



Graphic by [Steph](#)

**Rating: R for language, violence**

Classification: Drama, Angst, Romance

Spoilers: "Ice Queen"/"Meltdown," "Lawyers, Guns and Money"/"Pas de Deux"/"A Tangled Webb"

Disclaimer: If I owned the characters, we never would have ended up in this situation in the first place. Judge for yourself whether or not that would be an improvement.

Author's Notes: Well, it took me a while to get here, although I've been itching to write this since the day after "ATW" aired. But I didn't want to split time between two or three different stories, so I hope people aren't too sick of cliffhanger endings by now. This one goes off in a slightly different, slightly darker direction, so for those who would like to get off the carousel of angst, consider yourselves warned. I will offer a note of reassurance, though: when was the last time I didn't end a story on an up note? Anyone? Hey, stop that - "Disconnect" doesn't count ...

Also, I need to ask for a bit of artistic license here. The show referred to Gunny being assigned to the American embassy in Asuncion, and I changed the embassy's location to Ciudad del Este for this story. The reason I think I can get away with that is the fact that there is no American embassy in Paraguay at all. Just pretend that if there were, it'd be in Ciudad del Este instead of Asuncion, and we'll get along fine.

Lastly, I'm fairly harsh to the CIA here, for the purposes of making the conflict work, but please don't infer that I harbor any disrespect toward the actual organization. They do a very important job, one that I'm very glad I don't have to do myself, and I have no reason to believe that they operate in the callous manner I've described. Just repeat to yourself: "It's just a fic ..."

Many thanks to Valerie, the beta-reading champion of the world, for always being there when I need her.

## Unknown Location Southeast Paraguay

She could hear a faint moaning sound off in the distance, long before anything else penetrated her mind's thick haze. She wondered for a while where the sound might be originating, until something clicked in to inform her that it was her own voice.

Mac opened her eyes slowly, suspicious that she wouldn't like the results. More darkness greeted her, and she became aware that her forehead was cold. Metal. She was bent forward, her head resting against something - the edge of the cockpit. What cockpit? That rickety piece-of-junk airplane ... only Harm would have the idiotic courage to fly such a -

Harm.

Full awareness flooded back into her, and she lifted her head faster than prudence would have recommended. Her vision swam for a moment, and when it cleared, she checked herself over for injuries. Her left arm throbbed painfully, her hand hanging at an odd angle from her wrist. That and whatever head injury had knocked her out appeared to be the only issues of consequence, for which she considered herself fortunate. Maybe that extra padding had come in handy after all.

Mac cleared her throat and tested her voice. "Harm?" His name came out weaker than she'd intended, so she tried again. "Hey, Harm. Sound off."

Still no response. Cautiously, she twisted around in her seat, hoping not to unbalance what was left of the plane. The battered fuselage had come to rest at a tilt, and she had no desire to tumble out of the seat or similarly dump her partner to the ground. She found the rear cockpit empty, however, sending ripples of dread through her body as she awkwardly wiggled herself free of the craft.

In an instant, she spotted him lying a few yards away, his unmoving form bent over a fallen tree like a discarded rag doll. Choked by fear, Mac ran to him, stumbling twice along the way.

"Not very God-damned funny, squid," she muttered, falling to her knees beside him and scrambling for a pulse. Finding it relatively strong, she breathed a silent prayer of relief, then attempted to check him over for any signs of spinal injury. She wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to be looking for, but he appeared to be all right, so she set her jaw against the inevitable pain and pulled him down off the log to level ground. Her wrist shrieked in outrage, but she lowered his head with infinite care and swallowed a pang of guilt upon seeing the smear of blood across his face.

Just like Clay ...

"No," she said aloud, banishing the idea from her mind with considerable force. "Come on, Harm, quit messing around and wake up."

As she began to check him over for broken bones, Harm stirred minutely, and after a moment he looked up at her through heavy-lidded eyes.

"Hi."

Mac could see at once that he wasn't entirely with it. Hoping fervently that it was only a temporary obstacle, she gave him a wide, false smile. "Hi. You need to stay with me, okay? I'm going to need some help in formulating a plan to get us out of this."

He gave no indication that he'd heard or understood her. "What's goin' on?"

"You were thrown out of the plane when we hit," she explained, attempting to keep her voice light. "I think maybe it took offense to you crashing it."

The flimsy joke fell on deaf ears. She saw his eyes begin to drift closed, and she reached out to shake his shoulder. "Oh, no, you don't, Harmon. No going back to sleep. Nobody's going to get us out of here but us. You would like to actually get home one of these days, right?"

Harm focused on her for a brief moment, long enough for her to realize that something was clearly not right.

"What's the point?"

By the time Mac recovered from the shock of that response, he had lapsed into unconsciousness again. "What? Harm, what the *hell* are you talking about? Harm!" She shook him again, to no avail. A chill settled over her, but with few viable options, she decided to resume her examination of his condition.

Bruises marred his chest in a network so extensive that it was impossible to distinguish the end of one bruise from the beginning of another. Other than that, and a few cuts on his arms, he looked to be all right. The head injury worried her, though. Going back to the ruined plane, she rummaged through the cockpits until she located a canteen and some packaged biscuits. Bless that farmer for forethought.

It was time to get out of the pregnancy getup once and for all. She stripped out of her clothes and extricated herself from the irritating suit, feeling a new sense of freedom. She pictured herself peeling away the horror of this assignment, at least as much as was possible, right along with the foam rubber. "You don't know what you're missing, flyboy," she said under her breath, keeping a careful eye on Harm as she dressed again. The maternity pants were going to be a bit of a problem, though. Without a second thought, she unfastened Harm's belt, not stopping to consider what he might say if he were to come to just then, and slipped it free for her own use.

Next order of business. She removed the padding from the suit and placed it under his head, then took his pocketknife and sliced off a piece of the suit's fabric. By the time she was done with the simple task, her wrist was swollen and radiating with agony. His head wound had to take priority over her wrist, though. Wetting the cloth with a small amount of water from the canteen, she smoothed it over his face and washed away the blood to get a good look at the gash. It was nearly an inch long, starting near his temple and reaching back into his hair. Thankfully, the bleeding looked to be slowing. It wasn't the worst she'd seen; hell, it probably wasn't the worst he'd had. Maybe they'd be able to walk out of this God-forsaken forest after all. Eventually.

Mac wrapped another strip of fabric around her wrist as best she could and settled down beside him, pressing the cloth to the side of his head. "My hero," she murmured, leaning back against the log and watching his chest rise and fall. He'd come for her. She had no idea how, but he'd done it. Few moments in her life had been as emotionally overwhelming as the

moment when that door had burst open and he'd come charging through. For an instant, the hell she'd endured and the journey ahead had simply winked out of existence, all because he'd come.

All too soon, of course, sobering reality had reasserted itself, finally landing them here. Wherever here was. She didn't want to think about Clay: having to see him cling so feebly to life had stirred up emotions that she couldn't quite name. He'd wanted to sacrifice himself for her - maybe he even wanted to love her, in whatever capacity he could. But despite everything they'd shared over the past few days, she still felt as if she couldn't take a deep breath around him. He was dark and conflicted, and dark, conflicted men had never brought her anything but pain.

As difficult as it was to comprehend sometimes, she knew her knight in shining armor would have to be just that - not the type of person who distrusted the world and everything in it. Certainly not the type of person who could shoot a suspected mole in the back of the head without blinking. For all his strengths, Clayton Webb wasn't a man of moral absolutes.

Harmon Rabb, on the other hand ...

She allowed herself a long sigh. Those unfaltering principles were the reason he was lying here in the middle of nowhere, and not safe at home in Washington. Home felt so incredibly far away just then - it was all but impossible to envision being back at JAG and no longer having to be constantly on her guard. Never had her plain, cluttered office seemed so inviting.

Once they were home, she'd get the whole story out of her partner as to how all this had come about. And maybe they'd straighten out a few other things, too. One thing at a time, though. Somehow, they had to get back to Ciudad del Este.

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When consciousness returned to him, memories of the crash followed in close succession. Harm jerked awake, his body instantly tensed, and he opened his eyes to find Mac hovering above him.

"Hey. Stay with me this time, all right?"

Her face was scraped and dirtier than before, and her hair hung in thick, tangled locks. Only a Marine could make that look good. "How long have I been out?" he mumbled, grimacing.

Mac looked relieved. "All together, about two hours, seventeen minutes. I think."

"You think?"

"Hey, give me a break. It knocked me out, too."

At that, he lifted his head. "You okay?"

"Better than you, apparently. But at least you're lucid now." She pulled her hand away from the spot that throbbed at his temple. "And the bleeding's pretty much stopped, so I'm relatively satisfied. Think you want to try sitting up?"

"The sooner the better, I guess."

When he pushed himself up off the ground, aided by her guiding hand, an unfamiliar kind of pain stabbed into him. Reflexively, he wrapped an arm tightly around his abdomen, pulling away from her. "Ahh, *fuck* ..."

Startled and instantly concerned, Mac didn't move for a minute. "Are you all right?"

After a few seconds, the sensation that he might be spontaneously combusting from the inside faded to a more manageable level, and he nodded without speaking. She reached for the canteen at her feet, still unsettled. "That was a first. I wasn't sure you even knew that word."

Harm cast a look of disbelief in her direction, eager to focus on something else besides how lousy he felt. "I'm an aviator. You think I don't know how to swear?"

She took a quick swig of water before replying. "It's not like we've never been in a curse-worthy situation before. But you're usually such a Boy Scout about things like that."

The comment brought a rueful smirk to his lips. Somehow that description felt further from the truth than it had ever been. How many men had he shot today? Three? Four? And the one that lingered, the one that was most clearly imprinted on his memory, was the man he *hadn't* shot. If he stopped to concentrate, he was certain he'd be able to hear that sickening crack -

The smirk abruptly vanished. "Mac, some of the things I did to get to you would put a Boy Scout in therapy for life."

She waited to see if he intended to elaborate. He didn't, so she simply passed him the canteen. "Am I going to have to put *you* in therapy?"

Shooting her a warning look, he took a drink and said nothing. No possible good could come from telling her any of the thoughts that had been churning around in his mind for the past two days. She had her own demons to battle: she didn't need his as well.

Mac shifted her wrist, wincing, and he realized her injury for the first time. "I should wrap that for you," he offered, moving closer to her. The bizarre pain he'd felt still remained, but he resolved not to make an issue of it. Crashing a plane was bound to net a person some serious bumps and bruises. He should have been thankful that he hadn't broken anything. At least this way they'd have a chance at making it back to civilization.

She held out her arm, and he rewrapped the makeshift bandage as tightly as he could. Her dark eyes locked on him as he worked. "I need to thank you," she said quietly. "What you did was incredible. I don't know how you pulled it off."

"Probably just as well. And you're welcome." It wasn't the most meaningful response he could have given, but he just didn't want to face the implications of all he'd done. "You think there's anyone out looking for us?"

Mac shrugged, easily changing focus back to the goal at hand. "Don't know. If Sadiq or any of his guys got out of there, they could be regrouping anywhere from here to Pakistan. Or they could be pissed off and trying to hunt us down."

"Either way, we should get moving. It'll be getting dark before long." Harm climbed to his feet with a fair amount of caution. Satisfied that he wasn't immediately going to fall over, he scanned the area around them to orient himself. "There was a road a couple of miles back, to the west. Let's head that way."

Mac stood up as well, gathering up the canteen and food packages with her good hand. "Not that I don't trust your sense of direction, but you did take a pretty good knock on the head ..."

He couldn't find the energy to be annoyed at her for doubting him. "We were heading west-southwest when we did our little CFIT." Pronouncing it 'see-fit,' he traced a path with his hand to illustrate their descent, which seemed to be borne out by the broken branches and the angle of the fuselage.

She nodded her understanding. "CFIT?"

"One of the great understatement acronyms of all time. Controlled Flight Into Terrain." Normally, such a remark would have been accompanied by some kind of self-deprecating gesture, but here there was only muted frustration. "Son of a *bitch*."

"You did the best you could."

"And this is where it got us." Upon meeting her gaze, he could see how sincere her statement had been. He gave a quick smile of acknowledgement, letting it drop before she could see how disingenuous it was. "Anyway, let's keep ourselves pointed in that general direction. We're bound to run into the road at some point."

They set out on the trek, the remains of their plan quickly disappearing behind them in the thick foliage. Mac offered one of the biscuits, but Harm shook his head. "You take them. Unlike you, I assume, I actually got something to eat earlier today."

Gratefully, she tore into the food as they hiked. He was almost glad for the excuse not to carry on a conversation. After a few minutes, though, the silence became palpable, and he decided to appease his curiosity. "Those people Sadiq shot ... were they the missionaries who disappeared?"

Her head swung toward him. "You saw that?"

"Yeah. We were working on our plan to get past the guards."

