



Graphic by [Steph](#)

**Rating: R (maybe even NC-17)**

Classification: Vignette, Romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "The Mission" & "Exculpatory Evidence"

Author's Notes: This is my answer to the "Harm was kind of an ass last week" complaints - believe me, I agree wholeheartedly. It's another one of those things that popped into my head while I was supposed to be doing six other things, so it's not much. Actually, it's two ideas kind of crazy-glued together. As smut goes, it's pretty light-hearted, and it's not nearly as naughty as some things I've seen, so don't get your hopes up.

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"What a week."

"You can say that again, sir," Mac agreed, gathering her files and standing up from the conference table. "If Bud's hearing had gone even a minute longer, I think we might have had to issue flak vests."

Admiral Chegwiddden rolled his eyes. "The next time I have to bring charges against one of my own, I'm going to do a preemptive strike and send Rabb to Afghanistan. Indefinitely."

"He did get it done, sir."

"Yes, he did, and admirably, but my opinion stands." He picked up his briefcase. "I really appreciate your time tonight, Colonel. I'm sure updating JAG Instruction 24-185 wasn't high on your list of Friday night activities."

"It's only 1950, sir. Plenty of time for me to hit Blockbuster Video on the way home." She started toward the door, but her commanding officer's uncertain voice made her pause.

"Mac - I'm not making something out of nothing, am I? I mean, the commander has been..."

She bit her lip. "It's not just you, sir. He's been pretty much impossible to all of us lately."

"That's what I thought. Was it Bud's case, or what?"

"Admiral, if I knew, I'd tell you."

The officers stepped out into the quiet bullpen: Mac headed for the elevators, while A.J. headed back toward his office. Within a few steps, both stopped, caught off-guard. On Fridays, Ops tended to clear out at almost precisely 1700. There were a few people who often

worked a little late, but the one desk lamp still lit didn't belong to any of the usual suspects. It was glowing from behind the door marked *CDR Harmon Rabb*.

By that dim light, they could see Harm sitting at his desk, and the picture was radically opposite from his usual image. The swagger he'd been projecting recently had dissipated, leaving him to appear almost ... defeated. His uniform jacket and tie had been tossed over a chair and forgotten, and he was staring past the computer screen with empty eyes.

Mac turned back to the admiral, surprise evident on her face, and found his expression to be almost identical. Where had this come from? Was this the same man who'd alternately sauntered and stalked through the bullpen all week?

In a low voice, A.J. asked, "Do you think you could put off that Blockbuster run for a few more minutes?"

She wasn't about to refuse. For once, she could honestly say that she had no idea what was wrong with her partner, and she definitely wanted to find out. "What do you suggest, sir?"

"I'll let you know after I scout the terrain."

"Admiral - "

"Relax, Mac. I'll do my best to go easy on him."

As he moved decisively toward the office door, Mac stepped backwards into her own office, resigned to follow her C.O.'s lead.

A.J. stood in the doorway for four solid minutes before Harm even noticed his presence. Finally, he lifted his gaze, and instinctively rose from his chair. "Evening, sir. I didn't realize anyone was still here."

"Is that why you felt free to disregard the uniform policy, Commander?" The admiral folded his arms: he was still smarting from the less-than-dignified events of the week, and despite this unexpected shift, he had no intention of letting the junior officer slide.

Harm came to attention, but his voice was flat. "I apologize, Admiral. I'll remedy that immediately."

"No, don't bother." A.J. stepped into the office without waiting to be invited. "Are you behind on some especially vital case?"

"Not that I'm aware of, sir."

"Then what the hell are you still doing here?"

Harm hesitated fractionally, his gaze still fixed on the far wall. "Am I required to have an answer for that, sir?"

"No, but I was hoping your response would enlighten me as to your attitude of late."

He glanced down at the floor. "Admiral, about the whole fiasco with the captain..."

