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### **Chapter 8**

The next two days were uniformly strained, though Harm was having a hard time pinpointing exactly why. Mac was in a foul mood that didn't seem to have any obvious cause, Diane had grown suddenly reticent about that dinner she owed him, and Sturgis watched him with barely-concealed accusation in his gaze, though over what Harm couldn't have said. It was starting to drive him batty.

"Lieutenant Sims, a moment," he called, seeing the familiar blond head passing by outside his open office door.

Harriet stuck her head inside. "Sir?"

"Come in and close the door." Harm closed the file he'd been trying to read, detailing the investigation into several of Master Chief Zonne's cohorts.

Harriet did so. She settled primly in one of the chairs before his desk, an armful of papers clasped against her chest. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." Harm leaned back in his chair. "I get the feeling both Mac and Sturgis are mad at me, but I don't have the faintest clue why. Is there something going on here that I've missed?"

Harriet's cornflower blue eyes widened in surprise. She blinked several times in rapid succession. "Isn't it obvious, sir?" There was just the slightest hint of censure in her voice.

Harm suppressed a snort. "Obviously not, Harriet. Enlighten me."

She pressed her lips together for a moment, then nodded. "All right, but just remember that I didn't get involved in this voluntarily."

Harm stared at her.

Harriet shook her head in a gesture of perfect feminine disgust. "It's all about Diane, sir. Now that she's back, everyone knows Colonel Mackenzie's not—" She stopped short, seeming to reconsider her words. "Well, it's just too weird, sir. You'd go crazy trying to maintain... whatever kind of relationship... with both of them." Cheeks flushed, Harriet looked away.

Harm bit his lip as a surge of anger welled up inside him. When he spoke, his voice came out in a dangerously even tone. "Lieutenant, are you trying to tell me that 'everyone'—very few of whom have any business speculating about my personal relationships in the first place—have arbitrarily decided that Diane's being alive means I have to choose between her and Mac?"

Harriet met his eyes without flinching. "Yes, sir, I'd say that's a pretty accurate summary."

"Is this your opinion, too, Lieutenant?"

Harriet drew herself up in her chair. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Wary, Harm nodded.

"I think it sucks, sir." Her vehemence startled him. "I'm not going to claim to be objective because Mac is my friend and the godmother of my child, and I don't know Diane really at all. But Mac doesn't deserve to be hurt." Harriet stared defiantly at him. "She's followed you into war zones and into all kinds of crazy schemes that I don't even know the details of, and—"

"Whoa, Harriet." Harm held out a hand to stop her building tirade. In the sudden silence, he stared at her, feeling oddly betrayed. "Why are you assuming I'm just going to turn my back on Colonel Mackenzie?"

"Because you've been in love with Diane since before any of us knew you."

Her response left him speechless. Harriet seized the opportunity to excuse herself and hurried out of his office, leaving Harm staring blankly at the space where she'd been.

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Harm wandered the confines of his apartment, his steps mimicking the restlessness of his thoughts. *In love with Diane*. The words had struck him like a thunderclap. He still felt dazed, his thoughts cycling endlessly through those four words.

The scary thing was, he didn't know if it was true.

Years ago, when Mac listened to his description of his relationship with Diane, she'd labeled it love, and he'd agreed. It had been such a relief to have someone take his scattered collection

of hopes and memories and put a name to them—something simple by which he could forever recall that part of his life, and a person who'd meant a great deal to him. The thought had comforted him in the days following Holbarth's death and had helped him lay his grief to rest at last.

But was it real?

Suddenly, Harm couldn't stand it any more. He spun on his heel, went to gather his jacket and keys, and headed out of the apartment. Maybe it was time to start finding out.

He knocked on Diane's hotel door with a good deal more confidence than he felt. Some part of his mind was screaming at him to run away before someone saw him there and the word could get back to Mac—because hurting her was one of the worst things in the world. Another part argued that, no matter how it turned out, facing his feelings for Diane—figuring them out once and for all—was something he had to do. And a third part simply wanted to be there in the hopes of recapturing something wonderful that, a cynical voice in the back of his mind reminded him, had been mostly in his head in the first place. After all, Diane had been looking at NSA before Holbarth came along.

Diane answered the door in faded sweats bearing the Naval Academy logo. She gave him a surprised look that transformed into a smile before ushering him in.

"Welcome to my humble abode." She made a grand gesture that encompassed the tiny suite, which boasted a small kitchenette in addition to a sitting room partitioned from the bedroom area by a half wall.

Harm looked around. A book on the table beside the couch and a couple of dishes in the sink were the only evidence of occupation. Diane had always had an obsessively neat streak—even worse than his own—which her Navy training had only intensified. Harm immediately found himself comparing the room to the cozy chaos of Mac's apartment and told himself to stop.

He adopted a casual stance belied by the tension he could feel thrumming across his shoulders and down his back. "I hope you don't mind me just stopping by."

Diane shook her head. "Of course not." She paused, and he realized she was just as uncomfortable as he was. "Um... can I get you something to drink?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you wanted to go out."

The moment stretched. Diane gave him a thoroughly startled stare, but eventually the expression gave way to a bright smile. "Sure, I'd love to. Give me a minute to get changed." She turned toward the bedroom, most of which was visible from the living room. Harm watched her for a moment, then turned away.

"So, is this the infamous convertible?" she asked when they descended to the parking lot, where Harm's red Corvette waited.

He chuckled as he held the door for her. "That's the one."

"I'll bet it's no substitute for an F-14."

The hesitation in her tone gave him pause. He turned to study her. Gentle compassion filled her eyes, mixed with curiosity. It took him a moment to remember: mentioning fighters to him had been a dicey business once upon a time. The wounds had been too raw, even years after his ramp strike. Now the memories were only that—rough-edged scars, the only reminder of wounds long since healed.

He grinned. "Not even close."

And with that, the uncomfortable moment broke.

"How often do you get to fly?" Diane slid into her seat. Harm closed the door, then went around to the driver's side.

