



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: action

Spoilers: "Florida Straits," "Offensive Action," plus general Season 9 and 10 events, primarily "Secret Agent Man," "The One That Got Away," and "Touchdown"

Disclaimer: Don't own most of the characters. TPTB may not care if they get Beth and Andy back, truth be told, but that doesn't mean I can keep them.

Author's Notes: Once again, passages in italics are flashbacks. This story is set near the beginning of Season 10, right after the episode "Corporate Raiders." In other words, Sturgis is still in charge and Maggie's still in D.C. Anyone looking for a lot of Harm time out of this one, prepare yourselves for disappointment. For those who may not have seen or recall the details of Harm's tenure with the CIA, his two partners were Beth O'Neill (the former Navy commander whom Harm and Manetti defended in "Offensive Action") and Andy Watson (his co-pilot in the hypersonic Aurora during "The One That Got Away"). Last but not least, one of the flashbacks is completely Lee's idea. Bet you didn't think I'd actually use it, huh, hon?

I'm not big on dedications, but as this story is mostly about the bonds of friendship and loyalty, I'm sending it out to my e-pals, especially SC, Dae, DelphieKat, and Steph. Here's to discovering amazing friendships in unexpected places, ladies.

1322 EDT

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

"Grace Aviation."

Harm smiled into the phone upon hearing his ward's voice. "Well, the new phone line apparently works."

In response, he could hear Maggie's own grin. "Yeah, we should be ready for business before too much longer. Did you call just to do a communications check?"

"I called this number to do a comm check. I called in general to see how you were doing." Harm leaned back in his desk chair.

"Good. Dad's gonna put some ads in the local papers, and we've got a couple of pilots hired already. Won't be as good as our last one, of course, but still."

"Shameless flattery won't keep me from asking about school."

"Yeah, yeah. I got all the assignments before I came down here. I'm only missing two days, anyway."

And he'd thought long and hard before letting her miss those two days, but in the end, Harm had forced himself to think big-picture. Mattie's future was with her father, and if a long weekend in Blacksburg would help her in that respect, then he wasn't going to hold her back. "All right. Jen says she'll call tomorrow night so you two can discuss that TV show you're both so hooked on."

"Cool. Hey, help me settle a bet with one of the pilots here. What's the fastest you've ever gone in an aircraft?"

He'd gotten similar questions many times in the past, and so an accurate, if misleading, reply was poised on his lips. "Top speed of an F-14 in full afterburner is a little over Mach 2."

Unfortunately, Mattie Grace was a fairly observant individual. "Yeah, but you've flown plenty of other things. The F-14 wasn't the fastest of them, was it?"

"Nothing's better than a Tomcat. You know that."

"You don't have any intention of answering directly, do you?"

Harm calmly changed the subject. "So you're coming back Sunday night?" He suspected Mattie knew full well that she was being handled, but while the cocky jetjock in him would have liked nothing more than to tell someone -- anyone -- all about the hypersonic Aurora and some of his other exploits, there was something left of the intelligence officer in him as well.

"Yep. Six o'clock bus."

"All right, I'll pick you up then. Tell your dad I said hi."

"Got it. Love you."

"Love you, too." Harm replaced the phone in its cradle and tried briefly to put a name to his current mood. To say that the situation with Mattie was bittersweet would be a colossal understatement. But he was nothing if not a pragmatist, and he'd never had much trouble focusing on another person's needs, especially if it allowed him to avoid turning his focus inward on himself. No, this was inarguably good. Mattie would get every opportunity he or Tom could provide, and most importantly, she was happy.

If the idea of letting her slip further and further away occasionally caused an almost physical ache in his chest, well, so be it. He'd survive. He always did.

Feeling a sudden need for a caffeine hit, he picked up his USS Patrick Henry mug and stepped out of his office. He had almost reached the break room when Jennifer Coates's bright voice rang out across the bullpen. "Sir! There's a visitor here for you -- no appointment, but ..."

"But you have time for a friend like me, right, Solo?"

Harm stopped in mid-step and turned toward the new voice. He hadn't heard that nickname in over a year, and there were only two people in the world who'd ever known it.

"They'll let just about anybody in here these days, won't they?" he called to her with one eyebrow raised, expertly masking his surprise.

Beth O'Neill grinned back at him. "Hey, I'm retired Navy. My ID card says so."

Harm crossed the distance in three long strides and caught her in a brief but warm embrace. "It's good to see you. It's been a while."

"That it has." She was wearing a gray blazer and dark slacks, a look that was professional but gave no hint of just what profession she might be in. "Thanks for showing me in, Petty Officer."

"Not a problem, ma'am," Coates replied politely, giving voice to the bullpen's general curiosity about the commander's visitor. "You two served together, I take it?"

"We flew together, in fact." Beth's gaze snagged briefly on something across the room, and Harm glanced over to see Mac emerging from her office. *That's right*, he recalled belatedly. *Mac and Sturgis prosecuted her case. Hmm.* But the women merely nodded, almost imperceptibly, at each other, and continued on.

"Oh? What ship?" Coates asked innocently.

"Here and there," Harm replied without missing a beat, his eyes fixed on Beth. There was no way she'd simply stopped by to say hi. "So what brings you to our little corner of the universe?"

Her pleasant expression never changed, but there was a certain gravity to her tone. "Just looking for a few minutes to talk about old times."

They'd only been a team for six months, but those had been the most intense six months of his life. In that time, he'd learned to read her voice and bearing like a code, as she had his. Right now, every inch of her was broadcasting something akin to a distress call.

Harm gestured toward his office, just as Mac turned to head back into hers. "Go on in. I'll be right there."

As Beth moved to comply, he followed Mac as far as her doorway. "Can you cover the meeting with Wells if I get tied up?" he asked.

Mac sat down in her chair and folded her arms. "I can, if you can tell me why you and Commander O'Neill lied to Coates just now."

He'd expected something along these lines, but it provoked a flicker of irritation nonetheless. "I don't lie."

"She said you two flew together, when I know you only met her two years ago during her Article 32."

He kept his features carefully controlled. It was a skill with which he'd gotten disturbingly familiar. "I *don't* lie, Mac."

"Then how could ...?" He could see the precise moment when the realization hit home. "Oh."

"Yeah."

Mac had some trouble accepting the fact that he'd worked for the Agency. He knew that, but he didn't dwell on it. After all, the concept didn't always sit so well with him, either. But it was a part of his reality now, and he didn't intend to make apologies for it.

"Then, ah, I guess she's not here to take a nostalgia trip."

His lips quirked upward, though with little humor. "Depends on your definition."

Mac's response was unexpected. "I might be able to help if you let me in on whatever the situation is. I've still got some contacts over there."

How magnanimous, he thought with a touch of irony. "Thanks, but I'm sure we'll be able to handle it."

Her eyes narrowed. "Worried that I don't have clearance? You might be surprised."

Harm shook his head. If she was looking for an argument, she'd be disappointed. "Actually, I'm confident that *you'd* be the one surprised on that score. Thanks for covering."

He left her office rapidly, before she could object, and stepped into his own, closing the door behind him. Beth had taken one of the chairs opposite his desk and was putting a small device back into her purse. Recognizing it, he gave her a dirty look, and she raised her hands in surrender.

"Hey, you'd be shocked at how infrequently some DoD buildings get swept for listening devices."

"I realize that. That's why I do my office myself on the first of every month."

His onetime partner gave a nod of approval. "Good boy. Once a spook, always a spook ..."

He rolled his eyes. "Is that how you see yourself, really? Spooks are intel. We are -- or were -- operations."

"Call it whatever you want. I just look at it as an extension of our duties in uniform."

Harm slid into the chair next to hers. "What's going on?" he asked directly.

Beth sighed. "Andy's gotten himself into a little trouble with some old friends of ours."

That didn't come as a great shock. The three of them had gotten into plenty of trouble together on the job, and had been nearly inseparable off it. As the 'kids' of the CIA air wing, they'd helped each other cope with the considerable toll that Agency employment took on its officers, and the importance of that bond couldn't be overestimated.

But he viewed that as a separate life, with boundaries more clearly delineated than any other period of time he could recall. He had his response formulated almost before she finished her sentence. "Much as I'd love to help out, B, I don't think I'm your guy this time. Not only do I have obligations to this office, I was just slightly disavowed by your boss, remember?"

She wasn't fazed in the least. "If this was a Company job, I wouldn't be here. I think you know that."

Harm frowned. "Andy's getting hung out to dry on something, isn't he?"

"You could say that."

"Which of our old friends are involved?"

"The FARC. Specifically, Velasquez."

At the name, Harm tensed, dark and ugly memories assailing his mind. Colombia. He should have known.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, abbreviated in their native tongue as FARC, had made their way into the war on terror rather quietly, mostly because their existence long predated it. The guerilla group had been kidnapping, and often murdering, both foreigners and Colombians alike long before extremists in the Middle East had grabbed headlines with the grisly practice. They were drug-funded and often drug-fueled, and they were a constant threat to the region's stability, even if the American media had taken little notice. The Agency had been in country on and off for most of the past two decades, but the emergence of a powerful faction leader named Antonio Velasquez had drawn more focused attention from the intelligence community, chiefly because Velasquez's group had proven to be as adept at trafficking weapons as they were at using those weapons.

One example of that increased attention had placed three CIA flyers in South America for five weeks over a year ago, providing recon 'assistance' to the Colombian government. Most days had been spent overflying known and suspected training locations; most nights had been spent in a makeshift bar set up on the grounds of tiny Air Base November, just over the border in Venezuela.

Most. But not all.

"Come on!" Andy shouted at them over the drone of the propellers. They bolted toward the idling plane as Roberto and his goons poured out of the building in pursuit. Beth leaped up and caught the handle of the cargo hatch, launching herself through the opening. She braced herself and stretched a hand out to Harm as the plane began to taxi.

Harm tightened his grip on Elena's small body and reached up to grab Beth's arm. He got a foothold on the deck and hauled himself and the child aboard just as a shot rang out -- and as pain blazed through his shoulder, Elena's body jerked and went slack.

All three of them tumbled to the deck as Andy advanced the throttle, accelerating to takeoff speed. Beth recovered first and took the girl from her partner's arms, trying in vain to slow the bleeding. Harm pushed himself up, and as the plane lifted from the ground, he caught sight of Roberto's outstretched gun and sadistic sneer.

He sagged back against the bulkhead as Beth shook her head, scrubbing angry tears out of her eyes. The remainder of the flight passed in defeated silence. The bullet had lodged in his shoulder, but not before piercing a hole through Elena's heart.

Beth watched him move to the window almost without conscious thought, absently rubbing his right shoulder. She could see the shadows overtaking his gaze and decided to give him a chance to regroup while she outlined the situation. "We were back in country on Monday of this week, trying to meet up with a member of Velasquez's group who said she had information about a potential threat. Apparently Velasquez is into more than just trafficking cocaine and AK-47s. Because we had the most knowledge of the area, Andy and I got drafted. We were supposed to meet the contact, take possession of some physical evidence, and take off again. But the meet went bad, and we got split up in the chaos. The contingency plan called for us to reconnect in Mexico City, so when I lost him, I hopped the first plane before someone could ID me. Andy never showed, and the Agency's already wiping him from the books."

Harm hesitated, then said, "B, you know I have to ask."

