



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Coming Home"

Disclaimer: "Whose characters these are, I think I know ..." Ahem. That rustling sound you hear is probably Robert Frost spinning in his grave. Anyway, not mine. Kindly refrain from suing, please.

Author's Notes: Well, I thought the episode was very well done on all fronts, but I'm going to focus on the subplots here, because let's face it - there's no way I can get away with not writing about Harm's admission to Mattie. So here's what I've got.

Directly following the episode
North of Union Station
Washington, D.C.

"Can we order Chinese for dinner?"

Harm tucked his cover under his arm as he unlocked the door to his apartment. "Sure, if you want." Stepping inside, he reached up to unfasten the constricting collar of his dress whites. Mattie immediately headed for the phone to order their usual. When she'd finished, she turned around to find her guardian watching her carefully. "You okay with everything that happened today?" he asked quietly.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked.

"This was the first time you'd been to a funeral since your mom's."

Mattie drew her arms tighter around her small body. "I'm doing better about that. Susan and I are kinda helping each other, I guess."

"I'm glad." Harm began to unbutton his tunic, walking toward his bedroom. "You want to go get changed before dinner gets here?"

"Umm, in a minute."

That reply seemed a little odd. He turned back at the foot of the steps. "Waiting for something?"

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door. With a suspicious look in Mattie's direction, he went to answer it. "Mac? Ah, hi ... ?"

Mac smoothed out the hem of her shirt with somewhat anxious hands. "Hi," she responded, taking in his half-done dress uniform and deciding that it was rather a good look for him. "Mattie's message said to be here at six - ?"

"Hi, Mac." Mattie smiled from behind her confused guardian. "I invited her for dinner," she explained. "That's okay, right?"

"Um, sure, although some warning might have been nice. Come on in, Mac." Harm stepped aside to allow her into the apartment.

"You two just get home from Arlington?"

"Just a few minutes ago. The service was nice. It was ... well, you know what it was like."

"All too well," Mac agreed quietly. "Bud and I are leaning on the test facility at Aberdeen to get some answers back on those vests as soon as possible. They can only rush things so much, though."

Mattie suddenly snapped her fingers. "Crap! I forgot about my biology homework. I'm gonna go get started on it."

Harm frowned. "Want me to come get you when the food arrives?"

"Nah, I'll come get the leftovers when I'm done. You two enjoy ..."

She was almost to the door when Harm's disapproving voice stopped her cold.

"Hold it right there, Miss Mathilda."

Mustering an innocent expression, she turned back to face him as he joined her at the door. In a low voice that may or may not have been out of Mac's earshot, he inquired, "This wouldn't happen to be a not-so-subtle attempt to force Mac and me to talk, would it?"

"I really do have bio homework," she protested, a little too guiltily.

"Mats, we've screwed this up enough times with our own arbitrary timetables. I think the last thing we need is another one tossed into the mix."

Mattie's shoulders sagged a little. "I just wanted you to see that I don't have to get in the way. You don't have to -- I don't know, wait until I'm gone to start having a life again."

Harm heard the unspoken thought. "Mattie, if you think I'm counting the days until I can get back to the way my life was before you, think again. I don't want that. You've helped me get my head on straight, far more than I think you realize."

"You're always telling me to talk to my dad, to try and forgive him ..."

"Not because I want to dump you on him. That's not it at all." Harm's gaze flicked over to Mac, waiting patiently in the living room, and he made a decision. "If it's all right with you, I'd like you and Mac to talk sometime. She's faced a lot of the same obstacles you have, and she might be able to explain better than I can why it's important that you try to make peace with what happened and with your father. Would it be okay if I set that up?"

"I guess." Mattie risked a glance up at him. "You're not mad that I called her, right?"

"Of course not," he said automatically, choosing for the moment not to think about the potential awkwardness of the situation. "C'mere."

She stepped into his arms, and he kissed the top of her head. "When I promised not to repeat what you said, that didn't cover indirect plotting on your behalf," she pointed out timidly.

"Quit while you're ahead, Mats." He watched her scurry out of the apartment, then turned back to his waiting guest. "Sorry about that. Slight misunderstanding."

Mac looked uncertain. "Is this not a good time?"

"No, it's fine -- it's good. Actually, I wouldn't mind talking to you about Mattie, if that's okay. Just excuse me for a second while I get rid of this uniform."

Mac remained in the living room, but her voice followed him into the bedroom. "I can't imagine that I have much in the way of useful parenting advice."

"That's not what I mean. Her father's mistakes cost her her mother. Try as I might, I'll never be able to see exactly where she's coming from. You can, though."

There was a long silence, causing Harm to rethink his decision to bring up the issue. Just as he was about to apologize, he heard her voice again.

"I don't know if I'm such a great example for her to follow."

Yanking a shirt on over his head, he returned to the living room. This needed to be said face to face. "I think you are," he replied honestly. "You struggled with forgiving your father, and you were stronger for having done it."

Mac crossed her arms, unconsciously echoing Mattie's earlier posture. "Sometimes it's hard to be sure of that," she said, her voice resigned. "Every so often, I think I've finally gotten my life figured out, but sometimes ..."

Possibly against his better judgment, Harm decided to charge ahead and ask the question hovering on his tongue. "Webb?"

