form a makeshift splint. As he started to work on it, the cell phone rang, and Harm lifted it with his uninjured arm. "Admiral Chegwidden's answering service."

"Harm!" Relief was evident in Mac's tone. "It's about time you joined the party."

"You know how I love to make an entrance," he replied lightly. "It's good to hear your voice, Marine."

"You too, sailor. I knew you couldn't be as bad as the admiral said."

He paused, and the teasing manner faded. "Mac, I don't know what he told you, but ... it's probably just as bad as he said. We'd really appreciate some help."

She didn't respond right away, and he could tell she was battling to keep the fear out of her voice. "We're not too far from you, but there's a lot of debris blocking the door. We've got some more crewmen and equipment on the way to move it. You just have to hang on, all right?"

"Doing my best, ma'am."

Another voice, older and male, took over. "Commander Rabb, this is Chief Corpsman Ford. Can you describe your condition for me?"

"Umm ... I think the admiral could do that better than me, Chief, but my arm's pretty badly broken, and he's working on setting it at the moment."

A.J. deftly tied off the straps and took the phone, holding it between them. "Admiral Chegwidden here, Chief. The commander has a deep head laceration, a puncture wound under the right front ribs - "

"I do, huh?" Harm said faintly, not expecting an answer.

" - and significant bruising over the chest and abdomen. And the arm, of course."

"Thank you, sir. I'm afraid you were probably right to suspect internal injuries, so Commander, you need to stay as still as possible so you don't exacerbate the problem."

"No argument here."

"Admiral, sir, if he starts to cough up blood - even a little - you need to help him sit up so he can breathe. We'll be in there just as soon as we can. Got that, sirs?"

"Understood," A.J. replied curtly, trying not to think about the implications of that. He'd seen some hideous things in Vietnam, but if had to sit helplessly and watch a friend drown in his own blood ...

Mac's voice came through again, with forced levity. "Sir, tell Harm he still owes me

lunch, and he can't use this to weasel out of it."

"I do not," Harm protested. "She cheats, Admiral."

A.J. shook his head. "At ease, you two. Keep in touch, Colonel."

"Will do, sir."

He ended the call and folded his arms. "She cheats?"

"Running bet on the Redskins game, sir. Whoever gets closest to the final score gets lunch on Monday. Last week she changed her guess after the Colts' wide receiver tore his Achilles in practice. Snapped my win streak at four."

A.J. had to smile. "I know this is a ridiculous question, but how are you holding up?"

"Okay, I guess." Harm tilted his head in an approximation of a shrug. "Have you ever been in traction, sir?"

"I think you can drop the 'sir' for the time being. And no, I haven't. You have?"

"It's kind of inevitable when you punch out a hundred feet off the deck. Everything hurts, and it's five times worse if you try to move ... this is a lot like that." He met his commanding officer's gaze, grim acceptance in his eyes. "I'm pretty wrecked up, aren't I?"

"Harm - "

"Seriously, Admiral. Even if I manage to get out of this, what are the odds I'll ever be able to fly again?"

He didn't answer directly. Harm's priorities - survival first, flying second, everything else later - shouldn't have come as a surprise, especially after the past year. After a moment, he replied, "For what it's worth, I can't imagine that your skills as an attorney would be affected."

Even dulled by pain, Harm's senses were accurate enough to catch the note of resentment there. Suddenly, the light dawned. "Sir, is that what all this was about? You don't think I'm committed to my duties at JAG?"

Startled, A.J. looked up. How the hell had he picked up on *that* so fast? As he considered it, though, it was clear that the time for brutal honesty was now or never. "Commander - " he started, then changed his mind. This wasn't strictly professional, as much as he'd tried to convince himself that it was. This was personal, as well.

"Harm, before you left, I would have given anything to have a dozen more officers just like you. Granted, I probably should have written you up for disciplinary action about ten times, but every case you took got everything you had, and sometimes more. I was positive that you were going to be one of the greatest JAGs the Navy ever had. And then you gave it all up to chase a dream you'd lost once already."

"Admiral - "

He waved him silent. "It's all right. I accepted your reasons for leaving, eventually, but when you came back ... it was like you were always half here and half in the cockpit. It's not that your work suffered - it was just that you seemed somehow distracted. There've been a lot of distractions around lately, of course, but ... I have to be straight with you, son. Some days I wonder if I'm going to walk in and find another transfer request on my desk."

Harm didn't speak for a moment, but when he did, his voice was clear. "Are you disappointed in me, sir? Because I used JAG as a fallback after flying again?"

"I'm trying not to be," A.J. answered honestly. "I understand that as well as anyone. I had two careers before JAG, remember. And what I see in you reminds me so much of myself that it scares me. I had to be forced into moving on, and maybe you do, too."

"Sir, with all due respect, it's not the same thing. I know you were an exceptional SEAL, but I spent my entire childhood dreaming of being a pilot. You chose to leave. I didn't. I love what I do, sir, but some people are just born to something, and I was born to fly. I wish I could make people understand what it's like - when I'm up there, it just feels right. Everything makes sense, somehow ... it's the one thing I can count on to never change."

Slowly, he began to realize the depth of sincerity in the younger man's words. Harmon Rabb had weathered so much in his life: he'd lost so many things, but he was clinging fiercely to what he still had. "What about your friends?" he questioned. "I'd hope you could count on them."

There was the slightest trace of bitterness in Harm's voice. "I would have thought so, too. But let's just say I didn't get too many letters on the *Henry*. Things are better now, I think - it's been long enough. But I don't think anyone ever really understood - they just decided to forgive and forget."

"Like Mac?" A.J. asked simply.

