



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13

Classification: JAG story, action, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "The Black Jet," "Boomerang," "Legacy," "Critical Condition"

Summary: On the brink of a new war, Harm and Mac risk everything to locate and bring home an American pilot taken prisoner -- without knowing whether or not he's even alive.

Author's Notes: The basic plot here comes from a real-life incident, and this time, it isn't by coincidence. During the Gulf War, a Navy pilot was shot down and classified "killed in action" by the U.S. military. Recently, however, information has surfaced which suggests that LCDR Michael Scott Speicher likely survived the crash of his aircraft and may still be a prisoner in Baghdad. I don't know too many of the details, but if one of our own is still out there, I'd like to think that we're doing absolutely everything in our power to bring him home. However, I'm doing my best to avoid taking a position on the validity of a war against Iraq, so please don't infer from this that I'm supporting the concept completely. Then again, I do keep F-16s in the air for a living, so if you want to flame me for something, that's your best bet.

Also, this story is set in the summer of 2002, well before Sergei decided to go all gloomy and leave the country in "Family Business." Actually, I think the reason I was annoyed at his hasty, sulky departure was that I'd already written his scene. So I guess I'm getting my revenge. And for anyone struggling with writer's block, a word of advice: nothing gets the creative juices flowing faster than a cable outage on a good TV night. I hate missing "Alias."

By the way, the phrase "the last full measure of devotion" is taken from the Gettysburg Address. For some reason, I feel the need to explain my titles. Additionally, the quote at the end is a real-life excerpt from a DPMO speech given on July 26, 2002. Just FYI.

August 14, 2002
Summersville, Maryland

"Mom, somebody's here!"

Hearing her son's shout from upstairs, Carol Frasier looked up from folding the laundry and moved to the window. A dark sedan was parked in her driveway, and the uniformed men that emerged from it immediately made her heart twist in her chest. She'd been confronted with that same image once before, over four years ago, and it had very quickly and effectively changed her life. Now, though, there was no pain left for them to deliver. She was a military widow, not a military wife, and as such, she couldn't imagine what these men could possibly want with her.

"Mrs. Frasier?" asked the older man through the screen door. "My name is Captain Hobson. May we come in?"

"Of course." Carol stepped aside and opened the door. "I don't mean to be rude, but what's this about?"

"It's about your husband, ma'am," the lieutenant beside Hobson began uncertainly.

"I assumed that much, Lieutenant. Could you be a little more specific?"

"Mrs. Frasier, what we have to say is going to come as a shock -- "

"Captain, the last time I got a visit like this, it came with the news that my husband was dead. Do you really think that whatever you came to tell me could affect me any more than that?"

"That's just it, ma'am. The Navy has recently gathered some information which suggests that your husband may in fact be alive."

From the top of the stairs, young Matthew Frasier watched his mother go pale. Carol stared at the visitors, waiting to be told that this was some exceptionally cruel version of Candid Camera. When that didn't happen, she did the only thing she could think of to do. She fainted.

1044 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Corporal Spencer, I don't understand how you could have so easily determined that PFC Barnes was the Marine who disobeyed orders and sneaked out that night. Did one of his squad mates turn him in?"

"No, sir. Even after the lieutenant got in their faces about it, they all stayed quiet."

"Then what was the smoking gun?"

"Sir, the private's boots were scuffed at inspection the next morning. Since the squad spent a good hour polishing everything that night, I realized that Barnes must have left the grounds."

"And your conclusion was based solely on a scuffed pair of boots? Even though another person could have scuffed those boots as a prank - or better yet, as a distraction?"

"Objection," called the prosecutor. "If the defense's aim is to accuse the witness of speculating, he ought to take some pointers from the case of *Pot v Kettle*."

"Withdrawn, Your Honor. I think the witness's superior investigative skills have been clearly established."

"Objection!"

"Sustained," replied Captain Sebring, a warning clear in his tone. "We'll recess for lunch. Commander, Colonel, I advise you both to go cool off."

The gavel banged, and Harmon Rabb gathered up the files from his table. Across the aisle, Sarah Mackenzie stood up and fixed him with a withering look.

"You're being such an ass about this one."

"I'm being an ass? You used the highly obscure yet brilliantly effective 'pot versus kettle' gambit," he retorted. "Either Duke Law is ahead of its time, or I must have been playing hooky the day they taught that one."

"Oh, shut up and take me to lunch."

Harm rolled his eyes, amused despite his exasperation. Only this woman could call him an ass and somehow keep from thoroughly pissing him off. "Okay, just give me a minute to return a phone call."

Mac smiled sweetly after him, but before she could head into her office, Harriet stepped into her path. "Ma'am, there's a woman here in need of legal advice. Everybody was out, and she's got her son with her, so I had them wait in your office. I hope that's all right."

"It's fine, Harriet. I'll take care of them." Mac moved through the doorway and extended her hand to the woman who sat in front of her desk. "I'm Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie. What can I do for you?"

After the door closed, Harriet's gaze continued to stray back toward the window into the colonel's office. When Harm emerged from his own office a few minutes later, she was still watching with curiosity. "Something interesting in there?" he inquired.

She jumped, startled. "Sorry, sir. I was just -- I don't know, I guess I was surprised by that little boy. He can't be more than nine or ten years old, and yet he's sitting in there, perfectly still and quiet. He doesn't have a book or a Game Boy or anything, and he's not climbing the walls. It's almost like he's *too* grown up. You think there's a reason he's so well-behaved?"

Harm followed her gaze to the solemn-looking child, and was instantly struck by a sense of familiarity. "There could very easily be a reason, Harriet," he answered. "Obviously I don't know for sure, but I think if you asked my mother, she'd tell you that I looked a lot like that thirty years ago."

As she began to comprehend his inference, a hint of sympathy crept into her blue eyes, both for this boy and for the boy he himself had once been. Soon, though, the door opened, and Mac beckoned to him with an unreadable expression.

"Harm, I think you ought to hear this."

Dutifully, he joined them in her office.

"Mrs. Frasier, I'd like you to meet my partner, Commander Harmon Rabb," Mac introduced them. "Harm, this is Carol Frasier and her son Matthew."

"It's a pleasure, Mrs. Frasier," Harm told her politely, shaking her hand. "Hi, Matthew."

Carol's gaze swept over the wings on his uniform, and she almost smiled. "What did you fly, Commander?"

Mac waited, wondering whether her friend would take offense at the use of the past tense in that question. But he only smiled back. "Anything I could get my hands on, ma'am. But I'm trained on the F-14."

"My husband flew -18s, so I'm sure he'd make all sorts of cracks in your direction if he were here. But personally, I'd be grateful to have an aviator involved in this."

"Well, that's not something I hear very often." Harm leaned against Mac's file cabinet. "So what is it we can help you with?"

Carol folded her hands in her lap and began in a careful voice. "In 1998, my husband, Lieutenant Commander Daniel Frasier, was stationed with VFA-63 on board the Truman. They were in the Arabian Sea supporting Operation Southern Watch, patrolling the Iraqi no-fly zone. In March of that year, Danny was shot down by what the Navy called a lucky surface-to-air missile. Central Command reported him killed the next day."

With that, Harm's suspicions were confirmed: Matthew Frasier's story might as well have been his own. "I'm terribly sorry, ma'am," he said quietly.

But she wasn't finished. "Because he went down over Iraq, the Navy wasn't able to retrieve his body. But they were sure he hadn't been able to eject... that is, they were sure until last month. A week ago, two officers came to my door and told me that Naval Intelligence and the CIA had uncovered evidence that Danny's ejection seat had been separated from the aircraft when it hit. They said there was a source in Basra who claimed to have seen an American prisoner many times. I don't know all the details -- I'm sure you could get more access than I could -- but the main thing is that last month, the Pentagon officially changed his status from 'killed' to 'missing.' And knowing nothing but that, I just don't know what to do."

For a long moment, Harm just looked at Mac, unsure how to react. After all this time, might an American serviceman still be left alive in a foreign land? "Did the officers who gave you this information tell you anything about what the Pentagon intends to do next?"

Carol spread her hands helplessly. "I don't think they knew. They told me to call someone in Public Affairs or Personnel, and then both of those told me to call the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, but that got me nowhere. All anyone could tell me was that the State Department is looking for a diplomatic solution."

Harm expertly concealed a bitter laugh. A diplomatic solution wouldn't have worked even while tensions had been eased. Now, as the United States threatened an all-out offensive against Iraq, it would be completely out of the question.

"I'm sure there are a number of intelligence assets looking at the situation," Mac assured her. "We can look into it and try to get you some more information. Some of it will no doubt be classified, but we'll do what we can."

"I'll take anything I can get, Colonel, and I very much appreciate your help. I know this isn't really your job, but I just kept hitting so many roadblocks ... I guess I just figured that you could at least open an investigation into his crash, or something."

"That's only one of many things we're going to do," Harm promised resolutely. "If you get stonewalled by anyone again, call us. Nothing scares a Pentagon desk jockey like the threat of an internal JAG investigation."

"You're really going to try to find him, sir?" This subdued, doubtful comment came from Matthew, whose dark eyes held the commander's gaze.

"We're going to do our absolute best, Matthew." Harm shook his hand as the family got up to leave. "We'll be in touch, Mrs. Frasier."

After they'd gone, Mac studied her friend carefully. "We should probably hand this off to somebody who knows what they're doing in this arena," she remarked. "But we're not going to, are we?"

He didn't answer the question directly. "You want to get us a couple of sandwiches from the caf? I'm going to go see if we can get in to talk to the admiral before court resumes."

She sighed, already sensing the beginnings of yet another quixotic quest. "Don't go in there without me. Someone's got to steer the ship until your brain catches up to your heart."

As it turned out, Admiral Chegwidden put up only a token protest. As a former SeAL who'd buried more brothers than he could count, his belief in the tenet of leaving no man behind was unyielding. As the Judge Advocate General, on the other hand, he had a responsibility to exercise caution.

"Investigate whatever you want," he told them flatly, "as long as it can be done from this office. Research, collect data, crawl up the Pentagon's ass, but remember what your duties are -- and more specifically, remember what the limitations of your duties are. Clear enough?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get out of here and wrap up the Barnes trial. And Mr. Rabb?"

Harm paused. "Sir?"

The admiral leaned forward. "As difficult as it may be to remain objective in the matter, do not let this get personal."

The younger man squared his shoulders. "I can handle the objective part, Admiral. But please, don't ask me for something I can't give."

Same location

Twenty-four hours later, they had a somewhat clearer picture of what they were up against. Lieutenant Commander Daniel Allen Frasier, a ROTC graduate of Pennsylvania State University, had been two weeks shy of his thirty-third birthday when his F/A-18 Hornet burst into flames over the Iraqi desert in 1998. Local residents had discovered the wreckage weeks later, and eventually a team of Saudi airmen went out to examine and photograph the site. They found the cockpit relatively intact and empty, with burn residue that suggested a successful ejection.

At the time, it was expected that the Iraqi regime would boast publicly about their victory, however small, over the mighty Americans; particularly if there was a living prisoner to show for it. When no such reports were made, and multiple requests for information were met with wide-eyed denial, U.S. Central Command closed its inquiry, concluding reluctantly that Commander Frasier had most likely succumbed to crash-related injuries or had died at the hands of angry locals. Nothing more was recorded in Frasier's file until June of 2002, when a detainee at Camp Delta, Guantanamo Bay, informed one of his guards that he had information about a captive U.S. pilot in the southern region of Basra.

"No wonder nobody's sure about anything." Mac leaned back in her chair and stretched out her complaining muscles. "An Afghan Taliban -- sorry, *suspected* Taliban member says he knew a man with a cousin in Basra who'd been in contact with jailers at a compound housing foreign prisoners. Leaving aside the fact that he voluntarily told all this to his supposed sworn enemy, isn't that about three levels of hearsay?"

"This doesn't have to hold up to a court of law. Besides, maybe the guy was angling for a deal of some kind."

"If so, he'd better not hold his breath."

Harm pushed another file across the conference room table. "Anyway, the source may have been shady, but Central Intelligence decided to shore up their human contacts in the area. The compound exists, and by some accounts, there have been some foreign guests there since the Gulf War."

"So how does the CIA intend to go about finding out whether or not Frasier is there? Somehow I don't think the Iraqis are going to be parading him around for our reconnaissance drones to photograph."

"I don't know, but I know who I'm going to ask first."

1510 EDT
CIA Headquarters
Langley, Virginia

"What do you want me to say? We're working on it through all available channels."

"That's a good start, Webb, but this isn't some nebulous, far-off issue. This is the life of an American citizen, a man with a wife and son who miss him. For all we know, he's getting beaten to a pulp for the eighty-fourth time right this minute."

Clayton Webb glared at him. "Well, thank you for putting it all in perspective. None of that changes the fact that intelligence gathering doesn't take well to acceleration. If we push too hard in the wrong place, it all goes up in smoke, and that doesn't help Commander Frasier."

Harm paced the senior agent's well-appointed office. "Okay, so we can't rush the intel. What about working on a parallel path? Can we put together an ops plan so that we'll be ready to go as soon as we know if he's there?"

