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Chapter 5

Harm all but leapt up from the couch when Diane and Mac reentered the room. He'd forced himself to sit down so that he wouldn't pace restlessly around the apartment, but he'd only succeeded in bottling up all his nervous energy and turning himself into a tightly coiled human spring.

"So," he began, with levity that was obviously and painfully false. "Did you find any differences, or are we going to have to issue name tags?"

Mac lifted an eyebrow. "Well, since none of you knows where my tattoo is..."

Sturgis cleared his throat. "Maybe we should name you Thing 1 and Thing 2, like in the Dr. Seuss books."

"I will not answer, Sam I Am," Diane promptly responded, eliciting a muted laugh from the others. Quickly, though, the room fell silent, and Diane drew a deep breath. "Okay, this isn't going to get any easier if I keep stalling, so I guess I'll just jump right into it. You all might as well get comfortable."

Mac waited uncertainly to see where Harm sat before choosing her own seat. Part of her wanted to sit down right next to him, clearly marking her territory, but she just wasn't sure how far her territory extended at the moment. He took the chair, though, leaving her little choice but to share the couch with Sturgis. Instead of taking the desk chair, Diane sat down on the floor, tucking her legs up underneath her.

"Let's start with what you already know. The night I was shot, I was going ashore to file a complaint against Commander Holbarth for refusing to address my charges of harassment. But that wasn't the only reason I left the ship. I also had a meeting set up with an agent from NSA, to discuss the position they'd recently offered me. They needed someone with my cryptology skills for a long-term mission in Southeast Asia, and they contacted me about a month before the *Seahawk* cruise ended."

She'd only begun this confession, but already Harm was stinging. Sensing his reaction, Diane rushed ahead. "I didn't have any intention of keeping that from you, Harm. It would have been the first topic of discussion that weekend, regardless of the sensitivity of the information. And honestly, I hadn't completely decided whether I was going to take the job. Until Holbarth stepped in and made that decision for me."

"He really did shoot you," Sturgis said, for clarification. Diane nodded, eyes cold, and her fingers touched an area just under her collarbone.

"If my sweater was a little more like Mac's, I'd show you the scar. He must have followed me to my car—I don't remember a lot of it. I didn't even know it was him until I saw the updated casefile a couple of years later." Her gaze flicked back to Harm, wanting to question him about that, but his hardened stare told her that now wasn't the time. "But just after it happened, my NSA contact came looking for me, and he called in a team of agency paramedics who kept me from bleeding to death. The agent in charge had to make a fast decision, and he decided that the opportunity to tie up some loose ends was too good to pass up. So they stabilized me, slowed my heart rate enough to fool whoever found me—"

"That would be Bud Roberts," Mac broke in. Diane's eyes widened, but she continued.

"—and switched their ambulance for a coroner's truck, and that was that. There were agents all over the place, pretending to be medical examiners or NCIS investigators, so they were always hovering around enough to keep any of the real investigators from looking too closely."

"I didn't want to look too closely," Harm said in a low voice, not looking at any of them. "As it was, five seconds after I saw you, I was already on the edge of the dock throwing up."

"They never told me you were there," Diane claimed, sympathy and remorse causing her voice to waver momentarily. "They just submitted a phony autopsy report and made me disappear. I woke up in an agency hospital two days later, and they gave me a choice. I could either go back to the life I had, where I wasn't sure of my future and where someone was apparently trying to kill me... or I could accept an assignment that would make vast strides in a critical area of our intelligence network. Since the damage to everyone I cared about had already been done, and since these people *had* saved my life, I agreed to take the assignment."

"Then you've been in Asia for the past few years?" Mac asked, trying to focus on the mechanics of the situation rather than the emotions.

Diane nodded again. "In Taiwan, working for a front company called Reliant Technologies. We deal in information technology and network support systems. A number of our customers are defense subcontractors who do business with the Chinese military. We got into their databases whenever it was safely possible, and as a result, we now have a much clearer picture of China's capabilities in terms of weapons development. It's an extremely well run operation. I was proud to be a part of it."

"So why did you come back?" Harm asked bluntly, looking over at her for the first time.

"We were all functionally undercover twenty-four hours a day for years at a time. You can only do that for so long before you start to push the limits of your cover." She sighed. "In my case, there was a man. Specifically, there was an American businessman who was fairly bright and wouldn't take no for an answer. I couldn't call the police on him without drawing more attention to myself. So I kept our director advised on the situation, and eventually he decided that I'd gone as far as I could without endangering the larger mission. I could have stayed with the NSA, but I wanted my life back, so I resigned."

"And you want to rejoin the Navy?" Sturgis asked.

"Well, to be honest, I don't know if I really have to 'rejoin.' I never officially separated from the service."

Harm snorted. "Your father has a folded flag in his possession. That's about as official as it gets."

Both Mac and Sturgis looked at him askance, put off by the unbridled bitterness in their friend's tone. Diane recognized it, though, and replied without commenting on it. "The Department of Defense doesn't do well with requests to change a service member's status. I realize that. I also realize that even if I succeed, I'll be coming back as an O-3, and I'll probably be serving under O-4s and even O-5s who are years younger than I am. But I still want to serve. It's the life I chose, and I still take a kind of refuge in it. I want to be back out at sea, especially now, with the world so uncertain. I can't imagine that the Navy would be so rigid that they'd refuse a qualified cryptologist just because they already played Taps at my funeral."

"Don't underestimate them," Mac said dryly. "No, I'm sure we can make some inquiries and find out if it's possible to get your status changed. But shouldn't your former superiors over at NSA be able to give you some help with this?"

