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Chapter 12

Mac saw the first flames as she slipped along the fence toward the row of boathouses. A spike of terror rammed straight through her, and for a moment the decision that lay before her was paralyzing. Take off at a sprint and hope a solution would present itself, or take a moment to call again for help? Instantly she made the choice and reached for her phone, still moving as quietly as possible.

"My name is Colonel Mackenzie, and I just talked to you a few minutes ago," she said under her breath before the 911 operator could even get a word out. "I need the fire department at the Windward Marina right now. I don't have time to tell you the nature of the emergency. Something is burning, and someone is trying to get away with murder. That's all I've got for you. Just get me that backup."

Shoving the phone back into her pocket, she took off toward the boathouse in question as the flames licked higher across its walls. It wasn't a sturdy structure, she could tell. It wouldn't be long before the fire brought it down. *Come on, Harm, do that hero thing...*

A shadow caught the corner of her eye, and her blood went cold as she recognized the figure moving away from the fire. Mac reacted instinctively, drawing her sidearm and stepping out just as the figure neared. No way was such a despicable man going to simply walk away from this crime. "Hold it!"

Before she'd even finished speaking, Rupert had his own weapon out. The flickering light prevented him from seeing anything more than her silhouette, but his aim was steady. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Drop your weapon. I'm not alone."

"You certainly look it to me."

"In five minutes there will be more flashing lights around this place than Las Vegas has on its best night. I'm giving you an opportunity to live through this. You'd be wise to take it."

Hesitation was evident in the admiral's stance as he attempted to place the voice. "Who's making the offer?"

Mac stepped closer, and had the empty satisfaction of seeing Rupert go instantly pale. "How in the hell?" he demanded, briefly jerking his gaze back to the burning building in an attempt to figure out how she'd freed herself.

"Yeah, I'm a regular Houdini." Her voice was level, but edged in steel. "Did you not hear me before? I said *drop it*."

"And then what, Colonel? You going to stand guard over me while that place burns? I notice the commander isn't with you. Did you leave him behind? Are you going to let him die just so you can take me in? Not in the finest traditions of the Corps, is it?"

"Spoken like a swabbie," Mac fired back, allowing her anger to mask the panic that was rising along with the level of the flames. Over Rupert's shoulder, she could see the boathouse beginning to list to one side, and she hastily composed both a plan of attack and a fervent prayer that she wasn't condemning Harm and Diane to a fiery death by her actions.

When the structure collapsed with a sharp *crack*, the sound startled Rupert enough to give Mac a brief advantage. She took it, firing twice into his lower quarter. The first bullet struck his calf, the second his knee. The admiral collapsed with a cry and lay, writhing, as the first sirens neared their location. His gun tumbled from his fingers, landing in the dirt with a dull thump.

"One for each of them," Mac told him coldly as she kicked the weapon out of his reach. "Would you like one for Anthony Zonne, too?"

A half-dozen squad cars came screaming into the marina, spilling officers onto the gravel roads and docks. "Secure," Mac shouted to them. Getting out her ID, she waved them over, finally letting her weapon fall to her side. "This man set that blaze over there, and there are probably two people still inside."

She didn't hear whatever response the officer in charge gave as she turned back to the burning rubble of the boathouse. *Maybe they got out somehow. Maybe they fell into the water. They could have fallen into the water, couldn't they? Please, God...*

Unconsciously, she took a step toward what remained of the dock, watching helplessly as the fire crew swarmed over it. Then something moved out in the inky darkness of the water, and her attention snapped toward the motion. The unmistakable forms of two people dragging themselves onto the nearby boat ramp nearly made her legs buckle in sheer relief.

"Thank you," she whispered to the night air, and started toward them.

Gasping for breath, Harm leaned against the nearest post, drawing his partner into a tight embrace. "You okay?" he rasped, the combination of smoke and salt water grating on his lungs like sandpaper. Mac nodded silently, huddling against him and shivering. "Good. Now for the love of God, don't do anything like that ever again, you got that?"

Her head jerked slightly, but her voice remained hoarse and muffled by his blackened, soaked uniform shirt. "What- "

"Mac, when have I ever said or done anything to make you believe I'd be okay with you getting hurt for my sake? Have I ever given you the impression that I'd be anything less than devastated by such a thing? Why in the *hell* did you come after me?"

She turned her head so she could be more clearly heard. "I had to."

Something in her voice, and in her tone, stopped him cold. Harm pulled back and stared at her, seeing the difference in her eyes as if for the first time. Everything clicked into place at that moment: all of her actions made more sense... and less.

Diane offered a halfhearted smile of apology. "Surprise," she said softly.

Thunderstruck, he could only watch in disbelief as Mac hurried down the ramp toward them, clad in BDUs and a sidearm holster. "I'm sorry," she said breathlessly, dropping to her knees beside them. "I tried to follow him into the marina, but the security's too good. It took a while to find a way in. Are you guys okay?"

