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Spoilers: "The Prisoner," "Death Watch," "Answered Prayers"

Summary: When a critical figure from Harm's past resurfaces, he is faced with some difficult realizations as well as a choice.

Disclaimer: Having two authors means twice the fun, but when it comes to character rights, twice nothing is still nothing.

Authors' Notes:

From AeroGirl: Housekeeping stuff out of the way first. The story is set in the present (season eight), although there is no mention of Singer's current condition. Actually, Singer doesn't even get a cameo. (You're welcome.)

On a personal note - well, this was one highly entertaining experiment. I've never tried to write with a partner before, and I really started at the top, didn't I? It's truly frightening how much Valerie and I think alike sometimes - aero engineers of the fanfic world unite. This should have been difficult, probably, but instead it was a blast, and I think I'll be a better writer for it. Thanks, Val.

From Valerie: You know, we're probably the *only* two female aerospace engineers out there who are writing JAG fanfic... maybe any fanfic at all. I'm going to have to dub myself AeroGirl II or something. Anyway, I have to agree with AG—this was a blast. As for what I've learned from the experience, well, I've learned that it *is* possible for me to write a story that's not umpteen-bizillion chapters long. ☺ AeroGirl manages to pack an incredible amount of plot into few words, without sacrificing quality of writing. Definitely something I want to learn. So, enjoy. We certainly had fun writing it.

*What's past is prologue; what to come
In yours and my discharge.*

--The Tempest, by William Shakespeare

Chapter 1

She was just closing up her briefcase when the director knocked on the open door.

"Sir," she greeted him automatically, her eyes straying to the file in his hand. "Is that my life?"

"For lack of a better word, yes." The older man stepped into the office and handed the folder to her. "We renewed your driver's license, passport, and Social Security card, as well as opened a bank account in your name with a little bit in there to get you started again." As he spoke, she inventoried the folder's contents, finding her identity cards as well as a brand new checkbook and various official notifications from the bank and government agencies.

She nodded. "Thank you."

The director shrugged, the corners of his mouth curling upward. "All part of the package. This isn't the first time we've done this, you know."

That made her grin as a mixture of excitement and trepidation filled her. To finally be going back to her life...

A new thought struck her. "What about the Navy?"

This time his shrug was less encouraging. "It's not as easy to pull strings at the Pentagon. Their bureaucracy doesn't handle this kind of thing very well, so I guess you'll have to look into it once you're settled."

She chewed on her lip for a moment, her heart growing heavy with uncertainty. "I have a... friend who should be in the Navy's JAG Corps somewhere."

He nodded. "A lawyer's probably what you'll need. It helps to know someone."

She looked down at her shoes. Friend, she'd called him. The term was singularly insufficient to describe their relationship. She wondered how their reunion would play out. Would he feel betrayed? Hurt? Overjoyed?

"Here's your plane ticket," the director went on, handing her the typical packet stamped with a familiar carrier's logo.

She fingered it, both relieved and overwhelmed by what it and the other papers in her hand signified. "Well, I guess I'd better head for the airport," she said after a moment. Despite the many doubts that plagued her, she knew she was doing what she needed to—for herself, her family, and her future.

The director gave her an odd smile. "I have trouble thinking of you by anything other than your cover name, so..." He stuck out his hand. "Safe trip, Alison. Good luck."

She gave him a genuine smile as she returned the handshake. "Thank you, sir."

Harm breezed into work just in time to catch Mac headed the other way, briefcase in hand. They met just shy of the doors fronting the bullpen, a gentle collision that produced a brilliant cascade of sparks. Mac rocked back a half step, cocking her head in an expression Harm had learned meant she would rather have avoided him at that particular moment. He bit back a sigh. Why was it that every time they tried to have a conversation about the future, it ended up becoming an argument over who was responsible for the past?

"Morning, Mac," he said with forced cheer, holding out a hand in an effort to corral his partner and keep her from slipping past without some kind of acknowledgement.

She flashed him a look of annoyance. "Harm, I'm due in court."

"And that's reason enough not to say good morning to your best friend?"

She bit her lip. "Good morning. Now get out of my way."

After a moment he stepped aside, allowing her to pass. Casting a resentful glance over her shoulder, Mac brushed past him and pushed through the bullpen doors, her stride swift and angry.

He shook his head as he turned away. Maybe she was just in a hurry. Reading Mac's emotions was not on his list of well-honed skills. And getting her to open up about it when she was mad at him fell even lower on that list.

