



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: romance (Harm/other), angst

Spoilers: anything after "Ice Queen/Meltdown" but before "The One That Got Away"

Summary: Set during Season 9, and in the timeline of "Learning How to Fall." Starting over never gets much easier, but sometimes the best assistance lies in helping someone else rebuild.

Disclaimer: You won't have to get too far into this story to realize that I am not the official caretaker of these characters. I'm merely borrowing the ones I like and tossing the rest back.

Author's Notes: Gasp - I've gone non-shipper. Now, don't panic, anyone. This doesn't mean that I've necessarily fallen off the shipper bandwagon for good; this is just how I'm feeling at this particular time. Also, if you know anything about me personally, you're going to be amused as all hell at what I've decided to do with the end of this. I offer no excuses - I'm just writing a guilty pleasure story for a change. You will be returned to your traditional JAG fare shortly.

This story diverges from show canon early on in Season 9, approximately around the episode "The One That Got Away." I'll provide a little bit of background info on Andrea (Andie) Nichols, but you should really read "Learning How to Fall" and maybe "After Two" to get an accurate picture of her relationship with Harm. This obviously doesn't follow the same timeline as "Innocence Lost and Found" (another Andie story), though.

The title has a double meaning. One will probably be fairly clearly stated by the end. As for the other: well, just ask a Girl Scout.

He sat on the couch, slumped back with his head leaning on the cushions. The windows were open wide, a surprisingly stiff wind swirling through the apartment. The papers on his desk were threatening to scatter, but he made no move to protect them. They'd still say the same thing, whether stacked neatly on his desk or skittering across the hardwood floor.

He wanted a drink. The only thing that stopped him from pouring one was the fact that it was four in the afternoon, and somehow that made a difference in his mind. He'd never been

someone who 'needed' a drink, and he was going to do whatever it took not to start down that path. Besides, you were supposed to drink to stop feeling, weren't you? That wasn't what he was looking for. What he wanted was to feel something, anything, beyond this wearying numbness that had settled in.

So he'd opened the windows, because without that humid breeze on his face, his apartment had begun to feel like a sensory deprivation chamber.

He'd gone into this assignment, like all the others, with open eyes. He'd understood that it had the potential to get ugly. But somehow, he'd always expected that any disagreement he might have with the Agency's ways would stem from some questionable action they wanted him to take. He'd never envisioned a scenario where they might *prevent* him from acting.

Upon his return earlier that day, he'd immediately sat down at his desk and scratched out his after-action report on the half-dozen sheets of paper that were now spread out on the floor. He'd wanted to get it all down in writing quickly, because his superiors were never happy with vague reports, and he knew that his subconscious would immediately try to bury as many details as possible.

What are you doing? his mind demanded. *What made you think that you could fit their profile?* Too wild for the Navy, too straight-laced for the CIA -- a man without a service. He smirked. No, he'd stay with the Agency for the moment, if only because it wasn't in his nature to quit so easily. But understanding, on any subject, wouldn't be this long in coming again. He'd make sure of it, for the sake of his sanity.

Harmon Rabb rose from the couch, pulled the windows shut, and gathered up the strewn papers. Placing them in a folder, he reached for the phone on the desk. Once it was in his hand, he gave some thought to what number he intended to dial. He'd made a decision early on in his fledgling CIA career not to involve anyone from JAG in his assignments. His rationale had been twofold. Pulling JAG officers into Agency matters had often ended badly in the past, even before the disaster in Paraguay. But more than that, he just wasn't sure what talking to any of them would accomplish.

He didn't particularly want to hear any office gossip or commiserate about tough cases. They surely didn't want to hear about all the various ways he'd risked his life in the past week or month. JAG had brought them together and held them there. He knew that he'd been a big part of that, regardless of the admiral's pointed remarks about his teamwork skills. But without JAG, there was little to bind him to them. They'd move on if given no other choice; it was the military way. He'd survive, because that was his way.

At one point, he'd believed that the bond he shared with Mac would transcend JAG, but if the truth were known, JAG had been the only thing holding the two of them together for some time. Whether it was their differences or their similarities that had torpedoed their friendship, he'd probably never know, but it had disintegrated all the same.

Out of the recesses of memory, a sensation flickered to life, and he imagined he could feel a graceful pair of arms encircling him from behind, a smooth cheek resting against his shoulder. He recalled the feeling of warmth that touch had always brought, and he knew who he needed to call.

There was no answer at her office, which surprised him a little. Her direct line had always had voice mail enabled before. But rather than calling the receptionist to track her down, he flipped through his address book until he found the number for her cell phone.

The line clicked in on the second ring, and then he heard her voice. "Hello?"

Some of the bindings around his heart loosened. "Hi, Andie."

She paused for only the briefest of moments, and when she replied, her voice had the rich smoothness of caramel. "Harm. God, it's good to hear your voice."

"You, too. I, ah, was hoping to bend your ear a little, if you've got the time."

A sympathetic smile wound its way through the line. "Must have been a pretty terrible day, if you need to unload even before Taps is played."

"It's been a pretty terrible couple of months, to be honest."

"I understand. I'm not exactly thrilled with my current situation, either. But you called me, so you get to go first."

He drew a long breath, wondering how she'd react to his revelation. "I resigned my commission three and a half months ago, Andie. I had to do it in order to save a life. Now I'm flying for ... another agency, and I'm just not sure I can do this for the rest of my career."

A considerable silence followed that declaration. When her voice returned, it was filled with awe. Not disappointment, or disbelief, but simply awe. "Do you regret it?"

"Resigning? No. But I wish like hell I hadn't had to do it."

"Harm," she breathed, still trying to get her bearings. Then, he could almost hear her tempering her reaction, and a stronger voice came through. "We need to talk. I mean, really talk."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"The thing is, there's something I'd like to do first. I hate doing this to you, but would it be all right if I called you back in ... say, three hours?"

Dismay flared, but he nodded resolutely, even though she couldn't see him. "Sure, of course. That's what I get for calling you before the end of the work day, anyway."

"No, it's all right. I'm glad you did, and I am making you a solemn promise right now that by seven-thirty tonight, your phone will ring. Will that suffice, or would you rather do this now?"

Despite his mood, he smiled. Trust Andie to display such fierce loyalty. Loyalty had been in rather short supply lately. "Go do whatever you need to do, all right? I'll still be here."

"Waiting by your phone? Your home phone, at precisely seven-thirty?"

"Just get going, would you?"

"I'm going, I'm going." She sighed. "Seriously now, Harm. Eventually, it'll be all right."

Somehow, when she said it, he believed her. "I know. Talk to you soon."

Clicking the phone off, he crossed over to the kitchen and leaned on the island. It had been most of two years since he'd actually seen her, but they'd spoken on the phone on and off, more often than they had in the past. After they'd graduated from law school together, she'd gone to work for a firm in southeast Michigan, staying close to her roots. Family law was her bailiwick, but she spent a fairly staggering number of hours doing pro bono work with Child and Family Services in downtown Detroit.

He smiled, remembering how young and endearingly bright-eyed she'd looked when he'd bumped into her on campus that first week. Andrea Nichols had charted her course early on in life, and nothing had ever come along to knock her off it. Some people, predictably, saw that and dismissed her as naïve. He himself very nearly had, once. Those hazel-green eyes and slight frame, however, belonged to a woman with an amazing level of determination, and anyone who underestimated her in the courtroom most assuredly paid the price.

It had been her positive outlook that pulled him through that difficult first term, when he'd struggled with his reasons for being in law school in the first place. When he needed to get his nose out of the books, she offered football tickets. When he needed reassurance, she offered her couch. With diplomas in hand, they'd finally gone their separate ways, as had been inevitable, but for nearly twelve years after that day in the quad, they'd been there for each other when no other comfort would do. Even her voice over the phone had always had the power to briefly bring him back to simpler times ... not the happiest or easiest times, possibly, but simpler.

Seven-thirty, she'd said. Was it seven-thirty yet?

He killed some time with a shower and shave, neither of which had he gotten in the previous forty-eight hours. Food probably should have been on his to-do list, but it held little appeal at the moment. Instead, he put a U2 CD in the stereo and stretched out sideways across his bed, waiting for divine guidance, or maybe absolution.

He dozed off a few times, only for about ten minutes each time. That had been his primary method of sleeping for a while now, and he didn't need to be told that it wasn't a healthy habit to have. But given his current line of work, it was decidedly less healthy to get shot for a lack of alertness.

The phone rang at 7:23, and within half a second, it was in his hand. "Andie?"

Her voice was calm and instantly reassuring. "Did you get caller-ID, or am I the only person who could possibly be calling right now?"

Harm rolled into a sitting position and rubbed his eyes. "Not exactly the only person, but I'm very much off-duty, and I'm not getting a whole lot of social calls at present."

"Even from the gang at JAG?"

"Especially from the gang at JAG. A lot of that is my fault. I've been away a lot, and ... it's just easier not to get into it with them."

There was an audible sigh on the other end. "Oh, Harm."

A knock sounded at his door, but he chose to ignore it. The only conversation he wanted to have tonight was just getting started. "It's all right. It's just - "

"In what way is it all right? Other than the fact that you're still in one piece, which when taking your new vocation into account seems like a pretty big deal."

The knock came again, and again it was steadfastly ignored. "Okay, it's not all right just yet. But things are already starting to look a little better than they did five minutes ago."

Her answering smile was clear in her tone. "That's nice to hear. Continuing on that theme, would you please answer your door?"

"You can hear that through this stupid phone?"

"No, hon. My knuckles are getting sore."

His mouth fell open. "Andie, you didn't."

"Obviously I did."

Dropping the phone to the bed, he leaped up and crossed the apartment to yank the door open.

With a duffel bag slung over one shoulder and a cell phone in her hand, Andie Nichols offered a shy, uncertain grin. "For the record, I'm aiming for cute and supportive, not impulsive and stalker-ish."

"You nailed it." Without a second thought, Harm stepped forward and caught her in a crushing embrace. The duffel bag hit the floor with a soft thud as her arms went around his neck.

They stood there for most of a minute, simply enjoying this reunion. "I can't believe you jumped on a plane," he told her, a little embarrassed at how pleased he was to see her.

"I would've been on the 4:45 into National, but I had to throw some clothes in a bag, and then I-275 was a royal mess. Had to settle for the 5:10 into Dulles." Andie gently disengaged herself, rolled back off her tiptoes, and nudged her duffel into the apartment with her foot. "I assume there's a Holiday Inn or something around here?"

"Yeah, you're standing in it."

She smiled wistfully. "I didn't want to assume. It's been a long time since one of us has spent a night on the other's couch."

"Don't worry about it. But I have a hard time believing that your caseload allowed you to just skip town in the middle of the week."

"Well, my schedule is more or less free and clear at the moment, so I'm all yours, like it or not."

He caught a flicker of something in her gaze and frowned. Suddenly he remembered receiving no answer at her office, and a mental light bulb went on. "Did you ... You left Holland Archer, didn't you?"

Biting her bottom lip, she shrugged. "Call it irreconcilable differences."

"Wow."

"Yeah. I called here a couple of times, but I didn't want to leave a message like that on an answering machine and have you feel obligated to call back right away. Of course, now I realize why you were never home." She gave a gesture of dismissal. "So there was a slightly self-serving aspect to my coming out here, I'll admit. But my next job isn't nearly as weighty an issue as your current job, it seems, so let's start with you and leave me for later, all right?"

"Whatever you say." Harm held out a hand toward the couch. While Andie moved to take a seat, he went into the kitchen and turned on the coffeemaker. Turning back to face her, he realized how little she'd changed over the years. Her golden-brown hair didn't fall all the way to her shoulders anymore; it was a little shorter and more carefully styled, but he still got the feeling that she'd throw on a baseball cap without hesitation to go to a game or out jogging. Unsurprisingly, she wore a little more makeup than she had at twenty-two, but she was still wearing jeans, and he suspected that they didn't have any designer label attached. Of all the words he could use to describe Andrea Nichols, 'image-conscious' wasn't on the list.

And apparently she still liked to sit in the corner of a couch and tuck her legs up under her. He smiled and walked over to sit across from her. "I never could figure out how you managed to sit like that all the time. Doesn't it kill your knees?"

"Just lucky, I guess. Besides, as much as I hate to bring this up, I'm not approaching forty quite as fast as you are."

"Thanks. I really needed that." Shaking his head, he dropped his gaze to the coffee table. "That's right around the corner," he commented. "In October, I'll be forty, and what have I got to show for it?"

"Hey, don't do that. Do I need to start reading from the gigantic list of people whose lives you've changed for the better?"

"I know. I promise not to go too far into the self-pity routine. But in terms of my life, personally, it's hard to see too many tangible differences between ten years ago and today."

"You mean because you aren't coming home to a house with a white picket fence and two point five kids?" Andie spread her hands. "I can't exactly throw stones when it comes to that particular topic."

"Sure, but as you so eloquently pointed out, you're not about to turn forty."

"But I'm a woman. We're supposed to freak out about such things earlier, or so I've been told." She tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned on the arm of the couch, her expression growing solemn. "I don't know how to put this delicately, so I'm just going to dive in. What's the situation with Mac these days?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, then lifted his head to ensure that she saw the seriousness in his gaze. "Nothing. There's nothing with Mac these days. We don't speak."

A little taken aback, she blinked a couple of times before responding. "That's hard to imagine. I know things have been strained for a while, what with your turns on the bench and everything, but I never got the idea that it was this bad. Is she angry about you resigning?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think that's the main issue, but I've begun to realize that I know very little about the way her mind works."

"Well, if you had to do it to save a life, I would hope she'd have some understanding ..."

She trailed off, somehow plucking the truth right out of his eyes. "You're kidding. It was *her* you had to save?"

"There's a lot more to it than that - "

"I sure as hell hope so. God, you saved her *life*, and the two of you aren't even talking?"

When he just stared back at her, she damped her initial indignation and folded her hands. "I think you'd better start at the beginning."

And he did, although some might have said that he started before the beginning. In his mind, though, the rift between himself and the rest of the JAG crew had begun the day NCIS showed up to accuse him of murdering a fellow officer. Andie had known about that already, because unlike his coworkers, she hadn't been directed not to speak with him during his confinement. But it hadn't been long after that fiasco ended that the Paraguay fiasco had begun.

He told her about his search for any information on Mac's whereabouts; about the admiral's laissez-faire attitude at his departure; about spilling more blood than he cared to admit in the Chaco Boreal; and finally about the long, continuous duel he'd fought with Mac over the course of the trip. Other than the occasional classified tidbit, he left out no details of those conversations -- he didn't want her view to be tainted by his bias. Andie was under no illusions about his capacity for screwing up that type of situation. She'd believe and understand this one, too.

He knew her well enough to recognize that she was biting back a comment or two, waiting until he was finished to speak. He appreciated the effort.

"I was just so off-balance the whole time, you know?" he admitted, going over to pour the coffee. "I thought we'd be able to deal with the crisis at hand and talk about personal things later. I just didn't envision trying to make decisions about us in the middle of South America. But she needed to deal with it right then, for some reason. Maybe she needed to retake control of something after all that chaos. I don't know. All I know is that it completely knocked me for a loop."

She pursed her lips. "In retrospect, was she right?" she asked finally. "Do you both want to be on top?"

"Maybe. It's not like I've never been asked to compromise in a relationship before. Granted, maybe I had to be beaten over the head with it, but I've done it."

Andie looked thoughtful. "Has she?"

"What?"

"Well, let's run down the list of what you've told me about, and I quote, 'the men she picks.' She wasn't really given much say in things during her marriage, I'm guessing. Being with a senior officer, likewise, probably didn't involve a lot of compromise. Then there's the guy she left JAG for. Do those things add up?"

"You're forgetting the one who moved across the Pacific for her," he observed, somewhat sourly.

"No, I'm not. From what I gathered, that disaster wasn't much about compromise, either, dramatic gestures notwithstanding. Was it?"

She had a point. "No," he admitted. "It looked more like a tug of war. In each situation, there was always a winner and a loser."

"So from her point of view, why should being with you be any different? You're obviously a strong personality, so she might think that you'll expect her to bend to some unwritten rule or another. And the fact that you've been hesitant in the past could reinforce that impression."

Harm lifted an eyebrow. "I'm surprised that you're seeing her side so easily."