"He's burned," Diane said, tugging at the ruined fabric of Harm's trousers. The swollen mark, forgotten until then, began to sting.

"And bleeding," Mac added, reaching toward the rough gash across his wrist.

Harm looked from one woman to the other, trying to work out the situation in his mind and failing entirely.

"This has been the weirdest freaking week," he muttered, sagging back against the post. "If it's okay with you ladies, I'm just going to pass out now, okay?"

Mac caught the front of his shirt in her fist. "Don't even think about it, sailor. We've got a monster debrief ahead of us."

She turned as a pair of paramedics approached them. "These two could use some oxygen," she directed somewhat unnecessarily, edging herself out of the way.

Harm noticed the faint wince as she moved, and immediately pushed away the mask being offered to him. "Mac, what's up?"

She shrugged off his concern. "Nothing big. It's just that my alternate point of entry into the marina involved some concertina wire."

Diane motioned one of the medics over to Mac, taking a long pull from the oxygen mask she'd been given. "Well, at least we won't have to find ourselves somewhere to spend the night," she pointed out between breaths. The other two looked at her, and she shrugged. "The ER will probably be all too happy to keep us."

"Normally I'd argue that just on principle, but right now I'll take any bed I can get." Harm closed his eyes for a moment, finally beginning to see the evening's events with a semblance of clarity. "The two of you did this together," he stated quietly, still trying to wrap his mind around the idea. "You figured it out somehow, and you came after me together."

"It was a team effort in just about every sense of the word." Mac shared a glance with Diane, one that was surprisingly pure in origin. "Who else would you expect to have your back, after all?"

Harm only shook his head. "I'm not sure I deserve either of you, much less both." Something about that choice of phrase struck him as wrong, but he was too tired to address it just yet. For now, he could take comfort in the fact that both of them—all of them—were safe.

It took most of forty minutes to explain the chain of events to Admiral Chegwidden the next day. Fortunately, they'd already gone through the entire explanation with the Virginia Beach police, and given an abbreviated version to the D.C. Homicide detectives, so by that point the three of them had the story down to an efficient, polished joint briefing.

Their poise wasn't enough to impress the JAG, however. His gaze swept across the trio, meeting each pair of eyes before moving on.

"Lieutenant Schonke, I thought I'd heard it all before from these two, but this has got to be the first time they've dragged someone who was totally uninvolved into one of their misadventures."

Diane stood next to the partners, automatically at attention despite her civilian dress. "There was no dragging necessary, Admiral. When I offered to help Colonel Mackenzie go through the files and we began to get a picture of who the killer was, I had no intention of sitting around and waiting for the situation to resolve itself. So at that point, I was as involved as involved gets."

Chegwidden pinned her with an intimidating stare. "I see. You were helping Colonel Mackenzie go through the files. Because non-JAG personnel are always allowed full access to our files, aren't they, Colonel?"

Mac's lips twitched at the sarcasm in their superior's tone. "That was a breach of protocol, sir, and I apologize for it. I assure you, it won't happen again."

The Admiral pursed his lips. "It had better not. I appreciate the fact that a greater good was served, but from now on, let's try to keep things a little more orderly around here, shall we?" His eyes swept over them, making it clear that this was by no means a request.

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"All right. Now that we've got that covered, I trust that no one is too worse for wear after last night?"

"We're fine, sir," Harm answered for them, sliding his hand down to cover the bandage on his wrist. "Looking forward to nailing Admiral Rupert at trial."

The Admiral snorted. "Well, Commander Turner will no doubt want to hear all about your intended testimony. Just let him prosecute without standing over his shoulder the whole time."

Chegwidden rose from his desk and stepped around to address Diane directly. "Lieutenant, I can't say I'm thrilled to discover that you're cut from the same cloth as these two, but all the same, your actions last night were above and beyond the call. I don't have any mechanism to commend you for that since your military status is still a little vague, but hopefully this will do. This morning I put in a call to Admiral Wendland down at Norfolk to, ah, advise him of your situation. He agreed with my assertion that your departure from the Navy occurred under the most unusual of circumstances and was not motivated by any desire to abandon your responsibilities. There will be no charges filed. A letter of reprimand will be added to your file should you choose to reactivate your commission." The Admiral's steely eyes held a hint of amusement. "Admiral Wendland also mentioned that if you decide to come back he has some contacts at Naval Intelligence who would be very interested in talking with you."

Diane found herself temporarily at a loss. In a very short period of time, the pieces of her life had gone from a jumbled mess to something that closely resembled order. There were other pieces to arrange, of course, but this was a far better start than she could have reasonably hoped for.

"Thank you, sir," she said quietly, not sure what else to say. "I'll do my best to deserve everything you've just given me."

"I don't doubt it. Good luck to you. Commander, Colonel, a significant amount of work has been collecting on your desks recently." His tone implied that they'd been neglecting their jobs rather than hunting down a cold killer. A small, wry smile softened the impact. "I know this because I just told Tiner to add to it. The wrongful disposition investigation is being reopened. There are a couple of names that need to be cleared-Master Chief Zonne's among them. Get to it. Dismissed."

