



Graphic by [CG](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: action, drama

Spoilers: 2004 Virtual Season

Read [Part I](#) by Siamese Cat.

Disclaimer: The VS crew jointly owns Admiral Blankenship, and SC and I jointly own Gunnery Sergeant Connors, but we stole the rest of the gang from TPTB under cover of darkness. They will be returned in time for the Season Ten premiere, and not a moment before.

Author's Notes: Just a quick note of thanks to my good friend SC for being such a terrific partner. She really deserves credit for the lion's share of this plot, as well as for motivating me to get writing, and also for bringing me maple butter when she visited, thereby satisfying my maple-sugar fix. (I tell you, I must be part Canadian somehow.) Cat, you've made the past year so much brighter, just by being you. Thanks, hon.

Previously on JAG ...

"Nineteen out of twenty-nine Marines tested positive for cocaine."

"Nineteen Marines in one platoon. That's what I call taking unit cohesion to a whole new level."

*"Mac, I don't think Connors did this."
"Well, that just figures, now doesn't it?"*

**1232 EDT
Federal Holding Facility
Arlington, VA**

Anthony Rockovich shuffled into the interview room, a stony gaze fixed on the Marine waiting for him. Her uniform didn't impress him, and he wanted to make it clear from the start that whatever she had to say wouldn't impress him, either.

"What's this about, Colonel?" asked the public defender, a young woman by the name of Cordova. "My client has already given you a full statement."

"Yes, I have a copy of it right here." Sarah Mackenzie opened the folder in front of her, but kept her focus on Rockovich. "You stated that you were contacted online and, through a standard set of code words, arranged a meeting with Gunnery Sergeant Connors. And at that meeting, you made an exchange of cash for cocaine. In exchange for giving this testimony at trial, you've secured a plea bargain on a lesser trafficking charge. Did I hit the highlights?"

"Colonel, you've got the statement."

Mac didn't even glance over at Cordova. "The man you met with was Connors," she repeated, her dark eyes trained on the dealer. "You can positively identify a man you met in an alley for two minutes in the dead of night?"

"Hey, you've got my computer, don't you?" Rockovich fired back defensively. "It's his email address. Who else could it have been?"

"That wasn't my question," Mac replied with cool patience, though she felt anything but. Beside her, Cordova turned a surprised glare on her client, who stubbornly attempted to maintain his stoicism.

"You ID'd him in the photo lineup," she all but accused him.

Mac shook her head, still watching him. "You got lucky, didn't you?" she asked. "He fit what little you remembered, so you ID'd him. And when they told you that you'd fingered a Marine, you figured testifying against him was your best chance to make a deal. You weren't thinking about perjury tacking more time onto your carefully-negotiated sentence, were you? Because I can assure you that false testimony is just as illegal in a military court as it is in a federal one."

Rockovich held onto his sullen silence for as long as he could, but in the end, he came to the conclusion that in a staring contest with a Marine, he didn't have a prayer.

"Those meets aren't designed to help you ID people," he mumbled. "Matter of fact, they're kinda supposed to discourage it, y'know?"

"So other than the email traffic, you can't conclusively say that Connors is the man with whom you made the exchange that night."

The dealer's silence gave Mac her answer. She stood up from the table and turned at last to the bewildered public defender. "If I were you, I'd get on the phone with the U.S. attorney's office. Mr. Rockovich is headed back to the bargaining table."

She rapped on the room's thick metal door to signal the guard. "We're done."

Opening credits ...

1452 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"He folded," Mac announced, flopping into her chair with a resigned sigh. "He lucked out on the original ID. He wanted a deal, and he knew the only way to get one was to give us what we wanted."

"And we almost gave it to him," Harm finished, bracing his back against the doorframe of his partner's office. "So how far back toward the beginning are we?"

Mac reached for the small white board they'd been using to map out their evidence. With one finger, she erased 'Rockovich testimony' from the column labeled Means. "We still know that nineteen Marines ingested cocaine, presumably without their knowledge, through food served at the going-away picnic. We still know that Gunnery Sergeant Connors was present in the building before the meal was served. We still know that a withdrawal was made from his bank account two days prior to the incident. And we still know that some recent changes in his behavior have drawn the attention of some of his men."

"We also know that one of the other senior NCOs, a man I trust, swears that Connors couldn't possibly have done it, recent changes or not," Harm pointed out. "And we have an email account used to set up a drug purchase, but it's a free online account that could have been tampered with."

Mac rolled her head around, trying to relax her knotted shoulders. "No clear motive, no clear means."

"We've got to get him to talk to us, Mac, or at least to Bud. This 'que sera sera' act doesn't make any sense. Does he *want* to go to Leavenworth?"

If she'd had a response, it would have been interrupted by the arrival of a hesitant-looking Petty Officer Coates. "Ma'am, sir," she reported, "Admiral Blankenship would like to see you in his office."

Harm noted that the yeoman had yet to refer to their CO as "the admiral," as if his predecessor had held the only claim to that particular version of the title. "You've got that 'nice knowing you' look on your face, Coates," he observed.

"He did seem ... perturbed about something, sir."

"Lovely." Mac stood up and followed Harm to the JAG's outer office, where they waited for a gruff "Enter" from within.

Blankenship watched the senior attorneys file into his office and, as had become his custom, waited until they'd been locked in at attention for a few seconds before speaking. "I just got a call from the U.S. attorney's office," he stated, in a tone that suggested a patronizing type of displeasure. "It seems you threw a wrench into both their case and ours in a matter of minutes this afternoon, Colonel."

Mac didn't outwardly flinch, but Harm knew that they shared the same thought: *Bad news travels fast*. "Sir, our primary witness admitted that his statement was false. He cannot positively ID Gunnery Sergeant Connors."

"I see." Blankenship folded his hands on his desk. "And you somehow sensed this, prompting you to go threaten the witness with perjury charges as soon as he sat down? Why doesn't this entirely surprise me, Colonel, given your track record?"

"I had suspicions about the defendant's story, Admiral," Harm jumped in before Mac could open her mouth again. "Based on this new information, I believe it's in the interests of all parties to postpone this hearing pending further investigation."

The JAG's cool expression turned to ice. "Oh, you do, Commander?" he inquired. "I don't recall ever relinquishing my authority over such decisions."

"Sir, I didn't mean to overstep my bounds," Harm replied as diplomatically as possible. "My intent was -"

"You both signed off on the charge sheet." Blankenship gave no sign that he'd even heard his officer. "You have a mountain of incriminating electronic traffic on Connors's account, plus a drug transaction for nearly the exact same amount of money withdrawn from his savings, *plus* eyewitness accounts of his presence at the gathering in question. And let's not forget -- the actual cocaine stash found in his locker. Am I meant to believe that all of that is now merely a coincidence?"

Harm kept his gaze forward, over the older man's head. "Admiral, I don't believe we can prove conclusively that it *couldn't* have been a coincidence. More importantly, I don't believe we can prove that Connors isn't being set up."

There was a brief, tense silence, as Blankenship regarded them both with disapproval. "For the sake of the services' public image, this cannot be allowed to drag on. Any perception of stalling or weakening our stance will be interpreted very badly, both by the press and by those above." He exhaled forcefully. "But we can't very well allow an inadequate case to lead to an acquittal, either. You have three days. Find me a smoking gun -- either Connors's or someone else's. Otherwise he goes to trial as planned. You're dismissed."