"He's not dead," she asserted, and the tone of her voice was insistent but not desperate. "The FARC likes their headlines, and Velasquez is no different than the rest of them on that. If they'd killed an American, especially one not obviously there as a missionary, we'd have heard about it by now. It's been three days, and he hasn't even tried to contact me outside of standard channels. It's possible that they've got him, but not likely. I think he's gone deep for some reason. Maybe he got the information from our contact and doesn't want to risk exposing it or her. Maybe he's lost his cover information and can't safely get out of the country. I don't know. But I've got a decent idea of where he might be hiding out, and I'm not going to write him off, Company policies be damned."

He wasn't about to argue with that. While he understood why the CIA couldn't mount rescue missions for its operatives and still perform its functions, it was the polar opposite of the "leave no one behind" mantra he'd always held up as a personal code. "So what are you proposing to do?"

Beth's response was immediate and resolute. "Go back to Arauca. Find Andy and do whatever it takes to get him out of there."

"And somehow Blaisdell's not going to string you up for going UA on him?"

"Blaisdell's a good guy, Harm. He wouldn't have let you go if he thought there was any way to work around it. In this case, he's not providing any official assistance, but he's agreed to give me a week of leave to do what I have to do. Of course, if I go missing as well, there

won't be anyone left to come after either of us, but there's nothing to be done about that. That's why I think two heads are better than one."

Harm closed his eyes. This was something he'd dreaded ever since leaving the Agency: getting drawn back into the web. He couldn't simply pull up stakes and take off for Colombia -- but he couldn't live with himself if he left Andy out there to become another unmarked star on the wall at Langley, either.

"My face has been on ZNN," he pointed out. "There's always the possibility that I could get recognized."

"That's going to be an obstacle no matter what, because Roberto and some of his punks saw both our faces for a few minutes a year ago. But they won't be expecting you, and it's not like we've never gone stealth before. We can handle it."

He shook his head. "Beth, if it were just me, I'd walk out of here with you right now," he said quietly. "But it's not. I'm a guardian to a fifteen-year-old girl. She and her dad are almost ready to be a family again, but they're not there yet. Am I supposed to leave her the standard 'If you're reading this, I'm dead' letter? What if my oh-so-flexible acting CO decides not to grant me leave? If I toss in my wings again, I can't exactly go back to Blaisdell for a job this time, can I?"

Beth regarded him for a moment without speaking, giving him plenty of time for the guilt trip to set in. At last, she replied simply, "I can't make the call for you. Andy's a big boy and knew what he signed up for. He's not our responsibility. But he *is* our friend."

And that, of course, was the inherent truth of the matter. Harm's lips twisted in resignation. "You're not going to try and tell me that he'd do it for me?" he asked wryly.

A hint of a wistful smile crept into her eyes. "I don't have to. You know it's true."

And he did. "All right," he mumbled, dragging a weary hand over his face. "I'm not buying a plane ticket just yet, but if we're going to try and plan this out, we'd better take it way the hell off government property. Have you got access to the after-action reports from last year and the cover IDs we used to use?"

"That and more. I told you Blaisdell was a good guy."

"All right. I need to finish up a few things here, and then I'll meet you at my place. Gather up whatever you think we'll need, and we'll work on it from there."

Beth stood up, a single nod conveying her approval. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I know this isn't your world anymore -- I don't suppose it really ever was -- and I know you have more to risk now. So don't think that we don't understand or appreciate that."

"Make no mistake -- I'm going to rip into Andy after we haul his ass back here." Harm offered a tight-lipped smile. "But let's figure out how to bring him home first."

"Fair enough. See you in a few."

After she'd gone, he slumped back into his chair, making a halfhearted attempt to give order to his thoughts. He had every reason to refuse this mission, if that word could be used,

and only one reason to accept it. But that one reason was the one that trumped all others: if he made no attempt to help his friend, then the rest of his ideals meant nothing.

Not for the first time, he cursed both fate and himself for the sequence of events that had led to this split personality of his. *Pilot, sailor, lawyer, spy*, he thought darkly, deliberately misremembering the phrase. *A jack of all trades is one confused son of a bitch.*

He flew through the stack of motions on his desk, completing them with speed if not style, and shut down his computer. Picking up his briefcase and cover, he stepped out into the bullpen and called over his shoulder to Coates. "If Commander Turner comes looking for me, Petty Officer, tell him to call my cell phone."

"Aye, sir," came the response. "Where should I tell him you've gone?"

"Back in time," he muttered as he crossed through the doorway.

"You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, do you?" Harm took a long pull of his beer before lining up his next assault on the dart board. Behind him, he heard Beth snickering.

Andy drew himself up as if insulted. "I know exactly what I'm talking about, thank you, and I'd appreciate a little more consideration from the likes of you. Always trying to drag a guy down, that's you two. No sense of trust." He drained the last of his bottle and set it down on the counter with a clunk. "Now. What was I talking about?"

Beth's snicker turned into a full-fledged laugh at that point, and her dart missed the board entirely, causing Harm to declare himself the winner by default. After Beth gave up protesting the rules of the game, they slid into their chairs next to Andy as he poured three glasses of bourbon from the nearby bottle. "This one's in honor of our fearless leader, Allen Blaisdell, for once again sticking us in the middle of frickin' nowhere, but giving us a stocked bar to make up for it."

"Amen to that," Beth echoed. They clinked their glasses together. "Last drink of the night -- eight hours from bottle to throttle. Who's pulling double tomorrow?"

"It's my turn." Harm flexed his hands and cracked his knuckles. "I'm riding right-seat with you in the A.M., then babysitting Skywalker here on the late flight."

"Hey! What'd I do to deserve that? Come to think of it, what does it even mean?"

"It means you're a farmboy flyer, Watson," Beth put in, quickly warming to the new nickname. "With scruffy hair."

"Hey, my hair's shorter than his!" Andy gestured toward Harm, who ran a hand through his decidedly unmilitary hair; it'd been nice to have an excuse not to cut it for a while. "And if I'm anybody, I think I'm Han Solo."

"You are SO not Han Solo, you dork." Beth shook her head. "If anybody's Han Solo, it's Harm."

"Yeah? How do you figure?"

She shrugged and leaned back in her chair. "Got drafted rather reluctantly into our little corps, pulls our asses out of the fire when needed, inordinately proud of a complete hunk of junk -"

Now it was Harm's turn to protest. "Hey now -- what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that bike of yours is a Darwin Award waiting to happen!"

"I've restored a seventy-year-old Stearman and a '68 Corvette. You don't think I'll be able to fix up an Indian motorcycle?"

Beth rolled her eyes. "Fix it up, sure. But for the love of God, don't ride it until you do, dumbass!"

Andy found this inexplicably hilarious, and nearly fell out of his chair as Harm shot a mock glare at Beth. "Okay, okay, if I'm Han, which one of you is Chewie and which one is Lando?"

Andy and Beth traded glances, uncertain. "Which was the better pilot?" Andy wondered. "Probably Lando. I'll take Lando."

"If you want to be the one who almost screwed them all, be my guest."

"What, you want to be the walking carpet? Fine by me."

Harm sat back and listened to them bicker, finishing his bourbon with a satisfied smirk. Both the drink and the laughter would have to last them a while; another long day stretched out ahead of them.

1742 EDT
Harm's Apartment
North of Union Station

Sarah Mackenzie walked up to the apartment door and knocked twice. She'd seen an unfamiliar car out front and suspected that it was Commander O'Neill's, reinforcing her earlier suspicions. When Harm answered the door, she saw the other woman behind him, standing over the dining room table with a pen in hand. "Can I come in?" Mac asked before he could offer a greeting.

"Sure." Harm stepped back and waited for her to step inside before closing the door behind her. Beth straightened up and began to fold up the map that was spread across the table, but he held up a hand, indicating that it was unnecessary. Mac bristled inwardly at the idea that they might have secrets to keep from her. "What's up?"

"You're planning an op?" she asked without preamble, already knowing the answer.

"We're helping a colleague. Calling it an op implies some level of official sanction." Harm leaned down to point to a location on Beth's map. "Is there still a checkpoint on that road?"

Beth gave an affirmative nod. "I was thinking we'd use that diversion that worked so well in Kyrgyzstan."

He shook his head. "We're flying commercial -- too hard to get the detonators through security. How about the bait-and-switch we used in Prague?"

"Fine, as long as you haven't let yourself get rusty over the past year."

With a knowing smile, Harm palmed the pen from the table and pretended to check his watch, the pen vanishing from his hand. Beth reached into his back pocket with a sly grin and retrieved the pen. "Best hands in the air wing. Damn, we've missed you."

Mac listened to their easy exchange, feeling increasingly out of place. Apparently Harm's duties with the CIA had extended further than the simple reconnaissance and airlift missions he'd obliquely referred to in the past. "May I ask where this pseudo-op is going to take place?"

Harm's expression was guarded as he turned back to her. "Are you asking out of interest, or as a prelude to telling me not to go?"

"Both." She folded her arms tightly across her chest, shielding herself from the confrontation ahead. "You have responsibilities here that outweigh whatever allegiance you might still feel to your former employers."

His eyes narrowed, but his voice remained deceptively calm. "I don't have any particular allegiance to my former employers, and I definitely don't need to be told about my responsibilities."

"So you're going to run off to God knows where -"

"Colombia," Beth filled in without elaborating, her face a mask of control that matched Harm's.

That gave Mac pause for a moment. After the fiasco in Paraguay, nothing about South America as a whole was all that enticing to her, and she had to wonder just what it was that held enough power over him to make him even consider disrupting his entire life that way again. "- and throw away everything that you worked so hard to get back a year ago? What about Mattie? How does she fit into your spy game?"

"Do you really think that hadn't occurred to me?" Harm demanded, a note of irritation beginning to creep into his tone. "Do you think we're doing this for kicks?" Abruptly, he shook his head. "I don't have time to have this fight with you, Mac. I have to go have it with Sturgis, since I can't see him being all that excited to grant me leave."

Mac watched him cross the apartment to his desk, grabbing his car keys. "You're really going to walk out of here without even attempting to justify this crazy stunt, aren't you?" she said in disbelief. "How can you look down your nose at Clayton Webb and then go off and play in his world?"

That was a mistake, and she realized it the moment the words were out. Harm spun back toward her, keeping his anger just barely in check. "Don't you toss me in with him. This isn't about helping the Agency play its game. It's about going after a friend who needs help, a friend the Agency left out there to die. I would think that you of all people would be able to appreciate that."

The remark sliced deep, and she could see even through the initial stab of pain that part of him wanted to take it back. But he simply looked away, waiting for her to strike back, as if it were only fair to allow her another shot.

"I suppose I shouldn't be making comparisons without supporting evidence," she allowed quietly. "But if you want me to understand, you're going to have to give me a little more to work with."

Harm's eyes flicked over to Beth. "Tell her," he said tersely. "I have to go talk to my CO and see if I can keep my job."

The two women watched as he left the apartment, then turned probing gazes on each other, sizing each other up to determine just what role each played in the life of Harmon Rabb.

"You couldn't possibly have done this without pulling him back in?" Mac asked bluntly.