"Aye-aye, sir."

Harm turned to Diane as soon as they had filed out of the admiral's office. "Well, that just saved us a lot of paperwork. A letter of reprimand? Granted, it'll be the longest letter of reprimand on record, but once anyone makes their way through the whole explanation, they'll understand the situation." He flashed an encouraging smile at her, which she returned with a tinge of apprehension. He seemed to comprehend, lowering his voice. "That is, assuming the Navy is what you want."

"I'd like to talk to you about that, actually." Diane twisted her hands in front of her. "About-where we go from here, I guess."

"Sure," he said simply, with a fair imitation of nonchalance. "Now?"

"Good a time as any."

He held out a hand toward his office. Diane followed his lead, too wrapped up in what she needed to say to notice Mac slipping back into her own office with a stiffened spine.

Harm sat down on the corner of his desk, waving Diane into the chair in front. "So you've thought about your options some more?" he asked, fixing his gaze on a point somewhere on the far wall.

"I have. And I think I know what I want-actually, I think I knew it before the Admiral got me off the hook, but that does make it a little easier." She paused for a split-second, trying to choose her words, but he misinterpreted the silence.

"Di, maybe this would be a good time for me to say something-"

"I'm going back to the Navy," she interrupted him, anxious to get the statement out before she could reconsider it yet again. "I need to. I've missed it, more than probably anyone but you could imagine. It's what I chose from the beginning, and no matter what's happened over the past six years, that's still the person I want to be. If Naval Intelligence wants me, that's great. If it's something else, then okay. However it works out... I want that life again."

Harm didn't respond, and Diane wondered if he understood his feelings any better than she did at that moment. She gave him a weak smile and continued, "And it's okay, because you were about to tell me that the two of us were never going to work. Weren't you?"

Surprised, he started to deny it, then shook his head and surrendered. "I don't think that was the exact phrase I had in mind."

"Did you have any kind of exact phrase in mind at all?"

"Can we stay on topic here?" Harm tried to grin at her, but it quickly fell away. "Di, you're always going to be beyond special to me. You know that."

"I do, and I'm grateful for it every day. But I'm not the girl who snuck off the grounds for pizza anymore, and you're not the guy who quietly kicked everyone's butts in aerodynamics, either. We both realize that." She paused, daring to meet his eyes. "For a long time, I know you saw me when you looked at her, but now I think the positions may have reversed."

He opened his mouth to contradict her, but she stopped him with a single shake of her head. "I'm not talking about last night. Well, in a way, I am, but not like that. It was only natural for you to assume I was her, then-that was the whole point. But it gave me a glimpse of how you look at her, and now that I've seen that, I can do this."

She stood up and pressed her lips to his in the gentlest of kisses. "Be happy, Harm," she whispered into his ear. "You've long since earned it."

He caught her in a brief embrace and she closed her eyes, letting herself be strengthened by his touch one more time.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"For what? Giving you company in captivity last night?"

He shook his head. "For completely obliterating my world... and leaving it a far better place than it was when you found it."

After a long moment, Diane stepped back, eyes bright. "Well, I guess I've got some calls to make. Can I trust that you'll give me a full after-action report following your next meaningful conversation with Mac?"

"Get out of here," he grumbled good-naturedly, watching her leave with a wistful smile. "Hey, before you go-there was one more thing you asked for my help on when you first showed up. I just want to make sure you know that, whenever you want to do that, I'll be here."

She glanced down for a second, comprehending, and nodded. "Thank you. I'll call. As soon as I'm ready, I'll call you."

After Diane's departure, Harm leaned back in his chair and stared blankly at the wall. His mind wandered through memories-first of Diane, then Mac. His memories of Diane had always been filled with a sense of... incompleteness. He thought it was because of her death, because a piece of his heart had been ripped away. But getting Diane back hadn't healed that hole, he realized now-and her death hadn't caused it in the first place. That part of him had always been empty.

Until he met Mac. Somewhere between Red Rock Mesa and the Russian taiga she'd slipped into his heart, completing him. But he hadn't realized it. He'd been foolish enough to mistake the memory of that aching hole for the real thing.

Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair, searching for a way to open this all-important dialogue with Mac. At last, he decided to stop stalling and just wing it. It had to come out somehow, and it couldn't be any worse than some of their previous attempts.

Bracing himself, he rose to his feet. He strode purposefully across the bullpen and opened her door, expecting to hear her chide him for not knocking first. Instead, he found her lamp turned off, her computer powered down, and her briefcase and cover gone.

Chapter 13

Sturgis Turner was surprised to hear a knock on his door just after 2100 hours. He didn't often have evening visitors-not while Bobbi was off campaigning, at least. He rose from his seat on the couch, setting aside the file he was reading, and went to answer the door.

Mac stood in the doorway, looking like her entire world had been ripped away. His stomach clenched with apprehension.