Harm managed a short, humorless laugh, ending in a deep cough. The sound was harsh and ugly even to his own ears. "I'm not sure she's done either one. I'm not going to jump ship again, Admiral. I know where I need to be now. But if you want to know whether I still wish I were flying ... I can't honestly deny it, sir. I can't help that."

A.J. nodded, grateful at least for the full truth. "All right," he said quietly. "I guess I can accept that."

For a long moment, there was silence, each man caught up in his own thoughts. The muffled sounds of cutting torches and lifting equipment echoed in the corridor outside, and for a brief instant he imagined he could hear the faint sounds of a faraway battle as they waited for their evac helo in the suffocating blackness of jungle night.

"It's taking too long, LT."

A.J. swung around, startled. "What did you say?"

Harm looked up at him, confusion flickering across his features. "I just wondered what was taking so long, sir."

"They've got a small army of workers out there. It won't be much longer." He composed himself immediately, but there were very few things that could shake a two-star

admiral, and it didn't escape the commander's notice.

"Admiral, are you all right?"

"Yeah," he answered unconvincingly. "I'm just getting a nasty case of deja-vu out of all this."

"How's that?" When the older man didn't answer right away, Harm offered an apologetic grin. "I could really use something to get my mind off how much this hurts, sir. Can you spare a war story or two?"

"All right, you asked for it." A.J. sighed and leaned back against the wall. "In '71, SEAL Team Two went in along the Mekong Delta for a special op that never came together. We ended up doing a good imitation of regular infantry for a few days while the brass figured out what to do with us. One night we came across some of our guys that were getting pounded by NVA regulars, so we joined in to help them out. My point man, Chief Marks, got hit, but we were pinned down, and it took ages to get a medevac in to pull us out. I waited with him for at least three hours before help finally got there, trying to get him to hold on in just about any way possible. He was telling jokes most of the time, if you can believe that."

"Sorry I don't have any jokes for you." Harm smiled a little, but it didn't last. "Did he make it?"

"Until the helo got there? Yeah, he did. But he was dead by the time we landed."

Harm waited a moment, watching his C.O.'s guarded features carefully. "Surely you don't blame yourself for that, sir?"

"No, not really. But it's not the most pleasant memory. He was older than me, probably thirty or so. Seemed ancient at the time. I figured he'd seen it all. When he first went down, he kept begging me to help him, not to let him die ... but as time went on, I think he realized that neither of us could do a damn thing about it."

"Sounds familiar," Harm admitted, a trace of bitterness creeping into his voice.

"That's not funny, Commander," A.J. said sharply, his gaze fixed on the far wall.

"Sir, look at me."

He turned to face the injured officer, and his heart tightened in his chest. Harm's skin had slowly paled to a waxy gray, and each breath seemed to take more effort than the last. "Oh, no," A.J. warned. "You are not going to get fatalistic on me, you got that? This is not Vietnam. Your best friend is right on the other side of that door. You think she's not going to move heaven and earth to get in here and help you?"

"Aye, sir - " But the reply was cut off by another round of coughing, and as it finally subsided, there was a thin trickle of blood visible at the corner of his mouth. A.J. tensed, but as he met Harm's gaze, it was clear that both men understood that the odds were falling fast. *Oh, God. Here we go.*

Same time
Sixteen meters southeast

Mac yanked off her safety glasses and tossed them away in disgust. Granted, blowtorch operation hadn't been one of her required courses at OCS, but she'd had more luck with fully automatic weapons than she was currently having with this damn torch. A helpful young petty officer took the equipment from her and started working on the fallen crossbeam himself, leaving her to contemplate her failure.

Bud watched her slam her hand against the wall in frustration and moved over to her. "Ma'am, these guys know what they're doing. They'll break through in no time, regardless of what we do or don't do to help."

"I know, Bud. I'm just not very good at being helpless." Mac sighed and leaned back against the wall. "This is Harm we're talking about. There's no way he'd let something like this beat him, right?"

The junior officer bit his lip, hesitating. "I'd like to think so, ma'am."

"I'm not sure I can bear to think otherwise." Her phone signaled, and she wearily raised it to her ear. "Mackenzie."

"Status, Colonel."

The admiral's voice sounded distinctly more apprehensive than in the first two calls. His tone immediately put her on alert. "We're getting there, sir. Twenty minutes, if I had to guess."

"Make it ten, Mac. We're running low on time in here."

Her breath caught in her throat. "Aye, sir," she managed to say, fighting to keep the tremble out of her voice. "Admiral, may I talk to him?"

There was a brief pause, and then Harm's voice came through, ragged and weak. "Hi, ninja-girl."

"Hi, flyboy," she whispered, his obvious pain sending icicles through her heart. "You have to hang on, all right?"

"I'm trying, Mac ..."

"Not good enough," she demanded, unsure whether this temporary surge of strength came from determination or from desperation. "We need you, Harm. I need you at my back. This whole partnership thing doesn't work without you, don't you see?"

"I'm sorry ... Mac, I ..."

Her partner's voice faded into a steady stream of static. "What? Harm, what are you sorry for? Damn it, Harm!" But the phone had gone dead. Mac squeezed her eyes shut, forcing back the tears that threatened to overtake her. "Bud, I can't lose him," she said

softly. "Not like this."

Bud Roberts had stood by these two through innumerable trials and tests of will. They were his mentors, his friends, his child's godparents - and up until this point, he had always been able to convince himself that any flickers of something more between them were simply his imagination. Now, though ... he just wasn't as sure anymore.

He reached over and grasped her hand for the briefest moment, empathy radiating from him. She nodded, with the ghost of a grateful smile, and moved back to the work crew. "We're working on a deadline here, people. Let's get moving, all right?"

Same time Section 4-Delta

Inside, A.J. helped Harm to sit up against the side of the overturned bench, lifting the junior officer's weakening body as gently as he could. The blood loss was threatening to take what little awareness he had left, but Harm forced himself to focus on the other man's face. He coughed again, tasting the metallic tang of blood. "Knew I should have ... charged the batteries."