"I wish. But in bringing me in the way they did, my chief even had to bend some of NSA's own rules. Officially, no one named Diane Schonke ever worked for the National Security Agency. From the moment I left the hospital six years ago, I was Alison Markham. Even letting two people deep inside the Pentagon in on my cover would have been two too many for their liking. If someone comes out and publicly admits to the DoD that a deception of this magnitude was perpetrated on the Navy, all the usual inter-agency skirmishes will escalate into a full-blown war, and that's the last thing anyone needs at a time like this. So any help I get from NSA will have to be extremely quiet. You see, that's why I need you—at least, as many of you who are willing. I need to sneak this through the tiniest backchannels possible to avoid a public confrontation."

"That's not going to be easy," Sturgis warned. "We all know a few people who can get things done, but they're not going to act without some kind of corroboration for your story. If you walk up to the Navy with evidence of nothing besides your identity, the first thing they'll probably do is make us charge you with desertion."

"Worst-case scenario," Mac added, her brow furrowing. "You were assigned to the Seahawk at the time of your... disappearance, and your battle group had just returned from supporting Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia. If the convening authorities wanted to get really nasty, they could try for desertion in a time of war."

Diane paled. "You don't really think—"

"Only if NSA completely cuts you loose, and even then it's not likely," Sturgis assured her. "Still, we have to be prepared. We all worked on a desertion case for a Jewish Marine last fall, and these two argued that he hadn't deserted in order to avoid hazardous duty. I think that applies here."

"Well, it didn't advance our case as far as we would have liked, but going from one branch of the U.S. government to another has got to look better than ditching the Marines in favor of the Israeli army." Mac turned to her partner. "And an attempt on a defendant's life is a pretty good rationale for a duress argument, wouldn't you say?"

Harm didn't respond, and the room took on an immediate chill. The three people there knew him better than just about anyone else on the planet, and his expression made it clear to them that he wasn't simply lost in thought. He knew he'd been asked a question, and he was choosing not to answer for a reason.

Ever the peacemaker, Sturgis chose to face the mounting tension head-on in an attempt to defuse it. "Listen, Di, none of us was in your shoes when all this happened, so we're not going to try and pass judgment on anything you did. Right, buddy?" When Harm remained silent, Sturgis kicked him none too discreetly in the shin. "Rabb. Speak."

Harm continued to focus his stony gaze on a corner of the coffee table. "I was always taught that if I couldn't say something nice, I shouldn't say anything at all."

Diane had expected him to be hurt, even angry. She hadn't expected this... coldness. "You don't even care, do you?" she asked, almost in disbelief. "I realize how awful this seems, but I thought you of all people—"

He gave a short laugh. "You're not in the best position to be talking about empathy at the moment."

"You think I haven't reconsidered that decision every day for the last six years? I didn't see that I had much choice! Someone wanted me dead, remember? You saw yourself what he did to me—"

"And now you see what that did to me. Does that make us even?"

She recoiled from the ugly tone. "Have you really changed this much?" she whispered. "I don't even think I recognize you right now."

"Of *course* I changed! I thought I'd lost everything that day, and it did change me, all right? It changed me into a person who was capable of taking vengeance, and believe me, that was a big step. Only now it sounds like maybe I had less to lose than I thought."

"Wait a minute!" Diane jumped to her feet. "Just what did you think you *had*?"

"I thought I had something worth holding onto. Something I wouldn't so easily have obliterated to go play spy games."

"Are you actually trivializing the concept of serving our country because of personal spite?"

"I'm not trivializing anything. I'm well aware that 99.9 percent of American citizens would probably approve and even praise your sacrifice. But all those people don't know you, do they?"

All I'm saying is that you chose that service over everyone who loved you. I know I don't get to decide whether that's right or wrong, but damn it, you don't get to decide how I feel about it!"

Harm flung himself out of the chair and stalked away from the group.

"What do you want from me?" Diane demanded hotly, trembling. "Am I supposed to *apologize* for not being dead? Is that it? I'm screwing up your tragic hero self-portrait or something?"

"I don't want an apology!" He whirled back toward her. "What I want is to know why I almost killed a man for something that turned out to be a lie!"

Silence descended heavily on the room. As they stared at each other, anguish burning white-hot between them, Sturgis rose from his seat. "I think we should go." He reached out to tug Mac's sleeve.

Fighting back overwhelming curiosity and concern for her partner, Mac reluctantly nodded and followed him. "We'll be in touch," she murmured in Diane's direction, then laid a hand on Harm's arm. "See you tomorrow?"

"Right." He didn't move, however, until the door had closed behind his friends.

"So, that discussion about the future," he began, in a more controlled voice. "The one we were supposed to have had that weekend at Norfolk. Since you'd been considering the NSA job, I'm guessing you weren't going to suggest that we make our relationship more serious."

"Your friend Maria might have had something to say about that," Diane fired back, still smarting.

"Oh, for the love of— I didn't learn to make Thai food and watch baseball for Maria, all right? I didn't spend four hours in the back of a freezing C-141 and break all speed limits on station at San Diego to pin lieutenant's bars on Maria! The only reason I ever spent any time with her in the first place was because I couldn't be with you, and we never pretended otherwise. What the hell did Keeter *tell* you, anyway?"

"Nothing I didn't already know. You weren't prepared to sit down and map out a future with me or anybody else. Why should I have rejected NSA out of hand, when all they were asking for at first was a trial assignment?"

The second part of that statement was completely lost on him as he struggled to grasp the first part. "What did I say or do to make you think I didn't want to think about the future? Why do you think I was so determined to see you that weekend?"

When she only looked at him, disbelieving, a new wound was torn open on his scarred soul. All this time, he'd held a certain image in his mind, a surprisingly romantic idea that had fate not intervened that night, everything would have fallen into place for them at last. That had somehow become his truth without him even realizing it—the lens through which he looked back on that chapter of his life. Only now, as that flimsy construct came crumbling down, did he see it for what it was.

"I see," he said dully, turning away from her. "I'm sorry. I must have... misinterpreted."