"I spent an eight-hour plane trip racking my brain for a way to do just that," Beth replied truthfully. "I came up empty. A lot happened in those six months Harm was with us, Colonel, more than even you could imagine. We depended on each other in ways I never would have thought possible. When one of us is in trouble, this is what we do. I can't go it alone, and there's no one else. That's just all there is to it."

Mac sat down on the corner of the couch, forcing herself to keep an open mind. "So you were the Three Musketeers, and one member of your trio is MIA in Colombia?"

"That's the abridged version. The three of us spent a few weeks down there a little over a year ago, monitoring a particularly nasty faction of the FARC. Andy and I were back down there a few days ago to take possession of some intel regarding a possible attack on their government, and it went bad. Andy's gone to ground. We're not planning to take on a guerilla group -- all we want to do is find our friend and give him the help he needs to get out of the country. If all it takes is handing him a new passport so he can move freely, nobody will be more pleased than Harm and me. But neither of us is willing to bet Andy's life on that."

She indicated a stack of documents on the corner of the coffee table with a tilt of her head. Mac reached over to pick them up: passports, visas, driver's licenses and credit cards for three different people. One set was for a blond man whom she assumed was Andy, in spite of the name printed on them; the others bore pictures of Harm and Beth, and the names Michael and Susan Kallen.

"The Agency is the world's biggest community of pack-rats," Beth said. "They never throw anything away."

Mac paged through Michael Kallen's passport, noting the numerous and varied stamps in it. There was a wallet in the stack as well, and she opened it up to reveal a dog-eared photo of 'Michael' and 'Susan' in a laughing embrace. She looked up at Beth, raising an eyebrow. "A lot happened in those six months, you say?"

Beth didn't entirely manage to hide her smirk. "Colonel, I got out of the Navy for a reason. Trust me, Harm's not my type."

The light began to dawn then, as she remembered the end of the trial two years earlier. "So your type is ..."

"Female."

"Ah." Mac somehow escaped a full-on blush. "That clears up a lot of things about your harassment case."

"Doesn't it, though?" Beth walked over to the kitchen and opened the correct cupboard on the first try to retrieve a glass. As she filled it with water, Mac wondered just how often she'd been here. Maybe Beth O'Neill hadn't been everything to him, but she'd clearly been *something*. As had this Andy, apparently, or he wouldn't be doing this.

Still, there was something about all of this -- the cool, methodical planning, the slickness of that sleight-of-hand trick -- that didn't quite ring true with the picture she had of Harm. He obviously hadn't been this way when he'd charged into Paraguay after her ... but then, he hadn't had the 'benefit' of employment with the Company at that time, had he?

"I'm having trouble figuring out whether the CIA changed him, or if it just brought out a side of him he never showed the rest of us," she said aloud, not really expecting a response.

But she got one anyway. "Wondering if we nurtured his alligator-wrestling tendencies?" Beth asked, the easygoing demeanor gone as if it had never existed. She leaned forward on the kitchen island, eyes piercing, as Mac placed the reference and inwardly winced. "Yes, he told us about that, among other things. I think you need to understand something about what we're trying to do here, Colonel. When we were down there over a year ago, we learned the hard way that there's no clean way in or out of the FARC. There was a little girl, about ten years old, who was little more than a slave for the Velasquez cartel. She helped us, and we tried to extract her when we put together our exit strategy, but Velasquez's brother, the head of the goon squad, decided to make a statement at her expense. She didn't have any information that would have hurt the cartel, but that didn't matter. Harm was holding her when that bastard shot her, Colonel. Don't ever presume that he was just playing thrill-seeker with the Agency. Maybe it was explanation enough for your admiral, but you're smarter than that."

Mac had no response for that. She resented being accused of pasting a label on her best friend, and she resented the hell out of the fact that this woman felt she knew Harm better than her, but getting into an argument about it couldn't possibly be productive. Besides, the image left in her mind by that tale was rapidly making a number of things clearer to her.

"You don't know me any better than I know you, Commander," she replied carefully, rising to her feet. "A lot's happened here in the past year, too. I hope you find your friend."

As she neared the door, Beth's voice followed her. "He'll come back, Colonel. He's not the same man he was when he worked with us. The stakes have changed for him." The smirk crept back into the other woman's voice. "Besides, if he tries to do something stupid, I'll kick his ass."

Somehow, in spite of the utter strangeness of the situation, that reassured her. "I'd appreciate that."

1829 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Sturgis looked up at his friend, feeling a knot begin to form in his stomach. Harm wouldn't have come back after day's end to ask for something simple. "How long?"

"Tomorrow and probably some of next week. It's hard to know for sure." Harm stood in front of the JAG's desk, technically at ease but far from relaxed.

"This is related to Commander O'Neill's visit earlier," Sturgis theorized, already beginning to get the picture.

Harm dropped his stiff posture, giving an almost apologetic nod. "A good friend needs help, Sturg, a guy who's saved my life. I can't just leave him out there to fend for himself. That's not the way we were taught."

"No, but it is the way the Agency plays, and those are the rules your friend signed up to follow." Sturgis shook his head. "I don't like the concept either, but buddy, you can't have it both ways. You can't be everything to everyone without tearing yourself in half trying."

"So you're turning me down for my own good?"

"I'm turning you down for your own good and also for the good of the command. We can't spare a senior attorney. Your duty is here now - "

"This isn't about duty!" Immediately after that outburst, Harm paused to reconsider. "Actually, that's not true. It *is* about duty, but not the kind we swore our oath to uphold. This is the kind of duty that almost forced me to resign to go find my brother, the same duty that made me go after Mac in Paraguay. I know that doesn't fit the way things are supposed to go. And I know actions have consequences. I made a choice, and then another, and this is where the road ended up. But there's nothing I can do to change that now. I have a responsibility to the people I served with, in or out of uniform; and I can't understand, for the life of me, why nobody seems to comprehend that."

"I do," said a calm voice from the doorway.

Both men turned as Mac stepped into the room. She faced Harm, and with a gaze that pleaded with him to understand her, she continued. "I can cover the Wells case, and I'll back Bud up on Callahan. Do what you need to do."

Harm searched her features for any sign that she was hiding, but found none. "You're sure?"

She gave a single nod. "Just swear to me that whatever happens, you won't lie about anything, to any of us," she said quietly. "If you can't say, then you can't say, but lie and I'll kill you."

Somewhere underneath the shield she seemed to have constructed recently, Harm found confirmation that she did truly understand, and his eyes radiated gratitude. "Never," he promised.

They turned toward their acting CO, and Sturgis realized he had little choice. He couldn't keep Harm here, and he'd be damned if he cut his friend loose and caused history to repeat itself. "All right," he said simply, letting his reluctance be known. "I can give you five days. After that, it's going to start getting tough to explain your absence."

"Thank you." Harm was looking at Sturgis, but he addressed it to both of them. "I'll be back in time for staff call on Wednesday. And that'll be the end of it. You have my word on that."

He turned toward Mac, but there was nothing he could say just then that she didn't already know. Coming briefly to attention, the first real gesture of respect he'd demonstrated in that office since A.J. Chegwiddden had left, he headed for the door.

When he'd gone, Sturgis looked at Mac. Her expression was conflicted, but composed. "Do you really think he could?" he asked.

She glanced at him. "Could what?"

"Lie."

Her gaze turned wistful. "No."

As he stepped out of the building, Harm lifted his cell phone to his ear. The connection was made just as he slid into the driver's seat of his car.

"Hello?"

He paused a moment, caught off-guard. "Tom, hi. Is Mattie around?"

"Hey, Harm," Mattie's father replied easily. "No, she's out with Kevin -- they were going to a movie tonight. Damnedest thing, isn't it?"

"I hear you. You tell the young man to keep his hands to himself?"

"Hell, I told them both to." The two men shared a laugh. They coexisted rather well, for two people who had fought a bitter court battle over Mattie's welfare. They backed each other up and never questioned each other's judgments. The strength of Mattie's newfound bond with her father was the primary reason Harm had convinced himself he could make this decision and still look at himself in the mirror.

"Anyway, we agreed she'd be home by ten-thirty, so I can tell her to give you a call then."

"That's all right. I won't be home." Harm ran a hand through his hair, at a loss. This wasn't the way he'd wanted to do this. Hell, he didn't want to do 'this' at all. But as was so

often the case, options were in short supply. "Tom, I have to go out of town for a while. It shouldn't be longer than a couple of days, but in case it is, Mattie really ought to stay in Blacksburg until I call. I hope that's not a problem."

"No -- I'm happy to have her here, obviously. Your office will be able to reach you in an emergency, like usual?"

"Not this time." He hated this, just flat-out hated it. "Listen, I know how dumb this sounds, but if a week goes by and you haven't heard from me ..." His throat constricted painfully, leaving him unable to finish.

Comprehension began to seep into the other man's voice. "Harm, you know how grateful I am for everything you've done for my little girl. But if whatever this is is as bad as it sounds, you'd better swear to me right now that it's worth what you're doing."

"It is. I'll explain it to her, Tom -- I swear. One way or another, I'll make sure she understands. Until then ... she doesn't really need me as long as she's got you."

They both knew what a massive oversimplification that was, but Tom, thankfully, didn't press the issue. "Keep safe, Harm. I'll give Mattie a hug for you."

"Thanks," Harm said quietly. "I'll be in touch."

Closing his phone, he let out a long breath. In a way, maybe this was the better way. If he'd had to hear Mattie's voice turn teary -- or worse, look into those big blue eyes -- he likely would have recanted every cliché he'd given Mac and Sturgis and stayed in Washington. Had he really thought, when he first pinned on his wings, that he might someday successfully have a family while on flight duty? Wave goodbye to a child and take off on a six-month cruise, with little more than faith that skill and providence would bring him home?

He was lucky this time. Mattie was fifteen years old -- nearly an adult, it often seemed -- and had a capable biological parent standing by. She would be fine. That didn't dull the visceral pain that had taken up residence in the pit of his stomach.

Only one reason to do this, and every reason not to.

With more force than strictly necessary, he shoved the key into the ignition and turned. He had a long flight ahead of him, and things would only get tougher from there.

He glanced up as Andy sauntered across the tarmac, looking -- as usual -- like he didn't have a care in the world. "God love the rocket scientists who dreamed up the Aurora," he declared, plopping down beside his crewmate on an unused maintenance cart. "Nothing like a coast-to-coast run that's shorter than the drive into this little undisclosed location."

"They did find us the biggest patch of open desert left in the contiguous U.S.," Harm responded, aware that he sounded less than enthusiastic. "Seen any scorpions lately?"

"Hey, I never swore that there were any here in the first place. I merely suggested to Amy that she might want to carry a flashlight at night."

"And of course it never occurred to you that she might get freaked out and decide to stay in your quarters for the night instead."

Andy spread his hands wide in mock innocence, his eyes twinkling. "So," he said simply, letting the levity drop. "What's up?"

"With what?"

"Crappy poker face, Solo. If something's eating you, I'd like to know about it, in case it affects us later on. We're not playing with Matchbox cars out here. Mach 4's a bad place to have a distraction -- blink and you're way out over Cleveland."

Harm turned to look at his friend, dressed as he was in a plain black flight suit. No name, no rank, no service. No identity. "I don't belong here, A-Dub," he said quietly.

"Does anyone?"

"You don't seem to mind it too much."