Suck it up, Rabb. There's nothing you can do about it right now. Maybe, in a couple of days, they'd be able to talk about it. He would just have to live with the sick knot in his gut until then.

He wandered back to his office, intent on catching up on some of the paperwork that seemed to reproduce at an alarming rate when left alone on his desk for any length of time. He managed to distract himself with work for almost two solid hours before something tickled his radar, making him raise his head and look beyond the confines of his office.

To his surprise he saw Mac standing in the middle of the bullpen, dressed in casual civilian clothing and looking around like she'd forgotten something but couldn't quite remember what it was. As he watched, Bud passed by, folder in one hand and cane in the other.

"Good morning, ma'am," Bud said, his eyes never leaving the folder he was perusing.

Mac just stared at him.

Bud paused. "Aren't you supposed to be in court this morning?" he asked, glancing at her.

Her mouth opened soundlessly, then snapped shut.

Harm rose from his desk, concerned by the odd behavior. She was supposed to be in court and Admiral Morris was going to have her butt in a sling if she didn't have a good reason for not being there. He headed toward his partner.

As he approached, Harriet joined her husband. "Good morning, ma'am," she told Mac with a bright smile, which immediately turned curious. "Did you change your hair? It's cute."

Harm hadn't really registered the difference until Harriet said something, but Mac's hair was different. A little darker and curled under a bit, like she'd worn it back when they'd first met.

Mac's hand immediately went to her hair, fingers twining in the dark locks in a girlish gesture Harm had never seen her use.

Truly concerned now, but not wanting to further provoke his partner given her mood this morning, he opted for a lighthearted approach.

"Did you decide to play hooky from court today, Marine?"

Mac whirled at the sound of his voice, and on seeing him, her face lit with a dazzling smile of joy and relief. "Harm!"

His brow dipped in confusion for the complete one-eighty her behavior had taken. "Yes?" he asked warily. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a warning voice had begun to chatter an indecipherable message of caution.

Mac's face fell by degrees. She stared at him with a pained, confused expression. "Harm, it's me."

Harm stared at her as the warnings in his head intensified. That wasn't Mac's voice. It was too high, too soft. It was a voice he knew by heart, one that sometimes still floated through his dreams, taunting him with could-have-beens.

In an instant Harm's world shattered, demolishing his heart with it. He watched, stunned, as everything he'd believed to be true unraveled before his eyes, all because of this woman. Sagging against the corner of a nearby desk, he managed to choke out her name.

"Diane."

Chapter 2

Activity in the bullpen ground to a near-halt. The staff pretended to be occupied with other duties, but everyone was curiously monitoring the bizarre encounter taking place in the middle of the room. While none of them had a clue what was going on, the complete and utter shock written on the features of the normally unflappable commander had made an immediate impact.

Bud was the only one with the knowledge necessary to figure it out, and once he had, he managed to ignore the apparent impossibility of it all and move quickly.

"Sir, ma'am," he said quietly, breaking through the powerful, tense gaze the two shared.

Diane blinked at him, the memory returning after a moment. "Uh, it's good to see you, Ens-ah, Lieutenant Roberts."

"I guess I can say the same, ma'am, although I'm really confused right now."

"You're not the only one," Harm echoed in a low, sardonic voice.

Diane's gaze returned to the commander's, once again locking with his in a palpable connection.

"I know this is a shock, Harm-

The commander's eyebrow rose in understated vehemence. "A *shock*?"

Bud knew that tone of voice. He shoved his own overwhelming curiosity away in the interest of protecting his superior and friend from broadcasting what would undoubtedly be a difficult conversation.

"Sir," he interjected quickly, "wouldn't you rather use your office to ... uh, catch up?"

Harm straightened, his typical cool demeanor snapping back into place. Mostly.

"Good idea, Bud." He gestured for Diane to follow as he led the way to his office. Once there, he opened the door for her, then closed it securely once they were both inside.

No sooner had the door clicked shut than the bullpen began to hum with murmurs. Harriet studied her husband's face and read something in it that she'd never seen before. Taking a guess, she asked tentatively, "That wasn't Colonel Mackenzie, was it?"

He shook his head. "No."

That left only one explanation, and her eyes widened. "Was it-?"

"I think so."

Sturgis wandered into the bullpen then, noting the commotion with a puzzled expression.