"Not as often as I'd like, but since I invariably get into some kind of trouble every time I do, I suppose I can't complain. I certainly get enough excitement."

"Every time?"

He started to laugh. "I'm not exaggerating. My last flight, I clipped a weather balloon. The time before it I got to play tag with a nuclear missile. Before that was a single engine landing due to battle damage."

Diane was staring at him.

"What?" He turned the key. The Corvette started up immediately, settling into its wonderfully masculine purr. "It's true."

She shook her head, chuckling. "I know. You've been a trouble magnet ever since the Academy. Didn't you think it was odd that a straight-laced kid such as yourself would fall in with a couple of practical jokers like Keeter and I?"

"Are you trying to tell me you guys didn't really like me, you were just being opportunistic?"

Her laughter filled the car. "Of course we were. But then we discovered there was really a kindred soul underneath all that no-nonsense seriousness—" She leaned her head back against the seat, her eyes dancing. "And that's when the fun really started."

Harm couldn't help but smile. His little adventure in Laos as a teenager had stripped away much of his innocence. Diane and Keeter, with their constant joking, pranks and all-around troublemaking, had taught him how to find the fun in life despite that.

For a moment, Harm took his hand off the gearshift and reached over to clasp Diane's fingers in his own. It was a wordless gesture of thanks, but she seemed to understand. She squeezed his hand in return, her smile happy.

"So, where are we going?" she asked after a bit. The lights of the capitol flashed by outside the windows, bright streaks across the glass.

Harm shrugged. "No place in particular. There's a street in Georgetown with a bunch of little clubs and restaurants and such. Lots of live music, pretty good food—it's near the university. I used to hang out there a lot while I was working on my degree. What kind of music are you listening to these days?"

"Do you know any place I could hear a good Celtic ballad?"

He looked at her askance. "You're kidding, right?"

The corners of her eyes crinkled. "Of course I'm kidding. Why don't you surprise me?"

"Okay."

They ended up at a little bistro that served superb penne rigate. The music for the evening turned out to be acoustic guitar, which pleased Harm immensely. They settled into a corner table, comfortably private but with a decent view of the stage. Their conversation ranged across innumerable topics, none of them terribly important. It served only as a medium of contact, a way to enjoy each other's company.

Eventually, though, Harm glanced at his watch and concluded that it was time to bring the evening to an end.

"I hate to say it, but it's getting late, and I, at least, have to get up in the morning," he told her. "Mac and I are going to try to interview some of the people Master Chief Zonne worked with in the Navy Exchange Command. We'll have to get on the road early. Virginia Beach is a three hour drive."

"Sounds like a long day."

He nodded. "Yeah. But I'm sure we'll be back in time to meet with you and Sturgis for a couple of hours, at least." They had scheduled the evening to go over various strategies for approaching Diane's reinstatement.

Diane gave him a hesitant look. "Um... right. Look, Harm, about that—"

He paused, surprised by her sudden reticence. "Is there a problem?"

"No, no." She shook her head a bit too quickly. "I just—I guess I'm starting to realize that the Navy isn't my only option." Her brown eyes held a wealth of information Harm didn't know how to interpret.

"I thought you wanted to be back at sea," he ventured.

"I do." She paused. "I mean, I love what I do. I love serving my country." Her eyes took on a faraway glaze. "But I was recently reminded that there are other things in life, too, and maybe I... I don't know—maybe I want to pursue those instead."

"What kind of things?"

She shrugged, her gaze darting to his before jumping away. "Haven't you ever thought of *really* settling down—having a house and... a family?"

*With your looks and my brains...* Harm cleared his throat self-consciously. "Um, yeah. Sometimes."

Diane gave him a wry, deprecating smile. "Well, I haven't. Not really. But now I have my life back and..." She sighed, looking down. "I want to make sure I do the right things with it."

Harm reached over to give her shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "You will." He released her, clasping his hands together on the table in front of him. "You don't have to make any decisions right now. A lot of what we've been talking about doing will serve to tie up loose ends with the Navy whether you decide you want to be reinstated or not."

She nodded. "Thanks."

"Any time."

They made the drive to her hotel in comfortable silence. Harm offered his arm as they walked up the two flights of stairs to her room. Diane accepted, tucking herself against him and resting her temple against his shoulder. At her door, they paused. Diane slipped her arm free of his grip, but then turned to face him.

"Well... goodnight," she said softly.

Harm stared down into her upturned face—bright, warm eyes, full lips, velvet skin. Memories swirled around him, and, almost without thought, he bent to kiss her. Diane responded immediately, sinking against him in achingly familiar surrender. For just a moment the world went away, lost in the scent of her hair and the passion kindled by her touch.

Harm pulled back after a bit, touching his lips first to her mouth, then each of her eyelids in feathery kisses. Her name hovered on the tip of his tongue, longing for release.

...*Sarah.*

Sarah... Mac. Horrified, he clamped his mouth shut before he could utter a sound. Diane's head rested lightly against his jaw, her hair catching in the faint stubble there. Her hands had knotted themselves in his shirt and he could feel the softness of her breasts where they pressed against him. Things were so complicated with Mac—so deep and powerful and frightening. His relationship with Diane had always been simple. He wavered. It would be so easy to ignore the urgent warning that clamored in the back of his mind and give in to the here-and-now.

So easy... but wrong.

He raised a hand to cup Diane's cheek, tracing the line of her cheekbone with his thumb. "This isn't the right time to be making this decision, Di."

Disappointment flared in her eyes, but she nodded. "You're probably right." She shifted away from him, bringing a much-needed bit of separation. Harm forced himself to complete it. He released her gently and tried to smile.

"I'll see you tomorrow night?"

She brushed a lock of hair from her face. "I'll be there."

He took another step back as she turned to unlock her door. She slipped inside, closing the door behind her. Harm stared at it for few seconds after it clicked shut. Then, shaking himself, he turned away.

