



The Greatest Gift

Rating: PG-13 for violence, language

Classification: Romance (H/M), Angst

Spoilers: anything with Palmer - especially "Webb of Lies", "Boomerang, Part II" (as always), "Ghost Ship" (barely), and "Heroes". And it's not a spoiler per se, but if you don't know why Christmas sucks for Harm, you're not worthy of understanding the reference. So there.

There was a light snow falling outside the window, dusting the street with a shimmer of white. She'd never cared much for snow before, but now she watched the tiny flakes with a new fascination. The snow was the last thing of beauty she would ever see in this life, and she wanted to capture it forever.

Sarah Mackenzie had finally accepted the realization that she was going to die. It had taken nearly three hours of watching her own blood trickle down her arm and onto the concrete floor, but she could find no escape this time. Her wrists were handcuffed to an unyielding iron pole, and anything she might have used as a tool had been taken away hours ago. She'd struggled against the cuffs for a long time, but the effort had only drained her strength.

The day had started off so well. She'd won her case, a slam-dunk minor in possession charge against a nineteen-year-old seaman, and she'd even had time to buy little A.J.'s Christmas present. When she'd opened the door to her building, Clark Palmer had been the furthest thing from her mind - which was precisely why he'd chosen to strike at that moment.

Whatever drug he'd given her had long since worn off, leaving her with the dull ache from the slash across her wrist. "Suicides are so simple, yet so dramatic," the special-agent-turned-freelance-killer had commented as he'd secured her to the pole. "This one is hardly my finest work, but it'll serve the purpose."

"No, it won't," she'd argued, more out of desperation than anything else. "No one's going to believe that I killed myself."

"That's all right. I'm only looking to buy myself a little time to disappear." Palmer had flashed a truly evil grin. "I don't need to convince everyone. I only need to convince everyone but Harmon Rabb."

Hoping to keep him talking, she'd pushed further. "So this is all another elaborate way to play mind games with Harm?"

"Hey, everyone's got to have a hobby. I'll deal with him sooner or later, but right now I want to see him suffer."

He'd said little else, finishing his scene-setting and locking a deadbolt on his way out. "See you soon, Sarah. Though I don't expect you'll see me."

So she lay there, turning over the possibilities in her mind until the blood loss began to take effect. *Harm will find me*, she repeated to herself, but eventually a dismal sense of reality crushed that hope. No one knew she was gone. Even if someone did, no one could

possibly know where she was - hell, she herself didn't even know. Harm had pulled off some impossible tricks before, but this one was beyond even him. While there was still time, she would have to make her peace.

Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie prepared herself to die, alone, on the floor of an empty warehouse, the victim of a bizarre, senseless murder. As consciousness slipped away, she felt a strange calm wash over her ...

Mac opened her eyes to nothingness, a brilliant, white oblivion. "Hello, Sarah," said an unfamiliar voice, and she turned. Did she turn? Or did the figure before her appear out of the air? She couldn't be sure. Nothing hurt anymore: in fact, she could barely feel her body. "Oh, God," she whispered. "I'm dead."

"No, not yet. That's why I'm here." A young woman in a glistening white gown stepped toward her with a serene smile. "Don't be afraid. I'm Hope, your guide."

"Guide for what?" Mac glanced around, doubt clouding her eyes. "Is this a dream?"

"If you'd like to think of me that way, you may. I'm not here to challenge your faith or beliefs. Typically, though, I'm referred to as an angel."

"An angel? Shouldn't you have wings?"

The girl - Hope - only shrugged gracefully, and a pair of huge, gleaming wings appeared. "I don't know who on earth came up with that idea. They tend to intimidate more people than they comfort." The wings vanished. "I'm sure this all seems very peculiar, but it's important that you keep an open mind. I'm here to help you, Sarah, to help you see why you can't give up. You have to make the choice to live."

"It hardly seems like my choice anymore."

"That's only your perception. Come with me. I will show you what I mean."

And with a wave of her hand, they were gone -

- and standing in the middle of JAG Ops. Mac looked around the room, uneasy. It was as full of activity as ever, but something didn't feel quite right. She didn't recognize many of the people hurrying past, and she could have sworn the walls weren't that shade of gray before.

As if reading her thoughts, Hope explained. "This is the future as it would be if you died that day. Six years have passed. Your friends, loved ones - their lives are very different."

A lieutenant flew into the bullpen, straightening his jacket along the way. He pulled up short at Gunnery Sergeant Galindez's desk, where he received a disapproving stare. "Morning, Gunny," the young officer said cautiously. "I take it the captain isn't too happy right now."

"Well, he was doing just fine until he got a call from Norfolk NCIS about twenty

minutes ago.” The Marine folded his arms. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you, LT?”

“Word travels fast. How long do I have to live?”

“He’s on the phone with NCIS HQ, arguing jurisdiction and trying to save your ass. I’d say you’ve got three minutes, give or take.”

Mac listened to the exchange with growing curiosity. “ ‘The captain’? Is Admiral Chegwidden - ”

“Retired, a little over a year ago,” Hope answered easily.

“I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same.” She smiled. “I remember Harm making an entrance like that a few times.”

“Funny you should mention that ...” The angel moved away from the door to the JAG’s office. The immaculate gold lettering read Captain Harmon Rabb, Jr. “He’s expected to get his star soon.”

“Wow,” Mac said softly. “Way to go, flyboy.” It was difficult to imagine her partner, who’d written the book on bending the rules, now as the authority who held others up to those rules. But he’d never been anything less than passionate about finding justice in any form, and she had no doubt that he served the office faithfully.

At that moment, she heard his voice from behind the door, deadly calm. “Lieutenant Merrick, please report.”

The lieutenant exchanged a glance with Galindez. “Nice knowing you, Gunny.” He raised his head and strode into the C.O.’s office.

Mac watched him walk right past her without flinching. “They can’t see us?”

“We’re not really here, so we can’t affect them. We’re simply observers. It doesn’t work quite like in that movie. You know, when the bell rings, the angel gets its wings?” Hope raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve never been a big fan of ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’, anyway. Even if it is that time of year.” Mac didn’t bother asking how she knew of movies. She seemed to know everything else. “Can we go in? I’d like to see Harm, even if he can’t see me.”

“That’s why we’re here.” Hope laid a delicate hand on her arm. “I should warn you, Sarah. The man in there isn’t the Harm you remember. A lot has happened in six years. I just want you to be ready.”

She nodded, but the seriousness in the girl’s tone sent a chill through her. “I am.”

“Then go ahead.”

She reached for the doorknob, but her hand passed through it as if it wasn’t there. Startled, she looked to Hope for guidance, but the angel only smiled and stepped effortlessly

through the wall. Shaking her head at the surreality of it all, she followed.

In the office of the Judge Advocate General, Lieutenant Sean Merrick stood at attention in front of his commander, waiting for the worst. Captain Rabb sat behind the imposing oak desk, his ice-blue eyes holding the anger that he'd managed to keep out of his voice. "Do you have an explanation for me, Lieutenant?" he asked quietly.

"Sir, I thought it was the only way - "

"The correct answer is, 'No, sir.' Because I don't see what possible explanation you could have for pulling a stunt like you did last night. It is going to take months to repair the damage you caused in one fell swoop to the authority of this office." He rose from his chair, towering over the silent junior officer. "I don't ever want to get another call like the one I got this morning. Is there anything unclear about that?"

"No, sir."

"Good." The JAG took his seat again, and some of the anger dimmed. "Now you can tell me how you got into the simulation server room at Sea Systems Command." The younger man hesitated. "At ease, Merrick. I just want to know how the hell you did it."