"Stand down, folks," he commented, coming over to join the two flabbergasted lieutenants. "What's the story in here?"

Bud hesitated, knowing how wrong the explanation would sound. "Sir, Commander Rabb had a fairly strong reaction to a visitor, and people are a little confused about it."

Sturgis's gaze flicked over to his friend's closed door, the puzzled crease between his eyes deepening. "Why, who was it?"

Bud gave him a helpless look. "That's the thing, sir. It was-I mean, it is-I don't even know if she has a rank anymore, but... Diane Schonke is here."

Immediately, Sturgis's eyes flashed, and he lowered his voice. "That isn't funny, Lieutenant."

"Sir, you don't have to tell *me* that." Bud's response was uncharacteristically forceful. "I was the one who found her body."

The commander stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. "I was at her funeral," he said distantly. "My father did the service, for God's sake..."

Bud braced himself for his next question. "Sir, not to be disrespectful in any way, but was there by any chance a closed casket?"

Inside the office, Harm just looked at Diane, still trying to reconcile two very different images in his head. She was here, standing in front of him with the same bright eyes and glowing presence he'd tried so hard not to forget: but she was also lying on that stretcher back in Norfolk, too, cold and lifeless. He'd been there, damn it. He'd seen her, touched her, even had thoughts of kissing her goodbye.

And yet, he couldn't chalk this situation up to a madman's twisted scheme or a concussion-induced hallucination. She was here. There was no getting around it.

"I'm sorry," Diane began before he could convince his mind to formulate a proper question. "Before I try to explain all this, I want to say that. I know how badly I must be freaking you out right now, and-

"Oh, you do, do you?" Something warned him that lashing out at her wasn't a good idea, but the shock of it all had paralyzed his sense of tact. "Do you know how badly you freaked me out when I opened up that body bag six years ago, too?"

This time, she was the one who went white. "You were there?" she whispered.

"It was my *case*!" At the horror and guilt in her dark eyes, his anger cooled somewhat, replaced by more confusion. What else didn't she know? What the hell was going *on* here?

"You were dead," he told her flatly, his voice beginning to waver. "I know what death looks and feels like, and trust me, you fit the profile. Now you come to me after six years-six *years*-and tell me that it was faked?"

Her lip trembled, but she held her ground. "Not entirely. I really was shot by that creep Holbarth. What happened afterward is something that I didn't have a whole lot of control over until after I recovered, and by then..." Her eyes pleaded with him for understanding. "I'll tell you everything. I promise. Just please don't lock me out of your life. Not until you've heard me out. There's so little left of the life I remember, and I've spent so much time wondering what I'd do if I could see you again..."

"So have I," Harm admitted, his voice barely audible.

Impulsively, Diane stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. After a moment of awkwardness, he closed his arms around her, evoking a long-buried memory, and he knew he couldn't just push her away.

She stepped back after a few seconds, looking away. "I probably shouldn't have done that."

Harm braced his hands on the desktop behind him. "I'm not sorry you did. But, Diane-" Even saying her name again felt strange. "-I'm going to need some time to work through all this in my head, and I don't know how long it's going to take."

"I know. I'm not going to ask you to go back in time. I just want-" She sighed. "I *need* your help. Whatever happens as a result, I'll accept."

"Okay." Some of the tension in his frame eased, and he looked at her with something akin to a smile. "You look good."

She smiled. "You, too. Older, of course."

He rolled his eyes. "Thanks a lot."

"I meant it kindly." Her scolding grin brought up a score of memories. "More secure-maybe even wiser-in both good ways and bad." A shadow fell across her face. "I suppose I'm responsible for more of the bad than the good."

He wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he chose to stay silent until she spoke again.

"Who did you think I was?"

Harm froze. "What?"

"When you first saw me, you called me 'Marine'-?"

Oh, Lord. "That's, um, complicated."

At approximately the same time, Mac came striding through the bullpen, a woman on a mission. No more messing around. If that self-centered jetjock happened to be in his office, he wasn't getting out until she could get her point of view through his thick skull.

Bud and Sturgis both moved to head her off.

"Ma'am, this isn't a good time."

She didn't break stride. "It never is, Bud."

Sturgis planted himself in front of her and placed a gentle restraining hand on her arm. "Mac, trust me, you'd be hard-pressed to pick a worse time."