## Chapter 9

Mac was nearly out the door of her office when she heard the phone ring behind her. Muttering a low curse, she set down the stack of files in her arms and hurriedly reached for the phone.

"Mackenzie."

"Mac, it's me. Are you busy?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, Harm, I'm not busy at all. I stayed back here in D.C. and sent you off to Virginia Beach on your own because I needed a nap, not because I had three other pressing cases. My time is yours."

There was a brief pause on the line. "O-kay, I must have dialed the wrong number. I was trying to reach Sarah Mackenzie, but it sounds like I got the Sarcasm Hotline by mistake."

She blew out her breath in a sigh. "Sorry. Ensign Daniels is driving me crazy—keeps changing his mind about a plea bargain. What can I do for you?"

Harm's voice sounded distant, as if he was working something out in his head even as he spoke. "Just got through interviewing some of the NEXCOM headquarters staff, and I'm not sure what to make of it all yet."

Mac perched on the corner of her desk, shifting the phone to her other ear. "In what way?"

"Well, it's not a big shock that nobody really wants to talk to me. They're all convinced I'm here to broaden the wrongful disposition charges, so getting any new information out of the staff is like pulling teeth. But I did find one person who was a little more useful. Remember Petty Officer Davidson?"

"He was one of Zonne's office assistants. We were going to call him as a character witness, right?"

"Right. He was all gung-ho to stand up for the master chief, because he was absolutely certain that there was no misconduct in that chain. The kid's loyalty to Zonne was bordering on hero worship."

"Does he have new information for us?"

"Not exactly. In fact, he was so tight-lipped that I almost wasn't sure I was talking to the same person from last week. I think he's afraid to say much, which just makes me even more certain that the murder is related to the scandal. All I got out of him was a comment that, quote, 'the bond between shipmates sure isn't what it used to be.' What do you make of that?"

Mac reached across her desk for Zonne's personnel file. "It could be one of two things. Either he's just confirming that it was someone at NEXCOM, or he's being a little more literal and suggesting that it was someone the master chief had previously served with."

"Or both." Harm's voice took on a more focused quality, and she could hear the wheels in his head picking up speed. "Say the master chief came upon information that implicated someone

else at NEXCOM. If it was someone close to him, who knew him and his wife well enough to know what prescriptions would be in their medicine cabinet..."

"Yeah," Mac agreed. "Good theory, but no evidence."

"I'll work on the evidence part—I'm already down here. Something still doesn't add up with the sleeping pills. The coroner said the drug was introduced by injection, not orally, so instead of a sloppy fake suicide, we've got a sloppy frame job by our killer. I'm guessing he had the needle with him and ready when he arrived, and swiped a few of Mrs. Zonne's pills on the way out just in case the suicide ploy didn't fly."

"Well, it didn't, but that doesn't make our killer any smarter. They didn't get any prints off the bottle, did they?"

"Nah, we're not that lucky. Anyway, I'm going to wander down to the med center and see what I can find out about missing supplies. Needles are easy to steal, but sedatives should be a little better controlled. I know you're swamped, but if you can get somebody started on looking through ships' records for people who served with Zonne—"

"I'll put Coates on it," she assured him. "I don't want to know where she got her skills, but she's frighteningly good at tracking people down."

"Thanks. I'll probably be late getting back into town, so tell Sturgis and Diane not to wait around for me."

Mac had almost managed to forget that the four of them had planned to go over Diane's case that evening. The idea of putting it off didn't bother her in the slightest. Seeing Harm and Diane together inevitably made her start hyper-analyzing every look and comment that passed between them, which wasn't helpful to her state of mind. "Right. You'll call when you get back, though?"

There was a hint of a smile in his voice. "As you wish."

At that, she instinctively smiled back, rolling her eyes. "Whatever, sailor. Talk to you tonight."

After hanging up, it suddenly occurred to her that her partner was three hours away and tracking a killer who might now be all too aware of his intentions. Maybe it hadn't been such a great idea for him to make this trip alone.

Mac consciously told herself to stop worrying. She'd never known a lawyer with better combat instincts than Harm, save for possibly herself. He could take care of himself—he always did.

Well, almost always. She sighed and stood up, going to the doorway. "Coates, I've got a job for you."

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It was early evening by the time Harm left the medical center, and he was no closer to any answers. Out of frustration, he'd read the riot act to the lieutenant in charge of the drug lock-up after discovering that the records were inaccurate going back at least a month. The young woman had been appropriately contrite about the oversight, and nervous enough that he'd



eventually taken pity on her and not filed a reprimand. Still, it left him with no better leads than he'd had when he started.

*Take a deep breath, Rabb, and start over.* He headed for the O-club to get a bite to eat, and took the casefile and his laptop with him. Over a sandwich and some cold French fries, he went back through the information he and Mac had gathered throughout the past couple of weeks.

The homicide cops had been through Zonne's home computer, looking for any messages or files that might shed some light on who he'd been talking to recently. They'd copied everything in the inbox, trash can and 'sent-mail' folders, and Harm had gotten a copy of the whole thing just this morning. He hadn't been looking forward to going through the huge file, but his other options seemed to be rapidly diminishing.

Tuition statements for the Zonne children... probably not relevant. Regular correspondence from a sister in California, then a few messages of support from old Navy buddies... well, those might be more interesting. All of them seemed to be coming from the far reaches of the globe, though. Then there was a thread with no subject identified, coming from a free, net-based email account. Harm clicked it open and scanned down the screen.

*> Why don't we get together and talk this through? I can come up next weekend, or something. At least so you'll understand where I'm coming from. This could work out better than either of us thought. You just have to trust me, all right?*

Harm frowned, beginning to get a clearer picture of the situation. Maybe Zonne did have information on one of his colleagues, and that person had tried to bribe him into keeping quiet. When that failed, he'd taken him out of the way more permanently.