Coming to attention wasn't necessary; he'd never given them permission to stand at ease in the first place. "Aye, sir," they chorused, turning smartly toward the path of escape.

Once safely inside Mac's office with the door closed, Harm rolled his eyes. "Well, I feel like a valued part of our national defense," he commented dryly.

"I love the way he keeps us at attention in there sometimes, like basic trainees. You think he's insecure, or is it just a born and bred sense of entitlement?" Mac crumpled a piece of scrap paper in her hand and launched it toward the trash can.

"I'm not ruling out either one, but I'm leaning toward the latter."

She turned to face him, as if suddenly remembering something. "Why did you leap into the fray in there? I was the one who leaned on Rockovich, and it looked to me like Blankenship would've been perfectly happy to focus his wrath on me for a while until you stepped in."

"Which is exactly why I stepped in." Harm folded his arms. "That random, nonsensical crack about your record isn't the first one he's made. He wanted to get on your back, and since we're in this together, I wasn't going to let him pin it all on you."

He prepared himself for her usual annoyance at his protective tendencies. Instead, she gazed at him with a tolerant shake of her head. "He doesn't trust either of us, but you won some points by helping him out with that family matter early on. And you blew them all today, so you're back at the beginning."

"A *blank slate*, if you will?" His eyebrow quirked.

Mac groaned and threw another crumpled paper at him. "Cute. I'm just saying that you probably didn't have to give him the opportunity to practically accuse you of insubordination."

"It distracted him, at least." Harm lowered his voice. "I don't know if it's just that he has a thing against Marines, or if he's also a closet misogynist, or what. What I *do* know is that there are times when standing at attention in heels for long periods of time exacerbates your back, and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing you even blink."

Mac's face softened at that, to his relief. The last thing he wanted was to patronize her. "You could tell that?" she asked quietly. "I thought I covered it pretty well."

"You do. But I've known you a long time, and on this subject, my powers of perception are not to be compared with mere mortals'."

"Well, two can play at that game," she countered, leaning forward on her desk. "Did you know that your jaw twitches ever so slightly when Blankenship says something you don't agree with, which is a lot of the time?"

"And how did you discover that?" he wanted to know. "Most of the time you're at attention right alongside me!"

"I've got ways," she tossed back, with a hint of smugness.

Harm let the teasing note fall, studying her for a moment. "That you do," he said distantly. Before she could respond, he realized what a uniquely bad time and place this would be for them to wander any further down that road, and he shifted the conversation back to the case. "So we've got three days to make some headway, and I'm sure the fact that the Secretary of Defense is going on the Sunday news shows has something to do with our deadline.

From where I'm looking, we've got three possible leads to follow. The money's just about a dead end. The email account isn't. After that, it's down to Connors himself."

Mac nodded, trying not to let her mind linger on the sense of warmth that had resulted from his earlier comments. "As far as the email goes, either the address could have been spoofed or someone could have gotten into his account. Either way, it leaves open the possibility of a deliberate attempt to frame the gunny."

"Strange method, though. In any case, Bud's probably going through the electronic trail with a fine-tooth comb already, so maybe he's got something."

"I'll talk to him. Maybe he can convince Connors to talk to us some more, give us some ideas of who might want to set him up. Maybe if he realizes we're open to the idea of looking in other directions ..."

"Yeah. One can hope." Harm pushed himself off the wall and moved toward the door. "I've got a meeting with State on the international maritime whatever-the-hell in ten minutes. "You still want me to bring dinner over tonight?"

"Did I give you some reason to think I'd changed my mind?"

Damn. Answering questions with questions -- it always threw him off his game when she did that. "Well, no -- at least, I don't think so."

Mac smiled, letting him off easy. "I haven't. I'll see you at 1900."

"All right."

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1712 EDT
Base Brig
MCB Quantico, Virginia

Bud was already in the room when Mac arrived, skimming through a document in his hand. "Good afternoon, ma'am," he greeted. "The guard just went to get Gunnery Sergeant Connors."

"Thanks for setting this up on short notice, Bud. How's the brood at home these days?"

Bud shook his head with a weary smile. "Jimmy's starting to get into things. A.J.'s starting to figure out that he can convince his brother to try just about anything. And Harriet

says she feels like she's full-term already. But on the whole, life's pretty good. How are *you* doing, ma'am?"

Mac heard the note of cautious concern in his voice. He didn't want to overstep, but he wanted her to know he hadn't forgotten about her recent hardships, either. "I'm feeling good," she said confidently. "And on the rare occasions when I'm not, I deal. Harm's been a lifesaver more than once during all this."

"He's had a lot of practice at it, I think." When Mac glanced at him, unsure how to interpret that, his eyes widened in characteristic Bud Roberts fashion. "I didn't mean to direct that solely at you, ma'am. Just making a general comment about the commander's sense of loyalty. I know I've benefited from it a few times myself."

Somehow, that clarification unsettled her more than the original comment. She'd been enjoying Harm's company lately, and at times had allowed herself to hope that they were moving toward something as-yet-uncharted but desired by both of them. At other times, though, lingering doubts hung in the air, stifling that hope. Was he there because he truly wanted to be there, with her? Or was it, as Bud had inadvertently suggested, a role he felt compelled by friendship to fulfill?

The grating sounds of an ill-fitting metal door snatched her out of her internal debate. Mac looked up as the guard escorted Connors into the room. The Marine stiffened at the sight of her, and warily moved toward a chair.

"I was only expecting you, Commander," he said to Bud. "Are we here to discuss a deal?"

Bud turned toward Mac, deferring to her. "No, Gunny, we're not," she told him, folding her hands on the table. "We're here to decide whether or not to continue with the case."

The flash in Connors's eyes conveyed his surprise, but he said nothing.

"We had a material witness," she continued, "the dealer who sold you the coke. Turns out he can't ID you after all. So unless we come up with some other evidence, the government's case isn't nearly as strong as it once was. I only tell you this because barring the discovery of another suspect, you *will* go to trial, and regardless of the outcome, your career will not end well. Public opinion has essentially dictated that much. Therefore, if you want to save yourself, it'd be smart to tell us who might hypothetically be out to get you."

Bud intervened. "Colonel, with all due respect, isn't reasonable doubt my responsibility, not yours?"

"The investigation has been temporarily reopened, and Commander Rabb and I were the original investigators," Mac answered, watching Connors, who shook his head.

"A little late for that, isn't it?"

"Give me reason to look at someone else, Gunny," Mac countered. "Despite the continued investigation, nobody's all that convinced of your innocence. There are techs going through your computer as we speak. If they find that you sent the messages setting up the buy, that gives us the ballgame. If they don't, there may be someone out there who wants to hurt you and the Corps, and we can help find him. Remember, eighteen other Marines are in this, too. If someone has a larger plan, you could make the difference between success and failure.

We'll get to the truth faster and less painfully for you if you help us -- but one way or the other, we *will* get there."

Connors regarded her, his face expressionless. "Come talk to me after you get the computer records. "Till then, I've got nothing to say."

Mac drew her lips into a thin line and gave a curt nod. "Have it your way. Hope your rack's comfortable." She signaled for the guard, and Connors was lead away. With a frustrated sigh, she leaned back in the chair. "He's not helping himself, Bud."

"Ma'am, I couldn't tell you even if I knew anything, but he's not talking to me, either." Bud shrugged. "The computer files and the records of his internet provider are going to have to do for now."