She glanced down at the hand on her sleeve. "Knock it off, Sturgis. Let him prepare his own defense, all right?"

"It's not about that, Mac." Something in his voice caught her attention. A quiet reserve that said she could do real damage here if she wasn't careful.

She paused, staring into his dark eyes. Sturgis was a sensitive man, and a cautious one. A warning from him wasn't to be taken lightly. And yet...

And yet. Harm couldn't hide behind his well-intentioned friend. With a tight smile, she sidestepped Sturgis and headed toward Harm's office.

Behind her, the two men exchanged helpless looks, then turned smartly on their heels and made haste in opposite directions. They, like everyone who worked at JAG headquarters for any length of time, knew when to get out of the line of fire.

Mac opened her partner's door without knocking-and walked into possibly the most surreal experience of her life.

Chapter 3

Mac wasn't sure what she'd expected to find in her thickheaded partner's office, but another woman, honestly, wasn't very high on her list. They were past that-or so she'd thought. But the way the woman stood, hovering just within the boundary that defined Harm's personal space, branded her as something other than a business contact. His body language, too, shouted that this was a woman with whom he was intimate... if not entirely comfortable.

Mac gripped the doorknob until her knuckles turned white. *This* was what Sturgis didn't want her to interrupt?

Harm's head jerked up at her entrance, his face betraying surprise, guilt, and a kind of shell-shocked emptiness that alarmed her even through her anger.

"Mac-"

Whatever followed her name dissolved into an indistinguishable buzz as the woman with Harm turned around. Mac found herself staring at a mirror image of herself. A flesh and blood woman wearing her face, which paled in shock even as Mac's jaw sagged open. They stared at each other in stunned silence.

Harm finally broke the stalemate. He cleared his throat, sounding acutely uncomfortable. "Diane Schonke... meet Sarah Mackenzie." He gestured to each in turn. "Mac, this is Diane."

Diane. The name jolted Mac all the way down to her toes.

"You're supposed to be dead," she blurted before either courtesy or good sense could reassert itself.

Diane turned a pleading look on Harm. "I don't understand..." she managed.

Harm shrugged helplessly.

Finally, Mac wrestled herself under some kind of control. She closed her mouth, moistening her lips as she crossed the office, and extended her hand toward the other woman.

"Hello, Diane. Harm's told me a lot about you."

Diane stared at her hand as if it might suddenly turn into a snake. The moment stretched until Diane hesitantly extended her arm. Mac had a strange thought-wondering if she and Diane might not spontaneously combust when they touched, as if the two of them couldn't exist in the same universe. She twitched, resisting the impulse to snatch her hand back. Then Diane's hand closed on her own, smooth-skinned and a touch clammy. Her grip was weak, feminine.

They separated quickly, still staring, though Mac had the distinct feeling Diane was reeling even more thoroughly than herself. But then, Diane hadn't had any forewarning.

Only then did Mac remember the third member of their bizarre trio. Her head snapped up, centering on her partner's face.

"Harm?" She didn't need to say more than his name to convey the many levels of her concern. After all these years, and after all the hurt Diane's death had caused him...

His ever-changeable eyes, at the office usually blue in reflection of the navy blue uniform, had clouded to gray. He gave a minute shake of his head, his eyes pleading with her to let it go, at least for now.

Unable to tear her gaze away, she gestured toward the closed door at her back. "I should-I should probably go now. Harm, don't forget we have a meeting with Master Chief Zonne to go over his appeal at 1600." That was a couple of hours from now, but she'd needed something... official to say.

He gave her another nod and a lightning-quick smile that didn't go near his eyes. "I'll be there."

"All right, then." She mustered a pleasant expression for Diane, not knowing what else she could possibly say, and rushed out.

The door swung shut, and Diane looked up at Harm, her face registering the same kind of shock he'd worn only minutes before. "Did I imagine that, or did it really happen?" she finally asked.

"Imagine how I felt when I first met her. You'd only been gone maybe six months, and for weeks I was doing double-takes every time she walked into the room."

Obviously you got over that, she almost said, noting the familiarity the two officers had shared even in that brief, awkward exchange. But common sense quickly prevailed, and instead she asked, "You've been colleagues since then?"

He nodded, his expression neutral. "And close friends."

"Am I allowed to ask how close?"

His tone grew sharp. "I don't know if you and I are in a place right now where I want to discuss that."