"I sneaked in with the custodial staff, sir. I had a friend who got through college by mopping floors, and he always said you could learn anything that way. That is, up to a point, of course."

"Was he right?"

Merrick relaxed a little. "Yes, sir. The records were right there, and the navigator's scores were outstanding. Her commander had to have falsified the OPRs."

Captain Rabb nodded and leaned back. "Look, Merrick, I'm not going to sit here and tell you that everything here goes strictly by the book. My reputation alone ought to be proof enough against that. But you have to choose your battles, or you run the risk of making some powerful enemies. The Navy has a long memory at times. The good news is, you can usually get around a roadblock without having to bulldoze it. And if your back's against a wall, come talk to me. I'm willing to go to the mat for my people, provided they give me a good reason."

"Yes, sir. I'll think it through more carefully next time."

"That's good enough for me. Dismissed."

"Aye, sir. Thank you, Captain." The lieutenant turned on his heel and headed for the door, but paused halfway. "Um, sir?"

He glanced up from his paperwork. "Something further, Lieutenant?"

"On the subject of unconventional tactics ... It's not really my business, sir, but I heard rumors about a case, a long time ago, where someone fired an automatic in the courtroom. I asked Commander Roberts about it, but he told me to drop it."

There was a hint of amusement in the captain's expression. "I'll bet he did. Ancient

history, Merrick - probably most of ten years ago now. But as I recall, it did prove the point.”

“So it really did happen?” Merrick shook his head, amazed. “I’d like to meet the lawyer who had the ...” He trailed off, slowly comprehending. “*You*, skipper?”

“Me, Lieutenant. And I’m still living it down. So take that as a warning.”

“Aye, sir.” The junior attorney snapped to attention and exited quickly, leaving his commanding officer lost in thought.

“Marines don’t duck,” he said softly, recalling that day. “They take cover, but they never duck.”

Unseen, Mac watched from the corner, realizing how painful the memory was for him. Did it hurt him to remember her at all? She couldn’t tell; he was even more guarded than she remembered. In his career, at least, he seemed to be doing well for himself. There was no ring on his left hand, and no evidence of a family: the only picture on his desk was of little A.J. Their godson must be nearly eight by now ... She smiled inwardly, thinking of how adorable he must be.

She studied her friend’s face. As handsome as ever, Harm was also clearly older. There were a few streaks of gray at his temples, and lines around his eyes that spoke of a long-standing tension. That wasn’t quite right - maybe it was something else. In any case, there was surprisingly little happiness to be found in his being.

She looked at Hope, questioning. The girl shook her head. “Be patient. There is more to see.”

The phone signaled. “Sir, just a reminder that you have a briefing with Admiral Patrick in half an hour.”

“Thank you, Keller. Tell Commander Roberts that I’ll need to see him when I get back.”

“Aye, sir.”

Harm gathered the files on his desk and reached for something behind him. As he stood up, Mac realized with sudden horror that it was a cane. She watched, shocked and saddened, as the tall, proud captain walked stiffly over to the bookshelf, favoring his left leg. He leaned the ebony stick against the fireplace and picked up a framed photograph that had been hidden near the back of the shelf. She hurried to look over his shoulder and saw the two of them smiling out at their future selves. They’d been caught in a water-bottle fight after a JAG softball game, and a certain someone had thought to bring a camera. She remembered threatening to steal Bud’s film after that one ... He stared at the picture for an immeasurable time, his features a mask of non-emotion.

“Oh, Harm,” she whispered, wanting to reach out to him. “What happened to you?”

Then he shoved the frame back onto the shelf and limped to the door, ready to confront the here and now.

When he’d gone, Mac whirled on the angel. “What happened? Why does he walk like

that? Is it permanent?"

"As I said, much has changed. He was injured in the performance of his duty five years ago. His leg will never fully recover."

She didn't speak for a moment, stunned. The idea of Harm being disabled was unthinkable. He'd always been so strong ... "How did it happen?" she asked in a low voice.

"I will show you. Come." Together, they walked back through the wall -

- and directly into Harm's office. His old office, or was it his present one? Mac gave up trying to keep the timelines straight in her head. The version of Harm that stood there wore the three stripes of a commander, and there was no trace of a limp in his rapid pacing. This was five years earlier, and therefore, she reasoned, a year after her death.

"Stop it, Rabb. You're making me dizzy." Clayton Webb was leaning over the desk, studying the floor plan of a building. "You know this is a suicide mission, don't you?"

"Not suicide. Kamikaze, maybe." Harm was intently focused on a piece of paper in his hand. "Are we absolutely sure he's there?"

"If he were that predictable, we'd have had him years ago." The deputy director of CIA operations looked up. "I checked our intel backwards and forwards. He's there."

"Then I'm going in tonight."

"What are you, Dirty Harry? You're not going in there alone. I've lost partners to this guy, too, and you're going to need help."

"Webb - "

"Save it, Harm. I'm going."

"Need a third?"

Harm whirled. "Admiral - Sir, we were just - "

"I know what you were just doing, Commander, and I know that I couldn't stop you if I tried." A.J. Chegwiddden leaned against the doorframe, his arms folded. "I also know that Palmer is one tricky bastard, and an aging SEAL is better than no SEAL at all. Especially when all you've got is a spook and a jet jock."

"A vengeful jet jock," Webb added, earning a dangerous glare from Harm. "Welcome aboard, Admiral. I hope you know what you're getting into."

"I always do. Let's come up with a plan, shall we?"

As the three men gathered around the desk, Mac listened with growing dread. Even if she hadn't seen the future, she'd have known that this couldn't end well. Palmer was too

smart, too well prepared, too ... evil. Harm had gotten it right from the beginning. *"He's like a disease ... you know that sick, eerie feeling you get just before the flu attacks your body ..."*

This wasn't just for her, she tried to tell herself. She hadn't been his only victim. Clark Palmer deserved to die a hundred times over for his crimes, and they were simply trying to prevent him from striking again. But as she watched their body language, she knew it was more than that. This was revenge, as pure as it could be. Especially for Harm - she could read it in his eyes. Her partner would not rest until Palmer was stopped.

"I don't know if I want to see this," she told Hope.

"I sympathize, but it is necessary. I wish there were an easier way to make you understand." With a dismissive wave of her hand, their surroundings morphed into a darker, more ominous scene.

Inside a deserted factory, not unlike the building in which she'd found herself trapped, a figure crept along the wall. Clad in black fatigues, Harm moved cautiously with his weapon drawn. The trio must have split up to cover the building. Mac wanted to scream at him to go find Webb or the admiral, as if she could change or control anything about the current situation.

"I've swept the north end of the first floor," he said quietly into a tiny microphone on his collar. "I'm heading for the south annex." The radio crackled in his ear for a moment. "Anybody read me?" Nothing. Frustrated, he yanked the earpiece out, letting it dangle against his shoulder.

Mac followed him, with Hope a few steps behind. The Marine in her sensed something in the shadows, and instinctively she shouted, "Harm!"

But of course, the warning went unheard. A silenced gun jabbed into his back, and he stiffened. "You should have let Webb's boys handle this one," came Palmer's voice from the darkness. "You're not exactly built for stealth."

"You knew I wouldn't." The commander kept his voice level.

"Of course you wouldn't. You're too damned self-absorbed to think anybody could do the job better than you." Palmer smirked, but his eyes were cold. "Especially since you don't just want me caught. You want me dead."