Mac turned her gaze forward, her expression clouded. "Yes, that was them. Don't ask how I feel about what happened to them, either, because I haven't figured that out yet."

Instinctively, he reached out and touched her arm, slowing to a temporary halt. "Hey. I know what mental torture feels like. You don't owe any explanations to me or anyone else."

She searched his eyes for the meaning behind that statement. Slowly, she asked, "How exactly *do* you know?"

At that, he realized what he'd said. Dropping his hand, he started walking again. "Ancient history. I'll tell you the story sometime. Right now, I'm just trying to make sure you're all right."

"I will be," she said, and he believed her.

They traveled in silence for a while longer, always keeping an ear alert for any sign of activity. Every so often, Mac stole a glance back at Harm, and he got the sense that she was trying to read him somehow. The silence stretched thinner and thinner, until he finally saw no choice but to break it. "That sixth sense of yours doing you any good at the moment?"

She didn't smile, looking at him with unease. "This feels strange," she told him. "The last time we were in a situation like this, we were Butch and Sundance."

He knew what she meant, but this wasn't the time or place to fully speak his mind. The last conversation they'd had before she left for this assignment, the way she'd so easily held up their relationship to the light and then closed the door on any further discussion, had rocked him hard. Possibly harder than she'd intended, but that didn't make it any easier to accept. He knew intellectually that that night wasn't fresh in her mind after the horror she'd experienced down here, but to him it cast a spotlight on the chasm that still existed between them.

Aware that she was waiting for a response, he said only, "We weren't the designated team this time, were we?"

"No. But we're together now, so you obviously rectified that mistake soon enough." She sighed. "Clay needs to get through this just so I can smack him around for the way he handled this mission."

Harm stepped around a fallen branch a few paces in front of her, and spoke in a voice that was nearly beyond her hearing. "I'm sorry I didn't get there sooner."

"What?"

"Maybe a couple of minutes would have made a big difference to Webb. Although I'm sure Gunny found a way to get him to the hospital."

Mac watched him carefully as she followed his path. "I thought you'd be more pissed off at him."

"I'm plenty pissed off at him. Doesn't mean I'd wish that kind of torture on him. And I know he means something to you, so - "

"Wait a minute. What exactly do you think he means to me?"

Another topic he didn't want to discuss. She'd kissed Webb. He'd seen it. She knew he'd seen it. Anything he said, and anything she heard, would undoubtedly be colored by that knowledge. "Look, Mac, you two went through hell together."

"Exactly. He needed comfort, and I wanted to help him hang on however I could. That's all it was."

"Okay."

Apparently his assent wasn't convincing enough, because her eyes darkened. "You don't believe me?"

"No - I mean, yes. I believe you, all right?"

"Then why are we having such a hard time even talking right now?" she asked, stopping him with a hand. Her voice pleaded for understanding, but he had little to offer. No matter what she thought, Webb wasn't the reason - or at least not the full reason - for the turmoil in his mind. But explaining that to her would require him to figure it out himself, and he wasn't at all sure that he'd be able to accept the likely conclusion.

He answered her question with another question. "We don't have more important things to focus on right now?"

"Not really, no. Harm, tell me you didn't go UA to come down here."

Thrown off by the sudden change of subject, he narrowed his eyes. "Where did that come from?"

"Before, when you woke up the first time, I said something about going home, and you said 'what's the point?' And it scared the hell out of me."

Harm shook his head. "Mac, I don't even remember saying that," he told her, fully aware that it wasn't strictly true. "And I didn't go UA. So relax."

"Then how - "

"Mac, can we please just concentrate on getting out of here, and have this conversation later? I can't think straight enough to - " He clamped his jaw down hard, praying that he'd be able to mask the blinding hopelessness that threatened to drag him under. "I just can't right now. Please."

After a long moment, she released his arm. "All right. Later."

As they walked, the sum of everything he'd done to find her swirled around him, seemingly choking off his air. His career was the one thing that defined his existence more than anything else, and he'd surrendered it in a heartbeat. He held contempt for the organization that had created this chaos in the first place, and he'd made a true devil's pact with it. He'd taken the first uncertain steps down a path whose end was shrouded in darkness. And for all that, he still had no idea where he stood with her or how to break this stalemate between them.

*God help me when she finds out what I've done.*

Aloud, he said, "I think I see the road."

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**2317 Local**  
**Our Lady of Providence Hospital**  
**Ciudad del Este, Paraguay**

They'd been extremely fortunate. When the first car passed them, they'd feared it might be Sadiq's men, so they'd stayed hidden in the brush. Aware that this tactic wasn't likely to get them far, Harm had proposed a new plan. Mac had moved a hundred yards down the

road in order to check out any passing motorists without being seen. When an unassuming-looking local finally passed by, she'd signaled to him, and he'd stepped out to flag the man down. Apparently there were more than a few people in this country who were willing to stop for grimy, bloodied Americans.

Their destination options were limited: go to the American embassy and check in with someone back home; go to Hardy, the CIA station chief, for help; or go to the hospital in hopes of finding Gunny and Webb. Since Hardy had been less than helpful in the past, and since Webb had been insistent that they trust no one outside of each other, the hospital seemed the best choice. Besides, having no information on Webb's condition was beginning to play havoc with Mac's state of mind.

Victor Galindez leaped up from his chair when they came into the quiet waiting room. "Ma'am, s-sir," he greeted them, with a touch of awkwardness overshadowed by relief. "Damn good to see you."

"Same here, Gunny."

"You two look like you didn't have an easy time getting here."

"That's an understatement." Harm rolled his eyes. "We rented a plane that refused to stay in the air and is consequently scattered all over the forest. But we took care of business."

Gunny lowered his voice. "You got 'em?"

"Not sure on Sadiq, but his cargo's been blown sky-high." Mac glanced around the stark hospital corridors with some anxiety. "How's Clay?"

"Hanging in there, ma'am. They said he'll pull through, but they're going to take him into surgery in a little while to patch him up."

Mac twisted the loose fabric of her shirt with her good hand. "Do you think I could get in to see him before they take him?"

"Nothing wrong with trying to find out, ma'am. I had him admitted under his cover name, so maybe you should just tell them that you're his wife." Gunny gestured toward the nurses' station.

Trying not to flinch, Harm pointed out, "You need to get your arm looked at, too, Mac."

"You're a fine one to talk, concussion-boy," she told him with a trace of a wry smile. "I'll get checked out in a little while. I'll catch back up to you later."

She quickly disappeared down the hall. Gunny waited until she was gone, then turned to Harm. "What now, sir?"

"You're asking me? I'm the only one here who doesn't have any official role in this assignment."

The Marine looked at him askance. "Due respect, sir - don't ask me to buy that story. If you didn't have some inroad with the Agency, you never would've gotten here."

Harm's expression changed from one of casual innocence to one of grudging admission. "You're entirely too perceptive for your own good, Gunny. But it's not like I had time to get a full in-brief on procedure. Is there somebody we're supposed to call or something?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Webb was working pretty much on his own for this one, but I never completely believed the stuff he was feeding me about going silent and not trusting anyone. He's a company man, sir - you know that better than I do. I think the Agency wanted it to look like he was going rogue, so they could play him off the other operatives in the region and find the leak in their network."

Harm's eyebrows shot up. "There's a leak?"

"So they say, sir. My suggestion is that I check in with the commander of the Marine detachment at the embassy. He's technically my CO, and he ought to be able to put us in touch with someone at Langley."

"Makes sense to me."

Gunny moved to the pay phone in the corner of the room and dialed a number he'd obviously committed to memory. Harm didn't bother to listen to the half-conversation that followed: he was too busy trying to quiet the inner voices that had as yet refused to leave him alone.

*You didn't have to do it. You could have knocked him out with a rock, or a right hook, but you didn't. You snapped his neck, and you did it without even blinking. Like it was natural.*

"Sir," Gunny reported, breaking into his thoughts. "They're asking me to put you on the line."

"Who's 'they'?"

He shrugged, with a somewhat wary look. Harm crossed the room and took the phone from him. "Rabb."

"Mr. Rabb," greeted a pleasant yet serious voice. "My name is Richard Wallis. I'm an associate counsel to the ambassador. I've been asked to tell you that your presence is requested at the embassy as soon as you can arrange it."

His tone immediately set off Harm's radar. '*Associate counsel.*' Right. "May I ask what my presence is being requested for?"

Wallis's voice didn't change. "I believe that your wife would like to speak to you."

Harm closed his eyes, beginning to comprehend just how deeply he was mired in this mess. His marriage to Catherine Gale may have been a masquerade, but he was wedded to the Agency now, at least for the time being. They'd allowed him into their fold, and such access didn't come without a price. The sooner he repaid his debt, the better.

Mac would probably be preoccupied with Webb for a while yet. He had no reason to believe that he'd be missed too much.

"All right," he told Wallis curtly. "Tell her I'll be there in half an hour."

Hanging up, he turned to Gunny. The other man's expression was as impassive as ever, but his eyes flashed with dawning comprehension. "Are they calling you out, sir?"

"Knock it off, Victor. You're not going to be saluting me again anytime soon." Instantly Harm regretted his harshness and softened his tone. "I owe it to them, anyway."

"Seems to me that your IOU ought to be null and void, since you did manage to extract their operative and neutralize the threat."

"I don't think they see it that way. Did you get any instructions from your CO?"

Gunny nodded. "I'm to stay here with Colonel Mackenzie and Mr. Webb until he's stabilized for transport back to the States. There's a courier coming from the embassy to bring us some clothes, money, and diplomatic identification. The colonel will be able to catch a flight home as soon as she's ready."

Harm noticed that his name hadn't been included in that plan. With nothing in the way of ID or money for himself, he was essentially subject to the Agency's decisions. God knew the Navy wasn't going to bail him out.

"Okay. Tell Mac that I'll, ah ... I'll be back a little later. Either that, or I'll check back in through the embassy."

"You don't want to tell her yourself?"

"Not particularly, since she's likely to kick my ass for it."

Doubt shadowed Gunny's features - he knew that a summons like this wasn't something to be taken lightly. But he simply stuck out his hand. "Take care of yourself, all right?"

Harm shook it. "I'll do my best. Listen - thanks for everything you did to make all this happen."

"Glad to have done it." Gunny watched him walk down the hallway and disappear around the corner without so much as a glance behind.

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Inside Webb's room, Mac smiled as his eyes flickered open. "Hi there," she said, leaning over the bed rail. "You made it."

His voice was a whisper. "Could've ... fooled me."

"Well, I'm sure you don't feel like it right now, but you're going to live. They're going to do some surgery to patch up Sadiq's handiwork, though."

With a concerted effort, Webb focused on her face, and his eyes cleared noticeably. "You're okay?"

"I'm fine. Although my luck with Harm and airplanes hasn't improved one iota." She gave a rueful shrug and reached out to grasp his hand.

"I told him ... to take care of you."

"He did. He does. In his own unique way."

Webb looked at her for a long moment, seeming to recognize the distance in her dark eyes. "He doesn't deserve you ... but I think he deserves you more than I do."

At that, she struggled to maintain her smile. "Don't worry about things like that now."

"It's true ... I put you at risk. He rescued you."

"Clay, listen to me. We can talk about this later. The doctors are going to take you in a few minutes, and when you get back, I'll still be here. I promise. Okay?"

He nodded imperceptibly, his fingers tightening around hers. Soon, his eyes slid shut again, and she allowed herself a few tears of self-pity. She'd been the cause of far too many shattered hearts in her time. None had been deliberate, but that didn't make them any less real. She had little doubt that she'd damaged Harm's as well, though it certainly hadn't been a one-sided affair. But Clay wasn't a lovesick teen. He'd understand, once all this madness was over.

When the orderlies arrived to take him into surgery, Mac left the room and wandered back out to where Gunny had symbolically been standing his post. "Where's Commander Rabb?" she asked, glancing around. "Did he find somebody to check him out and make sure he hasn't lost any more brain cells than usual?"

Gunny hesitated. "Not exactly, ma'am. He was called away to the embassy. He promised to check in later on."

"The embassy?" Mac frowned. "In the middle of the night?"

"I'm sure he's getting debriefed on today's events, ma'am." Gunny's lips twisted wryly. "I'm having a hard time not thinking of him by his rank, too."

She cocked her head. "Is there some reason why I shouldn't?"

Surprise flickered across Gunny's dusty features, and suddenly a terrible realization struck her. He said he hadn't gone UA ... but he didn't see the point of going home ... "Oh, my God," she whispered. "Harm resigned, didn't he?"

"I figured he'd told you, ma'am."

"Tell me? Since when does he tell me anything?" Hot tears burned her eyes as the full weight of her partner's sacrifice came into sharp, painful focus. Twenty-two years he'd spent wearing the uniform with distinction ... could such a thing really be undone so easily? "Jesus - what was he *thinking*?"

"My guess, ma'am," Gunny said solemnly, "is that he was thinking you needed help, and there just wasn't any other way."

