



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Adrift," "Ready or Not," "Friendly Fire"

Summary: Follows the eighth-season episode "Friendly Fire." Separating personal and professional lives just keeps getting harder around here.

Disclaimer: Don't own the characters. If I did, Mac would have spent the last five minutes of this episode groveling for forgiveness. Or maybe she wouldn't have been so whiny in the first place. It's a toss-up, really.

Author's Notes: This is kind of a "what if" story - what might happen if the animosity we saw in "Friendly Fire" continued on in the direction it was going. I fully expect a lot of people to disagree with my take on this episode, but I really felt like Mac was overly sensitive and unfair to Harm for much of the case. (Not that he was the epitome of maturity, either, but it sure seemed like it started with her.) It doesn't seem consistent with Mac's character that she would suddenly get this mercurial in the courtroom, regardless of anything Harm said or did, but since that's what TPTB gave us, that's what I'm working from.

Also, "blue on blue" and "blue fire" are simply other terms for friendly fire. When the U.S. military and its allies conduct exercises (wargames, if you prefer), the forces representing the allies are the "Blue" team, and the aggressor forces are the "Red" team. Three guesses why.

Two days after the Ridley trial
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

The knock at his office door forced Harmon Rabb to bring his thoughts back to the present. He straightened up in his chair and pretended he hadn't been brooding for the last half-hour.
"Enter."

Bud Roberts stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "Got the file on the Martin appeal, sir. We can go over it whenever you're available."

"Thanks, Bud. How's 1400?"

"Sounds good to me." Bud watched him for a moment, weighing the best approach to take. The commander hadn't exactly been his usual confident self for the past couple of days. "So, uh, I bet you're glad your first stint on the bench is over."

"You have no idea how glad, believe me." Harm smiled ruefully, but there was more resignation than amusement in it.

"That bad, sir?"

He snorted. "Bud, look me in the eye and tell me that we weren't ten seconds away from a complete train wreck in there."

Bud shook his head. "It wasn't that extreme. The truth did come out, after all."

The senior officer grimaced. "Yeah, and even getting to that was sketchy." He leaned his elbows on the desk and rubbed his eyes. "Tell me honestly, Bud. The way I went about pointing you toward that AWACS data ... did it piss you off?"

"No, sir. I know you were exploiting a gray area, but you didn't have any other way to get that information out."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. Petty Officer Coates and I spent most of that night exploring the options and came to that same conclusion."

Bud decided to risk a further query. "You're afraid Colonel Mackenzie disagrees, aren't you?"

Harm cocked an eyebrow at the unusual display of candor, but the question didn't surprise him. "A reasonable fear, considering the way the trial went, wouldn't you say? If the phrasing with which I sustained her objections is fair game, I'd think damn near anything would be."

"She was a little sensitive about the possibility of bias," Bud admitted, starting to grow uncomfortable with the conversation. He'd never gotten used to being in the middle of these disputes.

"A *bit*? Asking me to step down, and then asking the admiral to force me out? I realize that we have to be able to keep professional matters just that, but it's really hard not to take that personally."

"Sir, that's just it. I think personal issues are what worried her."

Harm lifted his head to look directly at his friend. "So it really wasn't about the concept of an aviator judging another aviator? It was about me judging her?"

Bud raised his hands in surrender. "You'd have to ask the colonel, but I'm sure the idea must have occurred to you."

"Of course it did, but I'm telling you, Bud, it didn't go any further than that. I wasn't acting out of spite for anything she did while she was on the bench. I may have gotten a little target-fixated, trying to figure out the case, and yeah, I'd do some things differently if I had it to do over. But if I had any bias for or against anything, I came by it honestly. There was nothing intentional."

"Respectfully, sir, you don't need to convince me. I only wanted to make sure the two of you were okay."

Harm sighed. "Tough to tell."

Wanting to escape, Bud tried to sound reassuring. "Forget I said anything. You and the colonel work through this kind of thing all the time."