A.J. tossed the now-dead phone aside. "Doesn't matter now. You'll be able to talk to her in person soon enough."

Harm only shook his head fractionally, and the admiral could see the glimmer of faith in his blue eyes beginning to fade. Desperate to keep him alert, A.J. spoke again. "So. 'Ninja-girl' and 'flyboy'?"

"Long story, sir ..."

"That's all right. At the moment, what you two call each other is extremely low on my list of concerns." But he watched the younger man's ashen features carefully, wondering just what he'd intended to tell her. With a sudden jolt of fear, he realized that consciousness was slipping away from Harm, and A.J. reached out to seize his good arm. "Snap to, Commander!" he ordered harshly. "You are not allowed to pass out, understood?"

After a long moment, Harm's eyes flickered fully open again, and behind the glazed, pain-dulled expression that lingered there, A.J. saw something terrible ... something he recognized from that hellish night so many years before. This was the look of a man who had accepted the fact that he was dying.

"Admiral," Harm managed to say. "Will you take some ... messages for me? In case ..."

It was a hideous thought, one that he had refused to completely acknowledge before now. But at some point, it would become inevitable. Maybe this was it. And if it would ease his mind at all ... A.J. nodded solemnly. "Tell me what's on your mind. I'll make sure the right people hear it."

Harm drew a deep, shaky breath and forced a wan smile. "First of all, tell Keeter I was kidding ... about not wanting him at my funeral. And tell Jordan ... well, tell her I'm sorry, I guess. I know all the reasons why it didn't work ... but make sure she knows I don't regret any of it. Tell Harriet and Bud ... I wish I'd gotten to see baby A.J. grow up. And that I've always

been grateful for ... their friendship, and their loyalty. Especially tell Bud ... tell him thank you, for all the times he should have questioned and didn't. Mac and I, we've always been proud of him, but we never say it ... we never ..."

He seemed to lose focus for just a second, but gathered himself and pushed ahead. "And Admiral ... sir, more than anyone, you've always had my respect. I know how hard I've made things for you, especially lately ... but there is no one else I'd rather serve under. You have my word on that."

For the first time in what seemed like years, Rear Admiral A.J. Chegwiddden found himself holding back tears. "You have always made me proud, son," he replied softly. "Don't ever believe otherwise. But you're saving the best for last, aren't you?"

"Just stalling ... I think," Harm admitted, his voice falling to little more than a whisper. "Sir, tell Mac ... God, I don't even know what to say ..."

"Are you sure about that?" A.J. lifted an eyebrow, trying - and failing - to bring some levity. "Just start with why you told her 'I'm sorry' a few minutes ago."

"I'm sorry ... because I couldn't make her understand ... why I left ..." His breath was coming in short, shallow gasps, and they both knew he couldn't hold out much longer. But he met his superior's gaze with surprisingly clear eyes. "Sir ... just tell her ... I love her."

Stunned by his simple, sincere admission, A.J. didn't move for a moment. "Harm," he said finally, "did I hear you right?"

"Yes, sir," he responded, weakly but earnestly. "And that's ... why I'm sorry ..." His eyes rolled back, and his head sank onto his chest.

"Harm!" A.J. fumbled for a pulse, and found it shockingly slow. His blood turning cold, he stumbled toward the door and pounded on it with everything he had. "Hurry the hell up out there! I need medics now!"

After a few seconds, there was a muffled reply. "Sir, back away from the door, please!"

He did, and with a massive *bang*, the hatch caved in. A pair of corpsmen climbed through the jagged opening with a stretcher in tow, and they moved quickly to assess their patient. A.J. stepped aside to clear their path and came face to face with his other two officers, looking nearly as dirty and exhausted as he was. Mac's gaze fell on her partner's motionless form, and the horror in her dark eyes was unmistakable.

"He's a fighter, Mac," he said in a voice meant only for her ears. "You've never given up on him before. Don't start now."

"No, sir," she whispered, her eyes never leaving Harm. "I never could."

They watched the corpsmen work rapidly and efficiently to help their friend. As they picked up the stretcher and hurriedly made their way back through to the corridor outside, Bud spoke up. "Sir, not to interrupt, but that cut looks pretty nasty."

A.J. reached up to touch the gash on the side of his head and winced. "Forgot about

that," he admitted. "I guess we're all headed to the med center anyway."

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Let's go." But he continued to study the carefully-controlled reactions of the colonel who walked beside him. What had happened - or hadn't happened - between Harm and Mac to bring them to this point? What would it do to her, if she were to find out those last words?

You had better damn well get through this, son, he thought silently. Hers is one message I'm not sure I can deliver.

**1251 PST
Outside OR 2
Medical Center**

A.J. glanced up from the section of tiled floor he'd been so intently studying to see Dennis Plummer making his way down the corridor toward him. The two old shipmates just looked at each other for a long moment, knowing that no words would ease either man's burden just then. Finally, A.J. spoke up. "So what happened here today?"

Plummer shook his head. "What Garrison predicted," he replied, defeated. "What your officer feared. The casing didn't hold under the new conditions. It burned through and destroyed the motor, which was bad enough, but then the fire spread to the liquid propellant section, and then it all went to hell ... I just didn't see it coming. Everything I saw told me that we had it all controlled down to the last micrometer." The program director visibly shook off those questions and nodded toward his friend. "How's your head?"

"I've had plenty worse." A.J. set down the ice pack he'd been holding.

"And Commander Rabb?"

"In surgery." Plummer followed his gaze to the remaining two attorneys in the hallway. Mac was lingering near the door, occasionally wandering a few steps in either direction, her mind clearly elsewhere. Bud stood a few paces away, silently keeping watch over her.