"What do you mean, 'we'?" Webb queried evenly. "Did you pick up a SeAL trident or a Force Recon qualification when I wasn't looking?"

"I meant 'we' as in the U.S. government, and you know it. But I'd go in a heartbeat, and I think you know that, too."

Webb just looked at him and nodded once in acknowledgement. "Regardless, the answer to your question is no. There can be only the vaguest possible discussion on this topic: no specific contingencies. We've already got a lot of weapons aimed at the Middle East as it is. If we put something on paper that looks at all like an incursion of Iraq's borders, we risk fouling up the real-life strategic objectives that are already in place, just waiting on the word 'go.' If Commander Frasier were aware of our situation, don't you think he'd understand that?"

Harm tightened a fist. "Probably so. But if you do receive credible evidence that he's alive, there's got to be some way in that wouldn't compromise our battlefield objectives."

"If there is, you can be assured that it'll be implemented with all due speed. Now will you let me get back to work?"

"Thank you." Heading for the door, he couldn't resist getting in one last shot. "And would it kill you to take a break once in a while? You're more uptight than our new SECNAV."

Webb opened his mouth to hotly contest that statement, but the other man was already gone.

1632 EDT
Summersville, Maryland

Harm got out of his car and approached the Frasier residence, still trying to decide why he'd driven all the way out here. It wasn't as if the information he had to share was that critical. Hearing the admiral's warning in his head, and subsequently ignoring it, he went up to the porch and rang the doorbell.

Matthew answered the door, regarding him with slightly less gravity than he had the day before. "Sorry, sir, but my mom isn't home yet. I'm not allowed to let anyone in if she's not here."

"That's okay, Matthew. I understand. What time does she usually get home?"

"Pretty soon. Maybe fifteen minutes." The boy hesitated, curiosity warring with his desire to obey his mother. "You think she'd get mad if I came outside to talk to you instead? That way you don't have to come in."

Harm smiled. "If she does get mad, I'll tell her it was my idea, all right?"

"Okay." Matthew slipped through the doorway and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "So do you really fly F-14s?"

"Sure do. Do you like jets?"

"Definitely. My uncle took me to the air show in Baltimore last month. The Blue Angels were there and everything. They fly F/A-18s, just like my dad did." He looked up at the officer before him. "Sir, can I ask you something?"

Harm bent down to meet his gaze. "Anything you want, Matthew."

His voice was troubled. "If there wasn't a war going on, why did somebody shoot him down? And why wouldn't they let him come home?"

Harm remembered all the meaningless platitudes that he'd been given at that age, and vowed not to use any of them here. "I don't know if I can answer that very well," he said finally. "The war that went on over there still affects things, even though it's over. The man who rules Iraq was told by the rest of the world to stop doing a lot of bad things, and he wouldn't listen. Because he kept hurting people, we decided to try to contain him, and not everybody liked that idea. Some people get angry when America gets involved in other countries' problems, but the important thing to us is to make sure more people aren't hurt. That's what your dad was doing, and no matter what, you should always be proud of him for that."

Matthew looked at him with eyes far wiser than his ten years. "I know," he said matter-of-factly.

A car pulled into the driveway then, and Carol Frasier stepped out, recognizing her guest. "Commander Rabb," she greeted him, quickly turning to her son. "Following the letter of the law, huh, sweetheart?"

Matthew offered a guilty shrug, and she ruffled his hair. "It's all right. Go work on your math, okay? Commander, come in. Do you have news?"

"Only a little, ma'am."

"I'm not used to the 'ma'am' thing anymore. Call me Carol."

"I'll do my best. You can call me Harm, if you're comfortable with it."

"I'll do my best. Can I offer you a cup of coffee?"

"That would be great." As she moved around the kitchen, he explained what they'd learned. "It's not much more than you already knew," he admitted in conclusion. "But the prison compound exists, which gives us a solid place to start. I'm leaning on a friend at the CIA to keep us updated."

"You're right -- it is a start. Not that I mind the personal touch, but you could have picked up the phone to tell me this."

"I know. I guess I wanted to see how you were doing."

Carol handed him a steaming mug of coffee and shrugged. "We've been hanging on for four and a half years now. We can handle this."

"You're a strong person," Harm told her earnestly. "This can't be easy."

"I don't worry so much about myself. I worry that Danny's out there, spending another hour or day or week alone. And I worry about Matthew more than anything. He hasn't seen his father since he was five. He's a wonderful child, but I can't help wondering if he'll even remember Danny's face when he's twenty."

"I suspect that he will. Even if all this searching only gets us back to where you started ... you're obviously helping him remember his father." He gestured toward a framed picture on the counter, a snapshot of Daniel Frasier sitting in the cockpit with his baby son on his lap.

"I have to. I need him to remember. I just ..." Carol sat down on one of the kitchen stools and sighed. "I just want someone to reassure me that he'll turn out all right without his father. This generation is different -- there are so few people in this situation anymore, even after Desert Storm and Afghanistan. That's a good thing, I know, but it doesn't help me find a lot of support. I keep thinking that there must be an entire generation of Vietnam children out there who lost fathers, and I wonder what happened to them all."

Harm reached into his pocket and withdrew a laminated picture from his wallet. "I can't speak for the rest of them," he said simply, "but some of us turned out all right."

Carol took the picture he held out to her, immediately recognizing the similarity to the picture she kept of Danny and Matthew. In surprise, she looked up at him. "Your father?"

"Shot down over North Vietnam, December of 1969. I was about the same age Matthew was."

"Was he killed?"

He shook his head. "Not right away. He was a prisoner of war for years before he died. I had to risk my life to finally find out what had happened to him."

She shook her head in wonderment. "That's why you're working so hard on this. You understand."

"I understand that I have the chance to do something here that no one was able to do for my mother and me. That's all the reason I need."

"But after everything you must have been through, only to find out that he was dead ... didn't that destroy your faith?"

"It was damaged, certainly, but not destroyed. If I didn't have any faith, I wouldn't be here."

She nodded, accepting that answer. "I don't know how much faith I have left right now," she confessed. "I'll do whatever's necessary in order to find out the truth, but after so long, the odds of getting a happy ending out of this can't be very good."

"I've seen plenty of people beat lousy odds," Harm told her. "We're going to do something about this, and we're going to do it soon. I promise."

Carol smiled gratefully, blinking away a few tears. "Commander - Harm - I'm beginning to think you were heaven-sent."

2011 EDT North of Union Station

"You're brooding."

Harm glanced up at his dinner companions with a mildly indignant look. "I am not."

"Sure you are. Sergei, is he or is he not brooding?"

Sergei thought carefully about the question for about two seconds. "She is right, brother."

"Thanks a lot. Memo to me: never let Mac and Sergei team up." Harm got up to clear the table, but he knew he wasn't going to be let off so easily.

"You're frustrated because of the lack of news on Commander Frasier," she suggested. "True?"

"Yes, I am, and I think I'm entitled. I know these things don't happen overnight, but I wish there were some way we could measure our progress. I mean, the man has a family who's waiting on any word at all -- "

"-- and you're personalizing this way too much," Mac finished for him. "This is Matthew Frasier's father we're talking about, not yours. It's absolutely the right thing to do, but it isn't going to change the past."

At that, Harm's eyes flicked over to Sergei, and he fell silent. The significance wasn't lost on the younger Rabb, and he spoke quietly. "Harm, do you think it will hurt me if you say that you wish our father had come home? I know that this is true. And I know also that it does not mean you wish I did not exist, even though the two things are connected. Love does not have to make sense in that way."

"Don't I know it," Harm sighed, careful not to look up at Mac at that particular moment. "Thanks for understanding."

Sergei smiled and stood up. "Thank you for dinner. Now I should go. I have much to do."

"You're sure you have to leave already?" Mac asked.

"Let me try again. I should go, and let the two of you be alone." At Harm's look of consternation, he frowned. "What? First too subtle, then not subtle enough?"

Harm wadded up the dishtowel and threw it at him. "Jeez. Get lost, little brother."

Sergei disappeared with a not-quite-innocent grin, and Mac hid a smile. "Your personality is rubbing off on him," she commented.

"Hey, I'm not the one who told him to join a hockey league to impress girls." Harm cocked an eyebrow challengingly, but soon sobered. "It's a good thing he isn't taking offense at all this. I don't mean to make it so personal, but I don't know any other way to see it."

Mac crossed the living room to sit down on the couch. "I think that's reasonable, and I certainly think it's a noble cause -- it might be the most noble cause there is. I just don't want to see you give yourself a stroke in the process."

At this, he hesitated. Coming over to join her, he took a seat in the opposite chair. "If I'd been shot down over Libya or Kosovo," he began, not meeting her eyes, "I'd like to believe that someone would have come after me, no matter when or how. In fact, I have to believe that. Without that, the fundamental precepts of our military are lost. Aren't they?"

"Maybe so." She toyed with the silver bracelet on her wrist. "In any case, I know at least one person who would have come after you. No matter when or how."

He turned fully toward her, reaching for her hand, but the telephone sharply broke the moment. Shaking his head, he leaned over and grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"Thought you'd want to know ASAP," Webb's voice reported. "How fast can you get to a secure line?"

"We could probably get to you in person just as fast, unless you're in Grozny or something."

"Fair enough. There's a drugstore six blocks down from you. Know which one I mean?"

"Sure."

"See you in fifteen minutes."

The line disconnected, and Harm turned back to his partner. "Guess we're going on a field trip."

The drugstore in question was open twenty-four hours a day, but its photo counter was closed in the evenings. When the two officers wandered into the quiet store with a practiced nonchalance, Webb was idly pressing buttons on the instant photo-maker machine in the corner, trying to look busy.

"Vacation photos, Webb?"

"Exotic locales, at least." The agent handed over a manila envelope. "If you tell anyone that these pictures left Langley -- "

"We know the drill," Mac told him, looking over Harm's shoulder. "Oh, good lord ..."

There were two photographs, both taken from a moderate distance and in a hurry. One showed a pair of men dragging a bedraggled prisoner by the arms. The other showed the same prisoner lying limply against a dirty stone wall. Under his tattered tunic, a small tattoo was visible on his shoulder.

"We're sure this is him?" Harm asked in a low voice.

In response, Webb showed them a third photo, an enhanced view of the tattoo. "Recognize that?" When they looked at him blankly, he rolled his eyes. "I don't believe this. I have to clue *you* in on college football trivia."

"It's a lion," Mac realized suddenly. "A Penn State Nittany Lion."

"Frasier's alma mater. He assisted the defensive coordinator for two seasons."

Unable to tear his gaze away from the bleak image, Harm gathered his courage to ask the inevitable next question. "Is he alive?"

"Until recently, obviously he was. Now ... we don't know for sure if he's even alive in this picture." Two appalled stares greeted that admission, and he spread his hands. "The guy who got those pictures is an Iraqi national. He works in the adjoining compound, and he couldn't get any closer without compromising himself. You can understand why he'd be skittish about being on our payroll."

"But there's no reason to kill Frasier now, after they've held him for so long," Mac pointed out. "They could even try to use him as a bargaining tool, to stall the expected attack."

"For all we know, they're taking out their frustrations with the U.S. on him," Webb returned. "And they know we won't fold for just one man. We're principled, but we've got our limits."

"The point is, they've got him, and at least until very recently, he was alive. So how do we get to him?"

Webb met their anxious gazes calmly and slid the pictures back into their envelope. "Let's take this discussion outside," he suggested.

The trio proceeded down the sidewalk, each concealing a hurricane of turbulent thoughts. "We don't get to him just yet," the agent continued as they walked. "Current tentative plans are to include the liberation of the compound in one of the military operations in the Basra region."

"You mean after we've already started an attack?" Harm demanded. "That's ludicrous. Even assuming an attack is inevitable -- which I doubt -- once the bombs start falling, who knows what'll happen in there? We can't guarantee that he'll even survive that long."

"We can't guarantee that he's even survived *this* long," Webb countered. "Without concrete evidence -- and maybe even despite it -- no one on our side could risk even the most well-planned insertion. It's just too unstable."

Harm pounded a fist into his palm. "So we just sit on our hands?"

"Maybe not." Both men turned to Mac as she spoke thoughtfully. "Maybe there's a way to get that evidence. Would the word of an American observer be enough to verify Frasier's status?"

"Like who? Somehow I don't think he'll be part of the dog-and-pony show the Iraqis are going to put on for our Congressional delegation next week." At that, Mac and Harm shared a look of simultaneous inspiration, and Webb abruptly stopped walking. "Oh, no. No way in *hell*."

"This could work," Mac argued. "We could be part of the advance group, working out the procedures and schedules and such. Although ... once we're in, we'd better go all the way and actually extract him. We definitely won't get another chance once our intentions become obvious."

"You really think they're going to let a pair of military officers into the country?"

"We're lawyers, Webb. We're the personification of the weakness and excess of the West, remember?"

"And they'll underestimate Mac like crazy," Harm added. "Just by virtue of being female. If we play it right, nobody will believe that we could be qualified to infiltrate anything."

"Maybe that's because you're not! This can't be a seat-of-the-pants maneuver. It has to be precise."

