



Rating: PG-13 for mild language

Classification: JAG Story, Romance (Mac/Harm)

Spoilers: "Lifeline" (and the episodes it referenced), "Adrift"

Author's Notes: Ahh, "Lifeline". Was that a shipper's dream come true, or what? Same goes for "Adrift", in its own bizarre way - trust me, if you haven't seen it yet, you're not going to get much out of this. (For those overseas, my apologies.) And I know there will be five million stories finishing this episode, but I couldn't help it, so you're stuck with one more. I made up a lot of the Coast Guard stuff, so I hope it's not too far off, but I met a Coastie helo pilot recently and decided to give them the props they so often deserve but so rarely get. This isn't the most fabulous ending you'll ever see, but I've never been particularly adept at creative 'happily ever after's. Although I'm convinced TPTB won't make the most of this brilliant opportunity to hook our heroes up, hope still springs eternal. Especially after seeing the last five minutes of the X-files season finale ...

1935 PDT

La Jolla, California

Frank Burnett was walking past the front window when he saw the car. It was a nondescript black sedan, hardly worthy of notice, except for the fact that it was pulling into their driveway. Because of that, he paused long enough to study the passengers.

Two men emerged, both dressed in Navy class-A uniforms. Immediately Frank's blood ran cold. For the families of service members, this visit was something you prayed to never see. It meant one of three things, none of them good: someone you loved was either missing, badly injured, or dead.

He took a moment to compose himself, then called his wife as calmly as he could. "Honey, could you come out here?"

"I'm almost done clearing the table. Give me a minute."

"The table can wait, Trish."

His quiet, controlled tone brought her out of the dining room with a frown. "Frank, what - "

He took her hand, and she followed his gaze out to the approaching officers. Patricia Burnett was instantly transported back to a cold December morning thirty years ago, when her

life had changed forever. All the color drained from her face, and she leaned against her husband for support. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Not again ... not my baby ..."

The young lieutenant's grave words barely registered in her mind.

"Ma'am, it is with deepest regret that the Navy wishes to inform you that your son, Commander Harmon Rabb, Junior, has been reported lost at sea from the USS *Patrick Henry* ..."

A choked sob was the only reply.

Same time Off the coast of North Carolina

He wasn't sure how long he'd been fighting the endless waves. Everything since that last titanic crash, the one that had ripped him away from his survival raft, was rapidly becoming a blur in his mind. There was no time for him to look for Skates, no time to signal any rescue teams that might be overhead. The only thing he could focus on was keeping his head above the water. Everything else would have to wait.

But as the storm slowly ebbed, it clawed and scraped away at his strength, and he knew he couldn't hold out forever. As a bleak numbness settled over his body, he remembered something he'd once said about drowning, back on the crippled USS *Suribachi*: "It's a hell of a way for an aviator to go." His own sarcasm was coming back to haunt him. Surely this wasn't how it was supposed to end - lost, alone, where no one would ever know what had happened to him ...

He fought it with all he had, even when his arms and legs could barely respond to his commands. As consciousness slipped away, the clouds finally broke, and the stars gleamed unflinchingly down on the sea - calm at last.

2320 EDT Olivia and Juliet's Georgetown

Sarah Mackenzie had weathered many, many difficult times in her life. She'd struggled to cope with her mother's absence, her father's cruelty, and the deaths of more friends than she wanted to count. Through it all, she'd clung to the hope that someday, she'd have the peaceful existence that had eluded her for so long. And despite the past few tumultuous weeks, she was one step, one night, away from making it all come true.

And then the admiral's phone had rung, and any dreams she'd had of that fantasy ending were shattered. In all her darkest memories, she couldn't recall a time when she'd felt so hopeless.

"He's going to be fine, love," Mic said gently, his strong arms encircling her. "Harm's never let himself be beaten by anything. He's not going to start now."

"Mic, you don't understand," she begged, swiping uselessly at the tears staining her cheeks. "When he left, we both said some things that ... I was so angry that when he asked me to wish him luck, I wouldn't do it. Don't you see, I always wish him luck - God, if he dies thinking that I hated him ..."

"Don't say that," her fiancé commanded. "He would never think that of you, after all you've been through together. This isn't your fault, Sarah."

"No? He was trying to get home for the wedding! If I hadn't accused him of being thoughtless - if he didn't feel like he had to make it up to me, he'd be in a rack on the *Patrick Henry* right now, waiting it out. Instead, he's out there somewhere ..."

The tears began anew, and Mic held her tightly, not knowing what else to do.

Out in the dining room, Admiral Chegwidden surveyed the group, stunned into silence by the events of the past hour. "People," he said with as much authority as he could muster, "it has become clear that nothing is going to happen until the storm lifts, and we can't stay here indefinitely. I suggest that everyone go home, get a shower or a change of clothes, or whatever you need, and anyone who wants to continue waiting can come back to JAG. We'll receive updates from there, and we'll utilize the phone recall roster to keep everyone else informed if there's any change. I'll have the radio set up in the conference room in one hour. Dismissed."

As they filed out of the restaurant, he turned to the chaplain and spoke quietly. "Better keep those prayers coming, Father."

... Fifty-six minutes later, the admiral carried the radio from his office into the conference room, wondering which of his crew would be waiting for him. He wasn't surprised to see the answer: every member of JAG Ops was already present, along with Mic, Chloe, and Renee. *We don't leave people behind*, he mused idly. They had all changed into more comfortable attire, in anticipation of the long night ahead - even Renee, who he would have sworn never left the house without her stylish pantsuits. The always-chic director looked small and vulnerable as she pushed up the sleeves of Harm's Annapolis sweatshirt. She stared intently into nothing, and he recognized the look of someone terrified of the future. Harriet was holding a sleepy baby A.J., and her eyes kept drifting over to Mac, whose features seemed to be carved in stone. The ever-prepared Gunny had brought in a small television and turned it to a muted ZNN, knowing that the longer they went without word, the more the silence would drive them all mad.

"I just spoke to Captain Ingles again," Chegwidden began, as all heads swung toward him. "Here's where we stand. They're predicting for the heaviest storm cells to clear any moment now. They've got a Viking and a Sea Hawk on the deck, ready to go as soon as they get the green light. Also, Skates is a little banged up, but she's all right. She says to tell you all to stop worrying because, and I quote, 'Harm is both the smartest and the luckiest son of a bitch ever to make a trap.' "

There were a few forced chuckles from those who knew Harm's RIO. The comment was classic Skates. She was right, of course, but he suspected that she didn't believe it any more than they did. Those waves would be hell on even the strongest of men, and the water temperature was probably only fifty-five degrees ... He quickly banished those thoughts. He was their commanding officer, even now, and it would fall to him to keep as much optimism as possible. Besides, he wasn't yet ready to consider what this office would be like if Harm were

to never come home.

Meanwhile, Singer's attention had been captured by something on the TV. "Turn that up," she directed, and Tiner hurried to comply.

"... we've received reports from the Atlantic Fleet that the downed aircraft was an F-14 Tomcat, assigned to the VF-218 squadron aboard the USS *Patrick Henry*. Rescue operations have been held back by the storm, but we're told that one of the aviators has been recovered and is in good condition. The missing pilot has been identified as Commander Harmon Rabb, a former squadron member now assigned to the Judge Advocate General Corps in Washington. Commander Rabb had posted top scores on his flight qualifications only hours before the mishap, but had previously been involved in another Tomcat crash in 1991 ..."

The screen flashed to Harm, smiling out from his official Navy photo. *Where the hell did they get that so fast?* the admiral wondered. As the anchor continued, Renee went pale. "Oh, Christ," she whispered. "They're talking like he's already dead."

Mac controlled her own fear by masking it with indignation. "How can they run this? It's only been a few hours! What if they haven't reached his mother yet?"

"They have," answered a quiet voice from the doorway. The assembled group turned to see an older couple standing there, looking uncertain. Mac paused, surprised, but Renee stood up.

"Trish, Frank - how did you did get here so quickly?"

Harm's mother embraced her, as composed as any of them. She was experienced at this terrible art. "Frank's office keeps a Learjet on standby. Admiral Chegwidden said you'd be getting news here, so we ..."

"Mr. and Mrs. Burnett, welcome to JAG," the admiral said, extending his hand. "I do wish this could have been under better circumstances."

"Thank you for including us, Admiral," Frank said solemnly. "We very much appreciate being closer to everything, and being with Harm's friends right now."

Renee took the initiative and introduced them to the staff. Mac felt a twinge of jealousy at seeing her familiarity with Harm's mother and stepfather, and immediately chastised herself. Where had that come from? Harm and Renee had been dating for over a year now. Of course she would have met his parents; even if his partner and closest friend for the past five years had not.

When they came to her, Trish was visibly taken aback. Recovering quickly, she offered an apologetic half-smile. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's not like I haven't seen you in pictures. I just wasn't expecting the resemblance to be so strong."

Mac tried to smile back. "I understand, Mrs. Burnett. Sometimes I wonder if he still sees it."

Renee looked from one woman to the other, perplexed. "Resemblance to who?" she ventured timidly.

"An old, ah, friend of Harm's," Trish answered after a moment's hesitation. "From the Academy. She's been gone for most of five years."

Renee nodded, but her eyes were troubled. Mac realized that Harm had never told his girlfriend about Diane, and she wished there had been another way to explain. She knew Renee had always had difficulty with the partners' complex relationship, much as Mic had, but this added another layer of confusion. "I see," she said, unconvincingly.

Before the situation could get any more awkward, a burst of static issued from the radio speaker, and all conversation ceased. Tiner instantly re-muted the TV, and everyone leaned in to hear the latest information.

"Viking one-four is airborne," a voice reported. "On route to last reported coordinates."

There was an imperceptible shift in the current of the room. Optimism was rarely abundant in their line of work, but at least this was progress, perhaps a fighting chance. This was one thing that the self-reliant Harmon Rabb would not be able to do alone. Help was at last on the way. They just had to pray that it wasn't already too late.

"City Desk, we've got a flash on the surface," came the static-filled voice.

"Can you safely descend to check it out?" Captain Ingles's voice replied.

"That's affirm. Viking one-four is on scene, starting our descent."

The conference room was silent as, for the first time in hours, a sliver of hope crept into view. After a few moments, the crew could be heard conferring in the background. "One-four, what's your status?" the captain demanded.

"Sir ... we've located the wreckage."

Mac felt as if she'd been kicked in the stomach. *Oh, God. Please don't find him there ...* The others looked similarly taken aback. If he'd gone down with his aircraft, there was no way he'd survived. As awful as the waiting was, she couldn't bear hearing them say they were bringing home his body.

"Angel two, get down there and scope it out," ordered Ingles. "I want to hear about evidence of ejection, and drop a buoy to mark the location so we can come back for the pieces. We're going to have to explain to a mishap board how we lost a bird tonight, and I sure as hell don't want to have to explain to the JAG how we lost one of his men."

"Damn right," mused Admiral Chegwiddden, unheard by the rescue crew.

"Copy, sir," the helo driver answered, and they waited again. Four minutes and thirty-nine seconds later, a response came back. "Captain, there's not much left of this thing, but we've got the cockpit. No sign of the commander, and there's burn residue on the plates. I think we can assume he successfully ejected."

Mac closed her eyes. One nightmare averted. But a four-hundred-knot plunge into the Atlantic would have been far more merciful than a slow, agonizing surrender to the frigid water. Refusing to acknowledge that idea, Renee sagged back in relief. "There's still a

chance," she murmured to no one.

"Continue your search run," Ingles directed, his taut voice displaying no sign of reprieve.

"Aye, sir."

Minutes stretched into an hour, and then two. The mood of the JAG staff shifted from anxious to restless, and people wandered in and out of the room, finding work to catch up on, or other distractions. The file cabinets had been organized three times, and Tiner's desk had never been so tidy. When Mac wearily crossed the bullpen to retrieve a few depositions, she noticed Trish standing in the center of Harm's darkened office, looking very alone.

"Am I disturbing you?"

Harm's mother glanced up, and attempted to smile. "Not at all. I just wanted to see where he spends his time."