"You mean your little foray into matchmaking? You were projecting your conflict with Commander Turner. I know. That doesn't make it any less ridiculous or ill-advised." A.J. studied him with a hint of amusement. "Though I do have to wonder why you'd take such an interest in my love life when you're obviously not making a concerted effort on your own behalf."

At that, the younger man's lips twisted wryly. "Don't quote me on it, sir, but there's a strong possibility that I've given up on myself in that regard."

A.J. frowned, somewhat at a loss. He'd never been particularly good at reading his senior attorney, but today was a new low. "I know I'm going to regret even asking this, but is there something going on that I should know about?"

"No, sir. That is, I appreciate your concern, sir, but I'm fine. I just wanted to work on a few things, and I thought I could get more accomplished here than at home."

The Judge Advocate General was a man of many talents, but this type of counseling was not his strong suit. He knew his own limits, and he knew that someone else would probably handle this far better than he could. "Very well. Just don't stay all weekend. Good night, Commander."

"Night, sir."

A.J. was inside Mac's office in five strides. "Well, I struck out. He says he's just getting caught up. Have you ever seen him work late for no apparent reason?"

"I wouldn't call that 'working,' sir."

"No, neither would I. You want to give it a try?"

"Is that really a question, sir?"

"In that case, I leave it in your capable hands. Do whatever you want, but fix it."

"Aye, sir. Have a good weekend."

"You, too." A.J. headed for the elevators once more, confident that if anyone could snap Rabb out of his latest funk and restore order to the office, it was Sarah Mackenzie.

She stood in her partner's doorway for a moment, watching him stare at an open folder on his desk. The lack of motion in his eyes betrayed the fact that he wasn't really reading it, just fixing his gaze on a convenient point while his mind turned in tighter and tighter circles. Unlike the admiral, she chose not to wait for him to notice her. "So, are you going to call her?"

Harm glanced up with a raised eyebrow. "What is this, the tag-team approach?"

"The admiral was the warm-up act. I'm the main event."

"You certainly are." He waved a hand, inviting her in. "Am I going to call who?"

"The architect. Bobbi Latham's friend."

"Wasn't planning on it. I don't think I have the energy for a first date at the moment." He shrugged a little, leaning back in his chair.

"So you were just flirting with her out of habit or something?"

"I wasn't flirting."

Mac rolled her eyes. "Give me a break. Only you could flirt on instinct and not even realize it."

"You don't have anything better to do than screw with me right now?"

His response surprised her a little. Usually they just took each other's teasing as exactly what it was: good-natured kidding. Even when a jab hit too close to home, they rolled with it, hesitant to disturb the balance. But this time he sounded defensive, almost hurt.

"Sailor, what's going on?"

"What do you mean, what's going on? I'm working late. Why does everybody see that as a sign of the apocalypse?"

"Working late is one thing. I'm talking about the rest of the week. Harm, you hauled off on Sturgis the second the hearing was announced. You tried to pick a fight with me over my testimony when even Bud was trying to talk you down. You've been oscillating between fighter-jock arrogance and full-blown brooding, and none of us has the first clue where to start with you. I repeat the question - what's going on?"

"Mac, I had the career of one of my best friends resting on my shoulders. I'm not allowed to feel a little pressure?" At her disbelieving look, he relented slightly. "Look, I'm sorry. It's been a rough couple of days. I think that sortie I flew when we were out on the Seahawk rattled me a little more than I expected."

"The bombing run?" She narrowed her eyes. "Harm, in my experience, you're never more comfortable than when you're in the cockpit. Was the landing really that bad?"

"Bad hardly covers it. My afterburner didn't light until the last possible second. The LSO was yelling 'eject', and suddenly it felt like..." He looked up at her, and the twinge of humor in his voice didn't entirely mask the pain. "Well, let's just say I remember punching out over that deck once before, and it didn't go so well."

Mac had to admit that she hadn't thought of that. "You seemed fine after post-flight."

