



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13

Classification: Action, Romance (Harm/Mac/Brumby)

Spoilers: "Family Secrets", "The Prisoner", "Death Watch", "Boomerang"

Important - the actual U.S.-China incident involving a Navy surveillance aircraft did not occur until I was about two-thirds of the way done with this story, and it had only recently been resolved when I finished. Believe me, if I'd had that kind of reference to work from, the details would be a lot tighter. It gave me an extremely creepy feeling to see the similarities. Nevertheless, they are entirely coincidental.

Author's Notes: This is set mid-sixth season, approximately after the episode "Touch and Go". Yes, the EF-111 Raven does exist, but nearly all details shown here are products of my twisted imagination. And in case anybody's curious; yes, I'm well aware that the show 'runs' on Zulu time, but admit it - it's just not worth doing the math. My frame of mind for this story is this: considering everything that our heroes have been through, they're entitled to be a lot more emotionally fragile than the show would have us believe. A word of warning to the shippers - Brumby figures prominently in this one, and I'm fairly nice to him. (Renee's nonexistent.) But don't fret. All will be made right.

1042 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

There was nothing Harmon Rabb, Jr. hated more than not being in control.

Everyone around him knew it. He'd pace restlessly, firing useless questions at anyone within earshot, all to give himself the illusion that he wasn't helpless. And he'd never admit to doing it for a second.

Sometimes, his partner had to admit, that unyielding need to act served him well. It had saved lives on more than one occasion. Other times, when there was simply nothing to be done, it clawed at the back of his mind for days, leaving no sign of its presence save for the ache that lingered behind his eyes.

This was one of those 'other' times.

When Sarah Mackenzie first appeared in his doorway, he was staring at a section of last

week's *Washington Post*, not really reading it. He already knew what it said. The Russian son of an American POW had been captured in Chechnya, and U.S. authorities were joining the negotiations for his release. The truths that had taken him years to uncover were now being broadcast to the world.

"He's going to be fine," Mac said, stepping into the office. "For better or worse, Sergei's just like you. He's a survivor."

Harm glanced up, then tossed the newspaper aside with a rueful half-smile. "Never thought of myself as my father's other son before."

"Reporters bugging you?" she asked sympathetically.

"I've got caller-ID. They'll lose interest soon enough. What can I do for you, Mac?"

"Just wanted to touch base. We haven't had too many opportunities to connect since all this happened." She twisted her engagement ring around without realizing it. The motion didn't escape his notice.

"You think I'm sulking because you finally moved that ring?" he asked, a little more sharply than he'd intended.

"No, I think you're sulking because you can't go off and rescue your brother," she returned. "And you're justified in that. But I also wonder if you're ... disappointed in me."

A kind of shock flickered across his features. "Disappointed? How could you think that?"

"Come on, Harm. You and Mic have been doing pretty well at this little truce, but the fact is, you two can't stand each other. I mean, you've cracked each other's ribs. Am I supposed to just hope all of that is just water under the bridge?"

"Mac, you don't need my approval to get married."

"But I want it. Your opinion is important to me."

He surrendered. "I just want you to be happy," he said simply. "I think the world owes you that."

"And you really don't think I would be, with Mic."

Without meeting her gaze, he answered quietly. "You don't know what I think."

There was an awkward silence for a moment. She waited for him to explain, to open up, the way they used to. But no explanation came. "You're right," she said finally. "I never do, do I?"

The words stung a little, but then again, he deserved it. "This isn't really the best place to be having this conversation, is it?"

"I don't know. Is there actually going to *be* a conversation?" she asked with feigned

innocence. He shot her a withering look.

"Play fair, Mac. I'm trying, all right?"

"I'm sorry. I just want to show you that Mic's not the jerk you think he is."

"I told you, you don't owe me anything."

"Maybe not. But I want you to be happy for me. So would you humor me for a while? Lunch, maybe?"

He sighed. Maybe she didn't owe him, but he somehow felt that he still owed her. "All right. I'll come find you when I finish up this report. But no burgers."

"Deal."

"Damn, too late. And here I was hoping to steal you away for lunch." Mic Brumby stuck his head around the door with a grin. Startled, Mac didn't answer for a moment.

With a glance in her direction, Harm replied, "Sorry, Mic. We have a couple of things to discuss. Probably won't take long."

Mac recovered quickly and moved to embrace her fiancé. "I thought you were job-hunting today."

"I was. I got a call to be here at eleven. No one told you?"

She and Harm exchanged blank looks. "Be here for what, exactly?"

Mic shrugged. "Didn't say, really. The message just said that there was an upcoming investigation that you might need my perspective on."

Harm masked his disbelief that they could need Mic's perspective on *anything*. "Did the mystery message leave a name?"

"Not specifically. I think it said State Department." A sneaking suspicion dawned on him. "You don't think -?"

The other two finished for him. "Webb."

"Speak of the devil, and he shall appear." Clayton Webb was the next person through the door, not waiting to be invited in. "Glad you got the message, Brumby. And don't bother asking how I got your cell phone number."

"What's going on, Webb?" Mac asked, without wasting words.

"You're about to find out. We're expected in the admiral's office in three minutes." He gestured toward the hall. "Shall we?"

She and Mic exited, and Harm rose to follow. Within two steps, however, Webb held

up a hand. "This one actually doesn't involve you."

"You're kidding, right? *Brumby* gets read-in, and I don't?"

"*Brumby's* the one I need," the intelligence agent said bluntly. "The only reason I'm letting Mac in is that she's marrying the guy."

Mac had paused to listen, and turned back to them. "We don't keep secrets, Webb. I'm just going to tell him everything as soon as you leave. Why don't you save me the trouble?"

Rolling his eyes skyward, he relented. "I don't know why I bother. All right, come on. Time's an issue."

As they filed into the office of the JAG, Admiral Chegwidden eyed them warily. "All the usual suspects, I see. If this is a reprise of the Stealth incident in Iran, you can forget it."

Webb looked faintly surprised by that, which was unusual. "Not quite, Admiral, but close." He took a deep breath and launched into his briefing. "Yesterday, an Australian F-111 doing patrols over the South China Sea had to make an emergency landing at an airfield outside Thanh Hoa, Vietnam. Apparently the pilot had some kind of respiratory problem, and set down at the first place he could find. He's okay - the Vietnamese government was very cooperative about getting him back to his division. Unfortunately, they're being less helpful in returning the aircraft. We need someone to ostensibly represent the Australians and negotiate for its return."

"What does that have to do with us?" Mac frowned. "Doesn't the RAAF have people for this kind of thing?"

"They do, but it's not really their bird. It's ours."

Harm crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't buy it, Webb. The Aardvark's not exactly new technology. The RAAF still flies a few of them, but our Air Force retired them almost a decade ago. What's so special about this one that you need a covert op to get it back?"

"Think about it, Rabb. It's not really an Aardvark. Can't imagine who came up with that God-awful name, anyway." While the others looked bewildered, Webb waited for Harm to figure it out. It wasn't long before the light dawned.

"It's a Raven, isn't it?"

The agent nodded. "Now make yourself useful and clue in the rest of the class."

Ignoring the sarcasm, Harm explained. "The EF-111 Raven is an electronic warfare platform; early warning, jamming, and the like. They mainly flew SEAD missions - suppression of enemy air defenses. We had a couple of them attached to our squadron in the Gulf, before things got hot. I thought the Air Force deactivated the last squadron of them two years ago."

"They did. This one's even more important. It's been overhauled and used as a testbed for new EW and reconnaissance capabilities, very highly classified. The Defense Intelligence Agency has been running the program. For security, they made sure the aircraft

looked like a typical Australian model in every way. Because of that, it's possible the Vietnamese don't even know what they've got. But since they're reluctant to give it right back, we're assuming that they'll call some Chinese friends to come check it out. And I don't need to tell you how catastrophic *that* would be."

"Our best technology, gift-wrapped for communist China," the admiral mused.

Mic was shaking his head. "So you want to keep up the illusion that it's an Aussie plane, and send me in after it?"

"That's the plan."

"Why me?"

"Because only a few high-level people in the Australian military even know about this. And because you know something about both their interests and ours. You have experience with international law, and I'm fairly confident that you won't fall apart if things go south."

"What if things *do* go south?" Mac demanded, doubt clouding her dark eyes. "What if they've already contacted the Chinese? If they already suspect that they were being spied on, he might be in danger."

"It's a risk. I can't deny that. All I can say is that we'll be ready. The USS *Coral Sea* is operating in that theater, and a Marine Recon team will be along for the ride, just in case." Webb looked from her to Mic impassively. "Obviously, this is strictly by volunteer. You don't have any obligation to me or to the DIA. But this can work. Our intel doesn't show any activity from the Chinese air forces, so the odds are good that we can be in and out before they can even blink. I really believe that."

To his credit, Mic barely hesitated. "All right. I'll do it."

"Wait," Mac interjected. She met his gaze, and an unspoken message passed between them. Turning to Webb, she said, "If he goes, I go."

"For what? Moral support? You won't be able to do much from the ship."

"Better than being half a world away. I'll be a legal aide, or something. I don't care. But I'm not going to sit here and keep the damn home fires burning. I'm going, Webb. Deal with it."

Harm spoke up. "Got room for one more?"

"Oh, for God's sake," Webb threw up his hands, exasperated. "Can't you keep your nose out of *anything*?"

"Think it over, Mr. Webb," Admiral Chegwidden suggested, amiably but firmly. "This might go exactly the way you planned, but it'd be the first time. These two have pulled your ass out of the fire more times than you'll ever admit. Wouldn't it be wise to have them both in your corner?"

"Not this time. Rabb stays here. And don't bother trying to pull rank. This is a black

op, remember? There's no one to tell."

"Whatever you say." The admiral leaned back in his chair. "Commander, I believe you have an investigation to conduct on the *Coral Sea*? Something about observing shipboard legal procedures?"

Harm was nothing if not fast on his feet. "Ah, yes, sir, the captain's-mast review." He wasn't about to mention that he'd set up the mundane review for the *Patrick Henry*. "I can leave whenever you give the word."

"Good. Be prepared to stay a few days. Those captain's masts can be pretty tricky."

"I hear the Gulf of Tonkin is lovely this time of year, sir."

Mac was trying to hide her amusement at Webb's frustration. Admiral Chegwidden merely fixed him with a cool smile. "I may not outrank you, Webb, but I can sure as hell out-manuever you. Those of you that *do* report to me, keep me informed. Good luck, Mr. Brumby. Dismissed."

As Webb stalked past, Harm couldn't repress a satisfied smirk. "Have fun trying to get my orders canceled."

"Don't think I won't try. You know, not everything in this world needs your style of diplomacy."

"Hey, I'm just along for the ride. And to do a three-hour review, apparently." Harm watched Mic follow his fiancée back to her office, then lowered his voice. "Be realistic, Clay. Do you really want a worried Marine on your back while all this is happening? At least I can try to keep her busy, distract her from the fact that you're putting her future husband into hostile territory."

"As long as she doesn't break my nose. I'm sick of getting pounded on by lawyers." Webb shook his head. "Have you thought about this? You, of all people, going to Vietnam for a downed plane?"

"This isn't about me," he countered. "My ghosts are buried."

"The hell they are. Your ghosts have human form, and he's in a Chechen prison camp."

"Look, save the shrink routine. It's a long flight."

"All right, all right. Transport leaves in two hours. Be ready, or I'll happily leave you behind."

"I'll be there. And Webb - " His voice took on a warning tone. "If she gets hurt, I'll break more than your nose. Consider that a promise."

In her office, Mac closed the door and faced Mic. "Are you sure about this?"

"Not really, but I've got a few hours to convince myself." He flashed a smile, but it was tinged with apprehension. "It's the best way, love. I know I'm not wearing the uniform

anymore, but I still consider it my duty. You'd do the same."

"And you'd hate it if I did." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him gently. "I'm proud of you, you know that?"

"Never had a doubt. Come on, let's get going."

1612 Local
USS Coral Sea
Off the coast of Vietnam

Harm stood at the rail, gazing out over the flight deck. The plane crews were going about their duties, without a clue as to where the recently-departed helicopter was going, or why. They might not have noticed the passenger, a man in Royal Australian Navy blues; although they most likely noticed the beautiful Marine who'd kissed him goodbye. Certainly they hadn't noticed the change in her stance when the helo faded from sight. Harm had seen it, even from his vantage point on the weather deck. He knew her too well. Sarah Mackenzie wasn't going to get much sleep that night.

Webb had laid everything out with military-like precision, but that wouldn't keep her from worrying. The entire operation was dependent on Brumby's cover. If his ties to the U.S. were exposed, it would be a toss-up as to who got to him first: the Marines or the Chinese. To improve the odds, he was wearing a small radio and a state-of-the-art transponder so they could track his location. Harm had hung back from the planning session, less out of deference to Webb than a sense of keeping his place. He wasn't particularly fond of playing third wheel. Besides, Mac and Brumby needed some time. It would have to last them a while.

So he'd watched from there as she strode back across the deck, head held high, as if her fiancé was simply going off to New York for the weekend. Not for the first time, he admired her strength.

Behind him, the hatch opened. "How's the view?"

He turned, surprised. "Same as always. How'd you get up here so fast?"

"Not much else to do now." Mac shrugged and stepped up beside him at the rail. "Done with your 'review' already?"

"You know me - master of efficiency," he deadpanned. "Guess I'm on vacation now."

"You and me both. Webb doesn't want me anywhere near his crew." She mimicked a line from *A Few Good Men*. "'I have no responsibilities here whatsoever.'"

He responded in kind. "'My kind of case.'" Studying her calm exterior, he asked, "How are you doing?"

"Okay, so far. I just keep telling myself that they know what they're doing."

"They do," he said resolutely. "Mic's a good negotiator. He'll have them convinced in

ten minutes flat, and he'll be on the radio asking for a ride home before you know it."

She smiled faintly, but the smile, like his reassurances, was forced. "How'd Renee take the news that you were skipping town again?"

"I wouldn't know, since I talked to her voice-mail. We're, ah, taking a break from each other."

Mac drew back, caught off-guard. "When did this happen? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I would've said something yesterday if we hadn't gotten extremely sidetracked. We decided it over the weekend." He stared out at the waves, expressionless. "Renee and I get along great, but we're not madly in love. And we respect each other too much to pretend otherwise."

She would have guessed that months ago, but she wasn't about to say so. "So it's over?"

"I don't know. She may be optimistic, but I'm not. I think we're doing this to find out if we can live without each other, you know? And I think I already know the answer to that."

It occurred to her that this decision had come rather soon after her engagement, but she dismissed the thought. *The world doesn't revolve around you*, she chastised herself. *Especially not his world*. "So," she said again, changing the subject. "The Raven, huh? Much better name than the Aardvark."

"Fairly good metaphor, too. Like the Raven in the poem, always watching, never acting. But the watching was enough to drive anybody mad."

"The poem?"

"Edgar Allan Poe? 'Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary ...' You never read it?"

Raising an eyebrow, she tilted her head. "And you apparently did?"

"They do teach literature at the Academy, Mac. Besides, we were too close to Baltimore to escape it. They worship Poe over there - I think it's his hometown. Personally, I couldn't get into it. I thought the poem was about twice as long as it needed to be. I mean, we got the point from just from the last few lines."

"And what was the point, Commander Shakespeare?" she inquired, amused.

Suddenly he seemed to pull back, uncertain. "It's depressing."

"Poe was a depressing guy. Come on. What was the point?"

"The Raven was haunting him. He said it was the memory of his lost love." Distantly, Harm spoke the words with a measured tone and cadence. Amazing - after all this time, she was still learning new things about this man. " 'And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon that is dreaming/And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadows on the floor; And

my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/ Shall be lifted - nevermore.' ”

Coming out of his reverie, he noticed that she'd turned away. “Oh, God, I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. The last thing you need right now is morbid poetry. I'm supposed to be cheering you up - ”

“It's me, isn't it?”