"So he throws away the most important thing in his life?"

"Ma'am, I apologize in advance for stepping out of line here, but if that were true, do you really think he would have done it?"

Mac sank into a chair, having difficulty drawing a full breath. Right now, she wasn't prepared to think too hard about just what was the most important thing in Harm's life. "If he's not on Navy business, then who the hell yanked him away from here in such a rush?" Gunny didn't reply, and half a second later, it hit her. "No. No way did he get in bed with them. He puts up with Webb, but the entire intelligence community drives him nuts. Their world is so ...inconsistent, and no one's world is as black and white as Harmon Rabb's."

"Like I said, ma'am. I don't think he had a choice."

She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed at her temples, hoping to end this madness by sheer force of will. When she looked up, though, the white walls still glared back at her. Webb was still in surgery. And everything surrounding Harm was still an utter mystery.

"When that crazy - " She halted, at a loss. What was she going to call him? Flyboy? Sailor? Did either of those nicknames apply to him anymore?

Damn him for finding yet another method of tying her heart into knots. "When *Harm* gets back, he and I are going to have words," she informed Gunny, staring fiercely ahead as if the focus would give some order to her jumbled thoughts.

"Understood, ma'am. In the meantime, may I suggest that you get that wrist set?"

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**2352 Local  
American Embassy  
Ciudad del Este, Paraguay**

Harm pulled out his backup stash of local currency and handed the last of it over to the taxi driver. Climbing out of the cab in front of the embassy gates, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder just how he was supposed to convince the Marine guard to let him in.

"Corporal," he began, hoping to win points with the correct use of rank. "I'm an American citizen. My passport and ID were lost, but I was told to meet with a Mr. Richard Wallis here. My name is - "

"Oh, thank God!"

Behind the stoic guard, Catherine Gale hurried up to the gate, the relief in her eyes a little too strong to be entirely false.

Harm hadn't expected his 'wife' to actually be present in the flesh, but by this point, he'd given up on being surprised by anything that happened in this country. "Hi, honey," he offered with an apologetic smile.

"Corporal, open the gate, please." As soon as her request was granted, Catherine flew into his arms and kissed him gratefully. He couldn't hold back a muted grunt of pain, causing her to draw back in concern. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine - just banged up. I'll tell you all about it later."

"Damn right you will." With another, gentler kiss, she turned back to the guard. "Please tell Mr. Wallis that my husband's arrived, and that we've gone to the hotel. And thank him very much for both of us."

She slipped an arm around his waist and led him away down the deserted street. "Are we really going to a hotel?" Harm asked, noncommittal, as they turned the corner.

"For the moment," Catherine replied. "But you can start filling me in on exactly what happened right now. The director's rather curious."

The explanation was complete by the time she opened the door to their hotel room. It was a nice room, at least: comfortably furnished, and a set of new clothes lay folded on the bed for him. Probably even the correct sizes, too. Harm watched her sweep the room for listening devices and reflected on how different she looked from the person he'd met back at JAG.

"For a lawyer, you're a very good actress."

Understanding his meaning, she cast her gaze downward. "I'm not field-qualified and don't have any intention of becoming so. Director Kershaw just thought that you might be more comfortable with me than with someone you didn't know."

Harm wondered if the decision to use her had had more to do with his comfort, or with the fact that he'd already demonstrated an inability to say no to her. "When I agreed to go through with the wedding farce, I didn't realize we'd be using it as a cover story," he remarked, watching for her reaction.

Catherine looked as though she'd expected such a comment, but it seemed to sting nonetheless. "It's a fortunate coincidence. I didn't tell anyone at work about faking the wedding. I only told them that I owed you a debt of gratitude."

Based on the few hours he'd spent with her back in Washington - had it only been a few days since then? - he recognized truth in her assertion. She had the capacity to be emotionless when required, but her displays of real emotion were genuine.

"How's your mom doing?"

"She's stable. They said she'd hang on for at least another few days, so when work called, I told her I had to come see you. She says hi, by the way." Catherine smiled faintly. "I got on a plane about the same time you arrived here. I'll fly back as soon as my delivery services are no longer needed."

"Dare I ask what you're here to deliver?" he asked.

In lieu of a response, she picked up the clothes from the bed and placed them in his hands. Leaning in, she studied the cut behind his temple. "You're sure you're all right? Your color's not good."

"Catherine," he said quietly. "I need to know what your boss expects from me. Preferably soon."

She nodded. "Take a shower first, and put these on. It'll be best if you blend into the background from here on out."

The shower was welcome, in that it afforded him the opportunity to wash away the grime and dried blood he'd accumulated over the past twelve hours or so. But the water didn't soothe his battered body or his churning mind: rather, the longer he stood under the spray, the more ill he felt. So he quickly scraped the day-old stubble from his face and reached for the clothes she'd provided.

A black button-down shirt and pants, paired with a dark-gray jacket. Stylish and nondescript at the same time, it could easily have been the wardrobe of a businessman or a pleasure traveler. He wondered idly if the Agency had their own version of the military's Clothing Sales, one that sold nothing but three-piece suits and outfits like this.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Catherine's eyes betrayed a hint of dismay at the transformation. She was just beginning to realize what she'd been sent to accomplish, and in a way, he pitied her for it. Although her paychecks were marked "CIA," it was possible that he was more intimately aware of her employer's reach than she herself was.

In a blink, the dismay was gone, and she snapped open a metal briefcase marked with a diplomatic tag.

"I was sent down here after some new information was received regarding the local situation. Director Kershaw will fill you in on the details, but it's not difficult to infer that he'd like you to do something else while you're here."

There was a box inside the briefcase, also locked. She turned it toward him. "I don't have this combination. I'm told that it's the date of a significant event in your life."

Harm fixed her with a look of exasperation. He'd never been the type to idolize James Bond. An eight-digit combination. Of all the significant events in his life, only a few actual dates were burned into his memory. And the odds of the Agency selecting one of the positive ones weren't very good.

12-24-1969.

*Click.*

"Bastards," he muttered under his breath. Opening the box, he first focused on the gun - a special-issue Sig Sauer Mark 23 with a textured composite grip and an impressively short silencer. They'd had her transporting a firearm under diplomatic protection. Cute. The silencer was a clear warning that this wasn't meant to be a strictly defensive weapon, but he shoved that thought aside and moved on to the other contents of the box. A passport, New York driver's license, and a credit card, all bearing his picture and the name of Jason Michael Beale. And a plane ticket in a fat envelope - departing Ciudad del Este in four hours and arriving at Baltimore-Washington International midday tomorrow.

"A hit and run?" he asked Catherine, cocking an eyebrow without even a trace of humor.

"I hope not," she answered, honestly unnerved. "The director's supposed to give you the assignment himself."

She pressed a series of buttons on her cell phone and handed it to him. Cautiously, he lifted it to his ear. "This is Beale."

"Good to hear from you, Mr. Beale," came the resonant voice of Deputy Director Harrison Kershaw. "This is a secure satellite link, but I trust you'll understand if I don't go into too many details."

"Of course, sir."

"Did you get what you came for?"

"I did. Thank you for your assistance in that regard."

"You can thank me by hearing me out. You're in a unique position to take care of a problem within the company."

A problem. What a neat, bloodless euphemism for a mole. "You've identified the problem, then?"

"We have, and I'm disappointed to say that it's a larger problem than we'd anticipated. Nonetheless, action must be taken quickly. Inside the envelope with your flight arrangements, there are two more documents. They'll explain the problem and our preferred correction."

Harm opened the envelope and shook out two newspaper clippings. The first was a report on a local drug syndicate. A marked section outlined the syndicate's trademark style of execution: a silenced Sig Sauer against the base of the victim's skull.

The hollow ache in the pit of his stomach only grew as he read the second clipping: an advertisement for the import/export company that served as a front for the Agency's local operations. Edward Hardy's face smirked up at him from the page.

*Holy shit.* They wanted him to kill their own station chief.

Finding his voice, he asked, "Sir, can I ask how you came to the conclusion that this was the ... problem?"

"We've been working under that assumption for some time, actually. It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when the original break occurred, but recent experiences, yours included, have shown that he's been an obstacle to business, and there are documented cases of information traveling through inappropriate channels." Kershaw dropped out of his double-speak temporarily, his tone grim. "He's out for himself. You can be assured of it."

*He warned Sadiq.* The realization struck like a thunderclap. Hardy hadn't been merely unhelpful. He'd told Sadiq to be prepared to move his missile stockpile. What else could explain the fact that his men had already been loading the Stingers onto a truck when they arrived?

"I understand," he said, not knowing what else to say.

"Prudence seems to dictate that you return home as soon as possible after making the correction," the Deputy Director continued, as if he'd never broken stride. "Are you prepared to take care of this for us?"

Harm looked down at the weapon in its padded box. *Was he prepared?* There were no battle lines here. This was an American, a fellow government officer. A traitor, apparently, but he was being asked to take that practically on faith. If he went through with this, all the rhetoric he'd previously clung to, about taking a life only when it directly threatened others, would be worthless.

*You don't have a choice*, his inner voice told him. *You accepted this before you even left Washington.*

His soul for Mac's life, and Webb's. Maybe that was the going rate.

"I am," he answered.

"All right. We'll talk again after you get back. This is an important thing you're doing. I thank you for it. Good luck."

The line disconnected, and Harm set down the papers in his hand. Catherine picked them up, her features darkening with dread as she began to put the pieces together.

"Don't do it," she said flatly. "Take the plane ticket and just walk away."

He paused in the middle of loading the Sig Sauer, surprised. "What?"

"They're only using you because you're convenient. You can get to him quickly and be out of the country long before anyone misses him, and you'll likely never be back."

"Seems like that's a decent enough reason. The longer it takes to set up, the more time he has to endanger other operatives."

"But this is the kind of job they have specialists for - people who've been trained, especially in the mental aspects of ..."

"Sweeping?" he supplied impassively.

"Threat neutralization," she corrected. "It's not the type of thing most people can do. Certainly not someone who -"

"Someone who what?" he asked, and the cold edge to his voice startled them both.

She stepped in front of him, forcing him to look at her. "Harm, I realize that I don't know you very well, but I can recognize a person who lives by his principles. Do you honestly think that this isn't going to affect you tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that?"

"National security isn't designed for the purpose of allowing me to sleep at night." He stuck the gun into the waistband of his pants, under his jacket. "Check out your boss's file on me sometime. The guys I killed today were a long way from being the first."

As he stowed his new identification in his jacket pocket, she tried one last time. "Did you tell Colonel Mackenzie where you were going tonight?"

He fired a hard look in her direction, but he knew his voice would sound empty. "Go home, Catherine. Go hug your mother. I'm not your responsibility anymore."

Unwilling to deal with her obvious worry and remorse, he opened the door and stepped out to face the task ahead.

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There was something otherworldly about the way he found himself at the Gonzalez Import-Export Company without a clear mental record of the path he'd taken to get there. Hardy's apartment was above the office, and although it was after 1 a.m., there was a dim light flickering in one dusty second-floor window.

He climbed the fire escape silently, glad to have been issued rubber-soled shoes. There was an open window, but it was too far from the ledge for him to reach without risking some noise. The door, then. Thirty seconds with the blade of his pocketknife caused the lock to spring open, and he shook his head. Anything that might have connected Hardy to the Agency was undoubtedly well hidden, but apparently his personal security had not been such a priority.

All his stealthy moves seemed to have been wasted, as he discovered upon stepping fully into the apartment. Hardy was slumped over the small kitchen table, a cana bottle sitting next to him, bleary eyes staring at - or possibly through - the spoon and the lighter in his hands. Drugs. It figured.

"You sold out your country for *this*?"

Hardy looked up, barely reacting at the sight of the gun trained on him. He shrugged listlessly, his level of interest dimmed by the alcohol and other chemicals coursing through his veins. "So you're their new favored child, huh? It doesn't last long. Trust me."

"Not when you deliberately compromise operations to fund your habit, no."

Hardy pretended not to have heard. "Someday you'll get relegated to the ends of the earth like this, and things will start to look a lot less clear ..."

"Shut up," Harm told him roughly, moving to stand behind him. "You know what I'm here to do, so why waste your breath?"

"Because I know what you're here to do, and I don't see the point in making it easy on you." The station chief tossed the lighter and the spoon aside and picked up the bottle, taking a long swig. "Matter of fact, I'm not so sure you can pull it off."

In response, the silenced muzzle jabbed against the base of his neck. "You almost got my partner killed, asshole. You're not getting a lot of sympathy from this corner."

Hardy laughed, a harsh, hollow sound. "Real strong advocate of the American system of justice, huh? Aren't you supposed to haul me in and give me my day in court, so I can get my death sentence back home instead? You strike me as the type to hide behind the system so you

don't have to think too hard about what you're doing. That's not gonna help you much right now."