"And if he just went to a coffee shop to send the messages instead of using his home computer?"

"I have no doubt that you and Commander Rabb will think of something, ma'am."

The vague, nagging sense of unease returned as she recalled Harm's earnest determination to see this case resolved justly ... the same earnest determination that ran through everything he did. Had she been too quick to believe that the way he stood by her was somehow different from the way he seemed to stand by everyone else?

Get a grip, Marine. You're being oversensitive. Mac busied herself with her files in the hope that Bud wouldn't see her sudden doubts. "Yeah, that's our Harm," she murmured, quickly standing up and heading for the door.

1907 EDT
Mac's Apartment
Georgetown

Harm arrived only a few minutes late, knocking on the door with his elbow in order to avoid setting down the various containers in his arms. Mac let him in with an amused look at his precarious position.

"I thought you were just going to get takeout."

"I was. But I had a little time, and I thought some stir-fry might be good." He set the stack of containers down on the counter and watched with satisfaction as she lifted each lid, sniffing and nodding approvingly. "I just pulled it off the burner before coming over, so it ought to still be hot."

"Ooh, nice. I don't know where you learned to cook Asian, but wow, did you learn it right."

"I'm from California, remember? There's practically an exit test on Asian food." Harm reached over her to get the plates out of the cupboard. Mac wasted no time in loading her plate with rice, shrimp and vegetables. "Did you talk to Bud this afternoon?"

"I did one better. Bud agreed to let me meet with him and Connors. I just got back from Quantico half an hour ago." Pulling a pitcher of iced tea out of the refrigerator, she moved over to the table. "Unfortunately, the gunnery sergeant isn't very inclined to help us look for answers. He said to come back when we had the data from his computer. I honestly don't know if he's bluffing, or if he knows we won't find anything tying him to those messages."

Harm joined her at the table. "Well, if he's guilty, we can't really expect him to announce it to us."

"But you still believe he isn't."

"Yeah, I do. Which means there must be something else going on that he doesn't want to talk about, or he'd be shouting his innocence from the mountaintops. Wouldn't he?"

Mac took a bite of her dinner and savored the hint of ginger in the dish before replying. "You'd think. But what about the money he withdrew from his savings account? If he didn't use it to buy the drugs, it has to have gone somewhere."

"That's been bugging me, too." Harm shook his head, spearing a shrimp with his fork. "\$4620 doesn't just up and vanish, especially from an enlisted man with a daughter to support."

She frowned. "\$4620? Rockovich's statement said the purchase was for \$4500."

"That's not a huge difference. He could've used the extra to buy groceries, for all we know."

"But most people withdraw money in fairly round numbers," she pointed out. "Why choose \$4620 rather than \$4600 or 4700?"

"Maybe it's a lucky number or something. In any case, I don't think it proves anything, and it's not something we can track."

Another thought occurred to her. "But we can check the security tapes from the bank. What if it was his money that bought the drugs, but not *him*?"

Harm leaned forward on the table, dinner temporarily forgotten. "His account card was in his wallet when he was arrested."

"What about his daughter? She might have a card for that account -- what if hers was lost or stolen at some point? We didn't think to ask her."

"Guess that answers the question of what we're doing tomorrow morning," he commented. "You get the security tapes, I call Shawna Connors?"

"Sounds like a plan."

They let the case fade into the background for the remainder of dinner. Mattie had babysat A.J. and Jimmy the week before, and Harm related, with considerable amusement, her panicked call that night when she discovered A.J. giving his little brother a "tattoo" with Crayola markers. When they finished eating, they began washing the dishes without a word, her washing and him drying, as if it were standard procedure.

As they completed the chore, the silence morphed from comfortable to slightly tense, for no reason that was apparent to Harm. He wondered if there was something Mac wanted to say but couldn't quite get out, yet for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it might be.

"That's the last of them," she announced as she drained the sink, with a brightness that seemed a little forced.

He hung the dishtowel on its hook and jammed his hands into his pockets, unsure what to do next. "I probably ought to head home," he suggested lamely.

"Probably," Mac echoed. "Thanks again for dinner. You're way too good to me."

"All part of the service. I'll see you in the morning." He turned toward the door, but her tentative response made him pause.

"Harm?"

He turned back. "Yeah?"

"Why *are* you so good to me?"

The question caught him off-guard, but the look in her dark eyes told him it was a serious one. "What do you mean?"

She turned a hand palm up, giving a half-shrug. "Ever since Webb, and my illness, you've been ... the dinners, and the movie nights over with the girls ... you've been there for me pretty much every time I've even hinted at being unhappy, and I want to make sure I understand the reasons why."

Her gaze bored into him, and a hundred different answers flew through his mind. "Because that's what we do for each other," he replied, less than convincingly. "Because I want to help however I can, and I don't know how else to do it."

"It's a gesture of friendship?"

Still surprised, Harm answered more openly than he might otherwise have done. "Mac, I think it's been a long time since the word 'friends' was enough to cover what we are."

She lowered her eyes for a moment, acknowledging that truth, but continued. "Then I'll ask the question again. Why are you here with me?"

He had to work to keep a note of defensiveness out of his tone. "Because I want to be, and because I thought you wanted me here," he said. "Was I wrong?"

"No. You weren't -- you're not. It's just ..." Mac lifted her chin and spoke with deliberate calm. "I don't want you to feel obligated, because I can handle things. I appreciate the sympathy - "

"Sympathy? Is that really why you think I'm here?" Harm shook his head, trying to ignore the twinge of hurt that resulted from her words. Hadn't they gotten past this? "Did that kiss a few weeks ago feel like a pity offering?"

"One moment it's that, the next you look at me like you're afraid I'll break. Which is it, Harm?"

"Which *what*? Yes, I care about you, and yes, I'm concerned about you sometimes. Where's the inconsistency in that? I know you won't break. I've never doubted your strength, now or any other time. So what is it you're really trying to say, Mac? Help me out here, because I think I'm behind the power curve."

Abruptly, Mac shook her head and looked away. "Nothing, I guess," she said dully. "I'm sorry. I don't know what ... I am glad you're here. It's just hard to convince myself that you're doing all this because I'm me, and not because I'm a generic person in need, bringing out the Boy Scout in you."

She hadn't meant it as a condemnation, but it pierced through him with the precision of a laser. "I'm sorry, too," he said finally, at a loss. "I guess we don't understand each other as well as I thought."

He moved toward the door again, and again she called after him. "Harm, wait."

This time he didn't turn back around. "You're extraordinary, Mac," he said quietly, his hand on the doorknob. "To everyone, but especially to me. You always have been. That's why I'm here. If me standing here telling you that doesn't convince you, then I don't know what will."

And although he knew even in the moment that it was the wrong choice, that he should find a way to talk it out with her at all costs, he walked out and closed the door behind him, allowing the hurt and uncertainty to prevail yet another day.

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0843 EDT
Base Housing
MCB Quantico, Virginia

He hadn't slept well that night. Only after Harm had already reached his apartment had the obvious answer come to him, and when it did, he'd very nearly beat his head against the wall.

Three little words, you moron. The same ones that would have resolved a dozen other situations over the past few years.

But it was the same old story. Each of them hesitated because the other one did. And Mac's questions had revealed her own doubts fairly clearly, causing *him* to question many of the same former certainties. Was it possible that she'd brought him into confidence back in

May, not because of the enigmatic bond they shared, but because she felt she didn't have anywhere else to go?