Beginning to understand, Diane felt a painful lump rise in her throat. She'd hurt him all over again, simply by not knowing how deeply she'd hurt him the first time. "It's not that I didn't want a future for us," she attempted to explain. "But you wouldn't have been able to make any major decisions at that point. You'd just started at JAG a few months before, and Luke had just died, and everything felt so up in the air..."

"You thought that I wouldn't be able to make a commitment, so you weren't even going to bother trying for one?"

"Harm, we weren't kids, even then," she said softly. "We'd known each other for more than ten years, and in all that time we'd never been able to get past a certain level. I couldn't find any reason to believe that things were going to change. Could you?"

His response was low, defeated. "Back then, actually, I could. Since everything else in my life had changed over the course of those couple of years, I guess I thought we could, too."

Tears brimmed in her large brown eyes, and she resisted the urge to reach out to him. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Me, too."

She tried to laugh, but it came out choked and awkward. "Really? I'm sorry for the lies, and for not giving you the chance you wanted, and for ripping your heart out and stomping on it. What are you sorry for?"

He kept his gaze focused on the floor, only glancing up at her from under his brows. "I'm sorry for not taking any of the other chances we had, and for throwing everything back in your face tonight ... but mainly, I'm sorry for being late."

"Late?"

He shrugged impassively. "If I'd come to meet the ship when you first docked, maybe none of this would have happened."

There was another silence—not as painful as the first, but not comfortable, either. "So where do we go from here?" Diane asked tentatively.

Harm shrugged again, trying to sound neutral. "We focus on the task at hand. We find a way to get you back into the Navy, and I guess we see where that takes us."

She lifted a hand to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, unsure of her next question. "Do you think we'll be able to be friends again?"

Before she could drop her hand, he reached out and caught it in his. "You shouldn't have to ask that," he said quietly. "I'm not saying it'll be easy, but as long as we both walk this earth, I'll still be your friend."

Scrubbing a few stray tears from her eyes, she squeezed his hand and stepped back to retrieve her purse. "I guess I'll talk to you tomorrow, then."

"You know where to find me."

After she'd gone, Harm stood in the center of the room, lost. In the span of a few hours, nearly every constant in his life had been torn to shreds, and the pieces seemed to be reassembling into something unrecognizable. Was he supposed to just buck up and move on in the same direction as before? How could he continue in the present when someone had altered the past?

Feeling more alone than ever, he reached for the phone and hit the memory button.

"Mackenzie."

Her calm, confident voice, so different from Diane's ... "Are you busy right now?" he asked, forgetting to identify himself.

Of course, he didn't have to. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Huh? How are you—"

"Do you need a friend right about now?"

He sighed. "I need *you* right about now."

Although he couldn't have picked up on it over the phone, that comment both elated and worried her. "Then don't question my methods."

"Okay." He slumped down onto the couch, too rocked by the evening's events to consider doubting her. "I'm so damn confused, Mac."

"You're entitled to be. They don't make self-help books for this one."

"But I ought to be able to handle it better. I ought to be happy, for God's sake. I thought she was gone, and now I have a chance to know her again. The thing is... what happened to her feels like such a big part of who I am, and I don't know how to undo that. I'm not even sure if I want to."

"It'll be all right. Unlock your door."

He frowned even as he moved to comply. "Mac, a Tomcat couldn't have gotten you here this fast."

"Just open the door, would you?"

He did, and a few seconds later, Mac walked through it, dropping her cell phone on his desk. She took one look at him, at the utter helplessness that marred his features, and immediately wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I was out front in my car," she confessed as he returned the embrace, willingly receiving the strength she offered. "Just in case."

"You're incredible," he mumbled into her shoulder.

She stayed for an hour, and in that time only a few words passed between them. She didn't need to be told, and he didn't want to speak. Yet that nearly silent visit would be his foundation for the days and weeks to come.

Chapter 6

The next morning Mac returned from her run to find Harm waiting outside her apartment, immaculately uniformed and leaning against the hood of his SUV, arms crossed. Her internal clock told her it was still a few minutes shy of 0700, which meant Harm must have gotten a *very* early call this morning.

"What's up?" she asked when she reached him.

Beneath the brim of his cover, his eyes were dark and serious. He handed her the water bottle she'd left on her kitchen counter along with the towel that had been lying beside it.

"Master Chief Zonne is dead."

Mac paused in the act of raising the bottle to her lips. "What happened?"

"Suicide, they think."

"But his appeal hearing is tomorrow."

Harm nodded minutely. "DC police are still investigating and the coroner needs to look at the body before we'll know anything for sure."

Mac took a swig of water. "How did he die?"

Harm straightened, uncrossing his arms. "Stuck a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The gun was his-a Beretta 9mm. They found the registration in his office. The trajectory and blood spatter were consistent with a self-inflicted wound. No signs of forced entry or struggle."

By the time he reached the end of his description, Mac realized he'd already been to the crime scene. She felt a flash of anger at having been excluded, but quelled it. On the heels of what had been a pretty ugly confrontation with Diane the night before, he undoubtedly needed some space. Riding his case over little things would not help.

"What about his family?" Zonne had a wife and two grown daughters.

Harm glanced toward the sun, which was just peeking over the tops of the nearby buildings. "His wife was in bed when she heard the gunshot. The daughters are both away at school."

Mulling her thoughts, Mac led the way up to her apartment. They'd met with the master chief just yesterday to prep for his appeal hearing. He had been an assistant to Rear Admiral James Rupert, Commander of the Navy Exchange Service Command, before charges of wrongful disposition of military property had ended his career. The evidence had been mostly circumstantial, which was why the jury had given him only a dishonorable discharge and loss of benefits, not jail time. Now, with new evidence coming to light that others within the NEXCOM organization had been involved in selling millions of dollars worth of goods out the back doors of several exchanges, Harm felt the master chief's claim that he was ignorant of the scheme just might carry enough weight to win an appeal.

Mac opened her door and walked in. "He was under a lot of stress." The financial strain of putting two children through college, trouble in the marriage, fear of the future. They'd both seen the marks of it on Zonne's face.