"Well, between investigations and trials, I'd be surprised if he spent more than one day a week actually *in* the office." Mac moved to the bookshelf and absently picked up a framed photo. "I could show you the courtroom, if you'd like."

"Thank you, but perhaps another time. I don't want to be too far from the others - in case ..." Trish trailed off and gazed at the picture with a sigh. From behind the glass, a young Harmon Rabb was flashing quite possibly the most dazzling grin in all creation. Brand-new ensign's stripes glinted on his shoulder-boards, and his arms were wrapped around the waist of his beaming mother. "You do keep me on my toes, darling," she murmured.

Without raising her eyes from the picture, the older woman continued, her voice distant. "I always lived in perpetual dread of something like this. I never questioned his decision to be an aviator, because I knew it was in his blood. But it's hard not to wonder if history really does repeat itself. You know, he didn't even tell me he'd been in combat until after the Libya strike had hit the newspapers. He told Frank where he was going, and swore him to secrecy unless the worst happened. I knew he was trying to protect me ... but when he was deployed to the Gulf in 1990, I didn't sleep for weeks, even though he never flew a single mission over Iraq. I was sure that somehow the press was wrong, that our carriers would be attacked, and that he'd be right in the middle of it all. When he came home without a scratch, I finally relaxed - and then, when I least expected it, there was the ramp strike. It made me question just about everything I believed. I didn't understand how he could survive a war, but be betrayed by his own eyes. Kosovo was the same as the Gulf - I didn't start to breathe again until he called me from this office the day he got back. And now this." Her features were proud, but her voice trembled. "I love my son desperately, Colonel. I'd sell my soul if it would bring him back. But I loved his father, too, and losing him the way I did nearly destroyed me. If I had to choose between mourning Harm's death and wondering for the rest of my life ... It sounds awful, but I think I'd rather see him come home in a coffin than not at all."

The words chilled her to the bone, but Mac shook her head. "It won't happen like that," she said firmly. "It can't. Harm has made a career out of beating the odds. He'll find a way."

"I'd like to believe that. But faith doesn't come as easily as it once did." Trish finally lifted her eyes. "He dedicated so much of his life to finding the truth about what happened to

his father. When everyone begged him to quit - even me - he kept going. I have to wonder if anyone would do the same for him.”

The Marine squarely met her gaze. “Yes,” she answered simply. “I would.”

With a grateful nod, Trish started to place the frame back on its shelf. As she did so, another picture, tucked in the back, came loose and fluttered to the floor. Mac bent to retrieve it, and tears stung her eyes once again.

In the photo, she and Harm were sitting on the floor of the Roberts's' living room, playing with baby A.J. The toddler was delightedly swinging a soft baseball bat in the direction of his godfather's head, and both adults were doubled over in hysterical laughter. Somehow, Harriet's camera had caught them sharing a fleeting glance. When had they last been that secure and happy? And how long had he been hiding that picture?

Abruptly, she shoved it back into the frame. It suddenly felt wrong to be in here without him, as if they were walking on his grave. “Excuse me,” she managed to say before rushing out.

In her own office, she shut the door, lowered the blinds, and sank into her chair. Burying her face in her hands, she let the tears flow until her body ached from the wracking sobs. “Damn you,” she whispered when there were no more tears left. “Why am I *always* the one to cry?”

Receiving no answer, she laid her head down on the desk. As soon as sleep claimed her, the dreams began. Mac found herself in front of a mirror, admiring her wedding dress. Harriet appeared beside her and spoke solemnly. “It's time, Sarah.”

She moved to the door of the church, but the dress had vanished, replaced by her blue dress uniform. Already afraid of what she'd see, she risked a glance down the aisle.

Mic wasn't there waiting for her. Instead, a flag-draped casket was placed at the altar, and a pair of gold wings rested on the field of stars. A very real ache claimed her, and she ran down the aisle -

“Mac?”

She jerked upright from the desk, gasping for breath. Harm leaned against the doorframe, wearing his flight suit and carrying his helmet under one arm. With a surreal calm, she folded her arms. “You can't have it both ways, sailor. You don't get to work at JAG *and* wear the fancy flight suit.”

“Sure I do. Just not both at once.”

Hearing the tonelessness in his voice, her face fell. “You're not really here, are you?” she asked softly.

He silently shook his head.

“Then get out of my mind,” she said sharply, turning away. “It hurts too much to see you.”

"Mac, you have some difficult decisions to make. Would you rather take advice from me, or from Jiminy Cricket?"

Despite herself, she smiled. "That's some pretty severe irony. You, of all people, standing in as my conscience."

"Hey, when have I ever steered you wrong before?"

As quickly as it had come, the moment of respite disintegrated. "Never," she replied wistfully. "It was me. *I steered you wrong.*"

"How do you figure that? If we hadn't argued, do you think that would have changed anything? I still would have had to fly right through the storm because of the low oxygen. The flight controls would still have fritzed out. And most importantly, I still would have moved heaven and earth to be here for you. You know that, Mac."

"Maybe I do," she acquiesced. "But I'm not sure I know why."

"That's a subject best left to you and my real-life counterpart, I think. But regardless of that, you still have to figure out what you're going to do about tomorrow." He checked his watch. "Actually, later today."

With a jolt, she realized that she was supposed to be getting married in less than eight hours. "Today was supposed to be the happiest day of my life, wasn't it?" she asked dully, pain ringing through the words. "Can I even consider going through with it now, knowing I'll be miserable?"

"I don't know. Can you?" He gave a slight shrug. "It might be hours before there's any news, or it might be a few minutes. It might be good news, or it might not be. I can't answer those questions for you. You have to be able to live with your decision regardless of what happens to me. More than ever, you have to be honest with yourself."

He turned to leave, but paused. "I said it before, Mac, but think about it this time. Do you really need me to be at your wedding to make it work? If you can answer that, you have all the answers you need."

And he was gone. She shook herself awake, disoriented. *I'm losing my mind.* Only in her dreams would Harm ever force her to confront the questions that his real self wouldn't dare acknowledge. The frustration she'd been feeling for the past few weeks returned with a vengeance. She'd done everything possible to get him to open up, and she'd nearly succeeded. They'd come so far that night on the admiral's porch: for a brief, paralyzing moment, she'd thought they might be on the verge of changing everything. But he'd hesitated at the very last step - and in spite of the truths they'd found in that desperate kiss, he hadn't been able to voice what she knew he must have been thinking. She could have pushed harder, but she didn't. And so the most important question of all reverberated in her mind.

An idea suddenly came into focus. Maybe he hadn't completely had blinders on when he'd agreed to go flying during the rehearsal dinner. Maybe, subconsciously, he'd been doing what she accused him of before - running from his pain. And maybe, arguments notwithstanding, he'd still risked everything to be there for her on a day where she would cause him more pain than ever.

"You and your over-developed sense of honor," she said bitterly, not expecting a

response. "You asked me time after time why I was marrying Mic, but you never once asked me not to."

She still didn't know if he would ever have been able to let himself take that last step. She didn't know if either of them would have been happy once he did. But as she considered what lay ahead, she knew that the only thing that mattered was whether or not she could be happy with Mic when all this was over. She had an answer to that question, but it was an uncertain one. And since it was hardly an unqualified 'yes', there was only one choice.

Mac drew a deep breath and opened her office door. Within two steps, she was face to face with her fiancé.

"I was getting worried," he offered tentatively.

"I'm all right - just fell asleep. What time is it?"

The fact that she didn't know took Mic by surprise. She wasn't the Sarah Mackenzie he knew tonight. Tonight, she looked very much like a woman whose world was crashing down around her. "About three," he replied quietly. "Half the group's asleep in there. We're more or less taking turns listening."

"So nothing's changed?"

"The weather's cleared up a little, and the Coast Guard's joined the search. They're trying to predict which way the waves would have carried him."

She nodded stiffly. "How long until they change the mission from 'rescue' to 'recovery'?" she asked, her voice hollow.

Mic had been a Navy man, too, and he understood the terrible difference between the two terms. "Sarah ..."

"How long?"

He relented. "With the water temperature, and the storm currents ... they're estimating that he could survive for about twenty-four hours."

She closed her eyes as that information sank in. "So we've got eighteen hours left."

"Not necessarily," he hurried to point out. "The last known position was pretty close to shore - it's possible he may have ended up somewhere on the coast, or -"

"Or he might have been injured in the ejection, so we might not have eighteen hours at all." With a long, resigned sigh, she looked up at him. "Mic, we have to talk about the wedding."

"I know. We couldn't possibly have it with Harm still missing." He took her hands, a flicker of hope still visible in his dark eyes. "But we have some time, love. We couldn't contact anyone to call it off until morning, anyway, and by then, maybe they'll have found him. Our day's not ruined yet."

"Yes, it is," she whispered. "I can't do it, Mic. I can't even think straight right now."

Even if he walked in that door at this very moment, I'd still have no idea which way is up. I know how complicated it'll be to put it off, and I know it'll be hard for us, but ... I just can't."

Slowly, Mic nodded, but now it was his world that was shattering. He knew that this wasn't just a minor delay. He'd seen it in her eyes the instant they'd learned that Harm's plane had gone down: a heart-wrenching anguish unlike anything he'd ever seen. She'd lost friends before, and loved ones, but this one was different. Losing this one would devastate her. "It's all right, love," he said, forcing a pained smile. "I've waited this long, haven't I?"

She clutched his hands tightly, hating herself for hurting him but knowing that it had to be this way. "I'm so sorry," she told him tearfully. "You deserve so much better than this."

Harriet was returning to the conference room from the kitchen, having retrieved a juice box for baby A.J., when Mac called to her. "Harriet?"

She paused, hoping she hadn't interrupted them. "Did you need something, ma'am?"

"Do you have the list of wedding guests handy?"

"It's in my purse, in the other room. I can go grab it - "

"No, it's all right. Can you do me a very big favor?" The Marine lifted her chin with all the military bearing in her soul, but it took everything she had not to break down. "If we're still here like this as 0800 ... would you and Bud please start calling people to let them know that the wedding has been canceled?"

Harriet's eyes grew bright with fresh tears, but she nodded dutifully. "Of course."

1247 EDT

The coast off Knoll Cedars, North Carolina

Coast Guard Lieutenant Nick Sheridan hadn't originally intended to spend his weekend like this. He'd been looking forward to heading up to Baltimore for the Orioles' doubleheader against his hometown Red Sox. Pedro Martinez was even scheduled to pitch the second game. But when the rescue medic's beeper went off at six that morning, he'd known immediately that his plans were on hold.

Now, he was leaning against the inner frame of a Sea King helicopter, scouring the waters below for any sign of a missing naval aviator, and getting progressively tenser by the minute. True, he wanted to get back for that second game, but more importantly, he knew the effects of prolonged cold-water exposure on the human body. This poor bastard had gone down over fifteen hours ago, which didn't make his rescuers overly optimistic. But they'd seen people beat tougher odds than these.

"Sir! You see that?"

"See what?"

"Two o'clock, over on the shoreline!"

Sheridan strained his eyes. "I don't see shit, Chief!"

"Here, sir!" The chief handed over his binoculars and pointed. "I swear I saw a flash off something!"

And then he saw it, too - a momentary glint of light. He shouted over the noise of the rotors. "Get us over there, Smitty!"

The helo pilot went for the radio. "City Desk, this is Guardian three-two, reporting a possible contact."

"Check it out and keep us apprised, Guardian."

"Aye, sir."

As they neared the location, Sheridan squinted into the lingering cloud cover. Off the northernmost part of the Carolina coast, a few tiny islands jutted out into the ocean, hardly large enough to be identified as anything but glorified rocks. One of them was relatively flat on the west side, but dropped off into rocky terrain where it met the ocean on the east. Among the jagged gray boulders, there was a trace of green: the drab green of a Navy-issue flight suit. Sheridan held his breath.

Come on, let's see that flash again.

As if in response, there was a flicker of light.

"Got him! Smitty, get us down!"

Coming closer, the Coast Guard crew could make out the unmoving body of a man, crumpled against a rock only a few feet from the crashing waves. The flashes they'd seen had been from the automatic strobe attached to his harness - there had been no conscious attempt at a signal. The chief paused in his retrieval preparations and studied the situation, cursing. "Doesn't look good, sir," he observed.