Trying not to let the jabs even enter his mind, Harm reached for the curtain and drew the fabric between his body and Hardy's. He wasn't sure how messy this was going to get, but he sure as hell didn't want to be wearing the other man's blood all the way back to the States. "So you think I'm going to go all noble on you and back down? Or maybe just lose my nerve?"

"Not that I care all that much anymore, but yeah, pretty much."

He shook his head, feeling an icy numbness beginning to creep in. "You know, Hardy, part of me really does wish you were right."

Gently, he squeezed the trigger. The bottle crashed to the floor.

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His memory blurred again after that: his next moment of real awareness occurred as he stood on the bank of a small local river. This tributary flowed into the Iguazu, only a few miles away. It was deep enough that the gun would probably end up buried thirty feet down in the silt. If not, then maybe the current would carry it far enough away that it would never be connected to the event that had just taken place. Rivers seemed to be an excellent place to lose or find evidence. It had almost worked for Lindsey and that God-damned cover.

He wiped the barrel with the sleeve of his jacket and hurled the weapon out into the water. After watching it sink unceremoniously under the rippling surface, he turned away, swallowing a sudden rush of bile.

*Jesus ... what did I just do?*

The world tilted dangerously, and he shut his eyes, trying to steady himself with a deep breath. Apparently that was a mistake, as his stomach did another sickening flip. Both Hardy and Catherine had said that he wasn't the kind of man who could do this - but he'd just done it, so obviously that wasn't entirely true.

So what kind of man was he?

Lurching back toward the sidewalk, he threw himself into the backseat of a nearby cab, needing to get as far away as possible. His flight home was scheduled to board in an hour. Home ... maybe home wasn't where he needed to go right now. What could he do there? Attempt to reconstruct some semblance of the life he'd had only a few days ago? Was that even possible anymore? Even if he could walk back into JAG HQ and magically get his job back, he wasn't sure he'd even be able to perform those duties again after having cast his beliefs aside the way he had tonight. He wasn't sure he'd even be able to look someone like Bud Roberts in the eye.

Maybe the Navy should have kept him locked up after all.

Almost dizzy with confusion, self-loathing, and a fair amount of pain, he made his way into the airport and collapsed into a chair, as far out of the path of passenger traffic as possible. He thought briefly about changing his destination, but couldn't find a better alternative than simply heading for Washington.

*So you got your hands dirty. There are lots of dirty jobs out there. People have to do them sometimes, for the greater good. How else does somebody like Webb do a job like his for so long and not get consumed by it?*

*He does get consumed by it, you idiot. This whole thing was a clusterfuck from the beginning. Was that anybody's fault but his?*

*The desired outcome was achieved, though. Sometimes the ends actually do justify the means.*

*The ends don't justify the means. They never have. There's no value in a society that allows - no, compels - a select few to break its rules.*

He trudged onto the airplane with barely a nod to the cheerful flight attendant at the door. They'd given him a first-class seat. Somehow that didn't surprise him in the slightest. The takeoff roll only magnified his nausea, ending any thoughts he'd had of abusing the liquor service. *Harmon Rabb getting sick on an airplane. Wouldn't that just be a riot?*

Maybe what he'd done tonight had saved lives. He'd never know. All he knew for certain was that he'd taken one. The sound of the silenced bullet had not been enough to mask the gruesome sound of the man's brain being obliterated. That sound would forever be coupled in his mind with the crack of the guard's neck back in Chaco Boreal. He wondered bleakly which one had sealed his fate.

Unable to face himself anymore, he leaned his head back against the well-cushioned seat and fell instantly into a dreamless sleep.

"Sir? Excuse me, sir?"

*What the hell ...* He pushed his eyes open and focused on the flight attendant hovering over him. Her earlier cheerfulness had been replaced by wary concern.

"Sir, we've arrived at our destination."

The fact that he'd somehow slept through an entire eight-hour flight didn't quite register with him as he sharply realized just how terrible he felt. Chills racked his aching body, and he felt a sheen of cold sweat on his skin.

"Should I call for a doctor, sir - "

"No. Thank you." He wasn't quite sure where that vehement insistence had come from, but he pushed it away and forced a weak smile. "I'm fine. I've just ... had some bad flying experiences lately."

With great effort, he pulled himself out of the seat, using every ounce of willpower in his being to keep from staggering, and made his way off the plane and into the terminal. Before he could think about where he was headed, the vertigo overwhelmed him. He stumbled drunkenly into the men's room, making it only as far as the trash can and heaving the contents of his stomach into it.

With a trembling hand, he wiped his mouth and stared at it as it came back streaked with red.

Blood. And not a small amount of it, either. *Shit.*

Coherent thoughts were coming with far less frequency by now. Reeling, he used the wall to hold himself up and attempted to move back out into the terminal. His legs buckled after only a few steps.

*Somebody ... help me ...*

Consciousness fled just before his body hit the floor.

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**1346 Local**  
**Our Lady of Providence Hospital**  
**Ciudad del Este, Paraguay**

Clayton Webb studied his visitor as she stared off into nothing. Sarah Mackenzie was a singularly beautiful woman: even a person who didn't share his feelings would agree with that. This, however, was clearly not one of her better moments. She'd cleaned herself up and gotten a change of clothes sometime during the night, but the exhaustion and pain etched into her features hadn't lessened since their escape from Sadiq. If anything, she looked even more troubled than before.

"Does your wrist hurt?" he asked, for lack of a better conversation starter. "You could share some of this IV - it's the good stuff."

Startled out of her thoughts, Mac gave him a brief, wry smile. "Thanks, but they let me have my own painkillers. Besides, I'm sure you need everything they're giving you."

"Probably. You want to tell me why you look so worried, or are you going to make me guess?"

"You've got enough to worry about on your own."

"I have approximately nothing to worry about at the present time, other than getting in even more trouble with my director over the way I handled this debacle. But that's not going to get worked out from here, so lay it on me anyway."

She sighed and relented. "Harm disappeared last night, supposedly summoned by someone at the embassy. It's been over twelve hours since he left, and nobody over there has any idea where he is, so I'm starting to wonder if your associates have pulled him into something I don't want to think about."

"My associates?" Webb reached for the controls and raised the head of the bed so that he could look at her more directly. "For one thing, I don't have all that many associates around here. And if I did, I think your partner would most likely tell them to take a long walk off a short pier."

"Normally I'd agree with you." Mac drifted toward the window. "He resigned his commission to come down here, Clay. I think he made some sort of deal with the Agency to find out where we were."

That was a surprise and a half. The idea of Rabb going civilian was a difficult one to envision. "You're kidding," he said, the medication limiting his ability to devise a more profound response.

"I wish. What's more, he didn't even tell me he'd done it. I had to get it from Gunny." She turned slightly away from the bed, but not before he could see her eyes glisten. "I wish to God I understood what goes on in that man's head."

Webb watched her for a few seconds, as she kept a torrent of emotions expertly contained just under the surface. During their imprisonment, she'd maintained a much tougher exterior, staying strong because they both knew he couldn't. She was making far less effort to do so here. It hurt to realize so unequivocally that her feelings ran that much deeper for Harmon Rabb than for him, but he couldn't honestly say that it was a shock.

"I guess that tells you once and for all how he really feels about you," he offered lamely.

Mac turned back rapidly, guilt weaving its way through all the other emotions that played across her face. "Clay, about yesterday ..."

"I'd rather forget I ever said most of it, if that's all right." He attempted a wan smile. "I know what a disaster we would be. But at the time, I didn't feel like I had too much to lose."

"I was flattered. If things were different - "

"They're not, though. You've been waiting for him for a long time. I'm not going to get in the way now that he's done something to earn that devotion."

She shook her head, with a soft, bitter laugh. "He didn't exactly come in and sweep me off my feet, though, did he? It took us hours to find our way back to civilization after the crash, and every time I tried to talk to him about anything even remotely related to us, he'd brush me off. And then he just vanished, without attempting to explain or even say goodbye - God damn it ..." Frustrated, she blinked the tears back. "It's the same old story. Harm came after me - after us - because he felt it was the right and noble thing to do. He didn't do it because I'm the love of his life."

"You won't really know that until you track him down, though, will you?"

"Clay, what the hell are you trying to do to me here? I don't need another person in my life trying to tell me who I love and who loves me, all right?" Immediately, she regained control. "I'm sorry. That was a lot harsher than it should have been. Especially to you."

"It's a self-serving goal, Sarah. Having to watch you be this miserable and confused is killing me. I don't want to do it any longer than I have to."

Mac gave him a small smile. "Yeah, Clay, you're a real selfish son of a bitch," she said quietly. "So what do I do now? Just wait for him to turn up and explain himself?"

"Chegwidden might have a clue where he is," Webb suggested. "Maybe Rabb doesn't report to him anymore, but he might at least be able to tell you who his contact at Langley was."

"That's a good idea. If you don't mind, I think I'll go call him. Maybe it'll preserve my sanity for a while longer." Stepping close to the bed again, she leaned in and placed a light kiss on his cheek. "Thank you," she murmured into his ear. "You're a good man, no matter what you think."

Moving out into the hallway, she pulled out the phone that the embassy officials had lent them and dialed.

"JAG Headquarters, Petty Officer Tiner speaking."

"Tiner, it's Colonel Mackenzie. Is the admiral available?"

The yeoman's voice jumped nearly an octave. "Colonel, good to hear from you, ma'am! The admiral said you were okay, but we ... uh, yeah, the admiral. Ma'am, he's not in the office at present, but he left strict instructions for me to have you call his cell phone. Any time of the day or night, he said."

"Thanks, Tiner - but I don't have his number handy at the moment. Can you - "

"Yes, ma'am. I'll put you through right away."

There was an extended pause on the line, and at last the admiral's voice came through. "Chegwidden."

"This is Colonel Mackenzie, sir. I hope I'm not interrupting something."

"Not really, no." Her CO sounded tired, she noticed. "CIA informed me that you and Webb made it out. Best news I've had in weeks."

"Thank you, sir. You can thank Harm and Gunnery Sergeant Galindez for that."

"I intend to, at such time as it becomes possible."

In the background, she heard a loudspeaker paging a doctor, and she frowned. "Admiral, are you at Bethesda?"

"Johns Hopkins, actually." There was a heavy sigh from his end. "Colonel, I have a story to tell you, and if it makes sense to you when it's over, then maybe you can explain it to me."

"Sir?"

"The ER down here admitted a patient by the name of Jason Beale this morning. Apparently he'd collapsed at BWI shortly after getting off a flight from Paraguay. When they tried to locate next of kin, they discovered that neither Jason Beale nor the Social Security number on his passport existed. One of the doctors found a Naval Academy ring in his pocket and recognized the name on the inside from the tribunal coverage last year. That's when my phone rang."

Mac's throat closed up. Harm was back in Washington? "Sir, is he all right?" she managed to say.

"He will be. There were some internal injuries that he'd apparently been ignoring - the doctors estimated that he'd been bleeding for at least twelve to fifteen hours. They've patched him back together yet again, and I'm hoping to get some explanation from him when he comes around. They say the damage is consistent with a high-speed car wreck - ?"

"Plane wreck, sir." She tried vainly to keep her heart from racing. "We borrowed a local's plane in order to destroy the Stingers ... I should have known he was hurt worse than he let on."

"I don't think I can accurately comment on that, but Mac, what the hell is going on? You're in a hospital right now, aren't you? Why did he hop a plane instead of getting help there?"

"Sir, I don't have a clue, but it probably has something to do with the fake identification he was using. Or more likely, with the people who gave it to him."

The admiral said nothing for a moment. When he spoke up again, his voice was less confident. "Mac, I wanted to grant him leave. I really did."

Was it possible that he was feeling responsible for this? "Sir, I understand. Having one military officer down here was sketchy enough. It's just ... I wish he hadn't had to go to *them*."

"So do I." His voice changed again, as he regained his authority. "What are your intentions, Colonel?"

She glanced back at Webb's door for a moment, hoping he would understand. "Sir, I'm coming home."

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**1512 EDT**  
**Johns Hopkins Hospital**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

A.J. shut off his phone and looked over at the motionless form of the man who had until only a few days ago been his best lawyer. This entire situation didn't feel right to him. When Harm had handed over his letter of resignation and walked out of JAG, he'd been wearing his heart on his sleeve, more so than ever before. A.J. had always found Mac easier to read than Harm when it came to their indescribable relationship: it had taken until that moment for him to see for certain that the commander's feelings ran every bit as deeply as the colonel's.

And now that Harm had accomplished the task for which he'd given up everything, now that he finally had the chance to tell Mac whatever it was he wanted to tell her ... he'd left her in Paraguay without so much as a word. That just flat-out made no sense. Even without knowing the details, A.J. was tempted to curse Webb's name for setting this bizarre chain of events in motion.