Harm followed her, laying his cover on her dining room table and running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, but why do it the day before the hearing? He knew we had a fair shot at having the conviction overturned."

Mac didn't have an answer for that one. She hooked a thumb toward her bedroom. "I'm going to grab a shower. Keep talking if you want."

While she showered, he stood just outside the bathroom doorway, filling her in on the additional details. Except for the timing, nothing stood out to her as cause for question.

"Do you really think there's a chance this wasn't a suicide?" she asked at one point.

"I don't know, Mac." She heard a doubtful note in his voice. "I guess I'll have to hear what the coroner has to say before I can form an opinion there."

Beneath the streams of water, Mac raised an eyebrow. She'd never known Harm to dither in his opinions. He followed his gut, holding to his instinctive conclusions until the facts proved him wrong, which did happen, though not all that often.

She did her best to cover the sudden uncertainty she felt. "I can talk to the wife while you see what the police have dug up."

"Sounds good."

Mac turned the shower off. "Have you had breakfast yet?" She squeezed water from her hair, waiting for his response.

"No, I've been going solid since about three."

Glad Harm couldn't see her smile, she shook herself into motion once again. "How does scrambled eggs and toast grab you?"

He paused a beat before answering, "Sure, that'd be great."

By the time she emerged from the bathroom, Harm had retreated to safer territory. Mac tossed on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and hurried toward the kitchen. She found him already there, efficiently cracking eggs into a stainless steel mixing bowl.

"Aha! Caught you."

He looked up with a half-formed grin. "I was just... getting things started for you." The smile gained power when she rolled her eyes.

"I volunteered to cook, Flyboy, so scram." She made shooing motions as she walked toward him. He backed away when she got close, raising his hands in mock surrender.

"I'm going, I'm going." He started slowly out of the kitchen, putting on a burst of speed when she grabbed the dishtowel and twirled it between her hands. They'd gotten into a wicked towel

war once, many years earlier, that had only ended because they'd both been laughing too hard to stand up straight let alone snap their towels at each other.

Back when our relationship was simple, Mac thought with a pang. Back before Dalton Lowne, before Harm left to fly-back when their friendship had been purely that, untainted by longing, or love.

Mac realized she'd just been standing there, dishtowel hanging limply from her hand. But if Harm noticed her lapse he didn't comment, and with a quick shake of her head she set about making breakfast.

Harm didn't stay out of the kitchen. As soon as she returned her weapon to its usual place on the oven door, he wandered back in and started pulling out bread, butter and condiments. Mac didn't protest. She liked his company and the closeness engendered by the tiny confines of her kitchen. The scent of his cologne mixed nicely with the warm smells of toast and coffee. She had hopes-probably vain hopes-that it would someday be a daily occurrence.

When the food was ready, they moved to the table where they ate in companionable silence. Eventually, Mac forced her thoughts away from her chaotic feelings toward her partner and onto the task at hand, which was the unexpected death of Master Chief Zonne.

"Have you talked to the Admiral about this yet?"

Harm scraped a last spoonful of eggs onto his fork and popped them in his mouth. "No. I figured 0900 was soon enough."

"Hmmm." Mac bit her lip as an idea occurred to her. "If you'll cover for me, I can stop by the Zonnes' house on my way in. It's only a couple of miles from here."

"No problem."

"Do you know if she has family to go to? Mrs. Zonne, I mean." Sheila Zonne had struck Mac as a woman whose life revolved around her husband and children. Losing one of those cornerstones would devastate her.

"I don't know." Harm shrugged, toying idly with his coffee mug.

Mac sighed. "I feel so sorry for her. Can you imagine what it must have been like for her to come downstairs and find her husband dead like that?"

Harm's head snapped up, his gaze centering on her with hawkish intensity. "I have an idea," he said quietly.

Mac's heart sank in dismay when she realized his implication. "Geez, Harm, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-"

He waved her off, the lines of his face somber. "Forget it, Mac. I'm sure I'm hypersensitive. Everything seems to remind me of Diane right now."

Mac had to fight not to let him see how much that statement hurt. She made a gesture indicating her face. "I guess I don't help, do I?" She could hear the traces of bitterness in her own voice.

To her surprise, Harm's expression softened, though the intensity of his gaze didn't fade.

"You don't remind me of anybody but you, Mac," he told her with such conviction that she almost believed him.

Harm was waiting for the coroner outside the double doors leading into the morgue when his cell phone rang.

"Commander Rabb."

"Hi, Harm, it's Diane."

Harm rocked onto his heels, his smooth-soled uniform shoes squeaking on the cheap linoleum. Every time he was reminded that she really wasn't dead, it shocked him all over again.

He cleared his throat, buying himself a moment to gather his composure. "Hey, Di. What's up?"

"I-" She paused, sounding inordinately shy. "I was just calling to see if you had any plans for lunch. I thought maybe we could... catch up some."

For a moment, Harm was transplanted into the past, to a time when a call from this woman was cause enough to dump whatever he was doing in favor of spending the time with her. Lunch, a weekend of leave... whatever it was, the invitation was always the first step in something wonderful.

He snapped back to the present, squeezing his eyes shut. "I can't. I'm in the middle of something right now, Di." Conflicting desires warred in his heart. "Maybe... maybe tomorrow?" He and Mac would still have to go before the hearing judge as a formality despite their client's death, so he'd be in the office. Thoughts of what Mac might say flitted through his mind, but he ignored them with determination. She would understand.

"Sure, tomorrow would be fine. Do you want to meet someplace?" He was grateful Diane hadn't suggested she meet him at JAG HQ. That would have been too complicated, which she seemed to comprehend.

Before he could formulate a response, Harm spied the city coroner rounding the bend at the end of the hall.

"Listen, Di, I've got to go. Can I call you later to work out the details?"

"Okay. Do you have the number of my hotel?"