Andie gave a short laugh. "Don't get carried away. I'm just offering random theories. I have no intention of trying to justify the things she said to you. Maybe I don't have the right mindset to be a Marine, but if someone turns in his wings, takes off for parts unknown, and risks his neck to save my life, I'm probably going to read something into that action. I'm not going to ask him to define it in the middle of that mess, and I'm sure as hell not going to make catty comments about him wrecking everything he gets his hands on. Good lord."

"That's more the answer I was looking for."

He handed over a mug of coffee, and for a moment, she watched him through the rising steam. "Do you still love her?"

The question didn't bother him nearly as much as he would have expected. "It's funny," he said quietly. "Before all this started, I don't know if I would have been able to put that label on it. Maybe a couple of years ago I was in a better position to recognize it, but not now. It took the threat of losing her for good to make me start to think, 'yeah, maybe I do love her.'"

"Which is why this hurts so much."

"Guess so. Now ... I can't just stop caring about her, but I'm not willing to go through this anymore. Regardless of who screwed up where, it's too damn contentious. I don't want to be with someone who takes those kinds of shots, and I don't want to be taking them myself. I wouldn't mind being able to carry on a civil conversation with her, since we do share a godchild and all, but to try for anything beyond casual friendship just seems futile."

"You sound pretty certain of that," she observed mildly.

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't be?"

"Not really. But no matter how ill-defined it was, the two of you had a relationship that spanned a number of years. You're going to have to deal with the loss, even if you know you'll be better off in the long run."

He looked down at his coffee for a moment. "We *will* be better off in the long run. Won't we?"

"My opinion doesn't really mean much here, but yes, I think so. The continual holding pattern is over. You'll both be able to move on, and you most likely won't be looking over your shoulder."

Once again, he got the sense that her response was a little too politic. "Andie, don't censor yourself here, okay? I want to know what you really think, even if it's ugly."

"It's not that ugly. Well, if it is, at least it's not aimed at you." Setting down her mug, she swung her feet to the floor and leaned forward. "I think Mac has some very admirable qualities, but she doesn't fully appreciate you for who you are. If she did, she would have accepted your way of expressing things and tried to work with it, rather than waiting for you to somehow change. If you're both simply too strong-willed in that area to be compatible, then so be it, but where does she get off highlighting all of your perceived faults and none of your strengths? To me, that says she doesn't get it and probably never will."

Well, that had certainly put it plainly. Harm shook his head, amused despite the topic. "You make it sound like she isn't good enough for me."

Her expression was solemn. "She isn't. But not because of her past or anything like that. After all this time, she doesn't understand you, and therefore, she doesn't deserve to have you."

"You really believe that?"

In answer, Andie gave a soft smile. "Hon, you know me. I'm never going to think that *anyone's* good enough for you."

Harm met her gaze, hoping she could see his gratitude. "You're incredible," he stated quietly. "For the first time in a good long while, I think I'm actually starting to not feel lousy about myself."

"I just call it like I see it." She reached for her mug again and took a sip. "So what about JAG?"

His smile immediately faded. "Well, that warm fuzzy didn't last very long, did it?"

That earned a wince. "Sorry. If you'd rather leave that subject for later - "

"No, might as well get it over with. When I got back to JAG, I was told in no uncertain terms that my nine lives had run out. My tendency to put instinct ahead of regs was no longer going to be tolerated. The admiral even went so far as to accuse me of not being a 'team player.'"

At that, Andie nearly choked on her coffee. "Please tell me you're making this up."

"I only wish."

"For Christ's sake! You saved the ass of one of his team members. You went to bat for Bud when he needed you. Not to mention the *three* combat decorations you've earned since coming to JAG -- I mean, last I checked, they didn't give those out for breaking rules."

"This is what I'm saying." He raked his fingers through his hair, longer now than it had been in some time. "None of that seems to matter anymore. Maybe it never did. Maybe he always resented me more than I realized."

"That can't be. There's got to be some reason why it's suddenly an issue now."

"If there is, it sure hadn't been made clear to me. God -- I felt like he invalidated my entire twenty-two years in uniform with that one conversation. Would you believe he told me to go wrestle alligators if I needed to be a thrill-seeker?"

"Oh, like you're out there putting it on the line strictly because you like the rush?" Andie was starting to heat up, he could tell. "The admiral may have just leapfrogged Mac on my list of people I'd like to smack upside the head. Again, I wasn't here, but judging by the way the Singer case was handled, criticizing your teamwork skills seems like a glaring case of hypocrisy."

"He's not entirely wrong," he pointed out, diffusing some of her ire. "From the Navy's perspective, at least. I do what I feel is right, and if the rules close the door, I get in through a window. I understand why those rules need to exist, but there are situations where I can't always obey them in good conscience."

"That's because the world isn't made up of absolutes. Anyone wearing two stars, especially someone who also has a law degree, ought to appreciate that."

"I agree. I'm just trying not to place too much blame. At least not without accepting a share of it myself." Harm released a long breath. "As much as it hurt to leave, JAG isn't my concern anymore, and I'm not theirs. I've got a new job now, and despite its glaring drawbacks, you can't say I haven't landed on my feet."

She watched him while taking a long sip of coffee, not fooled for a minute. He hadn't called her to try to convince her that his life was in order, unless he was trying to convince himself in the process. And maybe he was.

"I'm thinking that we'd better leave the details of that new job, sparse as they may be, for tomorrow."

"It'll be a longer conversation than you think," he warned with a raised eyebrow.

"Fine by me. I'm the one who showed up on your doorstep, remember?"

"Indeed. You think you can stay for a few days? I mean, do you need to be out shopping around for a new firm?"

Andie smiled. "Not just yet. Just because I do pro bono doesn't mean I don't bill any hours. I've been making a fair bit more than I really need for some time now. A break won't hurt me at all."

"You wouldn't care even if it did, would you?"

Her reply wasn't verbal. Instead, she stood up, walked behind him and put her arms around his neck, leaning down to rest her head on his shoulder. He closed his eyes, instantly comforted. This was what he'd been looking for in some vague way when he picked up the phone a few hours ago, but he hadn't dared to hope that he'd really find it. It was difficult to define, this bond of theirs, but even so, he could feel its strength.

"Andie?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

Harm awoke the next morning from an unexpectedly restful night's sleep to find Andie folding up the blankets she'd thrown over the couch. Chivalry had required him to offer her the bed, but they were accustomed to borrowing each other's couches, and he hadn't been surprised a bit when she rolled her eyes and stretched out in mock luxury across the couch.

He was, however, a little surprised to discover that she'd managed to get in and out of the shower without waking him up. With her damp hair combed back from her face, she stacked the pillows neatly and wandered over to the window to watch this corner of the District beginning its day.

"Either you've gone all stealthy on me, or I slept better than I have in a while."

She turned at the sound of his voice. "You looked like you needed it."

"Do you realize you were channeling my mother just then?"

"I've always liked your mother."

"Yeah, she likes you, too." He pulled a carton of orange juice out of the fridge and poured two glasses.

"How'd Trish take the news that you left the Navy for an even riskier line of work?"

"Not too well, predictably. Even after I prettied it up a little. But it's your turn."

Blinking in mild puzzlement, she accepted a glass of juice. "My turn for what?"

"Confession. Before I launch into how I screwed up my life as a spook, I want to know why you left the Ham Sandwich crew."

As expected, she shot him a dirty look. "Must you call them that? Holland, Archer and McNeil is a very well-regarded firm - "

"With rather unfortunate initials." He nudged her shoulder with a faint smirk. "Yes, they're an impressive firm. You did some really great work there. So why did you leave?"

Andie's expression shuttered, but only for a moment. She turned her hand palm up in a gesture of surrender. "They asked me to take a case I couldn't possibly take. Senior partners turned it into an ultimatum, mainly because they'd always wanted me to take more of those kinds of cases and less of the kind that came from Child and Family Services. Since they were going to show me the door anyway, I made use of it before it could hit me in the ass. That was that."

"What was the case?"

This time, she didn't attempt to conceal the shadow that fell over her delicate features. "A custody dispute. A very ugly custody dispute involving a lot of money and not nearly enough love. I've been handling juvenile cases my whole career. I recognize that kind of abuse a mile away. The partners either didn't believe me or didn't care. Either way, I wasn't about to stay there a minute longer."

"Good for you," Harm offered quietly.

"You would have done the same thing. Of course, I may have burned that bridge entirely when I went to the opposing attorney with tips on how to beat Steve Chalmers. I didn't get specific, but I'm sure they've got a pretty good idea of where some of those strategies must have come from."

That was unexpected. Andie had always been devoted to seeking justice, but cowboy tactics were much more his style than hers. "Did it work?"

The devilish, satisfied spark in her hazel eyes was new to him, and gave her a uniquely attractive look. "Like a charm."

"Wow. I'm impressed." He shook his head with a muted smile of concern. "You're gonna be okay?"

She could have shrugged the question off, but she understood how pointless such an action would be. "It hadn't been the happiest place to work for a while now," she admitted. "Their goals and mine never meshed as well as I hoped. That said ... I was there for most of nine years. I know it's not the same as leaving the Navy after so long, but when it comes to practicing law, they were all I've ever known."

Tucking back her still-damp hair, she conveyed a hint of the vulnerability that he remembered from all those years ago. Packing up and moving on was all but a foreign concept to her, he realized. This wouldn't be easy for her, no matter how well she faced it.

"Okay, maybe it's not the same, but we graduated together. We've been practicing for the same amount of time. You left Holland Archer, I left JAG. If nothing else, you have to admire the symmetry."

That earned him a smile, though it faded more quickly than he would have liked. "You've done this before," she observed. "Starting over, I mean. I could probably use some good advice."

"You'll do fine. But if advice is sought, I'll do my best to provide." Stepping closer to her, he rested his chin on the top of her head, and she relaxed against him. In stocking feet, Andie was five foot six "on a good day," or so she said; about average height for a woman, but nowhere close to matching his six foot four. The wide difference had made for a number of

amusing moments in the past, and on occasion it served his male pride to be able to be so physically protective.

After a moment, he suggested, "Let's get out of here, all right? There's got to be something fun and mindless and touristy we can do."

In response, she pulled back with a playful gleam in her eye. "You know, I've never been to the Air and Space Museum."

"Never?" With a melodramatic expression of shock, he staggered back a step. "Stay right there. I'm gonna go grab a shower, and then you and I are gonna check out some planes."

As he headed for the bathroom, she called after him, "But all I really want to see is Apollo 11 ..."

"Too bad!" he called back good-naturedly, knowing full well that she would continue to tweak him like that for the rest of the day.

An hour later, they were strolling into the main entrance of the National Air and Space Museum. Over Harm's objections, Andie insisted on tucking a map into her purse -- "for posterity," she claimed. While schoolchildren on field trips dashed around excitedly, the pair headed straight for the Wright Flyer exhibit, to start at the very beginning.

"The hundredth anniversary of powered flight is this December," Harm remarked as they took in the fragile-looking construct of fabric and wood. "I was sort of thinking about going down to Kitty Hawk for the celebration."

"I bet it'll be something. A hundred years from that thing to the Boeing 777 and the F/A-22. Crazy." True to form, Andie couldn't resist another comment. "You do realize, of course, that the actual event is the only thing that took place at Kitty Hawk, right? The Wright brothers lived, worked, and did most of their preceding *and* subsequent tests in Dayton, Ohio. Nobody's named an aircraft carrier after Dayton, as far as I know."

He turned to her, lifting one eyebrow in amusement. "I never noticed this before, but you're a Midwest snob."

Her eyes widened, though she too was more amused than annoyed. "A Midwest snob? Doesn't that sound like a contradiction in terms?"

"You know what I mean. You've never wanted to live anywhere else, have you?"

"Not really. I'm not cut out for New York City, and I'm equally unsuited to Southern heat or California earthquakes." She shrugged, not at all bothered by the concept. "Things work for me where I am, and yes, I take some pride in my general area -- so what of it?"

"Nothing. It must be nice to identify so closely with someplace."

They moved on to another exhibit. "You don't identify much with California?"

It was his turn to shrug. "There was never a real close-knit mentality where I was -- nobody I knew seemed to have much in common with me or each other. Besides, I left there while I was still fundamentally a kid. My adult life has been spent in Annapolis, D.C., or in

squadrons.” He paused a moment, considering. “I never gave it a lot of thought before, but I don’t really feel at home here the way you do in Detroit.”

“We’d gladly adopt you,” she offered obligingly.

He knew it was meant to be a throwaway comment, but somehow the larger concept struck a chord. “Don’t tempt me.”

Andie turned about from the brightly-painted Fokker biplane in front of her to look squarely at him. “You’re really thinking about leaving Washington, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not ruling it out. I’ve got friends here, but it’s not like there’s anything holding me down. And there are enough not-so-great memories here to make the concept of being somewhere else kind of appealing.”

Her eyes probed his features carefully, gently. “Is this more related to your Agency career, or -- ?”

“A little. But we can talk about that later, all right? This is supposed to be fun.” As they started toward the next hall, Harm glanced across the way, his newly-honed senses detecting a stranger’s gaze. “Heads up. Stalker at your four o’clock.”

Andie followed his gaze casually and rolled her eyes skyward upon locating the person in question, a thirty-ish man in thick glasses and a NASA T-shirt. “Stalker?”

“He’s pretty obviously checking you out.”

“How do you know he isn’t checking *you* out?”

“Because his eyes are halfway down your shirt!”

It was true that NASA-boy seemed to have taken an interest in her close-fitting V-neck shirt. Still, she shook her head, giving Harm a tolerant smile that he inexplicably found rather endearing. “Harm, I’m not the type of girl who gets ‘checked out.’ I’m the girl you get to babysit the kids while you check out more, ah, striking girls.”

That unflinching self-assessment gave him pause, and he studied her more intently for a moment. Maybe she wasn’t a model, but he couldn’t imagine a living heterosexual male who would pass up a second glance at Andrea Nichols. Her bright eyes, fair skin, and graceful body were ...

Wait a minute. Since when do I think about her body at all?

Deliberately, he chose not to answer that question, and instead spoke his mind with a knowing gaze. “Andie, you need to understand something, and I mean this in the best possible way -- you are very definitely not a girl anymore.”

Right after he said it, he realized just how bad such a remark could sound. Then their eyes locked, and he was warmed to see recognition and gratitude there, along with a new light.

“That guy still watching me?”

He looked. “Yep.”

And then she knocked him for a minor loop by threading her arm through his and leaning in to kiss his cheek, making sure that the action was done in full view of the other man. “Sorry, stalker, but this is one giant leap you’re not going to be taking. My dance card’s full.”

Receiving a slight tingle from the spot that her lips had brushed, Harm had to fight the urge to send a triumphant glance in the direction of NASA-boy. Then he immediately wondered what had brought that particular urge on at all. So she’d decided to send this poor guy a message, and she’d made him a co-conspirator. So what? Was he really ascribing some kind of meaning to the idea that she’d ‘chosen’ him over some random ogling nerd? *Man, do I need to get out more.*

They moved on, still arm-in-arm in case NASA-boy hadn’t fully gotten the message, and finally came upon a display describing the Wild Weasel and Iron Hand aerial missions over Vietnam. Immediately recognizing the significance to her friend, Andie started to step back, in case he didn’t want to confront that particular memory today. Harm understood her intention and appreciated her thoughtfulness, but as she began to slip her arm out from under his, he caught her hand. “It’s okay. It’s not like I haven’t seen all this a dozen times before. Go ahead and read it if you want.”

She did just that, taking in the descriptions of the Navy and Air Force aircrews who’d flown at such perilously low altitudes in order to destroy SAM sites in the North. They’d talked about Vietnam a little in the past, but on such occasions it had always felt to him as if he were giving her a lesson. Andie had been only a few months old on that December day in 1969, and her tranquil suburban hometown hadn’t sent as many young men off to war as others had. She’d made it clear to him that her understanding of that time had been shaped by him more than anyone else, and he took that responsibility seriously.

“This is you,” she told him, gesturing toward the pictures of young pilots forever changed. “If you’d been born twenty years earlier, this is exactly what you would have been, risking it all so that others might live. You really are your father’s son.”

Somehow, that idea bothered him profoundly at that moment, and it took a few seconds for him to figure out why. “Not anymore,” he said, and her head swung around at the sadness that had crept into his voice. “He wouldn’t be too proud of me now.”

She looked up at him in shock. “What does that mean?” When he didn’t respond right away, her fingers tightened around his. “Harm, please, tell me what you mean by that.”