"I need a drink," she said before he could react, her voice flat. The she drew a shuddering breath. "I didn't know where else to go-who I could go to." Her eyes pleaded with him.

Sturgis stepped back immediately, inviting her inside with a wave. He'd been raised to never turn away someone who needed help, and if Mac was having real trouble resisting a drink, she definitely fell into that category.

"Where's Harm?" he asked once she was far enough inside to allow the door to swing shut behind her.

Mac wrapped her arms around herself, fingers knotting in the sleeves of her jacket. "With Diane." She didn't look at him.

Sturgis didn't need any further explanation. Though he'd been on the far side of the bullpen, he'd seen the trio split after coming out of the Admiral's office, and later seen the gentle embrace Harm had given Diane before she left. For Sturgis, the situation was especially difficult, because he considered both women his friends and he wouldn't presume to judge which relationship was the "right" one.

He kept his thoughts to himself. Right now, Mac needed a sympathetic shoulder. "I was just going over some notes on the Vuarez court martial," he told her. "But I could use a break. Would you like something to eat?"

She shook her head.

"How about a drink then?" When she looked at him, he added, "Of the non-alcoholic variety, of course."

Her answering smile was wan but genuine. "Okay."

He fetched two glasses of iced tea from the kitchen, and when he returned he found Mac seated on the edge of the sofa, elbows on knees with her hands hanging limply between. Her head was bowed, her hair falling forward to hide her face. Sturgis felt for her, a deep sadness that threatened to choke him up. He fought it. The last thing Sarah Mackenzie would accept was pity.

"What happened?" He set one glass down on the coffee table in front of Mac, then settled opposite her.

Mac reached out to touch her glass. "Nothing happened, Sturgis. He's always been in love with her." Her breath hitched, sounding suspiciously like a sob. "And, you know what's worse?" She looked up at Sturgis through her bangs, her eyes bright and frantic.

He slowly shook his head.

"I can't even be happy for him." Mac spread her hands, fingers closing into fists. "I wish Diane had stayed dead! What kind of horrible person does that make me?"

His heart breaking for her, Sturgis moved to sit beside Mac on the couch. She leaned into his embrace without even a token protest, her quiet sobs muffled against his shirt. He sighed.

"You're not a horrible person, Sarah." He stroked her hair in a comforting gesture. "Just human."

The next morning the JAG office hummed with its usual activity, but something was distinctly different, Harm thought. For the second time in a week, he got the feeling people were unhappy with him, but this time the entire office seemed to be involved. The few greetings he received as he walked through the bullpen were stiff and unnecessarily formal, and the friendly ribbing he'd come to expect whenever he returned to work after one of his adventures was entirely missing.

He didn't spend much time worrying about it, though. He was too consumed with how to talk to Mac. Unfortunately-or perhaps fortunately-she was already in court. It would have to wait a little longer.

Harm tossed his briefcase onto his desk, plopped his cover down on top of it, and sank into his chair. He'd spent the entire evening trying to figure out how to tell Mac-what?

Just spit it out, Rabb, he chided himself. How hard can "I love you" be, anyway?

He snorted. *Yeah, right.*

The phone rang then, sparing him any further introspection. He wasn't too terribly surprised to hear Diane's voice on the other end of the line. And, as much as he considered talking to Mac a priority, he still didn't hesitate to call Tiner to secure a few hours of leave. This was too important, too delicate, to push aside for his own reasons.

Just over an hour later, he was standing on the porch of a home in suburban Baltimore, waiting for the door to open.

Michael Schonke was a slightly built man in his early sixties. His features were kind, and he spoke pleasantly enough, but the loneliness that governed his life became all too apparent after only a few minutes of conversation. His wife's cancer had been swift, which had been fortunate in some ways and terribly cruel in others. He had always been able to share the lingering pain of their daughter's loss with Ellen, but for most of the past year, it had been a burden he'd been forced to bear alone.

This morning, his demeanor showed only surprise at the visitor on his doorstep. "Now this is unexpected," he said pleasantly, shaking Harm's hand firmly.

"Hi, Mike." Harm greeted him with a warm smile. "Sorry to drop in on you so early."

"Well, I appreciate the visit, but I know this isn't on your morning commute." Mike's eyes held a hint of caution as he sized up the younger man, realizing at once that there was solemn business of some sort to be conducted. "Come on in, Harm."

The house still looked much the same as it had the last time Harm had been there, too long ago to recall. The two men had never been particularly close, but they shared a unique kind of pain that had bound them together. Mike poured him a cup of coffee without a word, and they sat down in the living room.

"I'm going to assume that you didn't drive all the way out here just to check in on me."

"You assume right. Although it's good to see that you're doing well." Harm took a sip of his coffee, trying to make himself relax.

" 'Well' is a relative term, but thanks." Mike leaned forward in his chair. "You haven't been this tense since Di first brought you around here, nigh onto forever ago. What's going on?"