"Yeah, I guess we do. 1400, then?"

"See you then, sir."

Harm watched the younger man leave, then returned his head to his hands. *Sure, we do this all the time*, he thought. *We bicker, and we get petty, and we keep going somehow. And for some reason, that arrangement's starting to bug the hell out of me.*

Mac entered the admiral's outer office that afternoon, finding her sometime partner already waiting near the closed door. "He's on a call," Harm explained, tilting his head toward the inner office. "Do you know what we're being called in to do?"

"No, and neither does Sturgis, who said he'd be here in a few minutes, by the way."

An odd silence fell. They hadn't exchanged much more than a few words in the two days since the trial ended: they were both equally hesitant, not knowing exactly where they stood. It wasn't an angry silence, really, or even an annoyed one. It was simply ... tense.

Tense enough, in fact, that Tiner chose to leave his desk at that moment, mumbling something about making copies. Mac's lips twisted wryly. "It's that obvious, huh?"

Harm shrugged, his features expressionless. "Hey, for all we know, he's avoiding the admiral's wrath, not us."

"Or maybe he wants to restock the aspirin after your star turn this week."

She'd meant it as nothing more than a glib remark, no different from their usual barbs. But when his eyes clouded over, she realized that she'd miscalculated.

He looked out into the bullpen, rather than at her, and spoke in a subdued voice. "You know, Mac, I'd already pretty much figured out that I'm not cut out to be a judge, so can we just let it go?"

Surprised by his reaction, she needed a moment to get her bearings. "Usually you hit back when I make dumb jokes like that. Or at least you usually recognize that it wasn't meant to be taken seriously."

"Well, it gets harder to make the distinction when the joke-maker had previously tried to have me removed from the case in question, since I had to take that pretty seriously."

"Really? How seriously did you take it? Because it was pretty hard to distinguish *that* from your little 'Catch-22' comment."

"Right, because I've never been known to use humor as a defense mechanism before."

"Wait a minute. You're telling me this now, after the way you treated me - "

"The way I treated *you*?" Harm cut himself off with a sharp shake of his head. "No, let's not do this now, okay? I'm sorry if my conduct led you to believe that I wasn't giving you your due in the courtroom. All I can say is that I really was trying to judge the case, not you. All right?"

Mac sensed a certain amount of wounded pride in his statement, but she also saw Sturgis approaching out of the corner of her eye. "All right," she conceded. "Thank you for that."

They heard a call of "Enter" from within, and the three senior attorneys filed into the JAG's office.

"This won't take long," Admiral Chegwidden began curtly. "Colonel, your next shot at presiding has come up faster than anticipated. We've got a new case - Lance Corporal Vincent Shaw. The charge is assault with intent to commit murder. Apparently there was an incident during an exercise at Quantico, and the rest of the details will be coming in shortly. Turner, you'll prosecute: Rabb, you'll defend. Any questions?"

"Yes, sir," Harm answered before the others, catching them all off guard. "May I recommend that Lieutenant Roberts take the defense instead of me?"

The admiral's eyes narrowed. "Is this a gesture of altruism on your part, Commander, or is there something I should know?"

Harm stared directly forward as he responded. "Sir, I feel that it might not be in the best interests of the client for Colonel Mackenzie and me to be facing off so soon after the last trial."

Mac felt as though she'd been slapped. Sturgis looked mystified. Only the admiral showed no reaction. "It was you who suggested the colonel for this post, was it not?"

"Yes, sir, and I stand by my assessment of her abilities. I'm merely concerned that she and I may be having some trouble ... maintaining the requisite level of decorum lately."

Chegwidden studied them both for a minute before making his decision. "All right, Roberts defends. One of you, go tell him so. The corporal will be transferred to the local brig at 2100 tonight. Article 32 proceedings are set for Monday morning. Dismissed."

By the time Mac had recovered her composure and turned around, Harm was already headed for his office. She lengthened her stride and caught up to him just as he passed through the doorframe.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded, shutting the door securely behind them. "You really think we can't suck it up and get through this like adults?"