“We shouldn’t do this now,” he stalled lamely. “Later, when we get back to my place.”

“That isn’t good enough.” Urgently, she placed herself in his sightline, and he was startled to see such heartbreaking empathy in her expressive eyes. “Did you bring me here so that you could pretend for another few hours that you’re not hurting? If so, you were doing pretty well at it for a while, but when you said what you did just now ... Harm, the level of pain you’re radiating at this moment is staggering, and it’s killing me to witness it. I can’t just keep looking at airplanes after this. If you want to keep this to yourself and continue hurting, I can’t stop you, but I’m telling you now that it’s hurting me to see you. Please let me in.”

At that, his willpower crumbled, because the idea of causing her pain was too much to face, and because it seemed nobler to be doing it for her sake than for his. He just had to hope

that telling her wouldn't make things worse. Nodding in acquiescence, he waved a listless hand toward the doors. "There's a courtyard out there."

She didn't release his hand as they moved out onto the neatly-manicured grass, settling on a bench that seemed to be out of the main flow of pedestrian traffic. "Something happened," Andie theorized by way of an opening, not wanting to push too hard. "On one of your missions -- a fairly recent one, I'm guessing -- something went wrong."

"You could say that. If you talked to the Agency, they'd say it went just fine." His jaw tightened as he mentally scanned through all the details, sorting them by level of classification. "Andie, there's a lot of this that I won't be able to tell you. All I can give you is the basics. It's infuriating, but there are good reasons for it, and - "

"I know," she broke in. "I can handle that. As long as it helps me to understand what it is that's torturing you right now."

His lips twisted in a humorless smirk. "Remarkably prescient choice of words. There was torture involved, but I wasn't the subject." He took a few measured breaths before explaining. "I was part of a team sent in to retrieve something from someone. The someone in question was observed during the operation and later taken in by the local authorities for 'questioning.' We tried to secure his family, but we were too late. They brought his six-year-old son out into the middle of the village and put a gun to his head in an attempt to flush us out."

He could feel her tense up beside him, seeing what was coming, and he wished he could somehow keep from having to finish this narrative. "We could have extracted him," he stated flatly, his voice sounding dead even to his own ears. "It would have been ugly, but it was possible. Another guy on the team and I were all set to try, but the command element ordered us to pull back. Exposing ourselves would have destabilized the larger situation, and most likely would have caused more deaths further down the road. I understand that, and from that point of view, I accept what they made us do." He closed his eyes, unable to face her. "But as a human being, you're simply not supposed to stand by while a six-year-old child takes a bullet to the back of the head. And that's what I did."

Andie's hand trembled, and he realized belatedly that he'd all but crushed her fingers during his confession. Feeling guilty on yet another level, he tried to release her, but she grabbed a hold of his hand with conviction.

Her soft, slightly tearful voice broke through the darkness. "Harm, look at me."

He didn't oblige, opening his eyes only to stare at a crack in the concrete walkway. "I'm not sure I can."

"You could a few minutes ago. What's changed?"

"Andie, there's nothing in the world that's more important to you than protecting children. I didn't want to tell you because I knew it would rip you up, and because I'm more ashamed of this than I've been of anything in my life. If I hate myself for having let this happen, what must you be thinking?"

"How about letting me make my own decisions on how to feel about this?" she suggested quietly, a complete absence of malice in her tone. With her right hand still entwined in his, she reached up with her left to turn his face toward her, and he took some solace in what he saw. There was shock there, and anguish, but no condemnation. She ached for the

child, but she still ached for him as well. "You're not a monster. I know how badly you must have wanted to save that little boy. It was a horrible situation, one that no one should ever have to face. As awful as it sounds, I'm willing to believe that you did what had to be done."

"I almost didn't," he told her, a catch in his voice. "I almost said 'the hell with it' and went in anyway. That's the moment I keep reliving -- the moment I made that decision. I keep wondering what would have happened if I'd gone the other way."

"Don't you think that you probably would have been killed yourself? Maybe I don't understand the setup, but that might have escalated things, and the boy might still have been killed. I know I can't fully understand what this must feel like, but Harm, you were willing to risk far more than your own life for that child. No matter what the result, that should count for something."

Harm thought about the threats that had been made against the American and British embassies, and the almost certain terror that would have rained down on them had the CIA task force been exposed. That knowledge was the only thing keeping him from full-blown self-loathing, and Andie didn't have that. All she had was his word that it had been important.

"You really believe that?" he asked, still braced for some sign of disappointment or even anger from her. Was it possible that somehow she *didn't* see this as a betrayal of her highest ideals?

She failed in her attempt to smile, but her gaze, though pained, was resolute. "I'm doing my best to believe it," she said truthfully. "I think that's about all you can do, too."

His voice fell to a whisper. "I can't help feeling like I may have failed myself and everyone I know."

"You haven't. To do that, you would have had to lose your most basic sense of what's right and wrong, and I know you'll never let that happen."

He realized then that he could spend the rest of his life near this woman and still never understand how she always managed to find precisely the words he needed. "After it happened, nothing felt real to me until you came ... I felt like I could so easily lose my grip on everything, and I need -- God, I don't know what I need ..."

Without a word, she pulled him into her soothing embrace, stroking her long fingers through his hair. "I don't know, either," she murmured after a while. "But you'll figure it out. You always do."

They ended up going back into the museum, and spent a while walking on the Mall after that; mostly in silence, because an admission of such magnitude demanded a certain amount of space. Every so often, one of them would point something out to the other in passing, and that served as a slow yet steady transition back into normal conversation. By late afternoon, they were talking and smiling again in ways he hadn't dared to hope for. And through it all, through rapid course corrections on busy sidewalks and ice cream sandwiches that threatened to melt disastrously down their wrists, each managed to keep a secure grip on the other's hand.

"If I stick around here long enough," Andie asked, as they strolled along the Reflecting Pool, "what are the odds that you'll take me up in the Stearman?"

He turned toward her, a little surprised. "Hey, just say the word. I didn't realize you wanted to."

She shrugged, her hair getting tossed by the breeze. "It's relaxing. When you don't go all aerobatic on me, that is. But even that is you in your element, so I can deal."

The idea made him pause to think. "You don't fully understand what it is I love about flying, do you?" he asked, a solemn yet tolerant note in his voice.

Her response matched that tone. "I don't have to. What I understand is that it's part of who you are, on a positively organic level."

He shook his head, returning his gaze to the gently rippling water. "Not too many other people have been so accepting."

"Well, maybe they didn't know you at the right time. I saw what that love did to you, remember? I saw the scars when they were still fresh. To have witnessed that and know that you still love it -- that makes a statement."

That was true, he admitted to himself. When he'd arrived at law school, he'd still been raw from the ramp strike and all its consequences. She'd been the first new friend to see that, which must have given her a better perspective than so many others. "And it doesn't bother you that a close friend of yours has almost gotten himself killed on a disproportionate number of occasions?"

A glimmer of hesitation appeared, but she wasn't contemplating how honest to be; rather, she was contemplating how best to phrase an already honest answer. "I'm not going to stand here and say that what you do hasn't scared the hell out of me a few times. In most cases, though, I don't hear about the crisis until it's passed. That said ... Two and a half years ago, I was at a reception for the firm, and one of my paralegals called me over to the bar. The TV was on ZNN, and they were covering rescue efforts for a Tomcat that had gone down off the Patrick Henry. Denise recognized you from a graduation picture I'd had in my office." She offered a feeble smile, not disguising the pain associated with those memories. "I called a cab and just went home to sit in front of my TV, waiting for that smarmy reporter to come back and tell me whether my friend was alive or dead. By the time he finally did, I was already trying to figure out how I'd get through your funeral."

"But that was the exception, not the rule," she continued, before he could open his mouth to proffer a stale apology. "Some of the things you do are so much larger than life that it would be easy to start overlooking the everyday things. But you've spent far more of your time over the past few years in the office or the courtroom than you have chasing terrorists or whatever. That's why I can't figure out why certain Navy types have pigeonholed you as a textbook adrenaline junkie."

"But I went off and proved him right, didn't I? I joined up with the air wing of the CIA, of all places, and played cowboy on a truly grand scale."

"It's not like you sought them out, though, right? You didn't go looking for a way to live on the edge. The intel types saw you as a hot commodity, and for you, it was a way to continue serving. It's not so unreasonable a progression."

Not sure where to take this discussion, he cast a sideways glance at her. "A 'hot commodity'?"

"In more ways than one." She shrugged, eyes twinkling. "Now we're even for the stalker-related comments earlier."

"Nice little mutual admiration society we've got going here."

"I think so," she agreed pleasantly.

Shaking his head, he surrendered. "C'mon, let's grab some dinner and head back."

They picked up some takeout from a little Japanese place three Metro stations down the line. Andie had never been accused of being a health nut, but she'd never pass up an opportunity for good sushi. With tuna rolls and salmon nigiri spread out across Harm's dining room table, they recalled adventures from law school and related tales of their most recent cases.

"What part of doing what you do is the most meaningful to you?" Harm asked, reaching for the wasabi. "Would you rather be in the courtroom arguing an individual case, or developing legislation?"

Andie leaned back and propped her feet on a nearby chair as she considered. "Well, in all fairness, I've only worked on a couple of legislative efforts, and those were broad agendas with Health and Human Services, where we worked alongside four other firms. I do like the idea of making a larger impact, improving the situation for hundreds or thousands of people rather than just one at a time. But that kind of work is a little impersonal and disconnected. It's not hard to get so absorbed in white pieces of paper that you don't see the children the paperwork represents. When I'm on an individual case, I get to stand in front of a little boy or girl and make a personal promise to help. And I get to see direct results. So maybe 'meaningful' isn't quite the right word, but that's the most gratifying part." With a slightly rueful grin, she twirled her chopsticks around in her hand. "And since that's also the least profitable part, it should come as no surprise that it got no love from the 'ham sandwich crew,' as you so eloquently put it."

Harm grinned back at the reference, but his mind was still working on something larger. After a moment, Andie questioned, "Do you miss the law?"

He was as surprised at her immediate insight as he was to discover that she was right. "Yeah, I do, a little. But what I miss is the principles, rather than the mechanics of it. I miss knowing the rules of my profession beyond a shadow of a doubt and using them in the pursuit of justice. I don't miss the plea bargains and the moral compromises in order to serve a larger but oftentimes vague purpose. So I guess I envy your role a little. When you represent children, innocence is virtually assured."

This time, it was her mind that continued to turn. "Those standards apply to your new job, too, don't they?" she asked thoughtfully. "You know the rules of the air, but you're not always sure of the rules of the Agency. And even when you do know them, you're not always comfortable with following them."

"Seems to be a pattern for me," he commented with a hint of bitterness.

"I disagree. You've never wavered from your own moral code, even when it conflicted with what you were being asked to do. That's how I can believe that you did the right thing on that awful mission - because if the logical part of your brain hadn't believed that it would ultimately save lives, you never would have done it."

"You have that much faith in the courage of my convictions?"

"Yes, I do."

There had been more than a few times in which his own faith in that area had wavered -- many of them recently -- so to hear that simple assertion was startling and touching. For a moment, he just looked at her, searching in vain for an appropriate response.

At long last, Andie's lips twisted wryly. "You always did know how to take a compliment."

"You sure know how to give them, though," he replied, utterly serious.

"Only when they're earned." She leaned across the table and snagged the last tuna roll.

He watched her pop it into her mouth, marveling at her ability to be so open without any reservations. And yet, there was an implication in her words that had yet to be addressed.

"You think I should quit the CIA, don't you?"

She took the question, like the rest of the discussion, in stride, which confirmed his theory. "I don't want to tell you what you should or shouldn't do. I don't have a vote in that decision."

"Andie, in case you haven't noticed, you're the one keeping my sanity in place right now. If you haven't earned the right to at least voice an opinion, I don't know who has."

"If you insist." She placed both forearms on the table, adopting the coiled, graceful poise of a sprinter. "I don't think the moral dilemmas you faced on this mission will be the last. I suspect that they'll only get worse, and I think you know that even better than I do. It's a necessary but difficult job that very few people are cut out for, and I just don't think you're one of them. Your devotion to duty is admirable, but speaking as someone who cares about you, I would much rather see you walk away from this before it truly damages you, either physically or emotionally."

He absorbed that sentiment, comprehending it but at the same time wary of its impact. "And do what instead?"

"Any number of things." She spread her hands wide. "Apply for reinstatement and go into the operations world if JAG isn't what you want. Or join the Reserves. Fly commuters, or give flight lessons. Find a law firm with goals that line up with yours. Any combination thereof would probably work, too."

"Maybe." He stretched, cracking his back as he did. "It's just that I'm pretty sure I'm too old to keep starting over like this."

"Well, you've always landed on your feet before. You never know -- this might be the last time you have to do it."

Another thought surfaced, though he couldn't have traced its origin. "If I stayed with the CIA, I think I'd pretty much be shutting the door on ever having a family. I mean, that's no kind of life ..." Abruptly, he shook his head, allowing a sardonic chuckle to escape. "Then again, I've never really made any great strides in that area before, so why worry about it now?"

Her response this time was more carefully measured. "Maybe this kind of shake-up is what you need to start having more faith in that concept, too. You know, if you can handle this kind of perspective shift, maybe you'll be more prepared for different kind of perspective shift." She gave a halfhearted shrug, looking a little less confident than before. "Timing is everything, or so they say."

Picking up on a new undercurrent in her tone, he glanced up. "Which one of us are we talking about right now?"

"Could be both," she admitted. "Hey, I've got a biological clock like everyone else."

"Yeah, you're one of the few people I never had a problem picturing with kids. It seems like you'd be such a natural at it."

"Like I said. Timing. I've dealt with far too many children who came into the world under bad circumstances. I'm willing to wait my turn if it means a better situation in the long run." She rose to her feet, gathering up the dishes. "Is having a family something you've been thinking about?"

"More so lately, I guess. Maybe because the one person I thought might want to be a part of it is now out of the picture. And it makes me wonder whether I'm cut out for that kind of life. I mean, let's be honest. Can you see me coaching soccer practice or reading bedtime stories?"

She didn't respond right away, and he swiveled in his seat. Standing at the kitchen island, she was studying him with a knowing look. "The capacity you have for precisely that kind of thing would surprise the hell out of you. DCFS would kill to have more parents with your values."

"Yeah, I've got principle to spare. Life lessons for everyone but myself. Besides, values don't count for a lot when the parent goes off to fly Spook Air or even ends up dead."

"So don't fly Spook Air anymore."

Could it be that simple? Could he give it up without looking back?

He'd lost more important things before and survived. And this time, it seemed, there was a brighter light at the end of the tunnel. He had a pretty good idea why, too.

"Not to alarm you or anything, but you're not allowed to leave."

That pronouncement didn't faze her in the slightest. "Oh? Why's that?"

“Because when you’re around, things actually seem to make sense.”

He didn’t sleep quite as well the second night as he had the first. He’d very nearly resolved to get off his current career path, but that only meant that a hundred other paths now stretched out in front of him, each one dark and winding. Robert Frost had had it easy, he decided. Two roads diverging in a yellow wood would have at least given him a fifty-fifty shot.

Somewhere around two-thirty in the morning, he found himself awake, turning over possibilities in his mind. Andie was all the way across the apartment, curled up on the couch, but he could sense that she was fully asleep, and so he didn’t get up for fear of disturbing her. If not the CIA, then what? Flying? The law? Somehow both? Who would be in the market for an aging throttle-jockey with a reputation for shooting up courtrooms?

Going it alone was a possibility, of course. He had ‘Sarah,’ after all, but there probably wasn’t much of a market for flight training on a plane that old. And getting a hold of anything newer would mean taking out a fairly substantial loan, which wasn’t overly appealing. Starting his own law firm, then? There would still be a major startup cost, and aside from that, what would he specialize in? Criminal cases? Medical malpractice? What were the odds of him finding a niche there?

The fact was that he had a hero complex, and shaking down a surgeon for an OR slip-up wouldn’t give him what he was looking for. This was Andie’s world, really. Her record on juvenile welfare cases was stellar, and he knew that there were plenty of successes she hadn’t even told him about. She didn’t need Holland Archer’s name or money to make her mark ...

Abruptly he sat up in bed, a realization dawning in sharp focus. He hadn’t resolved his own situation yet, but he might have resolved hers.