He shook his head, not comprehending. “What?”

There was sadness in her voice, of a kind he'd never heard before. “I'm the Raven. I'm a constant, unspoken reminder of her.”

Understanding flooded through him, and it stopped him cold. “Mac, I wasn't thinking that. I was spouting off some inane first-year memorization. I don't identify with the poem.”

“Why not? It's true, isn't it?”

“No. It's not.” Taking her shoulder, he turned her gently to face him. “It's been five years, Mac. No matter how much you once looked alike, I don't see Diane in you. Not anymore. You're the one who helped me move on, and I'll always be in your debt because of it. I thought you understood that.”

“Maybe I did. It's just so damn hard to know what you're thinking sometimes ...”

For instance, on a ferry in Australia. The same thought flashed through both partners' minds, but neither dared bring it up. If his office hadn't been the place for this conversation, the deck of an aircraft carrier was certainly no better. He effectively broke the silence by wrapping his arms around her protectively. “At present, I'm thinking that Mic's going to be fine, and needs to get his six in gear so that you can stop worrying about him. I'm also thinking that you look like you're freezing. Want to go below decks?”

“I suppose.” As he released her and turned toward the hatch, she called tentatively, “Harm?”

“Yeah?”

“I'm really glad you're here.”

At that, he smiled unexpectedly. “What do you know? We finally got our Hallmark moment.”

**1703 Local
Deng Sha Air Base
Socialist Republic of Vietnam**

Mic straightened his uniform, for the first time in ten months, and faced the trio of men that was walking toward him. He felt decidedly alone as the chopper ascended behind him, and he found himself wishing Webb hadn't convinced him to go without an 'assistant'. But since keeping his cover was paramount, any additional personnel would have raised

suspicions. The trick was in the level of interest he conveyed: he had to *want* the aircraft back, but not *need* it. The harder he tried, the more dangerous it would become.

He met the approaching officer with hand outstretched. "Leftenant Commander Michael Brumby, Royal Australian Navy. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me so soon."

"Colonel Li Tranh. My associates are representatives of the Foreign Ministry." The colonel, older but sharp-looking, studied him carefully. "I, however, am a man of the air. I had expected your government to send the same."

Mic answered with honesty - probably for the last time on this particular trip. "I may be a man of the sea, Colonel, but I am also a man of the law. I believe that is why I was sent."

"Very well. Allow me to show you in. We can start immediately."

As he followed Tranh into the building, Mic caught sight of the Raven, sitting quietly under a makeshift hangar on the tarmac. The base was small and sparsely populated, and no one seemed to be paying the visiting aircraft any mind. So far, so good.

Once they were seated around a conference table in the stark command center, Colonel Tranh leaned forward. "I will begin the discussion with a question, Commander Brumby. Why is the Australian government so eager to retrieve this aircraft as soon as possible? Surely your fleet is not so depleted that a few hours would make any difference."

Here goes. Mic folded his hands on the table and prepared himself to lie like crazy. "It's not so much the importance of the aircraft," he said smoothly. "As you know, the One-Eleven is rather outdated. It's more a combination of politics and unfortunate timing. Our Ministry of Defense has recently come under fire from many sides, primarily because of budget concerns. There are allegations that corners have been cut in some programs to circumvent the parliament's power to assign funding. I assure you, of course, that we have done no such thing. But if our press were to learn that one of our aging planes had gone disastrously off course, even due to a medical emergency ... there would be a firestorm. The Ministry would be accused of ignoring safety and endangering lives. We seek to minimize that damage by resolving the situation as quickly as possible. Does the timing present a problem?"

"Only a minor one." The colonel spoke just as smoothly. "We would like a day to examine the aircraft."

Mic's surprise was only partially false. He turned on an indifferent expression. "Colonel, we have recruits younger than this plane. Is there really anything you could hope to learn from it?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But we are not as affluent a nation as yours, Commander. Our resources are limited, and we do not have the luxury of American-built fighter planes. We take the opportunity to learn what we can, when we can."

He attempted a smile, his mind racing. "Well, say what you will about the Yanks, they do build a decent plane. Can't say I'm fond of their hamburgers, though. At any rate, I'm sure my government would be willing to provide you with some kind of training tool - maybe a deactivated aircraft - at a later date. As an offering of gratitude for your assistance in this matter."

The colonel spread his hands. "We don't intend to take your plane apart. All we ask is that you wait until tomorrow to bring your pilots in. We have no flight engineers on this base, and although they are traveling as we speak, they will not arrive until the morning. Is it really so critical to have it back immediately?"

Mic wondered where these engineers were traveling from. Beijing, maybe? Warning signals were flashing in his head, but he had no choice but to maintain his story. "As I've said, the longer we wait, the greater the potential for embarrassment to our military and discord among our legislators. Is it really so critical for *you* to have a look at this specific aircraft?"

Suddenly, the gloves came off, and Tranh came out of his chair, leaning toward him with obvious mistrust. "This 'specific' aircraft was in Vietnamese airspace, Commander," he hissed. "Were I in your position, I would first be grateful that it wasn't shot down on sight."

Bloody hell. Mic, of course, knew why it hadn't been shot down: they simply hadn't been able to see it. That fact alone probably had their suspicions up. His options were rapidly vanishing. "Are you suggesting that our plane intentionally entered your territory?" he said indignantly. "You're making a very strong accusation, Colonel."

"No, I am."

He swiveled toward the door, where another man in a different uniform stood. Mic paled, recognizing the red star at his collar. *Guess we didn't have to worry about getting in before the Chinese,* he thought bleakly. *They're already here.* "What's going on here?" he demanded, rising to his feet.

"You may drop your masquerade, Commander," the newcomer said evenly. "This is a spy plane, is it not?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You had our pilot examined - he had a genuine medical condition. Why would we send an ancient fighter on a reconnaissance mission?"

"This is a fighter without claws. We have inspected the air-to-air missiles. They are nothing but empty casings. Are you now so advanced that you can win a war without shooting?"

"I was only told that they were participating in an exercise," he hastily countered. "They must have been training without live missiles."

The Chinese officer shook his head. "Empty missiles serve no purpose. Tell me, was it done to save weight? Perhaps there is something else on that aircraft taking up the weight. Something important, or the canopy would not be armed with an explosive charge." His eyes bored unflinchingly into the Australian. "My men have not yet found a way to bypass the explosives, but they will. And then we will see just what is so special about your lost plane. If you'd like to help accelerate the process, I may be able to keep you from being prosecuted as a spy."

Mic stared straight ahead. *Damn it, Webb. Why didn't you tell me?* "I have told you all I know. I have nothing further to say."

"As you wish. Commander Brumby, you are under arrest for espionage." A guard appeared and immediately seized his arms, dragging him out of the room. In less than two

minutes, everything had gone to hell, and instead of a halfhearted group of Vietnamese airmen, he now faced a merciless Chinese leader. If he were to get out of this at all, it would have to be soon.

As he was roughly pulled toward the stairs, he focused on a large window at the end of the hallway. The glass was already cracked, and he allowed himself only a split-second to wonder whether this foolish idea had a prayer of working. Then, without a second thought, he wrenched himself free of the guard's grip and hurled himself through the thin windowpane.

It was a fifteen-foot drop to the ground below, and although he rolled to soften the impact, he felt and heard a sickening crack in his left leg. But there was no time to lose. He shook the shards of glass out of his jacket and flattened himself against the wall, evading a hailstorm of gunfire from above. As fast as possible, he moved around the other side of the building and took off at an uneven jog. Only two hundred yards, and he'd be in the trees. It would be getting dark soon, and these soldiers wouldn't be prepared to comb the entire jungle. Would they?

More gunshots rang out behind him, along with a flurry of shouting, but he dove into the bushes and kept going. All he had to do was find a decent hiding place and radio for help. If anyone could get to him in all this. He took in his surroundings, a dizzying mass of green and brown, and wondered how anyone had ever made it out of this bloody country and lived to tell about it.

His leg was screaming in protest by the time he finally felt safe enough to stop. There was something resembling a cave hollowed out of a medium-sized hill, and its entrance was partially obscured by low-hanging branches. Good enough for now. How far had he come from the airfield? It felt like miles. He collapsed against the tree trunk and fumbled for the palm-sized radio transmitter, thankful that no one had found time to search him and confiscate it. "Emergency, emergency. Recovery One, come in."

The static-filled voice that answered had never sounded so good. "Recovery One here. What is your status?"

Mic sighed. "Webb, the next time you ask me for a favor ..."

1925 Local USS Coral Sea

Harm was stretched out in his rack, reading a *Time* magazine article about the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, when the intercom signaled. He swung his legs around and crossed the stateroom in three long strides. "Rabb."

"Listen to me carefully," Webb's hard-edged voice replied. "Go get Mac and bring her up to CIC right now. Don't stop for anything. All right?"

At that, his blood ran cold. This was not good. "Got it," he said curtly, and hung up. In ten seconds, he'd scuffed into his shoes, grabbed his uniform blouse off the chair, and was out the door. In another two minutes, he was buttoning his shirt in front of his partner's room.

Mac opened the hatch, taking in his unkempt appearance with a puzzled smile.

"Better not let anyone catch you looking like that." But his eyes betrayed his apprehension.

"Mac, we need to get up to CIC."

The color drained from her face as she began to realize the implications of that quiet statement. Without a word, she followed him to the Combat Information Center.

A steady hum of low, tense voices underscored the usual activity of the CIC. It virtually came to a halt the moment Mac stepped into the room. The half-dozen techs and intel officers were fixated on their controls, pretending they didn't know why she was there. They fooled no one.

Webb didn't waste time with platitudes. He knew she wouldn't want them. So he looked her directly in the eye and told her what he knew. "A few minutes ago, Brumby's signal started moving. It shows him about a mile and a half off the base. We're presuming that he's on foot. Our best guess is that he's been compromised, and he's trying to elude them."

Mac didn't move. In a corner of her mind, she felt Harm behind her, silently offering support. "Anything from his radio?" she dared to ask.

"Not yet."

"Why haven't you tried raising him?"

"We don't want to risk breaking radio silence, in case he's not alone."

Knowing he was right, she nodded numbly. Harm's fingers tightened around hers. So much for a simple, straightforward operation. She forced herself to breathe normally and not automatically jump to the worst-case scenario.

After a moment, the radio crackled. "... emergency, Recovery One, come in."

She closed her eyes with no small amount of relief. He was alive. That was a start. Webb lunged for the handset. "Recovery One here. What is your status?"

Mic's voice was strained but clear. "Webb, the next time you ask me for a favor, forget it."

"What happened?"

"It was a bloody set-up, that's what. The Chinese are trying to break into your booby-trapped cockpit as we speak."

Webb cursed softly. "What tipped them off?"

The Australian's exasperation was recognizable even through the speaker. "For Christ's sake, Webb - you might have warned me that the so-called weapons hanging off this plane were fake!"

"Damn it, they were supposed to do something about that weeks ago." The agent ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. That one got by us. We'll deal with the plane

later. Is your position secure?"

"For the moment, at least. I managed to ditch the regular Vietnamese guards, but who knows how many Chinese troops are out and about. I'm out in the middle of the bloody jungle, though. I hope your search party's read their history books."

"Don't worry about that. We'll have someone to you in two hours. Until then, stay put, and stay off the radio unless it's an emergency. I don't suppose you got a hold of a weapon?"

There was a rueful laugh. "Optimistic little bugger, aren't you?"

"Can't blame me for trying. Hold tight, all right? We'll have you out soon."

Impulsively, Mac seized the handset. "Mic - keep your head down, all right?"

She could almost hear the anxious grin in his voice. "Always, love." After that, the radio went silent, and she waited a moment to compose her thoughts before turning on Webb. "Empty weapons, Webb? That's about as inconspicuous as a neon sign! How the hell did this happen?"

"I don't know. Air Force Special Operations wanted to really arm it - the Ravens have never carried weapons before - but there was a weight issue. They were supposed to have a fix by now, but DIA wanted to keep flying in the meantime ... never mind. It doesn't matter. We dropped the ball, and I'm sorry."

"You'd better be sorry! You were so worried about his cover, when all they had to do was tap on the missiles to figure out they weren't real!" Fury blazed in her eyes, but Harm's hand on her arm stalled some of her desire to strike.

"Kill him later, Mac. Right now, the main objective is to get Mic back." The commander's voice was level, and she didn't see how tightly he'd checked his own anger. "Webb, he said that the cockpit was booby-trapped?"

Webb would've taken anything Mac wanted to give him, even a right hook. At that point, he felt he deserved it. But there was no time for recriminations. "It's a security feature, to make sure no unauthorized people can access the avionics. Normally it would simply lock you out. But if you try too hard to get past the canopy bolts, the crew-ejection explosives arm themselves. Any impact from a tool primes it. Apparently they've already figured that out, which means it's only a matter of time before they figure out a way around it."

"Can it be detonated by remote?"

"Not unless you want to throw a grenade at it. It was supposed to be an absolute last-chance scenario."

"Well, I'd say we're there, wouldn't you?" Harm folded his arms.

He was right, and Webb knew it. He really didn't want to have to explain to the higher-ups that they'd been forced to destroy a multi-million-dollar aircraft, but it was better than the alternative. "We can pull Brumby out, but not without being noticed. Once that

happens, there's no way we'll get within a mile of the Raven. And it's not as if we can blow it up from the air - that would play like an airstrike on Vietnam." Belatedly, he realized that Harm had that look on his face, the one that signaled a possibly brilliant but highly unorthodox idea. Their gazes met, and Webb sensed that this needed to become a private conversation. He raised his voice. "Mac, why don't you wait in the pilots' ready room? We'll let you know when the Recon team's set to take off."

She looked from one man to the other, her eyes narrowed. "You're not telling me something."

"We're just going to work out some details, Mac. We're going to get him back. I promise." Her friend's words seemed to reassure her slightly, and she understood that she would be of little help. Webb watched her leave, then moved to a corner of the room to hear what Harm had to say.

"It's amazing how far she trusts you."

"It's a good thing, considering what I'm about to suggest." Harm leaned in, lowering his voice. "We can't get to the plane after we pick up Brumby, and we obviously can't leave Brumby out there while we go after the plane. So what if we did both simultaneously?"

"And just how do you propose we do that?"

"Instead of sending a Recon team, send me. I'll find him, and the two of us will fly the Raven out of there."

Webb snorted in disbelief. "You think you can magically learn how to be a Recon Marine *and* a One-Eleven driver in two hours?"

"Try me. I spent a week as a Recon gunnery sergeant once, and my men sure as hell didn't complain. If you drop me within a couple of miles, I'll get to him. And flying a One-Eleven's not so hard. It's a swing-wing, dual-engine aircraft. It just doesn't have as much under the hood as my usual ride."

"It also doesn't have any damned weapons. Even if you could get off the ground - and I'm not saying I think you can - how far do you think you'd get before they shot you down?"

"Far enough. All we'd have to do is make it into international airspace. There aren't any operational fighters at that airfield, are there? The Chinese would have to scramble some F-8s from another base, and that might give us enough of a head start to make it to feet-wet in one piece."

"And how do you expect to get into the cockpit at all without getting shot?"

"I didn't say it'd be easy. When sneaking around fails, I'll start shooting back. And you'll have to tell me how to bypass the explosive trigger. There are a couple of other major hurdles, though. When your pilot set the Raven down, did he say how much fuel was left in the tanks?"

"Should be over half full. They were only fifteen minutes into the mission profile."

"That'll get us airborne, but we'll have to be conservative to make it all the way back

here. Incidentally, the AFSOC guys didn't take anything else off to save weight, did they? Like, say, a tailhook?"

Webb shook his head. "Don't worry. The aircraft's been carrier-based for the last few months. If you can land a Tomcat on this deck, you can land a Raven. It's half the size."