"I was fine - I *am* fine. It's just another close call to add to my list."

She nodded, moving over to the window to watch a few scattered snowflakes fall to the sidewalk. "So if you're fine, why are you hanging around here on a Friday night?"

He studied the pen in his hand intently, not meeting her gaze. "Guess I just didn't feel like going home," he answered quietly.

"Is Sergei that terrible a houseguest?" she quipped lightly. The look that flickered across his features, though, told her that she'd come closer than she thought. "Harm? Is something going on with Sergei?"

He sighed. "Same as it's been for the last few weeks. He needs my dad's letters, and my mom is afraid to give them up. And I'm caught between trying to help my brother and protecting my mother. Compared to this, playing keep-away with Sokol and his buddies in Russia was a walk in the park."

Suddenly something clicked in her mind, and she understood why he'd been so blindly determined that week. He couldn't do anything to help his brother, so he'd done the only thing he could think of: he'd protected Bud with everything he had. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize how hard things have been."

"It's not that bad. I can handle it. It's just..." Harm rubbed at his forehead wearily and looked up at her. "Do you ever get the feeling your life isn't going anywhere? That you're just treading water, doing what other people expect of you, because you don't know what else to do?"

"You mean, like you're just reacting to what happens around you, rather than taking an active role?"

"Something like that. It's not like I'm unhappy with my work or anything. It just seems like lately, JAG is the only thing that's going halfway right."

It surprised her to hear him so despondent. She'd seen many, many emotions from this man, but this one didn't fit him. "What's changed?" she asked tentatively, moving to sit on the corner of his desk.

"Maybe nothing. Maybe I've been going in circles for years, and I was just too clueless to notice."

Mac wasn't sure what to make of this sudden bleak introspection, or how to respond to it. Her feelings for her partner were clear, if somewhat conflicting: despite their battles, having him in her life was more important to her than ever. She'd tried more than once to clarify exactly what they meant to each other, but each time, his hesitation had convinced her to step back. She'd never been willing to surrender any more of herself than he was, and after all this time, it was hard to tell whether he'd ever be ready to take that step.

Now, though, he seemed to be reaching out for something, as if he'd woken up one morning and discovered a gaping hole in his life. Somehow, seeing that change spurred her to a decision. She was tired of the waiting game, plain and simple. Cryptic comments and unexplained glances weren't getting it done anymore - as if they ever would. If she waited for Harmon Rabb to figure out precisely what he wanted, they'd be right back where they started ... at eternity.

Maybe this odd revelation of his was the point of no return. If she confronted him, really confronted him with the unvarnished truth about her feelings, he'd have only two choices. She wasn't sure just how she'd handle it if the answer was no, but at least they'd be forced into action one way or the other.

*This ought to be interesting.*

She stepped around the desk and placed her hands on his shoulders. He tensed slightly at her touch, but relaxed as she kneaded the taut muscles expertly.

"I'd forgotten how good you are at that," he murmured, closing his eyes for just a second. "Mac, am I going nuts here, or what?"

"I don't think so," she answered, focusing her attention on a stubborn knot beside his left shoulder blade. "I think it's possible that you've finally grown up."

He started to twist around to face her, but she firmly held his shoulders in place. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, my guess is that the majority of people eventually decide they want more out of life than a fast car and a slick job. Some just figure it out quicker than others."

"Wow," he said quietly, unsure if he should be offended. "I open up for once, and you tell me I'm immature."

"Sorry. But that's not quite what I said. I think we were on to something before, about how you've been just reacting to your surroundings. I can't blame you - the way our lives have gone, it's hard to find any spare time or energy for ourselves sometimes. I guess until now, I thought you were okay with the way things are."

"I thought I was, too."

"But if you really want something different from what you have, you have to take some kind of action to get it. I think it's a law of physics."