Something compelled him to get up and cross the apartment, and he was halfway to the living room before he knew it. At that point, his flimsy plan faltered. He didn’t really want to wake her up for this, did he? It wasn’t as if the idea would shrivel up with the sunrise. Still, for the first time in months, he had some pure, honest enthusiasm for something, and he wanted to share it. They’d wrecked up each other’s circadian rhythms plenty of times in the past.

Moving into the living room area, he stopped once again, for a different reason.

Even when closed, the blinds allowed a small amount of light from the street to filter into the apartment. Right then, that light was falling across Andie’s face as she slept, giving her already fair skin an ethereal glow. Her hair lay in soft, unkempt waves, wisps of it resting unnoticed against her cheek. At that moment, with all her quiet self-assurance locked away for the night, she looked positively angelic.

He was struck by a powerful desire to brush back that lock of hair, and only after his hand had begun to reach out did he halt himself and wonder how he’d become so mesmerized. Had having her here, so close and so understanding, changed something between them after all this time? Ever since that close encounter during their first term of school, where they’d both pulled back for rather undeniable reasons, he’d managed not to think of her in that context -- but he couldn’t deny how her presence now had lifted him, and try as he might, he couldn’t attribute that effect solely to her sage advice and talents as a sounding board.

The idea scared the hell out of him. He'd had two other truly close female friends in his life, and the mere prospect of moving those relationships beyond friendship had effectively destroyed both. For one, the final curtain had fallen on a dock in Norfolk; the other, at a taxi stand in Paraguay. If he let himself think in those terms now, what would the endgame be for him and Andie?

Was there a chance that he might actually be able to take some useful lessons from those mistakes and not wreck this up?

At a quarter to three in the morning, such thoughts weren't always meant to be completed. Crouching down beside the couch, Harm laid a hand on her shoulder. After a moment, she stirred, and her eyes opened just halfway. "Hey," she murmured, her voice a honeyed whisper. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry to wake you up. I just had this thought that wouldn't leave me alone, and I wanted to tell you about it."

After a couple of slow blinks, she propped herself up on one elbow. "What is it?"

"You said you were going to look for another firm that's more in line with your mindset. What if you started your own?"

That brought her mostly awake. "Are you kidding? What do I know about running a firm?"

"Get a staff to handle the administrative stuff, so you can concentrate on the cases."

"The kinds of cases I do best usually involve clients whose only source of income is a paper route. I couldn't start up a firm on that."

But he wasn't going to be deterred. "Make it a non-profit organization, then. A children's legal defense fund. Line up some donors to get you started, maybe get some federal funding, and then manage it well enough to pay your staff."

Andie narrowed her eyes at him, unaccustomed to late-night brainstorms. "This just came to you?"

"More or less." He folded his arms around his bent knees, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "Okay, maybe this wasn't overly time-sensitive. But seriously, I know you can do this. Just say you'll think about it."

A smile crept across her features. "*La nuit porte conseil*," she remarked, her voice still low. "The night brings counsel."

"Well, I am still technically a counselor, aren't I?"

Andie dropped her head back onto the pillow. "Go back to bed, hon. We can talk about it in the morning."

"Is that a yes?"

Her eyes already closed, she reached out to deliver a blind swat to his shoulder. "It's a conditional yes. If only out of curiosity."

"I'll take what I can get." On impulse, he placed a quick kiss on her cheek, and was contented to see her lips purse briefly in response. "Night," he whispered, and crept back to bed.

He had no problems getting to sleep after that, and so once again she was awake before him in the morning. When he finally emerged from the shower, there was a mug of coffee and a muffin waiting for him on the island, a legal pad and pen sitting beside them.

"Do I have to take a quiz to get breakfast?"

Andie looked somewhat smug as she perched on one of the stools in a faded 'Big House Football' T-shirt. "You're the one with the brilliant idea. I want details. How exactly would I set up this children's defense thing?"

"I'm not supposed to have a strategy mapped out before coffee, am I?" Harm reached for the mug without waiting for an answer. "Well, it seems like the first step is to figure out what your focus should be. What are the biggest issues you deal with?"

"Anything relating to children. Health care, child poverty, violence prevention, adoption and foster care, educational equality -- those are all the big ones. And almost all of them connect to each other in some way."

"Okay. And I'm assuming you'd want to do this somewhere around Detroit?"

Her gaze firmed. "In the state of Michigan last year, there were 25,000 reports of child maltreatment. Nearly half the state's population lives within the metropolitan Detroit area. By that math, I think it's pretty clear where something like this would be most needed."

"Then I know right where to start." Picking up his coffee mug, Harm went over to his desk and flipped through his address book. "You'll want to tap into some government resources. Some of the national advocacy groups you already work with might be able to help you out. But I'm thinking that some top-level support wouldn't hurt, either. Like, say, your Congressional representative."

The light dawned then. "Aha. And you happen to know my Congressional representative, don't you?"

"Small world, isn't it?" He dialed the phone and waited for a staffer to pick up. "Hi, this is Harmon Rabb calling for Congresswoman Latham. Any ten minutes she's got today -- if you could give her the message to call me, I'd appreciate it. Tell her it's in reference to a new child welfare program in her district. Is there a likely time for her to be free? Sure, around one o'clock will be just fine. Thanks very much."

Andie just stared at him as he hung up. "You did not just do that."

"What? All I asked for was a phone call."

"It's total cronyism. Friends helping out friends of other friends -- is that really how things get done?"

"Welcome to Washington." Harm returned his attention to his breakfast. "Bobbi's a good public servant. She knows the score in Detroit, and she'll give you balanced advice. And if she decides to put in a phone call to a few people on the Appropriations committee in the State House, well, that'll just be nice, won't it?"

She shook her head, climbing down from the stool. "Just remember that we're still in the information-gathering phase of this little adventure. I'm not diving in just yet. And what about you, anyway? You're dreaming up schemes to set me on track, but you are directing some attention to your own next step, I hope?"

"Sure. But there's no rush, and this is something worth devoting some time to. Don't you think?"

Still shaking her head, mostly in amusement, she drained her coffee mug and set it down. "Fire up that computer," she instructed, coming over to join him. "I need to get smart on the subject of non-profit orgs before we get a phone call from my duly elected representative."

What began as little more than an exercise in curiosity soon grew into a serious project. By the time Bobbi called, they'd drawn up a basic format, and she'd pointed them toward a couple of resources in the Department of Health and Human Services that had helped considerably. The better part of two days passed while they batted ideas back and forth, and Andie was finally forced to decide whether or not she really wanted to do this.

"I'm not going to be able to attract a lot of top-quality staff on the kind of salary I'll be offering," she told him, perching on the arm of the couch while he fiddled around with the spreadsheet they'd created. "A lot of people hear 'NPO' and run the other way."

"Not the kind of people you'll be looking for. You want people who are dedicated to the work, like you are. If you have to scrape by with one or two other lawyers and a handful of staffers for a while, then fine. It'll be a building process no matter what. If things go well, you can hire more along the way." Harm turned away from the computer to face her squarely. "I don't want to push you into anything, but if Bobbi's going to call in any favors, we need to be prepared to follow through on them. If you're not sure about this, I should probably call her back and make sure she doesn't move forward on anything."

She played with a pen in her hands, twisting the cap on and off in a nervous habit she'd had as long as he'd known her. "You really think I can strike out on my own like this?" she asked.

Stepping out from behind the desk, he stood in front of her, unwavering. "I don't think there's any question as to your ability. The question is whether or not you want to take on something this ambitious, because it is ambitious. You're the only one who can answer that, so ..."

"This could turn out to be exactly what I've wanted from the beginning. It could also turn out to be a colossal, ego-crushing failure."

"I've already given you my bet on that front."

She stood up and tossed the pen aside, her jaw set in a mask of determination. "What the hell. A ship in port is safe, but that's not what ships are for, is it?"

He couldn't hold back the broad smile that resulted from her words. Seeing this, she allowed herself a smile of her own, and they met in a quick congratulatory hug.

"Seems like we should celebrate, or something. Do you have a favorite place to go around here?"

"Well, there's a place called Bonfire -- kinda trendy, but they have great food and live music most nights."

"Works for me. Wait, how trendy? I didn't exactly pack any clothes for hitting the town." Before he could answer, she solved her own problem. "You know what? It's still early. Point me toward the nearest shopping, and I'll go get something new."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I want us to have fun tonight, and I'd like to be able to go a little higher than Pizza Hut. You want to come along for the ride, or can I just borrow your car?"

Andie had a look for such occasions; in school, he'd called it her 'I'm too cute to say no to' look. It still worked, though he would have handed over his keys even without it. "Let me draw you a map. I can use the time to call my employer and tell him why I won't be coming back to work after my 'vacation' week is up."

She paused in the middle of reaching for her purse. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Have you decided what you'll do instead?"

Harm rubbed at the back of his neck. "I think I need to get back into the law," he answered honestly. "Regardless of how uncomfortable things got at JAG, I was proud of what went on there. I don't know whether I'm going to aim for private practice or try for an ADA slot somewhere, but at this point, I think I can do more for the cause of justice in the courtroom than I can as a logistics officer somewhere."

"Then I guess we're both celebrating a new beginning." She slipped on her shoes as he scribbled some directions on a piece of paper. "Sure you don't want to come along on the shopping run? Just for the anthropological experience of seeing the female of the species in her element?"

"Beat it. I'll make us reservations."

The call to Blaisdell went fairly smoothly, as it turned out. The air wing boss wasn't thrilled to be losing an operative who'd taken on a large number of missions with remarkable success and little regard for his own safety. But the disconnect between the Agency mindset and Harm's had apparently been clear to others as well, and the call ended peaceably, with an agreement for him to come to Langley sometime in the next week to turn in his gear and

receive a separation briefing. And just like that, with no fanfare, another chapter in his unpredictable career had closed.

Andie promptly took over the bathroom upon her return, saying that her new outfit would be wasted if her hair didn't do it justice. He suspected that she'd said it mainly to tease him, but he amiably got out of the way, selecting a pair of gray slacks and a black shirt for the evening.

He'd been reading a book in the living room for a few minutes when the phone rang. Out of habit, he reached for the base, only to realize that he'd left the cordless handset somewhere else after calling the restaurant. By the time he located it, sitting on the kitchen windowsill, the answering machine had kicked in, and the voice he heard on the other end stopped him cold.

"Harm, it's me." Mac's voice sounded tense but resolute. "I'm sure you're tired of getting these messages, but I'm going to keep trying until I actually get through to you, because you're worrying the hell out of a lot of people. I know you're probably not at home much, and I know you're probably not too happy with some of us at the moment, and that's okay - "

"Thanks for that blessing," he told the machine, sarcasm dripping from his words.

" - but let's try to salvage something out of this, can't we? A lot of things were said in Paraguay that probably shouldn't have been said. Maybe some things like that were said at JAG, too - "

"You think?"

" - my point is, we've come through too much together to let it all fall apart like this." A hint of desperation crept into her voice. "I don't want to lose my best friend, Harm. Everything's such a mess right now, and the longer we spend not talking, the worse it all gets. Just -- please, just call me, would you?"

Shit. I'm going to regret this. Just before she could hang up, he clicked the handset on. "I'm here, Mac."

"Oh. Ah ... hi."

"Hi. I'm leaving again in a few minutes, so can we make this quick?"

The brusqueness in his tone was sharply clear, and it seemed to set her back a step. "How could we possibly make this quick?"

"Like this. I'm not looking to forge any kind of truce tonight. I only picked up the phone to let you know that I am in fact still alive, and to promise that I'll get in touch with Bud and Sturgis to tell them the same. Will that do?"

Mac's attitude was rapidly morphing from surprise to defensiveness. "So that's it? You don't care if we ever set things straight between us?"

"There is no 'us,' Mac. Of all the things that happened down there, that one I remember pretty clearly."

"What did you expect me to do in the middle of all that? Because I didn't fall at your feet, we can't even be friends?"

He clamped down on the anger that flared up at her accusatory tone, but didn't check his emotions entirely. "We can't be friends right now because the respect we once had for each other has apparently evaporated, and if you think what happened at that taxi stand is the only reason for my current outlook, then we must understand each other even less than I thought. I'm willing to talk about it, but I'm not going to drop everything and come running again, so come back to me in a couple of days, all right?"

There was a long pause on the line. He figured it was probably because she'd expected him to come at her with a snarky comment like before, and instead he'd let her have it with both barrels. He felt a flicker of remorse for that, but not for long.

"We *are* going to finish this one of these days."

"I certainly hope so. Tell Jen Coates I said hi." He clicked off the phone and walked over to replace it on its base.

Andie's voice came from behind him. "You're going to have to talk to her eventually."

He didn't turn around. "My partner at the Agency said that I'd know it was over when I was ready to talk to her. I'm pretty sure I hit that mark a while ago, so sure, why not?"

"You sure you don't want to do it tonight? Leaving things unfinished is a recipe for trouble."

"I'm sure. I want to do it on my own terms, not hers. Besides, tonight is for us, remember?" He turned to face her, and all of his bitterness vanished.

She stepped down the stairs from his bedroom in a pair of sleek, strappy heels. Dark gold curls spilled loosely from a sweep of hair on top of her head, easily 'doing justice' to the new outfit she'd teased him about. The dress was black with emerald accents, and it clung to her in all the right places. She'd never looked so stunning to him, and it left him searching for words.

"Forgot I knew how to clean up, did you?" she inquired, cocking an eyebrow.

"Not at all. Just ... You look great."

"Easy to say for a man who always looks great, but thank you. The shoes make the outfit. See, you're only seven inches taller than me now." As he watched, fascinated, Andie crossed the room gracefully, betraying no difficulty with the three-inch heels. A few feet from him, she stopped. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that you're looking at me differently," she observed hesitantly, unsure of how to react.

He considered attempting a diversionary tactic, but it seemed like the wrong move. "If you think back a couple of days, I think you'll find that I've been looking at you differently for a while now. Do you mind?"

"If I did, it would be awfully hypocritical of me." Without elaborating further, she picked up his keys from the table and held them out to him, lingering long enough for her

fingers to brush against his. "You, ah, realize that if I'm going to get this organization off the ground, I'm going to have to go home to do it. As much as I hate to leave, I think I've gotten about as far as I can from a distance."

The concept wasn't new to him, but he'd been trying not to dwell on it. "Let's worry about that tomorrow," he suggested simply. "All right?"

Placing a hand at the small of her back, he guided her toward the door.

There was indeed a live band that night, and it was a good one, too. He'd never been into dancing, but she'd begged with that same irresistible expression he knew so well, and the prospect of being close to her was admittedly appealing, so he'd put up only a token argument.

"Can I ask you something personal?" he began as the music faded into a smoky ballad.

In response, Andie tossed him an odd look. "At any time in our shared history, have I said no to a question like that?"

"I just wanted to give you fair warning."

"Duly noted. So go ahead."

"Why did your engagement get called off?"

He half-expected her to tense up, but she didn't. After a moment, she replied, "What reason did I give you a couple of years ago, right after it happened?"

"I believe you said that it had been for the wrong reasons."

"Right. Well, that's still accurate, even with the benefit of hindsight. Daniel had some trouble finding an anchor in life. For a while, I think I kept him focused, and in return, he treated me like a queen. But eventually I realized that I was actually trying to shape him, and even if it might have been for the better, it was exhausting to me and ultimately unfair to him. And for his part, he realized that he couldn't build everything around trying to please me." She offered a self-conscious smile. "The age-old tale, isn't it? Women trying to change men."

"Well, sometimes we need changing," he observed jokingly.

Her gaze turned pensive. "No," she said. "A person can't forcibly change another person, at least not without incurring some trauma along the way. The only way it works is when the person wants to change. Wanting to be better for someone is one of the nobler pursuits, but it has to be genuine. If you don't sincerely like someone the way they are, it's all built on quicksand."

Something about that statement made a very real impact on him, and he gazed down at her with a new sense of awareness. "Have I ever told you how much I like you the way you are?"

The serenity in her answering smile was pure. "Same here."

They danced for a while in silence, her cheek resting comfortably against his chest. Every so often he could hear her singing softly along with the music, and it took him back to those late nights on campus, after all the books were put away ...she would finally let her guard down enough to sing when he picked up his guitar, but never a moment before ... How during all that time had he never realized that being with her could feel like this?