Harm sighed. "I got some news recently, and I don't know how to spring it on you."

"About Diane?" When he nodded, Mike didn't flinch. "I don't think there's anything left for you to say that could make it better or worse. You're not going to scare me into cardiac arrest, if that's what you're worried about. My heart's as strong as ever."

"I can see that." Harm offered a small smile. "But I can guarantee that this is going to shock you. It shocked the hell out of me, and I thought nothing could get to me anymore. It's going to take a long time to fully explain, but there's no way to ease into this one."

Mike gave him a wary stare before nodding slowly. "I guess you'd better just tell me then."

Harm took a deep breath. "Your daughter is alive."

At once, all the color rushed away from the older man's face. He quickly put down his coffee cup before his trembling hand could spill it. Harm charged ahead, hoping to answer the inevitable questions before they could be asked. "Nothing beyond that has been a lie. She really was shot by the XO of her ship because she tried to report him. But the National Security Agency needed her skills for a very difficult and very important assignment, and they set this ruse in motion before she had a chance to do anything about it. Now she's finished her mission with the NSA, and she's come home to rejoin her life."

Mike just stared at him, clearly disbelieving. "She wouldn't do that," he stated, in a controlled voice. "That's not who she was. She wouldn't let us be hurt like that..."

"Mike, I've seen her," Harm said quietly, holding his gaze. "It's real. She came to me for help getting her life back in order. And she asked me to come talk to you because she can't stand the idea of hurting you any more."

Diane's father rose hurriedly from his chair, turning away. "How can that be?" he whispered. "Six years without a word to her own parents? To you? She couldn't come back to say goodbye to her mother? Ellen died believing a *lie*?"

"She didn't know about Ellen until it was too late. I think that's part of the reason she decided to come home now." It pained Harm to feel the man's veiled anger. He remembered all too well how cold he had been to her when she had begged his forgiveness, and a daughter's betrayal was far deeper than any friend's could ever be. "You have every right to be angry. I was, and I guess in some way I still am. But I'm trying to be angry at the situation, not at her. She put the good of the country first, the way we were taught, and because of her work, a lot of sons and daughters who defend American interests in Asia will be safer. You're never going to be able to get back those lost years, and she hates that as much as you do. But you have today, and tomorrow, and all this time you never thought you'd get... and it all starts the moment you let her back in. I'm not going to push you, but she's ready as soon as you are."

Mike turned back around, a faint ray of hope evident in his expression. "Where is she now?"

"Outside in the car," Harm replied with a gentle smile. "She wanted me to ease you into it, and she was afraid you might not want to see her right away."

"Not want to see her? After all this time, how could I not... Diane!" He started toward the door, then halted, catching a glimpse of himself in the hallway mirror. "She's going to think I've given up on myself. I look ancient."

"You do not, and I don't think she'd care if you did." Harm stood up and laid a hand on the older man's arm. "Relax. It's going to be fine."

"What am I even going to say to her?" Mike asked, nearly inaudibly.

"It doesn't matter. But it's been six years since she's heard 'I love you,' so that might be a good start. Wait here." Harm stepped outside and went back to his car, opening the passenger door. Diane climbed out, looking up at him anxiously. He squeezed her hand in reassurance.

When she turned toward the door, and her father saw with his own eyes that his little girl was alive and safe, it shattered every reservoir of self-control he'd ever had. Michael Schonke broke down in wracking sobs on his front porch, utterly overwhelmed by the sudden and complete restoration of his soul.

"Dad," Diane breathed, running up the steps to fall into his arms. "Daddy, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry for all of this..."

"It's really you," he managed to say, clutching her tightly. "My baby... Di, I love you-I love you so much!"

Her tears spilled over, and she buried her face in his chest. "I love you, too," she sniffled, clinging to him and remembering instantly how her father's presence had always been able to make the world right. "We're going to be okay, you hear me? I don't care what I have to do, but from now on we're a family again."

"That's all I need, sweetheart." He kissed her forehead and looked up at Harm with immense gratitude. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he answered softly, carefully keeping his own emotions in check. Witnessing that reunion would have melted even the hardest of hearts, but for him it was a far more personal experience. Two people who had been absolutely alone, who had made difficult choices and suffered by them, who were now willing to put all else aside and reestablish their bond...

In some inexplicable way, it made something clear to him. He knew now what he needed to do and say.

"It's probably time for me to hit the road," he remarked, fishing for his keys. "There's something I still have to do today."

Diane raised her shining eyes to his. "I'll give you a call when I get things sorted out with the Navy," she promised.

He smiled. "I'll hold you to that. If you need anything, you know where to find me, all right?"

She blew him a kiss as he climbed into his car, and watched as the Vette faded from view. Then father and daughter walked into the house hand in hand, ready to begin anew.

Chapter 14

Mac looked up from her conversation with Bud and Harriet with a sinking sense of dread to see Harm push through the doors leading into the bullpen. She'd been grateful, in a strange and painful sort of way, to discover that he'd left to spend some time with Diane. She'd been hoping to avoid seeing him, at least for today. She wasn't at all sure she'd be able to keep her emotions off her face if she had to talk to him.