"Don't cross that bridge 'till you come to it, Chief. Let's go!"

As Smitty set them down on the clearing, the medics dashed over to the pilot's motionless form. One leg of his still-drenched flight suit was torn to shreds and stained with blood, and there was an ugly cut above his right eye. More frightening than these, though, was the unnatural pallor of his skin. Despite his weak pulse and shallow breathing, he appeared lifeless.

"Check his tags," directed Sheridan as he expertly bandaged the injured leg. "Make sure the Navy didn't lose two guys last night."

The chief examined their patient's dog tags: RABB, HARMON, CDR. "He's our guy. These rocks really did a number on him."

"That's the least of his problems. Body temp's ninety-one point five." They strapped the unconscious officer onto the stretcher and headed back to the waiting helo. Once they were airborne, Sheridan let the chief deal with the thermal blankets and reached for the radio. "This is Guardian three-two. We've got our man on board. Repeat, Commander Rabb is

on board.”

“Copy, Guardian. What is his condition?”

“Sir, the commander is unresponsive and severely hypothermic. Request permission to divert to Portsmouth Medical.”

“Granted. We’ll let them know you’re coming. Good work, Guardian.” Captain Ingles set down the receiver and slowly exhaled. For his crew, and the hundreds of other sailors caught up in the search, a sixteen-hour ordeal was ending. But for Harmon Rabb, and those who loved him, it was far from over.

Same time
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

After another brief, but thankfully dreamless nap, Mac wandered over to the window and gazed out at the sun, which had finally chosen to make an appearance. It would have been too late for the wedding pictures, though, she mused. Hadn’t there been a song about rain and wedding days? How appropriate.

Right now, she was supposed to be dancing and tossing a bouquet. Right now, life was supposed to make sense at last. But it seemed more confusing than ever. Maybe there was some cosmic reason why she wasn’t currently enjoying the first few hours of wedded bliss. Did fate waste its time on people like her?

Harriet had been a godsend, calmly making all the arrangements to call off the staggering number of both guests and coordinators. When she’d finished, they’d all just stared uncomfortably at each other. For possibly the first time in JAG history, there were no motions to be recorded or forms to be filed. They’d run out of busywork sometime around six that morning. There was nothing more to do but wait, while hope slowly dimmed.

The bullpen had been silent for the last hour. Mic had taken one of the chairs outside the admiral’s office and was directing his attention a five-inch square section of the tile floor. Renee was sitting at Gunny’s desk, pretending to read an old *Navy Times*. And Mac continued to wander, not particularly caring if her restless action was irritating anyone. The others were still camped out in the conference room.

Renee spoke emotionlessly, not addressing either of them. “I should have seen this coming,” she said distractedly. “My sister kept telling me that trying to hang on to an officer was a mistake, that I’d end up getting hurt one way or the other, but I didn’t listen. When it got tough, I just told myself to be grateful that an amazing guy like him wanted to be with me. And I kept hanging on. So, of course, now that things were going so well ... I should have known it was too good to be true.”

“He’s not dead, Renee,” Mac said flatly. “He’s too damn stubborn.”

Harm’s girlfriend gave a humorless laugh. “Oh, that’s cute. Is that one of those things you soldier types tell each other to make yourselves feel better about charging off into

danger?"

Mac whirled on her, but kept her temper in check. "I am not a 'soldier'," she countered, her voice tightly controlled. "I am a Marine. And Harm is a sailor. A naval aviator. That's who he is - what he believes in."

"I know what he is." There was anger in her voice, too, but it was eclipsed by grief. "It's what got him killed."

"Stop saying that!"

The two women stared at each other, both recognizing the raw pain in the other's eyes. But there was something else in Mac's: a fear that all the things left unsaid would remain that way forever. Renee began to comprehend, and it jolted her out of her self-pity. She'd always known that Harm was conflicted in his feelings about his beautiful partner, but this was the first time she'd ever had any evidence that Mac might feel the same. Had she ever had a chance?

Tears slipped from her eyes as Mic hurried to head off any confrontation. But rather than comforting his fiancée, he sensed that Renee was more fragile at that moment, and decided to go to her. Mac barely noticed, realizing how tightly she was clinging to faith - faith in Harm's strength, in the determination and skill of the rescue crews, and in the belief that happy endings still existed. If she lost that faith, what would be left of her?

The conference room door opened, and Admiral Chegwidden emerged with an unreadable expression. Mac suddenly found that she couldn't move. "Is there word?" Renee asked fearfully, all her hope flooding back in an instant.

He only nodded. "Coast Guard helo just picked him up on the North Carolina coastline."

Forcing herself to draw breath, the colonel looked up at him. "Is he - all right?" she managed to say.

Their commanding officer sighed heavily. "No, Mac, he's not," he replied quietly. "They're inbound for Portsmouth right now. If we break some speed limits, we might not be too far behind them."

After a split-second's indecision, she nodded and snatched up her jacket. As much as the possibilities terrified her, this was a crucial step. There would be no 'maybe's this time: just a yes or no. She simply had to cling to that faith a while longer.

1529 EDT
U.S. Naval Medical Center
Portsmouth, Virginia

The drive from Washington was quiet. The admiral had driven the Burnetts and Renee, and Mic had taken Mac and Chloe, who'd refused to stay behind with Bud and Harriet. The rest of the JAG staff had been ordered home, with the promise that they'd be kept informed by phone. Mac stared out the passenger-side window, watching the docks go by and noting idly

that the *Seahawk* was in port. Past and present colliding once more.

“Mac?”

She turned slightly to face the backseat. “What is it, honey?”

The young girl hesitated. “Harm’s a good pilot, isn’t he?”

A flicker of remorse crossed her face. *His mother was right*, she thought. *It’s in his blood. No matter how much I try to make him deny it.* What she said, though, was, “He’s not just good, Chlo. When pilots do something especially brave or difficult, the Navy gives them a medal. It’s called the Distinguished Flying Cross.”

“And Harm has one of those?”

Mac couldn’t help smiling a little. “No. He has two.”

“So why did he crash?”

The smile vanished. “Because there are times when being good isn’t enough,” she answered softly.

Chloe, despite her tender age, seemed to understand. “Life sucks sometimes, doesn’t it?”

“It surely does.”

They pulled into the hospital parking lot just behind the admiral’s truck, and everyone herded into the emergency entrance. Amid the frenetic activity, the JAG took charge of the situation and stopped a white-coated lieutenant commander passing by. “Any word on a Commander Harmon Rabb?”

“Yes, sir - Coast Guard brought him in a few minutes ago. We’re working on him in Trauma Two.”

“Can you tell me his condition?”

“It’s too early to say, sir.”

“Commander, I’ve got a lot of worried people over there. Can’t you give me anything?”

The woman sighed. “Are you a religious man, Admiral?”

That was not the answer he’d hoped for. Before he could press further, a lieutenant in scrubs hurried up. “They need you, Cath. Your Popsicle pilot’s arresting.”

With a murmured “excuse me, sir”, the doctor flew off down the hall. The young man moved to follow, but the commanding voice of a two-star admiral stopped him in his tracks. “Lieutenant!”

He froze. "Sir?"

Chegwidden stood only inches from his face and spoke in a calm but dangerous tone. "That 'Popsicle pilot' has a mother, and she's sitting about fifteen feet from you. Don't ever disrespect a fellow officer like that again."

"No, sir - my apologies, Admiral - "

"As you were." The flustered lieutenant disappeared. The admiral's stern expression didn't waver, but the frightening news had unnerved even him. He glanced over to see if the others had heard, but the controlled chaos filtering through the doors at the end of the hall had captured their attention, and he knew they'd realized who was in that room. Renee's face had gone white, and she was gripping Trish's hand in quiet desperation. Frank had his wife's other hand. Mac had wrapped her arms tightly around herself, determined not to depend on anyone else for comfort. Mic, seeing this, had taken a tearful Chloe into his embrace.

For the first time in years - maybe for the first time ever - Sarah Mackenzie closed her eyes and spoke to God. *I'll do whatever you want*, she pleaded silently. *Just don't let him die.*

The next few minutes were more difficult than any of the past seventeen hours had been. At last, the doctor they'd seen earlier emerged, looking exhausted. Mac repressed the urge to run to her and shake any information possible out of her. The doctor came to stand in front of them, and addressed Admiral Chegwidden as the unspoken leader of the group. "Admiral, may I assume that none of you would like me to sugarcoat what I'm about to tell you?"

"You may assume exactly that, Doctor."

"All right. Commander Rabb gave us quite a scare a few minutes ago. His heart rate dropped substantially, but we were able to stabilize him. Unfortunately, I can't guarantee that it won't happen again. The commander is in hypothermic shock. He came in with a body temperature of ninety-one point eight, which is well past the limit of danger. We're treating him with a temperature-controlled environment: it's basically a glorified electric blanket. The difficulty lies in the fact that we can't warm him up too quickly, because his system can't adapt to rapid changes. Right now, his blood pressure and respiration are extremely depressed, which makes another cardiac episode a risk. In addition, he lost some blood to a leg injury, which isn't helping matters. But like I said, he's stabilized for the moment, so we're giving him fluids and waiting it out. His chances get better by the minute."

"What are his chances now?" Mac asked in a low voice.

The doctor gave a sideways glance toward the admiral, who shook his head fractionally. "I'm not the betting type, ma'am," she replied stiffly. "We'll be moving him to Intensive Care in a few minutes. I'll have someone show you the way."

"Thank you, Doctor," Chegwidden said grimly. As she moved to leave, he surreptitiously pulled her aside. "I didn't want them to hear it, but I'd like to know. What *are* his chances?"

"Right now?" She shook her head. "I guess I'd say better than even. But not by much."

... About half an hour later, a nurse informed them that the patient had been moved up to the ICU, and they followed her up the stairs. Outside Harm's room, the small crowd of visitors exchanged awkward glances, wondering how to proceed. The nurse politely informed them that hospital policy was to allow one visitor at a time. The admiral dispassionately suggested a half-hour rotation of Trish, Renee, Frank, and Mac, and no one objected. So Trish steeled her nerves and walked through the door to be with her son.

She emerged thirty-two minutes later, eyes red from crying, and all but collapsed into Frank's arms. "He looks so awful," she struggled to say. "It's like - he's not even there ..."

Renee's graceful features were pale with fear. "I ... I don't want to go in yet," she stammered. "I'm not ready to see him like that."

Mac looked from her to Frank, who was clearly needed at his current post. "All right. I'll go." And before she could lose her nerve, she pushed the door open.

The sight that confronted her brought Trish's words home. Harm's long, lean frame was wrapped from shoulders to feet in a heavy blanket, and an IV tube snaked underneath to his left arm. A small keypad on the blanket regulated its temperature, and a strip of similarly-wired fabric lay across his forehead, nearly obscuring the bandage at his temple. A monitor beside the bed signaled his shockingly slow but steady heartbeat.

For her, the worst part was looking at his handsome face and seeing only emptiness. There was no hint of the warmth that his blue eyes had always seemed to hold. She had seen death before, and at that moment, she could find nothing in his still form that suggested her dynamic partner lived somewhere within.

Keeping a tenuous calm, Mac slid into a chair by his side. She wanted to take his hand, but didn't dare move the blankets. Instead, she laid her hand against his ashen cheek - and gasped at the coolness that greeted her.

"Oh, God," she breathed, tears welling in her eyes once again. *How did this happen?* "I'm sorry ... Harm, I'm so sorry ..."

She laid her head against his shoulder and wept brokenly until her throat felt raw. Then, finally, she looked up at him with clear eyes. "You're not allowed to die like this, flyboy," she stated matter-of-factly. "We've got way too much to talk about."

Leaning in, she gently touched her lips to his, hoping irrationally for a fairy-tale ending. But of course, he didn't stir. The nurse had told them that he was literally too cold to shiver: his body still couldn't spare even that tiny bit of energy. With a sigh, she rose and moved to the door.

Stepping out into the hall, she saw a young woman in Navy khakis standing with the admiral. Recognition came quickly. "Skates?"

Lieutenant Elizabeth Hawkes offered a half-hearted smile. "Wish I could say it's good to see you, Colonel."