His blood burning, Harm couldn't hold back the cutting sarcasm. "Oh, like the stellar success that was the joint CIA-military operation against Kabir? That precise?"

Webb's eyes narrowed, and he aimed an accusing finger at the other man. "That's exactly my point, Rabb! After what happened to Secretary Nelson in the Senate hearings, I would've expected you to clue into this. Do you have any idea how much heat I took because of that debacle? The rest of the world views it as a total and unconditional intelligence failure, and not surprisingly, the DCI views it as my failure. For Christ's sake - I had him telling me to go out and enlist if I was so fond of the Navy! So I'm speaking out of experience and a certain amount of bitterness when I say this: JAG is out of the field ops business. Despite the proficiency you two have demonstrated on numerous occasions, it's still a lot like assigning a brain surgeon to start in the Super Bowl. You're not the right tool for the job."

"I know that, damn it, but the right tool isn't available to us, is it?" Harm kept his voice as level as possible, but intensity still glowed from his eyes. "Here's what matters. While we stand here and argue, Daniel Frasier is spending his fifty-third month as a prisoner of a regime about to come under attack by his own people, all because he did his job. I know for a fact that it's not the first time, and I seriously doubt that it'll be the last. So *I'm* speaking out of experience and a certain amount of bitterness when I say this: I'll be damned if I'm going to let him stay for month number fifty-four."

They stared at each other for a long moment, each man a staunch defender of his country in his own right. Finally, Mac spoke up quietly. "Okay, time out. We're not going to get official permission to do what we want to do. I think that's obvious. But what if we do it on our own? All we need is a legitimate way in. The Congressional delegation doesn't even need to know why we're really there. Your contact in Basra can help us out with the layout of the

compound. We can talk to some friends and get a helo crew from the Guadalcanal that'll pick us up with very few questions asked. If it goes well, everyone all the way up to the President will come out looking heroic. If it goes bad, we'll call off the pickup, and the U.S. government can disavow all knowledge of our actions. You can play up the story. Hell, make stuff up if you want. Harm disobeyed a slew of orders and went on a crusade because of his history with his father, and I went along with him because I'm either in love with him or slightly unstable."

Harm drew back, startled, but she only shrugged. "What does it matter? We'll be dead."

Webb just looked from one lawyer to the other in utter disbelief. "You'd really stake your lives and your reputations on the possibility, slim as it will certainly be, that you'll be able to not only get in and find this man -- which is doubtful enough -- but get out again without getting shot? You're willing to take those odds without even a second thought?"

"I can think pretty quickly. Here's my second thought: I'm going." Harm glanced over at Mac, considered raising an objection on her behalf, and finally thought better of it.

Unfortunately, she'd already read his expression. "Excuse me? You're going to try and tell me to stay behind? Did you not just hear me come up with pretty much the entire plan myself? You don't honestly think I'd let you pull this dumb-ass stunt on your own, do you?"

"I didn't even say anything!"

"You were obviously thinking it!"

Webb waited as the pair faced off. Soon, though, Mac relented, smiling a little. "Besides, does anyone in this world watch your six better than I do?"

A trace of a grin crept into Harm's eyes. "Just remember, Sundance -- you said it, not me."

"Christ. You're both apparently far crazier than even I gave you credit for," Webb stated in disbelief. "You know I can't take this to the DCI. The moment the word 'JAG' comes out of my mouth, he'll send me packing for Antarctica."

"So have someone else take it to him," suggested Harm reasonably. "There must be someone in that building who owes you a favor. Better yet, take it directly to Naval Intelligence. I don't care how you do it, but you have to at least try."

Webb pinned them both with a hard stare, then shook his head. "I've been playing this game way too long."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because there's a part of me that actually wants you to do this." He sighed in resignation. "I'll see what I can do. Don't hold your breath, but at the same time, stay close to the phone."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. A stunt this suicidal is going to need a lot more than just my backing." He was still shaking his head as he walked away. "I'll be in touch."

Mac and Harm looked at each other for a minute, contemplating the potential catastrophe that they'd just bullied their way into. "This might end up looking a lot like Keeter's jailbreak in Iran," Mac remarked.

Harm shrugged as they started back toward his apartment. "We don't have to worry about retrieving a plane this time," he pointed out. "Basra's close to both the Kuwaiti border and the sea. As long as we can get a helo in to pull us out, we're good to go."

"You can be amazingly optimistic when you want to be."

He flashed a quick grin at her. "Aviators are confident, Mac, not optimistic. 'Optimistic' doesn't reflect the appropriate amount of certainty."

"My mistake." She paused a moment, then looked up at him in all seriousness. "I guess we've never really talked about what's going on over there right now. Hypothetically speaking, do you support regime change by way of preemptive strike?"

He winced a little at the thought. "It's definitely not the way this country typically does things," he admitted. "Back on the Henry, I said something to X-Man once ... I told him that we were the good guys, and that we didn't get that way by shooting first. I still believe that, but ..."

"Yeah. I don't know if we can afford to leave this guy in power any longer, either." She shook her head, as if trying to clear those dark thoughts. "Anyway, that isn't what matters right now. They've got one of ours, and that's all there is to it. I think."

When they reached the spot where her Corvette was parked, there was a strange silence. It wasn't that either of them felt awkward; it was more the gravity of the duty that lay ahead. Confidence aside, there was no way this would be an easy task, and they both knew it.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow?" he said lamely, as if it were the best he could offer.

"Of course. Hey, thanks for dinner." She reached down to unlock the car door, but his hand shot out to still her.

"Mac -- I'm no good at this, but thank you. I know I dive into these kinds of things headfirst without checking the water, and I'm sure you could have tried to pull me back without, you know, jumping in after me. I guess I'm trying to say ..." He shrugged and gave her that half-sheepish smile that always melted her just a little. "I'm really grateful that you jumped in after me."

She glanced down at his hand on her arm, and covered it with her own. "Somebody needs to do this, Harm. I realize that there's a much larger issue in sight for this country right now, but that man gave everything he had to give for us, and if somebody doesn't go in after him, all our vaunted principles aren't worth a damn." With a hint of a smile, she continued, "But don't think that you have nothing to do with it, because let me tell you, if it weren't for you, my outlook on a lot of things would be very, very different."

"Was that a compliment or an insult?"

"It was a statement of fact. But I'd lean toward calling it a compliment." She squeezed his hand once, then opened her car door. "Good night."

It gave her an odd feeling of comfort to see him in her rearview mirror, standing on the sidewalk and watching until her Vette finally turned the corner.

0449 EDT
Same location

It had taken him a good hour and a half to finally fall asleep, so Harm was decidedly unprepared for the ringing of the telephone an hour before his alarm was set to go off. Mumbling a few curses, he reached for the handset. "Rabb."

"You don't sound very alert," Webb commented by way of greeting.

"It's not even five yet, Webb. What do you want from me?"

"Really? Well, I apologize," the other man replied in a clearly non-apologetic tone. "I guess I lost track of time after I stayed up all night to do what you asked of me."

That got Harm's attention. "What's up?"

"Can you be at Quantico by 0700?"

"Sure. Care to tell me why?"

"Because you're getting exactly what you wanted, Commander. A very small, very influential group of people worked something up last night. When Admiral Chegwidden gets in this morning, there'll be a fax waiting for him that will authorize your immediate deployment, by order of the Chief of Naval Operations."

"You're kidding. How did you pull that off?"

"Better that you don't know. Mac's my next call, since I figure it'll take her less time to get ready than it'll take you. You'll be meeting with a colleague of mine who's well-versed in extractions, along with a few Marine personnel who can tell you about operating in that theater. Play by their rules, will you?"

"We'll try. Tell Mac that I'll take care of the admiral -- "

"Don't even think about giving him any specifics, Harm. "

"-- and that I'll pick her up in twenty minutes. Thank you, Clay. Someday soon, a little boy and his parents are going to owe you big time for this."

"I sure as hell hope so." Webb sighed. "Good luck."

The line went dead, and Harm took a deep breath before dialing his commanding officer's home number.

To his credit, the admiral sounded far more alert than expected. "Chegwidden."

"Sir, it's Commander Rabb. I'm very sorry to disturb you so early, but Colonel Mackenzie and I have orders to report to Quantico this morning, and it's possible that we'll be out of contact for the immediate future."

Chegwidden's voice took on a sharper tone. "Orders from whom and to do what, Commander?"

"The CNO's office, sir, and the second part of that I can't tell you. I'm sorry."

It was almost possible to hear his brow furrowing. "Mr. Rabb, this wouldn't have anything to do with that situation I warned you about staying objective on, would it?"

"Admiral, all I can say is that it's very important that no one be aware of the details here. In the interests of deniability."

There was a long pause. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph," the admiral murmured under his breath. "I don't believe you're really going to try and pull this off. All right, do what you have to do, as if I could stop you at this point. As far as the staff is concerned, you're TDY to Great Lakes. But don't you dare come home dead."

"Aye, sir."

"And Commander?"

"Sir?"

"Bring him home."

The phone clicked off, and Harm hauled himself out of bed. It took him only a few minutes to run through the shower, throw on a clean uniform, and put his desert BDUs back into his sea bag. He opened the door to leave, and promptly collided with his partner.

"I told you I was coming to get you. How did you know we wouldn't end up passing each other on the road?"

"You're slow in the mornings," she informed him, with a touch of smugness designed to mask her apprehension at what lay ahead. It only partially succeeded. "Come on."

0723 EDT
Marine Corps Base
Quantico, Virginia

"This is pretty slick," Harm remarked appreciatively, studying the navy-blue duffel bag in front of him. "Kinda James Bond."

"James Bond wouldn't be caught dead carrying a duffel bag," Mac argued, pulling a wide strip of Kevlar composite out of the lining and holding it up. "So you just take the strips

out when nobody's looking, stuff them into this harmless-looking jacket in the correct arrangement, and bang, an instant bulletproof vest. Nice."

"It doesn't cover quite as well as a standard issue flak vest," the tech warned them. "There's only so much Kevlar you can sneak into a duffel bag without making it impossibly heavy. But these shouldn't trip anybody's security. We've also got some contact explosive that'll pass for toothpaste, so that should help with any locked doors you encounter. Your transmitter's made almost entirely out of a high-temperature composite material that ought to escape any metal detector. But it drains power big time, so don't use it until you need it. Weapons, unfortunately, are a little trickier. Best we can do for you is a small taser, and smuggling even that in will be a little dicey."

"What do you suggest?"

The tech blushed slightly and handed Mac a small pink compact, similar to the kind that typically held birth-control pills. She opened it to reveal a flat, palm-sized device hidden under the cover. "Cool. You might not be getting this one back, Sergeant."

Another man instructed them in ways to evade known Iraqi security procedures. Between his well-tailored suit and his gravely serious expression, it was clear before he finished speaking that he was a colleague of Webb's. Younger, though, which meant that Webb had most likely conned him into assisting them. Probably a desk analyst, Harm theorized, trading a dubious look with Mac.

"You ever done any of this kind of thing yourself, Agent --?"

The man cracked a slight smile. "Vaughn. And compared to a couple of the operations I've set up lately, this ought to be a walk in the park."

"Whatever you say. You work with Clayton Webb?"

"We've traded a few favors. If you want to blow me off, Commander, that's your prerogative. It's your ass on the line. But yes, I've done field work, and I'm still alive to talk about it, so draw your own conclusions from that. Any more questions?"

Harm wasn't accustomed to being so easily read, even by a spook, so all he could do was shut up before he dug himself in deeper. "Guess not. Thanks for your help."

It was midday by the time they joined the rest of the advance team on a jet bound for the other side of the world. Harm had been five seconds from stepping out onto the tarmac at Andrews in his summer whites when Mac had seized his arm and pulled him back into the car. "Just thought of something," she'd said quietly. "Take off your wings and your ribbons from the Gulf. If anybody over there happened to recognize them, they might get suspicious."

Now, sitting in the aft section of the airplane, he glanced down at his uniform and frowned. It felt strange without the weight of his wings. Sure, there had been a time when he hadn't wanted to wear them, but the person he'd been all those years ago was buried deep in the past. Much like the memories that had been surfacing recently; scattered flashes of those first few years without his father, things like school plays and baseball games. Many of the memories felt new to him, as if he'd never seen them before. He'd spent so much of that time shielding himself from the world around him that he'd managed to effectively block out quite a bit about those years. What kind of child had he been at ten years old? If things had turned out

differently -- if his father had been able to walk through the front door some bright day, would he have recognized his son?

Mac watched her partner for a few minutes, all too aware of his conflicted thoughts. He could be amazingly easy to read sometimes. Unfortunately, those times were few and far between.

To break his somber mood, she leaned over and nudged him with her shoulder. "You're not wimping out on me, are you?" she teased gently.

Harm straightened in his seat and shot her a disbelieving look. "Please. I was just thinking about how different the world will look to Commander Frasier now, assuming we can find him."

"I guess that's unavoidable. After being in captivity for so long ..." She trailed off, noticing his faint smirk. "What?"

"In 'captivity?' You make it sound like the panda bear exhibit at the zoo."

Deciding that they could use a little levity at this point, she smiled and rolled her eyes. "I always hated the zoo as a kid."