"If I don't, Mac will," he assured her, and then wondered why it seemed like the exact wrong thing to say. He didn't have time to figure it out then, though. He flipped his phone shut and went to meet the coroner.

Gabriel Dunn was a tall, stoop-shouldered man with thinning blond hair and an equally scraggly mustache. Harm had first met him during the investigation into Jordan's murder and found him surprisingly easy to work with.

"Commander Rabb." Dunn shook his hand briskly. "You're here about my suicide victim, I take it?"

Harm nodded, forcing his thoughts onto the case. "What can you tell me?"

"Absolutely nothing." The coroner smiled at his startled reaction. "I'm running behind-haven't done the exam yet. I was just headed that way, though, if you want to stick around."

Harm wasn't terribly fond of autopsies, but he did want to see the body. "All right." He followed Dunn through the double doors and into a room smelling of death and chemical disinfectants. Master Chief Zonne's body lay on one of three examining tables. Harm studied it as the coroner bustled around him in preparation.

"Single gunshot," Dunn told him, pointing as he spoke. "In through the mouth, out through the back of the head." He turned Zonne's head to show Harm the gaping exit wound matted with blood and brain matter. "The Crime Scene Unit found residue on his right hand." He picked up the hand in question, examining it briefly. "But there don't seem to be any other marks or abrasions."

Harm stood back as the coroner began the formal exam, listening absently as he listed off basic statistics and observations into a hand-held recorder.

"Oh ho, what's this?"

The exclamation brought Harm to Dunn's side. "Found something?"

Dunn pointed out a small red area on the Master Chief's back, low near the hip. "*That* is a puncture mark." He probed the tiny wound. "Made by something long and very narrow, like a needle."

A fresh suspicion flared in Harm's mind. "That might explain why there weren't any signs of struggle."

Dunn glanced over at him, frowning thoughtfully. "I already sent a blood sample to toxicology. It shouldn't take too long to find out."

"Commander, Colonel, I take it things have gotten complicated with the Zonne appeal?" Admiral Chegwidden looked at them over the rims of his reading glasses.

Seated in front of the desk, Harm glanced at Mac. They hadn't had a chance to compare notes before being called in to the Admiral's office, so the information would be new to her as well.

"Yes, sir. It looks like Master Chief Zonne was murdered."

Mac's eyebrows arched eloquently. "What happened to suicide?"

"It's not so likely when you've got enough sedatives in your blood to KO a horse." Harm held out the folder he was carrying, offering the toxicology report to the Admiral. "The coroner found a needle mark, and according to the tox screen, the master chief couldn't have been conscious when he was shot."

The Admiral scanned the report, then handed it back.

Mac's expression grew thoughtful. "So whoever did it wanted it to look like suicide... and did a pretty good job of it, except they didn't know the coroner would have his blood screened? Doesn't sound like a professional."

Harm caught her eye, his own thoughts turning. "A smart amateur, maybe? They knew enough to make sure the gunpowder residue ended up on his hand, and the bullet's trajectory was consistent with a self-inflicted wound."

"He would have to have been a pretty big guy. Master Chief Zonne weighs, what, two-twenty? If he was unconscious, somebody had to put him in the chair."

"Could you do it?" Harm asked, wanting a better idea of how much strength it required. He knew he could move a man like that, easily, but that didn't help him with the other end of the spectrum.

Mac narrowed her eyes. "Not without making a racket. Mrs. Zonne was asleep upstairs, don't forget."

"So almost certainly a man."

"And one who didn't break in. So he either knew the Zonnes, or had access to a key."

"Or was skilled at picking locks, though that would blow the smart amateur theory away."

As they bounced bits of information back and forth, a picture of their killer started to form. It was a skill they'd honed both together and separately, and one they'd become quite proficient at.

Admiral Chegvidden watched the verbal ping pong until they started to wind down.

"D.C. police doesn't want to let go of the case unless there's reason to believe military personnel are responsible for the murder," he told them.

Harm and Mac both turned, giving him their undivided attention as he went on, "However, since they have to admit that might just be the case, they've agreed to share information with our investigators, which would be the two of you."

Harm nodded. "Aye, sir."

"Keep me informed of your progress."

Recognizing the dismissal, the two officers rose to their feet. "Yes, sir," Harm said as they came to attention, then turned toward the door.

"Oh, Commander-"

Harm turned back. "Sir?"

"What is Lieutenant Schonke's status, if I may ask?"

Harm felt his fingers clench at his sides. Why couldn't he find it in himself to be happy she was alive?

"Sir, she's officially dead to the Navy, and, unfortunately, she didn't work for NSA under her real name. She also didn't go to work for them in an entirely above board manner." He shrugged uncomfortably. "Proving she isn't guilty of desertion is going to be difficult without setting off an inter-agency war."

"She wants to be reinstated?"

"Yes, sir."

Chegwidden frowned. "Well, it's not strictly Navy business, but I think I can stretch the definition if need be." He pinned Harm with a stern stare. "Just make sure it doesn't interfere with your regular caseload."

Harm accepted the mild rebuke with a nod. "Yes, sir."

"Very well. Dismissed."

Harm left the Admiral's office with a slightly lighter heart. No matter what had happened between them, Diane deserved a chance to get on with her life. And he would do everything in his power to see that she got it.

Chapter 7

At 1130 the following day, Diane was sitting in a café near her hotel, feigning interest in the newspaper in front of her. Her fingers drummed anxiously on the table as she reconsidered the wisdom of this lunch date for the seventeenth time. Their last encounter had been strained, to put it lightly. But if she was ever going to be an actual part of his life again-in whatever capacity that might be possible-she would have to get to know him as he was today, not as the troubled young officer she'd known seemingly half a lifetime ago.

Harm walked in a few minutes late, offering a look of honest apology. "Got hung up in a meeting with DCPD," he explained, taking a seat across from her. "Hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Nah, it's fine. What's going on with the police?"