"I understand. How are you? Are you all right?"

"Fine, ma'am - just wrecked up my wrist on the ejection. Skipper sent me back to shore for some recovery time." She held up her right arm, encased in a brace that reached

almost to her elbow. "But I'm left-handed, anyway."

"Lucky for you."

A shadow fell across her face. "Yeah," she echoed, her gaze straying towards Harm's room. "Lucky for me."

Mac, knowing she'd never fully comprehend what they'd been through, guided her around the corner, away from the others. "What happened, Skates?" she asked softly.

The RIO's eyes were hard as she relived the past day's nightmare. "The weather reports were wrong," she said simply. "They knew the storm was coming, but they said we could outrun it in a twin-engine prop. So when we got the low oxygen light, neither of us were too worried ... but when we descended through angels twelve, we found the storm down there waiting for us. It was too big, and we didn't have the fuel to go around it, so we strapped in and went straight through. We got zapped a couple of times, and the flight controls started going haywire, so we started to look for the closest place to set down. But it all went to hell so fast ..." It was clear that this veteran aviator, who'd survived a ramp strike and a few dozen combat missions, had honestly been terrified. "Harm was great up there, ma'am. He kept his cool, and did everything possible to keep us airborne. But we were getting tossed around like nothing you've ever seen. If he hadn't held it together as long as he did, I don't think either of us would be here right now."

Mac nodded, not really surprised by this. "But you didn't see him eject."

"No, I didn't. I don't know if there was a misfire, or if I was just too disoriented to see it." Skates twisted her hands in her lap. "Just before I punched out, he said, 'I'll see you down there. You have my word.' And I believed him, because in my experience, he's never been wrong. So now, I'm just praying that he doesn't pick today to let me down."

The other woman watched her battling back her feelings, and realized that she and Elizabeth Hawkes had a few things in common. Skates had always seen through Harm's fighter-jock façade, because she'd been up there with him. They'd had to rely on each other's skills and instincts more than any earthbound partnership, and they'd become friends in the process. But the difference in age, rank, and experience had earned Harm a level of respect from her that bordered on worship, whereas he and Mac were effectively equals. What she felt didn't stem from admiration, although there was certainly enough to admire. What she felt was ... what?

"Skates, can I ask you something?"

The lieutenant glanced up with a hint of amusement. "If it's the kind of question I think it is, you might as well drop the call sign. Once upon a time, people called me Beth."

Mac smiled a little. "Did you ever get Harm to call you that?"

"I made him a deal once. If he stopped calling me 'Skates' on the deck, I'd stop calling him 'sir' in the air. I broke the habit a lot faster than he did."

"Well, I'm never getting into a Tomcat again, so you'd better learn to call me Mac on the ground." The moment of levity passed quickly. "Beth, there's something I have to know. Was Harm determined to get home so that he could see the wedding ... or so that he could stop

it?"

At that, she looked startled: not by the idea, but by the fact that Mac suspected it. She answered the question slowly but truthfully. "I don't think he would have stopped it even if he could. He knew you had to make your own choice. But I wonder if ... maybe he would have given you another option."

"You think so?"

"I don't know. Talking to him, I got the feeling that doing quals this weekend was just what he needed - to escape for a while. And when he said you were getting married, it just seemed to fit with ..." Reluctant to break her friend's trust, she continued hesitantly. "Back when we were flying together, after you'd been on board for Buxton's court-martial, he was pretty depressed for a while. Tuna couldn't figure out what was bothering him, so I thought I'd give it a shot. I told him he looked like he'd lost his best friend. And he said, 'Maybe I have.' "

Mac didn't respond; her mind was back in that day two years earlier, when she'd watched him pack up his office and walk out of her life. Returning to an active squadron had changed him in her eyes, and their relationship had been forever changed as well. But how much of that distance between them had been real, and how much had they unintentionally put there?

"I didn't support him the way I should have," she admitted, probably for the first time. "I was angry that he wanted to leave - I felt like everything we'd accomplished meant nothing to him. I know it was selfish, but I honestly felt betrayed. I couldn't understand."

"That's exactly it," Beth pointed out. "There's no way you could. Being a tactical fighter pilot isn't something that you learn to love. It's either in you, or it isn't. Even I can't totally understand what it's like to have that drive, but I've been around enough of them to know that it's all-consuming. It's not a game, and it's not half as macho as they'd have people believe. It's just something that can't be put away on a shelf. You don't have to understand why it's there. You just have to accept that it *is* there."

Mac recalled what she'd said to Renee earlier: "*It's who he is - what he believes in.*" Maybe she'd accepted it all along, without realizing it.

"Can I ask *you* something, Mac?"

She spread her hands with a shrug of surrender. "Might as well."

"If none of this had happened ... if you'd been standing at the altar today instead of here, would you have been looking over your shoulder, waiting for him to object?"

With a glance down the hall at her fiancé, she shook her head. "I don't know," she replied helplessly. "I'm not sure I would have even gotten to the altar."

... When Frank stepped out of his stepson's room a few minutes later, his first vigil complete, Renee still looked uncertain. Mic surprised them all by speaking up. "Would you mind if I had a moment? I'd like to ... well, there are some things that I'd rather not leave unsaid."

The admiral narrowed his eyes, but didn't protest. Squeezing Chloe's hand briefly, the

Australian man stood up and went into the room.

For a few minutes, Mic just stood there at the foot of the bed, watching the weakened pilot's chest rise and fall imperceptibly with each breath. "I suspect I'm just about the last person you'd want to see you like this," he began in a voice far bolder than he felt. "But since you don't get a vote right now, I'm going to take my chances."

He sighed. "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about all this. Obviously we're not exactly good mates, but you know I'd never wish something like this on you. Especially since I've seen what it's doing to Sarah. To be honest, I've had this paranoid suspicion for weeks that today wasn't going to go as planned. I wish I could chalk it up to cold feet, but it's not me I'm worried about. I can't pretend I don't see whatever it is that's between you two. I know it would take a firing squad to make you admit it, but I think there's a part of you that's loved her all along. I just didn't want to believe that Sarah might feel the same. But ever since the engagement party ..."

He shook his head. "What did you say to each other out there? Did you give her some reason to rethink her decisions? Because ever since that night, she's been more distant than ever. But I know better than to think you'd suddenly fall at her feet and profess your undying love. You've got too much pride - and too many ghosts."

Mic laughed, a hollow, rueful sound. "We make quite the pair, don't we? Me, trying to hold on to something that was never really mine, and you, afraid to even reach for it. I don't know which one of us is sorrier. The only thing I do know is that the very idea of losing you is killing her, and seeing her hurt that much is pure torture. So if you can hear any of this, listen up. You don't get to give up now, all right? You don't have the right to take the easy way out and leave Sarah to pick up the pieces, because I can promise you that she'll bury her heart right beside you. If you love her the way I think you do, you had better damn well find a way to make it back to her."

A soft click sounded at the door, and he whirled, startled. Renee stared back at him, any embarrassment overshadowed by pain. "How long have you been there?" he asked.

"Long enough."

Mic cursed himself for not thinking of her before. "You shouldn't have had to hear that."

"I'm just as glad I did. At least I don't have to wonder whether I was imagining things." Determined to maintain her dignity, she managed a small, resigned smile. "We're an interesting pair, too. We're both hopeless optimists to think we could ever have their undivided attention."

"I had to try," he replied quietly. "Being with her has been the best thing that's ever happened to me. But the questions are still there, and they keep getting louder ... and even though I'm afraid I already know, I can't seem to get her to answer them."

"I know." She let her gaze fall to Harm, who still lay motionless. "I love him," she whispered. "I couldn't tell you why, but I do. I don't really fit in his world, but he fits in mine. I guess fate's cruel that way sometimes."

Tenderly, she reached down to stroke his dark hair. "I know we're not destined to be together forever. I know I'll eventually have to let him go - one way or another - but I don't

want to do it yet.” Her voice broke. “Not like this.”

Mic crossed to her and wrapped his arms around her. Renee leaned against him, grateful for support from the only person who could truly understand.

One of the monitors near the bed began a low, steady beeping, and she jumped, somewhat guiltily. Harm hadn't stirred, but she looked up at Mic, eyes wide with panic. “What's happening?”

“I don't know. But it doesn't sound like an emergency.” He hurried to the door and beckoned for a doctor. Terror seizing her, Mac stood up and hovered near the doorway.

The doctor gave the readouts a once-over and smiled. “You can all relax a little now,” he told them reassuringly. “The monitor was just letting us know that his body temperature is up over ninety-five degrees, which is our threshold. He's out of the woods.”

The news sent a wave of relief through the group. Mac sagged back against the wall as all the tension of the past twenty-one hours drained out of her body in an instant. Whatever repercussions this awful day held for the future could wait. All that mattered was that Harm was still with them.

After making a few adjustments to the IV drip, the doctor came out to address the anxious throng in the corridor. “Commander Rabb still has a ways to go,” he warned. “Obviously, ninety-five isn't nearly close enough to ninety-eight point six. But he's definitely getting stronger. Because of the incredible shock to his system, he's still deeply unconscious, and likely to stay that way for another couple of hours. When he does wake up, don't be surprised if he has some trouble speaking for a while. Salt water isn't kind to a person's throat and lungs. On that subject ... recovering from hypothermia is a difficult process. There's a high incidence of pneumonia, which we'll do our best to fight off. Also, has anyone described for you the injury to his leg?”

They shook their heads: everyone had been too consumed by the fear that he might not survive to consider what would happen if he *did*. The doctor continued. “The commander has a deep laceration along the side of his left knee. The Coast Guard medics who brought him in said they picked him up on some fairly nasty rocks, which would account for some of the other bruises as well. We've already had the wound stitched up, but it cut through layers of muscle both above and below the joint. It's going to take some time and rehabilitation before he regains full use of that leg. All of it will take some time. But your friend is apparently quite the fighter.”

“That he is, Doctor,” said Admiral Chegwidden, keeping his own relief tightly checked. “Thank you for everything.”

“My pleasure.”

Trish was trembling as she reached out to embrace Renee, unaware of the previous conversation. The younger woman returned the gesture, a rush of euphoria overriding any other emotions. Now, at last, life could go on.

... True to the doctor's predictions, Harm's condition improved markedly over the next couple of hours. Around 2030 - nearly twenty-four hours after Tomcat 241 had tumbled into the Atlantic - the thermal regulators were removed, and the nurse tucked a standard winter

blanket around her patient. As she did so, Mac stole a glance at her friend's injured leg, wrapped tightly from shin to mid-thigh, and wondered about the hideous scar the bandages must be covering. This day was not likely to be forgotten.

Trish sat with him, determined to be there when her only child regained consciousness. She settled into the chair by the bed and slipped her hand into his, waiting with him as she'd done ten years ago. The admiral left briefly in order to secure rooms for them all in the Norfolk VOQ, and Mic took an exhausted Chloe to get some sleep. Beth Hawkes's fiancé, a considerate lieutenant named Josh Keller, arrived to take her back to the Q as well. And just like that, their group was smaller by half.

No sooner had Trish closed her eyes than she felt a slight motion from the hand she held. Instantly alert, she jerked upright. "Harm?" she asked softly. In response, his fingers barely tightened around hers. "I'm here, dearest. It's all right. You can wake up now."

At last, his expressive eyes dragged open, and after a few seconds of disorientation, he managed to focus on his mother's face. She smiled down at him, blinking back tears. "Welcome back, darling," she told him. "You've had quite the adventure."

Harm attempted to speak, but his voice faltered. Trish quickly retrieved a glass of water and lifted his head to help him drink. He took a sip, then tentatively tried again. "Hi, Mom."

His voice was little more than a whisper, and even those two words had required great effort. She shook her head. "Don't worry about talking," she soothed. "In time, it won't hurt so much. You're in the hospital at Portsmouth. Do you remember what happened?"

Slowly, he nodded, and an expression of dread darkened his features. "Skates?"

"She's fine. I'm sure she'll be in to see you in the morning."

Immensely relieved, he closed his eyes for a moment. "What day - ?"

"It's Saturday night. You were out there for about fifteen hours." She wavered a little, remembering how close it had been, but kept her smile fixed. "But you're safe now, and you're going to be fine. Are you in any pain?"