The message was dated two days before the murder, and the address was jr206@freenet.com. Tracking down the owner of the address probably wouldn't be much fun, but he might at least be able to get an IP address to match it. He was about to get out his phone to call Bud when it hit him.

J.R.

"Oh, man," he whispered aloud. If those initials meant what he suspected they meant, this case was getting stranger all the time.

He shut the laptop and hurriedly paid for his meal. His mind churned fiercely throughout the walk back to the medical center's parking garage, where he'd left his SUV. Sliding into the driver's seat, he was too preoccupied with the possibility he'd just uncovered to notice the shadow in his backseat—until he felt an arm snake around his throat and the jab of a needle at the base of his neck.

"Sorry, Commander," said a low voice as his vision rapidly faded to black. "You've reached your limit on questions today."

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A knock at the conference room door brought Mac sharply out of her work. "Enter."

Diane stepped inside, looking hesitant. "Hi," she began simply.

"Diane, hi. I left you a message that Harm was going to be late getting back. Did you get it?"

"Yeah, I did. I thought I might as well come by anyway, in case you or Sturgis had something to get started on." She looked a little embarrassed. "Okay, to be honest, I'm bored, and I was hoping that I might be able to make myself useful around here for a while."

Mac smiled tiredly. "I never turn down free help. Especially since Sturgis had to take an emergency meeting with a client down at the brig. Take a seat."

Diane moved over to the table, which was strewn with files. "What's all this?"

"Full crew complement for every ship our murder victim ever served on. A lot of them are too old to be computerized, so I ended up with a sequoia's worth of paper. Seems the man spent half of his thirty years on carriers, so we've got quite the list."

"And you're looking for what, exactly?"

"A link to someone on *this* list." Mac indicated the list directly in front of her, marked up with three different highlighters. "It's mind-numbing and infuriating, and you're welcome to join in."

"Sounds lovely." Diane slid into a chair across from her and opened the closest file. "Hey, weird. *I'm* probably on this list. I was on the *Truman* in 1992."

"No kidding? Remember any of these people?"

"The odds aren't good, but I'll give it a shot." She started to scan the list. "It's not like I was well-acquainted with the whole crew. We crypto officers weren't exactly the prom queens of the boat, you know? We were more like the math club."

"And the pilots were the football players," Mac theorized with a knowing look. Diane glanced up at her and flashed a grin.

"Something like that. Thought they were hot stuff, but they basically got issued one brain per squadron."

"Even Harm?"

"No, Harm's made a career out of being the exception to the rule, hasn't he?" Diane shrugged a little. "There's always one football player who gets straight A's, I guess. Make no mistake, though—he had an attitude. A lot of it was just for show, but he had it."

"I can believe that." Mac tried to smother the twinge of resentment that was beginning to surface. Hearing this woman explain to her what Harm had been like, as if she didn't know him at all... *But you didn't know him. Not then. That's fourteen years she has over you, like it or not.* "He really should have called by now. Let me just check in with him, all right?"

Diane lowered her gaze to the roster in front of her, and Mac wondered briefly if she'd sounded just a little too possessive just then. Dismissing the thought, she picked up the phone and dialed.

"The cellular customer you are trying to reach is not available..."

Mac hung up on the recording, unnerved. "I can't remember the last time he let his batteries run down."

"Maybe he turned his phone off?"

"Uh-uh. That phone hasn't been turned off since he got it."

Diane's brow wrinkled. "You don't think he's in trouble, do you?"

Mac shook her head, as if trying to clear it. "It's probably nothing. Let's give him a little while before we jump to that."

There was another knock at the door, and Jennifer Coates stuck her head in. "Colonel, I found something that might be some help."

Mac blinked. "Coates, you're still here? It's 1946."

"This sounded important, ma'am. It's not like I had a hot date after work." The young woman offered a self-deprecating smile.

"Come in. Diane Schonke, this is Petty Officer Coates."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," Coates said formally.

"I don't know if I rate a 'ma'am' at the moment, but it's nice to meet you, too." Diane offered a hand, which Coates shook. Mac watched the petty officer's features waver for just an instant at the incongruity of hearing two very different voices come out of two very similar faces.

"So what have you got?"

Coates blinked and quickly regained her composure. "Right. Uh, I got a hold of some of the master chief's performance reports. I figured that since a lot of the NEXCOM staff are officers, maybe the killer was his rater at some point along the line."

"Good thinking, Jen," Mac said sincerely, taking the folder she proffered. Coates flushed at the praise. "Now go home, would you? It's late."

"Yes, ma'am." The petty officer disappeared through the doorway, and Mac opened the folder. Diane looked over long enough to notice the name printed at the top, and her eyes widened.

"Zonne? As in Senior Chief Anthony Zonne?"

Mac's head jerked up. "Master Chief now, or at least until a few days ago. You knew him?"

"Kind of. He was our master-at-arms on the *Truman*. He's your murder victim?" When the other woman nodded, Diane leaned back in her chair, stunned. "Wow. It's not like I played cards with him every night, but he was a good guy. He took care of the security issues for the crypto group, and put up with a lot more from all of us punk lieutenants than any NCO should have to. I think I heard that he got picked up to assist the battle group staff after that."

Mac paged through the stack of EPRs in front of her until she came to one marked USS *Harry S. Truman*. When she saw the signature at the bottom of the page, a terrible truth clicked into place.

"Captain James S. Rupert," she breathed. "Now Rear Admiral Rupert, commander of the Navy Exchange Service Command. He was Zonne's CO at the time all the goods were disappearing from Navy exchanges."

Diane's dark eyes widened. "You don't think this admiral killed him, do you?"

"It's worse than that. I think he killed him, and I think Harm had to inform him that he'd be in town investigating this today." Mac stood up from the table as the color drained away from Diane's face.

"Oh, God..." To her credit, Diane didn't fall to pieces when the realization struck. She kept her balance and got to her feet as well. "What do we do?"

"I don't know, but I think I'm going to Virginia Beach."