"Excuse me," she told the two lieutenants quickly, cutting Bud off mid-sentence. She flashed him look of apology then spun away, retreating toward her office as fast as dignity would allow.

"Hey, Mac! You got a minute?" Harm's voice froze her in her tracks.

Stiffening, she turned to face him. He was headed toward her with a determined spring to his step, and Mac knew instantly that he wanted to talk about something personal. She could read it in his eyes.

I can't do this right now, she thought, panicked. "No, Commander, I'm sorry. I don't." And before he could do more than gape at her in surprise, she turned on her heel and left.

When she reached the relative safety of her office, she closed the door behind her, then leaned her hands on the desk and tried to force herself to breathe normally. She straightened a moment later as the door opened, her heart clenching. She didn't need to look to know who it was. She could feel him standing behind her, his presence like an electrical thrill across her skin.

Some of the raging hurt she felt tore free at his intrusion. "Would it really be too much to ask for you to *knock* before barging into my office, Harm?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him recoil at her tone. "Mac? Are you all right?"

The loaded question nearly shattered her composure. She laughed raggedly, the sound emerging as a groan. "Go away, Harm."

His response was predictable. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's wrong."

Mac closed her eyes. *Insufferable, stubborn man*. If he stayed any longer, she was afraid she would either bawl or start screaming.

"I don't want to talk about it. Now if you'll excuse me--"

"Not until you tell me what's wrong."

Grimacing, she did the only thing she could think of. "Dismissed, Commander."

"Mac--"

"I said *dismissed*," she snapped, pouring every ounce of military bearing she had left into the words.

The silence stretched thunderously, but then she heard the rustle of cloth, the creak of shoe leather, as he snapped to attention. "Aye, ma'am."

Mac waited until his footsteps had retreated before allowing herself to release her pent up breath in a shaky sigh.

Sturgis and Bud both paused, startled, as Harm stormed into the commander's office. Harm was vaguely aware that he was interrupting, but he didn't care.

"Do either of you know what's wrong with Mac?" he demanded.

The two officers exchanged a look.

"Why? Did she say something?" Sturgis asked after a moment.

Harm crossed his arms over his chest. "No, she's refusing to speak to me." He felt like he'd walked into the Twilight Zone. For the first time in his life, he was truly ready to lay everything out on the table and tell the woman of his dreams exactly how he felt about her-and she, inexplicably, was unwilling to give him the time of day.

"Um, sir?" Bud waited for Harm to focus on him before continuing, "Can you really blame her?"

"Harm-" Sturgis' voice was the essence of reason. "Mac just needs a little time to adjust to the situation."

Harm stared at them both. "What situation?"

Bud gave him an incredulous look. "You and Diane, sir."

Resisting the temptation to grab the lieutenant and shake him, Harm forced out through gritted teeth, "What *about* me and Diane?"

Bud was starting to look uncomfortable. "Er... you and Diane... together. Sir."

The pieces clicked into place all at once and left Harm flabbergasted. "Whoa. Back up. Who ever said that Diane and I were together?" He pinned both men with an accusing gaze.

Sturgis and Bud exchanged another look, this one of dismay.

"Mac did," Sturgis finally answered. "Should I take this to mean-?"

"Diane and I are just friends." Harm was painfully aware of the irony in that statement. "And we'll never be anything else. That part of our lives is in the past." Then the full import of what Sturgis had said finally hit him. "Wait a minute-Why would Mac think anything different?"

Bud slowly shook his head. "I hate to say it, sir, but I think everyone had the same impression."

For a moment, Harm recalled the look on Harriet's face during their last conversation on this topic-the anger and disappointment in her eyes-and he realized it was true. He turned to Bud.

"Why?"

He could see Bud composing his thoughts. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Harm nodded, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose as he did so. He had the feeling he wasn't going to like what Bud had to say.

"It only took a couple of months... after Colonel Mackenzie was assigned here... for everyone to realize you and she were a really good fit." A crooked smile lit Bud's face. "For a while there was even a pool going as to when you two would get together." He met Harm's startled gaze and shrugged. "But after six years and-well, everything that's happened during them-I guess people finally came to the conclusion that there must be some reason it was never going to happen. Then Diane showed up, and it just seemed obvious that *she* must be the reason."

Harm stared at his friend as the words slowly sank in. "You know what the scary part is, Bud?"

The lieutenant shook his head.

"She *was* the reason. I didn't realize it, but she was. It took seeing her again to put everything into perspective."

Bud looked a little surprised at his admission. Sturgis remained inscrutable as he shuffled the papers on his desk. "I'm sure Mac will be glad to hear that."

Harm snorted at his droll tone. As with any good lawyers, the more tender facts of this case were known to all, but remained unspoken. "Yeah, if I can get her to listen to me long enough to tell her."