"Funny thing. I used to be kinda good at physics." He paused a moment, allowing her ministrations to work their way into his mind as well. When was the last time she'd paid him this much attention? Better yet, when was the last time they'd let themselves pay any real attention to each other at all? In a low voice, he asked, "What if I'm not entirely sure what it is I want?"

This was going to be harder than she'd thought. Letting her hands come to rest just below his open collar, she replied carefully, "I bet you have a better idea about it than you think you do."

He sat very still for a moment, acutely aware of how close she was, and the half-dozen varied thoughts flying through his head began to coalesce into two distinct possibilities. Somehow, though, making that choice seemed so far from his grasp. "How do you do that?" he said softly. "How do you always know how to make complicated things so simple?"

Hearing those words confirmed for her that they were indeed on the same wavelength. Maybe there was some hope for this after all. "I don't know," she answered honestly. "It's just the way I am."

Turning ever so slightly, he raised his eyes to meet hers. "I really wish you could teach it to me."

"I've got a few ideas."

He didn't realize it, but he was holding his breath. "Such as?"

Still standing just inches behind him, she slid her hands down, bringing her forward so that her lips brushed his ear and her breasts touched his broad back. "Don't call the architect, Harm. I don't care what kind of plumber she knows."

His throat had somehow gone dry, but he managed to croak out her name as her fingers toyed with the fabric of his white uniform shirt. "Mac, ah ... we should probably - talk about this."

"We probably should," she replied with a calm far greater than she felt. "But whenever we try, we tend to come to a screeching halt. So I'm jump-starting the process."

"We're in the middle of JAG Ops," he protested, rather weakly, attempting to figure out what the hell had happened to his partner. She responded by abruptly pulling away and taking the necessary three steps to securely shut and lock his office door.

"Is that the only reason you're stalling?"

He wanted to say yes, to tell her anything that would get her hands back to where they'd been before. Three steps had never seemed so far in all his life. But the fear still remained; the same fear that had propelled him to say 'not yet' on a starlit ferry two years earlier. "I'm stalling," he said, almost inaudibly, "because I don't want to do something stupid and lose you forever."

"So you'd rather leave us in limbo for the rest of our natural lives?"

"Mac - "

"No, God damn it - you're going to listen to me this time, because no matter what I feel for you, I can't keep going like this. You wanted me to wait 'as long as it takes', but I can't do that, and I shouldn't have to. So I'm making it very, very simple for you, Harm. I am standing here telling you that for some Christ-only-knows reason, I still want to be a lot more than your partner. And if you can't say the same - if you still can't let go of whatever it is that's holding you back, or if you don't think loving your best friend will fill that empty space in your life ... then you can walk out that door, and that'll be the end of it. But that will be the end of it. Believe me when I say that I won't be waiting any longer. So go ahead. React."

She stepped away from the door and stared at him almost defiantly, her dark eyes flashing with determination. He rose slowly from the desk, turning away from her. *Is this what you wanted?* his conscience accused. *An ultimatum? You're the one who brought this on. You were so terrified of doing the wrong thing, but doing nothing may have done every bit as much damage.* Aloud, he said, "You're asking me to decide something in five minutes that I haven't been able to figure out in five years?"

Her reply was carefully controlled. "Flyboy, there's a such thing as over-thinking. If you don't know, somewhere in the back of your mind, I'm not sure you ever will."

The battle raging in his soul at that moment was as heated as any conflict he'd ever faced. There were a number of reasons he'd been repeating to himself over the years, rationalizations against letting himself depend too heavily on anyone, even her. Especially her. If he chose to take that step tonight, he was fully convinced that it wouldn't be just a single step forward. It would be enough to carry them both over a cliff ... because the one thing of which he was entirely certain was that he'd never felt so strongly about anyone in his life.

Almost without thinking, he moved slightly away from her, toward the door - and for a brief, paralyzing minute, Mac thought the world might collapse around her.