"Then so am I." Mac spun around, primed to object, but the fire in the other woman's eyes temporarily silenced her. "Hey, this is Harm we're talking about. If someone could get the drop on him, they're obviously not someone to mess around with. You could use my help—if nothing else, I'm very good with computers and security systems." She flashed a tense smile as if acknowledging the fact that she was trying to sell herself as an asset. "Besides that, there's no way in hell I'm just going to sit around here when the best friend I've got is in danger."

Mac surrendered, gaining a grudging admiration for her companion. "All right, come on. We've got a long drive, and we're going to need it to come up with a plan of attack." A bizarre idea occurred to her. "Wait a minute. I just thought of a way to make this work."

Then she stopped dead, realizing just what that plan would entail.

## **Chapter 10**

Consciousness returned to Harmon Rabb with reluctance. Hearing came first, and for a while he listened to the sounds of someone moving about without really processing them in any meaningful way. Scent followed, bringing a briny, rotten-smelling tang to his nose. Eventually, some semblance of memory trickled back, and he forced his uncooperative body to respond.

It was a few seconds before he realized that there were bindings preventing his arms from moving. When he pried his eyes open, he found himself sitting in a metal chair, his wrists bound to a pipe that ran along the wall behind him. The room was dim and stark: if he'd had just a little more awareness going for him, he would have immediately identified it as a storeroom. As it was, his brain could only process the fact that he was cold.

"I should have figured I'd have to up the dosage for you, Commander," came a voice he knew he should be able to identify. "You're in better shape than Zonne was. Thing is, I'm running low on supplies, so I was trying to be conservative."

Harm lifted his head from his chest and focused carefully on the speaker. "Rupert," he managed, the name slurring slightly. "What-?"

"Loose ends," the admiral answered easily, with a casual shrug. "I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to find you poking around in this case. I'll admit that I didn't devote the proper amount of planning to taking care of the master chief. To be honest, I really didn't think it was going to come to that. I thought Tony would go along once he understood how much he had to gain by it. I guess I misjudged him."

As Harm's control began to return, so did his contempt. "I'd say the whole Navy misjudged you."

The older man rolled his eyes. "Full of misguided bravado, aren't you, Rabb? Must be the wings. At any rate, I didn't intend for it to escalate like this, but I can tell you right now that I'm not going to Leavenworth. So whatever you know or don't know is going to have to stay your little secret. I just haven't figured out what kind of accident you're going to suffer in order to ensure that. Got any ideas?"

Harm remained silent, knowing that none of the scathing epithets that were coming to mind would make much of an impact on this man. Before either of them could speak again, a signal from Rupert's cell phone shattered the silence.

"If you yell, you're a dead man," Rupert warned, patting the sidearm at his belt.

"Aren't I a dead man anyway?" Harm remarked acidly.

"Okay, I'll rephrase. If you yell, whoever's on the other end of this phone is a dead man." That shut the prisoner up, so the admiral reached for his phone. "This is Admiral Rupert. No, Colonel, you're not disturbing me at all. It is a bit late to be working on your investigation, though, isn't it?"

A hard knot formed in Harm's stomach as he began to realize who was on the phone. He clamped down on his emotions, but not before Rupert could pick up on the reaction.

"I believe Commander Rabb was interviewing my staff earlier today. Have you talked to him recently? Oh? Well, the commander struck me as a tireless worker—I'm sure he's knee-deep in files somewhere and forgot to turn on his phone." He paused, listening.

"I'm already on my way home, Colonel. If you'd like, you're welcome to come by my office first thing in the morning. The commander will probably be there as well, but if he isn't, I can show you what he's been looking at." He nodded. "All right, then. Goodnight, Colonel."

He clicked the phone off, enjoying Harm's struggle. "So how much did you tell Colonel Mackenzie?" he asked, almost rhetorically, as he strolled around the room. "Is she coming down here just because she couldn't reach you, or does she know something that should concern me?"

"I haven't told her a thing," Harm claimed—truthfully—but a little too quickly.

Rupert quirked an eyebrow. "You know, I thought you two were a little too close when you came down to depose me for the trial. Maybe that's how this should go—lovers' quarrel ended with firearms, or something."

"If she figured it out, what's to stop other people from doing the same?" Harm demanded, ignoring the jab. "Are you just going to keep killing everyone who tries to investigate this?"

"Won't have to. By the time anyone has a chance to cast much doubt on the circumstances surrounding your death, I'll be long gone. Four and a half million buys a lot in the Caribbean."

"Look, Rupert," Harm said, hating the desperation that was clearly audible in his voice. "You can stall Colonel Mackenzie long enough to make your getaway. She probably doesn't even have anything on you. You don't need to bring her into this."

Rupert watched him with detached curiosity, as if he were a museum piece or perhaps a circus sideshow. "If she puts as high a premium on your life as you do on hers," he replied, "I think I'd better."

When the needle came at him again, Harm didn't bother to fight it. It would be a losing battle in any case. Instead, he used his last moments of consciousness to hope fervently that this sick bastard was using up all of the drug supply on him, leaving none for Mac.

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"Will he notice that my voice is different from yours?"

Mac shook her head. "I only met him once. If he didn't pick up the difference on the phone a minute ago, he won't pick it up now."

"All the same, I think I'll try to fake it a little." Diane adjusted her Marine uniform, squaring her shoulders. "How do I look?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Well, yeah."

Mac stared at her doppelganger, both pleased and alarmed. A blow dryer and little amateur trimming had taken most of the bounce out of Diane's hair, and though it remained a bit darker than Mac's, the difference was hardly noticeable. She doubted anyone—not even her closest friends—would immediately be able to tell that it wasn't her.

Diane turned to look at Mac, unconsciously smoothing the green skirt with her palms. "What do you think Admiral Rupert's going to do when I—uh, when *you*—show up at his house?"

"Panic, hopefully. He's our only link to Harm." She paused. "Provided he really is the killer."