Hurt flashed in her eyes, but to her credit, she didn't take offense. "I understand. I only ask because the reason I came here first is that I need legal assistance to get my life back in order, and I was hoping you'd help me. It's going to take a while to explain the whole story, so if you intend to turn around and relay it all to her, I figured I might as well get it over with and tell you both at once. Maybe she'd be willing to help, too."

"I can't speak for her, Di." The nickname slipped out almost unconsciously, and it brought a hint of a wistful smile to her lips. "I'll ask, but neither of us can really spare any duty hours. Unless you're somehow still in the Navy."

"I'm not. That's what I need assistance with."

"Then it'll have to wait until this evening. Do you, um, do you have somewhere to stay?" That didn't seem like quite the right question, but what precisely was one supposed to say to a person who'd recently returned from the grave?

"I have money. I got a hotel room and a rental car for the time being."

"Then come to my apartment tonight at 1900."

"Are you still on Columbus Avenue?"

He shook his head. "I moved away from there years ago. Nicer apartment, but a worse neighborhood." He scribbled his address down on the back of a business card. "I'll ask Mac to come, too, and we can get started on clearing all this up."

"Thank you." Relief was evident in her voice. She reached out to take the card from him, and he willed himself not to react as their fingers brushed.

A sudden thought occurred to him. "Have you been home yet?"

She hesitated, recognizing his meaning. "Not yet. I guess I was hoping that maybe you'd be willing to call my dad-you know, to prepare him a little."

Her wording didn't escape his notice. "Then you know?"

She sighed. "They didn't tell me until a week or two after it happened, but yes, I know. They sent me her obituary-it said that she was buried next to her daughter." She shook her head sadly. "Life's so bizarre sometimes."

Harm wanted to tell her that he'd spoken to Michael Schonke at Ellen's funeral, and that he'd seen a man utterly devastated by loss; first his daughter, then his wife. He wanted to tell her that she bore responsibility for some of the pain her father felt, the pain he himself had felt. But that wouldn't solve anything, and he suspected that she was already well aware of it. So he said nothing.

Holding up his card gratefully, Diane moved toward the door. Impulsively, he called after her. "Diane-who's 'they'? And while I'm at it, how exactly did you get in here?"

In response, she reached into her purse and handed him two ID cards. "Go ahead and hold onto them. I can't see myself needing them anytime soon."

She disappeared through the doorway, and he looked down at the cards. One had been issued by a company named Reliant Technologies. The second bore the logo of the National Security Agency. Both were in the name of Alison Marie Markham, and both bore Diane's picture.

Shaking his head, he followed her out into the bullpen. For damage control, he told himself. The staff had witnessed enough to send the scuttlebutt flying. It would probably be good to

introduce Diane to a few people before she got away. And that way, a little voice in the back of his mind told him, he'd have multiple witnesses that she'd really been there.

Bud was standing at the corner of his wife's desk, looking remarkably busy with the file in his hands. Harm caught up to Diane and, gently taking her elbow, steered her in that direction.

"Come meet some of my friends, Di."

Both Bud and Harriet looked up at their approach. Harriet studied Diane with frank curiosity, then slowly shook her head.

"Honey, I'm sorry I didn't believe you," she told her husband.

Bud shrugged. "That's okay, Harriet. It's one of those too-weird-to-be-true things that happens sometimes."

Diane glanced up at Harm, many thoughts spinning behind her eyes. She seemed to be taking in just how strange the situation was now that she'd met Mac. The image of Diane and Mac shaking hands-mirrors of each other even in their expressions of shock-wasn't one he would easily forget. For many years he'd tried to tell himself the uncanny resemblance was as much in his mind as anything else, but seeing them together shattered that bit of wishful thinking.

He shoved his reflections to the back of his mind. "Diane, you know Lieutenant Roberts. He came to work for us after he finished his tour on the Seahawk." The two traded nods and smiles.

"And this is his wife, Lieutenant Harriet Sims."

Harriet stuck out her hand with a bright smile. "It's nice to meet you, ma'am," she said.

"And you." Diane returned the smile with one of her own. It was a far more open expression than Mac's when meeting someone new.

"Colonel Mackenzie, I don't recall giving you the day off."

The foursome had been so involved in their conversation that none of them had noticed the Admiral's approach. He stood a few paces behind Diane, his hands clasped behind his back, his expression diffident.

All four spun to face Chegwidden.

"Uh, sir-" Harm began.