"Me, too," he agreed, turning toward her. "What did you hate about it?"

"Well, it was the cheapest form of entertainment around, so we went a lot. I thought it was mind-numbingly boring. All those animals with nowhere to go. How about you?"

"Same reason, mostly. Except when I was in fifth grade, I read something in my history book about World War II POWs in the Pacific, and there was this picture that showed the cages they used. After that, I couldn't see those dumb zoo cages without picturing people in them."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that, so she impulsively slipped her arm through his and laid her head on his shoulder. "Get some sleep, flyboy. We may not get another chance for a while."

A little surprised by her action, he forced himself not to react overtly to her nearness. Her earlier words drifted back to him: " ... *I'm either in love with him or mentally unstable ...*" If only there were a way to erase all the subtext and irony from their conversations -- then maybe he'd have a prayer of decoding that statement. It was strange, he thought, how every slight touch from her only served to heighten his need. It was acute now, this ache of being with her but not *with* her, and it was beginning to consume him in such a way that he couldn't properly imagine how he'd ever managed to tell her 'not yet' so long ago.

But you did, a small voice in his head insisted. *You passed up the simplest opportunity you'll ever have, so now you've got to choose; whether to make use of a much more complicated one or to give up entirely.*

He pushed those thoughts aside and closed his eyes, choosing instead to drink in all he could of her presence and clear his mind. If they were going to have any hope of succeeding in this bizarre escapade, he was going to need every scrap of focus he could find.

**0932 Local
Republican Guard Regional HQ
Basra, Iraq**

"The tour will end here, and there will be an opportunity for the representatives to meet with the media for a brief press conference. ZNN, Associated Press and Reuters have been issued credentials for the event."

"And Al-Jazeera?" one of the State Department officials asked with an arched eyebrow.

The Iraqi associate minister gave a tight smile in response. "Of course."

"Sir, one of the main points that the UN resolution makes is that weapons inspectors have never been allowed access to the presidential palaces," pressed a young man whose tag marked him as a Congressional aide. "If we aren't going to be able to at least see one of them -"

"What occurs inside the President's homes is not relevant to this discussion," the minister parried smoothly. "They are his residences. We do not see the need to give guided tours as your President does."

Near the back of the group, Mac scanned the room discreetly. They were supposed to receive more detailed information about Frasier's whereabouts from the Agency's local contact, but the terms of the meet depended on him. If he didn't feel secure enough to come forward, they would have no choice but to go as far as they dared on their own. All they could do now was appear accessible.

There was a groundskeeper near the arched door, sweeping the walkway, and he paused in his duties just long enough to catch her attention. Maybe ... ? She brushed Harm's elbow ever so slightly, and he followed her gaze, giving a fractional nod in response. When the minister ushered the group through the doorway, she took the only opportunity she could find: she tripped over an imaginary loose stone and spilled her folder of documents across the floor.

Harm caught himself just before running her over, and the two of them feigned embarrassment as they collected her scattered papers. The group began to move on, and the man with the broom bent to assist them.

"Here is one that you missed," he said in quiet English, pressing a folded piece of paper into her hand and quickly vanishing around a corner. Mac shared a glance with her friend and tucked the note into her folder, where she could shield it from other curious eyes.

Your man still lives. When you return to your hotel, come to the west stairwell and climb to the roof just before sunset. Earlier and you will be seen - later and you may miss your chance.

Within moments, they had rejoined the group, carefully disguising the electric tension that coursed through each of them.

"You know, they say they're holding elections next month," one of the aides murmured to Mac under his breath. "Thing is, Saddam's the only one on the ballot. Why do they even bother trying to call it a democracy?"

She only shrugged, afraid that if she opened her mouth, some tiny clue about their true intentions here might slip free. Now that they were so close, every move seemed fraught with complications. It took far more of her Marine training than she cared to admit to stay silent until they finally arrived back at the hotel.

Harm stepped into her room without waiting to be invited, closing the door securely behind him. He'd changed into his desert BDUs, and held the camouflage jacket that was meant to double as a Kevlar vest in his hand. "From the tone of that note, I'd say tonight's our shot, wouldn't you?"

"I think so." She studied his shirt more carefully and noticed that he'd removed the name tapes and rank insignia. Probably a good idea, for the sake of appearances, even though it wouldn't be a stretch for anyone to identify them as Americans regardless of their uniforms. She reached into his pocket and retrieved the Swiss Army knife that she knew would be there, extending the blade to rip the stitches of her own name tapes. "How close are we to sunset?"

"Pretty close. We're not going to get spotted up there, are we?"

"I don't see that we have much choice, if we want this guy's information."

"Yeah, good point." Mac clipped the radio transmitter inside her jacket and readied the taser. "This is the point of no return, huh?" she asked softly. "As soon as we step out of here geared up like this, any person who sees us could bring down this whole thing."

"Then we'll have to be really, really quiet." He looked over at her for a long minute, then reached out to trace her cheekbone with the back of his finger.

"What was that all about?" she whispered.

He could only offer a helpless half-smile. "I think I'm just trying to fix in my head the last image I want to see if this all goes to hell."

She shook her head, trying not to dwell on the finality of that concept. "You pick the strangest times to be sweet."

They moved out into the corridor and slipped into the stairwell as stealthily as possible. At the top of the stairs, their contact was sitting near the roof-access door. His expression was difficult to read in the dim light, but there was a palpable sense of fear in the air.

"I am Amir," he began flatly. "The prison compound is two kilometers from here. There are no electronic security measures in the section that concerns us -- the people are meant to believe that it is empty, so to have such things would raise questions. I will guide you to your pilot."

Harm traded a wary look with his partner: they hadn't been expecting company. "You will?"

"On one condition. When you make your escape, I must be allowed to join you and seek asylum in the United States." Amir's dark eyes made it clear that the point was non-negotiable. "I have nothing to gain by staying here, and much more to lose than you can possibly understand."

"Our CIA is going to be disappointed to lose a valuable intelligence asset," Mac pointed out. "If we agree, will you continue to provide assistance to our government?"

"I have no love for this regime. I do not pretend to completely accept the ways of America, either, but if the way to stop our children from starving goes through you, then I am prepared to act accordingly." He withdrew an aged pistol and a pair of flowing robes, and held both out to them. "I expect you will need these."

Mac reached toward him, but Harm stopped her. "Hold on a minute. You hand us some tired rhetoric, and we're supposed to just trust you? How do we know that you won't lead us right into a trap?"

Unfazed, Amir lifted an eyebrow. "If I wanted to turn you in, I could have called a dozen guards to this roof before you even arrived. You could easily be arrested simply for leaving your rooms at this hour. Please. We have little time."

Harm still seemed unconvinced, but he nodded curtly and grabbed a robe. "All right. I'm Rabb, she's Mackenzie. Show us where we're going."

"We cannot risk leaving through any of the main-floor exits. That is why I asked you to come up here. There is an old fire escape on the back wall that the hotel has blocked off because they no longer consider it safe. If you are prepared to climb, we can reach the alley."

"Lead the way."

The fire escape was indeed old and less than perfectly stable. Its iron rungs were rusted, and the bolts that held it to the wall were shaky at best. Nevertheless, it seemed like the best chance for them to traverse the six stories to the ground without being seen. They went one at a time, not trusting the structure to hold two people at once, and within seconds, Amir had silently scaled down to the dusty alley below. Harm followed him, taking a while longer to get his footing. Eventually his shipboard skills kicked in, and he swung his boots to the outside of the ladder, shimmying down the last two stories in a second and a half.

Mac was about twenty feet from the ground when one of the bolts detached itself from the wall, throwing her off-balance. She fell against the bolt's exposed edge, the jagged metal tracing a fiery path over her upper arm. Gritting her teeth to keep from crying out, she followed Harm's lead and attempted to slide the rest of the way before the entire ladder could come loose.

Reacting instinctively, Harm lunged forward and caught her against his body as she all but tumbled to the ground. He swung her away from the wall and shielded her, praying that the ladder wouldn't come crashing down and announce their presence to the world. When the dust settled, the fire escape was still mostly attached, and they breathed a sigh of relief. "Nice work," he murmured into her hair, not ready to release his hold just yet.

"Yeah, you too," she replied, pulling back slightly and wincing at the gash across her arm. "Man, that hurt like hell."

"It looks nasty," Harm agreed, searching his pockets for something to use as a bandage. "Might get infected, and it didn't really occur to me to pack a first-aid kit."

"You must have been a lousy Boy Scout," she said dryly. But he came up with a small canteen and rinsed the cut as thoroughly as possible before binding her arm with his canvas belt. "Good enough for now. Let's get moving."

Amir led them through the back streets, outlining the layout of the prison compound in a calm, quiet voice. "As long as they have not moved him, your countryman should be in an isolated cell. That is fortunate for us. The leaders of the guards have argued many times over what is to be done with him, and all the while he remains there, apart from the rest of the prisoners."

"Why hasn't his existence been made public?" Mac wanted to know. "He's of no use as leverage unless our government knows he's here."

Their contact shrugged. "Secrets are a very valuable commodity in this regime. We hardly even know where our own President is most of the time. Once they reveal the prisoner, they no longer have any secrets to trade. He is -- what is the term you Americans would use ... an 'ace in the hole.' "

Harm frowned, surprised by the other man's knowledge of American slang. "You've studied in the States, haven't you?"

Amir shook his head. "I was a driver for the American embassy, back when there was such a thing. It would surprise you to know just how much people will say in the presence of their hired help." He turned a corner and crouched low, motioning for the two officers to do the same. "That wall surrounds the compound. Look down about forty meters to the east. Do you see the gate?" They both nodded. "Every twenty minutes the guard checks it. He should appear in approximately six minutes. We will need to overpower him without alerting anyone."

Mac withdrew the taser from her pocket. "I knew this would come in handy at some point."

They moved quietly along the wall, waiting in whatever shadows they could find until the guard appeared.

"*You there!*" Amir called in Arabic.

The guard halted. "*Who calls?*"

"*I am the groundskeeper. Do you not know me?*"

The younger man studied him. "*Perhaps. What is it? It is too late to do your work tonight.*"

"*I have news for your commander.*" Amir leaned closer to the flimsy gate, motioning for the guard to do the same. When he complied, Mac reached in and gave him a jolt with the taser. As he crumpled, she grabbed the keys off his belt.

"What did you say to him?" Harm wanted to know.

Amir gazed back at him in total seriousness. "I told him that I had news, which I do. After all, the Americans are coming."

Harm shook his head, and as Mac opened the gate, he dragged the unconscious guard into the nearest supply room and appropriated his weapon. "Where to?"

Amir took a moment to orient himself, then pointed. "This way."

The dim passageways were eerily quiet: the swirling wind and dust provided the only background noise. It seemed like miles before Amir at least pulled up short at a set of steps blocked by a gate. "If he is still here at all, he will be down there."

"If you're screwing with us, so help me -- "

"So help you what? God?"

The man's imperturbable calm only served to irritate Harm further. "Your God or mine, I guess."

Amir shook his head. "I do not believe that we have different Gods - only different interpretations of Him. If your people truly wish to bring peace to this region, it would serve you well to understand that."

Harm relented. "I apologize. Down here, you say?" The other man nodded. "All right. We'll check it out. You stand guard."

Mac tried all the keys until she came upon one that fit. When the lock clicked open, she looked up at her partner with equal amounts of trepidation and hope. This would be the answer to an agonizing question -- one way or another.

Harm climbed down the uneven steps first, squinting a little in the darkness. The stairway ended in a small cell, maybe eight feet by twelve, with only the tiniest window near the ceiling. In the corner, a figure huddled against the wall, shielding himself as best he could.

"Enough for today! Please!" he begged in disjointed Arabic.

Harm tensed. That voice might have been American, but what if it wasn't? Might another prisoner be willing to scream for the guards, hoping it might spare him from some later punishment?

What the hell does it matter? You're here now. In the calmest voice he could summon, he replied, "I'm sorry, Commander. English is my first and only language."

For a moment, there was no response. Then, slowly, the man raised his head, and beneath a tangled mat of dirty blond hair, a pair of pale blue eyes locked on the two visitors. "American?" he whispered, allowing only a trace of hope to creep into his expression.

"That's right. Commander Rabb and Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie, at your service. Can you walk?"

Frasier trembled slightly as he stood up to meet them. "Sir, right now I think I could fly if I had to."

"Well, one step at a time." Harm clasped his outstretched hand warmly.

Mac retrieved their radio and tuned it carefully before speaking in a hushed voice. "Taxicab, this is Triumph, come in."

"Go ahead, Triumph," came the response from the Guadalcanal.

"We've made our pickup, and we're headed for the exfil point. ETA approximately two-five minutes. Be advised that we are extracting four, repeat, four people."

"Roger that. We'll be there with bells on."

A burst of static issued from the receiver, and Mac killed the power before it could draw any unwanted attention. Harm was examining Frasier's bruised feet with concern. "We've got a ways to hike from here. Let's try something."

He pulled off his robe, fumbled around with his jacket, and finally removed one of the Kevlar panels from the lining. Tearing a strip of fabric from the robe, he tied the panel to the bottom of Frasier's foot. "Better than nothing, right?"