"I'm a test pilot. It's in the blood. I didn't really plan on getting roped into field-agent work every now and then, but if that's the tradeoff for getting to play with the fastest toys on the planet, I'll take it."

Harm studied him, curious. "You got any family?"

Andy shook his head, his expression matter-of-fact. "None to speak of. Foster kid with a talent for machines and getting in trouble, that was me. Not much more to it than that."

"And that's supposed to explain why it doesn't bother you to be cut off from the outside world for days or weeks at a time?"

"I didn't say it never bothered me. But this shit's gotta get done, so if I can do it with a high degree of effectiveness and relatively little downside, then it might as well be me, right?"

"There's some logic to that."

Andy cast him a sidelong glance. "But that logic doesn't hold up when you try it out on yourself."

Harm gave a small shrug. "It's funny," he said. "I went into the Navy intending to basically live this kind of life indefinitely -- always on the move, always disconnected. I left flying twice: once involuntarily, once voluntarily but with a fair amount of personal conflict. I guess I always thought, in the back of my mind, that if I'd been able to stay on that track from the start, things would have been ..." He tossed up a hand listlessly. "Different. Right."

"And now that you're doing the hero thing on a weekly basis and coming home to places like this in between, you're wondering if even a perfect Top Gun career would have satisfied you." The other man leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "So you wanted one thing, and now you want something else. What happened to make that change?"

There were a hundred possible answers to that -- the most significant one highlighted in Marine green -- but all of them could be combined into one straightforward explanation. "JAG happened," he replied bluntly. "But that bridge has been pretty well torched, so there's no point in getting nostalgic. I just think it says something not-so-great about me that wherever I am, I usually end up wishing I was somewhere else."

Andy considered that for a minute. "That extraction last week in the Ivory Coast," he began.

Thrown by the non-sequitur, Harm frowned. "What about it?"

"Are you proud of it?"

He thought about the immense relief and gratitude in the eyes of the UN diplomatic team as they'd left the rebel skirmish far behind. "Of course."

"What about our little stint as forward air controllers over Afghanistan in the Aurora?"

That four-minute pass had most likely saved the asses of twelve Delta Force operators. "What's your point, Watson?"

Andy gave a laconic shrug. "There are worse things in the world to be than us."

And despite all the times they'd been handed a mission with no background and no hope of ever learning the true outcome, despite the nights and days spent utterly detached from their lives, they both knew he was right.

Harm allowed his lips to curve into a smile. "Didn't you put some kind of bet down on what altitude we'd hit today?"

"So I did." Andy raised a triumphant fist and shouted in the direction of the small Operations building. "Elizabeth O'Neill, my dear, you owe me a steak dinner ..."

0205 Local 39,000 feet over South America

As a voice from the speakers politely informed him that the plane was beginning its descent, Harm folded the four sheets of paper in front of him and slid them into an envelope. Obediently putting up his tray table, he turned to gaze out the window into the darkness. Beth glanced over at him. "Mattie?" she asked.

He nodded. "Just in case." He'd addressed the letter to himself, on the assumption that if he didn't return, Mattie or someone else would eventually go through his mail. He couldn't take the chance of her never knowing, even if the explanations might ring hollow.

"You're not going to need it." Her voice was calm, self-assured, enough so that he could convince himself to believe her with little effort. But then, she was typically the calm one of their little gang, always finding a way to keep her focus dispassionate. That brought him back to Mac, and how they seemed to have swapped roles lately; him the steady hand, her the fire just barely controlled. But that wasn't a mental path he could afford to explore right now.

Beth continued. "I know it's not going to be a walk in the park - "

"We learned that one the hard way last time," he reminded her unnecessarily.

She could have taken offense at that, but didn't -- she hadn't been the one to feel that child's body go sickeningly limp. "That was a screw-up," she allowed, keeping her voice low and her words vague in case there were curious ears nearby. "We didn't know nearly as much as we should have, and maybe we got over-confident. This isn't the same as that was. We're going in with our eyes open."

"We'd better be."

They landed in Bogotá at dawn, having once again left their identities behind in Washington. Customs officials barely blinked at the American couple with the expensive cameras who professed to have business interests in the country. They'd played the roles often enough to be comfortable with the charade and with each other.

There was a highway to Arauca, though 'highway' might have been too charitable a word. They paid cash to rent a decrepit old pickup truck; the owner had been satisfied with the business cards they flashed which bore the name of an American magazine. The cracked pavement under the half-bald tires was rough but bearable, and they had most of an hour to talk through the details of their game plan before reaching the military checkpoint, which turned out to be nothing more than a manned shack by the roadside.

The sergeant waved them out of the truck, studying their papers critically as his two comrades searched the vehicle. "Your destination is Arauca?" he asked in Spanish.

"*Si*," Harm answered, hoping this conversation wouldn't tax his limited vocabulary too much.

The sergeant appeared unconvinced, nodding toward his camera case. "You have money. The train is a much faster way."

"For a photographer, the faster way is not always the goal."

The men searching the truck finished their task and stepped back around the vehicle. Beth chose the perfect moment to take a tiny step backward, causing one man's hand, slack at his side, to brush against her backside. Immediately she shrieked and jumped away, leveling an accusing stare on the bewildered soldier. "That man tried to grope me!"

Harm glared at the sergeant. "You allow your men to act like animals?"

"*Solamente un accidente!*" the soldier claimed, lifting his hands in surrender. His raised voice mixed chaotically with the sergeant's demands for an explanation. Harm waited for the older man to stalk past him, then reached out and deftly slipped the sidearm from its holster, tucking it into his waistband and under his shirt in one fluid motion.

"Come on, we're leaving," Beth informed him huffily, getting back into the truck and slamming the door. Harm followed suit, and as the officers attempted to sort out what had set the foreigners off, the truck continued on through the checkpoint.

"That was embarrassingly easy," Beth commented as the road led them through a thick, rainforest-like growth. "If their military was better trained, maybe they wouldn't have so many problems with scum like Velasquez."

"Scum like Velasquez generally find a way regardless."

The dark tone of his voice caused her to turn slightly in her seat. "We're not in this to finish off him or his asshole brother, remember. If we get sidetracked by some kind of revenge trip -"

"I know what the stakes are. I figured them out when that little girl died." Harm kept his eyes trained on the now-winding road. "A specific area in the city, you said?"

"Santa Luisa," she answered with a nod. "We passed through on our way in a few days ago, and Andy remarked on how little the people there seemed to have been touched by the cartels. Said it wouldn't be a bad place to disappear for a while."

"Let's hope he was being literal."

It was another hour before they reached the outskirts of Arauca, and thankfully the truck made it all the way without overheating. They left it parked on a side street -- just in case that sergeant had realized what had happened to his sidearm -- and caught a bus into the heart of the city, bound for a neighborhood known as Santa Luisa.

Beth led the way to the local hotel, where their obvious outsider status drew little more than a few passing glances. They played up their 'couplehood,' sticking close to each other as they checked in, and headed up to their room to determine the next plan of action.

Like the rest of the hotel, and most of the surrounding area for that matter, the room was fairly clean and well-appointed -- merely a couple of decades behind the times. Standard operational security called for a sweep of the room, but since their mode of travel had forced them to leave most of their gadgetry behind in the States, they did it visually: Harm took one half of the room and Beth the other, inspecting every surface.

No one should have been expecting them, of course, so it wasn't a terrible shock when they found no listening devices. Beth flopped down across the bed, watching Harm study the street below from their third-floor window. "You all right?"

He glanced over at her, hesitating a half-second before replying. "Yeah. This is just reminding me a lot of Paraguay."

She leaned up on her elbows, looking sympathetic. "How did you and Colonel Mackenzie get back to being friends after that debacle? You were -"

"I know." He shrugged, shaking his head. "I guess we started to recognize our own insecurities in each other, and they started to make a little more sense."

"But you're still not where you want to be with her, are you?"

"We're working on it," he replied, effectively ending the discussion. "So where do you suggest we start looking for Andy?"

“Actually, I suggest letting him find us.” Beth rolled to her feet. “We’ll stand out if we’re actively asking questions. I can think of a couple of public places we could hang around instead. If he’s still here because he needs a hand, he’ll be looking out for any opportunity. We’re not hard to spot if one cares to look.”

“Fair enough.” Harm gestured toward the door. “No point in killing time.”

They headed for an open-air café a few blocks away, about half of the tables occupied at this mid-afternoon hour. The local coffee was of course excellent, and the partners managed to fill most of an hour with a conversation about nothing but the current NFL standings.

At the end of that hour, however, a passing waiter managed to trip over a nearby chair, spilling a glass of water down Harm’s shirt. The young man apologized profusely and pointed the way to the restroom. Harm exchanged a glance with Beth, slightly wary. Outside of Hollywood, how many people usually got soaked by clumsy waiters?

“Go ahead,” Beth said quietly, her pleasant demeanor fixed in place. “I can take care of myself for a few minutes.”

Harm shrugged and moved toward the door the waiter had indicated, the feel of the pistol’s barrel in his belt both a reassurance and a pointed reminder of the situation. He stepped into the restroom and closed the door securely behind him, moving slowly along the wall toward the towel dispenser. There was another person in here; he was clear on that. Whether it was an unwitting patron of the café or something else entirely, however ...

“Mike Kallen,” said a familiar voice in greeting. “The world’s a freaking small place, ain’t it?”

Andy stepped out of the corner stall, hand outstretched. Harm relaxed and, hearing the cover name, responded in kind. “Rob, you punk, what brings you here?”

“Business as usual, my man.” His tone was as easygoing as ever, but the strength of Andy’s handshake conveyed his immense relief. “I thought I might see Sue around here, but I didn’t expect you.”

“Since when does she go anywhere interesting without me?” Harm flashed a grin. “You ought to come have dinner with us at the hotel. We can catch up on old times.”

“Love to. I’d better meet you there, though -- stuff I gotta take care of first. Good enough?”

“Sure.” Harm reached in his pocket for his room key, the attached chain conveniently printed with the room number, and pressed it into his friend’s hand as they shook again. “Can’t tell you how good it is to see you, Rob.”

“Likewise, Mikey, definitely likewise. See you in a while.”

With that, Andy stepped out, leaving Harm to dry off his shirt as best he could. If this were any other place, he’d have accused Andy of setting up the clumsy-waiter gag mainly for laughs, but the fact that Andy was reluctant to be seen with them made the setup understandable. Not for the first time, he wondered who might be watching.

Returning to the table, Harm slid back into his seat. "You'll never guess who I ran into in the men's room," he commented.

Beth's eyebrows shot up. "That didn't take long."

"No kidding. Shall we head back?"

They were back in the hotel within minutes, and Beth used her key to let them into the room. Once the door was locked behind them, she spun toward him, eager for answers. "Is he all right? What did he say?"

"He looked fine, and he didn't say much. He just looked really, really glad to see us." Harm spread his hands in a shrug. "He's obviously worried about being watched, which is why he's meeting us here. But that's about all I've got."

Only a few minutes passed before they heard a knock at the door. Harm handed the gun to Beth, who took up a position next to the door, and looked through the peephole. Andy stood there, along with a young woman who appeared to be a local. "Clear," Harm said quietly as he opened the door.

As the visitors stepped into the room, Beth's eyes went cold, and she whipped the gun back up toward the woman. "Hold on just a damn minute," she said warningly.