He refused to believe that was true, but all the same, it had kept him up half the night.

So now he was pulling up next to the squat base-housing unit occupied by Gunnery Sergeant Connors and his daughter, forcing his personal issues aside. He'd intended to do this by phone, but there was something in the back of his mind that told him he needed to *see* Shawna's responses. If her father was capable of this act, she had to have some clue, even if she had no intention of saying so verbally.

It took a few seconds, maybe thirty, after he rang the doorbell for the door to finally open, and even then it only opened a crack. "Commander," Shawna greeted mechanically, her expression vacillating between disinterest and distrust.

"I apologize for dropping in on you, Miss Connors. I was hoping to talk to you a little more about your dad."

She didn't open the door any further. "Has something changed?"

"We're not sure yet," he told her truthfully.

From what he could see of her face, the young woman looked as though she wanted to refuse. In a moment, however, she nodded abruptly. "I'm, um, I'm still in my pajamas -- I don't have work today. Can you hold on while I throw on some clothes?"

"Of course. I'm sorry for disturbing you." After she shut the door, Harm stood on the small porch for a few more minutes, inwardly cursing Navy whites for the six hundredth time. It was damned hot around here in August, even relatively early in the morning.

When Shawna opened the door fully, she appeared slightly more welcoming, though her dark eyeliner still gave the impression of perpetual sullenness. "C'mon in." She held the door for him and experimentally ducked her head into the outside air. "Ugh, it's oppressive out here. You want some iced tea or something?"

The offer surprised him, but she was talking to him, and his recent experience with teenagers had taught him not to question small favors. "That'd be great. Thanks."

She disappeared into the kitchen for a minute, returning with a tall glass. He accepted it with a smile, and at her gesture, he took a seat on the couch.

"So what's left to talk about?" she asked flatly.

"Well, one of the strikes against your father is the money that was withdrawn from his bank account just before the drugs were purchased." Harm took a sip of tea and leaned forward on his knees. "The withdrawal amount matches up to the amount of the purchase, plus or minus a little. The thing is, I don't think your dad was the one who withdrew that money."

Shawna's pale blue eyes flashed. "So what, you think I'm stealing money from my dad?"

"I didn't say that. But if you did *borrow* some money without telling him, it'd make a lot of things clearer. It'd knock down a major piece of evidence against him."

"Well, sorry, but I didn't take the money." She'd sat down for a moment, but now she stood up again, stalking to the other end of the living room. "So I guess you're gonna have to keep looking."

"Okay." He nursed the iced tea for a moment to allow them both to regroup. "Do you have an ATM card for his account, and if so, has it ever been stolen or misplaced?"

"No. I mean, yeah, I have a card, but I've never lost it or had it lifted." Her arms wrapped around her slender frame, the overlong flare sleeves acting as a kind of defensive cloak. "You want me to show it to you?"

"That's all right. I'll take your word for it." Harm weighed the chances of this next topic turning ugly, and decided he might as well go for it. "You and your dad have been having some problems, right?"

Her face seemed to grow sharper, its angles more pronounced, as she stared at him for a long moment. "No different from the rest of the Marines and their brats," she said finally. "Eventually we all get sick of taking orders."

"But it wasn't some other Marine and his kid who got into a shouting match at the picnic," he pointed out. "Shawna, this is an impossible question, but I have to ask it anyway. Do you think your dad could be desperate enough to work things out with you that he'd sabotage his unit's deployment to stay here in the States?"

The girl's eyes flicked back and forth between two points somewhere on the floor. "You have any kids, Commander?"

"I share custody of a girl close to your age -- she'll be sixteen in the fall."

"Then you can probably answer that question better than me. It's pretty obvious that my dad and I don't exactly 'get' each other."

Harm set down his glass and rubbed his temple, trying to shake loose a vague feeling of disorientation. He couldn't tell whether he'd stumbled on something critical or merely an angry teenager, but as expected, it wasn't a pretty situation.

Damn the summer heat, and these ancient base houses, and this convoluted case. It was way too early in the day to be getting a headache like this.

1351 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Sturgis, have you seen Harm around today?"

Sturgis Turner glanced up from the copy machine as Mac approached. "Heard but not seen," he reported. "He called pretty early this morning and said there was something he wanted to follow up on in person -- on the Connors case, I assume. Hasn't he been in yet?"

"I sure haven't seen him. And neither of his cars are in the lot." Mac wasn't about to go into detail about their little misunderstanding the night before, which might very well have had Harm making some effort to avoid her at present. It would be standard operating procedure for them, after all. "Running late as usual, I guess. I was just going to take a look at the depositions from the other Marines again, and I think he's got them."

Sturgis snapped his fingers. "I knew I was forgetting something. When he called, he mentioned that very thing and apologized for leaving the file at home. He said he was going to stop back by his place on the way in and grab it."

"All right ... Thanks. Maybe I'll just call his cell." She turned toward her office, but Sturgis's voice held her back.

"Mac? Any particular reason why he called me and not you?"

Mac offered a rueful half-smile. "None that could be considered new."

She moved into her office and closed the door, preparing herself to make the phone call. On the spectrum of screw-ups between the two of them, last night was little more than a blip on the radar. Still, she had the distinct feeling she'd personified the phrase 'looking a gift horse in the mouth.' He'd been nothing but supportive for so long, and in turn she'd demanded a justification for it. Perfect.

If you really needed to know, you could have just asked, she rebuked herself fiercely. You've been promising each other you'd talk this out for ages, so what would have been so wrong with 'Hey, flyboy, why don't we start calling these things we do dates?'

But somewhere, buried in her subconscious, there was a logical reason for why that step seemed so insurmountable. It wasn't just the idea of 'dating' him, because there could be nothing nearly that simple between her and this man. Once that bridge was crossed, she was almost certain that they would never even consider turning back. That step, then, was the proverbial giant leap; it represented a very personal assertion that she intended to make her life *work*, to find that ideal place she'd never been able to reach before ... and that she truly believed she deserved it.

That last part always seemed to rise up and kick her in the teeth when she least expected it.

She'd made bad choices, time after time. Not all of them had been wrong, and almost none of them had been *completely* wrong, but here she was, still trailing a long line of trauma in her wake. Each time fate dropped in to knock her for a loop, it became harder and harder to maintain her faith that real happiness waited out there for her.

Why would Harm -- or anyone else -- want to sign on for her brand of misfortune, other than out of duty to a friend, an overdeveloped sense of altruism?

She knew that wasn't fully accurate, but it had just enough logic in it to keep her chronic doubts alive. In any case, there wasn't much to be done about it right now. They both had work to do. And where the hell *was* he, anyway?

A call to his cell resulted in four unrequited rings and an automatic switch to his voicemail. It wouldn't be the first time he'd turned the ringer down while interviewing someone, but it didn't help her get an ETA on the file she needed. In a knee-jerk decision, she

stood up and grabbed her purse. She had a key to his apartment -- she could go get the damn file herself before picking up the security tapes, and if she happened to run into him in the process ... well, that would be okay, too.

"Colonel," Jen Coates began as Mac stepped into the bullpen, "Admiral Blankenship would like an update on the Connors case."

"In progress," Mac responded, not breaking stride. "He'll have a status summary on his desk by the end of the day."

"Ma'am, I think he meant now ..."