"If you're waiting for me to disagree, forget it. I do want you dead. I don't think there's any other way to stop you." Harm's eyes were just as cold: it frightened her to see that barely-veiled rage.

"You're probably right. But oh, how the mighty have fallen. A year ago, you really believed you could only kill for the greater good, didn't you? 'To defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic', and all that red, white and blue bullshit you people spout off at every opportunity?"

"You *are* an enemy of the United States, Palmer. You always have been."

"That isn't why you're here. That honor-and-justice mantra died with Sarah Mackenzie, didn't it? You knew it was me from the start, and now you're here to take your revenge for her. Congratulations, Rabb. You've finally learned the way of the world."

Harm's expression didn't change, but she could hear the grief behind his anger. "Why did she have to die, Palmer? What did ending her life get you?"

"It got me this moment. That's enough." There wasn't a trace of remorse in his words. Right then, Mac could have sworn that he wasn't even human. "Now are you going to put down your gun so we can do this face to face?"

"What if I said no?"

Without warning, Palmer lowered his weapon and fired directly into his adversary's left knee. Harm collapsed with a cry of agony that tore at her soul, and the gun fell from his hand.

"No!" she screamed, unable to repress the urge to run to him. "You bastard!"

As Harm writhed on the floor, clutching at his ruined leg, the killer shook his head.

"You never learned when to give up, Rabb. I said I'd break you, and I have."

"Maybe," he managed to say, gritting his teeth against the blazing pain. "Maybe not."

Palmer laughed. "Well, in any case, you've pretty much outlived your usefulness. Or

your entertainment value, at least. I bet you never thought this would actually happen, did you? The day when I finally stopped screwing with your mind and decided to end it once and for all?"

Slowly, Mac realized that her friend wasn't helpless. As the oblivious Palmer continued to gloat, Harm reached down with a trembling hand, past the bloody mess of his knee, and withdrew a small pistol from his ankle holster. *Come on, Harm*, she willed him. *Finish this.*

"Well, it's been educational." Palmer returned his full attention to his prey. "Give your partner my best."

With the last of his strength, Harm raised his gun and fired. The shot reverberated from the walls, and Palmer staggered back, a ragged hole through his forehead. His own weapon went off out of reflex, and another bullet sliced through Harm's upper arm. He seemed to barely feel it, watching with no satisfaction as the mercenary agent's lifeless body fell to the floor. His grip on the gun went slack as blood began to soak his sleeve.

In a weak, tortured voice, he whispered, "It's over, Mac ... I'm sorry I was too late."

She reached for him, but her hands passed through unnoticed. "Hang on, sailor," she pleaded, desperate to help him somehow. "You're going to be okay. Just hang on."

The excruciating pain was threatening to overtake his consciousness, but he fought it back. "Webb," he moaned, "Admiral ... somebody ..."

The gunshot had brought them running, and now both men burst through the doorway. "Damn." Admiral Chegwiddden quickly measured up the situation. "Check Palmer. I've got Harm." He dropped to one knee by his officer's side, tearing away the fabric to examine the wounds. Upon seeing what was left of Harm's knee, he recoiled. "Oh, Christ."

"Palmer's dead," Webb reported from across the room, reaching for his radio.

"Operative down. We need an ambulance in here. Threat has been neutralized."

Harm was drenched with sweat and white with pain. "Talk to me, Commander," A.J. demanded, expertly binding his arm to slow the bleeding. "Stay with us, all right?"

"Trying, sir - God, it hurts..."

The former Navy SEAL had seen his share of ugly wounds, and it wasn't a world he wanted to revisit. "I know it's bad, Harm, but you have to hang in there." He grasped the younger man's hand, feeling it tighten involuntarily with each stab of pain. "Help's on the way. I promise."

A team of paramedics rushed in, and Mac stood by helplessly as they worked on her closest friend, knowing that even their best efforts wouldn't be enough. His life was not in danger, but it would never be the same.

A.J. left Harm to the medics' care and moved to stand by Webb near the doorway. "He was ready to die for this," the CIA operative mused quietly.

"Not for this. For her." The admiral's dark eyes were haunted. "Now we have to convince him that he's ready to live without her."

She barely heard them, watching as Harm surrendered to unconsciousness. "Get me out of here," she pleaded. Hope nodded, and their surroundings faded back to white.

"It took four surgeries to reconstruct his knee," the girl explained, empathy in her lyrical voice. "The doctors still weren't convinced he'd ever walk again. He *does* walk, but ... well, you saw the cane."

Mac was almost afraid to ask the question on her mind. "Can he fly?"

"Not for the Navy. It took all of the admiral's pull just to keep him on active duty. He's flown Sarah once, because Bud and Harriet insisted. They had to help him, and he can't stand to be helped. He hasn't been up in three years."

"This can't be real. Harm's never given up on anything in his life."

"Even someone as strong as your Harm has a breaking point." Hope waved again, and Mac closed her eyes, dreading what she'd see next.

When she opened her eyes, they were standing in a physical therapy room at Bethesda. By the dim light shining through the windows, it looked to be early evening, and across the room she could recognize her friend on the treadmill. Harm walked slowly, haltingly, leaning heavily on the guardrails for support. His gray T-shirt was dark with

perspiration, and the brace on his left knee seemed to envelop most of his leg. The image of weakness was shattering. Mac looked away.

"How did he manage to live by himself through all of this? The steps in his apartment - he probably couldn't drive ..." She shook her head. "I suppose that's not really important now."

"Actually, it is somewhat significant. As it turned out, he wasn't alone." Hope inclined her head toward the corner, where A.J. Chegwiddden stood in jeans and a sweater. "The admiral's house is fairly accessible, even for a wheelchair. It was difficult sometimes, for both of them. But they became rather close in those few weeks."

"I guess I'm not surprised. He's been more of a father than Harm's ever known. Now that he really needs someone ..." The sentence was forgotten as Harm faltered and collapsed against the rail. The therapist immediately caught him, locking an arm around his waist - *he's so thin! Hasn't he been eating at all?* - and helping him into the nearby wheelchair.

"That's enough for today," the young woman said kindly. "You look like you could use some rest." He only stared at the floor, his expression stormy. She tried again. "Harm, it's okay. You can't bounce back from something like this overnight. Give yourself a chance." Still, he didn't respond. With a glance toward A.J., she left quietly. The older man pulled up a chair beside him and waited.

Finally Harm spoke, and his voice rang with defeat. "Don't waste your time on me, Admiral. I'm not exactly getting anywhere."

"That isn't true, and you know it. Last week you couldn't even stand up on that thing." A.J. paused, continuing cautiously. "We got a couple of new cases today. Nothing big, but I could really use your help. If I bring the files home tomorrow, will you take a look at them?"

"What's the point?"

"What's the point? It's your job, and sometime you have to come back to your life."

Harm gave a short laugh, charged with bitterness. "My life. That's worth a lot these days."

"What, so you're raising the white flag?" The JAG hesitated for a moment, but decided to push further. "God, wouldn't Colonel Mackenzie kick your six if she could hear that."

"Isn't that the point? She would, but she can't. Maybe this is fate's idea of justice."

A.J. steeled himself and forced a stern edge into his voice. *This is going to hurt*, his eyes said plainly, *but it's the only way to make you open up*. "Suck it up, Commander. Self-pity isn't your strong suit."