Diane looked down at her shoes. "Do you think Harm's still alive?" It was hardly more than a whisper, a desperate hope from a woman who couldn't bear to lose him. The fear in her voice echoed Mac's feelings so exactly that she sucked in her breath.

Closing her eyes, Mac forced her emotions back under control. "He's alive," she said with as much confidence as she could muster. *He has to be.* "And we're going to get him."

They made the trip down to Virginia Beach in near silence. Mac drove, while Diane fidgeted in the passenger seat. Mac had left a message for the Admiral on the off chance that, if things went *really* sour, he'd know where to start looking for them.

Their first stop was at a local Hertz, where Mac rented a dark sedan. Then, while Diane kept a cautious watch, she transferred her sidearm, extra clips, and the hunting rifle that usually collected dust in the back of her closet to the front seat of the new car. Her binoculars were slung around her neck.

"Now remember," she told Diane. "I'll keep you in sight the entire time. Try to keep the encounter low key." She stared directly into the other woman's eyes. "And if you get scared, get out."

Diane nodded jerkily. "I understand." She took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Have you ever done this kind of thing before?" she asked after a moment.

"Like what?"

"Playing bait."

Mac bit her lip. "No." She cracked a strange smile. "I've been shot, kidnapped, held hostage, ejected from an exploding fighter... but no, never bait."

Diane shook her head ruefully. "You and Harm are a matched pair."

Mac blinked, taken aback. She was certain it was a random comment, not meant to be deep or meaningful, but Mac couldn't help the warmth that spread through her. "I guess so. We certainly get into enough trouble together."

Diane looked up at that, her gaze thoughtful, but didn't comment. After a moment, she made a last adjustment to her borrowed uniform and smoothed the hair around her face. "Well, wish me luck."

"Good luck," Mac answered. She was surprised to discover she meant it, without reservation. Whatever else Diane might be, she was a good person, and a loyal and courageous friend. If she had to give Harm up to another woman, she mused, she probably couldn't have found a better one. Not that that would make it any easier...

Forcing the thoughts away, Mac went to the rental car and got in. One space over, Diane slid into the driver's seat of Mac's red Corvette. They shared a look through the windows. The most important thing was getting Harm back alive.

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It was very nearly midnight when Diane knocked on Admiral Rupert's front door. The highly polished wood glinted in the abundant moonlight until a light came on in the entryway, destroying the silvery effect. Footsteps followed the light, and then the door opened. James Rupert stared at her, his expression guarded.

Diane was grateful now for the years of covert operation. One thing she did know how to do was play her part.

"Admiral, I'm so sorry to bother you," she began in a fair imitation of Mac's throaty voice. "I know it's late."

"I take it you haven't heard from Commander Rabb?" Rupert stepped back, gesturing for her to enter. "Please come in, Colonel."

Slipping her cover from her head, Diane did so. She hadn't told Mac how good it felt to be in uniform again, even if it was the wrong color.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" She eyed his clothes, which didn't look like they'd been hastily donned. In fact, the dark jeans and heavy work boots looked pretty dirty, and for a terrifying moment she wondered if they'd gotten that way in the process of burying a body.

Rupert shook his head, smiling, but the expression never reached his eyes. "Not at all, Colonel. I'm a night owl by nature."

Diane accepted that and pressed on before the churning in her stomach could get any worse. "I appreciate you seeing me, sir. I'm very worried about Commander Rabb. He was supposed to call, and it's not like him to forget."

Rupert moved to close the door behind her. Diane swallowed convulsively, feeling suddenly trapped.

"I assume you've checked the VOQ and the O-club, et cetera?" he asked, ushering her toward the interior of the house.

Diane nodded as she followed him into a well-appointed kitchen. Mac had called both places while they were en route. "He had dinner at the O-club, but never returned to his quarters."

Rupert retrieved a couple of glasses from a cabinet, setting them down on the counter in front of her. He raised an eyebrow. "You sound convinced there's been some kind of foul play, Colonel." He sounded vaguely affronted. "I realize you're investigating a crime that, sadly enough, someone in my chain of command might be involved in, but it's barely midnight. What makes you think he isn't out enjoying the night life?" He cocked his head, his expression turning sly. "Or is it unthinkable that the commander might be enjoying himself without your company?"

The flush of anger that stained Diane's cheeks could only incriminate her in Rupert's eyes. But she didn't miss the deep irony in the situation as she replied, "My relationship with Commander Rabb isn't an issue here, Admiral. Very likely, *someone* in your chain of command is a killer, and that makes the commander's disappearance more than a little alarming." She took a deep breath, wondering if she was pushing too hard. "Now, is there anything at all you can remember that might help me locate him?"

Rupert rummaged around in one of the drawers, emerging with a snub-nosed revolver, which he pointed at her chest. "Actually, Colonel, I can take you right to him."

## Chapter 11

Harm had been awake for a little while when he heard the sounds of footsteps outside his makeshift prison. His head throbbed, sending red streaks shooting through the darkness



surrounding him, but the pain had been receding by degrees until it was almost bearable. He heard a metallic rattle—a chain through the door, he guessed—and then a blinding shaft of light speared through the dark. He flinched, instinctively turning his head away.

When he turned back, a jumbled figure filled the doorway. It immediately resolved itself into two as Rupert thrust someone into the room. Harm's heart lurched. The new captive fell forward heavily, landing on hip and shoulder with a muffled cry of pain. Harm caught a glint of silver at the collar before Rupert's movements allowed the light to sweep across his captive's face. Mac looked up at him, her brown eyes wide and frightened. She'd been gagged and her hands bound behind her. Her pantyhose were gone, her bare feet tied at the ankle. No doubt Rupert had known the slippery hose would give her some advantage in trying to wriggle out of her bonds. Mac's uniform skirt rode unseemly high on her legs, and Harm caught a glimpse of the long, bloodied abrasion on one knee from the hard landing.

With a wordless growl Harm surged forward, yanking at his bonds, but the ropes remained tightly wound about his wrists and forearms. Whatever else Rupert might be, he was a sailor who knew his knots.