"Then what's the problem?"

He realized he'd nearly allowed himself to be talked into this insane idea. "Hold on a minute, Superman. I didn't say I approved of this whole thing. There are a lot of ways for this to go disastrously wrong."

"Since when has that ever stopped you before?" Harm kept his voice light, but he was deadly serious. "I know what the odds look like. But we don't have a lot of options. Access and ability, remember? Even if we can't get the Raven off the ground, we can at least destroy it before anyone else can get any information from it. And you can always send the Marines in after both of us."

"What's left of you, maybe. I doubt these guys will let another escape happen."

"Well, with all due respect to Brumby's jungle warfare tactics, if they let him slip, they can't be too well prepared."

"Maybe not the regulars, but their radar's up now. That place might be crawling with Chinese reinforcements." Webb paused for a moment and studied the determined officer in front of him. "Do you have any idea what this will do to Mac? To have you both out there ... "

"Don't you think I've thought about that? Believe me, I don't want to make this any harder on her than it already is, but I don't think we have a choice. We can't let that technology be compromised, and we can't abandon Brumby. If you've got a better solution, I'd love to hear it." Harm's stance was unwavering, but Webb could see just how much it tortured him to leave his friend in this awful situation. Then again, maybe it was for her that he had to do this. And, as he'd said, options were limited.

"She's going to take it out on me, you know."

"I know. I'm just hoping she'll have cooled off by the time I get back."

Webb sighed. "All right. Suit up and get moving."

In the pilots' briefing room, Mac's nerves were threatening to snap. She'd been pacing the aisle for twenty minutes, and so far she hadn't heard a word from Webb or Harm. Opening the hatch, she flagged down a passing crewman. "Are you on the helo crew that's going mainland?"

"Yes, ma'am. We're up in fifteen minutes."

"Is the Recon team already assembled?"

The young pilot frowned. "Ma'am, as far as I know, we've only got one passenger on this hop. But they're being pretty hush-hush, so I could be wrong."

"I doubt it. Thanks, Lieutenant." Something was definitely up. She turned around to head back to CIC and came face to face with a nervous-looking Clayton Webb. "Somebody had better tell me what's going on, Webb. Why aren't you sending in a full team?"

Webb held up a hand. "Before you break me in half, you should know that very little of this was my idea."

"That's not enough to save you. You *are* going to pull Mic out, aren't you?"

"Of course we are. We're just going to pull him out in the Raven."

She gave a short, derisive laugh. "Oh, terrific. That makes all the sense in the world. I suppose Harm came up with this little scheme. Where is he, so I can break *him* in half instead?"

"Can it wait until I get back? Then it'll be open season on dumb-ass pilots."

At his voice, Mac turned, and froze. In the back of the briefing room, Harm dropped his gear on the nearest chair and faced her directly. He was wearing a dark-gray flight suit, with no patches to identify him, and a rappelling harness. The final pieces fell into place, and she stared at him in muted horror.

Harm's resolve didn't waver, but he seemed to shrink under her gaze. "Clay ..."

"Don't worry. I'm out of here." Webb had no intention of encroaching on this discussion. He exited quickly through the side door, leaving the partners alone.

She spoke first, her tone dripping with skepticism. "You've got to be kidding me."

"It's the best way," he said simply, unconsciously echoing Mic's words from the previous day.

"How do you figure that? You're going to put your six on the line to save a man you hate and a plane that might not even fly!"

"It'll fly. That's the least of our concerns." What he was about to say should have been said a long time ago. He cursed himself for all the lost chances. "I don't hate him, Mac. We don't get along, but I could never hate anyone who makes you happy."

Slowly, understanding lit a dim corner of her mind. "You're doing this for me, aren't you?"

He avoided meeting her gaze. "I'm doing it for both of you. And because it's the right thing to do."

"Then let it be the right thing for someone else to do. You don't always have to be the hero."

"I don't see anyone else stepping up. We can't let them get to the Raven, and we can't guarantee Mic's safety while we figure out what to do with it. I'm the only one who's got a chance at doing both." Surprised to notice a single tear slipping down her cheek, he reached up to brush it away. "Mac, you know I have to do this."

She caught his hand and held it tightly, needing desperately to show him just how much this was killing her. "I can't lose you both," she whispered. "I can't even think about it."
"Then don't." He drew her close, his iron will almost beginning to falter. If he could do anything, *anything*, to ease her torment, he'd do it in a heartbeat. But his duty, to her and to his country, had to come first. Otherwise, it was all for nothing. "I'm going to find him and bring him back to you. I swear."
The embrace seemed to give her strength, and when she pulled back, her eyes were clear. "Don't make a promise you can't keep," she said quietly, instantly taking him back to another time and place ... another lost chance. Although there were a thousand things he wished he could say, there was only one for this moment.
"Haven't yet." Reluctantly, he released her and picked up his survival gear. "Hang in there, ninja-girl."
"Good luck, flyboy." As he moved to the hatch, where Webb now waited silently, she called out instinctively. "Harm?" He turned back, and her eyes betrayed her fear. "Just come back alive, okay?"
He nodded once, and was gone. Truly alone, Mac sank into a chair and allowed herself a few tears for lost chances.

2128 Local

Somewhere outside Deng Sha

Michael Brumby's fifteen years in the Royal Australian Navy had done very little to prepare him for this situation. He could find any legal angle imaginable, but in this jungle, he was utterly helpless. His leg was a constant, throbbing distraction, and he would have given anything for something to eat or drink. The stifling humidity hadn't lessened with the sunset. The discomfort wasn't without its uses, though. It would keep him alert - at least for the time being - and if there were soldiers on his trail, being alert might keep him alive.

Why should they bother? he wondered bleakly. It wasn't as if he would be any good to them, even as a bargaining chip. They'd find a way into that cockpit, no matter what Webb's grand plans were. He'd been turning the 'negotiation' over and over in his mind for the past two hours. The deck had been stacked against him, certainly, but there must have been something he could have done differently, somehow ...

A faint sound in the trees sent simultaneous jabs of hope and dread through him. Friend or foe? He probably wouldn't know for sure until the person, or people, made an appearance. Irrationally, he wondered if there were any dangerous animals in this part of the world.

From the sound of it, whatever was out there was alone, but it was coming closer. Mic tensed and offered a silent prayer for a friendly voice.

"Anybody see an Aussie around here?"

The hushed voice was decidedly American. Mic sagged against the tree out of pure relief. A figure moved into his view, but he couldn't identify it in the darkness. "Depends on who's asking," he replied. "Recon?"

"You only wish."

The lone figure removed his camouflage cap and activated a small, dim light on the strap of his pack. "You're a tough guy to find, Brumby."

Mic gaped at his would-be savior. "Rabb?"

"Don't worry. I come in peace. It's pretty quiet out there, so maybe they're waiting till morning to look for you." Harm holstered his weapon and sat down across from him. Rummaging through his pack, he came up with a water bottle and some ration bars. "You look like you could use these."

Mic accepted them thankfully and tore into the food, but remained wary. "Not that I don't appreciate this, but what the hell are you doing here?"

"New plan. We're going to steal the Raven back ourselves. Since none of the Recon Marines know how to fly, I thought I'd give it a try." Harm was still pulling supplies out of his bag. He tossed Mic a dark flight suit like his own. "You all right?"

"Not entirely. I had to jump out from the second story to get out, and my leg didn't

take it too well.” He pulled up his pant leg, revealing a massive, ugly bruise.

Harm winced. “Well, that’ll make this a little more of a challenge.” He examined the injury and reached back into his seemingly-bottomless pack. “You think it’s broken?”

“Fractured, maybe. I heard something crack, but it’s not as bad as it could be.”

“All the same ...” The commander retrieved a first-aid kit and withdrew a hypodermic needle. “Painkiller?”

Mic shook his head. “I’m going to need all my wits for this crazy plan of yours.” Harm raised an eyebrow, but conceded, instead reaching for the bandages. In a few minutes, he had efficiently wrapped the wounded leg from knee to ankle. Mic nodded his thanks and started changing into the flight suit. “How far are we from the airfield?”

“About a mile and a half. We were aiming to get there by 0430, so we’ve got plenty of time to cover the distance. Don’t worry about that.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “Why worry about that, when there are dozens of other things to worry about? Christ, Harm, this is suicide! How the bloody hell are we going to get back on the base without getting killed? I don’t even have a weapon!”

“Sure you do.” Harm handed him a silenced pistol. “The trick will be to alert as few people as possible. If we’re lucky, we won’t have to shoot anyone.”

Mic gave up. “Is there anything you don’t have in that pack?”

“Luck,” he responded matter-of-factly. “We’re going to need some.”

The Australian shook his head, incredulous. Here they were, in the middle of God-knew-where, getting ready to walk willingly into the lion’s den, and his companion was as calm as can be. With a flash of envy, he said, “You’re in your element, aren’t you? You do this sort of thing all the time.”

With a sideways glance, Harm shrugged. “Not as much as I used to. At the risk of sounding cliché, I’m getting too old for it.”

“Right.” He managed a sardonic smile. “You have to admit, it’s damned ironic. You and me as a team.” He received a similar smile in return.

“No argument here.”

Mic paused, then spoke tentatively. “I guess I haven’t said ‘thank you’ yet.”

Harm glanced up, recognizing the seriousness in the other man’s voice. “I’ve lost someone to this jungle already,” he answered quietly. “I’ll be damned if I let it happen to someone else.”

He hesitated. “Do you mean me, or Sarah?”

Harm didn’t reply right away, attempting to conceal a flicker of uncertainty. Mic sighed. “We’re in this together, mate. We might as well be honest with each other. You’d hardly cross the street for me, but you’d do anything for her. You can admit it. I won’t be offended.”

“I have lots of reasons for being here,” the American officer countered, but soon dropped the defensive posture. “Look, Brumby, we’re not exactly pals, but you did the right thing by coming here. And anyone who does the right thing in a situation this lousy deserves all the help he can get.”

Mic accepted the truce conditions with silent gratitude. “She’s going mad back on the ship, isn’t she?”

Harm wasn’t about to tell him just how right he was. He ducked his head and studied his boots. “I came along on this whole escapade to prevent that. Looks like I failed miserably.”

“Maybe not. In hopes of making it all better, you had to temporarily make it worse. Sarah understands that. She’ll be all right.”

“Only if we succeed.” He raised his eyes, and the determination there burned brightly. “Let’s get moving. There’s a lot riding on tomorrow morning.”

0035 Local

USS *Coral Sea*

Webb found her in the exercise room, unleashing a barrage of blows on a punching bag. For a split-second, he considered turning back, but quickly dismissed it. He’d gotten

himself - and everyone else - into this debacle. And now that Harm was gone as well, she might need someone to help her hold on.

Besides, the worst she could do was trade him for that punching bag. He raised his voice.

"Do you still want to kill me?"

Mac replied without looking up. "That depends on the next few hours." After a few more jabs, she steadied the bag and turned to face him. Inadvertently, he'd already managed to break the ice: she laughed out loud at the blue ship's uniform he'd borrowed from a helpful comm officer. "Sorry," she said, immediately composing herself. "It's just that I've never seen you in anything but a three-piece suit."

"I didn't have time to pack," he defended self-consciously. "Not really my style, is it?"

"I don't know what you mean, 'Petty Officer Webb'. Does this mean you have to follow my orders?"

Hearing her snicker, he surrendered. She could use a little humor, even at his expense. "As if you and your partner in crime were the poster kids for following orders," he retorted.

Unfortunately, that brought her back to the present situation, and her smile faded. "I could have ordered Harm not to go," she said quietly. "Technically, I have the authority. It wouldn't have made any difference, but I could have tried."

Webb waited a moment, surprised. "Did you want to?" he asked simply.

"Part of me did." The self-assured Marine let her calm exterior slip a little, acknowledging his concern. She sat down on the bench and began to strip off her gloves. "I know this is the best chance to achieve all our objectives, but I'm sure you can see why I'm having a hard time focusing on the mission right now."

"Mac, I'm sorry it happened this way," he said with genuine regret. "They're the most important people in your life, and they're out there putting themselves at risk. And all we can do is wait it out."

"It's not your fault, Webb. We all knew the stakes. If I was going to blame you, you'd be on the floor by now." She leaned back against the wall with a tired smile. "It's bizarre to think of Mic and Harm actually working together."

"Are they still at each other's throats? I would've expected them to eventually cool off."

"Hell will freeze over first. You know Harm. And Mic's just as stubborn. They got off to an awful start two years ago, and things just went downhill from there."

Webb posed his next question carefully. "Why do you think that is?" That drew a sharp look.

"Don't think I don't know exactly what you're getting at. For a spook, you can be pretty transparent." Instantly she softened her tone. "I know they resent each other because of me. I'm the whole reason they butted heads in the first place. Sometimes I wonder if I hadn't been such a mess at the time, maybe they might have even been friends."

"Do they have that much in common?"

She shook her head. "I guess not," she mused. "Mic's so determined to be open about everything, even things I can't admit to myself. Harm, on the other hand ... well, sometimes I'd kill to know what he's thinking. The thing is, I can understand Harm's point. Mic basically accused me of murder the first week we met, and after that he wasn't exactly shy about his intentions. Harm hated that - he gets protective that way. But other than a few courtroom quarrels, I honestly don't know what he ever did to make Mic resent him so much. They both want to do what's right. How can they be so far apart?"

"Mac," he stated gently. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No, damn it, it's not. Because if you're going to try and tell me that they're both in love with me, don't waste your time. I know my best friend better than Mic does, and certainly better than you do. Harm has had plenty of troubles in his life - far more than he deserves. But I'm not one of them. Someday Mic will understand that, and my world will be a much calmer place."

"And you're calling *me* transparent?"

She jerked her head around. "God, Webb, don't be an asshole right now."

"I'm sorry. I know this is the last thing you need at the moment, but I can't listen to you lie to yourself. You're convinced you know how Harm sees you, but you just said you'd kill to know what he's thinking. Hell, sometimes *I'd* kill to know that, and it's my job to know what people think. The point is, you do know him, better than anyone else on this earth, and he knows you. And that counts for something." The agent faced her squarely. "Just think about this. If you're certain about how Harm feels, and you're certain about how *you* feel ... why did you almost order him *not* to go rescue the man you're going to marry?"

For a while, she just stared at him. Then, suddenly, she slumped over and buried her head in her hands. "Because I can't imagine what I'd do without him," she whispered. "I know I've made my decision, and I should stand by it, but I'm still not sure. And I'm terrified that some Vietnamese soldier out there is going to be the one to make that decision for me."

For the first time in four years, Webb truly saw her anguish. Slowly, awkwardly, he put an arm around her shoulders. "Don't think like that," he told her. "To borrow a phrase, Harm is a natural heroic son of a bitch. And Mic's not exactly a slouch. They're going to show up on our deck tomorrow morning, still arguing, and then you can have it out with either or both of them. No one is going to decide your life for you."

Mac looked up at him with the barest hint of a smile. "You're not a bad shoulder to cry on, Clayton."

"I won't tell if you won't."

"Are you kidding? Marines never cry. And when they do, they have the good sense to deny it."

0206 Local

0.4 miles outside Deng Sha

Harm studied his GPS tracker and stopped beside a cluster of low trees. "This is about as far as we dare go for the moment. How are you holding up?"

"Marvelously," Mic said through gritted teeth. He'd been leaning most of his weight on a makeshift crutch - Harm had located a suitable branch for the purpose - but it did little to dampen the spikes of pain that jabbed through his leg with each step. The mile-long hike had taken them nearly two hours. He tossed the branch away, with the intention of getting off that leg as soon as possible.

"Hey, time out." Harm hurried over to assist. He pulled Mic's arm across his shoulders and eased him into a sitting position. The other man grunted his reluctant thanks. He'd been refusing all offers of aid up to this point, in spite of the agony of walking. The fact that he needed so much help was really getting under his skin; especially help from the high and mighty Harmon Rabb.