"Do you remember the master chief Mac and I were representing in the NEXCOM fiasco?"

"Sort of."

"He was killed early yesterday morning. Our appeal hearing turned into a murder investigation somewhere in the interim."

Diane frowned. "That kind of thing is within the scope of your duty as a JAG? Tracking down killers?"

"It's not like I haven't done it before." Immediately Harm wished he could erase that comment. She recognized its meaning, but before she could respond, the arrival of their waiter stalled the conversation.

As soon as they were once again alone, she leaned her elbows on the table. "How did you find him?"

"Holbarth?"

"Yeah. After all that time, after the report had been closed and forgotten, why did you go back to it?"

Harm gave her an uncomfortable look and shrugged. "I guess I never completely accepted the idea that it had been Lamm who shot you," he said, his gaze fixed in the distance beyond her right shoulder. "I tried for a while because it hurt too much to think about it going unresolved, but somewhere along the line it started to hurt too much to *not* do something about it. One day I went through all your old letters and I found a draft of your complaint to Holbarth. Then it all started to make sense."

A sudden wash of bitter anger filled her mouth. Holbarth had intended to take her life from her and though he'd failed in the literal sense, the rest was open for interpretation.

"It made sense to you, maybe, though not in a way any court would accept," she told him. "But I guess that's why you confronted him yourself. That much I read about in the report."

He fixed her with a piercing gaze. "How much else did you read about?"

She chewed on her lip, weighing her response. "I know Colonel Mackenzie was there in a borrowed Navy lieutenant's uniform. I know Holbarth fell from the pier and was killed." She looked away, her voice low. "I don't know whether you pushed him or not, and I'm not sure I want to know."

An old shadow darkened his eyes, hardened them. "I didn't. He panicked when he saw Mac and lost his balance. Whether I would have shot him if he hadn't fallen... I'm not sure I want to know that, either."

Diane studied the man who had once been her closest friend. The hardened core inside him, something that had been visible in brief flashes even in their Academy days, showed plainly now. The blue-gray eyes reflected little turbulence at his last statement. Diane didn't know if that was because he'd accepted it and moved on, or if he'd simply become that adept at keeping his feelings hidden. She suspected the latter, sadly enough.

Silence descended for a moment. Diane cleared her throat, making an attempt to shake off the grimness. "Okay. Besides that, tell me what you've been up to for the past few years." Her eyes settled on his ribbons. She still remembered how to read them, though she hadn't really taken the time before. Now, the DFC with its bronze second award tag grabbed her attention. "I have no doubt that you've been getting into your fair share of trouble." She raised her gaze to his.

Harm smiled ruefully. "Understatement. What do you want to hear about first? How Mac and I found out what happened to my dad? The tour I did on the *Patrick Henry* during the Kosovo conflict? The brother I met a couple of years ago? Or the Tomcat I ditched in the Atlantic?"

By the time he'd finished the list, her eyes were saucer-huge. But she nodded. "All of the above," she requested bravely. "Chronologically, I guess."

"That was chronological."

She rolled her eyes at him, nevertheless glad to see the return of the wry humor that had always been so characteristic of him. "In a little more detail, please."

Over the course of lunch, he recounted all of that and more, starting with Bud Roberts' first bumbling weeks at JAG and continuing up through the present. There were parts he glossed over, she could tell, but she didn't press. Nor did she miss the cautious way he treaded around Mac's presence in so many of parts of his narrative. Diane resolved to ignore it. Whatever relationship she was going to have with Harm would be forged by the two of them, independent of his relationship with Mac.

"...so I hear Mac say, 'Harm, come take a look at this.' I turn around, and there's none other than Sturgis Turner pulling up in my Vette!"

"No way. *Sturgis* took it?"

"To get the new top put on, as a Christmas present. All day I'd been going nuts about that car, and he'd had it the whole time."

Diane laughed, shaking her head. "You two have never been very predictable. I can't imagine what an office with both of you in it must be like."

"We're older and wiser now, remember? At the very least, one of the two." He smiled, a more open and familiar smile than before. "Anyway, you were hardly boring yourself. I'll bet you gave your NSA cohorts fits with your stealth sarcasm. It was downright diabolical how you could insult someone without them knowing it."

Diane looked suddenly thoughtful. "My NSA cohorts," she echoed. "You know, I worked with a core group of people for almost six years, and I don't even know most of their real names. It's like I got older, but my life stopped moving forward the day I left the U.S."

"You were still you, even if your name was different," Harm pointed out reasonably. "You didn't stop learning or gaining new experiences."

"But the things I missed... I mean, I was halfway around the world on September 11th. I can't possibly have the same perspective on it that you do. For the past year or so, you've been part of a Navy at war. I guess maybe I feel like I should have been part of it along with you."

His eyebrows knit in surprise and disbelief. "Do you really think that what you were doing was any less important? Maybe we're not in a shooting war with China, but that doesn't mean I trust their government any further than I can throw an F-8."

She gave him an odd look, born of conflicting hope and fear. "Does this mean you're starting to forgive me for going?"

The shields came up in his eyes. "Maybe. I don't know. I just know that I didn't really enjoy my visit to China over the EP-3 incident, and the time before that was sheer hell on earth." Seeing

her confusion, he stopped short. "Did I not tell you about that? It happened a couple of weeks before your cruise ended... maybe I was waiting to tell you when you got back."

Something about his expression chilled her. "Well, now I'm back," she said cautiously. "So tell me."

He cocked an eyebrow in a distinctly *you asked for it* expression. "Okay. When you first went to work over there, did you ever hear anything about a territorial dispute between Hong Kong and the mainland?"

"Matsu and Quemoy, sure. It was one of the first briefings I got when I arrived. The U.S. sent a maritime law advisor to help determine our position, and the Chinese went off and abducted the guy-" She trailed off as a terrible understanding set in. "Oh, God," she whispered. "It was you?"