It wasn't the brightest career move she'd ever made, but Mac turned to give the petty officer a look that, while polite, left no room for discussion. "Tell the admiral that an update at this time would be a misuse of his time, and that significant information will not be available until this afternoon."

Coates's eyes widened, but she nodded smartly. "Aye, ma'am."

With that, the Marine made a strategically rapid exit before the JAG could receive the message and order her into his office.

When she arrived at Harm's apartment, she saw the blue file folder sitting on his desk and deduced that he hadn't been back yet. Mac tucked the file into her briefcase and reached for a nearby notepad. As she scribbled a note to let him know the file's whereabouts, the phone rang, and she briefly wondered who would call in the middle of the day before his answering machine picked up.

"Good morning! My name is Sandy, and I'm calling from Credit Restoration Incorporated. We have a terrific deal for you to help consolidate your college loans ..."

Mac smirked and punched the button on the machine, ending the call. "Your tax dollars paid for his college education, thank you," she muttered toward the faceless yet cheerful Sandy. Then she paused, not sure if she'd just screwed up the machine. The new-message light blinked for a moment and went out. "Crap." With no better ideas, she hit 'play' to see if a message had in fact been recorded.

"Going to the first saved message," intoned the recorded voice, which quickly changed over to a far livelier one. "It's me, darling. I hope I'm not calling too late in the evening, but I wanted to return your call as soon as I could ..."

His mother, Mac realized, and she moved to stop the recording. But something kept her finger hovering over the button, waiting to satisfy her curiosity before moving on.

"... it sounded like you could use a friendly ear -"

There was a click, and Harm's voice came over the line. Apparently this machine didn't stop recording if the phone was picked up. "Hey, Mom. Sorry, I was just over at Mattie's, saying goodnight."

"Good," Trish's voice said firmly. "Now I can hassle you directly."

"Mom -"

"Do you or don't you love Mac?"

Mac froze, unsure if she'd heard correctly. In a moment, however, she had her answer.

On the recording, Harm exhaled a deep breath. "Of course I do. I've forgotten what it was like *not* to love her."

"Then what's the problem this time?"

"The same one as always -- timing. If I said something now, after everything she's had to deal with lately, it would look like a pity party thrown by the neighborhood Good Samaritan. I'm afraid she might not be able to tell whether I'd said it because I wanted to or because I thought she needed me."

Mac closed her eyes. Somehow -- God knew how -- Harm had figured it all out, and he didn't even know it.

Trish's voice returned. "And if it weren't for that, you'd say something now? You could get past all the old roadblocks and do it?"

There was a pause. "Yeah," he said quietly. "This time, I know I could."

"Then say it in a way that'll make her see what you're really offering her, and why. It's that simple."

Another pause stretched taut in the air. "There's some logic to that," he admitted.

"Well, isn't that faint praise for the woman who brought you into this wor- "

The recording ended abruptly at that point, and the disembodied machine voice informed her that the message had been taken at 2217 on July 4th ... the night of their unexpected kiss. Mac sat down hard in her partner's desk chair, stunned. She'd required proof of him, however unfairly, and that proof had just fallen into her lap.

I am an unbelievable idiot. I played right into his fears.

Only a half-step behind that thought followed the next one: *He said he loves me*. Her brain locked up at that point, unable to process anything beyond the new, immediate goal: *fix this, and you can just about fix everything*.

Her fingers fumbled around for the cell phone in her purse, nearly dropping it when it rang in her hand. With a flash of hope, she checked the display: Bud. Damn. "Hey, Bud."

"Thought you'd want to know as soon as I got the computer records back, ma'am," Bud reported. "I wasn't able to reach Commander Rabb. The Coldmail account 'viper3584' was in fact accessed from Connors's home computer. There are other sites in the temp files that use a similar screen name."

"So he *did* set up the buy." Mac paced the length of Harm's polished wood floor. "Why bluff us, then? He had to have known that we'd get the records without much trouble."

"Don't know, ma'am."

"All right. I'm on my way back to the office. I want to see what else was on that computer."

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1522 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Harm still hadn't made an appearance by the time she walked through the double doors into Ops. Mac had tried his cell one more time, and consciously avoided slipping into worried speculation. It was only mid-afternoon. When it came to target fixation, Harmon Rabb was at least as susceptible as the next guy ... but if he'd discovered something critical to their case, she would have expected him to bring her in on it.

She and Bud took over the conference room and nearly covered the massive table with pages upon pages of files from Connors's computer. Bud was looking for evidence of blackmail, threats, or anything else that might create a mitigating circumstance for his client. Mac wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she was looking nonetheless.

"Where else did you see that 'viper' screen name, Bud?"

Bud leaned across the table to retrieve a particular stack of printouts. "Umm, apparently, it or some permutation of it was connected to an Instant Messenger profile, some message groups, that kind of thing."

"What kind of groups?"

He checked. "Huh. Well, the gunny didn't strike me as a big electronica fan, but I guess it takes all kinds."

"Electronica?" Mac frowned. "Just the music, or do they talk about rave parties and the like?"

"I thought Ecstasy was the drug of choice for those, not cocaine. But to a certain extent, a drug problem's a drug problem."

"Connors doesn't show any evidence of using, though." A bleak suspicion was beginning to creep into her mind, and she dug through another stack to find the sent mail recovered from the Coldmail account. "There are some messages in here from a member of one of those groups -- the sender address has YodelGroup tags." She read aloud. " 'Things get started

around midnight. Come in the side entrance and tell them you're with me, and they'll show you where to go. New DJ this week -- he's awesome. Just let me know how to recognize you.' "

"An invite to a rave," Bud surmised. "I didn't realize those were, ah, all-ages events."

"I'm not so sure they are. Here's the response: 'Just look down. I've got a tattoo of a snake on my ankle, and I'll make sure you can see it.' "

Bud's brow knitted. "Ma'am, the gunny's personnel file only lists one tattoo, and it's on his upper arm."

"That's what I was afraid of." Mac sighed. "But I saw that tattoo -- when I interviewed Shawna Connors. I'd be willing to bet that she's been showing off her tattooed ankles at plenty of raves, and that's part of why she and her father got into the argument."

"So his *daughter* set up the buy."

"And set him up as well."

"Wow. I sure didn't see that coming --" The sudden look of utter dread in her dark eyes made him stop. "What is it, ma'am?"

"Harm was going to talk to Shawna some more today," she said, her voice hushed. "If he went to Quantico, and she thought he'd found her out ..."

Bud's eyes widened, and he reached for the phone. "We'd better call base security ... Colonel, hold up!"

Mac barely heard him, moving instinctively toward the door, but the uncharacteristic force in that last directive halted her. "What, Commander?"

Unblinking, Bud held his ground. "Ma'am, I hope you're not thinking about just going in there without backup."

"Absolutely not. I'll get a hold of a weapon first."

"Ma'am - "

"Bud, he hasn't been answering his phone all day. If this girl has easy access to drugs and is pissed enough or unstable enough to mess with a whole unit of Marines, who knows what she's capable of?"

"Which is why I suggest calling the SPs, ma'am. They'll get there long before we do, anyway."

With a start, Mac realized that Bud was now standing beside her at the door, holding his cell phone instead of the conference room phone. "We?"

There was a determined glint in the young lieutenant commander's eye. "I wasn't disputing the action, ma'am. Only the specific tactics."

In spite of the situation, she had to smile. "Let's move, then."