His eye caught a slight movement from Harm's left hand, and he moved closer to the bed, folding his arms over his chest. "Get the lead out, Mr. Rabb," he told the younger man firmly. "There are a great many things we need to discuss."

After a few minutes, Harm managed to shake off his anesthetic stupor enough to open his eyes. Disoriented, he looked up at his onetime commanding officer. "That's a start," A.J. remarked. "Welcome back to the States. You're in Johns Hopkins, in case you were wondering."

As soon as the disorientation faded, an iron door seemed to slam shut. "Admiral," he rasped weakly, his expression revealing nothing save for the pain of attempting to speak.

"Your throat's going to feel pretty terrible for a while, since it was essentially filling up with blood when you were admitted. They practically had to use a Shop-Vac to clean you out. But I'm told that the actual injuries to your stomach and kidneys were relatively simple to repair, and that once your blood volume is replaced satisfactorily, these good people will let you go home. So you'll excuse me if I don't give you much of a grace period before asking what the hell you were thinking."

A.J. picked up a cup of water from the table and offered the straw. Harm took a few small sips, swallowing painfully before answering. "Thinking about what, sir?"

"Colonel Mackenzie informed me that these injuries were the result of a plane crash that took place yesterday. She's wondering, as I am, why you didn't seek any kind of medical assistance and instead boarded a jet for another continent."

Harm closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, they flickered with defeat. "Sir, have you ever been in a situation where you honestly couldn't tell whether the pain you felt was physical or not?"

Somewhat taken aback by that response, A.J. waited a moment before speaking again. "That doesn't quite explain why you came home without telling anyone."

The corner of Harm's mouth turned up in a humorless smile. "At some point soon, if it hasn't happened already, the *policia* in Ciudad del Este will begin investigating a murder. They'll most likely conclude that it was committed by drug lords, but on the off chance that they don't, it is in my best interests to be in another part of the world."

A.J. didn't press for details on the subject. Having been a SEAL in the midst of a very bloody war, he had a strong awareness of the psychology of killing: more so than Mac, and probably Gunny, and maybe even Webb. He wasn't shocked or repulsed by the idea so much as he was disappointed - because he knew that this man's view of such things was rather intransigent, and he suspected that this particular action might not have fit the constraints.

"Am I to assume that this is related to your newfound rapport with the CIA?"

"You're free to assume anything you want, Admiral."

There was an undercurrent of coldness in his voice, slowly gaining strength with every word. A.J. didn't like it, but he was willing to ignore it for the time being. "Well, since I'm here, I might as well address your personnel issue."

Harm lifted an eyebrow, looking as if he couldn't care less. "I wasn't aware that I had one."

A.J. paused midway through the motion of withdrawing the resignation papers from his pocket. "You're on terminal leave at the moment, Commander. Such things can be rescinded."

The coldness suddenly took on a sarcastic edge. "How magnanimous of you, sir."

The admiral's eyes narrowed. "I'm offering you your job back, Mr. Rabb. If I were you, I wouldn't be so quick to bite the hand that feeds you."

"If I was convinced that coming back to JAG would fix things, Admiral, I'd do it. Right now, however, I don't have any such conviction."

"And what better ideas have you got? Walking into Langley and walking out with another false identity?"

"Well, if the shoe fits."

"It doesn't fit at all. If you were thinking straight, you'd realize that."

Harm's eyes flashed. "Then I'm certainly glad to have someone around to tell me what to do with my life."

A.J. knew intellectually that he shouldn't be letting this conversation get to him, but for a moment, his anger forced that knowledge aside. "You don't think I can implement a selective stop-loss order? Play with the manpower numbers and say that the Navy can't afford to let a legal O-5 walk out the door? I don't have to accept your resignation, Commander. You signed on to obey orders - if you want to play hardball, then let's play."

When the younger man spoke again, there was something dark and ugly lingering behind his eyes. "In that case, Admiral, I suggest you take it up with Deputy Director Kershaw."

They stared at each other for a long minute. Finally, Harm dropped his gaze, revealing a momentary glimpse of the anguish in his mind, and A.J.'s anger dissipated. "Good God, son, what happened down there?" he asked quietly.

Harm didn't reply, and A.J. sighed. "For the time being, your terminal leave stands, but I should warn you that BUPERS will likely process your paperwork in the next few days. If time runs out and you haven't changed your mind, then your resignation will be effective at that point."

He started toward the door, and Harm found his voice again. "Sir, I know I don't have a right to ask for anything, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone at JAG where I am. I don't - I don't think I could deal with them right now."

"I'll take it under advisement." A.J. reached for the doorknob, then stopped himself. "You did one job, Commander. That's all. The Agency doesn't own your soul."

Harm didn't meet his gaze. "They didn't own it twenty-four hours ago, sir. Now ... I'm not so sure."

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**Two days later**  
**Same location**

The admiral had done as he'd asked. No well-wishers had come in with cheery balloons and innocent questions about when he'd be coming back to work. Harm was grateful for that respite, though the additional time to think hadn't gotten him very far. Upon signing his release papers a few minutes ago, the doctor had solemnly ordered him to rest at home for the remainder of the week. He had fought back a derisive snicker at that. Where else would he go?

Making his way down to the taxi stand at the hospital entrance, he prepared himself for the possibility that the admiral had come back to pick him up and engage him in another career-related skirmish. He hadn't considered the possibility that reinforcements might have been called in.

Mac stood up from a nearby bench, apprehension evident in her stance. His first instinctive reaction was utter relief: the mere sight of her immediately made the world seem just a little less hopeless. But no sooner had that feeling taken hold than a harsh reminder cut in, mocking him with memories of just how badly he'd failed her, and he stiffened.

The second reaction was the one she noticed, and she allowed a trace of hurt to show. "Did you think you could run forever?" she asked quietly.

Too drained to lie to her, he replied, "The idea had occurred to me."

"Should I be taking it personally?"

"Not really. I'm willing to hold myself responsible for my own actions."

"You usually are. Oftentimes a little too willing." She hitched her purse up on her shoulder. It hadn't been in danger of slipping, but it provided a convenient outlet for nervous energy. "Should I pull the car up?"

"I'm okay to walk."

She wasn't going to argue with him, not when the potential for so many other, larger disagreements existed. Instead, she pointed in the direction of the correct parking lot, and they started walking.

"How's Webb?"

"Better. Gunny's going to travel with him in a couple of days, when he's cleared to fly home."

"When did you get in?"

"Yesterday. The admiral told me where you were, and I decided I needed to be back here." Mac risked a glance over at him. "You scared the hell out of me, Harm. You just disappeared, and then I find out you're hurt ..."

"I had to leave. Circumstances dictated it."

"Did circumstances also dictate that you not tell me where you were going? Or that you'd resigned?"

He kept his gaze trained on the sidewalk in front of him. "Mac, I'm not too proud of what I did down there. The idea of facing you with it wasn't very appealing. It still isn't."

Her dark eyes guarded, she pushed forward. "I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

He gave a soft laugh. "Is this one of those magic moments where everything will somehow be better as soon as we talk it out? Has that worked at any time in recent memory?"

That clearly stung, but she wasn't going to let him escape so easily. "So I don't factor into all this? I was just the damsel in distress? I thought I'd at least merit some kind of explanation."

"You've already figured out the important part, haven't you? The part where I went to the CIA with my hat in my hand, humbly asking for their assistance, and agreed to help them carry out their objectives in Paraguay in exchange?"

Hearing him actually say the words chilled her: it felt so wrong, somehow. "That arrangement saved my life," she pointed out, with a heavy dose of caution. "I won't say I like the way the Agency does business, but - "

"You can't say that without knowing what they asked me to do."

"It won't change anything. I know you, Harm. You're not like them."

"Well, you've got a few things left to learn, apparently." Approaching her car, he shook his head violently, as if trying to banish the images. "I'm not who I thought I was, so it stands to reason I'm probably not who you thought I was, either."

Before she could venture a question, he leaned both hands against the car to steady himself. "The Agency doesn't bring double agents in for trial when they can just eliminate them. They told me he'd compromised operations, including yours, and they handed me a gun and said go - so I did. I shot him in the back of the head, and then ... I just walked away."

A cold hand gripping her heart, Mac just stood still for a moment. The incongruity of such a repulsive confession being given under the bright summer sun was sharply apparent to her. "Who?" she asked finally, afraid she already knew the answer.

"Hardy."

She remembered her dealings with the man; how she'd vacillated between unease and outright distrust, and how much she'd wanted to deck him for hanging Gunny out to dry. But she'd never expected to find that he'd been working against them, and she certainly hadn't expected to find that her best friend had willingly become his executioner.

After an excruciating pause, she reached down and opened her car door. "It's unlocked."

Harm searched his brain for a way to start. "I know you're angry, or at the very least disappointed."

"Right now I'm not anything except shell-shocked. I'll probably get to the rest in a little while."

"It's not - "

"Harm." Her voice was firm, but the words came out like a plea. "Get in the car."

The trip passed in silence. Her eyes stayed on the road, and his were closed, though he didn't expect her to believe he'd fallen asleep. When they reached his apartment, she followed him up, using her spare key to unlock the door.

Harm sank onto the couch, tired from the short trip, and leaned forward to lay his head in his hands. "If you're wondering why I did it, take a number."

Mac closed the door behind her, taking his statement as an indication that he wasn't entirely averse to talking. "You had evidence that he was part of Sadiq's plot?"

"Someone had to have warned those guys to have a truck ready."

"Please tell me you have more than that."

"Need-to-know on that particular point doesn't seem to reach beyond the DDCI."

"So he thought you were good enough to kill him, but not good enough to know why?" She struggled to keep her voice from rising. "I'm sorry, it's just - this just isn't *you*."

He lifted his head. "Isn't it? How can it not be, since I did it?"

"Because they coerced you, somehow - "

"They didn't coerce me into killing as many of Sadiq's men as I could find, did they?" Ignoring his fatigue, he pushed himself up from the couch, pacing the room. "Did they force me to shoot to kill at the compound?"

"That was different."

"Breaking an unarmed man's neck wasn't different. I didn't have time to realize it at the time, but it felt pretty much the same." He turned toward the window, needing to get away from her earnest, questioning eyes. "Gunny had already taken his gun. I didn't have to kill him, but it didn't even occur to me that there might have been a better way. Right there, in the middle of everything that was happening, I just reacted, and that was the result. So tell me, Mac - how many times can I make that kind of choice before that really *is* me?"

Feeling a sense of panic begin to rise in her throat, Mac took a hesitant step toward him. "What happened at Sadiq's compound was combat, fundamentally. You know as well as I do how blurry the lines can get."

"The Agency has a somewhat broader definition of combat, I think."

"That doesn't mean you have to." He said nothing, and her fear increased. If he was honestly starting to see things from that perspective after scorning it for so long, then perhaps she really was losing the man she knew. "You're not going to join them, are you?"

He didn't dare face her. "I don't know. It's one way to serve. Maybe it's more fitting than I thought."

"It'll tear you apart. Harm, listen to me." She reached out to grab his arm, turning him toward her, and the depth of despair in his turbulent eyes was stunning.

"I don't understand," she told him, her voice wavering. "You were willing to give up everything for this - "

"No. Not for this." Reluctantly he met her gaze. "I didn't even know what 'this' was until I arrived in Ciudad del Este. All I knew was you."

Though it clearly hadn't been intentional, that admission burned into her like a red-hot poker. All of his sacrifices had, of course, begun because of her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It was too high a price."

"No, it wasn't. That's not what I meant." He seized her arm, preventing her from turning away. "Don't ever believe that. You're here, safe, and that's the only thing I could even think about at that point. Everything that I did, I did freely, and I'll have to come to terms with it on my own." Abruptly, he released her, and went back to staring out the window with an empty expression. "So I guess now would be a good time for you to make your escape."

Bewildered, Mac drew back. "What?"

His voice was nearly inaudible as he replied. "I don't think I fit the qualifications to be in your life at the moment. Until I figure some things out, I'm not going to be a real positive force for anyone."

"What are you saying? That you're just going to close yourself off from me, from JAG, from everything that means anything to you, because you're ashamed of what you did down there?"

"It isn't just that." How was he to make her understand this when he wasn't sure he himself understood? "It isn't even just Paraguay. I've been having trouble making sense of things ever since Lauren Singer was killed."

Uncomprehending and thoroughly off-balance, she simply waited for him to explain.

"I was accused of dumping a fellow officer off a bridge, Mac. They put Jennifer Coates up on the stand and asked her whether or not she thought I was capable of it - "

"That's not what they asked her."

"It's close enough. God, when I saw the look on her face up there ... I've spent so many night wondering if maybe she was right about me, about what I could be. I thought I finally had myself convinced, but then all this started - and I went into some kind of screwed-up autopilot berserker mode ..."

A painful lump rose in her throat, as she began to realize what she'd done the night she left for the assignment. By not recognizing his already brittle state of mind, her intended wake-up call had probably felt more like a slap in the face.