Rupert shook his head in mock exasperation. "You're a hard man to keep unconscious, Commander. I'm going to have to start bashing you over the head if you don't settle down."

Harm took the hint and went still. "What are you going to do with us?" he demanded after a moment.

Rupert shrugged, seemingly satisfied with his capitulation. "I haven't entirely decided yet, but I'm working on it." He grinned. "Don't worry, I'll let you know." And with that, he left, taking the light with him. Harm heard the chain rattling as he secured the door, and then the fading sound of his steps.

Eventually, there was nothing but silence and the faint sound of water lapping against the shore. Harm could smell the ocean—a comfortingly familiar mix of salt, seaweed and fish that had accompanied much of his life. As his eyes adjusted, vague shapes appeared out of the darkness. The adrenaline began to fade, leaving him lightheaded.

"Mac? Are you okay?"

Her reply was an unintelligible muddle around the gag, but even that was enough to reassure him. His relief soured almost immediately. "Good, then remind me to kill you once we get out of this."

"*Mmph?*"

Harm couldn't help but smile at the note of outrage in her voice. "You heard me. Listen, Sundance, you're supposed to get me out of situations like this, not join me in them." His humor faded as he leaned his head back against the pipe to which he'd been tied and closed his eyes. "Besides, my tactical skills go to pot when you're in danger." He snorted wryly. "As I'm sure you've noticed."

"Marm—"

At the warning note in her voice, he decided to drop it. "Never mind, Mac. Let's just concentrate on getting out of here. You don't by chance have some Marine trick up your sleeve for getting out of these ropes, do you?"

He heard a muted rustling as she tested her bonds, then her shadowy form shook its head. Harm sighed.

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Mac prowled the expanse of ten-foot fence topped with concertina wire, searching for a way into the marina. Rupert—with Diane—had driven in through a cardkey operated security gate, making it impossible for her to follow in her vehicle. Every few steps she muttered another curse. The 911 emergency operator she'd talked to was probably still checking her identity. After that, she could hope for reinforcements, but by then both Harm and Diane might be dead.

*I can't believe I was such an idiot!* The bolt cutters, which resided in the toolbox with her tire changing and emergency roadside equipment, remained in the trunk of her Corvette. Beyond the fence, a number of buildings—more like sturdy sheds—marched in rows down to the water, where piers and boathouses intermingled. The marina housed several hundred boats, Mac guessed. They bobbed and swayed at their moorings in the gentle Virginia Beach tide. The security for a civilian marina seemed a little extreme until she recalled that they were in the same channel as the Newport News shipyards, where she knew the *Stennis* was currently in dry dock for overhaul.

Finding no better solution to her dilemma, she went back to the rental car and pulled one of the floor mats out of the front seat. She was going to have to climb the fence, despite the coils of razor wire. Hopefully the heavy rubber mat would be enough to keep her from getting too badly mangled.

Slinging the mat over one shoulder, she began to climb. The chain links dug into the joints of her fingers. She scrabbled for purchase with the thick toes of her boots, making the fence jingle. Reaching the top, she awkwardly braced herself, then slung the mat off her shoulder and through the coils. That cleared a narrow passage through which to thread her head and shoulders. A sharp barb caught her shoulder as she shoved herself forward. She gasped, wriggling to try to free the painful hook from her skin, but was unsuccessful. Finally, she gritted her teeth and let her weight carry her headfirst over the fence. The barb traced a line of fire across her back as she tumbled down the other side.

Mac tucked her shoulder as she fell. She landed hard, but rolled to her feet, catching at the chain links with one hand to steady herself. She flexed her shoulders to assess the injury. The motion burned, but she didn't think it was serious.

Quickly checking her sidearm, she set off in the general direction Rupert had gone.

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"Where are we going?" Harm asked as Admiral Rupert jabbed him in the back with the muzzle of his gun. The weapon immediately returned to its usual position—pressed against Mac's temple. Rupert had the other arm wrapped around her slender waist, nearly lifting her off her feet with each step as he dragged her along. He'd crossed her ankles before trussing them, making it impossible for her to manage more than an awkward hop. Harm's ankle bonds resembled a horse hobble—a figure eight of rope that allowed him to move forward in little mincing steps.

They emerged from the storage building into a brightly moonlit night. Ahead of them, Harm could see a row of small boathouses that undoubtedly sheltered pleasure boats or perhaps

personal watercraft. They weren't very big. Beyond them, the ocean lay black and mysterious, broken only by an occasional silvered ripple.

"Keep moving," Rupert said, poking him once more. Harm complied for lack of any better alternative. Mac's lack of resistance left him feeling deeply uncertain. He'd expected her to turn into a polecat as soon as Rupert freed Harm from the chair where he'd been bound, providing him an opportunity to catch the admiral off guard. But she remained docile through the entire process, and even now endured Rupert's rough handling with no more bravado than an occasional grunt of pain. Without her active cooperation, Harm didn't think they stood a chance of getting away. He could only hope she was trying to lull their captor into a false sense of security, and to that end he tried to keep an eye out, watching for the circumstances she would pick to make her move.

Their little caravan proceeded to the door of an older and rather rickety-looking boathouse, its boards warped and weathered. Rupert released Mac, allowing her to slump against the wall while he knelt to light a small kerosene lamp. Raising it awkwardly in his gun hand, he worked the combination lock that secured the door. Harm watched, memorizing the combination in case it might do him some good later on.

For a moment, he glanced past Rupert toward Mac, hoping to catch her eye, but her gaze was cast groundward. He growled to himself in silent frustration. *Come on, Mac! What's wrong with you?*

Rupert swung the door open. Harm was immediately overwhelmed by the thick chemical smell that rolled out of the building. Polyurethane. The owner of the boathouse must have been waterproofing recently.

