

"Why?" Marcy noticed the look of distaste that crossed his face.

"Nothing. I just don't think her kind have any business in the military," Jim said.

"What do you mean, her kind?" Marcy asked, her shoulders tensing and hands balling into fists.

"Homosexuals."

"How the hell do you know she's gay? You've only met her a couple times."

"You can tell," Jim replied. "Look at her uniform for Christ's sake."

Though Julie wasn't completely within regulation, with her too long hair, wrinkled coveralls and unpolished boots, she loved the military as much as Marcy did. Just in a different way. Julie enjoyed fixing the airplanes, figuring out what was wrong with them and then following her reasoning to the end. She was one of the best technicians in the shop. Just because she didn't go along with all of the bullshit military life sometimes entailed it didn't mean she wasn't dedicated to her job. Julie just didn't understand why you had to play the game in order to get ahead. Marcy understood it all too well.

"There's an old saying you might not be familiar with. 'Don't judge a book by its cover,'" Marcy said with a slight smile that held no trace of humor.

"I'm also friends with people in your squadron, in case you've forgotten. I know what they say about her," Jim replied. "I know the law says we can't do anything as long as they aren't blatant about it, thanks to Clinton. I just don't agree with it. You can't count on them if

it comes to a life or death situation," he added, shrugging his shoulders.

"You can be such an ass," Marcy said, again preparing to get out of the car.

"What's your problem?" Jim asked. "This used to be something we agreed on."

"Things change. Especially after fourteen months."

Jim didn't reply. They'd already had this argument. He'd tried to convince her his reasons for staying in Diego Garcia were completely career motivated. She knew better. She'd heard the rumors. He'd fallen in love with the woman he'd been seeing; he'd even contemplated asking Marcy for a divorce so they could get married. Then he'd been dumped.

From what she'd heard he'd taken it pretty hard, but she hadn't been able to feel sorry for him. When he'd come home he'd expected to fall back on her and have someone to soothe his wounded pride and ego. She'd asked him about the divorce.

He'd denied it too quickly. After that she'd spent as little time as possible in the same room with him.

"Look, I have to go. We'll talk about this later," Marcy said, stepping from the car and slamming the door behind her.

Approaching the entrance to the security gate, she heard Jim backing out of the parking space and gave a sigh of relief as he left. Julie and the young airman stopped talking as she neared them. Julie smiled at her.

"Hi, Julie. Hi, Josh," Marcy greeted them, fishing in her pocket for her ID.



"Hi," Julie said.

"Hi, Marcy," Josh said, looking at her, then at Julie.

"What's up?" Marcy asked, sensing an undertone passing between them.

"I've been on watch since nine o'clock this morning. Do you think I could just go home when I'm done in a couple of hours, or do I have to work tonight?" Josh asked.

"I haven't been in the shop yet. Let me see what's going on. Stop by after you're relieved, and I'll let you know. If there's not much to do, I don't see why you can't."

"Okay." Josh made an attempt to give her a smile, but it fell short.

"Are you on your way into the hangar, or over to the smoking area?" Julie asked.

"Smoking area. I've still got about half an hour before I'm due in for pass down," Marcy said, consulting her watch.

"I'll join you. It's hard to tell what they'd find for me to do if I went in now. See ya," Julie said to Josh, before turning to walk away.

Marcy looked at Josh and noticed his eyes moving from her to Julie. The look on his face made her nervous. She had seen it too often lately.

"So, what were you two in such deep conversation about?" Marcy asked heading for the alley separating two of the hangars.

"He was asking me if I thought you'd let him go after his watch."

"Why was he asking you?" Marcy demanded, a note of panic in her voice.

"How should I know? Ask him."

Marcy didn't reply. As they walked, she ignored the members of her squadron

they encountered. Julie called out greetings and witty comments, but Marcy's stride and purposeful attitude didn't encourage stopping for conversation, so the two of them continued walking until they reached the end of the hangars, then veered right.

The smoking area sat between the back of a small gray storage building and the security fence. With the use of expectedly military logic, someone had decided it would be a good idea to place three wooden picnic tables in the space. Unfortunately, since the climate in Whidbey Island tended toward rain ninety-percent of the time, and there was no shelter over the tables, they were usually ignored in preference of huddling under the overhanging bit of roof the small building provided.

Today, however, the sky was uncharacteristically clear so Marcy walked over to the farthest of the tables. Sitting near the corner of the tabletop with her feet resting flat on the bench seat, she finally lit the cigarette she'd been craving earlier.

Julie took a seat on the table next to Marcy. They were close enough so they could talk without being overheard, but far enough away to avoid suspicion.

Marcy didn't feel like breaking the silence between them yet, so she turned to look out at the flight line instead. The beautiful landscape in this area of the country had always fascinated her. From where she sat she could make out the Olympic Mountains in the distance, their jagged lines etched into the sky. The sun had just started its descent toward the horizon, but since they were so far north and the sun set so early, it wouldn't be

long before the skyline would be a fiery combination of reds, oranges, and purples. If the sky stayed clear tonight, and there wasn't much work to do, she knew she'd find a few minutes to go out away from the lights of the hangars and watch the stars. She always hoped to see at least a few shooting stars as they made their rapid descent toward the earth.