He gave a tiny shake of his head. "Tired," he answered weakly. "And cold."

Trish reached up to stroke his cheek, still pale and cool to her touch. "Just rest now," she said gently. "Everything's all right. We'll be here."

"Who's 'we'?"

Before she could reply, Mac stepped through the door. "I brought you some coffee, Mrs. -" Seeing Harm's gaze upon her, she stopped in her tracks. Part of her was desperate to fly across the room and fall into his arms, but she held her ground. That was the absolute last thing he needed just then. "You're awake," she offered lamely.

"More or less." It was then that she realized that he wasn't her flyboy yet. He wouldn't be storming back from near-death overnight. For a while, they would have to see him, not as the dashing hero figure, but as he was - fragile and sick. It was a new, strange

realization.

Harm looked as though he wanted to say something, but words failed him. Instead, he reached a hand out to her with what little strength he could summon. Noticing the concerted effort, Mac hurried to his side and grasped his hand. "You do know how to make an entrance, sailor," she said lightly.

"Mac ... I'm sorry ..."

"Shhh," she reassured, wondering if he even knew what he was sorry for. "Later. Just get better."

Even as she said it, he was slipping back into darkness. As his hand went limp, she kissed it tenderly and laid it down on the bed with a kind of warmth that she'd never really expressed before. With a start, she remembered that they weren't alone in the room; and she glanced up at Harm's mother, who was studying her inquisitively.

"I, um ..." Mac gave up, looking self-conscious. "You must be awfully confused right now."

"No more so than you, I expect," Trish replied quietly. "Actually, a few things are making a lot more sense."

"Such as?"

"Such as the time he came to visit last year. I asked him how the trip to Australia went, and he said something like this. 'Well, I got a murderer off, I broke my friend's jaw, and on top of that, I think I made the biggest mistake of my life. I hurt someone who means everything to me. How was *your* week?' And that was basically all he said."

"That sounds like him." Surprised by how much the older woman seemed to comprehend, Mac could only look away. "Are we ever going to understand each other?" she whispered.

"It seems to me that you've got another chance to set things right," Trish pointed out. "That kind of chance doesn't come around often."

"I know. I just wish I knew which way was right."

"I think you already do know. Both of you." She patted the young colonel's arm. "Go get some sleep, dear. Things will look clearer in the morning."

0913 EDT
U.S. Naval Medical Center
Portsmouth, Virginia

Harm pressed the button to raise the head of his bed to a semi-sitting position, and winced a little. He'd been moved into a regular room early that morning, although it was something of a haze in his mind. He'd been drifting in and out all night, but now he finally felt

almost human again - enough to notice the aches in every corner of his battered body.

Renee frowned. "Hon? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said faintly, wishing he had his voice back. "My head hurts a little. And so does my leg." Pausing to consider what he'd just said, he looked up at her. "Why *does* my leg hurt, anyway?"

"The Coast Guard found you on the coast of North Carolina. The waves must have knocked you up against the rocks. Your knee is pretty torn up." They were both a little surprised at how calmly she relayed the events. "You don't remember hitting rocks?"

He shook his head, and the dizziness that followed made him regret the action. "All I remember is the water," he murmured. "I lost my raft, and I couldn't see anything ... I just kept thinking about - "

Renee unconsciously held her breath, wondering just who his thoughts had been with.

" - Skates, and how she doesn't swim so well, and ..." He stopped, realizing how close he was to losing control. He had let her see many sides of him, but he never dared let anyone see him lose control. Not if he could help it. "I just did the best I could," he finished uncertainly. "I think I passed out before the storm was really over."

"It must have been awful," she stated, squeezing his hand. "But it's over now. You're still here."

"I guess I am." Noticing the dark circles under her eyes, he suddenly grew concerned. "You're exhausted," he said softly. "You should get some real sleep."

"Are you sure? I don't want to - "

"I'll be fine. I'm sure I'll have plenty of visitors to keep me company." He reached up to brush a hand through her hair. "Thank you for staying."

"I had to. I had to see for myself that you were really all right." When she leaned in, he could see the evidence of the hours of tears. "You had a lot of people worried, flyboy."

Their lips met in a sweet, simple kiss, which Mac walked in just time to witness. She swallowed the flush of conflicting emotions that resulted, and spoke up. "Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's all right. I was just leaving." Renee stood up and dropped another kiss on his forehead. "Be good, all right? Don't let all these people passing through tire you out."

"You need to quit hanging around with my mother," he replied good-naturedly. "I'll see you later?"

"Count on it."

Once she was gone, Mac and Harm just looked at each other for a minute, not knowing where to start. His ice-blue eyes were clearer now, but also more guarded. "You look much

better,” she began, hovering near the foot of the bed. “How do you feel?”

“Pretty lousy. But at least I can carry on a half-decent conversation now.” He kept his expression neutral, but his already-weakened voice grew even softer. “Should I be saying congratulations?”

It was a moment before she realized what he meant. In her mind, so much had happened since her almost-wedding, but for him, it had all been one continuous nightmare. “Harm, I didn’t do it,” she confessed, the words tumbling over each other. “God, how could I? Did you really think I’d be able to go through with a wedding while my best friend in the world was missing?”

If he found any relief in that knowledge, he didn’t let it show. Instead, there was only shock, and a trace of guilt at the repercussions of his fateful flight. “I don’t know,” he said, sounding doubtful. “I guess - I wasn’t sure if you knew what was happening, or - ”

“Harm, we all knew. Captain Ingles called the admiral right away, and we even listened to the radio feed. Trust me, you had our attention.”

He lowered his gaze, not meeting her eyes. “I thought you were going to walk down the aisle believing I’d failed you as a friend,” he admitted painfully.

“I thought you were going to die believing *I’d failed you.*”

At that, he raised his head, and their eyes locked for a moment. Then Mac tore her gaze away and changed the subject. “Listen, Chloe’s here. She’d really like to see you before we put her on a plane for home. Are you up to it?”

“Sure. Is she all right?”

“She will be. This whole thing upset her.”

“I can imagine.”

Mac moved to the door, and Chloe stepped inside, followed by Mic. The thirteen-year-old girl looked wary of the stark hospital surroundings, but she didn’t shrink away. “Hi, Harm,” she said hesitantly.

He smiled, trying to be strong for her. “Hi, short stuff.”

Her lips quirked up a little. “You said you wouldn’t call me that anymore.”

“Oh, I did? Why would I say that?”

“Because Mac threatened to start calling you ‘stickboy’ again if you didn’t.” They all smiled a little, though Mic’s was forced. “Skates said you guys got caught in the biggest thunderstorm ever. She said the lightning was like fireworks. Did you get hit by lightning?”

“Oh, yeah. About four times, I think.”

“Wow. But you’re okay now?”

"I'm getting there, Chlo. It sure is good to see you, though."

"You, too. You promised me a ride in your biplane the last time I came to visit."

"I will definitely get you up there next time. Swear on my wings."

The false bravado wasn't entirely fooling her, he could tell. "Harm, were you scared?" she asked suddenly.

He could think of a hundred ways to answer, but in the end, truth won out. "Yeah, Chloe," he said honestly. "I was really scared."

The girl's voice trembled. "So was I."

"Oh, sweetheart ..." He opened his arms, and she buried her head in his chest. The others silently watched, wishing she hadn't had to witness this entire experience. He stroked her blond hair as her words came in muffled, jumbled sentences.

"We were listening on the radio, but it was so loud, and nobody knew what was going on ... everyone was snapping at each other, and crying ... especially Mac, and she never cries ..."

He chose not to look over at Mac just then, despite the questions in his mind. This was clearly not the time to confront any issues, old or new. He was barely thinking straight as it was, and his track record for personal discussions was less than stellar. But something had changed in her eyes, in her stance. He just wasn't sure how to interpret it.

"I made a big mess of things, didn't I?" he asked quietly, when Chloe's tearful chatter subsided.

She looked up at him with alarm. "But it wasn't your fault. Right?"

"I don't think it was," he sighed. "It's kinda hard to remember."

"It couldn't have been your fault! Skates said it was a glitch, 'cause of the weather. She said you did everything right, so you could both get out. She said she'd fly with you anywhere." There was a hopefulness in her young face, begging him not to destroy the image of him that she'd built up in her mind.

He realized then that he'd been elevated to hero level in her eyes, almost as high as her beloved 'sister'. The unwavering admiration left him at a loss, and he hugged her tighter. "Well, Skates usually knows what she'd talking about," he replied.

Mic cleared his throat. "Sorry, love, but we've got to head for the airport pretty soon."

Chloe disengaged herself from Harm's embrace. "You swear you'll take me flying next time I come out?"

"Cross my heart. Besides, you'll have to come back soon, won't you? For the wedding?" He risked a glance at Mac and Mic, and was somewhat startled to see the look of

hesitation that passed between them. "It's being rescheduled, I assume?"

"We, ah, haven't discussed the logistics yet." Mac effectively ended that line of questioning by moving to hug her little sister. "I'm going to stay here for a while, Chlo. Have a good flight - I'll call you tonight, okay?"

Chloe looked from her to Harm, a little dubiously, but smiled. "Okay. See you later, Harm."

"Bye, short stuff."

"Watch it, stickboy," Mac retorted without a second thought.

Chloe giggled, but as she followed Mic out into the hall, the laughter faded. She was unusually perceptive, and she'd seen his carefully-controlled reactions to the whole situation. "You're afraid she still loves him, aren't you?" she asked quietly.

He glanced over, not really surprised. "How do you know she ever loved him in the first place?"

"I just do. Do you think he still loves her?"

He closed his eyes, resigning himself to the truth. "Yeah, I do. I just don't know if that's enough for them."

... Inside the room, Harm fixed his gaze on Mac, who shifted uncomfortably. "You haven't discussed the logistics yet?" he echoed.

"No, we haven't. What's your point?" she returned, a little too sharply. "Sorry. That was the lack of sleep talking. But really, when did you expect us to fit that particular conversation in?"

"I don't know. I guess I figured - it's important and all ..."

"Harm, for the last day and a half, nothing's been important. For any of us. Don't you understand that? While you were out there, and then when they weren't sure you were going to make it ... we couldn't just go on with life. We were too afraid to do anything at all. The world stopped." Turning away from him, toward the window, she finished in a softer voice. "Mine did, at least."

He didn't respond, and she glanced back. She'd expected her admission to elicit some flicker of hope, but instead, regret had overtaken his features. "Can you ever forgive me?" he asked simply.

She did an about-face and stared at him. "Forgive you? For what, other than scaring the living daylights out of me?"

"Mac, I single-handedly ruined the biggest day of your life."

"Unless you put that plane into the water on purpose, I don't see what's to forgive." Wanting to reassure him, she stepped closer. "Nothing's broken that can't be mended. I

promise. It was mainly just the hassle of canceling everything.”

“It was more than that,” he countered. “It had to be.”

She bit her lip, trying to decide how far to take this. Before she could come up with a response, the door opened again.

“Is this a private party, or can anybody join in?”

Immediately his face lit up with something close to a genuine flyboy smile. “Skates!”

Beth Hawkes fixed him with a glare of mock-exasperation, unfazed by Mac’s presence. The colonel did her best not to be disheartened by the fact that seeing his RIO had apparently brightened his day more than seeing her. “I’ll let you slide on that one because you’re still out of it.”

“I am not ‘out of it’, *Beth*.” He emphasized her name to prove his point.

“Then what’s your excuse?”

“Jeez. Do you treat all senior officers like this?”

“Nope, you’re just lucky that way.” Beth grinned and moved to embrace her friend. “How are you feeling?”

“Glad to still be in one piece. That’s about the best I can say.” Harm shrugged ruefully. “What about you? How long before you can get back in the saddle?”

“A week or two. Guess I’ll have time to process my paperwork.”

“I hear you talked to Chloe,” Mac put in.

Beth looked a little embarrassed. “She looked like she could use some optimism.”

“Didn’t you overdo it a little?” Harm raised an eyebrow. “You’ve got her thinking I’m the best pilot in the service!”

“Aren’t you?” she shot back innocently.