"What the hell do you want from me?" Harm demanded angrily, showing more unbridled emotion than Mac had ever seen from him. "Do you really expect me to just pretend it's all fine, like I don't ever think about everything's that's happened in the last year and a half? Forget it. I don't do that anymore. I've lost my touch for it." His outburst finished, he raised his head, and there was only quiet anguish in his expressive blue eyes. "Sir, I know it wasn't my fault - at least, I think I do. I know I couldn't have saved her. But knowing that doesn't keep me from waking up in the middle of the night and hearing her voice, pleading for help ..."

He's talking about you, something in Mac's mind said. He's suffering, and if what Hope said is true, it's because you gave up.

"Harm, listen to me," A.J. said firmly. "You got him. It's finally over. Palmer will never hurt another person, and you'll never have to look over your shoulder again."

"Then why does it feel like he's won?"

Was there any good answer to that? "Because he took your best friend, and nothing can ease that. But you're still here, and if you don't keep fighting, he really will have won. There are other people that care about you, remember? A lot of us lost a friend that day, and we don't want to lose another one. We need you, Harm - not just as a friend, but also as an officer. This battle didn't begin and end with Palmer. We will always need someone to go after the truth, and no one does that better than you. But you have to come back to us."

Harm closed his eyes. "I don't know if I can," he whispered.

"Then do it for Mac," the admiral told him. "You know it would break her semper-fi heart to see you beating yourself up. And you ought to know that she admired you just as much as you did her. It would honor her memory if you were to continue the duty that you both performed so well. Could you do that for her?"

"I'd do anything for her." The simple honesty in that statement nearly moved her to tears. "I just ... I'm so afraid that it won't be enough."

"I know. But faith and courage have always been enough. Especially for you." A.J. laid a hand on his shoulder briefly. "You ready to go home?"

"Almost. Can I have a minute?"

"Sure. I'll be in the hall." He rose and started toward the door, but Harm's tentative voice made him pause.

"Admiral?"

He turned, with a half-smile. "Harm, I'm not here as your C.O. I'm here as your friend."

"I know ... Thank you, A.J. For everything."

"You're welcome, son."

When he'd gone, Harm looked skyward, and she could see that his eyes were bright with tears. "Help me, Mac," he said softly. "God, I wish I didn't miss you so damn much."

Her own tears threatening to overflow, Mac watched as he pushed himself out of the wheelchair. With determination etched across his face, he dragged his fragile body onto the treadmill to try again. She tore her gaze away, unable to bear the pain that marred his handsome features with every step.

"I can't do this anymore. I can't." She rushed out of the room, but instead of a hospital corridor, there was only nothingness. When Hope followed, she whirled on the angel. "Why are you doing this? Why do I have to watch him hurting and be powerless to do anything about it?"

"You *can* do something about it. That's why you're here. Don't you understand the power you have? Think hard. What would have happened if you hadn't died?"

"I - don't know." Pacing the empty space, she ran a frustrated hand through her dark hair. "Maybe Harm wouldn't have been so obsessed with going after Palmer. Or maybe he still would have gone, but I would have been there. Maybe I could have protected him somehow. Is that what you want me to say?"

Hope wasn't put off by her anger. "It's never been about what I want. You may be right, but there is more. It is not his leg that holds him back from life."

"Then what is it? Guilt? We all know that he never could have gotten to me in time. He said it himself. Then again, reality's never kept him from blaming himself before. If he could, I think he'd make Pearl Harbor his fault. Usually I'm the one who convinces him to let go of his guilt. We've played those roles a hundred times, but it still hurts to see that doubt in him. And now, it's so much worse ... " She shook her head, hopelessness descending on her. "I don't suppose you could understand how it feels to see a friend in such pain, but it's torture. Please don't make me go on."

The girl's porcelain-like face remained nearly expressionless, but there was a kind of compassion that resonated from her being. "Perhaps I could better understand if you told me something of the Harmon Rabb you remember. What does he mean to you?"

Startled by the blunt question, Mac answered almost without thinking. "What does he mean to me? Everything. We've been through some of the most important events in our lives together. Sometimes I don't like to admit it, but he understands me - better than anyone else I've ever known. I've saved his life, and he's saved mine, and if I had to trust anyone with my life again, I'd choose him in a heartbeat." Suddenly aware of what she was saying, she cast her gaze downward. "That must sound strange right now."

"I don't think so. You love him, don't you?"

Her head jerked up, and she fumbled for a response. "Are you asking if I'm *in* love with him, or - "

"Semantics are a waste of time. Do you love him, Sarah?"

A million conflicting thoughts flew through her head; times she'd wanted to deck him,

times she'd wanted to run away from him ... times she'd wanted to fall into his arms and let his touch soothe away the nightmares. "Yes," she said simply. "I don't think I was sure before, but I am now."

"And he doesn't know?"

"He knows enough. He knows that I asked him for a chance once, and he couldn't give it. He also knows as well as I do that there are roadblocks between us."

"Is that how you see it?"

"How else could I see it? Damn it, are you an angel or a shrink?"

Hope forced her to meet her gaze, and spoke gently. "Regret can be a very powerful thing. If you were never to see him again - if he were to slip away, never knowing that you loved him - what would you feel?"

"What kind of question is that? I can't ..." And then it hit her. "You're talking about Harm, not me. He's miserable because he loved me and I never knew? Is that what you think?"

"As I said, I'm not a part of this. I'm only showing you what is, or will be. Why is it so hard to believe?"

"Because it doesn't make sense. He doesn't want me. Maybe he thought he did, after I was gone, but it's not the same. If he really loved me, why would -"

"For the same reasons as you. You're both afraid, because you've both been hurt before. But because of that fear, the road you travel now leads to this." Hope studied her and sighed. "You still have doubts. I suppose that's only natural for an attorney. One last piece of evidence, then. If my word isn't enough, perhaps his will be."

Almost before she could blink, Mac looked around to see the familiar walls of the bullpen. The future bullpen, she realized, seeing Harm's name on the JAG's door. It was morning, and a few young officers were chatting easily as they hung Christmas decorations around the desks. After a few minutes, someone called, "Captain on deck!" and everyone snapped to attention.

"As you were. Morning, all." Harm moved through the room with a brisk, if uneven, stride. There was a chorus of "good morning, sir's" from the staff. A yeoman took his coat and cover, and he started toward the inner office.

A petite ensign cleared her throat. "Captain Rabb?"

He paused. "Yes, Ensign Billings?"

"Sir, last month you said you'd do your rifle trick if the office raised five hundred dollars for the Toys for Tots program."

He raised an eyebrow. "My 'rifle trick'? Don't they teach you kids anything these days? At the Academy, the drill team used to be revered. We got more dates than the football team." There were a few chuckles. "I take it we met our goal?"

"Six hundred and twenty dollars. Pay up, sir."

"All right, all right. I'm a man of my word." A smile flickered in his eyes. "If anybody so much as reaches for a camera, I'll have a reprimand in your record before you can say 'cheese'. I'd hate for the Navy Times to get word of how I deal with crew morale around here."

He stepped into the center of the room and raised his cane from the floor. As the staff looked on, fascinated, he snapped it smartly to his shoulder and spun it with the precision of a career rifleman. The 'weapon' flew effortlessly in his hands, but he stared straight ahead, the apparent ease of the routine betrayed by his focus. At last he flipped the cane up into the air, and it whirled rapidly before striking his palm with a resounding smack.

The assembled crew clapped and whistled appreciatively. "Who needs the Marines?" called someone. From the back of the room, Gunny shouted back, "Everybody!"

There were laughs all around, and the commanding officer rolled his eyes. "Okay, show's over. Staff call at 0900."

As the crowd dispersed, Mac was left shaking her head in awe. Only this man could turn his own disability into a skill. "I never knew he could do that. I thought only the Marines had drill squads."