It was after eleven when they left the restaurant. Having fought and lost the gallantry battle with her a long time ago, he didn't actually open her car door, instead unlocking it by remote before stepping around to the driver's side. It was an oversight he would have cause to regret, and one which he would never allow himself in the future.

"Where you goin', sweetheart?"

The man had approached rapidly and seemingly out of nowhere, though he'd probably been lurking behind one of the other cars in the lot. Harm whirled toward the voice, prepared to launch himself over the hood of the Lexus if necessary. Andie caught his eye and silently told him to keep cool, so he eased slowly around the SUV's front end.

She turned slightly toward the intruder, a thirtyish man in a leather jacket too heavy for the warm night. "Home," she replied calmly, her hand still on the door. "We're headed home, and we don't want any trouble, so if you'll excuse us ..."

As she moved to get into the Lexus, his hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. "C'mon, babe, this night's just getting started."

Harm surged forward, but the other man moved faster, yanking Andie toward him and pulling a handgun from inside the jacket. "Don't struggle and don't scream," he breathed into her ear, taking aim at Harm. "Just be cool, and your boyfriend won't get his ass shot."

This time, her voice was far less steady. "Look, if money is your thing - "

He wrenched her arm, and Harm's blood burned at the tears that sprang to her eyes. "You're my thing, babe. You get that?"

Across the parking lot, two busboys on a break had noticed the commotion and appeared to be dialing a cell phone. "Clock's ticking," Harm said coolly, tipping his head toward them with his hands still halfway raised. "You're not going to get out of here with her before the cops show, so you probably ought to cut and run right about now."

"Thanks for the tip," the attacker sneered.

Harm took a step forward and was greeted with both a jerky move from the gun hand and a look of absolute terror from Andie. "Harm, don't," she whispered.

"Man, is she that good in bed that you'd take a bullet for her?"

His eyes fairly glowed with barely-contained fury. "You even try to hurt her," he said in a low, dangerous voice, "and not only will I take a bullet, but I'll keep on coming."

Something in that threat must have registered, because the gun sagged ever so slightly. Andie's gaze drew Harm's again, and she flicked her eyes to her right in a calculated motion. He understood at once, but his gratitude for her composure was dampened by a lack of faith in

the scheme. If she could knock the gun hand up and to the right, he could charge from low and left and probably take the guy. But if any part of it wasn't fast enough, or if the angles were off, the gun would be far closer to her than him.

"Let it go, man," the attacker insisted, sounding less confident than before. "I'm not gonna kill her or nothin'." Harm took another step forward. "Come on, man! I don't see no rings on you two, so it's not like she's worth all this, right?"

A mental warning was flashing red, telling him to hold on to his objectivity with both hands -- but he decided that that ship had already sailed, and he met Andie's gaze one more time. "Yes, she is," he replied quietly.

And in that moment, she swung both arms toward the gun, knocking its aim away from her friend.

Her attacker cursed and brought the gun down hard against the outside of her knee, dropping her to the ground. In an instant, Harm tackled him, pinning his gun hand and delivering a punch that knocked the man's head back against the concrete.

By the time the busboys ran over to them, Harm was unloading the gun and keeping a trained eye on the now-unconscious attacker. As flashing lights approached, he raised his eyes to where Andie was slowly pushing herself up from the pavement, a few feet away.

"Go ahead. We got this," one of the young men assured him.

Without another conscious thought, he dropped to his knees beside her and gathered her into his arms, feeling her frantic heartbeat as clearly as his own.

"You okay?" he asked as he got his breathing back under control.

A shaky nod was her reply. "Nice teamwork," she added, voice muffled by his ardent embrace.

"That was all you, honey. I didn't know you had it in you."

"It was definitely a first. I've been mugged before -- it was unavoidable, working downtown for so long -- but this bastard didn't want money ... he wanted ..." With a shudder, she leaned into him even more. "Let's just not go there."

"He laid a pretty good hit on you," he fretted, pulling back slightly to examine her leg. "How bad is it?"

"I could use some Tylenol," she admitted, grimacing. "But nothing's broken."

As the police dismounted their vehicle, Harm stood up and helped Andie to her feet as gently as he could manage. She sat on the Lexus's bumper while they gave their statements, and because the busboys made for excellent witnesses, it wasn't a terribly long process.

"I still think we might want to hit the ER," Harm suggested as they finally pulled out of the parking lot.

Andie had been leaning back in the seat, but she turned her head toward him in mock exasperation. "It's a bruise, mother hen."

"It's going to be a prime-time, high-quality bruise."

"True enough." She offered a tired smile. "You're sweet. But I just want to go home, all right?" At his momentary hesitation, the smile grew more genuine. "*Your* home, Harm. Don't hop on the freeway heading west or anything."

He glanced over at her, trying to gauge her state of mind. "I just want to make sure you're all right."

"I know. And I know that you've been in plenty of situations like this, whereas I barely know how to do Tae-Bo. But I promise you, I'm not the same girl who used to get freaked out by your sidearm. I'm not going to fall apart." She brushed at the dirt-smudged fabric of her dress. "The outfit, on the other hand, might be a total loss. A one-night-only engagement, huh?"

"We'll get it cleaned. It looks too nice on you to give up so easily."

She acknowledged the compliment quietly, placing her hand on top of his on the gear shift. "Up until the parking lot, I really had a great time tonight."

"Me, too."

When they arrived outside his apartment, he hurried around the SUV to help her down, and watched in empathy as she gingerly put weight on her right leg. "All right, that's it." And before she could open her mouth, he swept an arm under her knees, the other at her back, and began to carry her into the building.

She barely had time to shove the car door shut, and gamely opened the building door for them. "You do understand that this is unnecessary and bordering on being flat-out goofy, right?"

"Humor me."

She acquiesced without further comment, resting her head against his shoulder. For his part, Harm wasn't sure if his insistence stemmed from a need to keep her close or from some guilt over the fact that the incident had happened in the first place. In any case, he carefully set her down in the hallway outside his apartment and unlocked the door.

"I'll get you an ice pack," he offered as she picked up her pajamas and headed toward the bathroom. "There's Aleve and some aspirin in the medicine cabinet."

"Thanks." A few seconds after disappearing around the corner, she called out to him. "If you're brooding about what you could have done to prevent what happened, knock it off."

Startled, he glanced up. "Where'd that come from?"

"Call it a hunch."

With a resigned sigh, he decided to take the opportunity to strip down to his T-shirt and boxers. "What good is the training if I let my guard down like that?"

"Things happen, Harm. It's not your fault if the CIA didn't issue you a sixth sense, and it's not like you were on a mission. You're not expected to have your defenses up in your own backyard."

Hanging his shirt in the closet, he went to retrieve the ice pack from the kitchen counter. "I'm usually a little more alert than that, though."

"You've got a lot on your mind."

"You have no idea," he muttered under his breath, returning to the bedroom.

When Andie emerged from the bathroom, he allowed himself a low curse. Without the aid of the darker-shaded nylons, her fair skin plainly showed the ugly violet contusion along the side of her knee. She followed his gaze. "Brings out my eyes, doesn't it?"

"You're a riot. Sit down here. And don't argue," he added preemptively, ushering her over to the bed and swinging her legs up onto it. As he handed her the ice, his gaze caught another bruise around her forearm, where the attacker had grabbed her.

"There's a nice one on my hipbone, too. Why couldn't I have landed on my ass?"

He shook his head, ducking into the bathroom. "Sit tight. I'm going to wrap that knee."

"Will that accomplish much?"

"Well, at the very least, it'll give you some support and a couple of layers of protection from any other blunt objects that come your way." Returning with a bandage, he sat down and pulled her legs across his lap. "Relax. I'm an expert at this."

"Yeah, I guess that doesn't surprise me." She leaned back on her hands as he wrapped her knee with equal parts precision and care.

By force of will, he resisted the urge to stroke that soft skin from the cuff of her shorts all the way down to her toes. She had a dancer's legs, lithe and toned, and that tank top wasn't doing much to disguise her other attributes, either. With a mental shake, he told himself to suck it up. This was decidedly not the time. After a night like this, the last thing she needed was to see his willpower dissolving.

"You're not sleeping on the couch tonight." The tension in his voice made it come out like a command. "Stay in here. I'll take the couch."

"Uh-uh. I'm not kicking you out of your own bed just because I picked up a boo-boo."

"Well, I think I can move faster than you can right now, so if I happen to get to the couch first, you won't have much choice, will you?"

She narrowed her eyes, but they were twinkling. "Let's see you try it."

"What? I'm not going to race you, even for twenty-five feet."

"Then how do you intend to beat me to the couch?"

He cocked his head toward her, but she hadn't made any move yet to pull her legs out of his lap. Deciding not to give her a chance to jump the gun, he started to get up -- and she threw her arms around his neck, bringing him back down to the bed with a thump.

"If you're going, you're taking me with you," she informed him sweetly. "What was that you said about being fast?"

Harm rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to accuse her of being an incorrigible smartass, but something else occurred to him in that moment, and he stopped. Andie's satisfied expression began to fade, and she released her hold. "What?"

He shook his head. "I was just thinking that I've been a real caveman tonight. I keep doing things and making decisions for you. Believe me, I don't see you as incapable, and it's never been my intention to treat you that way."

"I never once thought that," she answered, brow creasing in puzzlement.

"I carried you in here, for God's sake, and I'm here demanding that you sleep in the bed."

"Harm, if you really saw me as the fragile, helpless female, you wouldn't have let me sleep on the couch *before*." She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Tonight shook us up. It makes sense that you'd be concerned. I love the fact that you are, and convoluted though it may be, I love that you're concerned about how I feel about your concern. There's nothing inherently disrespectful or even patronizing about wanting to take care of someone. At the risk of offending the sisterhood, sometimes it's really nice to feel safe and cared for like that."

He looked at her in mild disbelief. "A lot of women would severely resent the implication that there's something they can't handle on their own."

She gazed back at him in total seriousness. "Well, maybe I'm secure enough not to assume that implication always exists. In my experience, there are a lot of things that can't or shouldn't be handled alone, and few of them have anything to do with gender. That's why we're both here right now, isn't it?"

Beginning to lose his train of thought in the depths of her eyes, he didn't respond. With an embarrassed, almost bashful expression, she continued. "Tonight scared the hell out of me. I have no problem admitting that. He kept pointing that gun at you, and ... I said before that I can handle the dangerous things you do, as long as I don't know about them until they're over. This one terrified me. If he'd pulled that trigger ..." A tear slipped free, and she brushed distractedly at it. "Anyway, this is me demonstrating that I care."

Almost of its own volition, his hand reached out to cup her cheek, and she closed her eyes. "I meant what I said," he told her softly. "You're worth it. All of it."

Maybe she leaned in then; maybe he did. Regardless of the mechanics, what mattered was the way their lips met, and the way something seemed to click into place with that very first kiss. He drew her to him, taking in the sensation as if it were his lifeblood. Suddenly he needed desperately to be as near to her as possible, to encircle her and hold fast such that maximum contact was achieved and maintained. This, this was *right*; this was intended,

somehow, in some way. He knew instinctively that he'd be a fool to ever surrender even a moment of this feeling.

After a measureless time, they were forced to pause for breath, and she pulled back to stare into his eyes. "Is this a bad idea?" she whispered, echoing words from a time long past. "If you say it's a bad idea, I'll - "

"I can't." He stared back at her, unblinking, wishing he could send all those indescribable thoughts directly to her so that she'd understand. "I know things are insane right now, but God help me, I couldn't tell you that this was a bad idea even if I wanted to."

She looked at him in wonder, questions in her gaze. "You look so nervous."

"I have a history of screwing up this kind of step."

"Everybody screws this up a few times."

"My screw-ups have been, on average, pretty spectacular."

"Ask me if I care."

He searched her gaze, wondering if there was a way to capture, whether by film, canvas or memory, the brilliance of her eyes at this moment. "How can you possibly trust me with this?"

"Because I know you trust me, and I know that trust can't be easy for you right now." She took his hand in both of hers and pulled it to her, caressing it with her lips. "I can't tell you why I'm sure this is right, but I promise you, I *am* sure."

He kissed her more vigorously then, his large hand splayed across her back in some unconscious effort to meld their bodies together. Her arms snaked around his neck and remained there, warding off anything that might dare try to separate them.

After another few minutes, she spoke up, her breath tickling his ear. "I hope this means you're not still planning on leaving me for the couch."

"I think I've got a much better offer, thanks."

The sunlight was already streaming in by the time Harm dragged himself toward wakefulness. The first fully-formed thought to enter his mind was to make sure that last night had actually happened the way he remembered it, and he reached half-blindly for the warm, inviting body that lay curled up beside him. Yep, still there, still wearing those short little pajamas and an Ace bandage. The realization sent both a thrill and a pinprick of fear down his spine. *What now?*

Absently, he stroked her arm, reveling in the softness of her skin, and before long she opened her eyes. "Hi," she murmured drowsily, snuggling closer to him. "Thanks for such a great night's sleep."

"A shipboard rack would seem good after a few nights on that couch."

"Well, I'd like to think it was the company."

Unable to resist, and seeing no reason to try, he leaned down and captured her lips again. "How's your knee?" he asked tenderly.

"A little annoying, nothing more. Well worth the eventual result."

"That's a lofty statement."

Andie propped herself up on an elbow, tossing her adorably-tousled hair out of her face. "I'm not sure you quite grasp the magnitude of my excitement right now. Many were the nights I remembered sleeping in your bed that one time during first term, wondering what would have happened if I'd ever had the guts to ask for another shot at it ..."

That surprised him. "Why didn't you?"

She smiled wistfully. "I knew better. You needed to know that you could stand on your own two feet as a lawyer instead of a pilot. I needed to know that I could stand on my own two feet at all. Back then, we both needed a friend more than anything else."

"And now?"

"Now, I'm confident that our friendship can take whatever comes its way. So I'm willing to reach for what I really want."

So simple ... Harm hesitated, but his thoughts stubbornly charged ahead. "I'm sure it's a mistake to bring this up before even making coffee, but when I told you yesterday not to think about the road ahead for a while, I wasn't expecting this -- us -- to happen. Not consciously, anyway. You've got all these plans now, and I ..." Helpless, he just shrugged.

"I know. I've actually got an idea I want to run by you, and I don't expect you to say yes or no right away, but I do want to state up front that I was thinking about this before last night." There was an anxious note in her voice.

"Don't keep me waiting," he quipped lamely.

Andie chewed her lower lip, then raised those endlessly captivating eyes to his. "Come with me."

It made some sense. "Okay."

That was clearly not the expected answer. "Okay?"

"Sure. I can help you get set up, make some staff decisions ..."

"No, Harm. Come *with* me. Be my partner."

He closed his mouth, caught entirely off-guard. She hurried immediately to continue, "It'll be an uphill battle in any case to make this work, but it would be infinitely better with you on board. I'll need at least one other experienced lawyer even to get started, and we've

worked so well together before. And it's good work, work that I know you'd be proud of and do well. You said you'd thought about leaving D.C. -- if you're moving, you might as well move somewhere you're already a little familiar with. Also, there's always the added attraction of Michigan football games."

"And we'd be together," he pointed out when she finally stopped to breathe.

A tense smile curved her lips. "Plus that."

Harm exhaled slowly. "Well, it's not like I have any real stability around here to worry about losing. Listen, I'm going to play my own devil's advocate for a while here, to try and think through this. Don't take it as a sign that I don't want to do it. I just need to talk it out."

"Okay."

"Okay. First of all, I don't bring you any experience in the field. I've done a couple of custody cases on the side, but nothing else relating to children, and certainly nothing related to public policy."

"Actually, you know all about forming public policy. You're just used to calling it maritime law. Everybody has a different set of goals, and you go back and forth until you've negotiated something livable for all sides. The mechanics of it are the same -- it's just the actual issues that are different. And I don't need someone else with the same experience I have. I need someone with another view. Matter of fact, you told me I needed people who'd be dedicated to the work, and I keep thinking about your case a few years ago -- the little girl whose twin was murdered ..."

"Annie and Darlyn Lewis," he said quietly.

Andie nodded, as if that confirmed something for her. "If you remember their names after all this time, I don't think there's any question as to your dedication to the work. It's like you said. They're innocent. Defending them is the easiest choice I've ever made."

He gave a single nod, accepting that. "Detroit, huh?"

"I'm open to other suggestions," she replied bravely, which told him just how serious she was. Home meant a great deal to her, and he had no intention of taking that away from her.