Before he could remove a second panel, Mac stopped him. "Hold on. Let's be democratic about this."

As she slid a panel out of the lining of her own jacket, Harm suddenly pulled off his jacket entirely and held it out to the prisoner. "I'm thinking you'd be better off wearing this." Frasier immediately began to protest, but the senior officer cut him off. "Face it. I'm bound to be a little more maneuverable than you are right now. Besides, if we let you get shot, Mac and I came a really long way for nothing."

Frasier accepted the jacket, grateful to have even a piece of an American uniform again after so long. "Is it really just the two of you?"

"We'll explain later, but yes. Suffice it to say that the amount of authorization we have for this little rescue is based on how successful it turns out to be."

He hesitated a little. "I do have to admit, you don't look much like any special-ops guys I've ever seen. No offense, ma'am."

"None taken. Especially since we're actually judge advocates most of the time."

"You're kidding me."

"Again, long story. But you have a very strong wife back home who wasn't about to give up on you." As Frasier reacted to that statement, Harm started to climb the steps. "Let's get moving."

Amir led them back through the compound without a sound, and also without a single guard in sight. When the outer wall came into view, they began to believe they might make it after all.

And then someone finally saw them.

A harsh yell cut through the air, and all four of them, without even a glance at each other, began to run for the gate. Frasier's stride was labored, having spent far too long in that

tiny cell, but Mac stayed with him step for step to pull him along. Harm reached the gate first and kicked it cleanly off its hinges. They had just slipped through the opening when the first shots were fired.

"Aww, damn it," Harm groaned, simultaneously checking his orientation and readying his weapon. "Mac, tell your jarhead friends to hurry up, would you?"

She ignored him, already shouting into the radio. "Taxicab, we are taking fire! Hope you brought a good gunner with you."

"The best, Triumph. We're inbound to you. Two minutes, tops."

As if on cue, the sound of rotors grew louder, drawing some of the guards' fire. Amir dove into an alley, struggling with his aged gun. "Down!" he screamed suddenly, and Harm hit the deck in time to watch a rocket-propelled grenade sizzle past and explode against a stone wall.

"What the hell are these guys doing with an RPG launcher?" he demanded, yelling over the intensifying chaos.

"Do you really expect me to know this?" Amir shouted back.

Mac and Frasier were crouched in a similar alley across the road. "Lawyers, huh?" the pilot asked, somewhat wryly.

"Better believe it." A blast of answering fire announced the arrival of the Marine helo, and Mac allowed herself a split-second of relief. "This is the home stretch," she told her companion. "Think you can make it?"

"No question, ma'am."

"Good. Harm! Cover -- "

"Got it," Harm tossed over his shoulder. "Go!"

Amir's sense of self-preservation had kicked in, and he was the first to reach the helo, which was still powered up and barely holding itself to the ground. Mac hooked an arm around Frasier's waist and practically dragged him along. The helo's door gunner paused long enough in his firing to reach down and haul him aboard, with Mac piling in after them.

Harm waited for the helo's covering fire to resume, then bolted toward it at top speed. He vaulted onto the top of the skid and immediately motioned for them to take off. As the helo lifted off, another grenade exploded just below, sending a concussion wave through the aircraft and knocking Harm backward before he could fully climb aboard.

On pure instinct, Mac dove forward and seized his wrists before he could fall. The gunner, whose uniform identified him as Sergeant Thomas, grabbed hold of her belt, and a terrifying aerobatic maneuver began.

Mac once again gritted her teeth against the blazing agony of her injured arm and focused on her partner, dangling helplessly above a rapidly shrinking landscape. "Set us down!" she ordered, panic rising in her throat.

Thomas shook his head. "Ma'am, we do that, another RPG'll get us!"

Harm's face contorted in pain as Mac attempted to wrench him up. "Let go," he shouted up at her. "Mac, for Christ's sake, let me go!"

"No, damn it!" she yelled desperately. "Hang on!"

"Mac, I can't ..." He released his grip on her wrists, only heightening her desperation.

"Not *good enough!*" As the sand whizzed by, two hundred feet below, she blinked away sweat and tears. "Sergeant, haul us up!"

Thomas, with help from Amir, started to slide Mac's prone body back into the cabin until the two of them could grab the commander's arms themselves. With one superhuman tug, Mac scrambled up, and all of them collapsed onto the helo's deck. Harm fell into his partner's lap in an awkward heap.

Exhausted, Mac sucked in a shaky breath. "That'll teach you to give up, squid!" she panted. There was no immediate response. "Harm, you okay?" She reached down to help him sit up -- and an icy spike stabbed through her as her hand came away slick with blood.

"Oh, God ..." The grenade -- the shrapnel -- the Kevlar jacket that he'd given up for Frasier ...

Harm twisted slightly to look up at her, and already she could see in his pale, drawn features that he knew exactly how bad it was. "Dumb jarhead," he offered weakly. "Told you ... to let go."

"Yeah, well, I ignored you, like always." Fighting back her fear, she attempted to compress the wound. But there wasn't simply one wound to find: his back was ravaged, his tattered shirt already soaked. He coughed fitfully, and tears sprang to her eyes upon seeing the thin trickle of blood that appeared at the corner of his mouth. "Oh Jesus, please, don't do this."

"Sorry ... Mac ..."

"Don't be sorry. You can be sorry later, when we're back at JAG and this is all just another red flag in our service records. All right?" She felt, rather than saw, consciousness slipping away from him, and instinctively she held him tighter. "Come on, flyboy, you have to stay with me."

Before she could even finish the plea, his body had gone limp in her arms.

As Sergeant Thomas got on the radio to warn the Guadalcanal of their incoming casualty, Frasier watched from the aft bulkhead, a maelstrom of conflicting emotions surging through him. Next to him, Amir sat silently, barely noticing as the coastline of his homeland vanished beneath him for the last time.

**0539 Local
USS Guadalcanal
In the Arabian Sea**

When he found her at last, she was sitting on the outer stairway to the weather deck. A few helicopters were fueling up on the flight deck below, but came as little surprise that she wasn't watching any of the activity.

"I thought you'd still be in sickbay, ma'am," he began awkwardly.

Mac glanced up, and almost didn't recognize the man who stood there. In the past three hours, Daniel Frasier had been thoroughly examined, gotten a long-awaited shower and a haircut, and had put on a flight suit for the first time in over four years. His painfully thin frame and hooded eyes still betrayed his ordeal, but he carried himself with the pride that the uniform had always inspired in him and so many others.

She waved at the stair next to her, and he took a seat. "I only went down there to get my arm patched up. I'm already as familiar as I care to be with the sickbay on this ship," she explained quietly. "A good friend lost a leg a couple of months ago. I waited down there in that frigid passageway through his entire surgery. That time, though, I had my partner to lean on. I don't know if I can handle it on my own."

Frasier nodded gravely. "Well, they only sprung me loose a while ago, and it sounded like things were going all right at that point."

"Meaning that he's still alive and they're still working on him."

"Yeah." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "This is the most English I've spoken in ages. Come to think of it, this is the most I've spoken at all in ages."

"I'm surprised you didn't forget how."

"It could've easily happened. There were times when I kept up a dialogue in my head to keep from going nuts."

She hesitated. "Do you know how long it's been?" she asked cautiously. "I mean, what year it is and everything?"

"Yes, ma'am. They were all too happy to remind me on a regular basis."

"I can't imagine what it must have been like."

"I don't think I could explain it if I tried, even though I know a lot of people are going to ask. I still can't fully convince myself that it's over." He paused a moment, gazing out over the vast sea bathed in the early dawn's glow. "I can't believe I'm watching the sun rise in a different place from where I was every day for the last few years. It's incredible ... I can certainly see how you might prefer to wait up here than below decks."

"That's not really why I'm here." She gave a small, hopeless shrug. "I guess I always thought of this as Harm's spot. Whenever we're on a carrier, he's up here every spare minute."

"The commander served on carriers, I take it?"

Mac smiled wistfully and reached into her pocket. In her hand were the wings she'd told Harm to leave behind, the ones she'd secretly taken out of his car when he wasn't looking.

Frasier blinked, surprised. "He's a pilot, ma'am?"

"Tomcats, but don't hold that against him. And given the circumstances, I think you can call me Mac. I suspect you're due for a promotion, anyway."

"Whatever you say. I'm Danny." He shook his head in wonder, still looking at the wings in her hand. "I guess he must have really identified with me somehow, if the two of you were willing to do all this without orders."

"It wasn't you he identified with. It was your son. Harm was six years old when his father went down in Vietnam." She pulled her BDU shirt tighter against the wind: she'd discarded the jacket hours ago, after discovering that it was stained beyond repair with her dear friend's blood. "Look, Danny -- how much did your captors tell you about what's going on in the world? I don't want to rush you if you're not ready to hear this, but -- "

"No, tell me." His tone was resolute. "I need to know as much as I can, as soon as I can. I need to get back into my life."

"Okay." She took a deep, measured breath. "Did they tell you anything about the World Trade Center?"

His brow furrowed. "I remember hearing someone talking about towers. Is that -- I mean, what about it?"

"They were destroyed. A year ago, terrorists hijacked four planes and flew them into the towers and the Pentagon. The fourth one was brought down by the passengers in an empty field. All together, about three thousand people were killed that day."

Frasier said nothing for a few seconds, unable to comprehend. "My God," he uttered finally. "A year ago, you said?"

"September eleventh, 2001. Everyone basically refers to it as 9-11. Since then, we've been at war with the terrorist cells in Afghanistan -- that's where my friend was hurt. And we're trying to oust Saddam before he can use the weapons of mass destruction that he's been trying to develop. It's all kind of confusing right now, and not everybody's on board with it, but that's why we couldn't afford to wait any longer to come get you. For all we know, the Air Force might park a cluster bomb in that compound tomorrow."

Still trying to get his bearings, he could only shake his head. When he spoke again, there was a note of uncertainty in his voice. "They really thought I was dead, didn't they," he stated, already knowing the answer. "I had a funeral, and a grave in Arlington -- I can't imagine ... Everything's going to be so different."

"Not everything. I think your wife will see to that."

"But Matthew was so little, and now ..." He looked up suddenly. "Have you met him? Do you know what he's like?"

"He's a remarkable young man. I'm sure you'll be able to see that for yourself soon enough."

Some life returned to Frasier's eyes as he nodded. "The skipper said I'm to be flown to Aviano, and that Carol and Matthew will meet me there. There hasn't been any press yet, but with all the gunfire in Basra, they had to pull that delegation of ours out of the country before someone could discover that there were Americans involved. The story's going to be out soon anyway, so the Pentagon is going to start taking credit for everything you've done. Maybe I'd better get ready to be the circus freak of the month."

Mac drew a sharp breath. "Oh, Christ. I need to call our CO. If the Pentagon releases our names, or what happened to Harm ..." She cut herself off before her tenuous control could slip. This man had enough trauma to bear right now. He didn't need to carry the weight of her pain and fear.

But he saw it nonetheless. "Mac, I don't know how to feel about some of this," he confessed. "I'm so incredibly grateful to both of you, but the fact that Commander Rabb had to make such a sacrifice -- "

"Don't. Just stick with being grateful, and tell your son that you love him at the first opportunity. That's what he'd tell you to do."

Frasier stood up, briefly laying a hand on top of hers before going below to leave her with her thoughts. Mac stared out at the faintly illuminated waves for a few minutes longer, tears burning her eyes.

Damn it, Harm. This is what happens when you insist on playing the hero. You leave me to pick up the pieces, and you'll never know how much it kills me to do it -- to do anything -- without you.

Same time
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Admiral Chegwidden reached over to tap the buzzing intercom on his desk. "What is it, Tiner?"

"Sir, ship-to-shore call from the USS Guadalcanal. Should I put it through?"

The JAG glanced over at his TV, where the crawler across the bottom of the screen alerted viewers to a breaking story about a rescue of an American pilot in Iraq.

"I'll be damned," he uttered quietly. "They did it."

"Sir?"

"Put the call through, Tiner." The admiral picked up the phone. "Commander, I have to admit that I had my doubts about this stunt."

The voice on the line wasn't Harm's. "Admiral, it's Colonel Mackenzie."

Instantly he read the undercurrent of her voice, and his blood ran cold. "Mac," he began slowly, "I ordered that partner of yours not to come home dead."

"He's trying, sir. It's just that there was this RPG, and some shrapnel, and ..." She gathered herself and continued. "They've got him in surgery now, and once they get him stabilized, they want to airlift to Aviano."

"Okay. But you got it done?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then hold onto that, and get Harm through this. I'll find a way to tell the staff before ZNN does. You'll keep me updated?"

"Of course, Admiral."

"Mac, if anyone can convince that man to turn down those celestial wings for a while longer, it's you."

"Thank you, sir," she whispered. "I'll be in touch."

The admiral hung up the phone and sank back into his chair, suddenly feeling very old. First Bud, and now Harm. This wasn't the way it was supposed to work.

"Tiner," he called into the intercom. "Get me Rabb's personnel file."

"It's a big file, sir. Anything specific I can find for you?"

"I need his mother's phone number. Now."