"Calm down, B," Andy began, taking a step forward. "She's with me."

"After the way our last visit went down, you expect me to trust her?"

The woman raised her hands, attempting to look non-threatening, but Beth wasn't buying it. "Somebody want to fill me in?" Harm demanded.

"Meet our contact," Beth answered, her gaze never leaving the potential threat. "The last person to speak to us before everything went to hell four days ago. Think that was coincidence?"

"It was not." The woman spoke for the first time, in halting but passable English. "The trap was set for me as much as it was for you. Please let Andrew explain."

Harm cocked his head, noticing the apparent familiarity between their friend and this woman. Andy stood between her and the gun, instinctively protecting her. "If you can trust me, you can trust her," he told Beth matter-of-factly. "She's the reason I'm still here, so if you came back to help me, you can either put that thing down or turn around and head for home."

"I'd hate to have come all this way for nothing," Harm said under his breath. Beth shot him a disparaging look, but relented and clicked the weapon's safety back on.

"Start talking, Watson."

"It's nice to see you too." Andy stepped fully into the room, encouraging his uncertain guest along. Moving behind them, Harm unlocked the door and folded his arms. "Harm, Beth, this is Reina. She's a housekeeper at Velasquez's hacienda, and therefore has access to most of his assets and information. Two weeks ago she learned of a plan to attack a government building in Bogotá. She used a public phone to call the local army garrison, which routed the

information to headquarters and to our chief of station. The details of that threat -- including copies of the FARC's plans of the building in question -- were what we were sent down here to retrieve and potentially act on."

"Guess that kind of thing was the reason for us getting hurried through helicopter quals," Beth theorized.

Andy nodded. "They'd have assigned us to assist the Colombian army with a strike on Velasquez's training compound, I'm guessing. But when our meet went bad, U.S. involvement was in danger of being exposed, so our *jefes* must've cut bait and told the Colombians they were on their own."

"Why *did* the meet go bad?" Harm wanted to know.

Andy glanced over at Reina, who responded. "Antonio Velasquez's brother Roberto has been suspicious of everyone since the attack last year." She didn't have to explain further; they knew she meant their infiltration of the compound. "He was even more suspicious of me than the others, I think. When I came into the city to meet you, he had me followed. I recognized two of his bodyguards on the street just before the shooting began, but I had no time to warn you."

"Another woman, a bystander, was shot and killed in the crossfire," Andy added, regret evident in his expression. "I switched her purse with Reina's in the chaos, and the local paper ran her death notice. I just hope Roberto's goons ran off before they could get a visual ID."

"And you were sure even then that she wasn't part of the set-up?" Beth had relaxed somewhat, but still sought proof. Glancing at the other woman, she said, "Sorry to be such a hardass, but we're in a pretty hardass profession, you know?"

"I was sure," Andy replied, "because before the shooting started, while you were scanning the area, Reina told me in one sentence why she would take such a risk." He gestured for her to explain again.

Reina lowered her gaze. "I had a daughter," she said quietly. "She disappeared a year ago, during the fight at the compound. Her name was - "

"Elena," Beth breathed, suddenly understanding.

Reina nodded, her jaw set hard against still-fresh grief. "They told me she ran away. They did not know that I told her to help the Americans and to go with them if she could, because I did not want her to be trapped in this life. But when I had no word from her for many weeks ..."

"She was given a proper burial," Harm managed to say.

She nodded again, attempting the ghost of a grateful smile. "Andrew has told me what happened. He told me the name of the church cemetery in Venezuela where she rests. I thank you for that kindness."

Harm recalled shoving off the Agency doctor and making his way into the small town near their base, barely feeling the driving rain against his face. He remembered knocking on the large wooden door of the local church, pleading in broken Spanish with the kindly priest who answered and clutching the little girl's rosary in his good hand. Most of all, he recalled

slumping down in a pew and feeling hot tears carve paths through the rain on his skin, marveling at the bitter irony of sitting in a house of God and feeling so little evidence of His presence in the world.

Seeing that Reina's motivations had been instantly accepted by his friends, Andy took over again. "The reason I stayed was to help Reina lay low and figure out how to secure both her and her information. We don't know the exact timetable on this planned attack, but we know it's soon, and now that I've had a chance to look at the plans, we know the target."

Beth, now perched on the arm of the sofa, leaned forward. "Well?"

"The U.S. embassy."

Harm jerked upright, almost knocking over the chair he'd been leaning on. "Are they nuts? It's in the FARC's best interest to have *less* American attention directed here, not more. If they hit our embassy, we'll have a battalion of Marines in here so fast ..."

"And then the whole dynamic of the drug war changes," Andy countered. "Velasquez is a bastard, but he's not dumb. He sees how American public opinion is influencing the war in Iraq, and he wants this war to be fought in the spotlight, too. Face it -- if the world was really paying attention, would the Agency be able to target and take out drug lords the way we do now? Velasquez knows that. As soon as we start bringing in troops instead of Company types, the Geneva Convention argument starts, and we start losing ground, because he has no intention of playing by the rules. Add to that the strain on our already-stretched military, and - well, they don't show us the reports of links between drug terrorists and Middle Eastern terrorists for nothing, you know?"

"All right, we're convinced," Beth put in. "Do you have a plan?"

"Not a solid one. I've been trying to figure out how to contact the station chief for two days, but I couldn't get to a secure line without the risk of exposing Reina. That's why I was so damn glad to see you two." Andy took a seat on the bed. "The way I see it, we have two options. We could try to find some way of getting to Bogotá without raising any suspicion, and deliver the intel to the embassy in person."

That didn't sound particularly promising. "Or?"

Andy just looked at them impassively.

"Ohh, I don't think so." Harm shook his head, instantly adamant. "After our last foray into that compound, you're actually considering going *back*?"

"We're obviously more familiar with the layout now," Andy pointed out. "We also have Reina's experience to exploit. She knows their routines. Besides, I'm not sure we have time to get to Bogotá, pass on the intel, and wait for the higher-up types to determine an appropriate response. They could be loading up as we speak."

"Or they could be aiming for a date days or even weeks away," Beth argued.

"I do not believe we have much time," Reina said, her fingers playing in her long, dark braid. "From what I could hear, it sounded like they were talking about an event that would take place at the embassy. They wanted to be sure they would do as much damage as possible."

"Tomorrow's Saturday," Beth said. "I'd expect them to wait for a work day."

"Unless ..." Harm stood up and scanned the room for a newspaper he'd noticed earlier. As he picked it up, comprehension dawned, and he pointed to a picture below the fold, of the U.S. Secretary of State shaking hands with a Colombian counterpart. "Reina, could you translate this article?"

She nodded, reaching for the paper. "He is here," she said simply. "Your diplomat. He is meeting with our government today, and will be speaking at the embassy tomorrow morning."

"Shit," Andy cursed softly, speaking for all of them. He reached under his shirt, coming up with a good-sized leather wallet that he'd had strapped to his body. From it, he withdrew a number of folded papers, spreading them out across the table. "This is all the info Reina was able to sneak out. The gates are well guarded, so their plan is to attack from the air -- my guess is they'll use a helicopter and fire off some Stingers or some other kind of missile." His finger stabbed at an area of the map. "There's an open-air courtyard in the center of the embassy grounds where they'll most likely hold that reception. Not exactly a hard target."

"I only see one viable option now." Harm's voice was grim, but resolute. "Call in the threat as best we can and hope the embassy switchboard will at least put us through to the security detachment, even if we've got no more credibility on the phone than a guy off the street."

"And then?" Beth knew that wasn't the only idea he had in mind. "Even with warning, the Marines won't have much protection from the air. They might be able to keep their own helo in the air to try and run the FARC thugs off, but with short notice and no hard evidence, I doubt the Colombian authorities will allow them to loiter in the airspace, and shooting them down over the city would almost inevitably incur civilian casualties on the ground."

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of." Harm glanced over at Andy. "You happen to bring an extra weapon?"

In response, Andy reached down and unsnapped his leg holster, handing it to his friend. "Thing is, you were right before. Shooting our way into Velasquez's compound looks a lot like a suicide mission."

"No kidding. That's why I'm thinking we probably shouldn't go in with the intention of shooting up the place."

"What else will stop them?"

A glint of wicked satisfaction shone in Harm's eyes. "Stealing their ride."

2143 Local Somewhere in Eastern Colombia

The call to the embassy went about as well as could be expected. The switchboard operator had expressed a fair amount of suspicion, but had at least taken their names and promised to pass the information on to the special assistant to the ambassador; the usual

transparent code for the CIA station chief. If they were lucky, the station chief would confirm their identities with Langley quickly and begin meeting with the Marine detachment on a contingency plan. None of the trio, however, had much faith in the ability of the system to deal with short-notice, "pop-up" threats.

Andy and Reina argued for a while over whether or not she should join them on this little adventure. He didn't want to risk her getting caught by Roberto, since that would undoubtedly end badly. She maintained that she could hold her own and provide another set of eyes, and pointed out that she would be more at risk from Velasquez's various informants on her own in the city, with no way of linking back up with the Americans after the mission. In the end, Andy had to concede, mostly because he too remembered the searing fury he'd felt at Elena's death, and he couldn't deny her mother the chance to bring about a reckoning.

They set off as soon as the sun fell below the horizon, banking on the likelihood that they'd be less visible at night. The old pickup truck came in handy again; they drove it as far as they dared into the rural country east of Arauca, then abandoned it about two miles from their destination. After the foiled meeting earlier in the week, Andy had retrieved his equipment from their hotel before ducking out of sight for a few days, so they had a handheld GPS locator and some tools, in addition to the high-powered zoom lens on the camera Harm had brought. For all that, however, they would have to rely heavily on their knowledge of the compound and hope that their instincts about the threat proved correct.

The foursome moved slowly through the brush toward the compound, covering the remaining two miles in about an hour to remain as stealthy as possible. They'd all donned dark, neutral-colored clothes, and Beth had an extra set available for Reina, drawing a crack from Harm about her tendency to overpack. When they neared the fence surrounding the compound, Andy consulted the GPS, confirming that this was in fact the side closest to Velasquez's private aircraft hangar.

Antonio Velasquez had made some cursory efforts to make his estate appear to be a typical coffee plantation. It was in the middle of nowhere, the only perimeter security a simple chain-link fence and a tiny guard shack on each corner. Anyone who cared to look closer, however, could see that there was a disproportionately large number of motion-sensing cameras attached to that fence in strategic locations. Fortunately, Beth had an idea to take care of the cameras.

The trees in this region brimmed with life; the one nearest the fence was apparently home to more than one family of birds. Beth picked up a fist-sized rock in one hand and a fallen branch in the other. She tossed the branch up into the tree, waking the birds and causing them to shoot out of the tree in an explosion of chirping. As soon as they flew past the nearby camera, Beth lobbed the rock at it, knocking the lens skyward.

Andy gave a low, appreciative whistle. "Fast-pitch softball?" he asked under his breath.

Beth flashed a grin. "First team all-conference in the Big Ten two years straight. If our luck holds, when the guards notice that this camera's pointed the wrong way, they'll rewind the tape, see the birds, and conclude that that's what knocked the camera. Even if they get out here to fix it quickly, they won't be looking for an intruder."