“Cute. You know, between the two of us, we’ve been involved in the loss of three separate aircraft?”

“Yeah, the taxpayers must love us.” A devilish gleam came into her eye. “Two more and we can be Tomcat aces.”

“Do they have a term for that? Can you be a reverse ace?” The joking manner dissolved, and they began to speak like compatriots who had shared their own personal hell. “Were you in the water long?”

She shook her head. “The Angel was on me within half an hour. My arm was wrecked,

and I was freezing my six off, but that was all. I kept screaming at them to go back for you, but I guess I knew they had to get on deck. And I still wasn't sure ... Christ, Harm, I didn't see your chute."

"The seat malfunctioned," he told her, as the events slowly became clearer in his memory. "Maybe the lightning hits did something to it. I got it to fire with the secondary handle, but by then I was too far away from you."

Visibly shaking off the memory, Beth smiled, somewhat unconvincingly. "Well, it'll be a great story to tell our grandkids."

"Right."

"Hey, Josh and I are headed back up to D.C. this afternoon. Is your car still at Andrews? We could pick it up and drop it at your place on the way."

"Thanks, but my keys are somewhere at the bottom of the ocean."

"You mean, these keys?" Triumphant, she dangled a set of keys in front of him. "They pulled up what was left of our bird and brought it back to the Henry. They probably found your bag before they even found you. Of course, the water ruined a lot of it, but at least you don't have to get new credit cards."

"I swear, I go through more uniforms ..." He paused a moment. "They're going to have to investigate, aren't they?"

"Don't worry about that. We didn't screw anything up. It was just a case of Murphy's Law to the extreme." The young woman reached into her pocket again. "Thought you might want these back."

At the sight of his wings, he nodded gratefully, one aviator to another. "You're the best, Beth."

"I try. Listen, I gotta run, but I'll see you at the review. Get better, sir. Colonel, keep an eye on him." She briefly came to attention, and was gone before either of them could question the unexpected formality. Mac looked to Harm, who only shrugged.

"She's a good friend," she said, hoping to draw him out.

"Yeah, I have a lot of those. Maybe more than I deserve."

A shadow had once again fallen over his face. Mac didn't know what to make of these uncharacteristic mood shifts, but she knew this wasn't the time to continue their earlier discussion. "Harm, it's okay. You just have to beat this and get through the review board, and then life can go back to normal."

He looked at her strangely, and she knew he didn't believe it any more than she did. Life would go on, certainly, but it would be far from their standards of normal.

"Mac, I'm kind of tired," he began.

She attempted to turn it into a joke. "Trying to get rid of me?"

The attempt failed when she saw the conflict in his eyes, and realized she'd hit close to home. He was tired, but he also didn't want to face her right now. "Please, Mac," he said softly.

"Okay," she acquiesced, expertly hiding the hurt she washed over her. "Call me. Whenever you want. I'll be around." And before she could lose her nerve, she leaned down to kiss his cheek and boldly walked out.

But she didn't leave right away. After a few minutes, she crept up to the door and peered through the small window. Far from being asleep, Harm lay silent, staring up at the ceiling with a tortured expression that made her heart ache. She wanted to walk right back in there and force him to let her help, but help was apparently the last thing he wanted, at least from her. True to his nature, he would do this alone.

Whatever 'this' was.

1609 EDT
North of Union Station
Washington, D.C.

Harm had been home for a few days, under his mother's care due to a persistent bronchial infection. Frank had gone back to San Diego the night before, to catch up on work. Renee had been in and out, but never stayed more than a couple of hours. The solitary manner he'd recently developed had put a strain on them, and although she suspected she knew the cause, it was hardly something she wanted to confront. People from JAG dropped by regularly: Harriet had been a frequent visitor, bringing food and stories of baby A.J. He appreciated and even enjoyed their company, but he'd begun referring to his apartment as 'Grand Central Station'.

It was hardly a surprise, then, when there was a knock at the door that afternoon. Trish went to open it. "Admiral, how nice to see you."

A.J. Chegwiddden nodded to her, cover in hand. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Burnett. I hope this isn't a bad time."

"Well, Harm's sleeping right now - "

"No, I'm not," came a listless voice from the bedroom. "Come on in, sir."

Harm slowly made his way out into the living room, maneuvering his metal cuff-style crutch with some difficulty. His commanding officer watched him drop onto the couch, trying to conceal the effort it required. "Have a seat, Admiral."

A.J. did so, and studied his senior attorney with concern. "How are you doing, Commander?"

"All right, sir. I'm hoping to return to duty on Monday."

Trish shook her head. "You try that, and I'll strap you down."

Harm shot his mother a long-suffering look. "Traitor."

"Someday you'll thank me, darling."

"You always say that, but I never do."

Trish tossed a couch pillow at her son, then affectionately kissed the top of his head. "I'll leave you two alone and go get something for dinner. Behave yourself, Harmon."

"Yes, ma'am."

A.J. smiled at the exchange. "She's an amazing woman," he commented when she'd gone.

"She certainly is." Harm coughed, betraying the lingering illness. "She's probably right, too. Kicking this bronchitis has been harder than I expected."

"Don't push yourself. Your caseload's been cleared, and the colonel can pick up any new cases that come along." He didn't have to explain why *her* caseload was clear: they'd all expected her to be on her honeymoon at this point. "You don't need to be a hero, dragging yourself back into the office before you can stand up. Just take it slow."

"Easy for you to say, sir. If I see one more episode of 'Judge Judy', I'm going to go postal."

"Can't blame you for that. How's the leg?"

"Could be worse. Rehab would go a lot faster if I had full lung capacity, though." He rolled his eyes. "Anything exciting going on at JAG, Admiral?"

He'd said it neutrally, but A.J. knew him well enough to decipher his meaning. "The mishap investigation is being handled down at Oceana. Everything so far points to a massive loss of flight controls brought on by multiple lightning strikes. The board of review will convene here at Headquarters on Tuesday, and Admiral Boone has been asked to chair."

Harm smiled a little. Once the CAG, always the CAG. "Anyone suggest that he might have a conflict of interest?"

"Why, because you saved his life once and his career, what, three times? It's not a court-martial, Commander. It's just a formality." The older man paused, seeing his less-than-enthusiastic expression. "It *is* just a formality, right?"

"Are you asking me if I screwed the pooch, sir?"

"I think it's pretty clear that you didn't, Harm," A.J. answered seriously. "Seems as if the only one who believes otherwise is you."

"I don't. Not really." The pilot shook his head, looking down at the brace on his knee. "I know I did everything I could, sir, but the fact is, I splashed a forty-million-dollar plane. I damn near killed my RIO and myself, and I put everyone I care about through absolute

hell. It's hard not to wonder if maybe we shouldn't have been in the air at all."

"You're not the type to second-guess yourself, even when the stakes are high. In fact, that's usually when your convictions are strongest."

"My life at JAG and my personal life are two different things, sir."

"They don't look too different from over here." The admiral crossed his arms, a sneaking suspicion entering his mind. This sudden introspection might have less to do with Harm's guilt over the crash than his guilt over another, more complicated matter. The theory was solid, but needed testing, and there was only one way to do it. "Have you spoken to the colonel since you got home?"

Something in the C.O.'s tone made it clear that he already knew the answer. "Ah, no, sir. I haven't."

"Was there something unclear about her request for you to call her?"

Harm blinked, confused, but kept his composure. "I believe, Admiral, that she requested for me to call her when I wanted to. I ... haven't gotten to that point yet."

A.J. chose his words carefully. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but Mac hasn't exactly been herself this week. She looks like she's just going through the motions. For a Marine, she's pretty damn close to a wreck. No one was more upset by what happened than she was. Believe me."

"I know, sir. That's why I haven't been able to talk to her." The junior officer sighed heavily, drawing his hand across his forehead. "I destroyed her wedding. I seem to have a knack for throwing a wrench in her plans as soon as she gets them on course. I can't imagine why she'd even want to talk to me."

"Maybe she likes the wrenches you throw," A.J. countered, earning a shocked stare. He shook his head. "I understand more than you think I do, son. She's not moping around my bullpen because her caterers are complaining, or because the church is booked for the next six months. She's facing the reality that she nearly lost someone very important to her ... and she's figuring out just how important."

"With all due respect, sir - "

"Harm, I know I told you once to never look back. But I'm wondering if maybe you should have ignored me."

"I look back all the time, Admiral - probably too much for my own good." There was a hard edge in his voice: the sound of defeat. "But I never turn back. There's a difference."

"Well, if there was ever a time to break with tradition, this is it." A.J. was not about to let one of his best officers give up on himself so easily. Slowly, the JAG began to realize something. "This has nothing to do with pride, does it? You honestly don't believe that Mac could possibly be in love with you."

Harm flinched at hearing the words aloud, but didn't yield. "Why wouldn't I believe that?" he asked quietly, his gaze charged with bitterness. "Because she'd going to marry

someone else, maybe?"

"I doubt it. Every time someone mentions the wedding, she changes the subject." The admiral leaned forward. "Trust me on this, because I've seen a lot in my time. In my experience, Mac has acted like this exactly once before - when a certain partner of hers turned in his JAG insignia for an F-14. I honestly thought that things were different now, with this wedding and all, but apparently they're not. The fact is, she needs you - maybe not to survive, but certainly to be happy. And I seriously doubt that you can deny feeling the same."

"Oh, I can deny it. I've gotten very good at denying it to just about everyone for the past few months ... even myself." He took a deep breath. "But I'm not going to do it any more. Even though you're the last person I should be admitting it to."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," A.J. said firmly. He didn't particularly want to consider the regulatory hurdles they'd theoretically be facing. "This is definitely not an official discussion."

"Thank you, sir. But I think you're wrong about Mac. She might have doubts, but she'd never do something she didn't feel was right, especially something as important as marriage. She's too strong for that."

It made sense, he had to admit. How could they reconcile their feelings with their actions? "Nobody's perfect, Harm," he replied, wishing he could do better. "All I can say is that she's probably in more or less the same place you are. It's just that her situation presented her with different choices, and she tried to do the best she could. I don't know how much you two have said to each other, but I'm guessing that there's still a ways to go. For your own sakes, and for the sake of my office, don't wait too much longer. All right?"

The younger man lowered his head and nodded silently. A.J. stood up and retrieved his cover. "Then my shrink duties are done, and not a moment too soon. Don't get up - I'll show myself out. Get well soon, Commander. I'm starting to miss the weekly complaints from SecNav."

"Aye, sir. Thank you, Admiral."

"My pleasure."

When he'd gone, Harm lay back on the couch, his mind whirling. He'd never known the admiral's intuition to be wrong before, but if he was right ... Regardless of what Sarah Mackenzie felt or didn't feel, one thing did become clear in his mind. Mentally preparing himself for the task ahead, he picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hi, it's me. Can you come over?"

Same time Across town

Renee numbly set the phone back in its cradle. She'd known instantly from the tone of his voice what he wanted to talk about. It wasn't as if she'd never had this experience

before.

It had just never hurt this much before.

She walked around her apartment in a daze, gathering up anything that belonged to him. After a year and a half, there was surprisingly little of it. Maybe that should have been an indication of how this would end. A few of his clothes - a spare khaki uniform - a toothbrush - a well-used Tom Clancy paperback - that worn-out leather jacket that smelled so much like him ...

She placed it all in a bag and bravely strode toward the door to face the inevitable. Live and learn, they always said, and she'd learned plenty from this man. If nothing else, she could hold on to that.

Same time
Mac's Apartment
Georgetown

Mac wearily tossed her briefcase on the couch and surveyed the disaster area that was her living room. Wedding gifts were piled in every available space, mocking her with their hints of domestic bliss. One of these days she'd have to get Harriet to come help her send them all back.

Belatedly, she realized with a jolt what she'd been thinking. Had she just subconsciously surrendered the idea of ever marrying Mic?

Who the hell are you kidding? You knew that a week ago, when you admitted that your world stopped for one Harmon Rabb, Jr. You just don't have the first clue what to do about it.

Why wouldn't he call? Harriet had prodded gently, but he'd remained reticent. Even the admiral had promised to talk to him, after she'd confessed her frustrations in one of the most singularly humiliating moments of her career. What had happened to make him so withdrawn - and why was it turning her into a junior-high cliché?