*"You only get like this when I have one foot out the door. Your interest always fades as soon as I'm in a position to return it ..."*

The idea that she might have so directly set in motion the events which led him into this bleak place was almost too much to bear.

"I wish I'd realized how hard the trial had been for you," she said, willing her tears to keep their place. "I should have known better. And I know there hasn't been much to like about the past few weeks. But they're over. There's no reason to let them dictate your future course."

When she again received no response, the tears threatened in earnest. Helpless, she offered a whispered plea. "Why won't you look at me?"

His voice was that of a man at his breaking point. "Because looking at you forces me to realize how much we keep hurting each other, and how far we still have to go. And right now I'm not sure I can make it."

That simple confession shattered her, robbing her of breath. At the same time, she knew that he'd said it not to destroy them, but as an attempt to maintain some kind of hope through truth.

"I think I should go," she managed to say, haltingly. "But I'm going to be back, and sometime we're going to talk through this. Nobody on this earth can force me to abandon my best friend. Not even you."

She hurried out of the apartment, making it all the way to her car before the tears won out at last.

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**Four days later**  
**1013 EDT**  
**CIA Headquarters**  
**Langley, Virginia**

The call had come jarringly early that morning. Since it had once again been Kershaw himself and not an aide of some flavor, Harm was beginning to suspect that the DDCI never slept. The request had been brief but cordial, though somehow requests from this man never actually sounded like requests. He'd been extremely tempted to refuse, recalling the faint look of dread and betrayal Mac had attempted to conceal during his prior Agency-related revelations. But this did seem like an opportunity to see how this operation ran from the inside, and that had the potential to change his outlook substantially. Out of curiosity more than anything else, he'd agreed to attend the meeting.

Upon pulling through the guarded entrance to the Langley complex and parking in the visitors' area, he'd been only halfway surprised when an efficient-looking assistant provided him with his own ID card. Harmon L. Rabb, Jr., Central Intelligence Agency. *You really went through the looking glass this time, didn't you, hotshot?*

They weren't doing a hard sell on him: he suspected that their organizational tendency toward arrogance would preclude such things. Instead, they seemed to be merely opening doors one at a time, saying in a knowing, only slightly sinister tone, "You'd like to be in here, wouldn't you?"

He still harbored a sizable amount of resentment over the way they'd dropped the Hardy assignment - God, now he was starting to use the euphemisms - on him. But he needed to carefully consider his options, and this was one of them. So he'd dragged out a somber civilian suit, one he hadn't worn since Renee's father's funeral; karma at work, possibly. And here he was.

"Mr. Rabb." Harrison Kershaw greeted him with a handshake at the door to his office. "Come in."

There were two other men already seated at the table inside the austere, expansive office. "Good to finally meet you in person," Kershaw continued, his expression giving no indication as to whether or not he meant it. "Harmon Rabb, Allen Baird and Michael Rodriguez, our co-leads on the Southwest Asia threat assessment team."

Harm exchanged handshakes with them both, and followed the DD's gestured invitation to take a seat at the table. The analysts were both slightly-built men, neither one a particularly dynamic-looking individual. But there was a sense of gravity in both men's presence that subliminally informed him that they, like their boss, were extremely good at their jobs.

"We don't have much spare time for pleasantries, so I'll get down to it." Kershaw tapped a keypad, and the screen on the far wall illuminated itself, displaying a surveillance photo of a private jet parked beside a small, unidentified terminal. "After receiving your information regarding the operation last week, we put a tighter net around the air traffic out of Paraguay and the surrounding region. One of our assets tracked this flight out of Asuncion, eighteen hours after you left out of Ciudad del Este." He clicked to the next photo, which showed the profile of a man disembarking the plane.

Harm tightened his fingers around the pen in his hand. He hadn't been up close to the man the way Mac had, but even so, he had no trouble recognizing Sadiq Fahd. "Where was this taken?" he asked, keeping his voice level.

"Aden," Rodriguez supplied. "He has some ties to Yemen, through a cousin who's high in their primary oil exporter's organization. He's gone there to regroup and plan for an assault on his secondary target."

"Do we know what that target is?"

Baird took over. "Thanks to your ... creativity, Sadiq's surface-to-air capability is severely hobbled. His previous target was the USS Coral Sea battle group, and that's now out of his reach."

Harm felt a spark of pure fury at the idea that this snake had targeted a battle group, coupled with a glimmer of hope that the good he'd done in Paraguay might overshadow his sins. Of course, his current companions didn't grade on the same scale as he did, so he merely pressed his lips together and waited for the rest of the explanation.

"Having lost his chance to hit such a high-profile military target, he'll turn civilian next. High population density, with the aim of hitting as many Americans as possible without actually having to enter the United States." Baird's demeanor didn't appear to visibly change, but somehow he'd taken on a grimmer expression. "He's aiming high again - the American embassy in Tel Aviv."

This time, Harm didn't bother to mask his reaction: his eyebrows shot up. "How does he expect to get into the country, let alone mount that kind of attack? The Israeli border security is tighter than ours."

"He has assistance over there that he wouldn't be able to get here. The amount of screening being done on Middle Eastern travelers in this country would keep him away from most of the supplies he'd need for a truck bomb."

His level of dread was creeping progressively higher with the passing minutes. "As in an Oklahoma City style truck bomb?"

"More accurately, Khobar Towers, or the embassies in Africa."

He leaned back in his chair, absorbing the information. "How do we know that's his plan?"

"We know," Rodriguez informed him coolly. "Our network in that region isn't perfect, obviously, but it's a lot better than in South America."

"This is clearly sensitive information," Kershaw broke in, "sensitive enough that it's not widely known even in this building. I'm sure you're waiting for me to come out and tell you why you're being allowed access to it."

Harm had assumed the reason at the start of the discussion, of course, and it felt like something of an insult for them not to realize that. "What are you asking me to do?" he asked flatly.

"Understand that this would be a provisional assignment, one that would come with no obligations on either side. If you accept, you will have the full support and resources of the Agency, and when you return, you'll have the option to come on as a full agent or simply leave."

"You don't expect me to find Sadiq myself, do you?"

Kershaw's half-smile had an element of Cheshire Cat shrewdness to it. "Finding him isn't the issue. We know where he is, and getting to him will be less complicated than you think. He's more complacent in Aden than he would be in other places. No, Mr. Rabb, I'm offering you the chance to take down the man who tried to blow up seven thousand of your brothers in arms and almost killed your partner."

Harm clamped down on the initial rush of bitter adrenaline that resulted from that statement. He knew he was still being manipulated to a certain extent. 'Offering the chance,' the man said; as if it were a gift instead of an assignment. No matter how much the devil on his shoulder urged him to accept, to exact punishment on the one person most responsible for setting this entire chain of events in motion, there was still a part of him that shunned the idea of 'taking down' anyone.

"I was under the impression that you had specialized personnel trained for such assignments," he remarked, his tone even. "Wouldn't you be better served by sending one of them?"

"There's more of an international presence in Yemen than there was in Paraguay," Kershaw responded smoothly. "If this operation were to be noticed by anyone, particularly

anyone who subscribes to a more regimented viewpoint of war crimes, it would be to our advantage to give the appearance of making an arrest rather than a targeted elimination. With your military background, you won't have the outward look of being a sweeper. You'd simply take in a small team to make the arrest, and if Sadiq resists - well, then, you'd have no choice but to subdue him by force, wouldn't you?"

The concept was distasteful, to say the least. They knew damn well that Sadiq wouldn't come quietly: they were counting on it. Not only would they be dancing around the accepted process, they'd be practically mocking it. But if he didn't go, God knew who would be sent in his place. Maybe he'd be able to sway the strategy in a more desirable direction.

"When do I leave?"

The DD showed no reaction to the agreement. "Assuming you're up to it, tonight at 2230. The team will assemble here for a final briefing, and you'll fly commercial into the region and meet up at a designated location."

"All right. Is there anything else?" Hanging around this place was giving him the creeps.

"Not at the moment. Good luck."

As he left the office, the task that lay ahead occupied his mind, preventing him from noticing the young woman who crossed the hallway just behind him.

Catherine Gale watched him leave, aware of and conflicted by what must have just taken place in Director Kershaw's office. She believed in the necessity of such assignments: she would have been in the wrong line of work if she didn't. But she also recognized the fact that it was work best suited to a certain type of person, and Harmon Rabb was clearly not it.

Why was he pushing onward with this? To punish himself for some self-perceived crime? Did he feel he had no other choice?

Catherine stepped into her office and closed the door behind her. With only a momentary flicker of guilt over her intention to interfere, she picked up the phone and asked her assistant to connect her to JAG Headquarters.

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"Colonel, there's a Ms. Gale on line three for you."

Mac's brow creased as she tried to place the familiar-sounding name. Petty Officer Coates hesitated before attempting to assist. "From Langley, ma'am?"

That clicked it in. The Agency lawyer from the Angel Shark investigation ... the pretty, innocent-looking face they'd put in front of their stone wall of denial. Immediately, her eyes narrowed, but she nodded crisply and reached for the phone. "Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie."

"I'm sorry to call out of nowhere like this, Colonel," the other woman began, sounding sincere. "It just seemed like the best way to get to Harm was probably through you."

Given her current attitude toward the CIA in general, Mac wasn't inclined to be overly solicitous. "If the two of you are on a first-name basis already," she responded with cool civility, "you're probably in a better position than I am."

Catherine's voice didn't waver. "I understand what you must think of me - of us - right now, Colonel. Especially if Harm's told you about the end of his visit to Paraguay. But for the purposes of clarification, the circumstances under which he and I got to that first-name basis are actually fairly comic, and besides that, it all started simply because he was absolutely desperate to find you. But that isn't important now. I have reason to believe that Harm is leaving tonight for a company assignment."

That got Mac's attention. "What kind of assignment?"

"I think that's a question better asked of him than me." There was a pause, and Catherine's voice came back with a little less confidence than before. "Contrary to what you may think, I'm not trying to entice him into anything. As a matter of fact, I tried to tell him not to accept the last assignment. But I can't say the same for my director. Harm has a number of traits and abilities that are desirable in a field agent. If he decides to commit to this job, I have no doubt that he'll be very successful. But I also think that it will utterly destroy him."

Mac swallowed hard around the growing lump in her throat. "I think that's something we agree on," she admitted hoarsely. "But if you're hoping that I'll be able to talk some sense into him, I'm not sure that's very likely."

"It's the best idea I've got by far. Everything he risked, he willingly risked for your sake. If you can't pull him back, show him just what it is he's trying to walk away from, I don't know who can."

She masked her fear with a weak chuckle. "You've got too much faith in me, Ms. Gale."

"Considering who I work for, I've got too much faith altogether. Good luck, Colonel."

The line disconnected before Mac could even protest that she hadn't yet decided on a course of action. For a moment, she felt helpless against the speed with which things seemed to be spinning out of control. She was on the outside, watching him slip further and further away from her, from the life he'd had before all this began. Even if she somehow managed to pull him back, as Catherine had suggested, there would be limits as to how far back they could go. Nothing would erase the memories of Paraguay that clearly still haunted him.

In truth, they haunted her, too. Not long ago, she'd drawn a contrast between Harm and Clay by affirming to herself that Harm would never cold-bloodedly shoot a man in the back of the head. But he'd done that very thing, and no matter how much it tormented him, that fact would never change. Could she accept that?

If she was going to continue to love him, she'd have to. And though it surprised her somewhat to recognize it so plainly, she knew that she *did* still love him.

Mac struck the intercom button on her phone. "Tiner, get me in to see the admiral ASAP. I need to ask him for the afternoon off."

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Harm had been home for only a few minutes when his phone rang. He ignored it, as he'd been doing for the past few days. Other than a brief conversation with his mother, in which he'd lied through his teeth about his quasi-resignation and everything that had happened in the last week, he hadn't spoken to many people. What would he say to them? That he'd temporarily misplaced his morality and was subsequently having an identity crisis?

The answering machine clicked on, and an unexpected voice found its way into the room. "Rabb, pick up the phone. You left Langley an hour ago, and I very much doubt you're out taking in a baseball game or something."

Annoyed but simultaneously curious, he grabbed the handset. "What do you know about my schedule at Langley, Webb?"

The agent's voice wasn't back to its normal level of wryness, but he sounded far better than he had the last time they'd crossed paths. "I do get along with a few people in that building, believe it or not. And thank you for the effusive welcome-home."

"You're back in the States?"

"As of yesterday. I still feel like I've been run over by the 82nd Airborne, but this hospital beats the hell out of its Paraguayan counterpart. If I'm lucky, they might spring me loose in the next couple of days."

"Glad to hear it," Harm said, only slightly surprised to realize that he meant it.

Webb sounded as if that response had caught him off-guard as well, but he swiftly moved on. "Thanks. Now let's talk about you."