Marcy knew the main reason she loved it so much here. The towering mountains and lush green of the trees were nothing like the flat brown state of Texas she had left behind at eighteen. The same age her mother had been when she had given birth to a baby she neither wanted nor cared about. Most of Marcy's life had been spent with her grandparents. A couple that weren't any fonder of the idea of raising a child than their daughter had been. They saw it as their duty though, as good Southern Baptists. A fact they had enjoyed reminding her and others of as often as possible. She hadn't spoken to them since she left and as far as she was concerned she didn't have any family in the civilian world.

"Why didn't you just let Josh go?" Julie asked, finally breaking the silence. "Damnit, I've got responsibilities," Marcy said. "There are plenty of times I've stood watch in the middle of night, then gone straight out to an aircraft afterward for an o'five hundred preflight. I know his type, and one of two things will happen to him in the future. Scenario one, he'll get out when his enlistment is over, take the college money, go back to school and after graduation, find a job in which he'll be as lazy as he is now. Scenario two, he'll

get some girl knocked up, and have to stay in to support his new wife and kid. He'll probably end up going back to the barracks and drinking half the night away with his buddies anyway."

"Not everyone fits neatly into the pigeon hole you put them in. Passing judgment on people really is one of your worst faults," Julie said.

"I know. I hate all the changes I see going on around me, though. I love the Navy. It's the only place I've ever belonged. It's just not as disciplined as it used to be."

"You have to admit some changes are for the better," Julie said, reaching over and laying her hand on Marcy's.

Marcy didn't say anything as she quickly removed her hand from Julie's, glancing around to make sure nobody had seen.

Julie sighed and decided to change the subject, "You and Jim seemed to be having a pretty heated conversation in the parking lot."

"He knows something's going on," Marcy said, getting up from the table and starting to pace.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are going to tell him the truth, aren't you?" Julie asked

Marcy took a deep breath. "Julie, can we talk about this later?" It struck her as odd that this was twice in the same day she'd posed that question to someone.

"No," Julie said, staring at her.

After a few moments Marcy stopped and faced her. "Julie, I'm sorry. I know I said I would, but I just can't. I've agonized over this, believe me, but it



could mean the end of my career. You know it's a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. If I told him, all he'd have to do is report it and I'd be finished. Even if they didn't kick me out, any chance I have of making rank or getting into an Officers Training Program would be shot. I'd never be more than what I am now, a 'first class' running the night shift in an AT shop."

"What the hell are you going to do then?"

"I love you, you have to know that, but you can't expect me to be willing to give up my career. It's the only thing I'm sure of right now." Marcy shook her head. "I knew you wouldn't understand. You've never had to make this kind of decision."

After Marcy finished speaking, they both remained quiet for a while. Marcy went back to staring out at the flight line, and Julie stared at her.

"It's a wonder your eyes aren't brown instead of blue, you're so full of shit," Julie said quietly. "So I haven't been married, and I don't see the Navy as the end all, be all of my existence. At least I don't pretend to be something I'm not, making myself miserable in the process. Let me tell you something I do understand. I understand what it's like to lie awake at night, wishing sometimes life wasn't so hard for the person you loved. Trying to figure out ways to make it easier, and knowing you can't. You can try to lie to yourself and say the first time we were together was an accident, that we both drank too much, but what about the last five months? You want this as much as I do. You just don't want it to cost you anything." As Julie finished speaking she turned her gaze to her hands, which were clenched together on her lap.

Marcy heard the hurt and anger in Julie's voice as she spoke. She knew she should get up and walk away, leaving things as they were, but she just couldn't do it. She loved her too much. She had to try to make her understand.

She walked over and stood close to where Julie sat. She wanted to reach out and touch her, but didn't. "Do you think this is easy for me? If you do, you're wrong. I hate this as much as you do. I know this wasn't an accident, or caused by a night of drunken carelessness. Well, maybe in the beginning I thought it was," Marcy said with a slight smile. "I've come to realize though that I needed you. Hell, I still do. That doesn't change the fact I have to make a choice. I know it's not what you would've done. Please try and understand. The Navy is my home, my family. It's the only thing I've ever been any good at. It's all I know. I can't give up everything I've worked so hard for. Not for something I can't be sure will work out."

"Are you so sure the color of your uniform or how many ribbons you have on your chest will be enough?" Julie asked as she stood up to face Marcy. They were so close it would have only taken a step to bring them together.

"No, but I do know I have a future here. Can you say the same about us?" Marcy asked.

"I could, but would you believe me?"

"Probably not," Marcy said, as she reached out to take Julie's hand without thinking.

Before Julie could reply, Marcy heard the sounds of someone approaching the smoking area, but she wasn't quick enough to respond, as Jim came around the corner of the building.

"There you are. You forgot your gloves in the car," Jim said, the scene in front of him slowly sinking in. His steps slowed and the smile died from his face. Marcy watched his hand holding the gloves clench around them.

Marcy dropped Julie's hand and stepped away from her. As she did she knew it was the one thing she could've done that could never be taken back. Until that point, if she had wanted to, all the words that had been spoken could be undone. Hurt feelings could be mended, and decisions changed. Now, things were severed forever.

Out of the corner of her eye Marcy could see Julie square her shoulders as she stared at Jim, almost daring him to voice the thoughts they both knew were going through his mind.

Julie finally broke the silence. "Guess I better get inside and change to go home," she said before walking away. She held her head high and didn't glance at Jim as she passed him.



Marcy watched her go and felt her heart break. This was the way things had to be. She stared at Jim a few moments longer and then turned to look out over the flight line, hugging her arms around her.

She'd been wrong about the sunset. It wasn't a colorful, brilliant display, but instead just a whisper of fading light as the darkness forced the sun back behind the horizon where it belonged.