Painfully aware of the tension, Harm took a seat on the ground and decided to be blunt. "You're entitled to go on hating me like usual, but like you said, we're in this together. You want to at least pretend to be glad I'm here?"

"Oh, sorry to be rude," he fired back, giving in to frustration. "Am I not showing enough gratitude for the daring rescue, Captain America?"

"Listen, 'mate', I didn't jump out of a helicopter just so you'd owe me one."

"No, it's just a convenient side effect."

"Would you rather be wandering around out here on your own?"

"Hell, I think I'd rather be a Chinese prisoner."

The remark was designed to be inflammatory, but it backfired. Harm tensed, and his voice was deadly earnest. "No, you wouldn't. Believe me."

Still smarting, he couldn't repress the sarcasm. "I suppose you'd know that from experience, like everything else?"

"Yes, I would."

The quiet tone surprised Mic. "You're telling me you've been imprisoned by the PLA?"

"Almost five years ago. I was in Hong Kong to provide legal guidance on a territorial dispute. They rammed my boat and held me captive in the hope of forcing me to tell them

whether or not the U.S. would intervene militarily.” In the dim light, his eyes were cold as he remembered. “For four days, they alternated between beating me and drugging me. By the end, I was seeing things, hearing voices that weren’t real. They knew exactly how to get to me. If I’d had any information worth knowing, I might very well have given it to them.”

Mic was speechless for a moment. He couldn’t imagine what it must have been like. His assignments had rarely, if ever, put him at risk; and although he’d heard plenty of war stories from JAG, he’d always wondered just how accurate the Rabb legend was. “How did you get out?” he asked finally.

“Long story.” A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “It was combination of sheer luck and a couple of very determined partners.”

Mic felt another twinge of resentment. “Sarah?” But Harm shook his head.

“No, this was before she came to Headquarters. Actually, I don’t think she even knows about it.” At Mic’s look of disbelief, he rolled his eyes. “Contrary to popular belief, Mac and I don’t share every last detail of our lives. Given our recent history, I would have thought that was obvious.” Almost to himself, he added, “She probably doesn’t even know how I got familiar with navigating these jungles in the first place.”

“You’ve been in Vietnam before?”

Harm nodded distantly. “In 1980, I spent a couple of weeks with a group of former soldiers investigating reports of MIAs. We made some progress, but we weren’t exactly welcome. I didn’t get any real information about my father until years later. The thing that gets me is, he was still alive then. I was just looking in the wrong place.”

Mic did some quick math in his head and frowned. “Either you’re a lot older than you look, or you were a teenager at the time.”

“I was sixteen. Probably the only kid in La Jolla who came back from summer vacation with a CIA file on him.” He lifted his gaze, and the other man began to comprehend the depth of these wounds. “I have reasons for being the way I am, Mic. You don’t have to like them all - I sure as hell don’t. But I do have them.”

Slowly, Mic began to see his sometime rival as more than an arrogant fighter jock with a competitive streak. This was a man driven by his past, far more than his typical attitude and characteristic grin ever let on.

“Maybe that’s why you and Sarah understand each other so well,” he said abruptly, catching them both a little off-guard. Harm looked surprised, but said nothing. “It makes sense,” he continued. “I can’t really identify with how difficult her life has been. I try to tell her that it doesn’t matter to me, but I don’t think she believes it. She knows I’m a little bit naïve - there’s no hidden tragedy in my background. I mean, who but a hopeless optimist would secretly pack up for another continent in the name of love?”

“It seems to be working for you so far,” Harm commented, without malice. Mic turned to him, showing his doubts openly for the first time.

“Is it? I got her to say yes, but let’s be honest. If it were her life on the line here, which one of us do you really think she’d want?”

“Mic, that’s not love,” he pointed out reasonably. “Mac and I have been getting in and out of trouble together for years. We know each other’s reactions, so we trust each other in tight spots. But the difference between covering our sixes and being soul mates is pretty huge.” He shook his head, puzzled by this unexpected change. “Do you really think that there’s something between us?”

“Maybe not. But I’m not quite naïve enough to believe that it couldn’t happen.” He pushed his hands through his hair, powerless to understand why he was suddenly confessing his deepest fears to the one person who could use them against him. “I know Sarah would never lie to me, but sometimes I wonder if she might be in denial about certain things. And now I’m wondering if you are, too.”

“Mic - ”

“Mate, there’s a strong possibility that in a couple of hours, one or both of us will meet a nasty end. Even if that weren’t the case, we’d still have to face facts eventually. If I ask you some straight questions, will you give me straight answers?”

Harm looked wary, but nodded. “All right,” he agreed at last. “Take your best shot.”

"In four and a half years, why didn't you and Sarah ever give it a go?"

His lips twisted wryly. "What makes you so sure we didn't?"

"Sarah told me so, and I trust her."

He relented. "Well, for starters, there's this thing called the UCMJ."

"Bullshit. If you tried, you could have found a work-around. It's obvious that you two have a bond. Wasn't there ever a moment where you wanted to say 'the hell with it, let's go for it'?"

Harm hesitated, but this was not a time to lie. "More than once."

"But you were afraid?"

"Of the rules? No."

"Of what, then? That there might be a woman on this earth that could resist your charm?"

He would have been amused at the jealousy in Mic's voice, if the topic hadn't been so important. Instead, he just shook his head. "Is there something about me that makes you think I've never gotten my heart broken? Or do you just assume I can shake it off?"

"You just don't strike me as the type to give up easily," Mic answered truthfully. "It's the risk you take to play the game. You get knocked around, but you get back in the seat. Was it so different with Sarah?"

The proud commander turned slightly away, his features a mask. Only his voice betrayed a note of regret. "It's not that simple, Mic."

Mic had been weighing a decision; whether or not to ask the question that had been steadily driving him to distraction. Now, it seemed, was as good a time as any other. He took a deep breath. "Harm, I have to ask this, and if you want to deck me for it, I'll understand, because I really have no idea what I'm getting into."

"Who is Diane?"

At the name, he jerked up as if burned, and undiluted pain shone in his eyes. Quickly, though, he damped it, and the mask of control returned. "Did Mac tell you - ?"

"No. It was something Bud said once. I asked him why you two never got together, if there was something that had come between you. He just got this strange look, and said, 'Diane.' When I asked Sarah about it, she told me to forget it." Mic leaned forward, and his face showed nothing but curiosity and concern. "Was this Diane the one who changed things? Did she break your heart?"

"You could say that," Harm replied softly, his eyes still wounded. "She wasn't the first or the last, but she left the most scars. Not that she ever knew."

"What happened?"

"She was killed. I was assigned to investigate her murder."

Mic was astonished by the simple revelation. "Bloody hell," he managed to say.

"There's more, but it's complicated." Harm pulled his long legs up to his chest, leaning his arms on his knees. "Have you ever met two completely unrelated people who somehow looked exactly alike?"

Perplexed, the Australian shrugged. "Not exactly alike, but pretty close, I suppose. Your Diane has an almost-twin?"

He nodded once. "And her name is Sarah Mackenzie."

Mic didn't bother to pick up his jaw. "You're telling me that all this time, you've been working side by side with a woman who looks exactly like your murdered girlfriend?"

"It's too bizarre to be made-up, don't you think?"

In a surreal way, this made sense. Could that explain all the awkward moments, the enigmatic glances that he'd tried so hard to dismiss? "So Sarah knows?"

"She knows. I had to give her some kind of explanation for why I flat-out stared at her the day we met. But I didn't tell her the whole story until a year and a half later ... when she stopped me from making a big mistake. That changed a lot of things. Now, I don't see Diane every time I look at Mac. To be honest, she doesn't even look as much like her anymore. She's a completely different person in just about every way, and I can handle that."

" 'Just about' every way?" Mic asked.

Harm smiled wistfully. "Yeah, well, I seem to have a history with very strong women."

Diane wasn't a Marine, though. She was at Annapolis with me. She had this amazing sense of humor, and she was unfailingly optimistic. She refused to let me get down on myself, even after my crash - she forced me to see the possibilities in everything." He glanced up. "I wouldn't be surprised if you were the same way with Mac."

The odd compliment took Mic by surprise, but he nodded acknowledgement. "I can see where it would be difficult to separate Sarah from her," he offered, not knowing what else to say. "How could you know if you were attracted to her for the right reasons?"

"Mic, what are trying to get me to say? That I'm secretly in love with your fiancée? Will that solve some mystery for you?"

"Only if it's true," he replied quietly. "I think you and Sarah have left a lot unsaid, and I don't want there to be any questions left when we take our vows. Is that an unreasonable request?"

Harm paused before answering, knowing that he was trapped. The only way through this was the truth. Still ... "What I think shouldn't matter," he said evasively. "It's what Mac thinks that's important."

"The two aren't necessarily independent of each other," Mic argued. "Frankly, I always assumed that you would be the one to have the unresolved feelings. Being the incurable optimist, I figured she'd turned you down at some point. So one day I asked Sarah if you'd ever made any advances toward her. She insisted that not only had you never done that, but also that you never would. And she looked as if it hurt her to admit that."

An unreadable expression darted across Harm's face, and Mic recognized something that resembled guilt. With that, his suspicions were confirmed. He continued slowly. "So I got to thinking, and I came up with a theory. She never turned you down. *You* turned *her* down."

Conflicting emotions raged as Harm struggled to explain. "It wasn't like that. We were stressed, and I don't think she'd really thought it through. Our friendship was a mess because I'd left to fly, and - "

"This was *after* you came back to JAG?" Mic's fear increased. "How long after?"

Harm cursed himself inwardly. He hadn't intended to give that particular detail away. Mic had made no secret of his feelings before Harm's tour on the *Patrick Henry*, but it was only after his return that Mac had begun to show any interest. And he'd only been back for a few weeks before the trip that had changed everything.

"Harm, I have to know," the other man implored. "When did she ask you for a chance?"

He steeled himself to deliver the blow. "In Australia," he said quietly. "A couple of days before you gave her the ring."

Mic looked as though he'd been struck. He'd always held out hope that his instincts were nothing more than petty jealousy, that the woman he loved was truly committed to him. But if she'd taken his ring only days after being rejected by her closest friend ...

Seeing the impact of this realization, Harm charged ahead. "But none of that matters anymore. It was nearly a year ago. Maybe she wasn't sure then, but the important thing is that she *is* sure now. She loves you, Mic. You give her things that - " *things that I never could*, he wanted to say. But he held himself back. He'd done enough damage. " - that she's never had. Stability, and a sense of self-worth, and ... she's happy with you. That's what counts."

Mic closed his eyes. "I want to believe you, mate," he whispered. "But I can't help being afraid that she needs something I can't give."

"Right now, just focus on getting back to her in one piece. You'll have time to figure the rest out once this is over." Harm unfolded his legs and tossed him the backpack. "It's not much of a pillow, but I don't expect you'll be sleeping much anyway. We've got two hours before go time. I'll take watch."

"Thank you for being honest with me."

"I think I owe you that much." He leaned against a tree and placed his weapon within easy reach. "Get as much rest as you can, all right?"

Mic obeyed, stretching out on the damp ground and laying his head on the pack, but his mind was whirling. As he silently watched the American officer staring up at the stars, he

realized that there were still a couple of questions he hadn't gotten answered.

"Harm?"

"Yeah?"

"Leaving aside the issue of regulations, and the ghosts of lovers past ... do you love her?"

Harm didn't look at him. "I don't know. Maybe I do."

"Then why did you say no to her?"

"I didn't. I said 'not yet'."

Mic let that sink in for a moment before speaking again. "And yet you're willing to let her be with me?"

"Yes. I don't promise to like it, but I am."

"Why?"

His ice-blue eyes burned. "Because I can't be what she deserves."

0426 Local

USS Coral Sea

Clayton Webb paced the bridge impatiently. Mac watched him, a hint of amusement breaking through her tension. Sometimes he could be a lot like her partner.

"Mr. Webb," Captain Patrick Reiter stated dryly. "Would you mind not wearing out my deck?"

"I apologize, Captain." Webb sounded appropriately contrite, but his mind was clearly elsewhere. The signal they hoped to receive from Rabb and Brumby was simply a communication from the Raven that they were in the air. Anything else - any indication of activity from other bases - would be a bad sign. Unfortunately, it would be difficult to interpret silence: it could be either a delay or a disaster.

"If they're on schedule, they should be airborne within half an hour," the captain reported. "But until then, I suggest you all do your best to relax."

Mac gazed out over the expansive ocean and said a silent prayer for the two people she cared for most in the world.

The two guards at the far post hadn't had a chance. The sun hadn't quite appeared over the horizon, and in the dim predawn light, they'd been less than alert. Before either of them could hear the figures creeping up behind them, they were both on the ground, and Harm dragged them into the guardhouse. "Those blokes are in for a hell of a headache," Mic said under his breath.

"Only if they're lucky. If we pull this off, their superiors might just kill them as an example." Harm crouched low behind the small structure and studied the landscape. "We've got about a hundred and fifty yards to the hangar. Think you can hack it?"

"Eat my dust, seppo."

Harm couldn't repress a smile. Together, they moved stealthily along the fenceline, weapons at the ready. Fortunately for them, there were no automated perimeter alarms. For all the world's advances over the past thirty years, Deng Sha looked as if it had changed little since the war. That was a definite advantage. Harm had a suspicion that the Chinese protectors were soon to regret having neglected this place.

Mic leaned against the outside of the less-than-sturdy hangar to catch his breath. His leg had been protesting strongly for the last few minutes, but there wasn't much to be done about it. Harm ducked his head around the corner briefly, then held up three fingers. At least they weren't too badly outnumbered. Now they simply had to neutralize three men without allowing any of them time to sound an alarm. *Piece of cake*, Mic mouthed.

They moved up to flank the open side of the structure, every muscle tensed for action. Harm silently counted to three, and without hesitation, they charged in.

Two guards went down immediately, felled by matching shots to the upper arm. The third dove for his rifle, but was met by a six-foot-four-inch roadblock with steely eyes and a service pistol. Harm shook his head fractionally, and the young man raised his hands in surrender. He quickly joined his disabled colleagues in the corner. Mic kept his own gun

trained on them while the aviator climbed up to the cockpit of the Raven in two long steps. Holding his breath, Harm performed the sequence Webb had shown him to deactivate the explosive lock. In a few seconds, the canopy clicked open, and he exhaled in relief. Recovering his composure immediately, he glanced down at Mic. "Pretty good aim for a lawyer."

"Likewise, mate. Though I expect you've had more practice."

"Unfortunately. Get up here - when I light this thing, the whole country's going to know we're here."

As he powered up the avionics and scrambled through pre-flight checks, Mic carefully hobbled up the steps, his weapon still aimed. "Are we good to go?"

"Unless you want to hang around."

"Not bloody likely. They're going to grab for their guns as soon as I lower mine, you know."

"That's why we live-fire test our fighters." Harm pulled his helmet on and rapped on his open canopy. "Bullet-proof. As soon as I cycle up the engines, slam that thing shut and strap in. We're going to have to do a high-speed taxi if we want to clear the range of their artillery."

"Let's get to it, then." Out of the corner of his eye, Mic caught a flicker of movement across the field - someone was emerging from the main building. "Bugger. Punch it, Harm!"

The side-by-side canopies slammed down as Harm ignited the engines. The injured guards were temporarily held at bay by the force and searing heat issuing from the exhaust. As the plane cleared the hangar, heading for the end of the runway, gunfire and shouts followed close behind.

"Helmet's under the seat," Harm directed, his voice calmly professional. "Get secured fast and get the mask on so the oxygen starts flowing. We're going to have to climb pretty quick once we get off the ground."

"You mean 'if' we get off the ground," Mic replied warily, watching the chaos build around them.