"Webb - "

"What the hell do you think you're doing, joining up with us? Would you just go back to JAG where you belong?"

Harm shook his head, his patience already starting to wear thin. "Interesting recruiting technique you folks practice. Sort of a reverse-psychology bait-and-switch."

"I'm not kidding around. You've obviously come to the conclusion by now that the company doesn't hold to the same rules you do. Regardless of what happened with Hardy, you're never going to be able to fully convince yourself that you want to play this game for keeps."

"If you're this well connected with your colleagues right now, then you know I'm leaving tonight. So all you're really doing is screwing with my head right before an assignment."

"Call it what you will. I'm actually just stalling for time right now, anyway."

That didn't make much sense. "Time until what?"

As if on cue, a knock sounded at the door, loudly enough that it carried through the phone.

"That," Webb replied without missing a beat. "Listen - good luck tomorrow. Keep your head down."

With a click, he was gone. Harm glanced out the window and saw his partner's Corvette sitting out front. Tensing involuntarily, he went to the door and opened it.

"Webb as a diversionary tactic. Not a bad idea."

Mac lifted an eyebrow as she stepped into the apartment. "Don't look at me - I didn't call him. That must have been some more of Catherine Gale's handiwork."

"Really. She's more devious than I gave her credit for."

"But at least she's using that deviousness toward a positive goal." Mac shifted her weight from the balls of her feet to her heels and back again. "I wanted to make sure you weren't going to disappear again without saying goodbye."

Harm turned away from her to replace the phone on its base. "Sometimes that kind of goodbye does more harm than good."

His response seemed to confirm something for her, and she nodded with a grave understanding. "You resent me for what I said that night, don't you?"

It took him a while to make himself answer truthfully. "Not for what you said. For the way you said it and left."

She accepted the answer well. "Is that the only thing coming between us right now?"

"Other than the somewhat atypical choices I made in Paraguay?"

"That's another topic unto itself. One thing at a time." Drawing her arms around herself in an unconsciously defensive posture, she perched on the arm of the couch. "For what it's worth, I didn't come to see you that night with the intention of getting into that subject. It just sort of happened."

"How did it 'just sort of happen'? All I said was I didn't want you to go."

Mac studied his features, sensing that the mask of stoicism was beginning to slip. "Was that meant simply as concern for a friend, and nothing more?" she asked, her voice fading to nearly a whisper. "If so, I apologize. I, ah, may have misinterpreted."

"You didn't." Harm kept his gaze trained on the floor just to her left. He'd been trying all week not to revisit that brief yet destructive conversation, but now that she was here confronting it, the hurt and indignation, and everything that had long been lingering just underneath his determination to find her, was bubbling to the surface. "Or maybe you did, partly. I didn't want you to go because the little I knew about your assignment scared the hell out of me, not because you were leaving me. You sat right there and told me flat-out that you were going off to do something 'very dangerous.' How did you expect me to react?"

"I only expected you to respect the choice I'd made," she returned, careful to keep a confrontational edge out of her voice.

"Then you might have said that!" He stalked across the room, leaning forward against the kitchen counter as if trying to hold back the floodgates. "Instead, you acted like I was purposely trying to keep you trapped in some kind of relationship limbo. You took a shot and then just left, when all I could think about was whether or not you were ever coming back ... how paralyzed with guilt I'd be if that turned out to be the last conversation we ever had ..." His hands gripped the counter's edge, knuckles whitening, until he whirled to face her with anguish radiating from his soul. "Jesus *Christ*, Mac - how could you just leave it like that?"

She stared at him wordlessly, shocked to see how the strongest person she'd ever known seemed to be coming undone before her eyes. "I - don't know," she confessed at last, wavering on each word. "I didn't realize how cruel it could be. I guess I didn't allow myself to believe that the worst could happen, and from that mindset I saw your reaction differently than I should have. Maybe I wanted to make sure I made an impact, so that we'd have to deal with the concept when I got back. But it was obviously a mistake to take getting back for granted. I'm sorry. I - " As the truth of those words fully registered in her mind, she simply shook her head, at a loss. "It was unthinkable cruel, and I'm truly sorry for it."

Harm drew a deep breath, feeling a few minor twinges from his healing injuries, and exhaled slowly. *Keep it together*. "But why did you need to make an impact? Why does everyone seem to think it'll take some momentous gesture to make this work?"

She didn't need to ask him what 'this' meant. "I didn't say that."

*Not this time, no*, he wanted to say, but thought better of it. "The admiral sure as hell did. I told him he'd be getting my resignation, and all he wanted to know was what I'd be willing to risk to keep you." Incredulous, he shook his head. "How was I supposed to think about that when I didn't even know if you were still alive?"

Unable to formulate a response, Mac simply returned his helpless stare. After a moment, he spun away again. "I did the only thing I could do. I had to come after you - I didn't have a choice. And not because of any unit-cohesion leave-no-one-behind bullshit, but because every other thing in my life stopped being important the moment you left. Even the possibility of having to go on without you just made me feel sick. I tossed in my wings without even thinking about it, and I swear to God, I'd do it again ... What would I give up? What would I risk? Isn't it obvious by now?"

His shoulders slumped as he leaned forward to bury his head in his hands. Tears welled up in her eyes as she battled to recover from the shock of his words. Somewhere in her mind, she'd believed that something like this was possible, but to hear him say it ...

It was what she'd wanted for as long as she could remember, but she felt as though she'd beaten it out of him. How could she ever atone for that?

She sprang to her feet and moved toward him, reaching out with her bandaged hand. As it closed around his shoulder, he looked up at her, searching her face for guidance. "What do I have left to give?" he whispered.

"It's not about that anymore," she told him, laying her other hand against his cheek. "It never should have been in the first place. I made demands of you that you've never made of me, and rather than tell me how unfair they were, you actually managed to meet them somehow. I don't know how to apologize for allowing it to get to this point, but I know I have to start, so I'm just going to do the best I can, and I just hope to God that you can believe me."

“Mac, I’m not looking for some kind of act of contrition.”

“I know. Maybe that’s not exactly what I’m offering. I think the only way to figure this out is to do it a little at a time.”

Neither of them could have explained exactly how it happened. The kiss began gently enough, but it soon metamorphosed into an insistent, desperate affirmation.

Suddenly, Harm broke away. “It’s too late,” he murmured, defeat echoing in his voice.

“Don’t say that. How could it be too late? We’re here, aren’t we?”

“I can’t be the person you - after everything that’s happened - ”

Mac forced him to meet her gaze. “Nothing that’s happened has set you on an irreversible path. Honestly, if you’d really changed that much, would you still be agonizing this much over what you did? Would you have these kinds of doubts if you really were the kind of person the Agency wants?”

“Can you accept this?” he asked, afraid to hope for too much. “Can you still want to be with me, knowing what you know?”

In response, she managed a tearful, tender smile. “You’re still *you*,” she promised, “and I don’t want to have to go on without you, either. Maybe it’ll be hard at first, but I’m not afraid to fight for it - for you, and us. I know you don’t see it this way, but I owe it to you. Let me help. Let this be something I can risk for you.”

Harm looked down at their hands, so tightly intertwined. He wanted so badly to say yes, to take in everything she was willing to offer. But he wasn’t quite that free. Not yet.

If they revoked his clearance for this revelation, then so be it.

“Mac, the assignment they gave me - we’re going after Sadiq.” Surprise flared in her dark eyes, and he charged ahead. “I have to take it. If I back out now, they could lose him before they get another team in place. But - I don’t know what it’ll be like once I get out there. I’m afraid it’ll - I’m afraid it might be like Paraguay, and I might ...” Failing to find a better term, he settled on yet another euphemism Webb had used in the past. “Lose perspective.”

Mac shook her head. “You won’t,” she said simply. “Not this time.”

“How can you have that kind of faith?”

“Because I know you. And because I’m doing my damndest to give you something to come back to.” She kissed him again; fiercely this time, as if demanding acknowledgement of their desire and their new bond. Fortunately, she found him a willing participant.

“Hang onto that,” she told him softly, when their lips parted. “Go do what you have to do, but hang onto all those things that I’ve always loved and admired about you. When it’s over, we’ll figure out whatever we need to figure out together.”

"Thank you," he breathed, clutching her to him in an attempt to fix her presence firmly in his mind. He still wasn't entirely sure, but he was beginning to believe that she alone might be able to save him. "Listen, if something should go wrong - "

"Don't say it," she interrupted, glancing away.

"I don't want to leave any questions behind," he insisted, his intense gaze holding hers hostage. "I've made that mistake before. So for the record, Mac, I love you."

A lone tear traced a path down her cheek, but her graceful features were serene. "That's nice to hear," she replied, with a hint of a blush. "I happen to love you, too."

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**2341 Local  
Classified Location  
On the coast of Yemen**

Harm jumped down from a twelve-foot rock ledge, landing with a grunt. *I'm too old for this.* Kershaw either hadn't taken his prior injuries into account when assigning him to this operation, or hadn't cared. It didn't really matter which.

The other three operatives along for the ride were all ten years younger and former military themselves, so he'd been hearing a lot of 'sir's ever since they'd left the safehouse forty minutes ago. Sadiq was supposedly holed up in this fortress of a house, one of a number of residences used by his cousin. It was expansive, but not particularly secure, and Sadiq had lost more than a few of his faithful crew back in South America. They'd need only to get in and conduct their search without being heard, all the while hoping that Sadiq didn't have any hidden surprises waiting for them. Simple as that.

The point man, Taylor, had a knack for picking locks: the bolt on this particular door slid silently open inside of fifteen seconds. Nodding his approval, Harm signaled for them to move in, and the foursome began a textbook room-by-room sweep of the house.

The corridors were dim, a fact which didn't bother this group nearly as much as it would have bothered most anyone else. Three of them were trained special-ops personnel, and the fourth had spent most of eight years developing other senses to compensate for his diminished night vision. All of them moved with swift confidence even in the darkness, drawing ever closer to their target.

Only one wing of the residence appeared to be occupied, judging from the few lights that flickered from that area. Wary of an ambush, they split up into pairs and took different paths to reach it, communicating through hand signals their intent to meet back up outside the largest room.

Harm's partner, a former Green Beret by the name of Riemer, slunk along the wall toward the sounds of quiet conversation. Withdrawing a tiny periscope, he aimed it around the corner and checked out their quarry. He raised two fingers, then patted his weapon to signify that they were armed. Harm nodded and readied his silenced Beretta. They moved through the shadows and waited for the men to turn their attention in the correct direction before leaping into action.

Riemer's man went down in a heap, falling victim to an obscure and effective combination of nerve compressions. Harm was forced to act with a little less style: he clubbed his man over the head with the butt of his weapon. They bound both men's wrists and ankles with zip ties, and together they charged into the main room, already suspicious of what they'd find there.

Another man swung an AK-47 toward them even as they kicked door open. Riemer's reflexes were well-honed, and he felled him with one bullet. Sadiq turned toward them, hands empty, and his expression was not one of shock, but of vicious contempt.

Harm realized at that moment that he'd been wholly unprepared for the clash of emotions that suddenly threatened to consume him. This man had done unspeakable things, a few of which he'd witnessed firsthand. This man hated everything that he held dear. This man had imprisoned, tormented, and ultimately intended to kill the person who meant more to him than anything in this world. And now, here they stood, just looking at each other.

The terrorist sketched a shallow bow. "Congratulations," he told them, voice dripping with sarcasm. "I suppose you've won, haven't you?"

Riemer took great care in aiming his weapon. "How about I just get this over with?" he asked in a flat, even tone, addressing Harm over his shoulder without turning.

"No." Harm kept his own weapon trained. "He's mine."

Sadiq raised an eyebrow, folding his arms. "Spoken like a man with a vendetta," he remarked coolly. "But that doesn't help me determine who you are, besides a godless American."

"I'm the one who took out your Stingers. That's all you need to know."

Sadiq's eyes narrowed, and the contempt in his gaze morphed into pure anger. Just then, something detonated in the hallway. A mild shock wave rippled through the room, breaking the tension for only a millisecond - but that millisecond was all he needed.

A shot rang out before either of the operatives could realize that there was now a gun in Sadiq's hand. Riemer jerked back, knocked off-balance, and the terrorist was through the side door in an instant.

"Shit," Harm cursed, taking off after him at a dead run. Riemer wasn't far behind; he'd only been winged in the arm by the hastily-fired bullet.

The explosion had been a smoke grenade, and even though it had gone off in another corridor, the entire area was becoming even more obscured than before. Harm could see Sadiq's silhouette moving through the haze, nearing the end of the hall. On reflex, he slowed, squared up on his target, and fired.

Sadiq collapsed instantly, the gun flying from his grip and clattering across the floor. He clutched at his upper leg, where blood spread in a circular pattern from a neat hole in his pant leg. Taking no chances, Harm was on him immediately, aiming down at him with the cold adrenaline that had become all too familiar to him over the past week.