"Nice," Harm agreed. "B, you and Andy head straight for the hangar. Find the helicopter that looks like it's loaded for bear and get it ready to fly. Reina, I need you to come with me and show me where they store their weapons. We need to set a diversion so that we can start up the helo without getting shot, and setting off some C-4 or something of the sort would do nicely. Anybody gets separated, we meet back at the hangar. As soon as we have all

four people on board -- or firsthand assurance that one or more people won't be making it back -- we take off."

"You always were better at making the plans than following them," Andy commented.

"Lock it up, wiseass."

They went over the fence one at a time: Harm went first, followed by Beth, and Andy gave Reina a hand up before bringing up the rear. With one quiet but earnest "good luck," they went their separate ways.

Reina put her years of employment to good use, leading Harm across the property in almost total darkness. The weapon storage was a small concrete building, across the short, unprepared landing strip from the majority of the buildings. There was a guard posted here, which Harm was relieved to see. He had a much better record against human guards than computerized ones.

"Diego," Reina called softly toward the guard, who startled out of his half-sleep.

"*Quien es?*" he demanded, stepping forward, away from the door. His eyes widened when he focused on the woman's face in the dim light. "Rei--"

He dropped like a stone, and behind him, Harm lowered his gun. Part of him wished he'd actually shot the man rather than clubbing him over the head, but he realized that such thoughts were a major reason why he hadn't been entirely sorry to leave the Agency's employ.

He opened the door using the guard's keys, and the two of them dragged the unconscious man into the building. Reina paled as her dark eyes took in the massive stockpile of automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. "I did not realize," she whispered, taking an involuntary step backward. "So much ... all for killing."

"Let's reduce their stock somewhat," Harm suggested, slinging an AK-47 over his shoulder and reaching for a cluster of three grenades. "We need to find someplace away from the runway to set this up -- it has to draw people away from the hangar."

"How will we set it off without drawing them toward us?"

He scanned the nearby shelf and grabbed a spool of medium-gauge wire. "We can secure the grenades by wedging them into whatever's handy, and thread this through the pins. We'll get as far away as the length of this wire -- there should be a couple hundred feet here -- and then give it a yank."

Reina looked doubtful, but stepped toward the doorway and pointed outward. "The building at the far end of the runway is a processing plant for the coca. It will be unoccupied at this time of night. If we lay the wire along the ground back toward here, we can hide behind this building to pull it and then run toward the hangar."

"Sounds good to me. Stay low -- there's not much cover between here and there."

They ducked down and made their way toward the building she'd indicated, finally flattening themselves against its outside wall. Harm studied the area, looking for something to wedge the grenades against. He settled on a pair of iron pipes leading out of the building and

taking a right angle to disappear into the ground. There was a space of about two inches between the pipes -- too small for the grenades to slip through. Perfect.

He threaded the wire through the grenade pins and positioned them in a row behind the pipes so that a hard jerk in a direction parallel to the ground would cleanly pull all three pins. Using the tool he'd borrowed from Andy, he clamped the end of the wire and twisted hard, making certain it couldn't come loose. "Okay. This is the careful part. Whatever you do, don't let me pull too hard on this wire before we're well and truly clear of here."

Reina's jaw was set, but her eyes betrayed her apprehension. They retraced their earlier steps, moving even more slowly in deference to the wire Harm was rolling out behind them. At long last they reached the weapon storage and dropped down behind the building, breathing identical sighs of relief. Harm glanced down at the spool in his hand; there were half a dozen windings left at most. He set it down and ducked his head around the other side of the building, looking for any sign of movement from the hacienda or from the hangar. After a few seconds, there had been no signs of life. "You know," he said quietly, "this might actually work."

"I very much doubt that, *señor*."

The voice behind him was low and male and decidedly not Reina's. Harm slowly straightened up, inwardly screaming a string of curses. The voice continued, "Diego missed his hourly check-in. Place the gun on the ground and turn around."

He obeyed, hoping that his cooperation would afford Andy and Beth the time needed to find the helo and get it flight-ready. As he turned, he saw Reina standing very still, her eyes cold and fixed on their captor ... and then he recognized Roberto Velasquez.

Roberto, for his part, saw something familiar in the American intruder as well. "*Te recuerdo*," he said thoughtfully, taking a step forward to study him. "It was you who came here one year ago to destroy my brother's business, was it not? What stupidity brings you back to try again?"

"You're still here," Harm answered pointedly, wondering if the other man had seen the wire that now lay ignored in the underbrush. If there was some way to get a hold of it ...

"I see. But your CIA should have sent someone else. I might have been merciful to a stranger. As it is, I remember well that you left here the last time with things that belonged to me." Roberto shot a sideways look at Reina. "Then again, you left with something that belonged to her, too. Is that why she went to you? Did you tell her that her little Elena was living the good life in America?"

"You are the son of a dog," Reina spat out. "You and your brother both. I know the truth of how Elena died."

"Do you? She would still be here if this man and his friends had never come. Isn't this true?" Roberto kept his pistol aimed steadily at Harm as he took another step forward, testing him. "Do you remember it, *norteamericano*? Do you wish now that you had not taken her?"

"I wasn't the one who shot her," Harm said through gritted teeth. Roberto only cocked an eyebrow and withdrew a hunting knife from a sheath on his belt. His gun hand never wavering, he split the fabric of Harm's shirt with the knife, exposing his left shoulder and the scar left by that single bullet a year ago.

"It has had time to heal," Roberto commented. "Maybe your memory is fading along with it. We can fix that." And he drove the blade deep into his captive's shoulder.

Harm clenched his jaw to hold back a cry of pain and reacted instantly, knocking the gun from Roberto's hand with his uninjured arm. Roberto wrested the knife free, and the two men battled for possession of it, knocking each other to the ground. They grappled for a few seconds, before a gunshot pierced the air.

Both men froze and looked up to see Reina standing over them, holding Roberto's gun. "Get up," she commanded, gesturing with the weapon. "Move away from him."

Roberto did as he was told, but not without directing a sneer at Harm. "So you bring the woman to do the work for you."

"I do this for no one but myself," Reina told him harshly, ignoring the tremble in her grip. "When I learned what happened to my Elena, I prayed for this moment to come."

"It's not that simple, Reina," Harm warned, reaching a gentle hand toward her. "Will you let me take that?"

"I know it is not simple," she responded, tears of rage beginning to pool in her eyes. "But it is what I want, and it is what we need."

Another gunshot took them by surprise, and Roberto fell unceremoniously to the ground, blood running freely from his temple. Reina jumped back as Andy stepped out from the side of the building, lowering his weapon.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded, her voice accusatory and nearly hysterical. "Why did you *do* that??"

"So you wouldn't have to," he replied quietly.

"It was for me to do! She was my *daughter!*"

Andy took the gun from her hand and pulled her tightly against him even as she pounded her hands against his chest. "I know," he whispered. "I'll explain it later. I promise."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Harm asked, clasp his hand against the deep wound in his shoulder.

"Beth has the helo set to go, and your diversion seemed like it was taking too long." Andy gave a cavalier shrug. "Maybe I am Han Solo after all."

"Well, those shots are going to bring somebody running pretty quick, so let's get this show on the road. Cover your ears." Harm picked up the forgotten wire and yanked hard.

The explosion was spectacular, sending orange flames and chunks of concrete shooting into the night sky. As men spilled out of the hacienda, shouting and running toward the site, the three trespassers bolted in the opposite direction toward the hangar.

"I'd better take the copilot's seat," Andy tossed over his shoulder at Harm as they ran. "Beth and I are both rated on these birds."

"Not to mention free of major bleeding." Harm knew the increased heart rate caused by this little sprint wasn't doing him any favors, but it was better than the alternative. They reached the hangar and piled into the helicopter, whose rotor had begun turning as soon as their diversion had provided the necessary covering noise.

"Buckle up!" Beth shouted over the din, gesturing toward a pair of headsets in the back. Andy slammed the door shut and strapped himself in, and Reina reached up to put Harm's headset on for him, seeing that his arm was being uncooperative.

"You're going to have to thread the needle, B," Andy's voice could be heard through the headset. "The doors are about forty feet high and eighty feet wide. You gotta get clear of those before you can climb."

"Sounds like a man who wants to bet a steak dinner on it." Beth's response was almost smug.

"I'm betting my ass on it -- isn't that enough?"

Harm leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. On this point, he had no fear. When the task was flying, the sky itself would fall before his friends would fail.

Beth effortlessly lifted the helicopter from the floor of the hangar, tilting it forward and aiming straight down the centerline painted on the cement. The rotor wash blew anything that wasn't secured to the back of the hangar as they emerged into the night air.

"Punch it!" Andy yelled as machine-gun fire flashed in their direction from the ground. Beth wrenched the craft skyward, and they were out of range within moments.

"Well, that was fun," Beth remarked dryly as they soared over the hills. "Where to?"

"Is the base just over the border still active? The one we used to use way back when?"

"November? Sure. Still has some American staff, too - we did our staging out of there a week ago."

"Then head for it. We need to get these weapons the hell out of the FARC's reach." Harm surveyed the contents of the helicopter: three open crates, each holding a FIM-92A Stinger missile. He'd never seen a Stinger launched from the air before, but with a small enough range between the firing point and the target, the results would no doubt be impressive. Assuming the pilot was still able to control the helo after the shot -- but then, maybe Velasquez didn't care if his men crashed, so long as they accomplished their task.

Fortunately, these particular Stingers weren't going to get that opportunity. He unfastened his seat belt and leaned over the first crate, retrieving the all-purpose tool from his pocket. Unable to raise his right arm more than a few inches, he put the tool in his left hand and clumsily unscrewed the four screws holding the access panel in place. Removing the panel, he reached in and ripped out the computer card that served as the primary control for the missile. He then repeated the task for the other two, and crushed the three cards under the heel of his shoe.

Reina watched as he settled gingerly back into his seat, wincing. She unfastened her own seat belt and reached a hand under the seat, groping for something. Coming up with a

first-aid kit, she knelt down on the metal deckplate and tugged his ruined shirt away from the wound.

"It's okay -- we'll be on the ground before too much longer," Harm protested lamely, but he knew the note of exhaustion in his voice was audible to both of them.

"You lost blood as we ran." She pressed a stack of gauze pads to his shoulder and held them securely in place, not trusting a bandage to maintain the needed pressure.

"Don't be angry at Andy for stepping in," Harm said after a few moments of silence. Reina's eyes darted toward him, then away. "Killing Roberto would have changed nothing about what happened to Elena, and it *would* have changed you."

"So it is all right for Andrew, but not for me?"

"It's not all right for anyone, but some of us have had to do it. And once we have, we try our damndest to prevent anyone else from being forced to join the club."

"It's an ugly business we're in, Reina," Andy put in, reminding them that the mike was open. "We do it so that others don't have to. You've already seen and suffered far more than most people ever do. If I'd let you pull that trigger, every time for the rest of your life that you felt haunted by that moment would be on my conscience."

Reina said nothing, but gave a slight nod, and Andy twisted around in the copilot's seat just in time to catch it. The two men locked gazes over her head, and Harm saw the depth of his friend's feelings. He'd been with this woman through hell and back, and he had no intention of walking away -- ever.

As they approached the border, Beth toggled the radio. "Air Base November, this is Bell Six-Two-Three light -- how do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Six-Two-Three," came the prompt response in American-sounding English. "Please identify."