"They're very loyal, aren't they?"

"They're a team. We all are. Even now." A.J. lifted his eyes. "Where do you go now, Den?"

"Me?" He gave a short laugh. "My time here is up. Maybe it should have been a long time ago. In any case, I'd rather not force you to prosecute me for negligence. I'll take whatever Command determines as the path of least resistance, and I'll become a full-time fisherman or something. Don't bother pretending there's a better way. You know the way the game works."

"Probably better than you do," the JAG admitted. But he got to his feet and shook the

other man's hand. "You'll be missed, Admiral."

"I hope so," Plummer answered in a low voice. He turned to leave and nodded once to the ensign who came to attention as he passed. A.J. watched yet another one of his peers riding off into the proverbial sunset and sighed.

"Lieutenant Roberts," he called quietly. Bud looked up and hurried over to his commanding officer. "How would you like to change places?"

"Sir?"

"Up until now, I seem to have been paired up with the commander, and you've been doing a good job of keeping the colonel sane without her noticing." The young lieutenant looked a little embarrassed, but didn't object to the assessment. "Would you mind keeping an ear open for any word over here while I talk to her?"

"Aye, sir," Bud responded dutifully, taking up a post just outside the operating room doors. A.J. moved over to where Mac was staring out a small window. He stood there without speaking for a moment, waiting for her to notice his presence.

Eventually, she turned halfway and started a little. "Sorry, sir. Guess I haven't been paying a whole lot of attention."

"Don't apologize, Mac. You're entitled to be worried about your partner. Even after the roller-coaster ride you two have been on lately."

She hesitated, but upon seeing his compassion, she surrendered. "Has it been that obvious, sir?"

"Obvious? No, I suppose not. But I know you two, and it's not hard to see the differences between this year and last year." He paused a moment before continuing. "Mac, by leaving the way he did, by rejoining the fleet ... did Harm lose your trust?"

"Not as an officer," she answered immediately. "That won't ever change. But as a friend ... maybe, a little. I guess I realized that I don't live in the same world he does. What I do is important to me, but it's not an obsession, an all-encompassing passion to cling to at all costs. I just ..." She trailed off, and the next sentence was delivered in a far quieter voice. "I wish I could understand what it's like to love something like that."

"You're forgetting something," A.J. pointed out gently. "He came back."

She looked away for a few seconds, uncertain how to respond. Finally, she said, "Yes. He did. I'm just not sure I can believe that he really wanted to."

"He did want to. I'm convinced of that now, although before today I doubted it as much as you do." He risked a sideways glance at her and recognized the hurt behind her eyes. "Or maybe not quite that much."

Mac ignored the unspoken query in the words. She hadn't yet been able to acknowledge that conflict even to herself. Admitting it to her commanding officer was out of the question. "Did he tell you that, Admiral? While you were trapped down there, did he ...?"

“Did I take confession from Harmon Rabb?” A.J.’s lips twisted in a wry smile. “Something like that. I think I understand some things a little better now. Maybe he does, too.”

“Sir, I ...”

That’s when he saw it: the same fear that had flashed across her perfect features when she first saw her dear friend’s broken body that day. It suddenly became clear to him that she wasn’t simply afraid of losing Harm. She was afraid that once he was gone, their quarrels and missteps would be their only legacy.

“Mac, he doesn’t blame you,” A.J. said quietly. “He wants very much to help you understand his reasons. He just doesn’t know how.”

She nodded, attempting the faintest of smiles. “Did he tell you that, too?”

“He told me a lot of things. When all this is over, I’ll make sure he tells them to you, too. Even if I have to pull rank.”

“Here’s hoping, sir.”

A.J. rested a hand on her shoulder briefly, before Bud called over to them. “Sir, ma’am.”

They hurried over to meet a weary-looking man in green scrubs just outside the OR doors. He addressed his remarks to the admiral, seeing that he was the ranking officer of the group. “Sir, your commander gave us a hell of a scare at first, but he came through very well. We had to drain his lungs, which was the dicey part, and patch up a lot of damage in the abdominal cavity, but his respiration is stable now, and that’s the most important thing. He seems fairly strong, so we’re projecting a full recovery. Give him a couple of weeks, and I’d say he’ll be most of the way back to normal.”

A.J. closed his eyes and said a silent prayer of thanks, while Bud smiled in obvious relief. Mac, however, wasn’t going to allow herself to give in to emotion just yet. “Doctor, he’s a pilot. Will he be able to get back in the air?”

“What does he fly? Fighters, jammers, transports?”

“Fighters. F-14s.”

The doctor considered for a moment. “Hard to say right now. Depending on how he heals, I’d like to say yes, but he’ll have to work with a flight surgeon to know for sure. Those traps are rough even on guys who haven’t been sewn back together.”

Her expression was unreadable as she continued. “May we see him yet?”

“Give him a couple of hours in post-op to come out of the anesthetic. Admiral, I understand you were with him?”

“I didn’t do much, other than setting his arm and slowing some bleeding.”

"Don't sell yourself short, sir. You probably saved his life."

A.J. kept his voice level, but the idea sent a strange sensation through his nerves. "Yeah, well, he owes me a lot of reports," he said gruffly, finally earning a smile from Mac. "Come on, folks. Let's go get cleaned up before the commander wakes up and thinks the world stopped for him."

1610 PST Medical Center

For a long time, very little penetrated his consciousness other than the pain. It wasn't localized in any one area - in fact, he would have been hard-pressed even to identify any precise parts of his body at that point. It was all just one giant, unspecified ache, with no reason or source. Then, a faint groan, which eventually he realized had come from himself, and a distant voice that seemed to be repeating itself.

"Commander? Sir, can you hear me? Commander?"