**Same time
Base Housing
MCB Quantico, Virginia**

Very few times in his life had Harmon Rabb been this thoroughly disoriented. He'd come out of anesthesia a few times before -- more than he cared to count, really -- and he'd woken up from various flying related mishaps to find anything from a quiet forest to a horse staring back at him. But this was an entirely new experience.

He dragged his eyes open, wondering why they took so long to respond to his commands, and attempted to blink away the visual and mental fog with little success. Where the hell was this? Last he remembered, he'd been driving to -- where? A base ... Quantico. Had he made it there? Tough to say.

When his eyes began to focus at last, he realized that he was lying on an expanse of rough, unforgiving carpet. His arms ached, and after a few more seconds he deduced that the reason for said ache was the fact that his hands had been secured behind his back.

Across the room, a young woman was stuffing various things into a backpack with little regard for their condition. *Shawna Connors*, some part of his brain kicked in to remind him. It was her he'd come here to see ... wasn't it?

An attempt to lift his head resulted in a flare of vertigo, and he groaned involuntarily. Shawna whirled toward him, fumbling for the gun stuck into her belt. "It was supposed to keep you out longer than that," she said curtly, turning back to her task. "I should've upped the dosage."

"What ... are you doing?" His words sounded slurred even to himself, but the glimpse he'd gotten of the gun had swiftly made it clear that waiting for his faculties to return fully was a losing strategy.

"Getting the hell out of here. Something I should have done a long time ago. Maybe then this wouldn't have turned into such a ..." Shawna's focus seemed to waver for an instant, but she quickly resumed her agitated packing.

"It was you ... not your father."

She looked down at him with disbelief and contempt, as if the question was too ludicrous to even contemplate. "You're going to try and tell me you hadn't already guessed that before you came here? To act all concerned and worm your way in so I'd just spill my guts? Or did you forget all that? Ativan's good for that kind of thing. Plenty of nights I wanted to forget, all gone ... well, not *all* gone, but gone enough."

As Harm's awareness began to return, he saw her arms, no longer hidden from view by unseasonably long sleeves. Those arms, painfully thin and mottled with small bruises, were the arms of a longtime drug user. How could he not have seen this coming?

"Your father was willing to go to jail for you," he realized, trying to sound accusatory but lacking the energy to pull it off. "He knows you did it, doesn't he? He's sitting in a cell not too far away, about to lose everything for the daughter who framed him."

"Right, he's the hero in this story, isn't he? My father. Gunnery Sergeant Garreth Connors, USMC." Shawna punctuated each letter with another shove into the backpack, then aimed an unsteady finger at him. "If he gets seventeen years, it'll be poetic justice. One for each of the years of my life he shrugged off."

Feeling a wall behind him, Harm used it to push himself into some semblance of a sitting position. His vision swam for a moment, and he leaned back against the wall, waiting for the dizziness to pass before speaking up again. "What has he done?"

The answer was a short, humorless laugh. "More like what hasn't he done -- cared. He never cared about anything that didn't wear Marine green. Unit, Corps, God, country -- isn't that the way you all say it? I didn't hear anything about 'family' in that list."

He decided not to point out the fact that he wasn't in the Corps; she didn't seem interested in understanding the distinction. "I know how hard it can be for family members," he ventured quietly. "They didn't sign up, but they pay a lot of the price of duty - "

"Duty?" Shawna faced him with an expression of barely-contained anger. "What the hell is duty to a six-year-old? How does duty explain why dear old dad never showed any interest in soccer teams or report cards? Didn't he have some kind of duty to us, too? God, even after Mom died, he stuck around for a few weeks, and then what did he do? Shipped out to freaking Afghanistan!"

"I'm sure he wanted to stay," Harm said, trying to keep her talking while he fought to banish the haze from his brain. "Sometimes larger events make it so that we don't have a choice."

"I don't buy that. He could have gotten out. He could have gotten transferred. But he *didn't* want to stay, so instead it's 'Sorry, honey, it's my job. Be good for Aunt Karen, all right?' When Aunt Karen can barely stand to look at me 'cause I look like her dead sister? Christ!" The girl's tenuous hold on her emotions threatened to slip, but she drew herself up, and her eyes grew cold again. "You can't make excuses for him, so stop trying."

She crossed the room to retrieve a small jewelry box from a safe in the bottom of the cabinet. Probably something she could sell on the road, he guessed. "So he screwed up," he said, knowing full well that he was treading a fine line. She didn't look like she wanted to kill him, but she didn't look like she'd entirely ruled it out, either. "Why not just go after him? Why hurt the rest of the unit?"

"Because it's not just him! Don't you get it?" Shawna jammed the box into her backpack. "None of them should be going over there. All this rhetorical crap about making the world safer, and they're not even helping anyone. They're just going to try and police a bunch of people who don't want them there. What good does that do? All the families just sit around and wait to hear that somebody got blown up by a roadside bomb? That's supposed to be a noble sacrifice? I don't think so. It's because of you people that so many of them have a father or a brother who's only halfway in their life -- or not in their life at all anymore. I wasn't going to sit back and watch that happen any longer."

It made sense, at least within the worldview she'd set up for herself. He was willing to bet that she'd started using in the time following her mother's death, and things had spiraled downward from there. Harm closed his eyes and resigned himself to the fact that he most likely wasn't going to be able to change her mind about much of anything. All he could do was ... well, what exactly *could* he do?

"What was the extra \$120 for?" he asked, without much forethought.

Her head swiveled back toward him. "What?"

"You took \$4620 out of your father's bank account to buy the drugs, but the dealer said he'd sold \$4500 worth of coke, supposedly to a Marine. What did you do with the extra money?"

A hint of a smirk crossed her features. "More poetic justice. When Dad came home a while back and saw that my new boyfriend was here, he literally threw him out of the house -- broke his cell phone in the fall. I figured that since I needed him to make the actual deal for me, the least I could do was buy him a new phone."

That made a few things clearer, at least. "You had your boyfriend pretend to be a Marine when he made the deal?"

"I didn't 'have' him pretend anything. All I did was tell him he'd look sexy in camouflage."

A knock sounded at the door, and Shawna jumped, drawing the gun again. Harm twisted around toward the front door, realizing belatedly that they were still in the Connors' living room, the curtains drawn closed to prevent anyone from seeing in.

"Shawna?" called a familiar voice. "Can I come in and talk to you?"

Harm sagged against the wall. Trust Mac to find a way. He wondered how she'd figured it out. His relief was short-lived, however, as the gun shifted in his direction.

"I have a gun," Shawna shouted back. "And my dad taught me how to use it." Almost as an aside to her captive, she commented, "One of the only things he ever taught me to do. The irony's running hot and heavy now, huh?"

"Well, I *don't* have a gun, Shawna," Mac's voice came back. "Look through the peephole and see for yourself. If you let me in, I can help you figure out how to get out of this."

Shawna flicked her eyes back and forth between Harm and the door, and he could see her weighing the options in her mind. She moved to the peephole and looked through. Apparently satisfied that Mac was telling the truth, she unlocked the door and stepped quickly backwards, keeping the weapon trained on Harm. "Just you, and make it quick," she called through the door.

Mac stepped inside and closed the door behind her, her dark eyes immediately searching out her partner. Upon finding him slumped against the wall, apparently uninjured, she offered a wry smile that masked deep relief. "You look like hell, flyboy."

"Nice to see you too," he offered weakly.