Tiner had been doing this job long enough to read the tone of his commander's voice, almost as well as the older man had read Mac's. He swallowed hard and replied. "Aye, sir."

0623 Local USS Guadalcanal In the Arabian Sea

Mac had been telling the absolute truth when she'd admitted her dislike of the LHA's sickbay to Danny Frasier. Upon seeing that all-too-familiar corridor, she could feel that same dull anguish returning, as if it had hidden away there on the day of Bud's accident and lurked until it became needed again. She imagined she could see Harm's proud features finally crumple as the surgeon ended their agonizing wait, and she imagined she could feel the strong comfort of his chest under her cheek as they both struggled not to break down.

Harm had always pulled her through those bleak times, she realized, whether he knew it or not. His mere presence in her life had nearly always empowered her in some way, if for no other reason than because she wanted to be better for him, to be the fearless Marine that he saw in her. It was only the times when their bond was threatened, when he wasn't there to make her suck it up, that truly shook her foundation. She recalled the hopelessness that had

reigned over her during his nightmare in the Atlantic, and felt it beginning to creep back into her mind. Without him, it was hard to find the energy to put up that brave front.

She couldn't avoid sickbay forever, though -- not while he was still fighting for every breath, somewhere beyond that hatch -- and she couldn't face the medics without some semblance of calm. So she waited silently in that wretched corridor, an expressionless mask firmly locked in place, until a weary doctor appeared at last.

Don't you tell me he's dead. The words had come from Jennifer Coates, months ago, but in her mind she heard them in her own voice. *Don't you tell me he's dead.*

"He's stable now," the man said without preamble, allowing her a moment to absorb that most critical piece of information. "No doubt you recognized the lung damage -- that was minimal, and it's been repaired. Loss of blood was substantial, and we'll need to keep transfusing him for a while yet. Most of the fragments didn't penetrate far enough to damage any major organs, so you can thank someone higher up than me for that."

Mac sensed the 'but' coming and tensed. "Why was the surgery so long, then?"

He didn't flinch visibly, but there was a noticeable split-second of mental preparation before he responded. "Some of the fragments were complicated to remove, due to their proximity to his spinal column."

Later, she would wonder if she might have physically stopped breathing at that moment. At the time, however, nothing else could force its way into her mind besides that chilling statement.

"There doesn't appear to be any overt catastrophic nerve damage," the doctor went on to say, "but at the very least we'll have to wait for the inflammation to subside before we know for sure what we're dealing with."

"You're telling me there's a chance of paralysis?"

"A chance, yes. By no means is it a certainty or even a likelihood. The primary wound is low enough on his back that it would hypothetically only affect leg movement. He's not on a ventilator, nor will he need to be. We're still planning to transport to Aviano -- the sooner the better. Flight Ops is working on that as we speak, so if you want to ..." He shook his head apologetically. "Then again, considering the circumstances, I don't suppose you really have anything to pack up."

"I'd like to be with him, whenever possible." She was saying the words even before they'd fully coalesced in her head.

"Of course. He's immobilized, to guard against further spinal injury, but I suspect that he wouldn't be strong enough to move more than a finger even if he wanted to. He's still coming out of the anesthesia, but we can give you a few minutes before we sedate him for the flight."

"Thank you, doctor."

"My pleasure. Best of luck to you."

When she stepped through the open hatch and saw him for the first time, it felt as if that cursed grenade had slammed into her chest. Her sailor's still form lay beneath a mass of tubes and restraining straps, and a cervical collar held his head and neck securely in place. His eyelids flickered slowly back and forth between closed and half-open. She grimaced as she realized that they'd had to place him on his back, where all of his numerous wounds resided, and then decided that he would probably be feeling very little pain right now.

But I'd rather he feel pain than nothing at all, wouldn't I?

Mac leaned over the gurney so that she would be in his limited line of sight. "Hey, flyboy," she said softly.

Harm dragged his eyes mostly open, and through a medicated haze, he focused on her face. "Mac," he whispered. "You're here."

"Where else would I be?" She wanted badly to reach out to him, to hold him, even if he couldn't hold her back. But with consummate willpower, she settled for stroking his pale cheek with a tender hand. "You're doing great, Harm. You're going to be fine."

"Tired ..." His gaze went unfocused for a moment, and then he looked up at her with an almost childlike expression. "Why can't I move?"

With tears stinging her eyes, she prepared herself to come as close as she ever had to lying to her best friend. "They have you secured for transport. We're on the Guadalcanal right now, and they're going to take us mainland."

"Okay," he agreed faintly, trusting her without a thought. "Both of us?"

"Uh huh. Commander Frasier, too."

It wasn't clear if any of this was registering with him. "You're beautiful," he murmured, seemingly out of the clear blue. At any other time, her heart would have soared at those words, but now they only brought fresh anguish. "I never told you that ..." His eyes drifted closed briefly, then opened again. "Why are you crying?"

Any answer she might have given would have been a further lie. Instead, then, she bent down to gently kiss his forehead. "Just rest," she whispered back. "It'll be all right."

**1106 Local
Medical Center
Aviano Air Base, Italy**

"Mac?"

She pulled herself awake immediately and looked up. "Danny, hi."

Danny Frasier stepped into the small hospital room and nodded toward Harm, still sleeping off the effects of the heavy sedation. "How's the commander doing?"

"Okay, I think. He was so weak from the blood loss and the surgery that the drugs really knocked him out. I'm starting to think that by the time he comes out of it, maybe some of the swelling will have already gone down."

"I hope you're right." He studied the floor and attempted to dampen his excitement, knowing that she couldn't share in it. "Listen, I'm sure you don't want to leave him for long, but I thought I'd ask anyway. Carol and Matthew are going to be landing soon -- would you come with me to see them?"

The unexpected request caught her momentarily without a response. "Wouldn't I just be in the way?" she asked finally.

"I don't think anything will get in our way today. Except if a reporter manages to get past security." He offered a small shrug. "Besides, they know you, right? I'm sure Carol will want to see you."

"I guess I could probably get back here before he wakes up." Mac rose from her chair and brushed her fingers across Harm's motionless hand. "I'll be back," she promised him quietly, moving to follow Danny.

There was a small passenger terminal on the flight line, and it was there that they waited for the Air Force transport to offload its passengers. When Carol and Matthew Frasier disembarked, they did so with carefully neutral expressions, unsure what to expect. Danny drew a shaky breath and stepped forward, and suddenly Carol's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Oh, my God," she breathed. "You're really here."

Instantly, he pulled her into a crushing embrace, four years of painful longing and desperate hope radiating across the expanse.

"They were so sure you were dead ..."

"The only reason I'm not is you," he told her, burying his face in her hair and immersing himself in her very presence. After a moment, he pulled back to focus on the awed little boy that stood beside them. "Matthew, buddy, is that you?"

"Yes, sir," Matthew answered solemnly, and Danny swept him up into his arms.

"You grew up an awful lot, kiddo. You and your mom did a good job together."

Matthew hesitated when his father set him back on his feet. "Dad, um, you know how you said you were going to teach me how to throw a spiral sometime?"

Danny was amazed that he'd remembered something like that. "I did make that promise, didn't I?"

"Well, um, Bobby Ritner's brother showed me how last summer. I hope you don't mind."

His heart swelled. "I don't mind a bit, son. But when we get home, I'm going to show you how to kick a field goal instead, okay?"

Mac watched the reunion from a polite distance, hoping her own tears weren't too noticeable. *You should be here, Harm*, she thought wistfully. *You should be here to see this wonderful thing you did, this thing that should have happened for you half a lifetime ago.*

"Colonel Mackenzie?" Carol spotted her then, and the Frasier's came over, hand in hand. "I don't even know where to start. How am I supposed to thank you for something like this?"

"Believe me, Mrs. Frasier, we were glad to do it."

She glanced around, searching. "Is Commander Rabb here? I have to ..." Her voice faded as she caught the look of sadness that passed between her husband and the colonel, and fear began to take hold. "Oh, no. No, he isn't --?"

"He's in the medical center," Mac explained, trying to force a brighter smile. "He'll be okay - it's just ..." Having nowhere to go, she let the sentence trail off helplessly.

Carol seemed to comprehend, and she nodded bravely. "Do you think he'd be up to having visitors?" she asked. "I'd like to thank him, but --"

"We can always give it a try." The smile felt insincere, but she willed it not to fade. "Actually the med center is probably a pretty good place to hide out from the media, if that's a concern."

"Why don't you lead the way?"

Danny slid an arm around his wife, reveling in the simple, amazing pleasure of it. After a moment, Matthew tugged on his father's sleeve, a question in his young eyes. Danny smiled and held out his hand, and his son slipped his own into it. Some families were not destined to be mended, perhaps, but at long last, this one was whole again.

Harm stirred slightly, his body feeling inordinately heavy. As consciousness floated back, he began to recall what had happened, and the first complete thought to cross his mind was surprise that he was waking up at all. And somehow he wasn't in unbearable pain, either. There was something vaguely familiar about that sensation -- or lack thereof -- but before he could pinpoint it, a voice broke into his jumbled thoughts.

"Harm ... Harm, it's me. It's okay. You can wake up now."

He believed her. What could possibly be wrong with any day that began with her voice? With effort, he forced his eyes open, and was rewarded with a view of her luminous features.

"Glad to have you back," Mac said softly, squeezing his hand.

It took a couple of tries before he found his voice, but Harmon Rabb was above all else a persistent man. "Now where are we?" he asked, hearing his own weakness clearly.

"Aviano. You had me worried, sailor."

He closed his hand around hers: it took more concentration than he'd expected. "I'm good at that, aren't I?"

"At what? Worrying me?"

"Yeah."

She smiled. "You're worth it."

A sudden thought occurred to him, and his face fell. "Does my mom know ... what happened?"

She fought to keep the smile in place once again, realizing that Harm's mother probably knew more about his condition than he did. "The admiral's keeping her updated, and I'm keeping the admiral updated. But so far, the Pentagon's managed to do a great job of taking responsibility for the whole thing. Our names haven't come up at all."

"Good."

Mac could see his uncertainty growing stronger, and she decided to act before he could ask a question she wasn't ready to answer. "Hey, Carol and Matthew Frasier got in a little while ago. They'd like to see you, if it's all right."

"Sure. Can you raise this bed at all?"

"The doctors said not yet -- they don't want to aggravate your back."

Even through the fading remnants of a drug-induced twilight, he knew there was something wrong with that reply. But she had already stepped out to find the Frasier's.

Carol entered the room first. She stiffened slightly upon seeing him, pale and fragile and utterly unlike the man who had stood before her only a few days ago. Quickly, though, she crossed the room and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you," she said urgently. "I don't think I could ever explain how much you've done for us."

"It's all right," he answered honestly. "I think I have a pretty good idea."

"Yeah, I suppose you would."

"Commander," Danny greeted, coming up behind his wife. "You're looking better than the last time I saw you."

"I could say the same," Harm commented. "Nice to see that you're finding your way all right."

"It'll be tough," the other pilot admitted. "But it's a chance I might never had gotten if it wasn't for all of you."

"Are they going to let you out of here soon, sir?" The question came from Matthew, hovering back from the group. "You're okay, right?"

Harm's gaze strayed over to Mac for just a second before he answered. "Yeah, Matthew. I'm going to be fine."

"We'll stop by later," Carol promised as they moved toward the door. "We've got some catching up to do."

"I expect so. Take care."

When they'd gone, Mac slid back into the chair by his bedside. "How are you doing?" she asked gently.

He stared back at her with a serious expression. "I think you'd better tell me what's going on," he said quietly.

She knew she couldn't stall him forever, but something irrational in her mind wanted to try. "What's going on?" she repeated lamely.

"Mac, I may not be firing on all cylinders right now, but I'm with it enough to know that something's not right. I need you to tell me why I can't feel my legs."

Her lip trembled slightly, giving him all the answer he needed.

"Damn," he whispered, closing his eyes.

"It's probably only temporary," she hurried to explain. "There's a lot of swelling, and as soon as it goes down it'll alleviate some of the pressure on your spinal cord. We just have to wait a little while to see."

He nodded, not meeting her gaze. "Okay."

"Really, it's probably nothing to worry about -- "

"I said, okay."

She closed her mouth, watching the walls immediately go up around him. "All right," she said simply. "Do you want some time on your own?"

"No!" The force of his answer surprised both of them, but he didn't back down from it. "No. Stay here. I don't want to stare at the ceiling for the next God-knows-how-long without ..."

"Someone to talk to?" she finished sympathetically. He raised his eyes to hers with a slight shake of his head.

"Without *you* to talk to."

It shouldn't have made that much of a difference, that one word, but it did. With a newfound feeling of warmth, she lifted her chin and smiled at him through a veil of tears. "I'm here," she said simply. "As long as you need me."

The following day
1347 Local
Same location

Sarah Mackenzie had never been one to take a promise lightly. She stayed with him almost constantly throughout the next twenty-four hours, not leaving the room even while he slept, which was a fair percentage of the time. They didn't talk as much as she might have expected, but he held onto her hand as if his life hung in the balance. Maybe it was partially to prove to himself that his arms were in fact still functioning as designed, unlike his legs. Somehow, though, she doubted that reasoning.