In response, she turned a hand palm-up in a miniscule shrug. "We officially confirmed what we both already knew. Whatever it was we were having - really lousy therapy, maybe - it wasn't a real relationship. And neither of us could or would do what would be required to make it into one. So I'm back where I started yet again."

"Welcome to the club." His lips twisted wryly. "Get your membership card punched three times, and you get a T-shirt."

His attempt at self-deprecation did little to assuage her doubts. "You've got Mattie," she pointed out, unconvinced.

"Yeah, I do, and I can't even begin to tell you how glad I am for that. But I won't have her forever. If she's able to mend fences with her father -- and for her sake, I have to hope that she can -- I'll have to give her up. And then, aside from being utterly destroyed, I'll be back where I started, too."

"No, you won't." Mac took a step toward him, almost without realizing it. "Don't you see how she's changed you already? She's brought out this amazing capacity for ..." She faltered on a word: likely the same word that always seemed to trip them up. Trying again, she continued, "She's brought out the best in you."

"Thank you," he said quietly, allowing himself to put voice to his fears for the first time. "But what happens if -- when she's gone?"

"What do you want to happen?"

He didn't answer directly, moving toward the window. "Mattie asked the other day if I was afraid to bring a girl home with her around. I tried to explain to her that that was hardly my biggest concern, but I'm not sure how well I did. Mainly, I wanted her to understand that shutting away her feelings about her parents would hurt her, the way that not accepting my father's death hurt me ... as well as the people I refused to let close."

He glanced back at her as he finished the sentence, and she nodded understanding. "I guess we're both guilty of that, among other things," she acknowledged. "Did Mattie understand?"

"I don't know. I think she did, at least partially, but I can't exactly expect it to make perfect sense to a teenager when it only just barely makes sense to *me*."

This time, her shrug was more open. "Well, on the road to self-awareness, progress is generally good however it comes. Take it from an expert. Small steps are acceptable."

Harm answered with a soft laugh. "Depends on your definition of a small step, I guess." Somewhat belatedly, he realized where he was heading with this, and it surprised him to discover that he wasn't nearly as tense as he'd expected to be. Now that he knew, really *knew*, what direction he wanted his life to take, making slow progress seemed insufficient. "Out of all that, I ended up telling Mattie something that I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to admit to myself, let alone anyone else."

Mac smiled, a bit wistfully -- or was that his imagination? "You told her you loved her."

"No. Well, yes -- I have told her that, but that's not what ... I told her I loved *you*."

Her eyes flared wide for a moment, and he wondered if he'd just gotten a brief glimpse into Sarah Mackenzie's soul. "Did you?" she finally managed to say, still not entirely accepting what she'd heard as truth.

No going back now, he reasoned. "She asked, I answered. Truthfully, to both of us. I also told her that we were working on 'closing the divide,' as it were. What I didn't mention was that I think I'd like us to be working harder at it."

Mac's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, taken aback by his new, no-holds-barred approach. It stung to recognize that she wasn't accustomed to such honesty from him, but he understood, and right now, he refused to look back.

When she'd recovered, she replied in a near-whisper. "After everything we've put each other through, I ... I didn't think you'd be able to say that."

For the first time in this revelation, he wondered if he'd made a colossal miscalculation. "Because you can't?"

"No! I mean -- I ..." Her eyes glistened. "Of course I can. I came to terms with it a long time ago, or at least I thought I had. But no matter how long I've spent trying to convince myself not to feel that anymore ..." She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture, unable to finish.

"I know. I'm not sure when it was that I finally admitted it to myself, but I know it took far too long. Maybe it's like I told Mattie. I needed someone to beat the idea into me that letting people in isn't always an express route to pain, and she was the one to finally do it. Whatever the reason, the important thing is that I *can* say it."

As if finally allowing herself to believe, the corner of her mouth curved upward. "Prove it," she challenged slyly.

That reaction confirmed something for him, and he folded his arms across his chest in a similar stance. "You first. I started this."

All pretense of defiance melted away, and she met his gaze with only the barest hint of fear. "I love you," she said simply.

He'd intended just to respond in kind, but the power of those three words in her voice undid every last one of his noble intentions. Acting on instinct, he pulled her into his arms, capturing her lips with a kiss that ended any question either of them had ever asked, consciously or subconsciously. After a moment, he drew back to stare into her dark eyes, intent on denying any and all possible misunderstandings. "I love you," he declared. "We've found every way on earth *not* to be together, and it never gets either of us any closer to being happy. Shouldn't we give some thought to the obvious remaining option?"

Mac leaned against him, and he sensed her heart pounding against his. "It can't be that easy, can it?" she murmured.

"Few things are. But it seems like this is a good start. We'll figure the rest out from here. Okay?"

In response, she tilted her head up to return the earlier kiss, and spoke in a low voice. "Consider me open to negotiations."

When the deliveryman from Jade Palace arrived at the address on his slip, he found a teenage girl hovering in the hallway outside the apartment. "That's mine," she said hurriedly, holding out a twenty-dollar bill and reaching for the bag in his hand.

The man hesitated. "It's supposed to go to this apartment," he began dubiously, indicating the closed door.

Mattie's eyes twinkled with a wicked gleam. "Trust me. They're going to be occupied for a while."

*** THE END ***