In that minute, though, Harm was inexplicably struck by the full weight of what he was giving up. Was he insane? Was he actually afraid of Sarah Mackenzie - the most incredible woman he'd ever known, the person who'd been able to understand him and reach him in ways he'd never imagined? Did he really believe that she'd inevitably hurt him somehow?

It was a risk, no matter how he looked at it. But if anything, any one person, was worth risking whatever nebulous pain he feared, it was her. Right then, he made a conscious decision: not to simply react, but to take his life into his own hands for the first time in ages. If he was going to make that leap, then he had to leave no trace of doubt.

Spinning on his heel, he took two long strides and crushed her body to his, leaning down to capture her lips before she could even take a breath. After a moment of pure shock, she wrapped her arms firmly around his neck and responded vigorously, amazed by how everything seemed to fall into place with that simple action. She'd been on the receiving end of exactly three kisses from him in the past, and this one blew them all out of the water. Before she knew it, she was pinned up against the far wall, and had it not been for his powerful embrace, she might very well have fallen unceremoniously on her ass. With a start, she realized that his hand was currently located directly on said ass, and the flush of warmth across her face intensified. Drawing back, she gazed directly into his eyes, and the unmitigated desire burning there answered every question that had ever existed between them.

"Good lord, Navy," she whispered. "When you make up your mind to go for something, you don't hold back, do you?"

"I had to make sure you got the message," he replied, somewhat breathlessly. "Are you complaining?"

"Christ, no..." She pulled him closer, raking her nails down his back, and he sucked in a sharp breath. Gradually she became aware of the growing hardness pressing against her stomach, and she smiled against his lips. "I always wondered if I could do that to you," she murmured, and he smiled back.

"Mac, you have no idea." His hand slid up under her uniform jacket, stroking one breast through the fabric of her blouse, and she closed her eyes, grateful for the wall that supported her. After a moment, though, he broke the contact between their lips, leaning his forehead against hers. "I think we'd better take this someplace more appropriate before we go any further," he suggested, his breathing ragged and uneven.

"Why? I locked the door," she replied huskily, and his pulse nearly doubled.

"Are you serious?"

"Don't I look it?"

*Sweet Jesus, this can't be real.* He forced himself to focus and stammered out, "Is it okay - I mean, do I need - "

If she hadn't been so floored herself, she would have burst out laughing at his awkwardness. Instead she hooked a finger around his belt loop and yanked him forward. "We're safe. Don't worry."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered obediently, deftly manipulating the buttons of her jacket and blouse. "Go easy on me, Marine. It's been a lot longer than I like to admit."

"You and me both, sailor - ohh..." The wall came to her rescue once again as her skirt hit the floor and his hand snaked under her panties to find the soft curls below. "Damn, you're sneaky."

"Well, I - " Whatever response he might have made was lost in a low groan as she stroked the bulge in his pants with long, precise motions. "God, Sarah..."

"Oh, now I'm Sarah, am I?" He didn't reply, flicking open the clasp of her bra and taking her right breast into his mouth while one hand still probed her depths. As his tongue swirled hungrily around her taut nipple, her vision faded to gray, but she managed to gather enough brain function to undo his belt and shove the pants down to the floor. *Silk boxers, and oh my god, he really is gorgeous from head to toe. I must be dreaming this.*

Feeling her quiver beneath his fingers, it occurred to him that there was nothing more stunningly beautiful and arousing than seeing her smoky eyes, her flushed cheeks ... hearing those little gasps in the back of her throat ... If just watching her was this good, what exactly lay ahead?

He just had to know. "Sarah," he begged, his voice nearly hoarse. "Let me in. Please."

She nodded, her own willpower crumbling in the face of the fire coursing through her blood. "Floor," she managed to say, stepping out of her skirt and sinking to her knees. He followed immediately, laying her back on the pile of discarded clothes: as a cushion, it was next to useless, but she couldn't have cared less. All that mattered was that he was there, and he was hers, in every way. Sensing the question in his eyes, she smiled up at him, and then he was inside her with a kind of ease that surprised them both.