"So what happens if things don't get better?" Harm asked out of nowhere, tilting his head toward her. "If another day or week goes by and this is as good as it gets, what then?"

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "I think you have to answer that."

He considered the idea silently for a moment. "I'll tell you one upside to it," he said finally. "By comparison, Bud would start feeling a lot better about having *one* working leg."

She studied him for moment, unsure how to react. "Was that a joke?"

"I'm not really sure ... On second thought, probably not."

One of the doctors poked her head in the door and smiled. "Ready for a little test, Commander?"

"I don't know. I'm not good with tests." He attempted to affect a good-humored attitude. "Am I allowed to phone a friend or anything?"

"I don't know if it'd help for this kind of test, but I'm sure Colonel Mackenzie would be your lifeline if you asked nicely." The therapist moved into the room, unaware of the weighty glance that passed between the partners. "The x-rays on your back are looking much better, so it's time to see what we've got. I'm going to manipulate your legs, and I need you to tell me if you feel anything, all right?"

"Sure." He tried valiantly not to tense up as she lifted his right leg and began to bend it at the knee. It was surreal to watch it happen and not be able to feel it, and it disoriented him so much that he almost didn't notice when the slightest sensation made its presence known. "Hold on -- I think I felt something there."

Hope surged in Mac's heart, but she fought it back.

The therapist extended his leg fully, and involuntarily he hissed in pain, shutting his eyes. Mac seized his hand and held it until he looked up at them again. "I sure as hell felt *that*."

"That's a good thing, Commander," the therapist told him, smiling broadly.

"Yeah?" He struggled to keep the desperate optimism out of his voice.

"Yeah. This is only the start, but I think we're looking at a pretty happy ending here."

She worked on him for a few more minutes, then left them, promising to return later with a more detailed therapy regimen. Mac sat back in the chair, unable to describe the overwhelming relief that gripped her. "You hear that?" she said, almost in disbelief. "Snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, as per usual. You're incredible, flyboy."

He didn't respond, and when she glanced down, she was surprised to see a lone tear tracing a path down his face. "Harm?"

"I'm sorry," he whispered, in a voice that didn't seem at all like his own. "I just kept thinking about Bud, and how I don't think I could live like that ... I feel awful for being this relieved ..."

"Stop it," she ordered gently. "You're feeling exactly how any normal human being would in this instance. Of course you're relieved. This means everything's going to be all right, remember?"

"I know." He scrubbed the tears away and gestured listlessly. "You think you could raise this damn bed now? I'm tired of being this far away from you."

Struck by his choice of words, she pushed the button to raise the head of the bed. As soon as he neared a sitting position, he reached out and pulled her to him, burying his face in her shoulder. "Thanks for staying," he murmured simply.

She closed her arms around him, careful of the bandages, and told her internal clock to get lost for a while. This wasn't the dynamic that she was accustomed to, but that wasn't important. The man who had always steadfastly refused to need anyone now seemed to truly need her, and she didn't dare fail in that responsibility, no matter how much it complicated everything about her own feelings.

A few days later
1625 EDT
Bethesda Naval Hospital, Maryland

"This is definitely not my preferred method of transportation," Harm remarked with a protracted sigh, carefully pulling himself out of the wheelchair to which he'd been relegated. "I'm going to lose this thing at the first available opportunity."

"Not before you work up to something more than five steps, smart guy," Mac rebuked him, helping him sit down on the edge of his new bed. "At least you're closer to home now. You won't be stuck with me as your only source of entertainment."

Something strange flickered in his eyes at that statement, but it was quickly gone. "Listen, you haven't told everybody the, ah, the extent of what happened, right? I mean, the admiral's the only one who knows how badly I banged myself up?"

Her brow creased. "Well, people have probably drawn some conclusions from the fact that we've been gone for a while. I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"I don't really want Bud to know that I have to rehab my legs. It's going to go a lot smoother than his rehab, and I don't want him to see that and get discouraged. You think you could manage to not mention that part if people ask?"

"I'll do my best, but -- "

"Thanks."

She closed her mouth, choosing not to ask how he intended to hide his inability to walk from any visitors that might appear. "So," she began uncertainly. "The admiral wants me to stop by the office this afternoon and give him a full report. Just because the brass is taking credit for our success doesn't mean they don't want to know exactly what happened. You're lucky to be getting a pass."

"I guess you need to get going, then?"

"Yeah, I guess I do." She was getting an odd vibe from this conversation, and she wasn't quite sure what to do about it. "You're okay on your own for a while, right?"

"Of course."

"Okay. Then I'll be back once I have a chance to go grab you some books and get a decent night's sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

"All right." But as he watched her move toward the door, something in his subconscious compelled him to act. "Mac, wait."

She turned back, eyebrows raised. "What is it?"

"I've been trying to figure out how to say something to you for the last three days, and now that we're back home, I feel like I'm going to lose my window of opportunity if I don't speak up now. Do you have a couple of minutes?"

Immediately wary, she stepped back into the room. "I suppose I can always tell the admiral I got stuck in traffic."

"Thank you." He relaxed somewhat, but the tension in his broad shoulders was still visible. "Um, when I said that I'd been trying to figure it out for three days, I didn't mean to imply that I actually *had* figured it out. I haven't, but I'm here now, so I'm just going to have to wing it."

"You do that."

Taking a deep breath was not easy, considering the fragile nature of his damaged lung, but he did it anyway. "Okay. All that time when I was stuck in that bed at Aviano, thinking that I'd be lucky if I ever walked again, I was thinking about you at the same time."

She could hear blood pounding in her ears, but she willed herself not to react. "Me?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about how much I depend on you, a lot more than I think you realize. I was thinking about how you came up with the dispassionate plan, like always, because you knew I wouldn't be able to do it alone but would have tried anyway. I don't deserve half of the help or the comfort or the happiness that you've given me, and it's pathetic that it took a rocket-propelled grenade to make me realize that I needed to do something about it. When I need you, you back me up without a second thought, even when you don't necessarily agree with whatever it is I'm into. And I'm pretty sure that's why I need you more and more with every day that goes by." He spoke without looking at her, as if that might break his concentration. "Anyway, what it all adds up to is this: I'm in love with you, and I'm finally ready to say it. I hope you can believe me, and I hope you can forgive me for not making sense of it all before now."

For a while, Mac didn't move a muscle. Her comfortably dysfunctional life had just taken a dizzying curve, and while it looked glorious on the surface, something about it didn't quite ring true. Her face must have betrayed her confusion, because when he looked up at her at last, the light in his blue eyes faded. "You don't, do you?" he asked quietly. "You don't believe me."

"I-I'd like to," she answered truthfully. "It's just that this seems so out of nowhere."

"Maybe it is, but I don't think so. I need you, Mac. Having you these last few days has been the only thing that's kept me from losing my mind. You were all ready to walk out that door a few minutes ago, just for a few hours, and it still physically hurt to watch."

She twisted her hands, feeling torn. This was exactly what she wanted, wasn't it? And yet ... "Harm, I don't know how to say this without sounding awful, but you hate needing people. It goes against everything you've always tried to be. I know that about you, and don't try to tell me it's not true. The last few days have been different, because of everything you've been through -- I just happened to be the one nearby when you were defenseless. Please don't diminish either of us by trying to turn it into something it's not."

"You think I just decided overnight to tell my partner I was in love with her? Because of a close call? I've had those before, Mac."

"Not because of a close call. Because you're -- you're something less than your full, normal self right now. You don't even sound like you, to be honest. You're hurt, and vulnerable, and you're trying to grab onto something to help you get through this. And although I'll be here for you until the end of time, that's not the way I want you to fall for me. I don't want you to need me like that, because soon enough, you're not going to be vulnerable anymore. You're going to be right back in your superhero role where you're comfortable, not needing anyone, and I'm afraid that I'll end up as good old reliable Mac again. I don't think I could handle that."

Her voice wavered a little, but he didn't meet her gaze. This was an altogether new kind of rejection, and it confirmed every fear he'd ever harbored about voicing those feelings. She cared, but she was still saying no. "So what do we do now?" he asked dully. "Pretend this never happened? Don't ask me to forget about it, because that won't work."

"No, just -- I don't know." She blinked away a tear and squared her shoulders. "Let's just table it for now. When you're better, and things look a little different, we'll come back to it if you still want to."

Seeing that he had no response, she moved to the door again, hearing the cracks in his soul widen with every step. "I'll be back in the morning," she whispered. "Take care of yourself."

He stared at the door until long after she'd gone, trying to figure out just what he was feeling. Was it possible that she was right -- that all the chaos of the last few days had skewed his judgement? No, it wasn't. Maybe he still had more drugs in his blood than he'd like, and maybe the terror of imagining a life of paralysis had affected him, but that didn't change the plain and simple fact that he was only happy when she was near. If she couldn't see that after all this ... maybe they weren't as close as he'd thought.

Shifting awkwardly on the bed, he reached for the phone on the table. There was only one solution he could see that might help him make sense of all this.

“Hey, Sturgis. Yeah, we just got in. I’m okay, thanks. But I need a favor.”

0803 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Mac sat at her desk the next morning, trying to get up the courage to face her best friend again. It wasn’t as if they’d never had to do this kind of thing before, she reasoned. They’d managed to coexist after her engagement party, and after the ferry ride, and after that surreal night in Norfolk. They’d be able to get past this one as well.

What are you, kidding? her conscience mocked. *During none of those incidents were there any specified declarations of love. On none of those occasions did you rip out the heart of a wounded man.*

It had been the right thing to do, hadn’t it? There was no way she could have taken that admission at face value. The Harmon Rabb she knew so well simply didn’t say things like that. The confessions of injured prisoners were inadmissible in court for a reason, after all: trauma affects both body and mind.

She’d done the right thing. If, by some divine act, he maintained that same story a few weeks from now, then they’d really have something to talk about. But somehow she had trouble imagining that happening.

Decisively, she pushed her chair back and strode across the bullpen. On the way out, she crossed paths with Sturgis, who nodded in greeting. “Skipping out on us already, Colonel?”

“I knew you’d say something like that, so I came in at oh-six-thirty, just for you.” She smiled, hoping her unease didn’t show. “Actually, I wanted to go over and see Harm before I get stuck in meetings all day.”

Sturgis hesitated, looking about as uneasy as she felt. “Mac, he’s not there. He had me take him to the airport last night.”

He was only slightly startled to see just how hard that news hit her. “Wait, he did *what*? He can barely stand up, and they released him?”

“Not exactly. He went home to La Jolla -- he’s going to stay with his mom and do his physical therapy out there. The attending physician and the admiral both approved it.”

She concentrated all her willpower on trying not to appear as though she’d just been slapped in the face. “Oh,” she said bravely. “Oh. I guess I’ll, um, see him when he gets back.”

“Mac, he’s not mad at you,” Sturgis assured her, lowering his voice. “I mean, he didn’t exactly pour out his heart to me, but I can add things up. I think he’s just trying to work some stuff out in his head, you know?”

Nodding, she asked, “Are *you* mad at me?”

His puzzlement was genuine. “Me?”

"Come on, Sturgis. You're his friend. And you know how I feel about him."

He paused. "Yes, I do," he finally replied. "That's why I have to believe that you must have had a very good reason for making whatever choice you made. Remember, I'm *your* friend, too."

She gave him a grateful almost-smile. "I'm glad."

Sturgis watched her for a moment. "You could always call him," he suggested, only to see her eyes widen in fear.

"I really don't think so. I don't know at all what I'd say. And what if his mother answered? 'Hi, you don't know me, but I'm the one who trampled your son's dignity.' That would go well."

"Trust me, Trish knows Harm well enough to understand that his point of view can get a little skewed. Just think about it, all right?"

"Sure." She sighed, and wandered back to her office. Once safely inside, she slumped back into her chair, feeling a lump rise in her throat. All those doubts that she'd tried so hard to lay to rest were suddenly back in force.

It was three days before she managed to make herself dial the California number. Over the course of those three days, she'd vacillated between wanting to forget everything about him and thinking about jumping the next flight to San Diego. What was he doing out there, really? Healing, or brooding, or both? If she spoke to him, there was the possibility that she would find him reverted to that closed-off, determinedly self-reliant person he'd been on so many occasions. That possibility worried her more than a little.

Eventually, she decided that the longer she waited, the more distance would grow between them. So she dialed.

An unfamiliar male voice answered on the second ring. "Burnett residence."

Here goes nothing. "Mr. Burnett, my name is Sarah Mackenzie. I was wondering if I could speak to Harm."

The voice didn't turn cool, as she'd feared. Rather, she imagined she could hear a trace of a warm smile in it. "Of course, Colonel. I'll go track him down for you."

A minute or so passed, while she wondered just how much Harm's mother and stepfather knew about her. Then there were a few scuffling sounds, followed by a voice she knew better than her own.

"Hi, Mac."

"Hi," she answered cautiously. "How's it going out there?"

"Pretty good, actually. I'm walking a lot better, and my back's not nearly as sore as it was when I got here."