"Not at the Academy. It's open to all cadets. It's just that usually only Marines can cut it."

Just when she thought she knew all about him ... "Why are we back here?"

"We're early, actually. I just thought maybe you'd like to see the entertainment."

With something vaguely resembling a smirk, Hope gestured, and the sunshine faded away into evening. Most of the staff had vanished, but in her old office, a man and woman were having a heated discussion. Mac recognized him as Lieutenant Merrick, the one who'd pulled that very Rabb-like stunt earlier. The young woman, surprisingly, was an Air Force captain, and a pair of silver wings gleamed on her blouse. Mac couldn't recall ever having seen a zoomie at JAG HQ before. She listened as their voices grew in volume and intensity.

"Where do you get the nerve to question my authority on my own damn base? The only reason I called you in the first place was to avoid a jurisdictional issue when the charges get filed. I gave you a heads-up, and you yanked the floor out from under me."

"I didn't have a choice," Merrick fired back. "If your suspect is a Navy officer, I don't care if you found the body on the flight line or behind the Burger King. I have to be able to interview him."

"So you had to come into my office and accuse me of - "

"Now, this doesn't sound like the spirit of the season to me."

Both officers leaped out of their chairs. "Sir!"

"At ease." Harm stood in the doorway, sizing up the newcomer. "Seems like I've seen you around, Captain - ?"

"Madigan, sir. Office of Special Investigations, at Andrews."

"Of course. I've been meaning to ask you: how does an OSI agent come by those wings?"

"The same way as you, sir. I flew Eagles with the 325th, out of Tyndall."

"Ever buzz NAS Pensacola while you were down there?"

Despite herself, the young woman smiled. "Once in a while, sir."

"Good, because I have fond memories of buzzing your friends." His pleasant demeanor never wavered as he swiftly changed the subject. "I trust that the two of you can work out this 'jurisdiction issue' without coming to blows?"

"Yes, sir." "Sorry, Captain."

"Glad to hear it. Go home, you two. Tomorrow's Christmas Eve." He turned to leave. "Merrick, if you're not in a hurry, stop by my office on your way out."

"Aye, sir."

Mac followed her friend back to the spacious office of the Judge Advocate General. There was a fire glowing in the fireplace, and Harm brought his coffee mug over to the table before taking a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs. Pain momentarily flickered across his face, and she noticed that he was moving slowly.

"You okay, skipper?"

Merrick hesitated in the doorway, concerned. Harm waved it off. "I'm fine, Lieutenant. But let me give you a tip: if you ever have your knee reconstructed, go south for the winter."

"Fair enough, sir."

"Come in, have a seat." He gestured to the other chair, and the junior officer joined him by the fire. "How do you know Captain Madigan?"

"She was one of my expert witnesses in the Baker court-martial last year. We've been helping each other out on inter-service cases, when the Air Force JAGs are dragging their feet."

"You're friends?"

"I'd like to think so, sir."

The captain nodded. "Not that it's any of my business, but why doesn't she fly anymore?"

Merrick drew a deep breath. "Sir, her brother was killed in a flight-test accident at Edwards a few years ago. Kate - Captain Madigan - transferred out of the fighter wing so she could challenge the findings of the mishap board. She did it, too. She proved that it wasn't

crew negligence that caused the fire. After that she went into OSI, mainly because she wanted to keep looking for the truth. She didn't want any other families to ever be left with the kind of questions that her family had. But also - she's an only child now, and they learned the hard way that flying's a dangerous business. Her parents ... she's their whole world. I think she didn't want them to constantly be worrying about her."

"Does she miss it?"

"Not as much as you'd think. Kate's a good pilot, sir, but she was born for this job. You should see her handle a crime scene ..." Merrick suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Well, you get the idea. I really am sorry about the argument, Captain. We're both too stubborn for our own good sometimes. It won't happen again."

"That's all right. It's hardly the first time there's been a difference of opinion in that office." Harm smiled with a trace of wistfulness, and beside him, Mac's heart ached.

"Actually, I'm about to overstep my command authority here, so don't feel you have to answer this next question if you don't want to." He met the lieutenant's gaze squarely. "Are you thinking about being more than friends with her?"

The moment of shock that lit Sean Merrick's face was quickly damped. He forced an embarrassed smile. "Is it that obvious?"

"Not unless you've been there."

Merrick didn't catch the meaning as his mind whirled. "It's not unethical, sir. We're not in the same chain of command - we're not even in the same service."

"Do you see me filing a reprimand? Besides, you haven't even talked to her about it yet, have you?" The younger man only looked back at him in confusion. "Humor me for a minute. Have you told her how you feel?"

"It's complicated, sir." A hard edge came into his eyes then, and Mac began to understand why she was there. "She's had some bad relationships, and our friendship would be on the line, and ... forget it, sir. You wouldn't understand."

"You have no idea how well I understand," Harm said quietly. "Merrick, you're going to think I've lost it, but I want to tell you something. Do you think you could put up with a few minutes of story time from the old man?"

"Captain, aren't you one of the youngest JAGs in the Navy's history?"

"Good answer. I guess you know a little about me, then?"

"You're the C.O., sir. Everybody knows a little about you. Two DFCs, all sorts of high-profile cases ..."

"That's what I figured. But my record isn't me. Do you think someone like me has many regrets, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know, sir," Merrick said, surprised and cautious to answer. "Does this have something to do with what happened to your leg?"

"Not directly." Shadows lingered in his ice-blue eyes, but his voice remained level. "There are a great many things I think about, things I could have done differently. I try not to spend too much time thinking about what might have been, but there is one thing, above all others, that I regret. And it's not the fact that I can't walk across this room without help. The man responsible for that also killed my partner."

"Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie. I've heard about her, sir. She must have been one hell of a Marine."

"That she was, Merrick. That she was." He was lost somewhere in the past, and she was struck by how much he'd seemed to age in such a short time. "She was amazing. I've never known anyone so dedicated to her duty and her friends. I don't think there was anything she couldn't do if she tried. And she had my number from the start. Sometimes I think she knew what I was going to say before I did. She was always there when I needed someone. In five years, she never once let me down."

"You didn't let her down, either," Merrick said quietly, but the other man shook his head.

"Maybe not. Even hindsight isn't always twenty-twenty. But that isn't what I regret. My regret is that she died without ever knowing ..." His voice faltered, and Mac caught her breath.

"You loved her, sir."

"More than anything," Harm said softly, looking into the fire. "I lived to see her face each day. When she was there, it felt like all was right with the world. But I couldn't admit it to myself. My life, and hers ... well, the word 'complicated' hardly covers it. I wasn't prepared to depend on another person for anything, even for a chance at real happiness. I didn't trust myself not to destroy everything we had. There are a lot of reasons I could give you, but they'd all be empty. The fact is, I had a hundred chances every day to tell her how I felt, but I never did. And then one day, time ran out." He met the lieutenant's gaze, sincerity radiating from every corner of his being. "I loved her, and I let her believe that I didn't care. And for that, I will never forgive myself."

Merrick was silent for a moment as the weight of the captain's words sank in. Harm continued, leaning forward. "I'm not trying to play some melodramatic scene here, and I'm not trying to be morbid. I'm just telling you that things can happen, things you don't expect. And I'm asking you, Sean - if you feel even a fraction of that, don't hesitate. Please believe me. The risk isn't worth the regret." Breaking the spell, he shook his head. "All right, that's it. End of lecture. Go see if she's still waiting for you."