Sure, I hear you, so shut up, he wanted to reply. No such luck. In time, with monumental effort, he dragged his eyes open and managed to focus on the anxious face hovering above him.

"Bud?" Was that really his own voice? Sandpaper would have felt - and sounded - kinder. "What ... the fuck ... happened?"

Bud Roberts's eyes widened at the uncharacteristically strong language, but he recovered quickly. "Um, just take it easy, sir. You just got out of surgery. Do you remember the explosion at the test center?"

"Sort of ... god, I feel sick ..." Harm squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, hoping desperately that the dizziness would pass. Finally, he felt steady enough to look up. "Everybody else okay?"

"Yes, sir. The admiral and Colonel Mackenzie are out searching for coffee. Apparently it's in short supply around here." The junior officer took a seat by the bed. "The doctors say you're going to be fine in a couple of weeks, and I have to say, you look a lot better than the last time I saw you."

"Considering how I feel, that's pretty depressing, Bud." He tried to shift slightly, and sucked in a sharp breath as a dagger of pain shot through his left arm. "Oww! Shit ..."

"Sorry, sir - your arm's supposed to be immobilized. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"Maybe some water ... and my sidearm, so I can shoot myself ..."

Bud smiled sympathetically and moved to the sink just as the other two entered the room. "Good to have you back with us, Commander," A.J. commented lightly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like hell, sir," Harm admitted, glancing between the JAG and his chief of staff. "Hi, Mac," he offered simply.

"Hi, sailor," she returned quietly, all too aware of the other people present. "Would you please do your best not to freak us out like that again?"

"Sorry. Guess the case wasn't interesting enough as it was."

Sensing the undercurrent of tension, A.J. cleared his throat. "Lieutenant, I've got to meet with the CinC staff to figure out how we're going to explain all this to ZNN. Would you mind assisting?"

"Not at all, sir." Bud hastily followed him to the door and glanced back for just a second. "Hope you feel better, Commander."

"Thanks, Bud. I'll see you later. And Admiral - thank you."

A.J. nodded once, with a hint of a smile, and stepped out into the hall.

When the others had gone, and it was only the two of them, Harm motioned toward the chair with his good arm. "So. Did I miss anything?"

"You missed me learning how to operate a cutting torch by trial and error. Other than that, not much."

"Sounds entertaining." He coughed a little, and Mac handed him the glass of water Bud had retrieved. "Somehow I'd managed to forget how much coming out of anesthetic sucks."

"It's not just that. Your lungs were filling up with blood when we finally got to you. The corpsman said if it had taken just five minutes longer ..." She cut herself off and forced a more pleasant expression. "Anyway, we tried to reach your mom and stepdad, but didn't have any luck."

"They're in Florence. I think. Maybe it was Rome." He shook his head. "Don't tell them. I'll talk to them when they get back - it'll give me time to figure out a way to explain it without giving either of them a heart attack." Some part of his still-fogged mind told him that she was holding something back. "Mac? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I mean, nothing aside from the fact that my best friend damn near died today." After the words were out, a split-second of shock flitted across her face, as if she wasn't sure she'd actually said them. "What I meant was - oh, hell, I don't know what I meant. I'm just still dealing with it, that's all."

Harm watched her for a moment, surprised by the very atypical reaction from the die-hard Marine he knew so well. Finally, he realized what had surprised him the most, and he spoke up. "After everything that's happened lately ... I'm still your best friend?"

"Flyboy, do you really even have to ask?" Mac smiled, but it was overtaken by doubt. "Aren't I still yours?"

"Of course. I mean, I hope so. It's just that - since I got back, everything's been so

different. It's not that I expected otherwise, of course. You, and Bud and Harriet, and the admiral ... I missed six months of your lives, and I know I can't do anything about that now. I wanted to believe that I could still be a part of things, the way it used to be, but every so often there's a casefile I don't remember, or a party I wasn't around for, and I feel like I'm on the outside looking in again. And I end up wondering if I really belong anywhere."

Suddenly he glanced up, shaking off whatever self-pity he'd slipped into. "Jeez, that went depressing awfully fast. Sorry to go all melodramatic on you. Things really have been getting better. I just wasn't sure if getting our friendship back was too much to hope for."

"Never," she vowed, laying her hand on top of his. "Harm, I'm not going to pretend I understand why you needed to go back to flying, but I can accept it. It doesn't make you a different person to me. I promise."

"I'm glad," he said softly, their gazes locked. After a few seconds, though, his eyes began to drift closed. He fought against it for a moment, but she shook her head.

"Go ahead and sleep. You'll feel better if you do."

"Sorry ..." he mumbled vaguely, slipping into unconsciousness again. Mac lifted his hand to her lips and gently placed it beside him on the bed.

"One day," she informed his sleeping form quietly, "you're actually going to have to tell me why you keep saying that."

Two days later
1043 PST
Medical Center courtyard

"Morning, squid," called a familiar voice from behind him. Harm turned to see Mac standing on the sidewalk, arms folded across her chest. "Took me forever to find you. How did you get out here?"

He shrugged, a little sheepishly, and gestured to the open seat next to him. She sat down on the park bench. "I was going nuts up there, so I begged and pleaded to come outside for a while. They made me take a wheelchair, but I ditched it by the door."

"Typical. I'm probably going to end up carrying you back upstairs."

"Yellow light," he retorted with a withering look, pulling his hooded sweatshirt tighter around himself. The motion didn't escape Mac's notice. He might be up to writing reports and terrorizing the nurses, but if the sixty-five-degree California weather was getting to him, there was still a long way to go. "Besides, it hurts more to pilot that damn wheelchair with a screwed-up arm than it does to just walk. What have you guys been up to?"