Harm nodded impassively.

"What happened?"

"Apparently they were expecting me, and they didn't think much of the sailing trip I was using as a cover. One minute I was changing tack, and the next I was getting rammed by a Chinese Navy cruiser. I fell from the bow when the hull gave way. The next thing I remember is waking up in a very dark cell."

With dread in her voice, she asked, "What did they do to you?"

He shrugged. "A little bit of everything. Lots of drugs, mostly - they wanted to know what recommendation I intended to give the State Department, and they tried like hell to get it out of me. Only problem was, I didn't have any recommendation to give them, because I'd only just arrived. It's a good thing, since by the time the deal was made for my release I could barely remember my own name. I swear, it was forty-eight hours before I could think straight."

He'd recounted it all with a sense of detachment that told her more about the ordeal than the words did. Then, as if flipping a switch, he gave a small smile, and he seemed to be himself again. "Anyway, long story short, you don't need to justify your work over there to me. I'm not going to say it doesn't still hurt that you went, but I can understand."

"I'm glad," she said softly, feeling her face start to warm under his gaze. Faint warning chimes began to sound in her mind as she recalled how he'd first melted her with those eyes back at Annapolis. It had always been easier to think logically about their relationship when they were apart-when she hadn't had to deal with his eyes, his touch, his presence...

Sitting across from him now, she had to wonder-had things had been different, would she have been able to stand face to face with him and tell him she was leaving?

Harm noticed the tears starting to form and reached across the table for her hand. "Hey, what's wrong?" The touch sent a jolt through her, evoking a maelstrom of memories that were by turn joyous, painful, and passionate. If there had ever been a time she'd believed she'd gotten Harmon Rabb out of her system, she had obviously been mistaken.

Diane shook her head. "Nothing, really. I just... I think I'm starting to figure out how much I missed you."

Harm watched her silently for a moment before withdrawing his hand. "I have a suggestion. Let's make this our last venture into the past, at least for the time being. Let's concentrate on where we are now, and maybe we'll get through this with our collective wits intact."

Diane accepted that. "I think that's a pretty good plan." She squared her shoulders. "So, looking to the future- how should I go about convincing the Navy to take me back?"

"Well, I've done a little background research. You were assigned to the Second Fleet, so the convening authority for your Article 32 would theoretically be Admiral Wendland. His record on desertion and similar charges, like UA and missing movement, is tough but pretty even-handed. He also has a background in intel, so that's a point in our favor. The thing that concerns me the most is the possible turf war we might start. The Navy crossed swords with the CIA last spring- partly because of an op of ours, but that's irrelevant- and we ended up with a Senate hearing and a new SECNAV out of the deal. So we'll have to see how sympathetic the brass is before nailing down our strategy. I'm thinking about emphasizing the fact that you were in mortal danger at the time of your decision..."

When he saw the look of wonder on her face, he paused. "What?"

Diane smiled and shook her head. "Before you walked in here, I wasn't sure you even really wanted to help me. Now I see that you've already got a plan of attack and you're prepared to battle the commander of the Second Fleet himself on my behalf."

"It's my job, Di."

"I think your CO might see it differently."

That, oddly enough, earned her a faint smirk, which disappeared an instant later. "He's given me permission, so long as I don't prioritize this over the rest of my caseload." Harm looked down at the Academy ring he'd been twisting around on his finger.

The action took Diane back to the day he'd gotten it. She'd swiped it, holding it ransom in exchange for a crab dinner downtown. He'd stolen it back, of course, but he'd still taken her to that dinner. Who in their right mind would have thought on that day that seventeen years later, they could end up here, like this?

"I do want to help you," Harm said softly. "Very much. You must have known that I would, right?"

"I guess I did. But I'm incredibly grateful, all the same." This time, she was the one to reach across the table, brushing her thumb over his ring. "I haven't seen my class ring since the night I was shot. The fake coroners must have taken it off somewhere along the line."

"They did." To her utter astonishment, he reached into his pocket and handed her a small box. "It was returned to your parents with your personal belongings. They wanted me to keep it. I meant to return it to you the other night, but it slipped my mind."

This time the tears came in earnest, as she slipped the ring onto her finger. "I think this means I owe you dinner," she pointed out with a sniffle, vainly trying to dry her eyes.

In return, he flashed a grin she hadn't seen in years, possibly since before his crash. The power of it effectively pinned her to her seat, breathless, as he rose from the table. "That was the

precedent we set, I believe. Listen, I really have to get back. But I'll be in touch either later on today or tomorrow, all right?"

All she could do was nod and try to return the smile as he laid several bills on the table then vanished through the café doors.

You knew this was going to happen, she told herself silently. You knew you wouldn't be able to see him again without feeling like this. You'd better figure out a way to deal with it before it gets too hard to handle.

Harm's cell phone rang before he'd gotten three steps from the front door of the café. Shaking his head in an attempt to clear the huge mix of emotions his conversation with Diane had stirred up, he retrieved his phone.

"Rabb."

"Hey, it's me." Mac's voice was instantly recognizable, and edged with caution. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

Harm couldn't help a sour grin. He wouldn't tell her it was actually a relief to have something to distract him from his tumultuous thoughts. "Nope. As always, your timing is superb."

Her response was a noncommittal snort, but when she spoke again he could hear the smile in her tone. "I've got some information on the drug that was used to sedate Master Chief Zonne." The humor faded quickly as she explained. "It's pretty common-used in prescription sleep aids like Noctran and such. Detective Mills said Zonne didn't have a prescription, but guess what? His wife does. She's been using them for almost a decade." Harm raised an eyebrow as she went on. "They're checking now to see if any of her pills are missing."

Harm reached his car. He dug his keys out of his pocket and opened the door, juggling the phone from hand to hand as he did. "What did Mrs. Zonne say when you talked to her?"

Mac sighed in his ear. "Not very much, honestly. She didn't seem terribly surprised, but she kept saying he'd changed since his discharge from the Navy and didn't have anything to live for."