"Sir, this isn't-" Bud said at the same time.

Diane stepped forward, her soft voice cutting across both of theirs. "Sir, I'm not Colonel Mackenzie," she told the Admiral.

Chegwidden blinked at that. Then he turned his head toward Mac's office. Harm knew the exact moment he spied the colonel through her blinds. He turned back, pinning Diane with a stern stare.

"So who are you, then, Ms.-?"

"Schonke, sir. Diane Schonke. I used to be a lieutenant in the Navy, but... not anymore."

Chegwidden's face was hard to read. "What happened?"

"I died, sir."

He eyed her for a long moment. "You obviously didn't do a very good job of it."

A step behind her, Harm nearly choked.

"Uh, no, sir." Diane was starting to look exceedingly uncomfortable. "It's a long story, sir."

Harm decided he'd better step in before the situation got any worse. "Diane went to the Academy with Sturgis and me, Admiral."

Diane's head swung around in surprise. "Sturgis is here? I thought-"

He shrugged fractionally. "It's been a long time. Things have changed."

Meanwhile, Chegwidden had turned a less-than-happy stare on his senior attorney. Harm managed not to blanch.

"Now that I think about it, I seem to recall you investigating Lieutenant Schonke's murder, Commander."

Harm nodded, his throat dry. "Yes, sir." Though Holbarth had met his fate falling off a pier, the Admiral was perceptive enough to have realized the truth immediately; that Harm had had every intention of killing the man himself. It was something Harm was ashamed to admit, and he suspected the Admiral considered it a black mark on his character, if not his record.

The Admiral chewed his lip for a moment, then turned away. He turned back almost immediately, as if a thought had just occurred to him.

"The CIA didn't have anything to do with this, did they?" he asked Diane.

She gave him an odd look, but one didn't question an admiral. "No, sir."

"Apparently, it was NSA," Harm supplied.

Chegwidden nodded, looking just a bit disappointed. "Well, I suppose there had to be something Agent Webb isn't responsible for."

On the heels of that cryptic statement, he returned to his office. Diane gave Harm a questioning look. He just shook his head.

"Don't ask."

Chapter 4

Inside the sanctuary of her office, Mac had collapsed into a chair, shaken to her very foundation. She remembered well the chill that had run through her when she'd stumbled upon that picture five years ago, a mirror image of herself in a Naval Academy uniform. Actually seeing the woman in the flesh, looking into unfamiliar eyes that stared out at her from her very own face ... the word 'unnerving' seemed woefully inadequate, but it was all she had.

You're exaggerating, some rational compartment of her mind pointed out. *You're not identical. It's just an extremely eerie similarity ... made all the more so by the fact that she's supposed to be freaking dead!*

She could still feel the stab of anguish that had resulted each time her partner had given her a look meant for someone else. It had faded with time, but now it seemed as if that anguish was soon to become a constant presence.

And if it could unravel her so effectively, what must it be doing to Harm?

There was a soft knock on her door, and the subject of her concerns stuck his head into her office, looking lost. "May I come in, or do you want-"

"No, come in. Please."

Harm closed the door behind him and stood in front of her desk. "You okay?"

In this case, the right answer was not the truthful one. "Sure," she said, pasting on a calm demeanor. "What about you?"

The helplessness that flickered across his features worried her further. "I don't know."

Mac rose from her desk and came around to sit on the corner closest to him. "Harm, you saw her body. Didn't you? I mean, if I have yet another twin out there-"

"It was her." The quiet vehemence of his reply convinced her not to question. "I think I'm angry, and I'm trying not to be, but... I just don't know." He held up Diane's NSA badge for her to examine. "She says she needs legal help, and that she'll explain it all to us. I told her to come to my place at 1900."

Mac tried unsuccessfully to read his expression. "Us?"

"If you're okay with it. I know it'll be extremely weird for you. I should probably fill Sturgis in, so I'll ask him to come along, if that helps at all."

It didn't, since she knew the three classmates could easily go off on a nostalgic side trip and leave her in the dust. But that wasn't the point. "I'll be okay with it if you want me to be," she said carefully.

At that, Harm almost smiled. "I want you to be there," he said softly. "You've always been good at locating my sanity when I misplace it."

In spite of the surreal situation, Mac was warmed by the statement, and she gave him a wry grin. "You realize how close I was to throttling you earlier, right?"

He winced. "I know. We have a conversation to finish."