Switching the lamp to his other hand, Rupert leveled the gun at Harm and gestured for him to enter. Harm did so, hearing the hollow echo as his shoes moved from dirt to wooden boards. The floor of the boathouse extended about eight feet past the edge of the water with a cutout that housed a small speedboat. The far wall had a large doorway cut in it for the boat to pass, which was covered by an ordinary garage door. The tracks arched over his head, with a garage door opener mounted just beyond. Harm wondered for a moment if Rupert planned to take them out and drown them.

He walked forward a few feet and turned, just in time to see Rupert shove Mac inside. She hopped once then fell headlong into him, knocking him off his feet as well. Harm landed on his back with Mac atop him. The rough wood dug painfully into his knuckles and elbows, eliciting a hiss of pain. He lifted his head to look at Rupert.

Highlighted by the light from the lamp, the admiral's face looked somewhat demonic. Then Rupert grinned, adding to the impression. "I gave up on the lover's quarrel idea, I'm afraid. Too hard to make convincing." He shrugged. "A tragic accident isn't nearly as poetic, but I'm afraid it will have to do. A shame you two had to pick such a dangerous place for some time alone."

With that, he raised the lantern, turning it on its side, then dropped it onto a small pile of open cans that sat just inside the door. The lantern's glass shattered. The flame inside guttered, but then flared as it touched the remaining waterproofing inside the cans. A brilliant flame shot upward like a torch. It transferred almost immediately to the nearby wall, climbing quickly toward the ceiling.

Satisfied, Rupert withdrew, closing the door behind him. A moment later, Harm heard a steady pounding at the base of the door and realized with a sense of horror that the other man had wedged something under the door to keep it from being opened.

Through her gag, Mac uttered a muffled squeak of pure terror. Harm stared at her, his shock giving way to anger. "Snap out of it, Marine!"

Harm raised his torso abruptly, dumping her off his chest. "Roll over, Mac. I need to get to the ropes on your arms."

She did so, while Harm struggled to mirror her posture and scoot close enough to catch the ropes in his fingers. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the flames spreading across the ceiling beams like some kind of malevolent creature. Smoke grayed the air, but so far it was thin enough down near the floor to allow them to breathe. Harm's lungs itched, though. There wouldn't be air much longer... that is, if the fire didn't get to them first.

The first stirrings of panic tightened his chest. He shoved it down, forcing himself to concentrate on the feel of the knots beneath his fingers. He was a sailor, too. He knew he could identify the intricate twists, and therefore undo them, if he could stay focused on the task. But the image of Mac burning to death kept creeping around the edges of his awareness, terrifying him. He eyed the slick fiberglass side of the boat where it disappeared beneath the edge of the planking on which they lay. The gap between the two was only six inches, but he suspected there was a little space on the other side as well. If nothing else, he and Mac could slip into the water to avoid the flames.

*And then what? Drown?* Mac couldn't walk—or swim—and without his hands free, he couldn't carry her. The boat door didn't quite go all the way down to the water, so he knew they could escape that way—if they could get out of their ropes.

The first knot gave way beneath his fingers and he crowed in pure delight. "We're going to make it out of this, Mac," he added, needing to hear the words as well. The fire had spread across the length of a second wall, sheeting it in orange. Luckily, it was the one on the far side of the boat, which shielded them from the worst of the heat, but he knew time was running out in a hurry.

"Marm?"

"Yeah, Mac?" He kept most of his attention on the knots. The second one started to loosen.

She sighed, sounding exasperated. "Marm, mimemotmap."

"What?" The second knot gave way. The third one, his fingers told him, was nasty. It was also the last. "Hang on. Just one more."

Flames covered the ceiling now, the crinkling, crackling sound loud enough to drown out the lapping of water directly beneath them. Harm's eyes began to tear. Behind him, Mac gave in to a fit of coughing as the smoke grew increasingly acrid. Bits of debris, much of it still burning, fell around them. They sizzled when they plopped in the water, and either died out or started a new little fire when they didn't.

"Aaagh!" Harm couldn't help a cry of pain as a burning fragment dropped onto his pant leg.

"Marm!"

Purely by reflex he rolled away, scrubbing his calf against the boards to extinguish the flame. As he turned back, he glanced down, but couldn't see anything except a charred hole and a glimpse of skin beneath. The spot throbbed to the frantic beat of his heart.

Well and truly terrified now, he grabbed the ropes binding Mac's hands and pried desperately at the last knot. The heat was stifling, searing his lungs with each breath.

"Mac, when this gives, I want you to get out of here. Forget about me." Dying wouldn't be so bad if he knew she was safe.

"Mo!"

"Yes! Don't argue with me. There isn't enough time!" And with that, he caught the proper loop of rope and pulled the knot free.

Mac sat up and yanked her hands forward, flinging the ropes away as if they were snakes. She immediately began to work on the ropes around her ankles. A sharp crack of sundering wood made her flinch, but she didn't look up as the far corner of the roof collapsed. The two adjacent walls began to lean inward.

Kicking, Mac freed her feet.

"Hurry," Harm urged her as she leapt to her feet.

Mac yanked the gag from her mouth, letting it hang around her neck. Another coughing fit grabbed her and she doubled over. She staggered forward a step, reaching out to brace herself against the side of the speedboat. It slid sideways about a foot, coming to rest against the far side of the cut with a shuddering thump that Harm felt through the boards beneath him. She leaned over the edge, reaching inside and rummaging around.

"Mac—" He didn't get any farther as he dissolved into a coughing fit. He curled up around the spasms, fighting to breathe.

When he came back to himself, she knelt behind him, a thick-bladed utility knife in her hand. He felt her sawing at the ropes, and winced as the blade slipped accidentally across his skin. But then the ropes parted, and all he could think about was getting away from the inferno that was about to engulf them. Grabbing the knife from her hand, he hacked at the ropes on his ankles. An inhuman roar and a sudden gust of hot air were his only warning that time had run out.

With reflexes born of many desperate situations, he grabbed Mac around the waist and rolled both of them into the water.