She turned her attention to the young woman who watched them both suspiciously, the gun clasped in both trembling hands. "I talked to your father, Shawna," she began gently. "He knew that you'd taken the money, and he realized that since the food was tainted at the picnic, you must have been the one to do it. But he was willing to take the fall for you,

because he knows he's done some things that have hurt you. He wanted to take responsibility for his mistakes, even to the point of going to prison and breaking his oath to the Corps for you. That should demonstrate that he cares very much about you."

Shawna shook her head in a violent motion. "He wants to take responsibility? It's a little too damn late for that. He should have tried that while my mother was still alive!"

Mac eased forward, so carefully that Harm barely noticed she'd done it. "Okay," she replied. "Then run. Get out of here and start your life over."

That threw her for a loop. "Like you're going to let me just leave?"

"If it'll keep anyone else from getting hurt, then yes." Mac withdrew her cell phone. "I can call the SPs and tell them we're going to be coming out through the front door. While they're focused on the front, you can slip out the back. It's as simple as that."

Shawna stared at her, challenging her to back down. "I don't believe you."

"It's standard hostage procedure," Harm stated, jumping in to play along with whatever Mac's plan turned out to be. "The person doing the talking on the inside makes the rules. They'll do what Colonel Mackenzie orders them to do without question. Unit, Corps, God, country, remember?"

Those words, which had always sounded so ugly and contemptible to her, seemed to change something in her mind. "Why would you want to help me get away?" she asked Mac, sounding much younger than she had before.

"Because I'd do just about anything to protect my friend," Mac replied honestly. "He's more important to me than punishing you, or getting a conviction, or ...really anything."

At last, Shawna nodded imperceptibly, and Mac raised her phone to her ear. "We're coming out," she said. "Front door, very slowly. Everybody on your toes."

Her wary gaze still trained on the front door, Shawna began to turn toward the back -- and then crumpled with a cry as Bud appeared from the hall and jammed a taser into her collarbone. Mac caught the girl easily with one arm and took the gun with the other, lowering her motionless body to the floor.

Harm blinked, not sure what he'd just seen. Mac rose slowly with a small shrug. "I told her I didn't have a gun," she emphasized. "Nobody said anything about nonlethal weapons. You're a lot stealthier than I realized, Bud."

"That's kinda the point, ma'am." Bud smiled, quickly turning his attention to their comrade. "You okay, sir?"

"Close enough, Bud. Nice work." Harm shook his head in amazement as Mac lifted her cell phone again.

"All clear," she informed the waiting police team, kneeling down to release him from the rope that bound his wrists. "Can you stand?"

"I guess we'll find out." Using the wall for assistance, Harm pushed himself up from the floor and immediately stumbled. Mac swiftly locked an arm around his waist, and he offered an embarrassed smile. "Thanks. For all of this, actually."

"All part of the service," she replied lightly, echoing his words from the night before. "I guess this is what I get for letting you out of my sight."

There was a new light in her eyes, though, as if the pieces of a long-jumbled puzzle had finally fallen into place. "What is it?" he asked.

"Later. Let's get this mess cleaned up first."

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1912 EDT North of Union Station

Harm set a direct course for the couch as soon as he stepped into his apartment. He flopped down with a heavy sigh, running his hands through his short hair. "Well, that day sucked."

Coming in behind him, Mac set their takeout bags down on the counter. "We've had worse. The real story did come out in the end, and no one was permanently damaged."

"Remind me of that when my head doesn't feel like it's full of cotton. And no remarks from the peanut gallery on what my head really is full of," he added, anticipating an incoming joke.

"Apparently you're with it enough to launch preemptive snark strikes." She flashed a smile at him -- a real, open smile, of the kind he'd only seen a few times recently. It warmed him, even if he didn't completely understand it.

The phone rang, and he reached toward the table to retrieve the handset. "Hello?"

"Commander," came Admiral Blankenship's cultured voice. "I trust that today's events have left you none the worse for wear?"

"Had a thorough check-out at Quantico, sir. The drug Miss Connors used was Ativan -- it's a narcoleptic with no long-term effects. You'll have a full report first thing Monday morning."

"Glad to hear it," the JAG replied, though Harm wasn't sure if he was referring to his state of health or the report. "Incredible story. The girl did all this as some convoluted way to get back at her father?"

"She was desperate to make her father acknowledge her, Admiral. The crowd she hung with, and eventually the drugs, all of it was an extension of that. But when Gunny Connors found out about her addictions, he responded so harshly that she fought back. I can't say it all makes perfect sense to me, sir, but it's what happened."

"Incredible," Blankenship muttered again. "Sounds to me like the Marines could use a bit of a refresher on managing their priorities."

Harm rolled his eyes, wondering how their CO could still find a way to pin blame for this regrettable incident on the Corps. With a glance toward Mac, he replied, "Respectfully, sir, may I point out that it was a Marine who resolved the situation today?"

Mac raised an eyebrow at him, clearly filing away that comment for future use. On the other end of the phone, Blankenship made a harrumphing sound and continued. "True enough. In any case, the charge against Gunnery Sergeant Connors has been lowered to obstruction, since he did willfully mislead the investigation in his attempt to protect his daughter. Miss Connors has been transferred off-base to the Quantico Police Department to await her formal charges. She'll most likely be charged as an adult, given the nature of the crime and her proximity to her eighteenth birthday. The D.A. may allow some leniency, though, since she's already turned in her boyfriend."

"And the rest of the implicated Marines, sir?" Harm asked.

"Their records will show nothing of this incident. They ship out in six days. In the future, the base has pledged to place stricter controls on the mess services, even the picnics." The admiral seemed relatively satisfied with the turn of events. "At least there won't be any headlines screaming about Marines attempting to shirk their duty or turning on their units. That'll be all, Commander -- I still need to call Colonel Mackenzie and fill her in on everything I just told you."

"Sir, I can do that," Harm suggested quickly. "The colonel just left here after dropping me off, so I doubt she's home yet, and I'll need to call her later to discuss our report anyway ..."

Across the room, Mac's eyes widened as she realized what her partner was hastily trying to head off. It wasn't an outright breach of protocol for her to be at his home, but it probably wouldn't sit too well with their appearance-conscious boss, either.

There was a pause on the line, and then Blankenship's voice returned. "Very well. See that she receives all the information. Good night, Commander."

"Good night, sir." Harm set down the phone and leaned back on the couch. "Sheesh. Talking to that man has something in common with navigating a minefield."

"Well, we're one for one on that count," Mac commented, coming over to sit down opposite him. "Everything's settled?"

"Connors is getting downgraded to obstruction, Shawna was turned over to the locals and gave up her boyfriend, and the MEU ships out in six days as if it never happened," he summarized. "Oh, and the Marines keep their high-and-tight heads off of ZNN, which of course is what really counts."

"You're getting sarcastic in your old age."

"I've always been sarcastic. I'm just choosing not to stifle it in my old age." Harm shook his head. "It's tragic, really. She fell into this tailspin all because she just wanted him to be there for her."

Mac heard the words 'be there' and bit her lip. "That actually brings up something I wanted to talk to you about."

He looked up, conflict instantly visible in his expression. The likely topics for this conversation were fairly limited. On one hand, he was well aware that keeping these last few inches of metaphorical distance between them was doing more harm than good. On the other ... there had to be a reason for the doubts she'd expressed only twenty-four hours before, and he just wasn't sure what he'd do if she chose to step back this time.