There would be a time for slow, languishing, tantalizing love, but this wasn't it. This was an urgent need, a desperate affirmation of something that had been burning for years, and regardless of circumstance, both were vaguely aware that they were using the floor of a government building for something other than its designated purpose. That knowledge didn't make it any less intense. As she rocked harder and harder against him, nearing her release, a faint voice in the back of her mind wondered if this was going to send her flyboy's ego straight through the roof.

Well, so what if it did?

"Ohh, god, Harm, oh, please..." A brilliant, searing oblivion flooded through her, and the strangled sound that escaped her couldn't even be recognized. The sensation sent him tumbling over the edge as well, and he all but collapsed on top of her as every last drop of energy drained out of their bodies in an instant.

They lay there together for a measureless time, the workings of her internal clock too much for her overloaded brain to process. A twinge of fear clawed at her, nagging her with doubts, but she shoved it aside. If he bolted on her now, she'd simply kill him. "Wow," she said finally, breaking the silence. "I almost don't believe we just did that."

He pushed himself up on one elbow, a sheen of sweat still visible on his skin. "Do you regret it?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Me either. I'm just not sure how I'm ever going to get any work done in this office again." He flashed that perfect grin again, but soon he was serious. "This doesn't mean we're done talking. If we're going to make this work, we're going to have to make some decisions, about JAG and stuff."

"I know. We should probably inform the admiral, just so we don't get accused of anything improper."

"That ought to be fun. I guess we've got the whole weekend to determine a plan of attack."

"I guess we do." She lifted an eyebrow. "Do you still keep an overnight bag in your car?"

"I learned from the best."

"Then you're coming home with me. You've still got a little brother sleeping on your couch, and the next time we do this, I want there to be a bed in the vicinity."

"Anything you say, ma'am." He reached out to trace her cheekbone with a gentle hand. "Thank you. For understanding, and for kicking my ass, and for not giving up on me. I don't know why I was so afraid before, but I won't be anymore. I promise you that."

"I know," she whispered. "Come on. It's late."

"Not too late, though."

She smiled. "No, you made it in just under the wire."

... Approximately four minutes later, Mac stepped out of her partner's office, her uniform and hair smoothed back into some semblance of order. Intending just to grab her purse and cover, she pulled up short when another person entered the bullpen. "Admiral! I, ah, thought you'd left for the day."

"Oh, I got halfway home before I realized I'd left my new book on my desk." A.J. studied her for a moment and chose his next words carefully. "Colonel, I know I told you to do whatever you felt was necessary to restore the commander's morale, but this is a bit above and beyond the call of duty."

She froze. "Sir?"

The admiral masked his amusement. "You're buttoned wrong."

As she attempted to get a grip on her humiliation, Harm stepped out, his uniform totally squared away. "Sir, you're still here?"

"So are you, apparently."

"Ah, sir, the colonel was helping me with - "

Mac broke in. "Give it up, Harm. We're busted."

The look of terror that crossed his face was enough to break their C.O.'s iron façade. Never before had he seen two highly capable officers look more like guilty teenagers. He snorted with laughter and shook his head. "As long as you two don't end up at each other's throats - "

"Definitely not, sir."

" - *and* you keep it the hell out of the office from now on, I don't want to know any more about it. We'll deal with anything else as it comes. Have a good weekend."

"Yes, sir," they both replied in unison, snapping to attention. A.J. started back toward the door. He knew he should be annoyed, but the whole thing was just too bizarre to even bother. Just when he'd started to believe that hell would freeze over before those two got it right...

Besides, he had someone waiting for him. Tucking his new copy of *Much Ado About Nothing* under his arm, he pushed through the double doors. What a week.

\*\*\* THE END\*\*\*