Mac tensed as soon as she heard the doorknob turn. There was no one else who could possibly have both the persistence and the audacity to barge uninvited into her office *twice*. "Don't take another step, Commander," she warned before his head even appeared around the door.

Harm ignored her, coming to stand in front of her desk with an expression she'd become very familiar with over the years. It was his closing argument 'game face,' and the determination he normally conveyed to a nine-member jury was now focused entirely on her.

"Are you going to call security to have me removed? That's the only way I'm leaving before I finish this."

She forced herself to meet his gaze, beginning to resent his insistence. What did he want from her? Permission to live happily ever after? Did he honestly have no idea what this was doing to her?

"What is there to finish, Harm?" she asked, her voice tired.

"A hell of a lot more than you realize. I finally dragged some information out of some of our coworkers, and it seems that everybody around here has a fundamental misconception about Diane and me. I think I've been unknowingly contributing to it, and that's going to stop right now."

Sensing that she was trapped, Mac decided to play along. She leaned back in her chair, pretending nonchalance. "Okay, what's the misconception?"

"That there is such a thing as 'Diane and me.' There isn't. We're friends, and we're always going to be friends. Nothing more."

Mac stared. He looked so sincere, and yet she couldn't possibly believe him. "Harm, I'm not going to try and get between the two of you." The words tasted awful in her mouth, and she drew on all of her strength to continue, "There's so much there that I know nothing about."

He flashed her a look of pure frustration. "Mac, you're not listening. Di's reactivating her commission. She wants to join up with Naval Intelligence and put her experience to work. When I left here this morning, it wasn't to go off and start something with her. It was to take her home to see her father. I'm not with her, and I don't want to be. What do I have to do to convince you of that?"

Mac shook her head numbly, standing up from her desk. "I think *you* believe that, Harm, but that doesn't make it true. You two have so much history together... Could you really tell me that you're never again going to look at her and wonder about what might have been?" She met his defiant stare. "I'm not going to compete with that."

"You don't have to. There aren't any questions any more."

Mac summoned every ounce of skepticism she could find to drown out the sudden hope that flared in her heart. "Can you guarantee that?"

"Yes!"

She bit her lip. "How?"

Harm threw his hands up. "Because she isn't the one I'm in love with!"

Mac stood very still, trying not to flinch under the intensity of his gaze. She couldn't breathe. If he really meant that... "Then, by extension, am I to assume there's someone else you're in love with?" she asked carefully.

Anger flashed in his gaze. "You don't have to assume a damned thing. I'll say it flat out."

Mac's heart sank. She sighed. "No, you won't," she said quietly. "Not here, in this office, and once we lose this moment I sincerely doubt we'll get it back. We never do."

A flash of panic flickered through Harm's ever-changing eyes, and she began to turn away from him, recognizing the all too familiar beginnings of a retreat.

"Oh no you don't." Without warning, he seized her wrist and headed toward the door. "Come on."

Thoroughly confused, she didn't resist as he dragged her through the bullpen. When she caught sight of the staff members gaping at them, though, some memory of propriety surfaced, and she straightened. "Harm, what in the- "

His voice was sharp. "Don't argue with me, Marine."

Unable to overcome her shock enough to protest, Mac allowed herself to be dragged after him.

No sooner had the doors closed behind the two officers than Harriet rushed toward Commander Turner's office, skidding to a halt in the doorway. "Something's happening," she told her husband and Sturgis breathlessly.

The two lawyers looked up with frowns. "What kind of something?"

"*Something* something." Harriet couldn't help her huge grin. "Come see."

Outside the building, Mac had given up on trying to decipher her partner's intentions. As much as she wanted to dig in her heels and demand an explanation, she hesitated to resist. Given his current level of resolve and the vise grip he had on her wrist, fighting with him would only have drawn more attention. She could only follow along for the time being and hope he hadn't wandered completely off the deep end.

"Sergeant," Harm called to the gate guard as they approached the guard shack.

The Marine sergeant snapped to attention, giving no indication that he saw anything odd about the situation. "Sir!"

"Where is the property line for this building?"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"We don't have a fence, so it stands to reason that somewhere beyond this checkpoint there is a line that separates federal property from the city of Falls Church. I want to know where it is."

The sergeant didn't blink. "Approximately thirty yards out, sir. Just beyond the second oak."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Carry on." Harm took off at a brisk pace, forcing Mac to trot to keep up. When they reached the point in question, he stopped abruptly and swiveled to face her.

"So, have we lost the moment yet?"

"What?"

"You made a good point about not having this conversation in the office. However, we're no longer on the grounds, so I'm theorizing that I can avoid a conduct unbecoming charge for doing this. Wish me luck." Then, before she had a chance to formulate a response, he pulled her in by her wrist. His other arm snaked around her waist, fingers splayed across her back as he brought her body flush with his. She felt every point of contact like the touch of a live wire as he bent down and delivered a stunning kiss.