Before she could complete the thought, the phone rang, jarring her out of her reverie. She reached for it. "Hello?"

"Evening, love," Mic's voice replied, sounding slightly tense. "Back from another day of making the world safe for democracy?"

"Something like that."

He hesitated. "I don't mean to push you, Sarah, but do you think we could talk about our plans? For the wedding, or ..."

He knows, she realized. Mic, please forgive me. "Yes," she said, with far more conviction than she felt. "Let's do that. I'll meet you outside in an hour."

It had been amazingly simple, for a relationship with such a complex genesis. They sat on a park bench and used some of the standard break-up lines, along with some new ones. In the end, there was no anger: only sadness, for a love that had so nearly been right. When the tears dried, she pulled back from his embrace and placed the ring in his hand.

When they went their separate ways, he wandered into a nearby pub and slumped into a corner booth, wanting to shut out the world. After a few minutes, he noticed a woman at the bar, her blond hair not quite obscuring her reddened eyes. Mic shook his head, wondering if perhaps Sarah might have her happiness after all. He picked up his beer and went to join Renee.

Back at her apartment, Mac fell onto her bed, out of tears. She'd just given up a future with a man who'd made her feel more secure and loved than anyone ever had. All for the slimmest possibility that she could overcome regulations, dead girlfriends, and God knew what else to get through to her emotionally-challenged partner. And that would be only the first step.

Tonight, though, she pushed that to the back of her mind. Tonight she was entitled to mourn the end of a difficult but meaningful relationship, and the rest could wait until tomorrow.

So of course, the phone rang.

She ignored it for a while, but the uncertain voice on her answering machine made her lunge for the phone.

"Mac, it's me. I'm sorry it took me so long to call ..."

She seized the handset. "Harm?"

"Oh. You're home."

"Yeah, I was just out walking Jingo," she lied. "How are you?"

"Okay. Mom's heading home tomorrow, so I'm probably going to ignore her strict instructions and come back to work on Monday."

"Are you sure you're up to that?"

"I'll take it easy. But I have my review board on Tuesday, and I have to do something besides sitting around here all day." There was a pause. "I'm really sorry I haven't called."

"No, it's all right. The phone works both ways, and all. I just wasn't sure if you really wanted to talk to me."

"I didn't. I mean, I wasn't ready to. But I think I am now."

She sat up straighter, startled. "You mean to *really* talk? Not like last time, when a cryptologist would have come in handy?"

Even as she said it, she regretted the harsh tone. But he responded to the statement,

not the tone. "Last time I hadn't thought it through. I don't expect you had, either."

"Point taken." She sighed. "The thing is, now's not the best time - "

"I know. I'm not asking you to drop everything and come over. I just ... wanted you to know that I'm trying."

"Then I guess I'll take your word for it."

"Actually, I can offer proof."

"Proof of what? That you're trying to let go?"

"I'm still not sure I know what that means, but yeah." After a moment, he explained. "I told Renee it was over tonight."

Mac sat very still for a few seconds, letting that knowledge sink in. Was it possible that they could finally ...?

"Mac?"

"I'm still here."

"I was expecting some fake sympathy."

"You can have the real thing. Like her or not, I know you two were good for each other in a lot of ways. There must be some part of you that loved her."

"Maybe. But not the biggest part. Doing it so soon after this whole mess was cruel, but I couldn't keep going like we were. I think she knew that before I even asked."

"What a night," she said quietly, not elaborating further. He deserved to know that Mic was gone as well, but something told her to leave it be for now. "We will have that talk, Harm, but let's save it until your mishap review's finished. The last thing you need is to be stressing about two different things."

A hint of his usual demeanor shone through. "Who said I was stressing?"

"You stress about everything." Despite the tumult of emotions swirling in her brain, she smiled. "I'll see you on Monday, then. Do you need a ride to work?"

"Don't worry, Gunny's got me covered. But thanks."

"Good night, sailor."

"Night, marine."

Hanging up the phone, she looked down at her newly-bare ring finger. Was she out of her mind? Was it possible to be depressed and hopeful at the same time?

God, my life is weird.

She pushed a box of champagne flutes out of the way and curled up on the couch. This week was going to be one for the record books.

**0843 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia**

Fifty-eight minutes. Mac had been at work for fifty-eight minutes, and so far no one had noticed the missing ring. She'd been politely dodging calls from friends all weekend, apologizing for the canceled ceremony and fending off the endless questions. Eventually she'd have to face everyone with the truth, but she hadn't yet settled on a plan of attack.

Her nose buried in a case file, she didn't notice Harriet hovering in the doorway of her office until the lieutenant cleared her throat. "Ma'am, how was your weekend?"

"Strange, but all right. How was yours?"

"Fine, thanks. Do you have the transcripts from the Nielson deposition? Bud's been looking all over for them."

"I think so. Just a sec." Mac skimmed through the stack of files on her desk and unthinkingly reached for a folder with her left hand. Harriet immediately saw the omission and gasped.

"Respectfully, Colonel - Sarah, would you like to revise your earlier statement? About your weekend being 'all right'?"

"I *am* all right, Harriet. I know what this looks like, but I really am. I'm starting to figure some things out. I just wish I hadn't hurt Mic so much in the process."

She nodded sympathetically. "Can I help?"

"Not right now, thanks. But I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything just yet."

"Of course." Harriet glanced over toward something out in the bullpen, and she began to understand. "I hope this isn't out of line, but does the reason for that have anything to do with a certain commander, six foot four, with a bit of a limp?"

"I'm not going to confirm or deny that." Mac felt a flush creep up her neck. Was she that easy to read? "Is he here?"

"Just came in."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. That'll be all."

"Aye, ma'am." Harriet wasn't sure whether to be sad or happy for her friend. She decided to reserve judgment, and went back to her desk to observe this reunion from a

distance.

Mac stood up from her desk and straightened her uniform. It had been over a week since she'd last seen him, and at that point he'd barely been able to get out of bed. She wondered how far 'back to normal' he'd managed to drag himself.

When she stepped out of her office, heading towards his, she came face to face with him, doing the opposite. They both stopped in mid-step and just looked at each other for a moment. She could make out the faint outlines of the knee brace under his summer whites, and he looked less than comfortable with the crutch. A fading bruise stretched up his forearm, and a barely-detectable bandage covered the small cut over his eye. Behind his gaze lingered a familiar kind of determination, warning the world at large that he didn't want to be treated as if he would break. Pity was something this officer had never been able to tolerate.

"Hi, flyboy," she said softly.

Harm's lips twisted in a wry grin. "When was the last time you called me that?"

"Not that long, actually. But you were unconscious at the time."

The grin faltered a little. "Hardly counts, then."

"Your voice sounds a lot better."

"Yeah, it's amazing how much better the world looks when you realize you can breathe without coughing." His eyes never left hers. "I was coming over to ask you something."

It was all she could do not to blush. "It's not personal, is it?" she asked, arching one eyebrow.

"Not this early in the day, it's not."

"In that case, come on in." She held open her office door, and he hobbled inside. "Here, get off your feet."

"Thanks, but just staying up is easier than trying to get up later." He leaned against her file cabinet. "I've come for a favor. How bad is your schedule for the next couple of days?"

"Not very. What do you need?"

"I go before the review board tomorrow afternoon. I know there's no reason to worry about it, but I'm entitled to counsel, and I'd really appreciate it if you'd sit in."

"Of course," she responded immediately. "But, Harm, you don't need me. It's not like it'll be too complicated from a legal standpoint."

"I know," he said quietly. "I just want you there with me. The last time I had to do this, ten years ago ... it's not exactly a memory I'd like to revisit. Do you mind?"

"Of course not." Warmed by his unconditional trust, she gave him a reassuring smile.

“Just tell me when and where, and I’ll be there.”

He returned the smile gratefully. “Thank you. I’ll get out of your hair now - I need a head start on the walk over to staff call.” He turned to leave, but she called to him.

“Harm?”

“Hmmm?”

“Don’t get out of my hair. Ever.”

He nodded once, and a trace of that stunning flyboy grin escaped. “Likewise, ninja-girl.”

She watched him leave, allowing herself for the first time to consciously admire his handsome figure. Even at less than full strength, he could still light up a room. Not for the first time, she wondered what was happening in his mind. Maybe tomorrow, once all this was over, she’d finally find out.

1427 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

“Know what I hate most about having a screwed-up leg? The total inability to pace properly.”

Harm was leaning back in a conference-room chair, his foot up on another. He was repeatedly tossing a soft-foam stress ball up in the air. Mac shook her head. “Spin your engines back down. I’m sure they’ll be done with Skates before long.”

“I can’t help it. I just want this to be over.” As the ball landed with a *smack* against his palm, he tilted his head toward her. “Mac, do you ever get the feeling you’re living in a fishbowl?”

“As a female Marine, I’m intimately familiar with that sensation.” She leaned her elbows on the table. “Can’t imagine it’s a new experience for you, either.”

“Not really. I’m used to having people pay attention to what I do, at least in the courtroom. But since I got back, I feel like - I don’t know, like everyone’s actually watching *me*. Like they’re expecting something to happen. Does the entire bullpen know something I don’t?”

“I doubt it. Besides, I thought you knew everything.” She flashed a smirk, although she suspected that most of the bullpen staff had in fact noticed something that he had yet to discover. They were probably falling all over themselves to see his reaction.

Harm shot her a ‘very funny’ look, but turned as the door opened. Skates ducked her head in and offered him a confident smile. “You’re up, Harm. It’s not too bad. They let Admiral Boone do most of the talking. Good luck.”

"Okay, here goes." They stood up from the table. He fumbled with his crutch, and Mac reached out to steady him. As he glanced down at her hand on his arm - the one with the bare ring finger - he jerked back with an expression of pure shock.

"When did *this* happen?" he demanded in a hushed voice.

She cursed herself inwardly. Of all the worst possible times ... "Thursday night," she answered, not meeting his gaze. "Just before you called."

"Why didn't you - "

"Harm, please. Let's just get through today."

They walked in silence to the boardroom. Mac slid into a seat while Harm came to attention in front of the podium. "Reporting as ordered, sirs."

Admiral Thomas Boone nodded from his place at the center of the bench. His steely gray eyes gave no indication that he considered the man in front of him a trusted friend and comrade in arms. "Thank you, Commander Rabb. Yeoman, get the commander a chair."

"Thank you, sir, but I'd prefer to stand."

"Then stand at ease."

Harm placed his right hand behind his back and braced himself with the crutch, his resolute gaze never wavering.

"State your name and duty station for the record."

"Commander Harmon Rabb, Junior. JAG Headquarters, Falls Church, Virginia."

Boone folded his hands. "Commander, over the past few hours, we've heard what I'm convinced is a fairly thorough account of the mishap that occurred on 25 May. But as the pilot, the full story begins and ends with you. Please start at the beginning, from the point at which the decision to fly was made."

"Aye-aye, sir." Harm continued to stare directly forward as his memory returned to the deck of the *Patrick Henry*. "My RIO, Lieutenant Hawkes, and I were both anxious to get back to the beach. She wanted to see her fiancé, and I ... I had a promise to keep. Captain Ingles and Captain Pike agreed that if the weather cleared, we could be the first ones off the deck. The weather group predicted that the incoming storm cell wasn't moving fast enough to affect our flight path, so we went. But the storm didn't follow the rules."

Mac listened as he dispassionately relayed the events of the flight, hoping that he'd been able to put their aborted conversation out of his mind. She imagined herself in his place, struggling to maintain control of a dying aircraft as warnings flashed all around; the panic he must have felt as the first ejection command failed; the invading darkness as hope dimmed out on the unyielding seas. How else but by divine intervention had he come back to her?

When he'd finished his story, there was a slight pause while the five officers on the bench scribbled in their notes. Then, the questions began.

"During your preflight checks, how did the oxygen levels read?"

"All green, sir. The plane crews on the *Henry* are top-notch. If there had been any indication of a problem, they would have caught it."

"Why didn't you declare an emergency at the first sign of a malfunction?"