"No, I don't." His demeanor had shifted slightly: he'd been confident before, but here in the cockpit, he was practically relaxed, flying through the motions with practiced ease. Mic couldn't help being impressed. Even in the face of these odds, Harmon Rabb was right where he was born to be.

A bullet zinged off the plexi-glass, making Mic jump. Harm didn't flinch. "If they were bright, they'd be aiming below the plexi," he commented, maneuvering them into position for takeoff. "Their loss. All right, here goes. Hang on to something."

And with a deafening roar, the engines sprang to life. Harm wrenched the throttle back, and the Raven raced down the runway and screamed into the air, leaving the confusion of the airfield far below.

"Come on, baby, don't let me down," he murmured as they climbed through the clouds. The aircraft's nose seemed to be pointing straight up, and as Mic felt himself being pressed into the seat, he had to remind himself that Harm knew what he was doing. Even if it meant facing another few seconds within artillery range, he wouldn't let them stall. At last, the altimeter crossed through eight thousand feet. "Hoo-rah," the pilot cheered quietly. "Let's get the hell out of Dodge."

Feeling the plane level out slightly, Mic managed to open his eyes, and stopped reciting 'Hail Mary's in his head. People did this willingly? "Christ," he gasped. "I'm never going to complain about flying coach again."

"Could've been worse," Harm commented. "You haven't tried a catapult launch yet."

"Not in this lifetime." Every passing second was giving him a deeper appreciation for aviators in general, and this one in particular. "Guess I finally get to see firsthand how you earned those DFCs."

"Well, I definitely didn't come all this way to get you killed now."

"Thanks. I think." He studied the readouts in front of him with growing apprehension. He couldn't make sense of most of them, but the flashing green dots in the central scope were not likely to be good news. "Ah, there's something on the radar."

"Those'd be our friends from China. They got here faster than I thought. How many?"

"Looks like two - wait, three." The 'rookie' struggled to read the scope properly.

"About two miles and closing."

Across the cockpit partition, Harm swore softly into his mask. "So much for pairs. Okay, here's where it gets interesting. We're only fifteen miles from international airspace. We just have to make it to feet-wet in one piece, and then they'll have to turn back, and we'll be able to coast to the ship. You going to be okay over there?"

Mic swallowed audibly. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not really. Hang on. I have to teach this relic how to dogfight without weapons."

He threw the Raven into a steep climb, then a rapid roll as the Chinese F-8s approached to intercept. Mic shut his eyes again, hoping irrationally that if he didn't watch the world spinning around him, maybe he wouldn't be sick. Then again, he'd rather be sick than dead.

Harm's touch was golden: none of the Eights had yet been able to get a missile locked on them. After a few minutes, however, the Chinese fighters switched over to guns, and it wasn't long before a round strafed the cockpit plating just under the canopy. There was a flurry of sparks, and Harm's cry of pain sent a chill of fear through his companion.

"Ahhh! Son of a *bitch!*"

"Are you hit? Harm?" There was no answer. Through the equipment that separated their cockpits, Mic attempted to get a clear view of the left seat. He yanked off his mask.

"Harm! Talk to me!"

After an agonizing moment, his voice came through, strained but clear. "Put your god-damned mask back on."

"Are you all right?"

"Just a little fried." Harm consciously ignored the stabbing sensation that accompanied each breath. They had bigger problems. "We can't shoot back, so we're going to play dead."

He nosed the plane over into a dive, still maintaining their heading in the direction of the closest international waters. Mic dug his fingers into the closest console. "Just how low are you planning to go?"

"You just worry about our distance to the border - I'll worry about getting splashed.

By the time we cross through angels three, we should be over the line."

As the ocean loomed large in the windows, Mic did his best to focus on the monitor.

"Almost there. One point two miles - point eight - point three - got it!"

Harm jerked back on the stick with everything he had, and the Raven soared back into the heavens. The F-8s, realizing their politically precarious position, drew back into their own airspace. That was it. For the first time in nearly twenty-four hours, Mic began to believe he might actually be gaining on that light at the end of the tunnel. They were on course for friendly territory - if only seven hundred fifty feet of it. He sagged back in the seat, drained of energy. "How in the name of God did you do that?" he managed to say. "There were three of them, and they were armed!"

"They were probably kids who've never seen combat. I'm not, and I have." There was surprisingly little satisfaction in Harm's tone: he was focused on their final task. "Right now I just want to get on deck."

"Nothing to it, right?"

"Not to shake your confidence, but this bird's a lot lighter than a Tomcat. I'm going to need some help from our friends on the Corrie." He toggled the radio switch. "Nest, this is Hawk One. We are feet-wet."

A muted cheer went up on the bridge of the *Coral Sea*. In the back, Mac closed her eyes and silently thanked whoever had heard her fervent prayers. The comm officer responded immediately. "Roger, Hawk One. Good to finally hear from you. See much traffic?"

"We had to outrun a couple of F-8s. Nothing I couldn't handle." The commander's voice was weary, but still strong. "Is Webb around?"

Webb leaned in. "Right here. How's the aircraft?"

"There wasn't a scratch on her until the Eights went to guns. Hope you'll take damaged goods."

"Are either of you injured?" the comm questioned.

There was a slight pause. "Mic's leg may be fractured. Other than that, we're just a little banged up."

"We'll have a corpsman waiting for you. Any red lights on your board?"

"Not so far, but we had a pretty good spark shower in here when that round got us. I don't know how far I trust the computers. You might want to clear the deck."

Hearing this, Mac's pulse quickened. Harm, who'd carrier-landed an overheating stealth fighter without breaking a sweat, was having doubts? She tightened her grip on the railing until her knuckles ached. *Come on, flyboy. You can do this.*

"Copy, will do. LSO, they're all yours. Grab the three-wire, Hammer."

"I'll do my best. Hawk One is on final."

"That's affirm, Hawk One," the landing signal officer reported. "Down range at two point one. Call the ball."

"Roger, ball." As the carrier deck slowly began to fill their view, Harm switched over to his cockpit mike. "Mic, put your right hand on that yellow handle near your knee. If I say so, yank it."

Mic hesitated, knowing that the F-111's atypical compartment design had made for some nasty ejections in the past. "What if - "

"Only if there's no other way. I'd rather avoid another ramp strike, trust me."

"I do trust you," he answered honestly, surprising them both. How far they'd come ...

"Thanks, buddy." And that was all that needed to be said.

A warning signal screeched in their ears, and the plane lurched suddenly. Harm battled fiercely for control. "There goes the auto-stabilizer. This is going to get rough ..." He smacked the mike switch. "Nest, how's my pitch rate?"

"Seven point five and holding," the LSO's voice came back. "Just keep her steady."

"Easy for you to say, damn it - this thing's handling like a washing machine." He fought the violent movements of the stick with one hand while preparing for the landing. "Gear locked ... hook down."

"You're a little low, Hammer. If you've got the fuel, you can go around again. It's your call."

"I won't make it that long," Harm stated tersely. "Cross your fingers."

Mic held on, barely hearing the edgy dialogue of numbers and directives. As they neared the deck, the only thought in his mind was that Sarah was down there, watching ...

The wheels hit the unforgiving steel deck with an uneven jolt, and the way his head slammed backwards told him they'd caught the wire. Almost before he realized it, the Raven was at a standstill. He slowly uncurled his fingers from the ejection handle, unable to think or move any further.

Mac and Webb breathed identical sighs of relief. A brief look passed between them, and without a word they both headed for the flight deck.

When he'd finally recovered his senses, Mic pulled off his helmet and wiped the sweat from his eyes. "Bloody amazing, mate," he said simply.

"Like you said. Piece of cake." Harm reached over to offer him a hand. The other man took it, not noticing the slight tremble, and they shook firmly. Then each opened his canopy to greet the approaching daylight.

A corpsman quickly climbed up to help Mic down the ladder; and as soon as his feet touched the deck, he saw the woman waiting anxiously by the tower, eyes shining. Shaking off the assistance, he hurried toward her.

Harm watched the reunion from a distance, just as he'd watched their farewell the day before. He'd done what he had to do, and in some odd way, he was glad to see this result. Even if it might cost him everything.

A crew chief leaned over the top of the ladder and helped him secure the cockpit. "So what were the odds?" Harm asked him.

The sailor did his best to appear confused. "Sir?"

"Come on, Chief, spill it."

He gave up, looking sheepish. "Sorry, sir - my money was on you to punch out once you made feet-wet."

"I love a confident crew." Harm started to pull himself cautiously out of the seat, trying to conceal a grimace. The chief paused with some concern.

"You okay, Commander?"

He waved it off. "Just toasted, that's all," he lied, following the chief down the ladder with his right arm clamped tightly to his rib cage. At the bottom, he removed his harness and leaned against the nose gear, glancing back at Mac.

She pulled back from Mic's embrace to look into his eyes. "Don't ever do that to me again."

"Go ahead," he grinned. "Say 'I told you so'."

"Not on your life." She kissed him again and clasped his hands tightly. "I just can't believe you two didn't kill each other."

"Well, it was educational, to say the least." Remembering their conversation in the jungle, and the marvel they'd just pulled off, he shook his head. "He's incredible up there, Sarah," he said softly.

"I know." Her voice was distant as her gaze drifted over to where Harm stood.

Comprehending, he only nodded. "We've got a lot to talk about, love. But it can wait."

Webb approached the Raven, giving both aircraft and aviator a once-over. Studying the jagged row of bullet holes in the fuselage, he observed, "I guess a Swiss-cheese plane is better than no plane at all."

"Navy blue isn't really your color, Clay."

"And dead pale isn't yours." Webb folded his arms, apprehensive. Something didn't feel right about this. "What happened up there? Would the Raven really not have made it back around?"

"I didn't say anything about the Raven," Harm replied quietly, lifting his hand from his side to reveal his secret.

Seeing the blood trickle through his fingers, Webb froze. "Holy ..." He lowered his voice. "What was it? Shrapnel?"

"I don't know. Maybe a - bullet ..." Harm's eyes lost their focus, and he swayed dangerously.

"Jesus, Rabb." The agent steadied him quickly and started toward the huddle of crewmembers. "Corpsman!"

Mac heard the undercurrent in his tone and turned. She met her partner's gaze, and her face went white, an icy hand gripping her heart. The temporary euphoria she'd felt vanished in the sheer horror of that sight. *I'm sorry*, his expressive eyes implored her ... and then he collapsed to the deck.

She called his name, but it came out a strangled scream.

Mic stood rooted to the spot, stunned. "Oh, no," he whispered. This was wrong, completely and totally wrong. He'd been so in awe of the entire incident that it had never occurred to him that Harm might have been hurt worse than he'd let on. As the corpsman moved to the fallen officer, he risked a glance at Mac. The torment that marred her graceful features only confirmed what he'd feared all along. He didn't doubt that she'd been upset without him, but without Harm ... her world would be shattered.

As if in a trance, she started toward Webb and the chief corpsman, bending over her friend's body. Then, just as quickly, she turned back to Mic, uncertain.

He masked his crestfallen expression and nodded bravely. "I'm fine. Go."

With a grateful half-smile, she rushed across the deck, dropping to her knees by Harm's side. Mic closed his eyes, the last embers of hope fading from his soul. He murmured a brief prayer for the injured man - both for Sarah's happiness and for his own conscience. Then he allowed a crewman to guide him to sickbay.

Mac grasped Harm's hand as the medical officer cut his flight suit away from the ugly wound under his rib cage. Against the angry scarlet stain, his skin was an awful gray, and he

was fighting to stay conscious.

"There's internal damage here," the corpsman reported grimly. "We need to stabilize him in sickbay and get a transport over to Okinawa."

As a young sailor ran off to arrange the transport, Mac brushed a streak of dirt from his ashen face. "Can't do anything the easy way, can you, squid?" she asked lightly.

"You know me ..." Harm coughed weakly, his eyes glassy. "Mic's okay?"

"Thanks to you. Hang in there, all right? There is no way I'm explaining this one to the admiral by myself."

"He's going to be pissed ..."

He convulsed in sudden agony, and Mac gripped his hand tighter. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she forced them back. "Harm, look at me. You're going to be okay. Harm!" But he had already passed out. "Damn it!"

The corpsman called over a stretcher, and a pair of medics carefully lifted Harm's motionless body. "We need to move. He's losing blood fast."

They hustled him away, leaving the once-stoic Marine to watch, utterly helpless. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see Clayton Webb's gray eyes holding hers. In four years and countless cases, she'd never seen such deep fear and regret emanating from him.

"I was so sure he was invincible," he said quietly.

"I think I was, too. Not that he's ever done anything to discourage that impression." She accepted his hand to help her up, and gazed off into the rolling seas. "Some women try to change their husbands. I try to change my partner."

"No, you don't. You like him exactly the way he is - obsessions and all."

He was right, and they both knew it. She sighed. "Right now, I'd like him better if he wasn't bleeding so much."

Webb took a calculated risk and spoke again. "It takes a very unique kind of person to risk his life, not just for the woman he loves, but for the man *she* loves."

Mac stared back at him, the tears threatening to overflow. "Not now, Clay," she whispered. "Not while I still have to wonder if I'll ever hear his voice again."

He placed a supportive arm around her waist, and they walked in silence to sickbay.

1138 Local U.S. Naval Medical Center Okinawa, Japan

Mic tested his new crutches tentatively, taking a few experimental steps in the hallway. He'd never been particularly graceful: these were likely to be a challenge. The fracture had been severe enough to warrant the crutches, but not a full cast, for which he was grateful.

At the same time, there was very little else to be grateful for. The intelligence community was thrilled with the 'successful' recovery of the Raven, but he was left with a sick, empty feeling. In an operating room directly above him, a team of Navy surgeons was working to save the life of Commander Harmon Rabb. They'd determined that a bullet had indeed penetrated the cockpit and struck the pilot, ravaging his insides even as he'd fought to land the aircraft. Everyone had said it was a miracle that they'd made it, but that was yet to be seen. The miracle would be when the Navy Cross was given to Harm in person, rather than placed on a marble headstone at Arlington.

The helicopter ride from the ship had passed in near-silence. Sarah had sat next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. They'd both tried to look at anything but the unmoving form on the stretcher, clinging to life with the help of transfusions and an oxygen mask. It wasn't so much that Harm was stable enough to be moved; it was more that they couldn't afford *not* to move him. He needed more help than a carrier sickbay could provide. The onetime Australian officer could hardly believe that the man lying there was the same man who'd pulled him out of the jungle and outwitted three enemy fighters to bring him home.

Now, Mic slowly made his way to the elevator and went upstairs to join Sarah in waiting. When he reached the floor, she was slouched over in a chair, eyes closed but clearly

not asleep. Hearing him approach, she straightened, and the lifelessness in her eyes tore at his heart.

"Any word?" he asked quietly, taking the seat next to her.

She shook her head. "He's still in surgery. We're going into hour five."

"You shouldn't have had to be alone. Where's Webb?"

"Off dealing with the loose ends. He said he'd be back as soon as he heard from Admiral Chegwidden."

"The admiral knows about Harm?"

She nodded, her voice dulled by exhaustion and worry. "He got the first plane out of Washington. He was supposed to call as soon as they left San Diego."

"What's in San Diego?"

"Harm's mother and stepfather."

Uncertain of how to respond, he fell silent. He'd never considered Harm's family. He hadn't even known that his mother had remarried. God, his mother ... she'd already lost a husband in the service of his country. How could she bear losing her son as well?

"Sarah, I'm so sorry," he began, almost before he'd fully decided what to say. "None of this ever should have happened."

"I don't blame you, Mic," she replied, a little surprised. "I blame the people in Vietnam and China who forced this situation. I blame Defense Intelligence for making us believe it would be easier than it was. I blame Harm for going, and Webb for letting him." She closed her eyes for a moment, and continued in a softer tone. "And I blame myself. But not you. You did everything you could, and you got the job done. Even if it wasn't without sacrifice."