When he pulled back, a fire raged behind his eyes. "I love you," he stated clearly, making her heart soar. "Not Diane or anybody else. I won't deny that for a long time she was the reason I held back, but it wasn't because I loved her. It was because I didn't know whether or not I loved her. I know that doesn't make much sense, but when she came back, I realized that she couldn't make me feel whole, and that the only person who could do that is standing right in front of me."

Tears brimmed in Mac's eyes as she recognized the truth in his words. "Harm- "

"I'm serious, Mac. When Rupert brought her in, I was sure it was you, and I was terrified for you. Di saw that-I mean *really* saw it-and she understands that what I feel for you is so much more than anything she and I ever had. So if she believes it, there's got to be some way I can make you believe it, too, and I'm telling you here and now that I'm going to keep trying until-

"Harm."

"What?"

"I love you, too." At his sudden, joyful comprehension, her earnest expression dissolved into a grin. "You need to learn to quit while you're ahead." She reached up and pulled his head down to meet her lips. He immediately drew her in, melding them together.

On the steps of JAG Headquarters, a half-dozen people were squinting out at the two figures across the parking lot, trying to get a good look. Tiner hurried out of the building with a pair of binoculars in hand.

"Found 'em!" he panted triumphantly. Harriet immediately snatched them away.

"Lieutenant," Admiral Chegwidden commented mildly from the step behind her. "Is that really an accepted use of Navy property?"

Harriet looked abashed and placed the binoculars in his outstretched hand. "Sorry, sir."

"Damn right." Chegwidden smiled as he lifted them to his eyes. "Admiral's privilege."

A low hum of conversation, broken by laughter, ran through the group. Even at that distance, it was obvious what the two officers were doing.

A.J. pulled the binoculars away with a snort. "Someone had better put a stop to this before we have to call the fire department," he muttered.

Handing the binoculars to Harriet, he set out across the parking lot.

Epilogue

Diane pattered around her San Diego apartment, humming to herself as she cleaned. The last year had seen so many fundamental changes in her life, but she was happier now than she could ever remember. Her work was challenging, her personal life full. Just being able to visit her father-go to an Orioles game from time to time-brought her tremendous joy.

A rap at her door interrupted her thoughts. She went to answer it, and was thoroughly surprised to find Harm standing on the other side.

"Surprise," he said with a grin.

"Harm!" Delighted, she wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him tight. Then she stepped back, inviting him in. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm on an investigation at Camp Pendleton, but I decided to take the opportunity to visit my Mom and Frank while I was here, and you're just around the corner from them, so-" He shrugged.

"Well, I'm glad you did." She eyed him critically, certain she knew the reason for the fundamental change she read in his face. "You look great."

He glanced down at his toes, abashed. "Thanks. You, too."

Diane tucked her hands behind her back self-consciously. "So, did you bring me wedding pictures?" She'd been deployed at the time and couldn't attend, which she figured was probably a good thing.

Harm reached into his coat pocket, emerging with a white envelope that looked to be stuffed with photos. "Of course." He handed them over.

Diane quickly settled on the couch, pictures in hand. Harm came and sat next to her as she flipped through the stack. The gold band on his left hand glinted softly as he moved, evoking a tiny pang of regret. Not because she resented his relationship with Mac, but simply because of what they might have had if things had been different.

The thought faded quickly as she studied the radiant couple smiling out at her from the photograph. No, this was how it was supposed to be. She looked up at Harm.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but does Mac know you're here?"

He flashed an amused grin. "Of course. She said to tell you hi."

Diane straightened the stack of photographs and returned them to their envelope. "Here's a bit of irony for you."

He quirked an eyebrow and waited.

She grinned. "I'm dating a pilot." At his look, she added, "Hey, if you can marry a woman who looks just like me, I can date a Tomcat pilot."

He chuckled and looked away. "Fair enough. What squadron?"

"He's a Top Gun instructor, actually."

That brought forth full-blown laughter. "Lucky man."

"I like to think so."

Their humor died quickly, replaced by stilted silence. Harm rose. "Well, I should go. I just wanted to stop by and... see how you were doing."

She touched his arm. "You don't have to worry about me, Harm," she told him gently. She stood up so she could look into his eyes as she spoke. He needed to know her words were true, and maybe she did as well. "I'm happy with my life." Somehow her hands found his. His grip was warm and comforting, but no sudden spark flared to life inside her at his touch.

He watched her for a moment longer, then bent to kiss her on the cheek. "I'm glad, Di."

She smiled fondly at him as she walked him to the door. "It was good to see you, Harm."

He echoed the expression. "You, too." Then, with a last grin, he was gone.

Diane closed the door behind him with a sense of closure. She doubted she would see him again for some time, but that was all right. Their past had become a stepping stone to separate futures, both of them bright. And what else, she thought, were friends for but to help each other through the rough times, and to see that they found the happiness they so richly deserved?

"Goodbye, Harm," she said to the blank door. Then, smiling softly, she turned away.

*** *THE END* ***