"The bureaucratic two-step, mainly. The whole Triton program is in overhaul, so we're helping out with the transition. I think they've run out of paper for us to push, though. We're supposed to fly home tomorrow. You going to be cleared to come back with us?"

"I sure hope so. I am well and truly sick of Jell-O. But if the doctors let me go at all,

they might make me go straight to Bethesda. They weren't too crazy about the idea of me being on my own, in spite of all my attempts to convince them."

"What if somebody stayed with you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Like who? You're not volunteering - are you?"

"I don't know, maybe. I do like a challenge." She flashed a quick smile, masking the fact that she really hadn't given it much thought before speaking up. "Besides, then I'd have a decent excuse to put Mic off for a while."

"Mic? As in Brumby?" His own smile faded a little. "What's he doing now?"

"We've been emailing back and forth, and he keeps trying to convince me to come out to Australia for a while. Now that we're out here on the West Coast, he seems to think this is a perfect opportunity. I don't know - it sounds nice, and it would sure beat the snow we're about to get in D.C. But it would be ... awkward, I think. This way I can say no without hurting his feelings."

"By telling him you have to baby-sit me? That'll go over well. He'd probably be first in line to drop another bench on me. Not that the feeling isn't mutual."

A slow grin crept over her face as realization struck. "You're jealous."

His head swung around, startled. "I am not!" he replied defensively. "Brumby's just an ass. The way he used to look at you, in the middle of the damn bullpen - if he were in our Navy, he'd have been on report ages ago."

"Just looking at a member of the opposite sex isn't a crime, sailor," she pointed out, enjoying his discomfort. "It's not a detriment to good order and discipline to find someone attractive, and it doesn't bother me. You can't tell me you've never looked at a woman in uniform that way."

"What, is that an invitation?"

Everything stopped dead for a moment. Mac kept her composure, but her mind was whirling. How the hell had he turned the tables on her so quickly? One look at him, however, told her that he was just about as shocked as she was. This was precisely the problem that both of them had been trying to deny for so long. Things had changed between them since his return, yes - but not all of it was the direct result of an F-14.

Quickly, he averted his gaze and spoke again, more tentatively. "Look, ah, you do what you want to do. I'll be fine by myself. To be honest, maybe a break from Washington would be good. Maybe you'll find that a change of pace is what you need."

"Maybe it's what we need," she answered quietly. "We're not in Washington now, are we?"

A hundred conflicting thoughts coursed through his brain in those few heartbeats. Was this the chance they'd been needing all this time? In the end, though, between desire and doubt, the side of him that had been hardened by all he'd seen and done won out. "Location

doesn't change who we are, Mac," he said in a barely-audible voice.

Hurt flickered in her dark eyes, but she didn't back away. "Most men would disagree with you."

"I know. I disagree with me sometimes, too."

She searched his features for some kind of explanation, but there was little to be found. "You still can't let go?" she asked finally.

"Let go?"

"Of the love you lost. Of the rules. Of whatever it is that's putting that fear in you right now."

He sighed, wishing there was some way to make her understand. Hell, to make himself understand. "It's not that simple, Mac."

"I'm making it that simple. Can you, or not?"

He closed his eyes. "Not yet."

There was a short silence, full of pain and broken chances. "Okay," she whispered. "I guess I'll see you later."

"Mac - "

But she was already walking away, crossing the courtyard with a brisk stride that he'd never be able to match. Harm leaned forward and buried his head in his hands, wondering if he might have just destroyed the best thing in his life.

1210 PST Test Division Headquarters

A.J. surveyed the busy office with a weary but satisfied gaze. Life was proceeding more or less as usual at Corona. The media had run the story of the test malfunction, but they'd been fairly respectful of the circumstances. Admiral Plummer's deputy was effectively in charge until the official change-of-command could take place, and the damaged lab building was slowly being repaired. Having left Commander Imes as the acting head of JAG, he was looking forward to getting back to D.C. to straighten out whatever arguments Mattoni and Singer had managed to get into.

When Mac walked in, he was surprised at her appearance. He knew of very few people who were as squared-away as this particular Marine, but today she looked shaken, almost upset, although she was doing an excellent job of covering it. After the hell they'd been through two days ago, sure, but why now? "Colonel? Is everything all right with the commander?"

"Yes, sir. I was just over there - but this is on another matter. I wanted to ask ..."
She drew herself up to attention and stared directly ahead. "That is, I'd like to request some

leave time, sir. Commander Brumby has invited me to spend some time in Sydney, and I'd like to take him up on it."

"Right now?"

"As soon as possible, sir. There's a flight this evening, with your permission, of course."

"Granted, I guess. However ..." He frowned, wondering just how far he should stick his nose into his officers' business. "Mac, have you and Harm had a chance to talk about what happened? Really talk, I mean?"

She barely flinched, but he could see the ache behind her eyes. "Commander Rabb and I have done all the talking we need to do for the moment, sir. Please don't make me explain."

"All right, but Mac - "

"May I be dismissed, Admiral?"

A.J. sighed and nodded. She turned on her heel and was gone in seconds. With a brief glance around to make sure he wouldn't be missed, he grabbed his cover and headed for the medical center. Something was definitely not right about all this.

He found his senior attorney sitting in the windowsill of his hospital room, looking down at the wind brushing through the trees. There was an aura of defeat about him that took the older man by surprise. "You look pretty depressed for a guy who recently knocked the Grim Reaper on his ass," he commented from the doorway.

Harm glanced up, but there was no light in his expressive eyes. "Hope you'll forgive me for not jumping to attention, Admiral," he said tonelessly.

A.J. folded his arms and came into the room without waiting to be asked. "Colonel Mackenzie asked for leave. Apparently she's going to visit Commander Brumby in Australia. Why do you suppose she'd want to do that all of a sudden?"