"November, two operatives left your base four -- correction, five days ago, bound for Arauca. Your commander can confirm that their names were O'Neill and Watson. I'm O'Neill, and Watson's sitting next to me. We've got a liberated helo that was very nearly used to attack the American embassy in Bogotá, and we're inbound for you, ETA one-niner minutes."

There was a pause. "Stand by, Six-Two-Three," replied the dubious voice.

"He's gonna wet himself when his commander tells him we're for real." Andy smirked.

At last, the controller came back on the frequency. "Six-Two-Three, you are cleared in. There are a few people here who'd really like to talk to you."

"Roger that, November. Please call the embassy and inform them that they can stand down any contingency plans they may have put in place for the event later this morning, but they need to stay vigilant."

The small base came into sight below them as the first rays of sunlight peeked over the horizon, a familiar view that Harm had never expected to have again. They landed without a hitch, and Beth shut the engine down as a cluster of people moved toward the craft.

"The Bogotá station chief's on the phone," an older man informed them without preamble. "He wants details."

"I can handle that," Beth replied, pointing to Andy, Reina, and Harm in succession. "You, take care of her - you, take care of yourself."

"Aye-aye, ma'am," the two men drawled mockingly.

Harm replaced Reina's hand on his shoulder with his own, offering her a grateful smile, and moved into the operations building. There was a cot in the alert room off the entrance, just as he remembered, and he sat down heavily on it, lacking the clarity of thought to seek out a medic. The only thing he could process was that he was tired, incredibly tired.

Velasquez and his cartel wouldn't be stopped by something as insignificant as this. There would most likely be another attempt, but that was for another day, and another team. He'd done what he came here to do, and another life awaited him at home, one he hadn't thought possible the last time he'd been here. Harm barely felt the cool pillow under his head before he dropped into a dreamless sleep.

"Harm ... hey, Harm ... come on, Solo, rise and shine, will you?"

The unceremonious shake of his good shoulder brought him back to the living, and he responded with a ragged groan, opening his eyes a crack. "Oww ... What?"

Andy was sitting on his haunches next to the cot. "Man, for a minute there I thought you were out for the duration."

"Maybe I was, and I was happier there, so if you wouldn't mind ..."

"Uh-uh. Time to talk to the boss. Don't have to go anywhere -- just sit up."

Harm cast a gaze around the room to better orient himself. He was still in the alert room, but his shoulder was expertly bandaged and secured in a sling. Probably stitched up as well, but he didn't feel the need to investigate that. An IV stand was positioned beside the cot, delivering the last of a pint of blood through the until-now unnoticed needle in his good arm. The blaze that had previously consumed his shoulder had faded to a more manageable smolder, accompanied by a vague mental fuzziness, and he suspected that blood wasn't the only thing he'd gotten through that IV.

"How long since we got here?" he muttered, hindered by a suddenly dry throat.

Andy handed him a water bottle as he struggled to a sitting position. "About four hours. Enough time for B to get her beauty sleep."

"Kiss my ass, A-Dub," mumbled Beth, sitting up on another cot and rubbing her eyes. "We got a phone call?"

"We do indeed." Andy reached over and punched a button on the phone sitting on the table. "Boss, you there?"

"I am," replied the voice of Allen Blaisdell. "Are the three of you in one piece?"

"More or less," Beth responded with a glance over at Harm. "Did you get our message through the embassy?"

"We did," Blaisdell confirmed. "But by the time we had a response scenario in place, we got a call from November saying you were inbound. For the record, O'Neill, when I authorized you leave to track down your partner, this isn't what I had in mind."

"Sorry, boss," Beth told him, in a voice that plainly said she wasn't sorry at all. "Rapidly changing circumstances."

Blaisdell harrumphed. "And Rabb, don't think you can skate out of the debrief on this one just because you're no longer on my payroll. Your ass had better be in my office Monday morning to go over this mess right alongside these other two jokers."

"Understood, *jefe*," Harm replied, prompting an amused snort from Andy.

"And the clinic at Langley will handle whatever follow-up you need on that shoulder. I doubt Bethesda would believe the story you'd give them about how you injured it. There'll be plane tickets waiting for you at the airport in Puerto Ayacucho later today. Since I assume you've got your alpha set of IDs with you, those are the names you'll travel with."

"What about Reina, boss?" Andy asked. "She can't stay down here, and she doesn't exactly have a passport handy."

"There'll be a ticket for her as well, but INS will most likely tie her up for a while. We'll do the best we can to grease the wheels, but they have their process, and God knows they can't stand to be diverted from it."

Andy's face fell as he realized just how many roadblocks the Immigration and Naturalization Service could conceivably erect between Reina and a green card. "Boss, they could toss her in a holding facility for weeks. Isn't there some way to get around that, after everything she did to help us?"

"Yes," Harm said suddenly, before the older man could respond. "Those plane tickets. Can you make sure we get routed through Miami on the way up to D.C.?"

Beth frowned. "Wouldn't it be a better idea to steer clear of the traditionally jam-packed ports of entry for Hispanics?"

"Not in this case. There's someone I can call who might be able to help. Boss, can you track down a phone number for me?"

He could hear Blaisdell curse under his breath. "I kick you out, and somehow I end up your answering service? All right, what's the name?"

"At the Miami INS bureau -- I need to talk to an agent named Janet Vitagliano."

The cemetery was small but well-kept, located behind the town's only church. Most of its occupants had been lifetime residents of the town, families who had never been apart in this world or the next. The lone foreigner who rested here had been accepted without question, however. A small bouquet of white flowers lay in front of the cross that simply bore the name *Elena* -- they had not known her last name, nor her precise age. But the Americans had told Father Domingo her brief story, and he in turn had told his town; and so they made an effort to honor her as one of their own.

Andy stood in the gateway to the churchyard, keeping his distance to allow Reina some privacy. The woman knelt by her daughter's cross, murmuring softly. Harm approached his friend quietly, not wanting to interrupt.

Andy glanced up and nodded at him in greeting. "How you doing?"

"Been worse. We shouldn't have any trouble with customs in Miami."

"How did you manage to get an INS contact down there?"

"I worked with her on a case a while back -- a juvenile Cuban refugee pulled out of the water by a Navy frigate. She made the right thing happen back then. I figured she would do it again."

"Remind me to send her a bottle of wine or something." Andy's gaze returned to Reina, and Harm could see the magnitude of his compassion for her. "I wish there was something I could do to make it better for her," he said simply.

"I think you're already doing it." Belatedly Harm recalled hearing a similar sentiment from Mac not so long ago, and the parallel made him consider something else. "You love her?"

Andy was startled by the question, but soon nodded. "Starting to think so."

"Then just be there."

Andy offered a small smile, then glanced down at his feet, shifting his weight. "I haven't really said 'thanks' for all of this yet." The three of them had never been big on 'warm fuzzies'; a word or two was usually all that was given or expected. Sardonic remarks had been made about them all being emotionally stuck on the same level, but there was more to it than that. They knew each other, and they knew instinctually when gratitude was present.

"You'd have done the same." Harm tried to provide him with an easy out, but he shook his head.

"I just haven't been able to figure out how to word it, you know? This wasn't Beth's responsibility, and it sure as hell wasn't yours. But there you both were, ready to do whatever it took, backup be damned. I have no idea what I would've done if I'd had to go it alone ... I swear, when I saw you two walk into that café -- I've never in my life been so relieved, or so glad to have friends like you."

"You're welcome," Harm said, fully meaning it. "But at the risk of sounding like a jackass, I'm starting to think that I didn't do this strictly for you, or for the principle of the thing."

"Yeah?"

He shrugged, looking out at a point far distant. "I don't really talk about the time I spent with the Agency. As soon as it was over, it was *over*. The topic gets avoided as much as possible at JAG, and a lot of that was kind of by design -- I guess I was embarrassed about having left the fold. But it's as much a part of me as anything else, and in a weird way, this whole thing helped me reclaim that ... maybe even take some pride in it."

"Glad I could help out." And the sarcasm was back. That was a good thing, Harm decided.

"Tough finding out that the world doesn't revolve around you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah." The joking manner faded as Andy saw Reina rise and move away from the grave. Harm clapped him on the shoulder and stepped back into the church to give them some time together.

"Asking if you're all right seems foolish," Andy began. "But -- are you?"

Reina nodded, not bothering to brush away the tear tracks. "She is with her father now," she answered. "Even if I cannot see God's reasons, it does not keep me from believing that He has them."

"I think we can see one of them. In a very direct way, Elena helped save all those people in the embassy, because she led you to find us."

Reina bowed her head, and after a moment, she reached out a tentative hand. Andy grasped it tightly. "We will leave for the United States soon?" she asked.

He nodded. "Don't worry. We've arranged it to make sure you'll be allowed in. And you won't be alone, no matter what. I'm going to stick right by you."

She looked up, and he could see in her fathomless eyes that she believed him.

"Then I am not afraid."

The flight back to the States was uneventful and, as a pleasant surprise, sparsely populated. Harm had secured some painkillers from the base's medical staff, and as soon as they hit cruising altitude, he was out like a light. Beth stayed awake a while longer, but eventually fell asleep as well, her head lolling against Harm's good shoulder. In the row behind them, Reina whispered a question in Andy's ear about the relationship between his two friends, and Andy's resulting guffaw briefly woke up both subjects of their conversation.

Stepping off the plane in Miami, the quartet bypassed the baggage claim, since they'd had little to bring back. With their 'alpha' IDs, Harm and Beth passed easily through Customs and waited on the other side for Andy and an increasingly anxious Reina.

"Where's your friend?" Beth muttered to Harm as their companions reached the front of the line.

"She'll be here."

The customs officer peered over his glasses at Reina, clearly mistrustful. "No passport? How did you even get this far?"

"We have special arrangements -" Andy began.

"Sure you do." The official reached for his phone, but a hard-edged voice halted his motion.

"Their special arrangements are with me."

All parties turned to see a short, middle-aged woman holding up a badge. "Janet Vitagliano, INS Agent-in-Charge for the Southeast Region. The young lady is to be released into my custody. My office will take care of all the paperwork you need."

The introduction and the badge were superfluous; her picture was framed on the wall. The officer blinked in surprise, then nodded and gestured for them to go on through.

Once through the gates, Mrs. Vitagliano caught sight of Harm, and the group was reunited. "What in God's name happened to you?"

Harm flashed her a wide grin. "Mrs. V, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were too young to be INS's top dog for the entire Southeast."

"Oh, can it, Commander -- you already know I think you're cute." The diminutive woman waved a hand at his sling. "What the hell were you people doing down there?"

"It's a long story, some of which we'll be happy to explain on the way to your office," Andy offered.

Reina looked at Mrs. Vitagliano as if her very life lay in this woman's hands -- which wasn't far from the truth. "You will let me stay?" she asked hesitantly.

The INS agent's motherly side shone through as she smiled. "There is a law that allows us to offer asylum to foreign citizens who aid in the national security interests of our country. I'm going to speed up the process as much as possible."

"Thank you," Reina whispered. "All of you."

"Least we could do," Beth replied. "But for the moment, at least, we have to say goodbye. Harm and I are traveling separately from you and each other on the trip to Washington."

"It's one of those Company precautions," Harm added. "I've been kind of visible in the media in the past, so the less time Agency employees spend in public with me, the better for them."