Shadows fell across her face as she finished the sentence. This time, it was Mic who was surprised. "How can you blame yourself?"

She didn't answer right away, turning to face him squarely. "Tell me the truth. When you two were out there last night, did you come to any kind of understanding?"

"About you, you mean?" At that, she flinched, but this conversation had been a long time in coming. "We understand each other a lot better, I think. As for reaching an agreement on the subject of you - I'm not sure that's ever going to happen. I think you want one thing, and he thinks you want something else."

"Does he?" Her voice caught a little, and she visibly attempted to keep her expression neutral. "If Harm really thinks I should be with him, why - "

"He doesn't, Sarah. I do."

The pretense failed her as her features crumbled. "Mic, no."

"Sarah, he risked his life to protect that aircraft, but also to keep you happy. He would do anything for you, even if it meant letting you be with me. He wasn't willing to believe that losing him would hurt you far more than losing me." She tried to protest, but he shook his head. "Please don't try to tell me it's not true. I see you two, the way you take care of each other. You always know what the other one's feeling, in every way but this one. Why do you fight it so much?"

"You don't understand. There's more to it than that ..."

"No, there isn't. He knows damn well that you're not Diane." Startled, she looked up. "I told you, we understand each other now. He doesn't see her in you anymore. He also said that when you asked, he never said no - only 'not yet'. Did the fact that he wasn't ready scare you so much that you felt you had to run away, to me?"

"It wasn't like that," she pleaded, not knowing that Harm had said exactly the same thing. "Mic, I was so confused - I still am. But I do love you. You've been so wonderful, better than anyone's ever been to me."

"So has he, love," he said softly. "He's been there for you in ways that I can't even imagine. He depends on you as much as you do him. He loves you, Sarah. He loves you enough to let you go if he has to. And so do I."

Placing a gentle kiss on her forehead, he tried to smile. "I'm not asking for my ring back. I do love you, and if you still want to be with me when this is all over, I'll still be here. But I want you to have everything you deserve - I want you to have the 'happily ever after'."

And I think your white knight wears gold wings.”

She looked into his eyes, her own bright and anguished. “Why are you so good to me?”

“Because you’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met,” he answered honestly. “And because it’s not your fault that life is complicated. We good guys have to help each other out.”

For the first time in all their experiences together, Sarah Mackenzie let the tears flow. “What if my knight’s fallen on his sword?” she whispered brokenly.

He drew her into his arms and soothed her as she wept for her dearest friend. He’d meant every word of what he’d said. He would be there for her; if not forever, at least for this. As much as she’d tried to never need anyone, right now someone had to be the strong one. He held her close and wondered if he’d ever get this chance again.

After a few minutes, a haggard-looking woman in scrubs appeared in the doorway. “Are you here with Commander Rabb?”

Both of them leaped up. “How is he?” Mac demanded.

“I’m Dr. Larson. He’s through the surgery. We’ve taken care of the organ damage, but there was a lot of internal bleeding, and the amount of time after the injury was a factor. His blood pressure dropped so low that he nearly crashed on the table.” The colonel paled, but remained composed. “But he’s still with us, and that’s the most important thing. It’s going to take some time before we really know where we stand.”

“What are his chances?”

“I don’t like to quantify this kind of thing. He’s extremely weak right now - he still needs a lot of help just to breathe. I’m going to list him as critical, but please don’t take that to mean the worst. If he improves enough after a few more hours of transfusions and fluids, you’ll be able to relax. He seems like a very strong person. We’re going to give him every chance to make a full recovery.”

Mac nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Standing behind her, just as Harm had done on the *Coral Sea*, Mic spoke for her. “When can we see him?”

“He’s in post-op right now, and we’ll be moving him to the ICU soon. I’ll have someone come find you as soon as we’re ready.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“My pleasure. They won’t tell us what happened, but I understand the commander was very much a hero today. I’d like to see him get the opportunity to continue his heroic ways.”

... About an hour later, Mac stood outside the door to ICU 3 with her hand on the doorknob. She’d been standing there, just like that, for six minutes and forty-one seconds. She did want to go in, wanted to see for herself that Harm was holding on. There was also a part of her that was filled with dread at the prospect. The way he’d looked when they’d taken him away still haunted her - so fragile, as if everything that had made him strong was being stolen from him. She’d been with him through countless bruises and scrapes: she’d seen him sick, drugged, and knocked on the head ... but never had she felt his very spirit slipping away like this. When she walked into that room, would she even recognize the man inside?

Suck it up, Marine. She pushed open the door.

The soft, steady rhythm of a half-dozen monitors immediately greeted her. The still form in the bed was clearly her Harm, but he looked so ... vulnerable. Tubes and wires ran along his arm, giving him back the blood he’d lost and keeping a constant watch over him. The artificial light from above sharpened his handsome features and accentuated the pallor of his skin. He looked older, somehow. She’d always found it both fascinating and irritating that he never seemed to age as much as others did. Eventually, she’d decided that the reason was in his eyes - those striking blue eyes that burned with intensity one moment, then danced with laughter the next. It was his eyes that kept him so young. Here, with his eyes closed, he looked all of his thirty-seven years.

Mac slid into a chair next to the bed and took his hand. It was cool to her touch, and she noticed that they’d removed his Academy ring, the only jewelry he ever wore. No, that wasn’t it: he’d left it behind on the ship, along with anything else that could have identified him as American military. The only possession he’d taken had been his wings, tucked away in

the arm pocket of his flight suit. She knew he carried them on every special op or undercover case. She took the practice to be a statement, secret though it was, that he refused to sacrifice his identity to anyone or anything. She'd learned of it years before, when he'd been posing as a Recon gunnery sergeant. When she'd made some comment about him 'ditching the squids and becoming a real Marine', he'd opened up his battle-dress shirt to reveal the insignia pinned inside his pocket. 'Not for the world,' he'd said earnestly. 'I don't want to be anything other than what I am.'

She hadn't known him very long at the time, and she'd admired his convictions. And although she'd never admit it, the image of him in his BDUs, gold wings shining against the camouflage, was one that she'd never quite gotten out of her mind.

Now, her only thought was to make sure the doctors hadn't discarded them along with his ruined flight suit.

"Okay, sailor," she said at last, tightening her fingers around his limp hand. "Time to stop scaring the hell out of us, all right? You did what you came to do. Our technology's safe. Webb's going to owe you forever. Even Mic's in your corner now. I don't know what you said to him out there, but ..." She shook her head, wishing irrationally that there was some way for her to get through to him. "Did you tell him you loved me, Harm? Is that why he's so sure? Did you tell him you took this crazy mission because of me?"

But of course, there was no response. She reached out to touch his cheek, afraid that anything more might somehow hurt him further. "I still don't know what you think," she continued, recalling the conversation in his office, before this whole thing began. "But I swear to you that I'm going to find out. As soon as all this is over, we're going to finish what we started. All you have to do is keep breathing. The rest can wait."

... Dozing in a chair in the corridor, Mic jerked awake at the sound of the stairwell door. Three people were walking toward him, and he scrambled to his feet. "Admiral!"

The older man was in civilian clothes, and looked as though he'd gotten no more sleep than the rest of them had lately. "How are you holding up, Mic?"

"All right, sir. I'm not sure it's all sunk in yet."

Admiral Chegwiddden moved aside to introduce the couple that had come in with him. "Michael Brumby, Frank and Patricia Burnett."

Mic squared his shoulders and faced them. Harm's mother was a petite, elegant woman who bore little resemblance to her tall, broad-shouldered son. But as he studied her more closely, he could see one common thread; the veiled pain behind her eyes. Now he understood where Harm's strength had come from.

"It's an honor to meet you both," he said, shaking their hands. "I have a great deal of respect for your son."

The admiral raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Trish Burnett met the younger man's gaze without flinching. "Admiral Chegwiddden told us that you were also a part of this assignment?"

"I was originally sent to try and recover the aircraft diplomatically, ma'am. When they accused me of espionage, Harm came in to get me. We were flying the Raven out when a Chinese fighter fired on us. He was already wounded when he landed the aircraft." He lowered his eyes to the floor. "I owe him my life, Mrs. Burnett."

She didn't react visibly, but her husband rested his hand on her shoulder. "You're not the first, Mr. Brumby," she replied, and the note in her voice was more of resignation than pride. "How is he?"

"Still critical, but the doctors seem optimistic. Sarah's with him now."

Trish frowned at the name, but then recognition dawned. "I'd forgotten that her name was Sarah," she said, offering a hint of a smile. "Harm never calls her anything but Mac."

"Have you met Colonel Mackenzie?" the admiral inquired.

"I'm afraid not. There always seem to be conflicts whenever we're in Washington. We'd always hoped he'd drag her out to La Jolla sometime during one of their trips to Miramar, but ... well, it never seems to work."

"Trish, why don't you go in," Frank suggested gently. "I think you both could use some

time.”

... Still clinging to Harm’s hand, Mac glanced up to see a newcomer in the doorway. Sensing something familiar in the sixty-ish woman’s piercing blue eyes, she knew immediately who this was.

The color drained from Trish’s face as she first caught sight of her son’s unconscious form. “Oh, my baby,” she breathed, tears brimming in her eyes. “Oh, Harm, why do you always have to be so brave?”

Mac watched, her heart breaking for the suffering family. After a moment, Trish tore her gaze away and turned to the younger woman. A new kind of shock flitted across her face. “Good lord,” she said, quickly recovering her composure. “I’m sorry. I should have remembered - he did tell me that you looked like - ”

“I know, ma’am. It’s all right.” Mac extended her hand. “I wish we’d been able to do this under better circumstances. I’m Sarah Mackenzie.”

“Please call me Trish. It’s good to finally meet you, Mac. You’re an important part of my son’s life, and I’m very grateful for everything you’ve done for him. I’m glad to finally be able to tell you that.”

“He’s done the same for me, and more. But thank you.”

Trish moved to the bed and leaned in to kiss Harm’s forehead. “I’m here, darling,” she said tenderly, trying to smile. “Me and Frank, and the admiral, and Mac ... Everyone who loves you, we’re all here. Come back to us.”

He did not stir. She sighed. “It’s déjà vu,” she murmured, half to herself.

Mac wasn’t sure she’d heard correctly. “I’m sorry?”

Harm’s mother gestured, her eyes never leaving his face. “I got a call just like this ten years ago, telling me that my son had been involved in a ramp strike, and that I should be on the next flight out. I’d hoped to never have that experience again.”

“He was hurt badly?”

“God, yes. I’m surprised you’ve never seen the scars.” She lifted a hand to her lower back and hip to illustrate. “He was airlifted to Landstuhl in Germany. Ejecting so low caused him to hit the deck hard - his right hip was shattered, and the head trauma was severe. He was in traction for weeks.”

Mac didn’t speak for a moment, shocked. Harm never really talked about the crash itself: the only way the subject ever arose was when it was connected to his flight status. Certainly he’d never mentioned being seriously injured. Her flyboy, who had beaten her in a 10K more than once, had once overcome being unable to walk? “I never knew,” she managed to say.

“He doesn’t like to talk about it much - doesn’t want the sympathy. He’d rather people remembered the poor boy who died that day, instead of the one who went on with his life. Of course, he doesn’t remember it the way I do.” Trish closed her eyes. “When I first saw him lying there, looking so defenseless ... I lost it. I started begging him to wake up, but he didn’t even know I was there. Seeing your child in pain is a horrible thing, Mac. I’d finally managed to erase that image from my mind, but now ... it feels just the same.”

“But it’s not the same, Trish,” Mac said with much more confidence than she really felt. “He knows his purpose now. What he did today saved more lives than we’ll ever know. You can always be proud of that.”

She shook her head. “With Harm, pride has never been a question,” she said softly. “But pride only goes so far when all you have left of your son is a pair of wings and a flag.”

... Out in the hall, Mic was faintly surprised when Frank Burnett sat down next to him. “Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all.” He waved a hand. “You don’t want to be in there with your wife?”

“I do, but I can wait. As much as I love Harm, he’s her son, not mine. They have a connection that I can’t match, try as I might.”

Mic nodded - he could identify with that. “Are you and he close?”

“Not as close as I’d like, but things are better now than they’ve ever been. You should

have seen him when Trish and I first married. He was twelve, and I was definitely public enemy number one.” Frank leaned back in the chair, shaking his head. “It was so hard for both of them, never knowing what had happened to his dad. I didn’t want to take his father’s place, but at the same time, I wanted everything for him that a father wants for his son. It’s a difficult line, and Harm never really understood that until he was an adult. But when he came home from his first year at the Academy, I could see the change in him. That year, he grew up on his own terms, not because life had forced it on him. From then on, he never said another angry word to me.”

The younger man smiled unexpectedly. “I’m having a hard time picturing a twelve-year-old Harmon Rabb,” he admitted. “Given his talent for being stubborn, I bet he was a nightmare to discipline.”

“The stubbornness wasn’t really a problem - he got that from his mother, and she could outlast him any day of the week. What got to me was the endless sarcasm. You wouldn’t believe how much contempt a twelve-year-old can summon if you push him far enough. It was always more depressing than frustrating, because I knew exactly why those barriers were there, and there was very little I could do about it.” He offered a rueful smile. “Actually, you’ve probably seen a little of that contempt, haven’t you?”

Mic glanced down uncomfortably. “I take it you’ve heard about my history with Harm.”

“Only enough to know that you and I have a thing or two in common that way. He resented you for the same reason he resented me - we were both intruding where he didn’t feel we belonged. And eventually, he got over it and learned to respect us. Is that accurate?”

“Maybe. But I’m not so sure he wasn’t right when it came to me.” Mic ran a hand through his hair. “I trampled on his relationship with his best friend, and still he came after me when I needed help. I underestimated him, badly. And now he might die because of me.”

“Hey.” Frank turned to face him. “That’s not fair to either of you. Would things have been any different if it had been someone else in that jungle? Would the mission have been any less important? Harm knew the risks, and he went anyway, because it needed to be done. Just like he always does. He wouldn’t dare tell his mom half the crazy things you people get into, but he does tell me. And every time he calls home, I thank God that he’s still in one piece. But I don’t tell him how much he scares the hell out of me, because he doesn’t need any more weight on his shoulders. He’s a naval officer, and he performs his duty without question or compromise. And I’m proud to call him my son.”

... An uneasy silence had fallen over the stark hospital room, broken only by the persistent humming of the machines. Mac hadn’t spoken for a few minutes: she didn’t know what to say. Trish looked as if she’d forgotten that the other woman was even in the room. The world outside had ceased to exist for the two of them as she gently stroked Harm’s pale cheek, the way she’d soothed him when he was sick as a child. For that instant, Mac envied him. In spite of all he’d suffered, did he know how lucky he was to have a mother like her?

“Mac?”

She shook herself out of her reverie. “Yes?”

“You were in Russia with him, weren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am. Both times.”

Trish was distracted enough not to scold her for the ‘ma’am’. “Did you meet Sergei?”

Mac hesitated. She knew Harm had only recently broken the news that his father had another son in Russia. She didn’t know how deep that revelation had cut. “Yes, I did,” she said cautiously. “He’s a good kid.”

“Does he look like them?”

Like his father and brother - both tall, dark and handsome, with devastating smiles, the very embodiment of the dashing fighter pilot. She smiled faintly. “Not really. He’s smaller, more blond ... but there’s something about him that screams Rabb.”

Trish looked a little guilty. “Is it awful of me to hope that he’s not quite as wonderful as my own son?”

“Is *anyone* quite as wonderful as your son?” Mac replied, half-wryly, half-wistfully.

There was a pause, as the older woman studied her carefully. “You meant that, didn’t

you?"

She bit her lip, uncertain how to respond, but she knew truth was the only option. There would be no more secrets today. "I guess I did," she confessed. "When I look at my life, and the way knowing him has changed me - he's held me up when I can't keep going, helped me find things I'd given up on long ago ... I can't imagine where I'd be if it wasn't for him."