"I didn't feel the situation warranted it, until the stabilizers went. Up to that point, we'd been trying to locate an alternate landing site. But the warnings compounded on each other so rapidly that making landfall at all became impossible. By then, no emergency procedures by Washington Center could have been effective."

"How much time elapsed between the original warning and the decision to eject?"

"I can't be sure, sir. Best guess would be six to eight minutes."

It seemed like such a short time in the here and now. In the center of a storm, though, it had been a lifetime. Boone nodded, as impassive as ever. "Commander, I expect you know we have to ask this question, so don't shoot the messenger, all right?"

"Understood, sir."

"You were restricted from night ops for a number of years because of a night vision problem which, along with poor weather conditions, contributed to a ramp strike on the USS *Seahawk* in 1991. Can you assure the board that no vision problems contributed to *this* mishap?"

Harm didn't hesitate in his response. "Sir, I have never once experienced any difficulty with my eyes since my surgery two years ago. I could see exactly what was happening on the night of the mishap, and what I saw told me that we were going down no matter what I did."

"I suppose that answers my next question, so let me broaden the scope. Do you have any concerns at all about the actions or abilities of the plane crew, Lieutenant Hawkes, or yourself?"

His expression didn't change, but a light in his eyes told the former CAG that Hammer was still very much alive. "Give me two good legs and a Tomcat, sir, and you'll have your answer."

With that declaration, Mac knew her flyboy was back, and a wave of relief swept over her. Yes, flying had taken him from her more than once - and this time, nearly forever - but quite simply, it was part of what made him so special ... part of what made her love him.

There. I finally admitted it to myself. Do I get points for that?

Boone nodded again, with the barest hint of pride. "Thank you, Commander. We'll conference shortly, and you'll be summoned when we have our decision. Dismissed."

Harm came to attention and turned to the door, where Mac met him. "I think that went well. Didn't it?"

He wasn't listening, already switching focus. "Come with me." And he limped swiftly back toward Ops, leaving a somewhat bewildered partner in his wake. She hurried to catch up and followed him into his office, where he promptly shut the door.

"No wonder the whole damn office has been watching me like a hawk. You took that ring off last Thursday? When precisely were you going to mention it to me?"

"Like I said, one thing at a time. I wanted to wait until we could have a proper conversation about it. About us."

"All right, let's." He looked at her intently.

"Now?"

"Now."

"Harm, that 'whole damn office' is right outside that window, and if you close the blinds now, you'll send the rumor mill into overdrive."

"Then let's hope no one out there reads lips." He sat on the edge of the desk. "Why did you call it off?"

"I think you know," she said quietly.

"I think I do, too, but there aren't going to be any more misunderstandings about this. You have to give it to me straight."

She lifted her chin and spoke calmly. "Because I don't love him the way I should. And I finally decided that rather than spend my life wondering what might have been, I'd wait."

For the first time, a glimmer of hope shone through in his voice. "Wait?"

"As long as it takes." As he let that sink in, careful to mask his feelings from curious passers-by, she watched him from her place by the window. "Your turn."

"Ask away."

"Why did you pick that night to end it with Renee?"

He sighed. "Because you were right. There was a part of me that did love her. And that part of me couldn't go on hurting her another day."

"I'm not sure I've ever heard you use the words 'me' and 'love' in the same sentence before." She said it lightly, but neither heard it as a joke.

"That's because I don't think I've ever been completely certain that I was in love before. I didn't have a frame of reference."

"And now you do?" she whispered.

His eyes held hers, and the depth of emotion she found there sent a rush of warmth

through her body. "I've been such an idiot," he said simply. "I fell in love with my best friend, and I don't even know when or how it happened."

Out of sheer willpower, she was able to keep herself from crying out for joy. After a moment, she found her voice. "Do you have any idea how many times I've thought about what those words would sound like coming from you?"

"I'm as surprised as you are," he replied, a little unsteadily.

"Why do you look so afraid? Isn't it patently obvious that for some reason, I love you, too?"

At this, a new expression came over his handsome features, one she'd never seen before. Finally, after years and miles of struggle, Harmon Rabb had completely, utterly let his guard down. The happiness in his face truly reflected his heart, and Sarah Mackenzie was the only one he'd allowed to see it. Somehow, that thrilled her even more than his admission of love.

"But why now, Harm?"

"I honestly don't know. Do you?"

"Not really." She spread her hands helplessly. "Maybe coming so close to losing everything gave us the push we needed. But after so long ... I mean, what happened to all those reasons we had?"

"They weren't reasons. They were excuses. Right now I can't even remember what any of them were."

"I only remember one." She inclined her head toward the bustling activity of the bullpen. "We can't just wish away the rules."

"I know. Believe me, that's the only thing keeping me from walking across this room and kissing you until you can't see straight."

Her dark eyes danced. "We'll figure out a way, won't we?"

"Absolutely. I don't know how yet, but we will."

As they stared at each other, repressing every instinct to rush into each other's arms, the phone on his desk rang. Breaking the spell, Harm reached for it and listened for a moment, then hung up. "The board's about to publish their findings." They started for the door, but he caught her hand for the briefest of moments. "To be continued," he promised, his voice low and husky.

And then it was back to business as usual. They strode out of the office and down the hall with characteristic professionalism. At the door to the boardroom, they met up with Skates, and the two aviators stood before the panel.

Admiral Boone began to read from his report. "Over the course of the investigation into the loss of Tomcat 241 on 25 May of this year, it has become apparent that, as is often the case, many factors contributed to the incident. Maintenance of older aircraft such as the F-14s

is becoming increasingly more intensive, and features that upgraded models have, such as lightning protection on avionic systems, can be complicated to retrofit to the fleet when squadrons are deployed at sea. This is not to say that there are no fingers to point. Some questions that bear further investigation are the false reading of the oxygen sensors, the ejection seat misfire, and the weather limit procedures, among others. These matters will be attended with due process. However, it is the opinion of this board that no fault lies with the aircrew in this case. Furthermore, Commander Rabb and Lieutenant Hawkes are to be commended for their performance under what could only be described as extreme conditions." The admiral looked up and allowed himself a small smile. "Glad to see I taught you two well."

"Yes, sir," they said in unison, exchanging a glance as he continued.

"Therefore, there is to be no disciplinary action taken in this matter, and at such time as he is medically cleared, Commander Rabb's flight qualifications will be restored. Harm, Beth, you got a new lease on life that night. Make the most of it. We are adjourned."

Harm embraced his RIO and made her promise to look him up when her tour was over. Officially free of the weight that had held him down ever since that awful night, he seized Mac's arm and all but dragged her around the corner to the little-used freight elevator.

"Where are we going?"

"The only place I can think of that nobody will look for us."

After navigating a couple of narrow halls and a set of steps she hadn't even known existed, they opened the door to the roof. Mac stepped out, unable to keep from laughing. "How long have you known how to get onto the roof, sailor?"

"Ever since half my pay for four months funded the repairs of said roof. I figured I'd get a return on my investment." He shrugged and looked around with a sheepish grin. "It's great for time alone."

"Or not entirely alone." She gazed out at the courtyard below. "Is this where you come to keep your secrets?"

"It was. Now ... I don't think I'll have to keep too many secrets anymore."

Swiftly, he pulled her close and enveloped her in the most dizzying kiss either of them had ever experienced. This kiss was not born of desperation, like the stolen moment on the admiral's porch; nor was it born of pain and comfort, like the surreal night on the Norfolk docks. This kiss released the torrent of conflict and passion that had been pent up for so long, and it altered their world forever.

After a measureless time, they broke apart, and he rested his forehead against hers. "Do something for me?" she asked breathlessly.

"Anything."

"Call me by my name? When we're not on duty, I mean?"

"You mean like this?" He leaned his lips close to her ear and spoke tenderly. "I love

you, Sarah. With everything I am.”

A tear traced its way down her cheek, and she reached up to kiss him again. “This is going to be complicated,” she pointed out with a smile.

“Considering what it took to get us here, this ought to be a walk in the park.” He brushed the tear away. “Today we get a fresh start. Let’s get it right.”

Epilogue: Three weeks later

1056 EDT
U.S. Coast Guard Station
Milford Haven, Virginia

Nick Sheridan studied the duty roster for the week and leaned back in his chair. A slow day was decidedly a good day in this line of work. They’d been training hard in preparation for a possible deployment down south, which could only mean one thing. Drug interdiction was a critical part of the Coast Guard’s mission, but all things considered, he’d rather be aiding lost boaters than busting coke runners. It was less depressing.

“You see the game last night, Sheridan?”

“Kiss my ass, Smitty.” The Red Sox had lost, and lost badly. He owed a couple of enlisted Cleveland fans money on that game. “Hey, heads up over there.”

The assorted crewmen lounging around the wardroom glanced up. A man in Navy whites and a woman in Marine green had just come through the front doors. The Navy man leaned slightly on a cane as they walked toward the group. When they were close enough for Sheridan to see the three stripes on his shoulders, he jumped to his feet. “Attention on deck!”

Everyone leaped up. “As you were,” the commander allowed. “Lieutenant Sheridan?”

“That’s me, sir.”

“Your skipper told us we’d find you here. He’ll be joining us in a moment. I just wanted to meet you first.” At the younger man’s wary expression, he smiled a little. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

Sheridan’s mind raced. “Afraid not, sir.”

“Relax, you’re not in trouble. I’m here to present you and your unit with a commendation. I assume you recall the search and rescue you conducted last month?”

“Yes, sir - peeled a Navy pilot off the rocks off North Carolina.” Suddenly, he noticed the wings on the commander’s uniform, and it all fell into place.

“Harmon Rabb. I’m the one you peeled off the rocks.” Commander Rabb extended his hand. “I think I owe you a case of beer, Lieutenant.”

The two men exchanged a firm handshake. "All in a day's work, sir. How are you doing?"

"Fine, thanks. I should be able to ditch the cane in a week or two. You guys do a hell of a job. They told me down at Portsmouth that the difference between full recovery and permanent damage was a matter of minutes. There are a lot of people who won't ever forget what you did that day. I just thought you should know."

"Thank you, sir. We don't do the job to get a pat on the back, but it sure doesn't hurt." His gaze shifted to the lovely colonel who'd accompanied Rabb. "Come along for the ride, ma'am?"

"Something like that." She linked her hand through her partner's, quietly defying the 'public affection in uniform' policy. Sheridan's eyebrows went up, but he wasn't about to question two senior officers, even on his own turf. "I'm one of the people who's least likely to forget what you did. I wanted to add my gratitude as well. If you Coasties ever need a favor, you know where to turn."

"Will do, ma'am."

When the citations had been handed out, and they'd all shaken hands one last time, the officers from Washington turned to leave. Sheridan then remembered something. "Sir, wait just a second."

He dashed out of the room briefly and returned with an envelope. "I almost forgot about this. We found it in the pocket of your flight suit when we were working on you. We were going to mail it to you, but I guess it kind of slipped my mind."

Handing it over, he looked a little self-conscious. The commander looked inside, and an odd smile came over his face. "Thank you."

"We were taking bets on who the girl was. I guess we don't have to wonder anymore. I have to admit, though, nobody pegged her for a Marine."

Perplexed, the colonel only shook her head. "Semper paratus, Lieutenant."

"Semper fidelis, ma'am."

Outside in the parking lot, Harm chuckled. "I guess 'Go Navy' doesn't quite have the same ring, does it?"

"And don't you forget it." She leaned over to try and grab the envelope, but he held it out of her reach. "Come on. With that leg, I could have you on the ground in three seconds."

"Now *that's* a red light." But he relented and handed it over. Inside was a weathered photograph, creased and stained by the salt water. She still recognized it immediately. It was one of her favorite shots from Bud and Harriet's wedding. The two of them stood together, beaming out at the camera and looking for all the world like they'd always belonged right there, with each other. Had three years really passed since then?

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "You carried this with you?"

“Not just this time. Every time I went up.” He shrugged, unable to explain. “I guess some part of me always knew.”

“Why did we wait so long?”

“I don’t think of it that way. I’d rather think of it as ... taking the time to make sure everything would be perfect.”

“And is it perfect?”

“So far, so good.” He brushed a feather-light kiss against her cheek. “Come on, Sarah. Let’s go home.”

***** THE END *****