Riemer halted a few steps away from them, sensing something not quite resolved about the situation. "Sir?" he asked uncertainly.

The other pair, Taylor and Campbell, appeared at the end of the hall, dragging a half-conscious guard along with them. "Secure, sir," Campbell reported, slowing to a stop as well. All the while, neither Harm nor Sadiq had moved a muscle.

Predator and prey regarded each other with open hatred, and the quiet, insistent voices began to creep back into his mind. *Finish it here ... it's what you were sent to do.*

The mental battle must have been evident on his face, because the terrorist looked up at him with a sadistic smile. "You don't really intend to 'arrest' me, do you?" he asked scornfully. "Are you really so weak as that? This is the way it was meant to be. No trials, no arrangements. This is not a game for courtly gentlemen - it is and must always be a fight to the death."

"You think I want to make a martyr out of you?" Harm shot back in reply, too conflicted to give it much conviction.

"Better than allowing me to live as your prisoner, is it not? I am a plague - my death can only improve your world." The words were derisive, but Sadiq's intent was utterly serious. He clearly preferred death over capture, and it was all too tempting to grant his wish.

"You cannot deter those who have the strength of their God to guide them. Your prisons will not hold us nearly as tightly as you think. End it now, American. Send me to the place I have earned."

No.

Harm pulled a zip tie out of his pocket and jerked the man's arms roughly behind him, securing his wrists. "And let you miss the guided tour at Gitmo?" Hauling the terrorist to his feet, he tipped his head toward the end of the hall. "Let's move. Grab whoever else you've taken and head for the exfiltration point."

The other three operatives looked back and forth between the two of them, thrown off by the unexpected turn of events. Taylor voiced their collective concern. "Uh, sir, when the director said apprehending him was our objective, I got the feeling that the parameters were a little more ... flexible."

"Well, flexible's not the way I work. Anybody have a problem with that?" Receiving no responses, Harm jabbed his weapon into Sadiq's side and started walking him in the direction of the door. "Then we've got a helo to meet."

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The safehouse hadn't exactly been expecting them to bring back prisoners, either, but the Agency personnel on the premises adapted well, securing the men until transport to the States could be arranged. Harm gave a curt after-action report to the ranking agent, still trying to slow his racing mind. This was the correct outcome, wasn't it? Maybe the CIA didn't want to waste time, effort, and money on a trial, but that didn't make their solution the better one. And maybe he'd lie awake some night two weeks or two years from now, still wondering if the world would have been a better place had he ridded it of this grotesque man while he had the chance. But that wasn't enough.

"Agent Rabb?" The sharp inquiry, and the truly bizarre-sounding title, recaptured his full attention. The ranking agent gave no sign that his lack of focus had irritated her. "Is there anything else you'd like the Director to get in his initial report?"

Harm met her gaze and summoned a level of confidence he hadn't felt in some time. "Yes. Tell him that when I return, I'll be scheduling an appointment for my outbrief. My permanent outbrief."

Not waiting for a response from her, he turned and left the room, needing to find somewhere to collect himself.

Eventually he ended up on a small terrace off the main floor, out of the general path of the others. There was a muted but pervasive buzz of activity in the building, and it didn't completely register with him until he sat down on the ledge that it was the middle of the night. What time was it back home? What did it matter? Familiarity with the time zones wouldn't alter his level of exhaustion. It was hot as hell, too. He loosened the laces of his boots and unbuttoned his black fatigue jacket, leaning forward on his knees and closing his eyes.

Exhausted, yes, and emotionally spent, but some part of him was also satisfied. He'd fought the compulsion that he'd dreaded so much, and he'd won. He hadn't been driven to kill Sadiq. Maybe the principles by which he'd always tried to steer his life were still worth something, after all.

At the sound of footfalls on the stone, he considered lifting his head, but couldn't find the energy. "Can I just have a minute?"

"You can have as long as it takes. You know that."

Startled by the unexpected sound of her voice, his head whipped up, and an immediate feeling of warmth and comfort flowed through him. He'd suspected before that things were going to be all right, but now he was certain they'd *really* be all right, simply because she was there.

Though he didn't know it, the expression on his face mirrored the one she'd worn when he'd burst into the torture room in Chaco Boreal. A line from a movie she'd once forced him to watch came to mind: somehow, he'd been rescued right back.

"What are you doing here?" he managed to say, unable to formulate a more incisive question.

Mac offered a graceful shrug. "Favor from Clay. He said it was the least he could do." She took a seat next to him on the ledge, clearly concerned but willing to let him be if that's what was needed. "You did it, huh?"

"S'pose so." Harm rolled his shoulders, working out the tension. "Though I'm not sure the Agency's too pleased with me for forcing them to deal with prisoners."

"They'll cope. They might even get some useful information out of the deal, and then they'll say that was their aim all along." She gazed out at the unblinking stars for a moment, wanting to tread carefully with her next question. "Besides, how much do you really care about the Agency's opinion of you?"

He answered directly and honestly. "At this point, it'd be hard to care less."

Relieved, Mac smiled. She reached toward his hand and stroked it with cool, gentle fingers. "I'd say proper perspective has been regained, then."

"Yeah, something like that." He stilled her hand by capturing it in his. "Thank you."

Her brow furrowed. "I wasn't there. You made this choice all on your own."

"No, I didn't. And yes, you were."

He leaned forward to kiss her before she could reply, and she melted against him in a healing embrace. When they at last pulled back, her eyes were glistening. "Does this mean you're okay?"

"I will be," he said, and she believed him.

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**Tuesday**  
**0811 EDT**  
**JAG Headquarters**  
**Falls Church, Virginia**

Mac had just finished pouring her coffee when Harriet came into the break room to stow her lunch in the refrigerator. "And how are the two of you doing this morning?" the colonel asked kindly.

"Well, one of us is being hyperactive, and the other one's worn out because of it." Harriet gave a tired smile, rubbing her rounded belly.

"Hang in there. Pretty soon it'll all have been worth it, right?" With an expression that was oddly cheerful, Mac picked up her coffee mug and reached for a bagel.

The lieutenant hesitated for a moment. "Colonel, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Of course not. What's up?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am. It's just - things around here have been kind of glum lately, what with you and then the commander both gone, and now that those two officers who tried Lieutenant Singer's murder case are around more and more, it just feels like ..."

"Like Harm's already being replaced," Mac finished, understanding. She'd felt it most keenly yesterday, when Sturgis had somewhat reluctantly moved into Harm's old office. But she knew the reasons behind it, which put her a step ahead of the others, and she was halfway enjoying her temporary advantage.

Harriet nodded, looking helpless. "Ma'am, do you know why he didn't come back? Was it his decision, or the admiral's, or some -"

"It's a complicated story, Harriet. I'm sure he'll be willing to explain it to you at some point."

Harriet occasionally had trouble maintaining protocol with her friends, and here that protocol was beginning to interfere with the conversation. "I hope this isn't out of line," she continued tentatively, "but I thought you'd be more upset."

Mac shook her head. "I'm a little disappointed," she replied truthfully. "A lot of things seem to be changing. But I believe that in the end, it'll be for the best. I really do."

Recognizing that she didn't have all the requisite information to comprehend this situation, the younger woman resigned herself to waiting for it. "I guess I'll try to do the same. Speaking of changes, isn't our new senior IMA starting today?"

Because she had long been a fixture on the staff, people often forgot that Harriet was actually a reservist. As an IMA - an individual mobilization augmentee - her schedule was more flexible than traditional active officers, but she almost always chose to be on full-time duty. And even though Admiral Chegwiddden was functionally her commanding officer, all her personnel actions had to go through the senior IMA at JAG.

Remembering all of this with a start, Mac flashed another smile and tried to look as innocent as possible. "Captain Bennett's replacement? Yeah, he's already here. He's not taking Bennett's place on the bench, though. He's supposed to be a liaison to Naval Intelligence for international law."

Harriet blinked. "I'm going to be reporting to an ONI agent?"

"He's not technically an agent. He's a JAG first, and most of the time he'll be chopped back to the admiral. He'll just be doing some work for ONI as well. Aside from his IMA duties, of course."

"Tall order. Have you met him yet, ma'am? Is he going to be okay to work with?"

"I think you'll like him. Tell you what - why don't we go up there, and I'll introduce you?"

Harriet instinctively backed away. "Oh, not yet. This man's going to be signing my fit rep, and I look even more like a whale than usual today. Can't I just stall for a while - maybe until after the baby's born?"

Mac clamped down on the grin that threatened to escape and pulled Harriet toward the elevator. "With me, Lieutenant ..."

The third-floor offices were a little quieter than those around the bullpen. The officers up here worked issues of international, maritime, and civil law, issues that rarely saw a courtroom. Harriet spent the walk from the elevator to the corner office smoothing her hair and forcing a pleasant expression to appear. With a straight face, Mac knocked smartly on the office door.

"Enter."

Recognizing the voice, Harriet lit up and pushed the door open. "Commander!"

Harm stepped out from behind the boxes on his desk and favored her with a full-power smile. Surprise overriding her sense of decorum once and for all, Harriet hurried toward him as fast as her advancing pregnancy would allow and hugged him tightly. "It's so good to have you back," she whispered.

"It's good to be back," he responded in kind. Releasing her, he straightened. "So what do you think, Lieutenant? Can you handle reporting to me every once in a while?"

"I'm sure I'll survive, sir," she replied, delighted but bewildered.

"Then let's schedule an official meeting to set up your maternity leave. Lunch tomorrow - I'm buying."

Harriet's brow was knitted. "Sir, if you don't mind me asking ... you're going Reserve?"

"Only technically. I'll be permanently called up." Harm pushed a box aside and sat on the corner of his desk. "A lot of the time, I'll be working cases just like before."

"But if you'll be doing mostly the same thing, why not just go back to your old job, on active duty?"

"I really did resign, Harriet. I was relieved of duty at the end of last week. The admiral was willing to hold it up, but for a while, I honestly wasn't sure whether I wanted to come back, and he couldn't just ignore it. But I am sure now, and fortunately the admiral and the intel community were both willing to get a little creative. And for another thing, the distinction gives us more latitude in the event of any conflict-of-interest situations."

Utterly confused, Harriet frowned. "Who's 'us,' sir?"

"Us," Mac clarified, linking her hand through Harm's, "means *us*."

Harriet looked as though she might just fall over from shock. "Really?" she squealed, in a voice befitting a high school cheerleader far more than a naval officer.

Both senior officers had to laugh at her excitement, but soon Harm sobered. "A lot has happened over the past couple of weeks," he explained quietly. "Some of it we're still figuring out how to deal with. And my change of status is part of that. But I think what's important is the fact that we're figuring it out. All of it."

Harriet clasped her hands together, eyes dancing. "I'm sorry to be such a dork right now," she bubbled, "but I'm so happy for you that I could just pop."

"Don't do that!" they ordered her in unison, this time sending all three of them into a brief fit of laughter.

"I need to get back downstairs. Should I give people the good news, sir, or were you hoping to surprise everyone at staff call?"

"I wouldn't dare deprive you of the chance to spread the word, Harriet. Dismissed."

"Thank you, sir!"

As she disappeared, Mac squeezed Harm's hand once before releasing it. "So, have you gotten through to anyone down at NAVAIR yet?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Being assigned to the Reserves might actually be a benefit in this case." His smile widened fractionally. "The Air Guard and the Navy Reserves are handling most of the homeland combat air patrols, so they get a certain amount of priority when it comes to scheduling quals. They told me I'd be on the roster for June."

"Good." She turned her gaze toward his window with a long sigh, a reaction that immediately concerned him.

"You're okay with me still flying, right? Because if this is going to be an issue for us, I -"

Startled, she swung back. "You'll what? You don't honestly think I'd ask you to give up your wings, do you?"

Harm hesitated before answering. "You've never liked it. It's always worried you. I'm not saying that I'd be particularly happy about the idea of hanging it up, but I'd be willing to at least discuss it if that's what you wanted."

Mac shook her head, indescribably touched. "You're wrong," she said quietly. "It does worry me, but I do like it, because it's part of who you are. If I ever wanted to change any part of that, it was a mistake. And even though there's something to be said for making sacrifices for each other, I think I've learned well enough by now that that isn't the right kind of sacrifice."

He cocked his head toward her, questioning. "And what is the right kind of sacrifice?"

She gestured around his new office. "Well, although I probably wouldn't have thought of this solution a week ago, it did work out in a fairly convenient manner. The biggest change to our routine will probably be the fact that the admiral won't dare assign us as opposing counsel anymore now that we're together. That, and I'm going to have to take a set of stairs to get to you from now on."

"You've gone a lot farther before," he reminded her solemnly.

"As have you." She looked up at him, seeing the depth of conviction that radiated from his eyes. "So. We're ready for whatever's next?"

"Whatever's next," he echoed. "Let's get to it."

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