"Does he know you feel that way?"

Mac sighed. "Harm and I don't communicate very well on some levels, Trish. He knows I care deeply, and I know he does, too. But when it comes to putting a label on it, one or both of us inevitably run the other way."

"Toward an engagement to another man?" Trish asked quietly.

"Maybe, although that's all but finished. I just - I don't know how to do this right. I've never had what you'd call a role model in the healthy relationship department. I think ... I think I'm afraid of screwing it up and losing him altogether. At least, I was." She let her gaze fall to Harm, who still lay motionless. "Now I'm afraid of losing him anyway."

The older woman reached over to touch her hand. "Don't lose faith, dear," she said with surprising conviction. "Not in anything, but especially not in my son. He'd do anything for you. He can do this, as well. Have faith in that."

She lifted his hand to her lips. "You hear that, sweetheart?" she murmured. "You *can*. So don't torture this poor girl any more."

... It was early morning when Mac finally fell into a troubled sleep at her friend's bedside. The past two days had been unending, and out here on the other side of the world, everything seemed so surreal. The doctors were cautiously optimistic about Harm's condition: they'd upgraded him to 'serious', but were concerned that he had yet to regain consciousness. All of them - Frank, Webb, the admiral, even Mic - had taken turns waiting with the two women, who never left the room. Almost twenty-four hours after the vigil had begun, Mac was exhausted enough to let herself sleep.

No sooner had she drifted off than she heard his voice in her head, small and lost. She couldn't make out the words, but she knew it was him, and she knew he was calling for her. What did he need from her? Was he trying to say goodbye?

The idea alone was enough to jolt her awake in a panic. "Harm?" she stammered, her voice quavering. "Please, no ..."

But he wasn't slipping away; rather the opposite. His hand moved, almost imperceptibly, and after an agonizingly long minute, the blue eyes she adored slowly opened and struggled to focus.

"Thank you, God," Mac breathed, attempting to maintain control. Across from her, Trish began to cry softly, clutching his hand tightly. The Marine blinked back her own tears and smiled down at him. "Welcome back, sailor," she said simply. "We missed you."

Disoriented, Harm held his gaze on her, as if her face would help him get his bearings. He took a few long, labored breaths before trying to speak. "Where ...?"

"Okinawa. We've been here about a day."

He raised his head slightly, and the tiny motion brought a grimace of pain to his handsome features. "Don't try to move," Mac warned, a gentle hand restraining him. "You got yourself pretty banged up."

"I guess so," he replied weakly, closing his eyes for a moment. The quiet sniffing beside him registered in his mind, and he looked up. "Mom," he whispered, and suddenly he looked so very young. "Mom, don't cry ..."

Trish embraced him lightly, ignoring the wetness on her cheeks. "You just had to go off and save the world, didn't you, darling?"

"Won't happen ... again," he promised, catching sight of the four men crowding into the doorway. "Did I ... cause all this ... excitement?"

"'Fraid so, flyboy." Impulsively, Mac leaned down and brushed her lips against his temple. Harm looked at her, through a haze of pain and medication, and seemed to understand that something was different.

"Mac ..."

"Later," she reassured him, squeezing his hand. "Just rest."

He nodded, eyes already falling closed, and she exhaled slowly. Life could now go on, for all of them. The tension that had been building since they'd first left the States was finally released, and she slumped over in the chair, burying her face in her hands in a vain attempt to hide the tears. Admiral Chegvidden, comprehending the unspoken shift, crossed the room in three decisive strides to place a comforting arm around her shoulders. Frank hugged his wife gratefully, and Webb risked a sideways glance at Mic, who watched it all with a guarded expression. Now that the crisis was past, they would have to deal with the aftermath.

For the next day or so, Harm drifted in and out of consciousness, gaining strength each time. Soon, a hint of color returned to his pale skin, and traces of his irrepressible humor shone through in his weakened voice. When the doctors at last upgraded him to 'stable', the cadre of visitors he'd acquired began switching off so he wouldn't feel smothered. Nevertheless, the nursing staff soon learned all of their names.

"Must be nice to feel so appreciated," commented Dr. Larson as she entered the room, noticing Mac and Webb in the chairs.

Harm offered her a faint smile, bringing the bed upright. "I appreciate you, doc," he pointed out.

"I'll bet you do." She hesitated fractionally. "Commander, if you're up to it, there's something I need to discuss with you."

Doubt flickered in his eyes, but he nodded. "Sure."

Immediately, Webb rose to leave, not wanting to intrude. Mac started to follow, but Harm's hand on her arm stopped the motion. "Stay," he said simply. Touched by the quiet display of trust, she kept her seat and slipped her hand down into his.

Dr. Larson took a deep breath. "I felt you should be aware of what happened during your surgery, and the implications for your recovery. Don't panic - as far as I can see, you should have no trouble going back to full duty in a few weeks. There is a catch, though."

"Just don't get shot again, right?" he suggested, trying to keep his voice light.

"It's not quite that simple. There was some damage to your right lung, and it collapsed while we were working on you. That's why you've been having difficulty breathing. We repaired it, and we expect it to function normally ... but I can't make any guarantees about how it would do under severe stresses. Such as high G-loads."

Harm tensed, but didn't react visibly. "Are you telling me I'm done flying Tomcats, doctor?" he asked flatly. Beside him, Mac fought for calm as the possibility hit her with full force.

"Not necessarily, but at least for a while. You might be able to eventually get cleared for land-based flights, but I'm afraid that carrier ops may be too much to hope for. Between the catapult takeoffs and arrested landings, not to mention the rapid pressurizations ..." She sighed. "You'll have to meet with a flight surgeon in a few months to see where you stand. But you know how hard the physical is, and unfortunately, you're not twenty-five years old. I know you want the honest truth, and I'm telling you honestly that it could be a long time before you get there, if at all. I'm sorry. I know how difficult this must be for you."

"I doubt you do," he replied quietly. "But thank you."

When the doctor had gone, he stared at the wall with cold eyes. "I guess no good deed goes unpunished," he said finally, with just a trace of bitterness.

Mac was lost for words. Was this real? Was God so cruel as to take away this, something he desperately loved, after he'd risked his life to save another? "Harm, I - " She stopped, feeling helpless. "There's nothing I can say, is there?"

"Probably not. But at least I know *you* understand." He glanced down at their entwined fingers. "If I'd known the Raven was going to be my last trap, I would've paid more attention on the way in."

"It's not over," she insisted. "If anyone can get past this, it's you."

"I'm not giving up, Mac. I came back once before. But - even if it is over ..." He met her gaze, and she could see the struggle behind his expressive eyes. "I'll be okay. Flying isn't my whole life anymore. And I'll still have my Stearman, anyway. If getting Mic out alive

meant losing my flight status, it was worth it. I mean, I'm still here, right?"

"Right," she echoed unconvincingly, knowing that even though everything he'd said was true, he was still hurting more than she could imagine.

"Besides, lawyers don't need to fly ..." Abruptly, the façade crumbled, and he shook his head. "I'm not fooling you, am I?" he asked softly.

"Never," she whispered, taking him in her arms and wishing she could somehow take away this pain. His embrace was feeble, but she knew he was clinging to her with everything he had. His head rested against her shoulder, and she brushed a hand through his dark hair. "I almost forgot," she said. "I have something that belongs to you."

She drew his wings out of her pocket and closed his hand around them. "How did you - ?" Trailing off, he surrendered. "You're amazing, Marine."

They held each other for a measureless time, each taking comfort in the other's presence. She knew she was there to be strong for him, but after all the waiting, the fear that she might lose him forever ... she needed this as much as he did. She just wasn't ready to tell him that yet.

After a few minutes, Harm turned his head slightly. "As much as I'd like to stay here like this," he began tentatively, "my stitches are starting to voice a complaint."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She eased him back against the bed, reluctant to break contact. "I'll be here," she murmured into his ear. "Whatever you need."

She'd intended simply to brush a kiss against his cheek, like she'd done before. But somehow it lingered an instant too long, and when she pulled back, she knew she'd just stepped over the edge. Now, there would be no going back.

He gazed up at her with a strange expression, unsure of what he'd felt. "Mac?" he asked cautiously. "Is there something we need to talk about?"

Damn it. I can't do this to him now. "It can wait," she promised lamely. "You need to rest."

"I'm all right. I want to know what's bothering you."

Overwhelmed, she gave a short, humorless laugh. "What's bothering me? Could it be the fact that I spent a good part of the last forty-eight hours not knowing whether my best friend was going to live or die?" Immediately, she softened her tone. "I'm sorry. That was unfair, especially to you. And more than that, it's not even the whole truth. Harm, when you collapsed on the flight deck, I was so afraid - afraid I'd lose the most incredible friend I'll ever have. I'm not sure I've ever been that scared before."

"Hey, it's okay," he reassured her, trying to smile. "I'm not that easy to get rid of."

"But that's not all. There was something else ... and I'm ashamed to admit it."

"Ashamed? What in the world would you ever have to be ashamed of?"

She paused a moment to prepare herself. "I'm ashamed," she answered quietly, "because I let you go into that jungle believing that you could make it all right by bringing Mic back to me, regardless of the cost. And because there were times during those first few hours here when I desperately wished that you hadn't gone at all."

Confusion was written across his face. "I don't think I understand. I had to go - "

"For your country, and for Mic. But not for me. I'm finally learning how to be honest about all this, mainly to myself, and I have to face the truth. I wanted to love Mic, and be happy with him, but it wasn't the thought of living without him that terrified me. It was the thought of living without you."

She watched his face carefully for his reaction, but he kept it well in check. "I'm a little fuzzy right now, Mac," he said slowly. "I think you'd better tell me what this means."

"It means I'm sick of living in denial. I almost lost my chance to say this, so I'm not going to let it happen again. It's you, Harm. Maybe it always was. You're the one who understands me better than anyone else. You're the one who's there for me when I can't make it alone. And you're the one I love."

He just stared at her wordlessly for a moment, wondering if she'd actually said what he'd heard. In his eyes, a battle raged: there was some part of him that wanted to believe her, but it was undercut by suspicion. "You thought my life hadn't already been turned around enough today?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not looking for any kind of answer from you. I realize that the timing is awful, but - well, you asked, and ..."

"What timing would have been better? Five minutes before you walked down the aisle?" He shook his head, bewildered and upset. "You love Mic. And I know how much he loves you. Why are you saying this? Out of sympathy? I don't need pity."

Shocked that he was unwilling to see, she drew back a little. "Harm, I have never once felt that you needed pity from me or anyone else. I'm saying this because it's true, and because I think there's something in the back of your mind that wants it to be true, too. Even Mic understands now. He wants me to be happy, just as much as you do, and he knows that I need you."

"If you mean that," he asked, not meeting her gaze, "why are you still wearing his ring?"

"Would that make a difference?"

"Of course it would! Mac, I put my life in his hands out there, and he put his in mine. If you're still his fiancée, I couldn't even think of -"

"All right, here." In one fluid motion, she pulled the ring off her finger and set it down on the table. "Your move, flyboy."

A flash of hurt came into his eyes, and immediately she realized what she'd said.

"Better come up with a new nickname," he said softly. "That one doesn't exactly apply anymore."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, God, Harm, I'm sorry. I didn't mean ..." Suddenly she hated herself for being so selfish. She'd dumped all of her conflicting emotions on him, barely considering his already-fragile state. Tears sprang to her eyes as she searched vainly for a way to help him understand. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I should never have said anything."

"Don't be sorry for that. It's just ... I don't know what to think right now."

"I know. I won't get in your way any more." She hurried toward the door before he could stop her. "But I'm not going to marry Mic. That's a promise."

"Mac, wait."

But she was gone. Harm strained toward the doorway, but a wave of dizziness and pain overtook him within seconds, and he sank back. The gravity of it all - her revelation, his flight status, how close he'd come to dying - struck him, and he didn't bother to stop the tears that burned his eyes. Everything he'd held up as a constant in his life was rapidly spinning out of control, and he had no idea where to turn.

After a moment, the door opened a crack, and Frank ducked his head in. "If you want to be alone, just say the word."

"No, it's all right. Come on in." He gestured listlessly, and his stepfather took a seat, taking in his reddened eyes without comment.

"So," Frank said gently. "Do you want to talk about it? Whatever it is?"

"I think there's more than one 'it' right now." Harm sighed, drawing a weary hand across his forehead. "First things first. 'I'm grounded, Frank.'"

The older man's eyes widened, but he kept his composure. "Permanently?"

"Looks that way. They don't think my lung will hold up under the Gs. I probably won't be able to even try passing the flight physical for months, and I'm not exactly a kid anymore."

"I'm sorry, Harm. I know I can't do anything to help, but I hope you believe that this mission was worth the sacrifice."

"It was. I never questioned that. It's just ..." He sighed. "Now I'm questioning everything else."

"Is this related to the way Sarah Mackenzie rushed out of here a few minutes ago, looking about as happy as you do?"

"Brilliant conclusion. I don't know what just happened, but somehow I hurt her again. It seems like all I ever do is hurt her."

Frank was hesitant to push further: he knew how difficult it had always been for his stepson to confide in him. So he waited patiently until Harm spoke again, staring into nothing.

"She said she was in love with me."

Both the statement and the quiet way he'd said it caught Frank entirely by surprise. He'd seen Mac's behavior over the past couple days, and her interactions with her maybe-fiancé, but he certainly hadn't expected ... this, now. "Did you believe her?"

"I guess I did. I wanted to. But at the same time, it scared the hell out of me. Because I wanted so badly to be able to say it back, and I - I just couldn't do it. Sometimes I really don't understand myself."

"Why couldn't you say it? Because it's not true, or because you were afraid to acknowledge the fact that it *is*?"

Harm just looked at him, anguish lighting his blue eyes, and they both knew the answer. But knowing wasn't enough. "You can say it, son. You love her, don't you?"

He only shook his head, unable to keep up the pretense of physical or emotional strength. "So much that it hurts," he whispered. "And you're the only person I've ever admitted it to."

"I'm honored," Frank replied quietly, "but if you can say it to me, you can say it to her."

"It's not just saying it, Frank. Regardless of what she wants now, until a couple of days ago, she was picking out china patterns with Mic. Was all of that a lie? A mistake? And - if I hadn't taken that bullet, would she have ever changed her mind? Or would she have married him?"

"I don't have those answers," the older man conceded. "I'm not sure even Mac does. But maybe you can answer something for me. Why are you so deathly afraid to admit that you love her?"

"God, I don't know. Hundreds of reasons. Mainly because it'll change everything I know - and everything she knows. We wouldn't be able to work together anymore, and ... now that I can't fly, my whole life is JAG and my friends. This would risk both."

"But is it a risk worth taking? You risked giving your life for her happiness before. Wouldn't you risk changing it for your own happiness?"

"No," Harm said softly. "Not just for mine. But for hers and mine, I would."

"And so would she, or she wouldn't have told you in the first place. The only real risk is that maybe you're not meant for each other, and you won't be able to go back. And how likely is that?"

He closed his eyes. "It's not a question of 'what if we're wrong'. I think I'm more afraid of being right. If we could be happy together, and we've been ignoring the possibility for so long ... what does that make us? Blind? Dishonest? Hopelessly screwed-up? None of the options are exactly in the finest tradition of the military."

"Harm, this isn't the Battle of Midway. You're entitled to be an idiot when it comes to relationships. Most people are. Hell, it took me most of two years to take your mother out on a simple date, and another two to get up the courage to ask her to marry me."

At that, he looked up with a hint of a rueful smile. "I'm not surprised, considering the obstacle you faced."

"What, an extremely bright grade-schooler who was determined to use his intellectual and creative powers for evil?" Frank chuckled.

"Even that description's too kind. I was awful to you."

"You thought you were protecting your mother. I tried to understand that. You sure threw me for a loop a few times, though. I didn't have much experience with kids, and I was about the same age you are now."