"No rest for the photogenic," Andy deadpanned.

Harm rolled his eyes and turned to Beth. "I'm on the 7:14 into National. You?"

"The 6:38 into Dulles, which means -" She checked her watch. "- I'd better get moving. See you all at Langley on Monday."

"Wouldn't miss it."

After some more goodbyes and a promise to send Mrs. Vitagliano a case of wine on his next TDY to Naples, Harm headed for his gate. Home by Saturday night. Not bad, considering all the messy ways this trip could have gone. He caught sight of a bank of pay phones and immediately changed course. "Michael Kallen's" credit card paid for the call, and he leaned against the wall, praying that he wouldn't get an answering machine. He was used to a relatively solitary life, but there were times when a person simply needed human contact.

The phone was answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

He exhaled. "Hey, Mats."

Mattie's voice went up half an octave. "Harm! Where *are* you? Dad said you couldn't tell him anything, and he looked pretty freaked out, which was freaking *me* out, and -"

"Breathe, kiddo," Harm instructed gently. "I'm in Miami. In about forty minutes, I'll be catching a flight home."

There was a brief pause as she drew in a calming breath. In a small voice, she asked, "So whatever it is -- is over? And you're okay?"

"It's over, Mattie. And I'm fine."

Another pause, and then the indignation that was every teenager's birthright returned. "Then why did you have to scare us like that, you big jerk?"

Despite himself, he smiled. "I'm sorry for that. I'll explain it to you as best I can tomorrow, when I pick you up. Wait -- actually, better have your dad bring you. I'm kinda not supposed to be driving."

There was a screech on the other end. "Haaarm! You said you were fine!"

"I am! I mean -- I just have one arm in a sling. Don't freak." Harm shook his head. The only kind of woman that seemed to enter his life: strong and rather protective. "How's everything going with your dad?"

"Good. Really good."

He read between the lines of that statement and fought back a wave of sadness as he realized that it wouldn't be long at all before he would be letting her go. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Suddenly Mattie's tone turned commanding. "You have to call Mac."

"Yes, I do," he replied agreeably. "Why are you telling me that, though?"

"I called her yesterday, hoping she had some clue about where you were. She said she knew a little but couldn't say, and she sounded ... well, a little freaked."

He winced inwardly, feeling a pang of remorse over the way he'd left things with Mac. There hadn't been time to think about it much before now. They'd dealt with each other in cool civility for the past couple of weeks, much as they had before the Paraguay debacle. Granted, he hadn't left under the same circumstances that she had, but this time she had reached out to make sure he knew that she understood before he left. That meant more to him than he'd first realized, and he needed to tell her that.

Plus, it would only be good etiquette to let one's best friend know that one hadn't gotten oneself killed in a half-witted scheme or some such. He was sure Miss Manners must have covered that at some point.

"I'll talk to her before the night is out," he promised. "Mats, I have to run -- my flight's boarding soon. I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

"Damn right you will. Thanks for letting me know you're okay. I love you."

"I love you too, honey. Night."

Harm replaced the handset and paused for a moment, considering his options. He could sneak in a five-minute call to Mac, but ... no. There were better ways.

Approaching his gate, he retrieved his boarding pass from his pocket. Michael Kallen would be traveling in seat 8-C for the last flight of his sporadic existence. When the Boeing 757 touched down at Reagan National Airport, Kallen would vanish, and Harmon Rabb would emerge, just a little more secure in himself and in his choices than he'd been before.

The knock at the door startled him -- he'd only recently arrived home, for the first time in ages, and he definitely wasn't in the mood for company. Harm set his guitar down and trudged over to the door to look through the peephole.

A woman with wild red hair and a man with glasses and a heavy five o'clock shadow stood there, wearing identical smirks. Harm shook his head and opened the door. "You two have officially gone off the deep end."

"Hey, what's the point of having access to the world's best disguise collection if you can't use it to visit a recently excommunicated friend?" Beth grinned at him, giving her wig an exaggerated flip.

"If Kershaw finds out you've been here, you're both gonna be out on your asses."

"He won't. This is just for tonight, and we know enough to watch ourselves." Andy took off his unnecessary glasses and pulled a bottle of rather ancient-looking bourbon out of a

briefcase. "Face it, Harm -- you were a damned good operative, and kicking you out the door without so much as a fare-thee-well from your fellow nutjobs in the air wing would be criminal."

Harm surrendered, moving into the kitchen to get some glasses. "They had to do it," he said unconvincingly. "I'm no good to the Company if half the Western world has seen me on ZNN. It's not like I'd be a terribly good analyst."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't keep the situation from stinking like yesterday's fish." Beth appointed herself bartender and began pouring.

Andy grimaced. "Like yesterday's fish? What are you, a Hollywood bit player from 1946?"

"This from the guy nicknamed 'A-Dub' despite his painful lack of street cred?"

Harm smiled, a little wistfully, at their dialogue. "I'm going to miss your sparkling repartee."

"To intelligent conversation," Andy declared, and they all drained their glasses.

"Do you know what you're going to do next?" Beth asked as she poured another round. "Not that you have to figure that out right away. For all the Company's downsides, they do pay well."

Harm shrugged. "I'll fly," he said simply. "Somewhere, somehow. I don't think civilian law is really for me, and there's no way I'm going to beg the Navy to take me back. I don't know. I'll think of something."

"You don't sound so sure," Andy observed.

Harm spread his hands wide, rolling his eyes skyward. "The world isn't exactly overflowing with options. I don't have a hell of a lot going for me right now."

"You have **you** going for you," Beth pointed out honestly. "That counts for more than you think."

"The redhead has a point. Things have a way of working out, especially for you. After all, you crossed paths with us." Andy raised his glass. "To forks in the road."

Harm looked from one friend to the other. Six months ago, he'd been at loose ends, just like this, and yet he'd found these two people. He'd dusted himself off plenty of times before. He'd find a way to do it again.

"I'll drink to that."

Mac turned on the lamp next to her couch and tucked her legs up underneath her. She'd put her Saturday to good use, doing all the chores around her apartment that she'd been putting off. A drill sergeant would have admired her brisk efficiency. But it was getting late,

after 2200 now, and all those mindless tasks were finished -- so there was nothing left to distract her from her growing dread.

It's only been two days, she tried to tell herself. You were gone a lot longer than that yourself, remember?

And that was really at the heart of the issue. This entire thing with Harm going to Colombia had dredged up a number of Paraguay memories that she'd only recently managed to deal with. It would never be fully settled in her mind, she knew, but she'd been able to stop being angry at half the world over the various blows she'd been dealt over the past eighteen months.

But that fragile balance relied upon the current stability of her life, and that stability in turn depended on Harm's presence far more than either of them had realized.

She'd wanted so badly to take him up on his offer to talk a few weeks ago, after Webb's deception had been laid bare. She couldn't begrudge him the hurt that plainly followed her refusal, or the distance that seemed to widen between them with every day she stayed silent on the subject. But something had still held her back, and though she couldn't put a name to that force, she was getting increasingly tempted to label it fear and be done with it.

Then, as she'd warded with herself over how to get past it, Harm's Agency friends had called upon him. Mac had forced herself to see that through his eyes for the first time, because she didn't dare let him walk away without some kind of armistice, the way she had before Paraguay. Still, that did little to ease her mind now that he was out there somewhere unknown and their chances of ever working it all out felt dimmer by the hour.

Keep him safe, she prayed once again to anyone who would listen.

Not long after, there was a knock at the door, and she tensed. It was too late for a social call, even on a Saturday, and she didn't get too many of those in any case.

A soft voice called through the door. "It's me, Mac."

Relief surged through her, and she flew to the door, yanking it open.

He looked bone-weary, the faint lines on his face deepened by forty-eight hours of presumably difficult work and little real rest. His right arm was immobilized in a sling and held gingerly against his chest, and he leaned on her doorframe with an almost apologetic expression. "Hi," he said simply. "Not dead yet. Thought you might like to know."

"I appreciate that," she replied quietly, stepping back to allow him in. "What happened to your arm?"

"First-class bastard with a tendency toward the melodramatic. Stabbed me right where he shot me a year ago, when he would've been smarter to just shoot me again." At Mac's unspoken urging, he took a seat on the couch. "But we found Andy and dealt with the threat he stayed behind to uncover. So I'll put up with being one-handed for a while."

"Let me get you something to drink. I can make coffee, or tea -- I might have cocoa." That wasn't what she intended to say, but then again, she wasn't really sure what she'd intended to say.

"I'm all right, thanks."

Unhearing, she moved away from him and into the kitchen, awkwardly rustling through her pantry. "Have you eaten recently? I've got some soup -"

"I grabbed a sandwich at the airport." Harm's voice took on a note of concern, no doubt surprised by the sudden, uncharacteristic mothering. "Is everything okay?"

Taking a deep breath, she closed the cupboard and turned back toward him. "I'm sorry. I have a habit of imagining worst-case scenarios. I think I spent so much of the last couple days thinking about what I'd do if you didn't come back that I wasn't really prepared for you to show up on my doorstep."

"I was afraid it was something like that." Harm's lips curved in that self-deprecating look he seemed to use so often. "Come sit down. I promise not to do anything stupidly bold until Monday at the earliest."

Willing herself to relax, she went to the couch and sat down at the other end, tucking her feet up as she had before.

There was a brief silence, and then both of them started to speak at once. Both tried to defer, and finally, with a hint of a wry grin, Harm went first.

"Once everything calmed down, earlier today, I had a chance to step back and really look at things, and I realized I'd stuck you in pretty much the exact same situation I was in when you left for Paraguay. Worse, actually, because you had some fairly awful memories of that as a reference. I feel lousy for forcing that on you, and you would have been justified in reminding me of it when I left. But you didn't. You backed me up and let me do what I felt I had to do without -- I don't know, excess baggage. I need to thank you for that."

"It was the only way," Mac replied, her voice low. "I was afraid we'd end up back where we were that night I walked out of your apartment and got on the plane with Webb. Or worse, that I'd lose you down there without us ever ... settling things. So I made sure you knew I understood, and then I spent the next couple of days actually understanding. But what I ended up understanding wasn't why you had to go -- although I *do* get that, and I promise I won't ever ignore or trivialize what you did for the Agency again. But what hit me between the eyes was ..." She waved a hand, grasping for words. "How it felt to be the one left behind. It's pretty miserable."

"Yeah, it is," he agreed. "I think we should try to avoid it in the future."

"And then there was the specter of Paraguay rearing its ugly head again, and that just brought me back to Webb, and the way he screwed with my head longer than should have been possible ..." She shook her head, hard. "I guess what I'm trying to say amidst this rambling is that you told me to let you know when I was ready to talk, and I think I need to make myself be ready. And judging from your comment about running into a guy who once shot you, I'm guessing that you have some things to talk through, too."

"That's only the start of it."

She nodded and met his gaze, resolute. "We haven't done much talking in a long time. Let's get back on the horse."

Harm looked at her, his eyes still holding a trace of the caution that he'd taken to using in her presence. She was able to see for what it was now -- a balance of deep concern for her well-being and respect for her wishes -- and that in itself was a step forward.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

The weariness faded away as he smiled. "In that case, I think I'll take you up on that drink."

*** THE END ***