Stunned, the young officer took a moment before answering. "I ... thank you, sir. I guess I have some thinking to do." He rose from his chair and came to attention before turning toward the door. "Merry Christmas, Captain Rabb."

"Merry Christmas, Lieutenant."

With that, he was alone again, except for the unseen visitors who'd witnessed the entire conversation. Harm's expression grew distant as he stared at the flickering flames, and for the first time, Sarah Mackenzie saw what she'd been looking for in those oh-so-familiar eyes. Maybe, in a way, it had been there all along, but he made no attempt to hide it now. Part of her wanted to feel joy - *he loves me!* - yet she couldn't tear her gaze away from him. His anguish was utterly overwhelming, and she didn't bother to stop the tears from streaming down her face.

"It's all right, Harm," she whispered, kneeling by his chair. "I know why you were afraid - I was, too. But I'm not afraid anymore, and I'm going to fix this. I promise. Please hear me ..."

"I'm trying, Mac," he said, and she wondered briefly if he really had heard. "I'm still doing it for you. I hope you know that."

"Harm, I - " As she reached out, the room began to fade, and she was left with only the vast emptiness.

"Do you believe now?" Hope asked simply.

Did she? "Yes," she whispered, overcome by all she'd seen and heard. "I do. Now please, for the love of God, show me how to prevent this. Show me how to survive."

"That, unfortunately, is a step I cannot take with you. You must finish this battle on your own."

"What? Then how - "

"A word of advice, though," the angel continued without missing a beat. "Escape is not your only option. You may be able to bring help to you. Look around you. A Marine will always find a way. Good luck, Sarah."

"Wait!" Mac had the sensation of falling, and Harm's words echoed in her mind.

"The risk isn't worth the regret ..."

-- and she came to consciousness with a start. The cold, damp warehouse had returned, and so had the feeling of weariness that penetrated her entire body. She tried to shake it off enough to focus on the situation. *Okay, back to reality. Think, Mackenzie.* She didn't stop to wonder about whether her glimpse of the 'future' had been real, or simply a dream, a hallucination. None of it would matter if she couldn't get out of this.

What can I use? Mac scanned the room. The only piece of furniture was a workman's bench, too high to see properly. She struggled to see over the top, and caught sight of something familiar. In a corner of the countertop, nearly hidden from view, Palmer had left her purse. If he'd meant it as a taunt, the effort had failed. She would find a way to get at it. There were still many obstacles in her path, of course. But if he hadn't thought to take out

her cell phone, there might be a chance ...

She stretched out flat along the floor, as far as she could before the muscles in her handcuffed arms could give way. Her feet just barely brushed the leg of the bench, and she gathered all of her strength to kick at the wooden table.

On the third kick, the purse tumbled to the ground. Mac breathed a silent prayer of thanks, then hooked the strap with her foot and pulled it slowly toward her. It was relatively easy to dump out the contents, which included her slightly-battered phone. She awkwardly maneuvered the phone into her lap and stared at it for a moment. How would she press the buttons? Her nose? Her toes? Both were too clumsy to be accurate on the tiny numbers. And even if she could get it into her hand, she wouldn't be able to speak into it ...

"A Marine will find a way," she repeated, attempting to think critically despite the gray weight of fatigue that threatened to close in.

And then she saw it; the emblem of the anchor, globe and eagle affixed to her collar. Suddenly it all fell into place. *Thank you, Hope.* She lowered her head and yanked the insignia off with her teeth. Then, carefully, she raised her knees so that the phone was balanced only a few inches from her lips. Using the pin, she leaned forward and pressed Memory-2. *Please be home ...*

The answer was immediate. "Commander Rabb."

Mac sagged with relief, letting the pin drop. "Harm," she said weakly, her head swimming. "Help ..."

"Mac?" His tone rose sharply with concern. "I've been trying to reach you for the last hour. Are you all right?"

"No ..." Damn it, why couldn't she talk? "Palmer ..."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and through the tiny speaker she heard genuine fear in his voice. "Oh, God. Mac, where are you?"

"Don't know ... warehouse ..."

He was instantly back in control. "Okay. Don't worry, Mac. Just leave your phone on, and I'll get it traced. Hang on, ninja-girl. I'll find you. I promise."

"Be careful ... Harm ..."

But he was already gone; probably halfway to Webb's to get the trace. She hoped desperately that he would come armed. Palmer could be half a world away, or he could be around the corner, waiting for his favorite adversary.

She didn't know how much time had passed. She couldn't even be sure if she'd been awake the entire time. When the sound of a heavy metal door alerted her, she scarcely had the energy to lift her head. "Mac?" Harm's voice called from somewhere far beyond, and for the first time, she allowed herself a glimmer of hope.

Suddenly, he was standing there, as strong and handsome and full of life as ever. Her heart soared. Lowering his weapon, he went white at the sight of his dear friend lying by a growing pool of blood. "Jesus ..."

In a split-second, he was at her side, deftly manipulating the lock and freeing her from the cuffs. "Talk to me, Marine," he ordered as he wrapped his coat around her shivering form. "Webb's on his way, with half the Agency. Let me know you're still with me, all right?"

He gathered her into his arms, using his leather watchband to stop the flow of blood from her arm. Mac fought to speak, wanting to ease the worry she saw in his features.

"How did you ... do that?"

"What, the handcuffs? One of the most useful and least talked-about skills you pick up at Annapolis." Harm raised an eyebrow, but his smile was forced. "You're going to be okay, Mac. You just have to hold on."

He lowered her gently to the floor and pulled out his own cell phone. "Clay, she's here. Get an ambulance. I don't care if the building's not secured yet. Get some help in here now, or so help me God I'll carry her to Bethesda myself." He started to rise, but she clutched fearfully at his arm.

"Don't leave," she managed to say. "Please."

"Never," he replied solemnly, stroking her pale cheek with a tenderness that was both surprising and comforting. "I'm not going to let you go, Sarah."

Some part of her brain registered the fact that he'd called her 'Sarah', for the first time in nearly a year. She looked up into his striking blue eyes and found the depth of emotion that that she'd seen in his future self. Perhaps it hadn't been entirely a dream, after all...

In that second, there was a flicker of movement across the doorway, and terror seized her. "Harm!"

He reacted well, sweeping up his sidearm and rolling to one knee away from her in one fluid motion. But as he turned toward the door, it was clear that Clark Palmer had the advantage, and the other man didn't hesitate.

The gunshot echoed through the concrete fortress. Harm's body jerked back, and he crumpled to the ground beside his partner.

"No!!" she screamed, straining to reach out to him. An angry scarlet stain was spreading rapidly across the lower right side of his shirt, and he raised a trembling hand to the wound in a vain effort to slow the bleeding. As she watched him struggle against the all-encompassing pain, her own was temporarily forgotten.

"I'm sorry," he choked out, drawing a ragged breath that ended in a hideous cough. Tears of helplessness and frustration stung her eyes. *This wasn't supposed to happen!* The similarities to the future confrontation she'd witnessed were bizarre, but there she'd known that his life wasn't in danger. Now ... Had she brought him here only to die with her?

Palmer stood over them, shaking his head with a truly wicked smile. "Well, that was satisfying. I typically try to do things with a little more style, but there's something to be said for a good old nine-millimeter to the gut. Supposed to be the worst kind of pain, next to a point-blank shot to the knee, because it kills you slowly. Then again ..." He examined the small trickle of blood at the corner of the injured commander's mouth. "What's this? Did I scratch a lung? Whoops. What do you know, Colonel - you might outlive your flyboy-sailor after all."