"Thanks. Remind me that I'm old enough to have a twelve-year-old."

"I'm just telling you that it's never too late. There's always hope if you're willing to fight for what you believe. And you're pretty good at that."

Harm accepted the soft-spoken compliment wordlessly. "I hope that's true," he said honestly. "But I'm still scared as hell."

"Just think it over. But don't think too hard - you look like you could use some sleep. I'll get out of your hair for a while."

Frank was nearly to the door when the younger man's uncertain voice made him

pause. "Frank?"

He turned back. "Yes?"

Harm lifted his head proudly, but his eyes betrayed him. "Thanks for being such a great dad," he said simply.

To the outside observer, it might not have sounded like much. To them, though, it was everything. Frank swallowed hard before managing to reply. "Thank *you*, son."

Once he was alone in the hallway, he swiped at his moist eyes and smiled. After twenty-five years, Harmon Rabb could still find ways to throw him. He said a silent prayer of gratitude to the boy's true father for the chance to be part of this family.

Late the next day, Clayton Webb joined Admiral Chegwidden outside Harm's room, just beyond the open door. "How are things?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"See for yourself." The JAG gestured toward his injured officer, who was sitting near the window, gazing blankly out at the ocean. "It's been twenty minutes, and he still hasn't noticed I'm even here."

"How did this happen? What does it take to make a man like him stop caring?"

The admiral shrugged. "He's facing the possibility of losing something very important. Dr. Larson seemed to think a little depression was only natural. "

Webb raised an eyebrow. "Did you tell her this isn't about flying jets?"

"I think she already knew."

The agent sighed. "So what are we going to do about it?"

"Well, I realize this is out of character for someone in your line of work, but we SEALs tend to tackle our problems head-on." With that, he marched into the room, and Webb had no choice but to follow.

"How are you feeling, Commander?"

Harm started, jarred out of his inner world. "Admiral - Webb," he greeted them automatically. "I've been better, sir."

"I should hope so, since you look like hell." Chegwidden took a seat without waiting to be invited. "You want to let us in on the soap opera, or is it more fun to sit here and feel sorry for yourself?"

He flinched, but his guarded expression remained intact. "Just want to get out of here, sir."

"Nice try, but we're not buying it. Now you can 'fess up, or I can drag it out of the colonel."

"Admiral, if you can get the colonel to talk to you, you'll be doing better than I am."

Webb frowned. "She's not talking to you?"

"I keep trying to call her at the VOQ, but she doesn't answer." The pain behind his eyes was visible now, and he looked up at them helplessly. "I don't have the first clue what to say to her, but I have to say something."

"I'm sure this sounds ridiculous, but can we help?"

"I don't know. Has she said anything to either of you?" The two men exchanged a glance, and he shook his head. "I feel like I'm in junior high. The dream girl, the one you worship from afar, suddenly does an about-face and says she's got a crush on you. And you freeze."

"Mac's not a fantasy," Webb pointed out reasonably. "She's very real, and she's probably even more insecure than you are right now. Harm, this whole mission just about killed her. Did you know that from the moment they brought you out of surgery to the moment you woke up, she never once left you, even for a second? Can you really still doubt how much she cares about you?"

"Maybe not, but knowing that doesn't magically solve everything. Things tend to look a lot less definite when the crisis is over, you know? I mean, now that I'm no longer half-dead, we can't even figure out how to talk to each other. Not real promising for any kind of relationship." Downcast, he went back to staring sullenly out the window. "I shouldn't even be talking to you about this, Admiral."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," his commanding officer said, exasperated. "If I was going to

take the hard line on this, I wouldn't even be here. We can make it work - there are always semi-official transfers and Pentagon liaisons and the like. This doesn't have to turn your professional lives completely upside down. So if you're looking for an excuse to give up, I suggest you try harder."

Harm immediately saw through his bluster and acknowledged the effort gratefully. "Thank you, sir, but it's not just that. I can't afford to go halfway with this. I - we - have made too many mistakes before ..."

"Then don't go halfway, mate," Mic said quietly from the doorway. "Give it everything."

The admiral and Webb were only slightly surprised to see Mac's former fiancé offering support to his longtime rival. Harm just shook his head. "Mic - "

"Why did you say what you did in the jungle?" Mic continued, cutting off the protest before it could begin. "Why do you think you can't be what she deserves?"

"Because she deserves someone stronger, who doesn't lie awake at night reliving the choices he's made. Someone who knows which direction he wants his life to take. Someone with fewer scars ... less blood on his hands."

"Is that really how you see yourself?" Admiral Chegwidden asked quietly, stunned. "Harm, listen up, because I'm only going to say this once. You have no reason to doubt yourself. Yes, there have been times when you've had to do difficult things, things that many people might not understand. But sometimes there just aren't any truly good choices. Every officer has to deal with that, and the good ones know how to do the best thing for the most people ... even if it means someone gets hurt. You do that, son. You always have. You've helped more people than you know, and you've never let your own needs get in the way of your duty. As a commanding officer, I could never ask for more than that."

Harm was silent for a moment, taken aback by the undiluted praise. "Thank you, Admiral," he finally managed to say. "I know I can't do any more than use my best judgment, and I think I do pretty well at that. But ... you know what it's like to take another life, sir. You always wonder if there's some tiny thing you could have done differently, so that it wouldn't have been necessary ... you wonder if his mother will ever know why he died ..."

Right then, the other men began to understand the depth of this ache, and how long it had haunted him. "About three years ago, when Palmer kidnapped me, he asked me about all the people I'd killed." His voice was distant as he remembered. "He said he'd counted at least eighteen, and he was prepared to list them all for me in detail. At the time, I didn't really believe him. I had enough other things to worry about. But that night, I sat down and thought about it, and I tried to remember who those eighteen people were. The pilots over Libya, the guards in Iraq, the terrorists in Peru, the agent who shot Meg Austin ... and I just kept thinking about how many times I'd used my weapon without even blinking. And by midnight, I'd still only come up with seventeen. And I just lost it. I sat there, crying my eyes out, because I couldn't remember number eighteen. What kind of person can take a human life and then *forget* about it?"

The others just looked at each other, at a loss. None of them had ever suspected that this man, the very embodiment of passion and integrity, could be carrying this kind of guilt, and of this magnitude. How on earth had he been able to hide it so well, for so long?

Uncertainly, Webb asked, "Did you ever figure it out?"

"Number eighteen? Yeah, I did. At about three in the morning." He gave a hollow smirk. "Gotta hand it to that Palmer. Eighteen was Kevin Mace, a lieutenant who was killed in a ramp strike aboard the USS *Seahawk* in 1991. The bastard counted my RIO."

A silence fell over the room, but it wasn't long before the troubled officer spoke again. "There have been others since then. The double agent in Iran, Charlie Lynch, the drug dealer Rojas ... I don't try to count them anymore. It's not a numbers game. But sometimes I just ..." He looked up at the admiral with pleading eyes. "How do you do it, sir? How do you keep from seeing their faces - or wondering what they even looked like?"

"You don't," Admiral Chegwidden said simply, and his gaze was haunted as well. "When you stop seeing them, when the guilt goes away, that's when you stop being human. Never lose your compassion, Harm. It's what keeps you from turning into one of them, and

what makes you a naval officer. We do what we have to do, and we sleep at night because we know we've acted for the greater good. But we sure as hell don't have to like it."

Harm shook his head helplessly. "I understand, sir, and you know how proud I am to serve. But sometimes it gets ... overwhelming. And I don't know if I can ask anyone else to share that burden with me."

"You're forgetting something, mate," Mic rejoined. "Sarah already shares that with you. Is there anyone in the world who understands your thoughts and fears better than she does?"

For a long time, he said nothing, his eyes drifting to the wings she'd retrieved for him, lying on the bedside table. Then he looked up, and they could see that Harmon Rabb, Jr., commander, USN, was still there and unwilling to give up without a fight. "All right," he said quietly. "Somebody figure out a way for me to talk to her."

"Leave that to me," Mic replied, rising from the counter he'd been leaning on. "Can you make it down to the courtyard out back?"

"We'll find a wheelchair - " Webb began, but Harm cut him off.

"No, you won't. I can walk if you'll help me." The tone of his voice left little room for discussion. "If I can't do this entirely on my own terms, I'm at least going to come as close as I can."

"Be down there in an hour. I'll take care of Sarah."

1636 Local

Visiting Officers' Quarters

Mac closed her small suitcase and sat down on the bed. She wasn't looking forward to telling the admiral that she'd arranged to be on the next transport stateside. Hell, she wasn't looking forward to actually *being* on the next transport stateside. Part of her was desperate to see Harm, knowing that it would be most of a week before the doctors cleared him for the flight home. But she dismissed the thought. The look in his eyes when she'd left him yesterday - so lost, so unsure - had convinced her that he needed time to come to terms with all of this. Her presence would only make things more difficult for him.

There was a light knock on the half-open door, and Mic stuck his head in. "Going somewhere?"

"Yeah, home. There's a Starlifter leaving at 2100 for Guam. I'll find a commercial flight from there." She didn't meet his gaze, anticipating his disapproval. "I have to get out of here, Mic. I need to rejoin what's left of my life."

To her surprise, he didn't argue. "There's plenty left of your life, Sarah. You've got a couple of hours. Take a walk with me before you leave?"

She wanted to decline, but she owed him at least that much. Silently acquiescing, she followed him outside.

"Thank you for returning the ring. Not that I especially wanted it back, but I think we could both do with a fresh start. No loose ends, and all that." The Australian man was doing his best to put on a brave face, but she knew him too well to believe it.

"I can never apologize enough for what I've put you through, can I?"

He squeezed her hand once before letting it drop. "No worries, Sarah. In my right mind, I know it's for the best. It'll just be a while until the rest of me catches up to my mind, that's all." As they continued walking, he began again. "You know, one of the things I've always admired about you is the way you don't run from your problems. You face them, without ever backing down."

Mac realized that they were approaching the garden that surrounded the west side of the medical center, and she began to understand what was going on. "Mic, I can't - "

"Don't worry. I'm not asking you to go to him now. We can stay out here and talk, though, can't we?"

Reluctantly, she took a seat on a nearby bench. "I'm not running from him. When we get back to Washington and everything calms down, maybe we'll be able to sort all this out. But right now ... it was a mistake for me to do what I did yesterday. It's my problem to face, not his. He's got enough to deal with."

"What if it's not really a problem?" Mic suggested. "What if, say, he's been calling you for the last twenty-four hours, trying to tell you something?"

"He wouldn't do that - it's not exactly his style to be open about this stuff. Even if ..."

She paused and turned to him. "Wait. Did he tell you he'd been trying to reach me?"

"I didn't make it up, Sarah."

"I didn't get any messages. Are you sure?"

He shook his head with a wry grin. "You two are impossible. After all this time, you've managed to make even the telephone an obstacle." He stood up and started to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not the one you need to be talking to right now." With a slight tilt of his head, he hinted for her to turn around.

Harm stood there, leaning heavily on the railing. In blue hospital scrubs and scuffed sneakers, he looked pale yet certain. Her breath caught, and she briefly turned back to offer a grateful half-smile to Mic, who nodded and moved away.

Taking a step toward her, the proud commander faltered a little, and Mac rushed to his aid. She locked an arm around his waist, careful of the hidden bandages, and helped him to sit down on the bench. "What in God's name are you doing out here?"

"Desperate times," he answered faintly. "Don't worry. I have permission, and as we speak there is a spook and a SEAL watching me like a hawk."

"Really?" she asked, amused despite herself. "I suppose they're undercover?"

"For all I know, they're in that trash can over there." The joking manner quickly faded. "I've been trying to find you all day."

"Technical difficulties. I'm sorry. Better late than never?"

He hesitated. "Even a year late?"

"Harm, I - "

"No, let me start. I'm sorry for yesterday, and for every time I've held back from telling you the truth about how I feel. By my count, that's about seven thousand five hundred and thirty-eight times, but math's not my strong suit. I had reasons - at least I thought I did - but none of them matter. What does matter is the fact that I was wrong to think that someone as amazing as you wouldn't want to be with me. I've never doubted you before, but this time I did. I let you down, and I am truly sorry. I won't ever doubt you again."

"I'm sorry, too," she said quietly. "I understand why you would have trouble taking me seriously after what happened in Australia. I can't explain why I took that ring - somehow I let myself get caught up in the moment, and later I decided that maybe I should try leading with my head instead of my heart for a change. That was wrong, too, because I was trying to see something that wasn't there. But none of that matters, either. We can't go back. All we can do is try to move forward from here. Right?"

"Right." He took a deep breath, his hand tightening around hers. "This is going to be hard for me," he confessed. "You know I'm not very good at expressing my feelings. But you were brave enough to say it first, so I don't have any excuses. Just be patient, in case I screw this up."

Dutifully, she waited a moment while he gathered himself, knowing that he wasn't really in any condition to be out of bed. But this was important, and he was determined to see it through.

"I love you, Sarah. I don't know how or when it happened, but somewhere between the Rose Garden and the dock at Norfolk, I started to see you as the best part of my life. I tried to pretend that it wasn't love - maybe I even believed it, for a while. But I think that was because I honestly didn't know that love could be like this. Now, though, I realize how much time I've wasted, and I never want to make that mistake again. If you're with me, I won't be afraid of not being able to fly. I won't feel sorry for what I've lost, because I'll know it's nothing compared to what I've found."

Caught speechless, her eyes flooded with tears. Maybe it wasn't the most eloquent declaration in the world, but it meant everything to her. Before she could respond, he spoke again. "The thing is, all this comes with a price. I have demons, Sarah. Most of them you've seen, and helped me fight, but I can't promise you that life will be perfect from here

on. All I can promise is that I love you now, and I'll love you always."

"Always?" she whispered.

"Always. I'm not in this for a quick thrill, and neither are you. What does it matter if we've never really been on a date? You mean more to me than anyone or anything in my life. I need you. If you're willing, I could spend the rest of my life with you."

She held her breath, wondering if this was too good to be true. All she could manage was a shaky laugh. "Was that a proposal?"

"Call it a promise. If I tried to get down on one knee right now, I don't think I'd be able to get back up." With a gentle caress, he brushed away the tear that trickled down her cheek. "This is going to change a lot of things," he said softly. "Now that I've admitted it to you, I'm ready to shout it from the rooftops, but I want to take the time to make sure we do this right. Having said that ... right now I think I'd give anything just to kiss you."

That last sentence and its simple honesty finished it. Without another thought, she thrust herself into his arms and pressed her lips to his, and all the confusion and anguish of the past year melted away. Now, at last, everything was right.

When they finally broke apart, there was something different in his blue eyes; a kind of happiness she'd never seen, but was sure he could see in her own eyes as well. "That's what I get for falling for a Marine," he said lightly. "They always have to lead the charge."

"That's only because we're so good at it." Leaning in to rest her head on his shoulder, she was startled by a polite 'ahem' from behind them.

"Sorry to interrupt," Admiral Chegwidden began, doing his best to repress a broad grin, "but there's a corporal for the motor pool looking for you, Colonel."

"Tell him he's mistaken," Mac responded airily, not making an attempt to detach herself from her partner. "I'm not going anywhere, except to take the commander back to his room."

"That's what I thought. Carry on."

As he wandered away, she pulled back to face Harm. "That wasn't a line. You need to get upstairs and get some rest."

"I'd argue with you, but the truth is, a bed is starting to sound awfully good." He allowed her to help him to his feet, but paused a moment. "I know this sounds strange, but I don't want to let you go just yet. Will you stay here tonight?"

She only smiled. "Sailor, you couldn't keep me away with an armored tank division. Come on. Tomorrow's a new day."

"It certainly is."

As she led him away from the setting sun and into the building, he shook his head. He wasn't entirely sure he deserved this chance, but he was ready to do whatever it took to earn it. For the first time, being less than completely in control didn't seem so bad.

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