"No, I'm okay with it. Though I might suggest an office in the suburbs." The next issue on his mind was a more complex one, and he hedged about how to phrase it to her. "This one needs a disclaimer. I don't mean to diminish your idea in any way ... but I've been having trouble picturing my life without flying. I mean, Sarah's one thing, and it's not like I don't think I'd be satisfied with a civilian law job. I just wonder if I'm suited to civilian life after all this time being - "

"Larger than life?" she suggested, not entirely joking.

Giving her a reproving look, he moved on. "Plus, there's the issue of me bailing on the Navy two years short of eligible retirement. I know money isn't everything, but it's still something."

"I've got an idea for that, too."

He frowned. "How's that?"

"Just a sec. I have to look it up and make sure it's still what I think it is." She rolled to her feet and scampered, with a slight limp, over to the computer. "Come on, Google ... got it."

"Got what exactly?"

She looked vaguely triumphant. "The 127th Fighter Wing."

That didn't help very much. "The 127th Fighter Wing of *what?*"

"The Michigan Air National Guard. Located at Selfridge ANGB, a base I know you've seen because they handled your PCS to and from law school."

Flabbergasted, but still curious despite himself, he crossed the apartment to join her in the living room. "You think I should join the *Air Guard?*"

Her dramatic eye roll was mostly for effect, but not completely. "I know it offends your Annapolis pedigree to consider slumming like that, but keep in mind that you all take the same oath and fight the same battles. Plenty of people switch services, or so I hear. Even if you did it just for the two years, it would give you a chance to decide what you want and get your pension, too. And you do look good in blue."

"Air Force blue?" he grumbled, mainly on principle, because he couldn't muster any real annoyance. "Well, what do they fly at Selfridge?"

She checked the site. "F-16s."

"Lawn darts!? Are you trying to kill me?"

"Oh, get over it, would you?"

"They only have one engine!"

"Half as much chance of engine failure, then." She tossed her head, daring him to retort. When he didn't, her confidence faltered. "I guess I don't even know if this is actually possible. Would they retrain you?"

"To qualify on the -16? Yeah, that wouldn't faze them too much. The Guard can get stretched pretty thin these days, so I doubt they'd balk at a Navy retread."

"Not one with your record. They'd be nuts to pass up two DFCs and a Silver Star." Andie turned away from the computer, looking solemn. "I swear, I'm not trying to force you into anything. I don't want you to do this out of obligation to me and end up regretting it. I just ... I think it could really work."

"Okay." He walked over to the cupboard and began retrieving the ingredients for French toast, which he knew to be her favorite. A trite, incomplete statement was all he could summon. "Let me think about it for a while?"

"Of course."

Breakfast was spent mostly in silence. They each took a few sections of the paper and made occasional comments to each other on various articles, and every so often someone would feel the need to kiss away a stray drop of syrup. Still, no matter how comfortable they were with each other, the offer she'd just laid out continued to hang over their heads.

As he cleared the dishes, she suddenly asked, "Would you rather think about all this without me around? I'm sure I could keep myself busy somewhere else for a few hours, if it would help."

"Thanks, but ..." In mid-sentence, he changed his mind. "Actually, you stay here. I think I need to wander around for a little while."

"Sure." The word was accompanied by an understanding smile, one which he chose not to examine too closely. If he did, he'd likely uncover genuine trepidation, and if she'd wanted him to see that, she wouldn't have pasted on the smile in the first place.

Harm drove around the city for a while, eventually leaving his car at a park and wandering further on foot. He'd asked for time to think about this decision because it seemed like the correct response, but the facts of the case were clear. A good opportunity lay in front of him, one that just might give him all the answers he sought, but to take it, he would have to leave the place that had been his home for most of the past eight years. He would be five hundred miles away from people he would miss terribly, as well as people from whom he wouldn't mind having some distance.

The idea of joining the Air National Guard didn't bother him as much as he might have expected. It would mean a substantial amount of additional training, and a new organizational style to get used to, not to mention the possibility of being deployed with the wing. He knew that there would be far more to the change than simply buying new uniforms and withstanding some inter-service ribbing. Maybe he'd adapt well; maybe he wouldn't. But spending a few days per month in the cockpit of a fighter was something he knew he could handle.

Walking down the sidewalk of a street he couldn't even identify, he smirked to himself. *How long would it take me to start thinking of myself as Lieutenant Colonel Rabb?*

She was right that he had some experience in starting over. How many times could he do it, though? If this children's defense fund idea didn't work, if they couldn't keep enough money coming in, then where would he be?

No worse off than I'd be if I hitched my wagon to a firm here and couldn't stand it. Well, that wasn't entirely true. If he did that, he'd at least have some decent money. But there was no way he was going to make that the deciding factor. The deciding factor, he was forced to admit, was currently sitting in his apartment, waiting for his return and probably as tense as all hell.

And if being with her was the deciding factor, the decision itself was academic.

Harm looked up at the nearest street sign, oriented himself, and started to walk in a new direction. When he finally came upon the endless ebony wall, he squared his shoulders and prepared himself to bare his soul.

"I think I owe you an apology, Dad," he told the silent stone in a quiet, measured voice. "It seems like the only times I ever come down here are when things are a mess. I'm not going to break that streak today, at least not entirely. My life never seems to travel a straight line. But I'm going to do my damndest to navigate a little better from here on out.

"I've done a lot of things that I'm not too proud of lately. I don't regret giving up the Navy to go to Paraguay, but I allowed some other things to happen along the way, and as a result, I've lost the respect of two good people. I agreed to take a job I never should have taken, and it made me question a lot of things."

He shook his head. "None of us are perfect. I'm not, the admiral's not, Mac's not, and God knows the Agency's not. The world isn't obligated to make sense. I know that. And I'll never regret what I did at JAG. But I think I need to make a clean break, and if I stay here in Washington, I'll spend too much time wondering what might have been.

"You accepted your fate, when you finally had no other choice. You tried like hell to escape and return home, but at some point you made a decision to allow yourself some happiness outside of the life you'd known. That's how I ended up with a brother, and if I ever felt angry about that, I promise you that it wasn't for very long. I'm not trying to equate my situation with that, but if it's all right with you, I'm going to keep it in mind whenever I wonder if you'd be disappointed in me for giving up the uniform you fought and bled for. I may end up back in the service after all, but part of my way of defining myself as my father's son was the Navy uniform with the gold wings, and I can't do that anymore. If I do put on a uniform again, those wings will still be there, but there will be a silver set along with the gold. I have a suspicion that they'll make me wear the silver ones on top, too. It's not how I planned it, but I'm not going to be ashamed of it, either. Life moves on."

With a long sigh, he dug his hands into his pockets. "And then there's something else. For the first time I can remember, there's someone who makes me excited to get up in the morning, to see the possibilities instead of the challenges. I don't have to guard myself against her. I want to keep her in my life, and for some inexplicable reason, she's asked me to be a part of hers.

"The bottom line of all this is that I'm going to get back in control of my life, and I don't think I'm going to be here again for a long while. So the reason I came, I guess, is actually to say goodbye." He traced the letter's of his father's name with two fingers. "Wish me luck, Dad."

Andie shifted her outstretched leg for the twenty-seventh time as she sat on the couch and read Harm's book. It was a good one, a narrative of the Battle of Britain, but she was absorbing so little of it that the next page could have described Churchill as a long-lost cousin of Mussolini and she wouldn't have batted an eye.

Intellectually, she knew that she couldn't expect Harm to make such a momentous decision in five minutes. If he needed to think it all through two or three or sixteen times, that would be perfectly understandable. And if he said no, that would be understandable, too. It was a lot to ask of him, to say the least.

Who are you kidding? If he says no, you'll feel like throwing yourself off a bridge.

Harmon Rabb was like no man she'd ever met, and she'd realized that even on that first day of Constitutional Law class. She'd never had much trouble keeping her attraction to him locked away, because until now it had been easy to point to the vast differences in their lives and see why it would never work -- and because until now she'd been terrified that even allowing for the possibility would inevitably start the countdown clock on their friendship.

It was still a significant risk to take, but something had changed in the last few days. Suddenly the idea of not being able to feel his lips on hers, or see that smile directed at her alone, was the stuff of tragedy. There wasn't any question of what would happen to their friendship if they split, because quite simply, she wasn't going to let him go.

Somehow that made another decision for her, and when he came through the door mid-afternoon, she all but leaped up from the couch.

"I'm not going to ask you for an answer," she hurried to say before he could even open his mouth. "Just let me say something first. I pitched all of this to you under the conditions that we'd set up somewhere around Detroit, because it's home for me and I know my way around the situation there. But that's asking you to pick up and transplant your entire life to accommodate me, and I'm not completely comfortable with that. So I'm trying to say that if you're still interested in working together, we can talk about setting up shop here, or in San Diego, or anywhere you want to consider. I said it before, but I want you to take it seriously. A place is just a place."

She'd just opened herself up to the possibility of transplanting her entire life, and of leaving behind the shelters and schools she'd supported for so long, but somehow she knew that she had to be willing to make that leap. This wasn't a one-way street.

The concession clearly made an impact on Harm. He watched her for a long minute, perhaps searching for the hint of fear that he correctly assumed would result from making that offer. A place wasn't just a place, and they both knew it.

With a small smile, he shook his head. "You thought you needed to offer a negotiating point before you knew whether or not it'd be necessary?"

"I'm a lousy poker player."

Dropping his keys on the desk, he picked up the phone and dialed. As she listened, stomach churning, he spoke into the phone. "Hi, Mom. Yeah, I'm fine. It's been rough for a while, but I've got some company now, which has helped more than you could imagine. That's why I called, actually. I thought you'd be relieved to know that I'm leaving the CIA." His eyes flicked toward his guest. "Long story. What's important right now is that I'm leaving D.C., too. I just wanted you to be the first to know. I'm going back to the law, to a children's defense firm. In Detroit. With Andie."

The rest of his half of the conversation faded away as she processed those few words. There wouldn't be a difficult goodbye at the airport or even any more two-hour phone conversations in the middle of the night. He wanted to come with her. The reasons why would probably be important at some later date, but right now all that mattered was the result.

He wore a look of satisfaction as he ended the call, and she wondered if she ought to be ticked at him for toying with her. Ignoring that, she charged at him the moment he hung up the phone, nearly knocking him over with the force of her embrace.

"You're serious?" she demanded, in between kisses.

"Would I dare tell my mother if I wasn't?" His grin conveyed a kind of relief, as if making that decision had freed him from something. After a moment, she composed herself and stepped back, and he cast a sweeping gaze around the apartment. "Packing all this stuff is going to be an adventure."

"Will you sell this place?"

"No point in keeping it. I doubt it'll be too tough to sell. The tough part will be finding a place in Detroit on short notice."

"My condo has plenty of room," she blurted out without thinking about how he might view such an offer. "I mean, you could put your stuff in storage for a while until you decide where you want to live ... if you want to."

He considered. "If you're okay with that ..."

"I've gotten used to having you around," she replied softly. "I happen to like it."

"Then I guess we've got a plan." He squeezed her hand. "I called Langley. I'll have a debriefing over there tomorrow morning, and then I guess my next career move is to take the Michigan bar exam."

"Better go for Ohio, too, just to cover everything."

"Yeah, yeah. Will you help me pack boxes?"

"Hell, I'll drive the U-Haul if you want. But are you sure you want to pack up and leave town so quickly?"

The enthusiasm that had been hovering behind his eyes now took a slight dip. "I'm not going to vanish in the dead of night," he assured her. "It'll take us a few days to set up a realtor and get everything packed up, and during that time, I'll go see the people I need to go see. Sturgis, and Bud and Harriet, and I guess Mac, too. It's not like I'll never see them again. As you've ably demonstrated, there are flights every day."

"They're your friends, Harm. They may not take this all that well, but they'll support you."

"Yeah," he echoed, with confidence that didn't quite ring true. "Anyway, we've got a lot to do, don't we?"

"Suppose so." Impulsively, she hugged him again, this time with less fervor and more gratitude. "Thank you for being willing to try this. I'll do whatever I have to do to make sure you don't regret it."

"Just keep being you," he said simply. "That ought to take care of it."

Late the following day, Sarah Mackenzie parked her car on the street near Harm's apartment building and scanned the area for his Lexus. When she located it, she had to quash a brief, instinctive urge to flee the scene. She'd been half-hoping that he wouldn't be home, allowing her to delay this conversation a while longer. The coldness of his voice on the phone two days ago had truly shocked her. She understood that his world had been upended recently, and she knew that she'd been somewhat less than helpful in that transition. Still, she'd expected ... well, maybe she hadn't really known what to expect.

But she did recognize that this gaping chasm between them couldn't continue to exist. Something -- everything -- had been left unresolved, and if there was anything that chewed away at her sanity, it was unresolved issues.

Harm didn't answer the door when she knocked; instead, it was answered by a woman with whom she had only a passing familiarity. "Andie," she said in surprise. "Ah, hi."

"Hi, Mac." Harm's law school friend had visited a few times, but if it hadn't been for the graduation picture he'd kept in his office, Mac probably wouldn't have recognized her. Andie's greeting was polite, if cool, which probably shouldn't have been a shock. "Harm's off running some errands."

"I'm sorry. I saw his car out front, so I thought - "

"I think he took the Metro." Andie checked her watch. "He probably won't be too much longer, if you want to wait."

She didn't want to wait, but she was already here, so she tried to smile as she stepped into the apartment. "Thanks."

The silence that followed was as awkward as any Mac could remember. "So, how long are you in town for?"

"A few more days, I guess. I'm in a bit of a career transition at the moment."

"Well, Harm's an expert on those." Mac had purposely kept her voice light, but the other woman didn't display any amusement. "Listen, Andie, I'm sure he's told you all about what happened, and - "

Andie held up a hand. "Unless you want to use me as a dress rehearsal, you'd better save it for your conversation with him. I'm a bystander in this whole thing."

"I never meant to hurt him." That wasn't quite what Mac had intended to say, but it was accurate enough.

Andie regarded her with a calm, impenetrable expression. "Seems to me that the two of you don't know how to keep from hurting each other."

"So he told you about the things he said, as well?"

"Yeah, he did. But I think he may have left some other things out, so maybe you can clear a couple of things up for me." She folded her arms, looking inquisitive. "He said that he'd made a hurtful comment about your past relationships, and that he'd regretted it and apologized for it. He also related a couple of comments you'd made about his relationships."

I'm sure you apologized for those, as well, but somehow he left that out of his explanation. So when did your apology come in?"

Taken aback, Mac didn't respond. Andie continued. "Guess we'll get back to that. One other thing he told me was that he liked the way his Agency partner always expressed her gratitude. Whenever he pulled her out of a tight spot, she always said 'thanks.' It wasn't any big deal, just a quick word or two, but it meant a lot to him. When he told me that, I realized that he never told me when it was that you'd thanked him. Would you mind filling me in? How did you tell him you were grateful for coming after you?"

Oh, no, you don't, Mac thought. "Harm knew I was grateful," she asserted, dark eyes narrowing. "Patting him on the back wasn't the first thing on my mind during all that, especially when he wasn't being the prince of tact himself."

"Oh, okay, then." Andie's tone was overly solicitous, bordering on condescension. "So after it was all over, and you were safe and sound at home while Harm was being shut out of JAG, that's when you said 'thank you,' right? Being his friend, you offered him some kind of consolation that his life as he knew it wasn't over. Didn't you?"

How dare she? "Do you always leap headfirst into other people's relationships?" Mac fired back defensively. "I don't remember you being present for any of this, so I'm not sure why I should be taking advice from you."

"I don't recall offering any." Andie was a good three inches shorter and more slightly built than the Marine, but anyone observing this confrontation wouldn't have known it. "I'm perfectly aware of Harm's faults in the communication department. What I can't figure out is why you would choose this moment to string him up for them, after he'd risked everything to save you."

Mac shook her head, stalking toward the window. "That doesn't prove a damn thing," she stated, bitterness ringing through her voice. "It's the way he is. He would have taken the same risk for a person off the street."

"He might very well have. But there's no way you're ever going to convince me that he should be resented for that."

As Mac swung around, ready to contest further, the door opened and Harm entered, an expression of cool indifference already in place. "Saw your car outside," he remarked to Mac by way of an opening line. "You were going to be my next stop, actually."

Mac managed to dampen the anger that she knew must have been glowing in her gaze. If this conversation was to have any hope of being productive, starting out angry was not an option. "After I talked to Bud this afternoon, I decided I'd better stop by. He said he was going out to lunch with you, and when he came back, he looked like his puppy died."