Mac's eyes never left Harm, willing him to keep fighting. With great effort, he turned his head toward her, and lowered his gaze to the floor between them. She looked, and blinked in surprise. His weapon had fallen, unnoticed, only two feet from her. Could she - ? She glanced back at Harm, and through the haze of shock that had descended on him, she could see his faith in her. *You can do this. Just this one last thing, and it will all be over.*

She summoned the last of her strength as Palmer continued, ignorant of the entire unspoken dialogue. "I hope you're ready to make your peace with the world, Harmon Rabb. I'm sure you thought you were invincible, but as we can all see, you soak up bullets just as well as the next guy. Got any parting wisdom you'd like to share?"

His attention seemed to be focused on Harm, giving her the opportunity to reach surreptitiously for the gun. Her sense of awareness was dimming with every second, but there was no mistaking the sensation of her hand closing around the cool metal grip. *Just don't miss.*

"Actually, Palmer," Harm rasped, each breath becoming more and more shallow, "there is one thing ... I never told you."

"Oh, really. And what's that?" Palmer crossed his arms over his chest - and Mac shot him cleanly through the heart.

"Duck," she answered quietly, watching his body slide slowly down the wall. With a long sigh, she let her gun hand drop. "We got him, Harm - oh, God ..."

Harm's head lolled limply to the side, and his expressive eyes had fallen closed. There was a bluish tinge to his lips that turned her heart to ice. *No. This can't be happening.*

Clayton Webb burst through the door, weapon drawn, and stopped dead with a quiet curse. As agents and paramedics flooded the room, he regained his composure and knelt down next to her. "Hang in there, Mac. Everything's going to be fine. You're safe now."

The world was going dark all around her, and her body felt numb. "Harm," she cried, but it came out a whisper. "Clay, help him."

Webb obeyed, moving to Harm's motionless form and checking for a pulse. Finding it weak, he leaned in, and the color drained from his face. "He's not breathing. Medic! Damn it, Rabb, this is what I meant when I said the building wasn't secure."

A pair of EMTs appeared and quickly took over. "Bag him," one told the other tersely. "This guy needs all the oxygen he can get." They placed a mask over his ashen features and

pumped it with a steady rhythm, breathing life into him.

At last, it was too much. Mac's last reserves were drained, and she couldn't bear to watch them racing to save her friend - the man she loved. For possibly the first time in her life, she was certain of how she felt, and now she might never be able to tell him. Was she to be cursed with the same regret that Hope had shown her?

As the darkness closed in, her last conscious thought was to wonder if she would even live long enough to find out.

"Wake up, Mac. It's all right."

The calm, steady voice that crept into her dreamless sleep was vaguely familiar. Against the staggering fatigue that seemed to hold her down, she dragged her eyes open and slowly focused on her commanding officer's face.

A.J. Chegwiddden smiled kindly, grasping her hand. "Welcome back, Colonel. You're in the hospital at Bethesda. You gave us a pretty good scare, but you're going to be fine."

Her throat was dry, and it was a few seconds before she could speak. "How long?"

"You've been here about a day and a half. They kept you sedated to give your body some time to recover. How do you feel?"

"Tired ..." Memory came rushing back, and as the gunfire echoed in her mind, tears began to slip from her eyes. "Harm," she whispered. "Oh, god - he's dead ..."

Lost in her grief, she didn't see the admiral's look of surprise.

"Mac - "

Was that his voice she heard in her head? Would she now be hearing it forever, as he had?

"It's my fault - if I hadn't called him - I got him killed and I - " She closed her eyes, wanting to shut out the world.

"Honey," A.J. said gently, "I think you ought to take a look at who's got your other hand."

She hadn't even realized that there was someone on her left, but sure enough, there was a hand holding hers. Slowly, Mac turned her head to see the hand's owner, and a sob escaped her lips.

"Surprise," Harm offered faintly.

He was sitting in a recliner next to her bed, wearing hospital scrubs and hooked up to a nearby IV tree. He was pale and exhausted, but alive. She stared at him, unable to speak. He leaned forward, and they embraced cautiously, both out of weakness and out of fear of hurting each other further. Through the thin fabric, she could feel the heavy bandages that encircled his rib cage.

When he drew back, her eyes were shining with new tears. "How - ?"

"Well, I'm working on ... about seventy percent ... lung capacity right now." His speech was punctuated by slow, labored breaths. "But it's getting better ... all the time."

"The commander here is supposed to be in bed, too," the admiral added mock-admonishingly. "But even half-drugged, he managed to con the doctor into letting him stay down here. Amazing."

"I have priorities." Harm looked at her with a hint of that perfect smile, and suddenly there was so much she wanted to say to him.

"Harm ..."

He put a finger to his lips. "Later. You need to rest."

Unable to disagree, she nodded. "Will you stay?"

His gaze dropped to their entwined hands. "I keep my promises," he replied softly.

Satisfied, she let her eyes close, and when she opened them again, it was nearly dark outside. Feeling a little more rested, Mac turned slightly to see Harm fast asleep in the reclined chair. There were lines of weariness and pain in his features that seemed to deepen imperceptibly with each breath. Earlier, she'd been so relieved to know he was alive that she hadn't fully realized the severity of his condition. Now, though, she saw him without the façade of strength that he'd put up for her benefit, and she understood just how close it had been.

As if feeling her eyes on him, he stirred and looked over at her. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty," he said lightly, carefully pulling himself to a sitting position.

"Hey, yourself." She told herself not to be convinced by the famous Rabb charm. "You need to find yourself a bed."

"Bed, chair - close enough." He gave a slight shrug.

"Seriously, flyboy. You look like hell."

"You think you look much better?"

At that, she had to smile, and she realized that he wasn't trying to put up a front. He was hurting, but he wasn't going anywhere. "You sound better, though."

"My secret weapon. Short sentences." He gave a lopsided grin, but it faded quickly.

"You scared me yesterday," he said quietly. "Don't do that, okay?"

"I scared you?? For Christ's sake ..." She tried to keep the tremble out of her voice, not entirely succeeding. "Harm, you weren't breathing."

"Yeah, so I heard. Funny, I've been shot at dozens of times. I've just never been hit before. Those paramedics know their stuff. Seven hours of surgery later ..." For a second, he looked away, and she wondered if it still frightened him, as well. Then he met her gaze. "I'm okay, Mac. We both are. That's all that matters."

"And Palmer's dead?"

"Very. I still can't believe it." A hard edge came into his eyes, and she noticed it before he could try to hide it from her.

"Harm?"

It was a moment before he replied, and this time it was his voice that trembled. "Mac, I am so sorry. It's my fault that you ... he only wanted to get to me."

"It is *not* your fault," she said firmly, reaching for his hand. "He was a madman. You saved my life, sailor. I don't know how you found me so fast."

"Neither do I. I've never driven so fast in my life. I just kept thinking about ...well, you don't want to know."

"I think I already do know." Hope's lessons were still fresh in her mind, but everything was so jumbled up. Had her subconscious manufactured that 'future'? Had it - and his feelings for her - been no more than a dream? She'd probably never be certain about Hope, but Harm was right in front of her, and after all that had happened, she was no longer willing to take any time for granted. "Harm?"

He moved closer to the bed. "Do you need something?"

"Yeah. I need you to listen to something, and just trust me for a minute. Okay?"

"Don't I always?"

"I guess you do. But I haven't always given you the same. When we were on the Hornet, and you saw the ghost of that lieutenant - "

"Mac, I had a concussion."

"Well, maybe I should have believed you. I don't know if ghosts and angels fall under the same category, though."