"What about his appeal?" Zonne had appeared more desperate than hopeful to Harm, but not unusually so for a man in his situation.

"She was pretty cynical about it. I guess that's not too surprising. I get the feeling a lot of their problems started when the master chief was court-martialed. Anyway, the DC police are bringing her in for questioning and I'm going to go sit in."

Harm started his Lexus. "Okay. I'm headed back to the office. I need to sort through who from his old chain of command is being investigated for wrongful disposition. If Zonne knew something about the scheme, maybe someone was afraid he'd talk."

He imagined Mac's casual shrug. "Well, that's a better motive than Mrs. Zonne's fifty thousand from her husband's life insurance. She'd have done better in a divorce, most likely. But, I'll give you a call if I learn anything interesting."

They hung up and Harm turned his thoughts, and his vehicle, toward Falls Church.

Mac got home around 1800 that night. Listening to Mrs. Zonne had been a depressing experience. The fifty-one year old widow had been fatalistically accepting of the idea that her husband had committed suicide. The concept of murder had shaken her to her core-at least, that was Mac's opinion. Since a number of Mrs. Zonne's sleeping pills were, in fact, missing, Detective Mills was less optimistic.

Mac slipped off her pumps by the door, dropped her purse and keys on the table, and proceeded stocking-footed into the kitchen. Before anything else, she needed some coffee. What bothered her more than anything was the obvious signs of failure that had marked the Zonnes' relationship. They were married-twenty-seven years-and they'd raised two children together, but they weren't happy. Sometimes it seemed like the happily ever after of fairy tales was a lie.

If it weren't for Bud and Harriet, I don't think I'd have any hope left at all. She smiled at the thought of her friends, happy despite all the challenges in their lives.

A quiet knock at the door brought her out of her reverie. She went to answer it, and was thoroughly startled to find Diane standing on the other side. Mac's gut knotted.

She forced a smile. "Hello, Diane. Come in." She stepped back.

Diane wandered into the apartment, looking around with patent curiosity. Her gaze lingered on the worktable with its collection of fossils, rock and bone fragments.

"This is nice," she told Mac.

"Thanks. Coffee?" She had to make an effort to keep her hands from clenching into fists at her sides.

"Sure."

Grateful for something to do, Mac went into the kitchen. She returned, a mug of coffee in either hand, to find Diane seated on her couch, hands clasped between her knees. Mac was somewhat reassured; Diane seemed as uncomfortable as she felt.

Setting one mug down in front of her visitor, Mac took a seat across from her in the chair. "So," she said with more confidence than she felt. "What's up?"

Diane looked up briefly. "I... need to ask you a question."

Throat suddenly dry, Mac nodded. "Okay."

"Is Harm seeing anyone?"

With that question, Mac's world ended. Pain, pure and unadulterated, crushed her chest, robbing her of breath. It had been hard enough to compete with this woman's memory. Against the flesh-and-blood, she didn't stand a chance.

"Ah... no. He's not."

Diane's expression brightened minutely. She toyed with her coffee cup, turning it this way and that on the little table.

"What about... the two of you?" She didn't quite meet Mac's gaze.

Mac stared at the wall. "We're just friends." The platitude rang a flat note inside her heart, mocking her with its discordance. That was no more true than it would have been to claim they were together. But there were no words to describe the limbo she and Harm had been trapped in for so long. Even worse, the woman sitting across from her might very well be the prime reason they'd never been able to move forward with their relationship.

"You've never been involved?"

Mac suffered a momentary flash of memory—a warm summer night and a desperate, passion-soaked kiss that she could still feel down to the tips of her toes. She shoved the memory away, exiling it to the dark corner that housed most of her dreams. That was the only place it had ever belonged. She unconsciously squared her shoulders.

"...No."

Diane didn't question the claim. She smiled, a shy, hopeful expression, and blew out her breath in a sigh. "Well, thanks for letting me be nosy. I didn't know who else I could ask."

"You could have asked Harm," Mac told her pointedly. Her first duty to him would always be as his friend.

Diane's cheeks colored. "Um, yeah. I just didn't want to... make things awkward for him if he was seeing someone. More awkward." She flashed a sheepish grin.

Mac watched her twin, her own feelings hidden behind an iron shield. "Do you really think Harm's going to want to pick up where you two left off?"

Diane snorted, her gaze growing distant. "I don't know. He's so different now." She shook her head. "But in a good way—stronger, more confident." She paused. "Happy, even. I don't think he was this content even before his crash."

Mac found that comment strangely warming. "He's found a lot of resolution since you knew him," she agreed.

"His dad." Diane nodded. "He told me about that. I'm glad he found out what happened to him."

Mac knew there was a good deal more to it than that, but decided to let it go. Against her will, her thoughts began to march through the possible future progression of Harm and Diane's life together, and a few things immediately jumped out at her.

"How does your reinstatement in the Navy fit with you and Harm?" she asked before she could consider the wisdom of the action. "You'd be stationed somewhere—possibly outside the U.S.—and out to sea part of the time. He's not going to be leaving D.C. any time soon, at least not without taking a career hit." *Another* career hit, Mac amended silently.

Diane straightened in her seat. "I... hadn't really thought about it."

"You probably should." Harm might very well have the opportunity now to make things work with the only woman he'd ever admitted to loving. And though it might tear her own heart into shreds, that chance for him was worth protecting with everything she had. "He deserves to know what you're offering, up front."

Diane pressed her lips together, eyes narrowing. But then she nodded and stood. "You're right. He does." She squared her shoulders. "And I will. Thanks for the good advice."

Mac climbed to her feet, feeling weary and cold. "You're welcome," she managed. She saw Diane to the door, then closed it behind her, leaning her forehead against the smooth wood. Unbidden, the tears slipped down her cheeks, accompanied by a familiar, rending sense of loss.