"It can wait. At least until after you've recovered from the shock of this whole deal."

"That could be a while," he muttered, half to himself. Abruptly, though, he straightened up, as if summoning his confidence. "Anyway, we've got a meeting, don't we?"

"We do. I'll meet you in the conference room."

"We're going to work this out, Mac. I'm not sure how, but when it's all said and done, all this is going to make sense, and things are going to be all right."

She smiled bravely. "I know."

That wasn't the truth, either.

Harm had been pacing the confines of his apartment, occasionally wiping his palms on the rough denim of his jeans, when the first knock came. He whirled, hands seizing into fists that he had to force to unclench as he crossed to the door. He reached for the doorknob, then paused.

Time to put on your game face, Hammer, he told himself. Grabbing the knob, he yanked it open. Sturgis stood in the hallway, his jacket balled uncomfortably in his hands.

Harm couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped him.

Sturgis flashed a smile. "I figured you wouldn't want to be alone with either of the ladies yet."

Harm wondered how much he was supposed to read into that statement, then decided to drop it. The last thing he needed at this point was to second-guess an all-around good guy like Sturgis.

"Thanks." He stepped back to allow Sturgis to enter, then turned toward the kitchen. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'm fine." Sturgis wandered inside while Harm ensconced himself behind the bulwark of his counter. He had a large pot on the stove.

"What's cooking?" Sturgis asked.

Harm glanced at the covered pot. "Vegetable soup."

"I didn't realize this was a dinner thing."

"It's not. The soup won't be ready for hours. I just... needed to chop things." Harm shrugged uncomfortably at the admission.

Sturgis chuckled and leaned his elbows on the counter. "Therapeutic vegetable massacre?"

Harm snorted in short-lived amusement. "Something like that."

They fell silent. Sturgis watched with interest, whether real or feigned, as Harm peeked under the pot's lid, then pattered about with a dishcloth, cleaning.

"Did you and Diane end up dating?" Sturgis asked suddenly.

Harm turned, his stomach twisting at the memories.

His old friend watched him sympathetically. "I know you two were only friends at the Academy, but I'd heard some rumors after that-" He shrugged. "You and I didn't cross paths for a while and then... well, Diane's funeral didn't seem like the place to indulge my curiosity."

Harm braced himself against the counter as resurrected hurt rose to the surface.

"Diane took leave... after my crash." He stared at the countertop, watching it blur in his vision. "She just... showed up one day, with a suitcase in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other, and said she'd come to cheer me up."

"Champagne?" He could hear the note of curiosity in Sturgis' voice.

Harm nodded. "To celebrate my 'triumphant return to the air,' she said." His voice broke on the second-to-last syllable. He gripped the edge of the counter until it cut into his fingers. "Until that moment, it hadn't even *occurred* to me that I might get back into an airplane-any airplane. Diane considered it a foregone conclusion." He straightened abruptly. "She was just like that. In less than five seconds, she upended my entire world, Sturgis."

"Sounds like all she did was turn it right side up again."

Harm ran a hand through his hair, feeling the newly trimmed stubble on the back of his neck. Mac had a thing about his hair when it was freshly cut. Every chance she got, she'd run her fingertips across those short hairs and grin impishly. It was one of his favorite expressions.

Shaking his head sharply, Harm forced himself to reorient his thought. He was terrified of the idea that he might get Mac and Diane mixed up somehow. "She did. I'm not sure I would have made it through the review board or rehab without her." He paused as the memories washed over him. "Somewhere in there, we stopped being *just friends*... but it was never official."

Sturgis regarded him for a moment. "'Official' as in...?"

Harm looked away. "Exclusive." He waved a hand vaguely. "I was here in Washington, she was in San Diego or deployed. We never connected as often as we wanted to, but when we did..." He looked away. "I guess we were too young and stupid to realize what we had while we had it. And then one day..." He snapped his fingers sharply. "It was gone, just like that."

For a moment, the gulf of anguish that lived perpetually in the back of Harm's mind threatened to rise up and swallow him, but he fought it back. He wasn't sure how long it took, but when he finally came back to himself he found Sturgis staring off into the distance, his expression profoundly sad.

He didn't get to ask about it, though, as another knock sounded at the door. Sturgis' expression cleared immediately as he turned toward the sound. "Do you want me to get it?" he asked.

"Yeah, if you would." Harm gave his friend a grateful look.