"Sir - "

"Save it. I know I'm overstepping my bounds, and at the moment, I don't particularly care. You didn't tell her what you told me, did you?"

"What did I tell you, sir?"

"Bullshit," he said harshly. Sometimes the only way to get through to a person was with a sledgehammer. "You know exactly what you told me. When you thought you might die, you wanted her to know, but now you don't? How does *that* compute?"

"I don't know, all right?" Harm snapped back, frustration finally getting the better of him. "If it made any sense, none of us would be here, would we?" After a moment, he spoke again, in a more subdued voice. "I apologize, Admiral. That was inexcusable."

"I'm not here to flash my stars at you. I just want to know what's going on here."

Forget about the chain of command for a minute, in all respects. Harm, do you love her?"

He took a deep breath, the awkwardness of it compounded both by the injury and his own fears. "Yes, sir, I think I do."

"Then why is this so hard?" the admiral asked honestly. "Don't you think she feels the same way?"

"It's not that. It's - well, maybe it is, in a way. But mostly it's just everything around us."

A.J. nodded, leaning against the wall. "Let me tell you something," he began quietly. "When I met my ex-wife, Francesca's mother, I was pretty naïve about a lot of things. I thought that as long as we were happy together, everything else would just fall into place. Then I ended up in a war, and things started to change. When my marriage started to fall apart, I didn't think there was anything I could do to stop it. The circumstances were fairly complex, and it just seemed like there was too much to overcome. She finally left, and for most of twenty years, I didn't look back. But when Francesca was kidnapped last year, and Marcella and I had a chance to really talk for the first time in years ... it turns out that when she left, she kept waiting for me to come after her. And I realized what a chance I'd missed, because I'd given up so easily. I didn't get to see my daughter grow up. I'm still not sure if it ever could have really worked, but now I'll never know, because we let the circumstances dictate our choices. And that's a coward's way to live."

Harm didn't meet his gaze, but it was clear that the message had gotten through. "I'm not afraid of being with her, sir," he whispered. "I realized a while ago that having her in my life is more important than damn near everything. I'm afraid I'll do something wrong - I'm fantastic at that - and I'll lose her for good."

"Harm," said A.J., his voice gravely earnest, "if you don't do something in short order, you just might lose her without even trying."

There was a long silence, and at last the younger officer looked up. "Admiral, you've already saved my life once this week. Can I impose upon you to do it again?"

And for the first time in weeks, A.J. saw the familiar determination that was so unique to this man. He nodded in satisfaction. "Find some shoes and follow me."

1718 PST Local Airport

Mac checked her watch for the fifth time before fully realizing what she was doing. When had she ever needed *anything* to help her tell time? The idea would have been worth a laugh, if she'd been in the mood for laughing. But it was hard to find humor in much of anything so soon after having her heart torn out with two simple words.

What in God's name were you thinking? she mentally berated herself. What had possessed her to confront him like that? She knew how he was about such things, probably better than anyone. Her best friend - the closest, truest friend she'd ever had, in spite of all the uncertainty of the last few months - and she'd practically propositioned him. In the span of mere seconds, she'd tossed the UCMJ and three years of partnership out the window. Why

should it be a surprise that he couldn't do the same?

It wasn't just that, though. She was starting to recognize the possibility that maybe he simply didn't feel that way toward her. He'd packed up for flight duty at the first opportunity, after all: and if a near-death experience wasn't enough to make things clearer ... Maybe 'not yet' was nothing more than an indefinite stall tactic.

But what if it wasn't?

She shook her head, trying vainly to clear it. Right now she needed to step back from all this madness. If Mic Brumby wanted to turn on the charm, he could take his best shot. There was very little to hold her down.

Her cell phone rang, and for a moment, she debated whether or not to answer it. Technically she wasn't on leave for another hour, but if it was Harm - she didn't have the first clue what to say to him. Eventually, duty overrode fear, and she flipped it open. "Mackenzie."

"Colonel," greeted the admiral's voice. "Your flight still leaving as scheduled?"

"Um, yes, sir," she replied, a little wary. "My leave's not canceled, is it?"

"No, nothing like that. I just wanted to see if you were still at the gate."

"Sir, I don't think I understand."

"You will soon enough," A.J. remarked calmly, and ended the call. Mac frowned at her phone for a moment, as if it might somehow decode the cryptic message. When no assistance came, she shoved it back into her purse and went back to staring at the poster on the far wall. It was a striking view of Sydney Harbor at night, with the Opera House bathed in light and the bridge in the foreground.

"You know, they wrote 'eternity' on that bridge in lights on New Year's Eve."

The soft voice off to her right was unmistakable, and it sent a warm flush straight through to her toes. Almost immediately, however, her brain clamped down on that feeling, knowing that she couldn't afford to lose herself so easily. A note of resignation echoed as she answered without turning around. "Is that how long we're going to wait? Is that what 'not yet' means?"

"No. It's not."

The conviction in that statement compelled her to turn. He stood there in sweatpants and a well-worn USS *Patrick Henry* T-shirt, a hospital bracelet still cinched around his wrist. It looked as if all the strength he had was focused on keeping himself upright, but there was no question about the certainty in his eyes.

"You look terrible," she said softly, and he responded with a rueful smile.

"I feel worse."

"You're UA from the med center, aren't you?"

"I had permission from my CO, if not the doctors."

Understanding flickered in her mind. "You roped the admiral into bringing you out here to stop me?"

"Sort of. Some of it was the other way around. May I sit down, or would you rather watch me suffer?"

"Oh, for God's sake, take a seat before you collapse." She gestured with a hand, and he sank into the chair beside her.

"I wouldn't blame you if you did want to watch me suffer a little," he said quietly. "I deserve it after what I did."

"What did you do? Tell the truth? I can't be angry at you for that." She glanced away, but his hand on her arm made her turn back.