"Good. Really good. Um, everybody sends their best wishes, and Sturgis says you probably shouldn't have let him borrow your Vette while you're gone." Her false cheer was clearly not fooling either of them, so she abandoned it. "Did you have to leave so fast?" she asked quietly.

He heard the words she didn't say. "I should have said something. I know. When I thought about it, I realized I needed this, and I just didn't see the point of waiting."

"You needed to leave again only hours after coming home?"

"This is home too, Mac. It's better for everyone. I can have some time with my mom and Frank, and no one in D.C. has to rearrange their lives to help me."

"I would have done it," she asserted. "I would've done it in a heartbeat."

"I know you would have. But now you don't have to worry about me needing you the wrong way."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. They were her words, more or less, but hearing them handed back to her made them sound a little uglier. "I meant that I didn't want this -- your injury -- to be the only reason you needed me. You're not good at being dependent, Harm."

"Which one of me would that be, by the way? The one you're used to, or the one you thought I turned into after Basra?"

There was no harshness in his voice, but the statement itself more than made up for it. She forced herself not to tense up. "I didn't handle that well. I'm sorry."

"I don't need you to be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Then what now?" she asked tentatively.

"Like you said, I guess. We'll talk about it later. After things get back to normal, whatever that is."

She didn't want to leave it like this, the weight of unspoken thoughts hanging between them, but it was becoming clear that something of this magnitude couldn't be neatly resolved over the phone. "I miss you," she offered simply, hoping that would at least make some kind of impression.

"Me, too, Mac. I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Okay. Get better."

Harm set down the phone, aware that he wasn't alone on the porch. "Go ahead and say it," he told the ocean air.

"Say what?" Frank inquired from behind him, leaning against the sliding glass door.

"Whatever it is that you've been hovering back there to say." He turned his chair partway and regarded his stepfather with a cocked eyebrow.

"If you insist." Frank stepped out onto the porch and took the seat across from him. "An uninformed person overhearing that conversation would come to the conclusion that you're angrier with her than you actually are."

"I just told her I wasn't mad at her."

"No, you told her you didn't need her to be sorry. There's a difference. But it's your business what you two say to each other, so -- "

"Glad to hear it," Harm remarked dryly.

"-- so I'm going to hit this from a different angle. You're not really angry with her at all, are you?"

The younger man looked at him impassively for a long moment, then shook his head. "No, I'm not. Myself, maybe, but not her."

"Why yourself?"

"Because after all the crap she's taken from me, she deserved better than the blindsided attack I gave her, even if my intentions were good. I wrecked things up in characteristic fashion, and I'm not sure how to get out of it."

"You don't want to get out of it," Frank informed him calmly. "From what little I know of this whole thing, getting out of it is what you always do, and it inevitably lands you back where you started. What you want is to get it right this time. Don't you?"

Harm eyed him suspiciously. "When did you learn to figure me out so damn well?"

"When you were fifteen, Harm. You just never noticed." Frank clapped him on the shoulder and rose to go inside. "Your mom wants to go out to dinner tonight, all three of us, and she's not taking no for an answer. Just wanted to give you fair warning."

He was almost to the door when he heard his stepson's quiet response. "Thanks, Frank."

A few days later
1449 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Colonel, a moment, if you would?"

The admiral hadn't even broken stride as he issued that mild command, and Mac hurried to fall into step with him. She followed him into his office, where a familiar trio awaited them. "Commander," she greeted with a startled smile. "Congratulations on the new half-stripe."

"Thank you, Colonel." Daniel Frasier was wearing his own uniform again, and his shoulders were now adorned with the three stripes of a full commander. Beside him, Carol and

Matthew were also well-dressed and smiling. "Apparently Personnel agreed with your assessment that I was overdue for it. I hope we're not keeping you from anything important."

"Not at all. You've officially brightened my day. How are you handling the media blitz?"

"It's starting to taper off, thank God. Since the Pentagon won't release any details of the operation, all the focus was on us for a while. But they've given me a new assignment -- chase detail at the Naval Air Warfare Center. After some time at home, I'm going to go down to Pensacola for some refresher work. It's almost hard to believe that I'm actually going to get back up in the air."

How familiar that sounded, Mac thought wistfully. "So what brings you out here?" she asked. In response, he exchanged a glance with his wife, who withdrew a small, flat box from her purse.

"Getting your fifteen minutes of fame has its advantages," Carol explained. "When the CNO himself came to see us, Danny told him that there were two officers who needed to be recognized for their heroism, even if it couldn't be done in public. The compromise worked out to this."

Danny opened the box and stepped closer to pin the Navy/Marine Corps Medal to her blouse. "The official commendation letter is classified, but it's there. It doesn't feel like nearly enough, but it's the best I can do." Stepping back, he saluted her crisply, and she returned it with a faint glow of pride.

"I know Commander Rabb is still recovering, so Matthew and I flipped a coin to decide who got to give you your customary kiss." She considered objecting to his comment about Harm, but the twinkle in his eye warmed her heart, because she knew that it hadn't been there only a few short weeks ago. "Matthew won."

"I'm glad." She bent down, and the boy dutifully gave her a sweet kiss on the cheek, blushing red.

"I trust that you can take responsibility for presenting your partner with his medal, Colonel?" the admiral asked.

"Of course, sir." She accepted a second box from Carol and shook both their hands. "Thank you for this. It really wasn't necessary, but it means a lot."

"It's the very least we could do. We'll be in touch."

Mac slipped the box containing Harm's medal into her pocket, and left it there for the remainder of the day. She intended to take it home and put it with his wings, which she'd managed to forget to return to him earlier.

Maybe that's what got everything so messed up, she thought humorlessly. You took his wings, like some Marine-green Delilah, and now he's powerless. Great idea. That bizarre thought only reinforced her growing belief that she was slowly losing her mind. She hadn't spoken to him since that stilted conversation last week, and it was eating her up to have to wait in silence. What if his back was worse than he'd let on? What if he was being told at this very minute that he'd never fly again?

Her entire drive home that evening was consumed with similar, equally irrational fears. He shouldn't be doing all this on his own. They were a team, and a damned good one; a pair, if not exactly a couple. She wanted them to be a couple, though. Despite her reaction to his confession, she wanted it more than anything -- she just wanted it to be *right*.

Well, how are you ever going to know if it's right if you never give it a chance, genius?

When the decision came to her, it did so with a sense of clarity that nearly caused her to slam on the brakes. "Screw it," she said aloud. It had been long enough. The moment she got home, she was going to call him, and they were going to talk this through. If his feelings hadn't changed -- if they hadn't been colored by the extreme circumstances of their recent experiences -- then there was still hope for the happy ending. If, on the other hand, he'd managed to bury that persona along with his vulnerability ... well, it couldn't be any worse than the ferry.

Pulling into the parking lot behind her building, she was so focused on her task that she almost didn't notice the other red Corvette parked on the street. When she climbed out of her own car, though, she pulled up short, and her breath caught in her throat.

He was leaning against the hood of the restored convertible, regarding her with the slightest hint of a smile on his lips. Wearing a beige button-down shirt and dark blue jeans, he looked comfortable and secure in himself, something that had been missing from his presence since she'd first seen him in the Guadalcanal's sickbay. When he stood up, he did so with surprising ease. "Thought you'd never get here," he greeted her, crossing his arms.

For a second, she just stared, as he started toward her with no trace of pain or weakness. "You're back," she said lamely. "And -- you're better? All the way better?"

Harm gave a small shrug, spreading his arms as if to offer himself for inspection. "Seeing is believing." He stopped a few steps away from her, and they drank in the sight of each other before looking away at almost the same moment. In a strange way, there was something comforting in that. Her flyboy was back, awkwardness and all.

"You look good," she said softly, meaning it. A few days in the California sun had replaced his pallor with a healthy color, and she found herself admiring his casual good looks with new eyes. "The admiral know you're back?"

"Yeah, he's expecting me in on Monday." He made a show of studying the nearby steps for a while, letting the tension linger. Just when she was about to break down and apologize for every harsh word she'd ever uttered to him, he did something that effectively destroyed her train of thought. "So I still love you," he began with a self-deprecating smile. "You okay with that?"

This time, she believed him without a moment's hesitation. There was no conscious signal from her brain that sent her hurtling into his arms, but it happened all the same.

"I shouldn't have doubted you," she confessed, her voice muffled by his broad chest. "I know you better than to believe you'd say something like that without meaning it."

"It's all right. I think I know why you did." He tightened his arms around her, relief flooding through his body. "Let's go inside, okay? We've got a few things to talk about."

She led him upstairs and into her apartment, gesturing toward the sofa as she rifled through a stack of take-out menus. "Did you just get in? Are you hungry? I could order ..." His hand on her arm stilled the restless motion. "Or I could throttle back and let you say what you want to say," she finished, smiling apologetically.

"One first, then the other. First of all, I think you have something that belongs to me." His eyebrow arched, and her cheeks turned pink.

"You noticed, huh?"

"I remembered putting them in the glove compartment along with my DFC and Kuwait Liberation ribbons. When I looked this afternoon, I only found the ribbons."

Somewhat sheepishly, she reached into her purse and handed him his wings. Harm examined them for a minute, then looked up at her with a more solemn expression. "You know that these aren't all I am, right? They're not the only thing that matters to me."

"Of course I do," she answered, not entirely comprehending.

"Before, at Bethesda, you didn't think that I was really myself because of everything that had happened." She opened her mouth to protest, but he silenced her with a shake of his head. "It's all right. I didn't exactly feel like myself the whole time, either. But there's something I want to show you, and maybe it'll help make my point a little clearer."

He started to unbutton his shirt, and she couldn't repress a smart remark. "Sailor, if you make me get out the traffic lights -- "

"Calm down, Marine. This is serious." Only the intensity of his gaze kept her from getting distracted by the hard planes of his chest. "You asked if I was all the way better, and I am. But I still have these."

Slipping his shirt off, he turned so that she could see the network of still-healing scars across his back. Her throat tightened, and without thinking she reached out to trace the mark that ran along his spine. "Do they still hurt?" she asked softly.

"No. In that sense, I guess you could say I'm back to being the same person I was before all this. But they're not going to go away anytime soon, so I'm still the person who needed you in Aviano, too. I think what I'm trying to say is that you're the only one who's ever really seen all the different sides of me. I can be hopelessly mercurial and impossible to figure out sometimes, and I know that can't be easy to deal with. I have a lot more scars than just these, and most of them you can't even see, let alone do anything about. I let my emotions overrun my good judgement, and I do crazy things like breaking into Iraqi prisons, and ... the point is, if there are things about me that you can't handle -- "

"Harm, there is nothing about you that I can't handle," she interrupted, surprising him into a momentary silence.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I was running scared before, because I was afraid you would regret opening yourself up like that. But if anything, I love you more for finally making yourself do it."

He turned back to face her, hope dawning in his expressive eyes. "Does that mean we -- I mean, you and I are --?"

In answer, she pulled his head down and kissed him soundly, and the world outside ceased to exist for a few blissful seconds. "Any questions?" she asked, a bit breathlessly.

"Not a one," he replied, reeling. That had been a lot easier than he'd expected. "You mean I might have been able to accomplish this without resorting to visual aids?"

She cast a mock-critical glance at him, eyes sparkling, as he rebuttoned his shirt. "You'll never know." Remembering the medal in her pocket, she reached in and pulled out the small box. "Almost forgot. I'm supposed to pin this on you."

"Better idea. Let's skip to the congratulatory kiss." He took the box out of her hand and tossed it onto the couch without looking inside.

"Harmon! Shame on you. That's an important award."

"And it'll still be an important award when I get around to it." He pulled her close again, and she recognized the seriousness of his expression. "I've spent way too much time prioritizing work at all costs. I let duty be my all-encompassing excuse for not giving us a chance earlier, when in reality it was only part of the story. It wasn't until last week that I finally looked at things truthfully, and I realized, with assistance from Commander Frasier and his wife, that being afraid is a lousy reason to do or not do anything." He gave a small shrug, without releasing her. "So here I am."

Blinking furiously to clear her eyes, she beamed up at him. "Took you long enough, flyboy."

"I know. You would have been justified in telling me to shove it, or that I waited too long."

"I don't think I would've been able to make myself do that."

"You sure?"

"Well, not that you wouldn't have deserved it, but ..." She shook her head with a helpless smile. "I have to face facts -- I just love you too damn much."

That sealed it. He leaned down and stilled her lips with a kiss that made all the stresses and fears of the past few weeks vanish into the air.

In a crowded auditorium across town, the deputy secretary of defense was at that moment preparing to address an audience of family members of missing American servicemen. In his introduction, the director of the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office made these remarks:

"American heroes are still with us, setting the marks many will aspire to, even decades from now. Young men and women find themselves in harm's way right now ... In the name of self-sacrifice, some have already given their lives to bring their comrades home. And you should know that this nation will continue to honor its commitment to you and to them, that we will do everything humanly possible to keep them from falling into harm's way.

“But failing that, for as long as it takes, we’ll make the effort to bring them home. We are keeping that promise.”

Meanwhile, two of the people who best exemplified that ideal were blissfully unaware of it all. They were curled up on the couch, secure in each other’s embrace, and fast asleep.

*** THE END ***