"I don't think I understand."

She took a deep breath. "Harm, when I was unconscious, before I called you ... I saw some things. I don't know if it was a dream, or a hallucination, or whatever, but it felt real. And I want to tell you about it."

He nodded, and it was clear that he would not question her. "What did you see?"

"There was a girl named Hope who called herself an angel. She said she was there to show me what the future would be like without me. She wanted me to see that I had to survive, because ... " She trailed off, uncertain.

"Because of what?" he asked quietly.

"Because of you." Seeing his surprise, she went on. "I saw you, six years from now. You were the JAG, and you were close to making admiral."

"Definitely a dream, then," he quipped, but she shook her head.

"Don't get your hopes up. There wasn't much happiness in what I saw. You'd gone after Palmer, and you got him, but he shot you in the knee. I watched it happen, and I couldn't do anything to stop it ... God, Harm, it was awful. It took you months to learn to walk

again, and you had to use a cane.”

“At forty-three? How depressing.” There was very little humor in his expression, though, and his next words were utterly serious. “If you’re asking whether I’d really do that, I don’t know if I can answer you. I’d like to think I’m not the revenge type anymore, but - Mac, he tried to kill my best friend in the world. I hated him for that - I still do. If he’d succeeded ... I wish I could deny it, but I think I would have done everything I could to send him straight to hell. No matter what the cost.”

“I think you’re right. But there was more to it. The person I saw was consumed by regret, and not about the cane. You were telling one of the lieutenants ...” Suddenly she didn’t know how to go on.

“Mac?”

Here goes nothing. She steeled herself and spoke bluntly. “You told him that you loved me, and that you’d always regret never telling me how you felt.”

His face didn’t change, but if possible, he grew even paler. “Really,” he said, his voice nearly inaudible.

“Really.” Not knowing what else to do, she rushed ahead. “It’s not out of the blue, now that I think about it. We’ve been tap-dancing around each other for weeks now. Months, even. And I can’t take it anymore. I’m tired of all this waiting and wondering, because the fact is, if just one thing had happened differently yesterday, either one of us might not be sitting here right now. I can’t justify ignoring this any longer. I want to get it all out in the open.” She lifted her chin, preparing for the blow. “So tell me you don’t love me.”

His head jerked up. “What?”

“Go ahead. Say you don’t love me, and we can end this whole thing.”

After an endless, torturous moment, he looked directly into her eyes. “I can’t do that,” he whispered.

She felt as if she couldn’t move. “Because you don’t want to hurt me, or - ”

“Because it’s not true.” Suddenly the words came tumbling out, the awkwardness compounded by his halting speech. “I’ve spent a good part of the last four years terrified of showing anyone what I really felt, because I was sure it would only hurt you, in one way or another. By revenge, like Palmer did, or by my own selfish obsessions ... I didn’t think you’d ever believe me if I told you. I know you think I see someone else when I look at you, but I don’t. I haven’t for a long time. But I have so many ghosts ...” He turned away. “You, better than anyone, ought to know that I’m not very good at letting people in.”

“You’ve already let me in, Harm. That’s the whole point.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He gave a short, nervous laugh. “Then why is this so hard?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard for me, too. But we have to do this, or we might never get another chance. I don’t know when it happened, or how, but - I love you, Harmon Rabb. I think you know that, and I think if you have something to say, you should get it over with before you lose your nerve.”

A new light had come into his eyes when she said those words, and she knew she’d broken through. “Okay, here goes.” She sat up straighter as he moved over to sit by her on the bed. He reached over to take her hand, and with a weak but certain voice, bared his soul. “I do love you, Sarah. I love you more than I thought was possible. For so long, you’ve been the best part of my life, the reason I want to get up in the morning. I’ve always been so careful not to let myself need anyone, but now I can’t remember a time when I didn’t need you. If you can ever forgive me for being so blind, I’ll do whatever it takes to prove to you that I mean what I’m saying. Even if I can’t believe I’m finally saying it.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, spilling over onto her cheeks, and she clutched at his hand. He reached up to brush the moisture away, his own eyes bright. “Oh, please don’t cry,” he whispered tenderly. “I don’t ever want to make you cry. I promise you, Sarah, I’ll make you happy. You deserve every happiness in the world.”

In all of Sarah Mackenzie’s thirty-four years, no one had ever said anything so wonderful to her. “I’ll be happy if you’re with me,” she said softly. “God, Harm, I love you so much!”

They met in an all-encompassing embrace, each holding on to the other as a lifeline. In some way, maybe, that's what it was. Their lives had been moving together since that first day in the Rose Garden, but with everything that had conspired to keep them apart, the fact that they had reached this moment at last was nothing less than a miracle. She pressed her lips to his, reveling in the rush of warmth. This time, there was no question. He was kissing her and no one else, and she wished it could last a lifetime.

After a minute, though, he broke away, but he still held her close. "Go easy on me, jarhead," he said faintly. "Some of us aren't breathing so well these days." He lifted her hand to his chest, and she laughed shakily as she felt the rapid beat of his heart.

"So what do we do now?" she asked hesitantly. "How do we tell the admiral?"

"You just did."

A.J. stood in the doorway, not bothering to hide his grin at the stricken expressions of his officers. "Sorry for the bad timing. I was just coming by to check on you two. I see you're both doing much better than I could have hoped. If you need me, I'll be in the hall, figuring out a way to keep my two best lawyers in the same office."

And he was gone again, almost before either had realized what he'd said. Harm met her gaze and smiled, that perfect flyboy smile that she now knew was saved just for her. "I'm not sure life could get any better right now," he said quietly.

Her head was spinning. In an instant, her world had changed forever. She had witnessed the very depths of despair, and then somehow reversed their fortunes - or had she? She still didn't know if what she'd seen had been real; but there was only one way to find out. "Harm, can I ask you something a little strange?"

"Anything, love."

Such an incredible sound ... "Were you on the Academy drill team?"

He laughed, surprised. "Now who told you about that? Keeter? If you ask me, he was just jealous. He had lousy focus, for a pilot. Besides, we got more dates than - "

" - than the football team," she finished with him, beaming. He nodded, confused, but she only closed her eyes and offered a silent prayer of gratitude to her angel. "It's enough to make a girl start believing in miracles."

"Well, it's certainly the time for it." He smiled and tightened his hand around hers. "In a few hours, it'll be Christmas."

"Is it Christmas Eve?" Her hand flew to her mouth as she remembered. "Oh, Harm - the Wall, your father - "

"It's all right," he soothed, shaking his head. "When we get out of here, we'll go together. And I'll tell him about the best Christmas of my life."

At that, her first reaction was sadness, for the pain that Christmas always brought to him. Then she realized that she felt the same. The one thing that she truly wanted was right in front of her, and no amount of regulations, old ghosts, or even bullets would be enough to destroy their happiness. Somehow, the faith that she'd lost so long ago was finally restored.

"Is this really happening?" she asked softly.

"I can only hope." She smiled at his choice of words. Hope, indeed.

Carefully, he rose from the bed and reached down to help her up. "Come on."

They moved slowly to the window, leaning on each other for support in more ways than one. As she laid her head against his shoulder, he wrapped his arms around her and brushed a feather-light kiss against her cheek. "Merry Christmas, Sarah. Here's to new beginnings."

There was a light snow falling outside the window, dusting the street with a shimmer of white. She'd never cared much for snow before, but now she watched the tiny flakes with a new fascination. The snow was the first thing of beauty she would see in this new, perfect life, and she wanted to capture it forever.

THE END