"I didn't tell the truth. Or if I did, I didn't give you the right reasons. I wish I could explain it better, but it all comes down to me being afraid. I've been afraid to let go, because I'm pretty sure that if I did, the sheer force of what I feel for you would be enough to take out a city block. I've known that for a long time now, but I never trusted my perception of what you felt. I guess I still don't. If you're not sure about what it is that's between us - if you're just looking to give it a try, to help you figure it out - then we're not on the same page. I know I can't ask for anything, especially after the way I've handled this whole mess, but - "

"Flyboy," she broke in gently, "slow down and breathe, or you're going to start coughing again. Besides, I'm starting to lose your train of thought."

"Sorry." He took a second to compose himself and spoke in a more reasoned tone. "This is a new experience. I don't think I've ever been this way with anyone else."

"I suppose I should be flattered," she commented lightly, masking the note of hope in her voice.

"You should, Sarah."

The use of her name surprised her into silence, and he slipped his hand down to catch hers. "I let you believe that I couldn't let go because I didn't care. The truth is, I couldn't let go because I care too damn much. I need you, Sarah. I need you more than I thought I could ever need anyone. The six months I spent at sea showed me that in vivid detail. I guess I've been working under the theory that it would be better to have you just barely out of reach than to not have you at all. If we try this and fail, and you're gone from my life completely - I'll go insane. I can't even stand to think about it. That's why I said what I did, and if it doesn't make any sense, then I'm sorry, but it's the best I can do."

Shocked by the emotional floodgate that had just been opened, she waited a moment before choosing her response. "Harm, I need you, too," she confessed, a slight catch in her voice. "Don't you see, that's why I had to finally face this. God, when I saw what had happened to you in the accident, I almost lost it entirely. Believe me, after that, I don't have any doubts about how I feel. And as long as we go on ignoring that, we'll be taking the risk of never knowing for sure. I can't swear to you that we'll get a fairy-tale ending out of this, but

if we find even a little of the happiness I'm hoping for, then in my mind, it's worth the chance. Is it worth it to you?"

He nodded slowly, as if hardly daring to believe that this conversation was even real. "Just please don't leave," he whispered haltingly. "I've made a lot of mistakes before, but I think it would be a mistake *not* to risk this one. I don't really know where to go from here, but I think I'm going to start by finishing my sentence from a couple days ago."

"Which one would that be?" she asked quietly, tightening her hand in his. "The one that began with 'I'm sorry'?"

"That's the one. The admiral asked me why I said that, and I told him. The look on his face was pretty bizarre ... it's the last thing I remember before passing out ..." He shook his head and continued. "Anyway, there were two parts to it. First, I'm sorry because I couldn't make you understand why I needed to go back to flying. I still believe that I did it for the right reasons - "

"Harm, you don't have to justify that - "

He silenced her with a gentle finger to her lips. "I'm not done. I still believe I did it for the right reasons, but I want you to know that I came back for the right reasons, too. I figured out what was important to me. That's part two. When I thought I was going to die, I was sorry because I never told you the truth."

She wasn't sure she was breathing, but somehow she managed to force out a response. "And what is the truth?"

"This."

And he kissed her.

Later, she would try to recall the exact circumstances of that first breathtaking kiss - where her hands were, how their bodies became entangled - but her analytical mind would fail her. All that lingered in her memory was the fact that it was the most incredible kiss she'd ever known.

"I love you," he said simply, his lips almost brushing her ear. "Whatever else happens, know that at least that much is true."

Her eyes were shining as she leaned in to return the kiss, the outside world vanishing around them. Travelers hurried past without so much as a second glance at the couple sitting against the wall, holding on to each other as if any hint of release would break the spell. At long last, Harm lifted his head and spoke in a small voice. "I wish I didn't have to say this, but my arm's killing me, and I'm getting kind of light-headed."

"Oh, God, I'm sorry. We've got to get you back to the med center. I wasn't thinking."

"Neither was I, obviously," he admitted sheepishly. "Will you come back with me?"

"Sailor, I'm not leaving you now without a direct order."

"Funny you should mention that," commented a voice from a few yards away. Both

officers instinctively straightened as A.J. Chegwiddden moved into view, careful to keep the smile off his face. "Colonel, upon further consideration, I'm not sure I can spare you this week. We're going to be short-handed until Commander Rabb recovers, and I need my chief of staff. Would it be possible to put off your leave until a later date?"

Mac hid her own smile. "Duty first, sir. We'll all be on the plane back to Washington tomorrow - provided the commander's up to it, of course."

"The commander isn't staying here a minute longer than he has to," Harm declared, glancing back at her. "He has a lot of catching up to do."

"In that case, can I offer you both a ride back to the base? It looks to me like there are a few things the three of us need to discuss. Such as the finer points of the Navy's fraternization policy." He enjoyed their uncomfortable glances for a moment before shaking his head. "Lighten up, you two. I'm only talking about where we need to 'officially' assign you so that you don't have to hide like guilty teenagers."

Relieved, Mac climbed to her feet and slid her arm around Harm's waist, offering support if needed. Together they made their way down the concourse, a huge weight suddenly gone from their shoulders. Now, at last, the uncertainty and misunderstandings of the past few months were behind them, and a far brighter tomorrow lay ahead.

"When we get home, you owe me lunch, remember?"

"I do *not* owe you lunch! You didn't win that bet."

"How's that? My score was closer."

"After you changed it, sure."

"It was before kickoff, wasn't it? Still legal."

"I don't think so, Colonel 'Redskins-have-no-pass-rush'."

"Oh, keep talking, Commander 'Defense wins championships'."

A.J. shook his head as his two best lawyers continued to wrangle over the finer points of their football bet. Some things truly were as constant as the stars.

***** THE END *****