She watched as he fought to keep his once-automatic emotional shields from going up. That simple action warmed her soul and at the same time strengthened her resolve. It would be something of a battle against instinct, but they would not hide from each other any more.

"I screwed up last night," she began, gathering her courage before he could speak. "You've been there for me through all the fallout from everything that happened in the spring. I don't know how, but each time you've given me just as much support as I need, no more or less. I should have just told you how grateful I was -- how grateful I am. I shouldn't have demanded a reason for it."

Harm leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. The posture suggested some lingering insecurity, but also a willingness to try. "It hasn't been a one-way street between us lately, no matter what you might think," he commented quietly. "Everything that surrounded Mattie's custody, plus your brief stints as my babysitter after the helo crash and the Alden case ..." His eyes flicked off to the side. "And you're entitled to want the reasons why."

For a moment, she wasn't sure what he was referring to. "The reasons why - ?"

"Why I can't resent Clayton Webb for loving you but hate him to this day for hurting you. Why I'd sell my soul to buy your happiness but can't seem to figure out how to give it to you myself. Why ..." He shrugged helplessly, as if words -- or at least the words he could find -- were insufficient, and gingerly pushed himself up from the couch.

Taken aback, Mac didn't respond as he slowly moved to the window. She couldn't have said what it was she'd expected from this conversation, but this wasn't it. Recalling what she'd heard on the message between him and his mother, she made a decision and stood up as well, closing the gap between them to only a few steps. "Harm," she said simply, drawing his gaze. "If you tell me the reasons why, I'll believe you."

He looked at her, uncomprehending, and she elaborated. "If you're afraid that I'll doubt you, because of what I said last night, or just because of everything that's happened, I'm telling you that I won't. I'm tired of being afraid of this thing between us, of getting so close to something and getting it derailed by misunderstandings or circumstances. I want to know what you think and feel, and I don't want you to hold back because you think I've been through enough lately. It's all right."

Turning away from his view of the empty street to face her, Harm spoke in a low voice. "I wanted to be whatever you needed when you found out about your illness, because I realized that there was a good chance you might have lost something that meant a lot to you. I just didn't expect it to hit *me* so hard, I guess."

She hesitated. "I don't think I understand."

He spread his hands, offering a small, wistful smile. "Just because guys don't draw hearts in their schoolbooks doesn't mean we don't spend any time thinking about what it'd be like to have a real home and a family. The subject has come up, with a number of different people. But the truth is, when I've pictured that life, there's only one woman I've ever really been able to picture it with."

Unexpectedly struck by a resurgence of irrational doubt, Mac's thoughts went to the young lieutenant whose murder had very nearly destroyed her friend so many years ago. "And she was taken from you," she said softly.

"No. She's standing in front of me."

That shut her down completely. Some part of her had always known, perhaps, but it was her nature to often distrust her instincts, even the ones she desperately wanted to follow. He used her silence to his advantage, taking a step forward and reaching out to grasp her hand, immobilizing it in his strong fingers. "Mac, none of this has been about pity, or a sense of obligation, or anything like that. You asked me why I'm here, and I should have been able to tell you -- I'm here because I'm so intensely and fundamentally in love with you that there's literally nowhere else I could be and nothing else I could do. But I was worried that you wouldn't see that for what it is, because of everything that's happened, and it looks like maybe I was right. So I'll turn the question back to you. Why are *you* here?"

Tears welled up and threatened to obscure her vision, and the words fell from her lips without a second thought. "Because I need you so damn much that my world would cave in on itself if you weren't in it," she confessed, her voice hitching on the end of the sentence. "I've tried not to love you, for all sorts of ridiculous reasons, and I've tried to tell myself that you couldn't love me, but I just can't get around it."

Relief and elation flared in his ocean-hued eyes, but she could see him holding himself back. "Then why, last night - ?"

"The same reasons we always second-guess ourselves. Fear, mostly, of one not needing or caring as much as the other ..." She cast her gaze downward. "You have to admit how it might be hard to believe that anybody could truly need me, especially now of all times ..."

His gentle fingers lifted her chin so that she had no choice but to look at him. "Believe it," he told her solemnly. "You stood here and promised that if I told you the reasons why, you'd believe me. I'm holding you to your promise. Believe me, the way I believe you -- and love me the way I love you. That's all I'll ever ask."

"I can do that," she whispered, melting against him as their lips met in a kiss that shattered the memory of every kiss that had come before. One became two, and then three, and she lost all track of time as they gave and took as much of each other as was possible from a simple kiss.

After a minute, Harm swayed on his feet and drew back to steady himself. "Whoa. Little light-headed."

Instantly Mac recalled the events of the day and winced. "I'm sorry. I forgot about - mmphh ..."

The word was lost as he caught her lips again. "I didn't say I was complaining," he informed her a moment later, a hint of his trademark grin evident in the velvet tones of his voice. Before long, though, another pulse of vertigo overtook him, and she tightened her hold to ensure that he wouldn't fall. "Damn it," he breathed, embarrassed and apologetic.

"Apparently you've had enough fun for one day," she told him, steering him toward the bedroom. "Come on."

She led him up the steps with one arm snugged around him, ostensibly in case he got dizzy again, but realistically because she didn't want to let go. Once there, though, she released her hold and stepped back, unsure.

"Do you, ah, think you need me to stay?" she asked tentatively. "I mean, just because -"

"Exactly." He reached into his dresser drawer and took out a T-shirt, offering it to her. "Stay, just because."

And so they found themselves lying together in the darkness, surrounded by each other and the indescribable comfort of a new, complete understanding. Both somehow knew, without speaking of it, that this moment would be repeated but never equaled, because it was the result of a unique confluence of events, a summation of all that had come before.

"Harm?"

"Hmm?"

"Slight confession to make ... I accidentally heard the message on your answering machine -- the one from your mom."

Shaking off the beginnings of sleep, he propped himself up on one elbow. "The one where -"

"That's the one."

"Then you had something of an unfair advantage in that conversation we just had, huh?"

Relieved that he didn't seem annoyed, Mac smiled into the darkness. "Call it signals intelligence. But it's not like it provided me a playbook for working this out."

"You know why that message is still on the machine after six weeks?" She didn't have a guess, so he continued. "Because as long as it was there, it was like a Mom-style string around my finger, reminding me that I had to find a way to talk to you about this. I guess it did its job, one way or another."

He settled back onto the pillow. She felt his soft, even breathing against her neck and felt an overwhelming urge for more, to look further down the road, because the future had a far more inviting look to it than she'd ever known before.

"Harm?" she whispered again.

"Yeah, Mac?"

"Is this what it's going to be like for us now?"

"Well, I was hoping that sleeping with you would eventually get a little more exciting than this, truth be told ..."

"Cute. I mean, when we wake up tomorrow, and Monday, and the next week - is this still going to be us? When it comes up at work, and when Mattie wonders why we're always together, are we going to know how to respond?"

In answer, she felt a light kiss against her collarbone and his arm sliding across her waist. "Some of it we'll have to take a step at a time," he replied. "But I think yes -- this is us, from here on out. Now that we know, I don't think there's any other way for us to be except completely and unequivocally together."

"Good," she murmured, drawing his arm tighter around her. "Because I meant what I said earlier. If I can help it, I swear I'm not letting you out of my sight again."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You get in far too much trouble when I'm not around."

"Go to sleep, Marine."

*** THE END ***