"Care to guess who it'll be?" Sturgis asked lightly as he walked toward the door.

Harm checked his watch, which read 1900 exactly. "It's Mac."

Sturgis opened the door. Mac raised one hand in a jerky wave, a strained smile appearing and disappearing in the blink of an eye. "Hi, Sturgis." She was dressed in chocolate brown slacks and a deep red sweater with a swoop neck. A slender gold chain decorated her throat. From the kitchen, Harm watched her, struck as always by her unconscious beauty.

Sturgis ushered Mac inside, his warm bass voice filling up the awkward silence. They walked over to the barstools lining the back of the counter. Mac tossed her jacket across the back of her usual chair and plopped her purse beneath it. Harm set a bottled water down in front of her. Their eyes met across the counter, and something inside Harm unexpectedly loosened.

"Hey, Mac." He smiled a real smile, happy to see her no matter what the circumstances.

She picked up the water bottle, twisted it open, and drank. "Hi, yourself." Her brief smile was both shy and warm.

A knock at the door shattered their rapport.

"I'll get it," Sturgis said quickly. He trotted dutifully to the door. Harm heard him greet Diane, and her subdued answer. On the far side of the counter, Mac turned to watch, her elbows braced against the edge. Sturgis stepped back, allowing Diane to enter. Harm blinked in surprise. Diane wore jeans, but her turtleneck was a deep red—the same color as Mac's.

Mac straightened abruptly as Diane walked into the room. The two women stared at each other. Then Diane raised one hand to shake a finger in Mac's direction.

"You know, I shouldn't be surprised at that. Red is my best color."

Mac stared at her, mouth working soundlessly.

Diane pressed her lips together, a flush rising in her cheeks. "Um... yeah. Listen, Colonel—"

"You can call me Mac." From behind, Harm couldn't read Mac's expression, but he could see the tension in her shoulders.

Diane nodded. "Okay. Mac. This is going to sound really strange, but would you mind if we found a mirror somewhere? I think I need to see us side-by-side before it drives me completely nuts."

To Harm's surprise, Mac nodded. "Me, too." She gestured to Diane. "Come on, there's one back here." As the men watched in bemusement, she led the way toward Harm's bedroom.

When they were gone, Sturgis turned to look at Harm with a faint expression of horror.

"What?" Harm asked.

"I'm just hoping you don't have a secret fantasy about twins."

Side by side, the two women stared into the bathroom mirror.

"My hair is a little darker," Diane said after a moment. Mac wondered if the relief she heard in her voice was real or just her own projection. She also chose not to mention the fact that she highlighted her hair.

"I'm a little taller," Mac added.

Diane looked down. "No, I think that's just the shoes."

Mac followed her gaze and had to agree. Diane had on casual sneakers versus her own boots. "You're 5'9"?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too."

They stared at their combined reflection. Diane blinked first.

"I keep thinking the weirdness will go away, y'know?" She gave Mac a rueful look.

Mac sighed. "I guess we're just going to have to get used to it." She paused, then forced herself to go on. "I used to wear my hair like that." She indicated the loose, swept-under curl that rested on Diane's shoulders.

Diane turned to look at her directly. "What made you change it?"

"Harm-" she blurted, then shook her head. "No. He didn't make me change it." She couldn't meet the other woman's eyes. "He just-I never knew who he was seeing when he looked at me. And then when I saw a picture of you, I understood why."

Diane stared at her for several long minutes, absently nibbling at her lower lip as she did. "Can I-can I ask you something before we go back out there? About Harm," she hurried to add.

Mac's gut clenched. "Okay."

"Is he... happy being a JAG? I was never sure." She shrugged uncomfortably. "He always said he loved trial law, but next to flying..." She straightened. "I saw he's wearing his wings again. He swore he wouldn't, but I always believed... eventually..."

Mac stared at her, realizing for the first time just how much Diane had missed. And for the first time since their bizarre meeting, she felt a ray of hope.

She found herself smiling. "Yes, I believe he's where he wants to be." He'd come back to JAG, after all.

As if her answer had lifted a weight from Diane's shoulders, the other woman nodded and turned back to the mirror. Mac's gaze followed and they once again studied their oh-so-similar features.

"You weren't by chance adopted, were you?" Diane cocked her head to the side, her expression quizzical.

Mac snorted. "Nope. You?"

"No." Diane heaved a sigh. "It was worth a try, though."