"Yeah. I got a similar response from Sturgis a few minutes ago." He glanced over at his other visitor, an apology in his eyes. "Andie, would you mind - "

"Of course not." She held out her hands in a catcher's mitt and caught his keys as he tossed them to her. "Might as well go find us something for dinner, anyway. I'll be back in ... actually, I'll be back when you call me and tell me to come back, okay?"

"Thank you." Harm looked as though he wanted to reach out to her as she slipped past him in the doorway, but if that was the case, he refrained. Mac wasn't sure what to make of that possibility, so she moved on, turning fully toward him as the door closed.

"Andie makes for a fairly aggressive guard dog."

"She doesn't pull her punches, no." He walked over to the kitchen island and pulled out one of the stools. "Did Bud tell you what I told him?"

"He said I needed to hear it from you." There was a clear note of trepidation in those words, one she didn't bother to disguise. "So what is it that I need to hear from you?"

"We'll get to it. Before that, I think we should get some closure on the highlights from Paraguay, don't you?"

Paraguay. It was nothing more than a name, and yet there was so much contained within it. "I suppose," she answered warily. "Who's going first?"

"I will." He toyed with a pen for a moment before looking up. "You'd been through hell down there, and I should have been more understanding of that."

"You gave up a lot for me, and I should have been more understanding of that."

"Okay. So why weren't we?"

"More understanding?" She spread her hands, having no better answers now than she'd had weeks ago. "I don't know. It was a uniquely terrible situation. I thought that since you'd come all that way, you'd want to finally settle things between us, and when that didn't happen, it further jumbled up my worldview."

"You wanted me to be able to enunciate why I came."

"Yes. I guess I still don't think that was too much to ask."

"It wouldn't have been, if I'd been able to look past the sniping that had been going on the whole time. It's hard to get poetic while ducking insults."

"I lash out under pressure, Harm! You've never noticed that in all the time we've worked together?"

"So you didn't mean any of what you said?" he asked bluntly. "I'm supposed to believe that none of it was based in real feelings?"

That question deflated her a little. "Obviously I can't make that claim, can I?"

"Neither can I." He stared intently at the pen in his hands for a few beats before speaking again. "Where do you think the disconnect is between us? What keeps getting us into these situations where we can't even speak to each other without causing an incident?"

"That's just it. Talking is the problem. You want me to deduce your intent from your actions, and I can never tell if I'm reading you right."

“And you say things that I can never be sure you really mean.”

“So it’s my problem?” Instinctively she bristled. “I really don’t think I’m asking for anything too difficult - ”

“No, Mac, you don’t ask for *anything*. And that’s a problem, too. You don’t ask, and then you’re surprised when no one’s able to figure out what you want. Being self-reliant is all well and good up to a point, but if you take it too far, eventually people get the idea that you don’t even want their support.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I’m not exactly accustomed to having support?”

He only shook his head sadly. “You’ve had it from a lot of people for the last seven years. If you don’t recognize that, I feel sorry for you, and for all the people who’ve been trying to give it to you all this time. And if that’s not long enough for you to adapt, I don’t know if you’ll ever be able to.”

His tone, so resigned and final, sent a chill through her. “You sound like you’re closing the book on me.”

“Not on you. I am closing the book on a certain aspect of us, but given that you’re the one who originally said ‘never,’ I can’t imagine that it’ll come as a surprise.”

Hearing him say it like that, without the fire that had always been present during past battles, Mac realized that this time was very different. That concept frightened her enough to step out onto a limb. “I shouldn’t have gone that far, not before we’d gotten some distance from that whole fiasco. You can chalk it up as another one of those things I said but didn’t actually mean.”

She watched his face, hoping to see some flicker of change, but none came. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he replied honestly. “I think you might want to start trying to believe it, because I do.”

That declaration hit her like a freight train. “So you’re giving up?” she asked, her voice almost inaudible.

He didn’t meet her gaze. “I’d rather think of it as accepting our limitations.”

“You don’t think we can work through this? We’ve been through a lot of bumps in the road, and we’ve gotten by.”

“Yeah, we have. But we’ve never learned enough from them to stop getting into these situations in the first place. At some point, don’t we have to face facts and stop banging our heads against a wall?”

“That’s not how I see it,” she protested, somewhat weakly.

“Try it sometime. It might work for you.”

“Damn it, Harm! When did you become a defeatist?”

"I'm being realistic, Mac. Neither of us has had the best track record with relationships. We've both got some self-destructive tendencies along those lines, and we tend to reinforce negative aspects of each other far more than positive ones. We're too alike to coexist."

"So that's where Andie comes in?"

"Andie came here to be a friend."

"Maybe she did, but it sure doesn't look that way anymore." She shook her head, pieces starting to fall into place. "That's why you're suddenly not interested in righting things between us. As long as you've got someone else lined up, why bother?"

At that, his voice immediately turned icy. "You don't know what you're talking about, so I'd suggest leaving that subject alone. This is about you and me. Andie has nothing to do with it."

"Well, obviously she does, because the moment I walked in here, she took my damn head off! All this crap about apologizing and showing gratitude -- is that how you really feel? You say you can't trust what I say, and then you're pissed at me for not saying the magic words?"

Mac had rarely, if ever, seen Harm get truly furious, but for a brief, bizarre moment, she wondered if she might have just earned herself a demonstration. He rose from the stool, his eyes darkened to coal, but at the last second he sat back down again, and his voice was controlled. "No. Let's not do this again, because it won't get us anywhere. I didn't say that I distrusted every word that had ever come out of your mouth. Yes, I would have liked to have gotten a thank-you at some point, but apologies have to go both ways. And for what it's worth, I am sorry for my behavior down there."

A few minutes or weeks ago, she would have been pleased to hear that, but now it seemed as though things were slipping further out of reach. "I'm sorry, too," she said quietly. "I am grateful for what you did. I'd like to think that we can salvage our friendship out of this."

"So would I. I just don't know how exactly that's going to work."

"I've been thinking about it, and I can ask the admiral to consider reinstating you - " Before the sentence was out, he was already shaking his head.

"I don't want that, Mac."

"How can you not want it? The Navy is the only life you've ever wanted. You're not actually telling me that you prefer the CIA, are you?" Even as she spoke, she remembered Bud's glum demeanor that afternoon, and she was suddenly struck by the unsettling thought that the proverbial other shoe was about to descend on her.

With a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, she turned toward the living room, and noticed for the first time a stack of collapsed packing boxes sitting in the corner. From there, everything seemed to close in on her.

"You're leaving?" she whispered.

Harm nodded, looking solemn. "I convinced Andie to start her own firm specializing in juvenile defense cases. She convinced me to go in on it with her."

"Back in Michigan?"

"Yeah. I officially left the Agency as of this morning, and I've got a couple of buyers already interested in the apartment."

Forcing air into her lungs was a painful exercise, but she was determined not to let this news choke her up. "Just like that? After eight years, you're packing up and bailing out?"

"There's not enough here for me to build a new life around. It's a good opportunity, and I'm going to take it."

"Not enough here? Wow, I'm certainly glad to know where we all stand with you."

"Hostility's not going to be very useful at this point," he replied with little rancor, seemingly determined not to let this deteriorate into a shouting match again. "I'm not giving the finger to JAG at large. There's a lot that I know I'll miss. But this is my choice, and I'm never going to be able to effectively explain my reasons, so I'm going to have to trust that my friends will accept it."

She could sense that she was losing the battle with her fear. All of a sudden, it didn't matter who had been right or wrong. The way of life that she'd clung to for so long was disintegrating, the last tatters of a once-powerful bond falling to the floor like windblown petals. "Please don't do this, Harm," she begged softly. "Without you, nothing feels the same. The whole office is off-balance, and I don't know how to set anything right -- I can't ..."

Not unsympathetic to her distress, he stood up and moved closer, but didn't close the distance completely. "You'll figure it out," he said simply, his blue eyes gentle. "Things change, Mac. For a long time, this was where I belonged, but things changed, and it's wasn't anyone's fault more than anyone else. It's just the way things are."

Mac looked down for a long moment, focusing on a single floorboard while she took a couple of careful breaths. *You can handle this*, she told herself firmly. *It's not what you expected, and it's definitely not what you wanted, but you can't say it isn't logical*. "There's nothing I can say or do, is there?" she asked.

Harm shook his head. "To paraphrase a friend, it's not like I'm going to Afghanistan," he pointed out, his features softening into the ghost of a smile. "I don't have any intention of shirking my responsibilities as a godparent. I'll be around once in a while."

"Yeah. Of course." She didn't entirely believe it, but the fact that he'd used the word 'friend' in the previous sentence was promising, so she chose to cling to that. With nothing and everything left to say, she brushed at a teardrop in the corner of her eye and met his gaze. "We'll miss you," she said, almost as a pledge. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too." Not quite sure of himself, he reached one hand out to her, and they met in a brief, simple embrace. "Take care of yourself, Sarah. Don't ever let anyone convince you that you're unworthy of anything in this world."

It might have been the kindest thing anyone had ever said to her, and it was all the more heartbreaking for its sincerity. "I hope you find what you're looking for," she replied quietly. You deserve to be happy. You've earned it many times over."

Her feet somehow propelled her toward the door, but just as her hand found the knob, she made herself turn back for just a moment. "Harm -- thank you."

A slight frown creased his forehead. "For Paraguay?"

"For the time you've been in my life."

She closed the door behind her before he could feel compelled to return the sentiment, and hurried toward her car as quickly as her self-respect would tolerate. She wouldn't allow herself to be devastated by this departure; she was above all else a survivor, and she'd survive him as well. She'd show up to work in the morning the way she had for most of the past seven years, and she'd keep putting one foot in front of the other until her surroundings made some sense again.

Somehow.

Not tonight, though. Tonight, self-pity was permitted.

By the time she reached her building, she could barely see through the tears, and she rushed up the stairs to escape into the sanctuary of her apartment. Whoever had touted the healing properties of a good hard cry was on to something.

After a few minutes, the phone rang. Mac made no move toward it. Her throat was raw already, and she couldn't think of a single thing anyone on the other end could have to say that would end this feeling before its time. When the answering machine clicked in, though, she was surprised by the voice that began to speak.

"Mac ... it's Sturgis. I'm guessing that you're talking to Harm right about now, and he's telling you what he told me a little while ago. I'm aware that I'm probably the last person you'd want to talk to at this point, but based on how rocked I am, I'm thinking that you must be feeling like a crash dummy, and I wanted to ... well, I guess I just ... Look, we can work out our differences at some later date, because I don't think they're as significant as we've built them up to be. I just wanted to make sure you knew that someone's there, if you need to talk or anything. You don't have to call me back. I'll see you in the office. Hang in there, all right?"

She placed her hand on the phone as the soft click sounded, more to feel the connection than to call him back. Being alone seemed like a good idea for the time being. But Sturgis's message had broken through in a way she hadn't expected, and it let a thin ray of light into the recesses of her memory.

Yeah, she'd survive. Eventually, things would be all right. They had to be.

"You know, I am totally overwhelmed by the sheer number of boxes marked 'Kitchen.' Have you been hiding an entire Williams-Sonoma store in here for the past few years?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Harm leaned against the kitchen counter and wiped his brow on his sleeve, having just taken the stairs for the four dozenth time that day. "If we'd waited another week or two to do this, it would be ten degrees cooler, and the stairs wouldn't seem so bad."

"A bit late now, I'd say." Andie adjusted her ponytail, trying to catch a few uncooperative strands of hair, and gazed around the all-but-stripped apartment to size up their progress. "Besides, going down the stairs with the boxes is better than the alternative. And my kitchen's on the ground floor, so if you want to haul this stuff in and make use of it at my place, I'm certainly not going to complain. Your cooking beats mine any day of the week."

"But you look awfully cute in an apron." He ducked as a roll of packing tape came sailing toward him. "I guess this is the last of it."

"Looks that way." She picked up the last box and secured it under her arm. "Have I thanked you lately for being willing to give this a shot?"

"Unless your definition of 'lately' is 'within the last three hours,' yes, many times." He met her gaze, wanting to be sure that his intent got through. "But as much as I'm glad to help you, I'm doing this for me, too."

"Good," she said simply. "I'll be downstairs if you want to take a few minutes ... you know, to make sure we haven't missed anything."

He smiled, grateful for her tacit understanding. "Thanks. I'll be down in a little while."

She disappeared through the doorway, and he was alone, standing for the last time in the place which had been his home for seven years. He'd poured so much of himself into this place, during that first year of renovations and even after that. It had fit him better than anywhere else he'd ever lived, even if that wasn't saying a great deal. But as he looked at it now, bare of nearly everything that had made it his, he felt rather less sadness than he'd expected.

There was *some* sadness, of course, as well as a fair amount of trepidation about what was to come. Some high school English teacher of his had once said that one of the greatest sources of conflict, in literature and in life, was the conflict of man versus the unknown. Given that the unknown had already smacked him around pretty well, even that early on, he'd been inclined to agree. That assessment had yet to change.

But this wasn't entirely unknown, and so he drew a certain amount of confidence from his plan to focus primarily on the next immediate step in front of him. Right now, that meant dropping off his Vette and the rented truck containing most of his possessions at the storage place. Then, they'd drive as far as Pittsburgh, stay the night, and hopefully cross the Michigan border shortly after noon tomorrow. One step at a time. No problem.

As he moved to sling his overnight bag over his shoulder, his cell phone chirped, and he fished it out of his pocket.

"Heads up," Andie's voice said without preamble. "Unless the landlord is a bald two-star with no visible sense of humor, I think your favorite former CO just pulled up."

That stopped him cold. "Thanks for the warning," he forced himself to reply. "If you hear windows breaking or anything up here, assume it's not going well and call the cops."

Clicking the phone off, he braced both hands against the counter. *Okay. There's a limit to how awkward and antagonistic this can be. Right?*

And to think he'd been a few minutes away from escaping it altogether. Well, it was probably for the best. Closure, and all that. Assuming that this would in fact end in closure and not in a train wreck.

The door had been left ajar, so A.J. didn't have to knock. He did so anyway, allowing Harm a brief moment to steel himself before turning to face the man he'd served for so many years.

A.J.'s eyes swept over the empty space, and Harm got the sense that the immediacy of the situation had surprised him, even if he'd never show it. "Already primed and ready to leave town, huh?"

"Already?" Harm echoed frostily. "Is there a standard waiting period I need to observe?"

"Only if you want to give your friends a chance to come to terms with your decision."

"And what would that change?" He folded his arms and leaned back on the counter. This was still his home for a few more minutes, and he'd be damned if anyone was going to come in here and lay into him. "I haven't exactly been able to spend a lot of time here in the past few months, so I think my friends are used to my absence by now. And I've said all the goodbyes I need to say."

The older man cocked his head in an if-you-say-so gesture. "I have to admit, you're setting an impressive standard. I've never known anyone who could make such long-standing waves as you seem to do."

"Is that why you're here, Admiral?" Harm asked bluntly. "To get on my case for once again disrupting your office? I'm willing to take responsibility for my actions while still in uniform, but whatever may have occurred after that point is your concern, not mine."

A.J. folded his arms. "No, as difficult as it may be to believe, I'm here about you, not JAG. I got a request from BUPERS to forward your unit personnel file over to the Air National Guard bureau."

"That's right. I report to Tucson ANGB for F-16 training in a couple of months." Harm knew he should just stick to the facts, but his pride wouldn't leave it alone. "Not quite the same as driving a cab or wrestling alligators, but I'll take it."

The unbridled hostility in his voice forced A.J. to finally show some surprise. "You're really that pissed off at me for not letting you waltz back into the Navy?"

God, he really doesn't get it, does he? Harm shook his head, incredulous. "No. That's not why. I signed the damn letter, didn't I?"

"Then explain - "

"It took you all of two minutes to trivialize my entire career," he drove ahead, cutting the admiral off. "I spent twenty-two years in that uniform, and I served with distinction. I made sacrifices that you of all people should recognize, and to have all of that dismissed as an

adolescent thrill ride was just about the gravest insult I've ever faced. No, *Admiral*, I'm pissed because I expected some scrap of respect from a commander who had always received it from me."

"Respect?" A.J. leaned forward, his slow-burning anger reaching a peak. "Were you demonstrating respect when you made a snap decision to quit rather than obey a lawful and rational order? Was I supposed to see that as noble, rather than a dismissal of my authority and the Navy's?"

"If I'd seen an alternative, don't you think I would have taken it?" Harm demanded, deadly earnest. "I knew I was going no matter what, and I'll never regret that. The only 'snap decision' was whether to disobey your order or take myself out of your command. You tell me. Which one disrespects your authority more?"

From his suddenly blank expression, it was clear that A.J. hadn't looked at it that way, but he wouldn't be so easily swayed. "And do you think your personal convictions and attachments are going to be valid rationale to the zoomies any more than they were here? If so, I'd get ready for a major disappointment."

"I don't expect the situation to come up all that often."

"Oh? So you're never going to feel compelled to ride to your brother's rescue again?"

That tore it. Harm felt liquid heat pulsing in his veins, and it was a severe effort to keep his voice level. "I have always taken my service seriously, Admiral," he asserted tightly. "I can see how certain past events might suggest otherwise, and I'm sorry for that. But I have never jeopardized another officer or their objectives by my choices, and I'd like to think that if I were to somehow be accused of such a thing in the future, at least I might get a little faith and help from my new team. Especially if the charge was murder."

Immediately seeing his implication, A.J.'s temper flamed again. "We're putting that in play now? You know damn well how complex the Singer case was for everyone."

"I do. But I'm sure you can understand how that might seem like rather cold comfort."

There was a long silence, as each man struggled to corral his thoughts. At last, A.J. spoke up. "I suppose I can."

Drained, Harm turned toward the windows, wondering just where this conversation should go. "Why *did* you come here today, Admiral?" he asked again. "Am I supposed to believe that it was solely out of concern for my career?"

A.J. shook his head, and although his features remained as impassive as ever, the edge faded from his tone. "Not entirely, I suppose," he replied. "More than anything else, I think I've been angry at you for not quite meeting the expectations I had for you. I demanded more from you because I knew that you had more in you. I'm not afraid to admit that. But I'm starting to realize that your goals and my goals for you may not have lined up as well as I once thought." He studied the younger man with the eyes of a mentor. "I assumed you had plans of advancing a substantial ways through the ranks. I expected you to take over my command someday. But you never really wanted that, did you?"

Harm turned back, the question giving him pause. He'd enjoyed his stints as acting JAG, but was it a post to which he'd ever truly aspired? Would he have ever wanted to leave the courtroom for a job that was more than anything else a supervisory position?

"No," he said truthfully. "I don't think I did."

A.J. nodded his acceptance. "I tried to make you fit a role you didn't want to play," he acknowledged. "I'm sorry for not recognizing that earlier."

"I'm sorry I was a lousy protégé," Harm responded, managing a faint smile.

"Call it even?"

After a moment, in which he judged the offer to be sincere, he accepted the proffered hand.

A.J.'s stiff façade remained in place as he broached the next subject. "At the risk of disrupting this truce in record time, are you sure you still need to leave?"

Harm had been preparing to lower his guard, but at that comment, he reconsidered. "I'm not running, Admiral. I wouldn't leave just for the sake of leaving. This is something I've given a lot of thought, and it's something I want."

"Juvenile defense, or so Bud said?"

"I've always found those kinds of cases rewarding. Between that and the Guard, I believe I'll have two valuable pursuits."

"I see." A.J. rocked on his heels for a moment, hands in his pockets. "But unless I'm mistaken, you could do those things here with very little effort. So do you see why it might appear as though you're avoiding something, or someone?"

Subtle as an ACME anvil. Harm sighed. "Admiral, I don't think you understand the situation between Mac and me as well as you think you do. I can assure you that neither of us did."

"Maybe not. But after seven years, to pack up and move five hundred miles to set up shop with your Friday night date from law school ..."

With that, something snapped in his mind, and he took an unconscious step forward. "Andie Nichols is *no one's* Friday night date. She is a brilliant, passionate advocate who will move mountains to make this firm work. What's more, she has never expected or asked me to be anything other than what I am. When we talk, she and I actually comprehend each other, without having to go back and translate half a dozen misunderstandings. And for the past ten years, whenever I've needed to talk something out, she's the one person who's always been there. Yeah, you haven't seen her here, and maybe I haven't mentioned her all the time, but you know what? Maybe that's because I took her for granted. I never stopped to think about the number of times she's restored my sanity with one phone call, or the way she has never once failed to brighten the world for me. I never stood up and said, 'hey, this woman makes me want to do better and be better simply by her very existence.' I never ..."

Slowly, but with penetrating clarity, he began to realize what he was saying, and the past few days swirled back around him in force. He'd never really been able to visualize what it was he wanted out of life, but he knew with absolute certainty that whatever it was, she held it in her hands.

Suddenly, taking it all one step at a time seemed utterly ridiculous.

Almost in shock, he looked up at the admiral again. "Um, would you mind if ..."

A.J. had read his expression and judged it accurately, nodding with a trace of a tolerant smile. "Go get her, Mr. Rabb. Have a safe trip."

"Aye, sir," he mumbled on his way out the door, too driven to realize that he'd fallen back into military courtesy for a moment. The stairs about which he'd previously complained were taken two at a time, only because three might have caused him to trip and lose precious time. Finally he reached the alley, where Andie was sitting on the bumper of the U-Haul truck and making notes on her PDA.

"I didn't hear any sounds of violence, so I'm guessing - " The sentence ended abruptly as he pulled her to her feet. "Harm? Everything okay?"

"It will be in a minute. Just listen for a sec, and be patient, because I haven't exactly planned this out." Drawing a deep breath, he faced her squarely, his gaze boring straight through her. "I think we need to clarify precisely what our goals are for this little adventure, because I'm not sure I've done a very good job of communicating my reasons for doing this."

Her eyes flared wide for a split-second, but that instant of palpable fear was rapidly locked away. "Go for it," she replied cautiously.

Here goes. "I'm not doing this just to give it a try. I mean, sure, maybe I won't be perfectly suited to this kind of practice, and for all I know, I could end up hating the F-16 or more likely something else about the Guard -- but those actually feel like secondary issues right now. I'm not afraid of one of those things not working out, because you and I -- we work. I'm sure of that. Being with you is bigger than moving to another state or changing uniforms. What I'm saying is, I didn't make this choice to get away from anyone or anything. I did it to get to someone and something, and I'm doing it for real."

Less than confident in that demonstration of eloquence, he paused anxiously to gauge her reaction. He was greeted by a pair of beautiful eyes, green flecked with gold, now bright with tears.

"You're actually getting this, aren't you?" he asked, feeling self-conscious and a little awed.

"Yeah, I am."

"What do you think?"

Her answering smile was watery, but utterly luminous. "I love you, too."

And with that, the world opened up, and those three daunting words lost their control over him. Harm drew her in for a powerful kiss, enlivened by the idea that he would never

truly have to let her go. "I guess that would have been less confusing if I'd opened with 'I love you,' huh?"

"Your approach worked just fine for me." Her reply was disjointed, made between kisses that conveyed every bit as much meaning as the infamous three words. "So, we've already got the truck rented and packed," she suggested when they finally broke for air. "The Vette's already hitched up. Theoretically, if we're thinking long-term, we could just blow off putting everything in storage here and take it all with us."

"When you offered to drive the U-Haul, I wasn't thinking in terms of a cross-country trip."

"We could trade off the U-Haul and the Lexus between us. There's a storage place up the road from my place." Andie's enthusiasm seemed to be emanating from every pore. "We could always start looking for a house to put all this in, while we're at it."

"We could always look for a justice of the peace along the route, too," he countered, upping the ante.

To his glee, she just glowed even more. "My mother would kill us."

"Mine, too."

"All right, I guess we might as well dial it back a little." She grasped both of his hands tightly. "Let's just get to Detroit. We've got all the time in the world to figure out the rest."

"Fair enough." With one more kiss, he released her and handed her the keys to the SUV. "Shall we get started?"

"Right behind you."

And that said it all. As he turned to climb into the truck, he caught a glimpse of A.J. stepping out from the doorway of the building, with an expression which suggested that he understood just enough to approve. Harm met his gaze briefly, touching his fingertips to his brow, and watched as the admiral returned the mini-salute.

Then, with a full heart and a certain step, he got into the cab, turned the key, and shifted the truck into drive.

Epilogue -- Spring 2006

Mac entered the ballroom on Brian's arm, looking slightly more poised than she felt. The Armed Forces Ball was becoming one of the biggest events of the year, so much so that these days only field grade officers had any luck getting tickets. Most of the senior JAG crew was in attendance, and Brian, despite being relatively new to the role of military boyfriend, had gamely agreed to hunt down a tuxedo in order to attend.

The source of her nerves, however, was not yet visible. Bud, now wearing lieutenant commander's stripes, had mentioned during the previous week that Harm was going to be in

town for a tactics meeting at the Guard bureau, and that he and his wife would most likely be attending the ball. Mac suspected that Bud had brought it up in order to warn her, which hadn't been a bad idea. Harm hadn't entirely disappeared when he left D.C.; he'd visited a few times, mainly to see the Roberts family, but their schedules often clashed. As a result, she'd seen him only twice, each time for just a few minutes, and both times over a year ago.

She was happy now -- though still new, the relationship with Brian was undoubtedly the most stable one she'd ever had -- and she'd pretty much convinced herself that she could no longer be affected by Harmon Rabb. But actually having a real conversation with him might still have the potential to throw a wrench in the works. So it was probably better to see him here, in a fairly innocuous setting, and finally put her mind at ease.

Just ahead of her, Sturgis turned his head and broke into a smile. Mac followed his gaze, tensing instinctively.

Harm was standing in a small group of officers, listening to an animated storyteller -- probably another pilot, she guessed. Like the others, his mess dress jacket was Air Force blue, an odd sight for someone who automatically expected to see him in Navy summer white. Andie was with him, half-hidden behind another person but standing close to her husband. They looked content, Mac decided, very content. She hadn't been invited to their wedding, but she hadn't taken offense; by all accounts, it had been an extremely small affair, limited almost exclusively to close family. It had been two years now, hadn't it? The idea was still a little hard to imagine.

Someone in the group moved off, and with a clear line of sight, she suddenly understood why the couple looked so blissful. Andie's elegant bronze dress made no secret of her burgeoning figure. Five months along, maybe a little more, Mac estimated. She was a little surprised that they'd made the trip, given that detail, but pregnancy certainly seemed to be agreeing with Andie.

And impending fatherhood seemed to be agreeing just as well with Harm. He stood with one arm around his wife's waist, hand resting comfortably and unobtrusively against the swell of her stomach. There was a light in his eyes that was visible even from across the room.

Sturgis immediately crossed the floor with a wide grin, and Harm stepped forward to greet him. After a welcoming kiss for Andie, Sturgis drew his friend away from the group, and Mac saw an opportunity. Despite their brief clash before Harm's departure, she didn't dislike Andie. Still, they'd spoken so rarely that talking to her now was bound to be stilted at best.

Turning to her date with a question in her eyes, she was relieved when Brian gave her an understanding smile. "Go ahead," he encouraged, having been told enough of their history to recognize this situation. "Go say hi. Meredith wanted to talk shop with me anyway."

Heartened by his acceptance, Mac squeezed his hand, then set her sights on the two officers and took a bold first step in their direction.

Harm caught sight of her just as Sturgis was taking his leave, and for a moment their gazes locked. When the inevitable flood of memories surfaced, she was pleased to note that the vast majority of them were good ones.

A warm smile graced his handsome features, and he raised his voice to be heard over the ever-present murmur of the crowd. "Colonel Mackenzie," he greeted.

"Colonel Rabb," she responded in kind, still finding it rather surreal to be using that rank for him.

Harm turned back toward Andie, his eyes asking the same permission from her as Mac's had from Brian. Andie made a 'go ahead' motion, giving Mac a smile and a wave. Mac nodded her thanks and mouthed 'congrats' to her, and the former partners moved off to the side of the room to talk more easily.

"It's good to see you," Harm told her, looking sincere. "You look great."

"You, too." She inclined her head toward the set of silver wings that gleamed above his familiar gold ones. "I can't get used to those."

He shrugged amiably. "Small price to pay, in the grand scheme of things."

"So I see. Congratulations. Andie's radiant."

"Thanks. She's been on cloud nine since the day we found out. Nothing fazes her. She can still roll out of bed half an hour before I do, put in most of a day at the firm, and help me work on the baby's room in the evening. I only realized I needed to make her cut back when she ended up too tired to haul herself into bed one night."

Mac made a sympathetic noise, though she was finding it hard to picture him in such a domestic scene. "When's she due?"

"Beginning of July."

"Well, we'll expect pictures." She shifted her weight onto one foot, studying the familiar contours of his face. "So are you ready for this, Dad?"

He examined his toes for a moment, but the faraway smile gave him away. "Yeah, I am," he answered easily. "Obviously it's not nearly the same as it was with Le, but at least I've got some reference, you know?"

She didn't know at all, actually. "Le?" she repeated, hoping she didn't sound as clueless as she felt.

Harm's brow knitted. "You must have known about Le -- right? I sent an announcement to JAG ... Bud's got pictures of her playing with Jimmy last time we were in town ..."

She could only stare back at him blankly, and an expression of remorse flitted across his features. "Mac, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to -- I guess I expected that Bud and Harriet would have said something."

He withdrew his wallet and opened it up to a stack of pictures worthy of any parent. Mac looked down at the one he selected, where a beaming eighteen-month-old girl had wrapped her chubby arms around Harm's neck, gazing up at him with adoration. The scene stunned her.

"I can't get enough of that picture," he admitted. "This is Le Tam. Her given name means 'heart of a lion,' which is one of the reasons we couldn't stand to change it. We got her six months ago."

In some strange way, this made sense. "She's Vietnamese?" Mac guessed.

He nodded. "Andie was over there on a kind of research trip, sponsored by the State Department. She was working with an orphanage, and when I picked her up from the airport, she had this look like I'd never seen. The very first words out of her mouth were 'We have to go back.' A couple of months and an obscene amount of paperwork later, we did."

"Wow." It wasn't the most articulate response she could have made, but it was all she had. She took the photos from him and looked at the Rabb family in wonder. At one time, she'd thought that she might have come close to sharing that life with him, but as she explored picture after picture of Andie and Le, she realized anew that this life had never been rightfully hers. Another one, maybe, just as peaceful, but not this one. Maybe Bud and Harriet had been right not to force her to see this too soon.

"Sturgis says you're seeing someone?" Harm inquired, a little tentatively.

Mac lifted her head and nodded, handing back the photos. "Yeah, he joined the faculty at Meredith's school at the beginning of the year. You know how Meredith can't leave anything well enough alone."

"Sounds like it's a good thing she didn't," he observed. "I mean, you look happy."

"I am," she answered, and she meant it.

"I'm glad. You've earned it."

"As have you." With a hint of a wry smile, she shook her head. "Did you ever think you'd be here? During all those crazy times at JAG, when all we could focus on was the next crisis coming down the road, did you ever think that things could change this much and still get all of us to a place we wanted to be?"

In response, he spread his hands in a gesture of surrender. "There were a lot of times when it was hard to be sure of anything," he agreed. "I don't know -- I don't think it can be easily explained. Some people know where they're headed from the start, and others have to take a few detours first. It's not like there's a right or wrong path for anyone. I guess ... the way I like to look at it goes like this. For a long time, my path joined up with a lot of amazing people, and I'm always going to be grateful that it did."

Through misty eyes, she gave him a disparaging look. "Fatherhood has turned you into a sap."

"Don't I know it." Harm reached out and drew her into a brief but meaningful embrace. "It really is good to see you, Marine."

"You too, flyboy," she said softly. "Let's try to stay in touch better. I want to meet these kids of yours."

"I'll let you know when the new one makes his appearance."

"His?"

"Yeah. Andie's already bought him his first football jersey. Then again, Le has one too, so go figure." The lights dimmed, signaling for everyone to take their seats. "Tell the gang I'll try to come talk to them after dinner. Take care."

"Take care," Mac echoed, and watched as he was swallowed up by the throng of people looking for their tables. She turned and made her way back to the group with buoyed spirits, and slid into the empty seat next to Brian. He slipped an arm around her waist, an inquisitive look in his eyes, and she leaned over to kiss his cheek. Just when she thought she had this world almost figured out, something always came along to surprise her. Finally, though, as strange as it seemed, that was okay.

*** THE END ***