"Adults can still be willing to step back from a bad situation. I'm just trying to live to fight another day."

"Why do we have to fight *any* day?"

"I don't know, Mac. But apparently we do." He walked away from her, opening a drawer in the file cabinet. "You brought up all that stuff about retribution, not me, and you did it before any of us walked into that courtroom. You were convinced from the start that I couldn't be objective."

"Ten minutes ago you were apologizing for having given me that very impression!"

"That's the standard procedure, isn't it? We butt heads, I say something dumb, then I fold, and we move on. That's certainly what happened last time. But you know what? It doesn't work. We can't just erase what was said and done, and pretend it doesn't matter, so why are we trying?"

Mac folded her arms, feeling the flames rise to her cheeks. "So this is about me going to the admiral to remove you? I damaged your ego?"

"What a shock that you'd say 'ego' rather than 'feelings,' since in your book I'm allowed to have one but not the other."

"Your judgment was impaired by those feelings!"

The file drawer suddenly slammed shut. "And so was yours!"

They stared each other down, the heat of the exchange fueled by a level of desperation higher than either of them could ever recall. "So what are we supposed to do?" Mac finally asked, her voice quiet.

His response was quieter still. "I don't know. I just don't want to keep going like this. I've had my abilities questioned before, but this time, because it was you ... I swear to God, it made me almost want to give up on the whole thing."

"The case, or being a judge?"

"JAG."

Stunned, she felt tears starting to prick at her eyes. Before she could voice the apology that came to her lips, though, Harm continued. "And I know I should be able to compartmentalize better, and I know I'm famous for not letting people in no matter what, but the fact is, this week hurt like hell, and it hurts even more because you don't see that."

Mac swallowed hard. "Well, maybe if we talk it through, we'll be able to figure out exactly where we are with each other and ... where we want to be, and we'll be able to finally put a stop to all this tension and awkwardness."

Even as she spoke, she realized that she was coming precariously close to tipping her hand. She didn't have much choice, though. She had to make him understand how important this was - how important they were. Even if they were hardly in a position to kiss and make up, he was right: they couldn't go on like this.

After a pause, he let out a long sigh. "Maybe. Just - not right now. Give me a little while."

"Are you busy tonight?"

"I don't think you understand. I'm saying I need time to work some things out in my head."

Something about his tone gave her a sudden feeling of dread. "What kind of time? Time away from - here, our partnership, what?"

"I don't know yet, Mac."

Panic rose in her throat, and her instinct to go on the offensive took over. "So once again, you're telling me to put my life on hold for you?"

"I didn't say that - "

"Sure you did. We can't move forward until both of us are ready, and as usual, you're the one putting on the brakes."

His eyes darkened, and an ugly undertone crept into his voice. "Right now I'm not really thinking about moving forward. I'm more concerned about stopping a backward slide."

"You think we're drifting apart?"

"I don't know what I think yet, Mac - you haven't given me a half-second to think about it!" He stalked across the office and reached for his briefcase. "I need to get out of here for a little while. Can I trust you not to follow me?"

That remark burned straight through her like a bullet, and again, given the choice between striking back and dissolving into tears, she chose to strike.

"And now we're back to the traditional 'running away' part of the cycle. Let me know where you're going, and I'll pack your bags."

He jerked around to stare at her, and just before a wall of anger slammed down, she imagined she could see a glimmer of surprise in his handsome features. "That's the way you want to play this? All right, why the hell not?" He punched the intercom button on the phone. "Tiner, it's Commander Rabb. Have you still got those orders I asked you to put on file for a while? Dust them off and give them to the admiral to sign. I doubt he'll have any problem with it."

Mac watched him secure his desk, feeling a rift in her heart start to widen. Maybe he hadn't intended to run this time, but she'd just pushed him into it. "You're really leaving town?" she whispered.

"Three-week TAD to Pax River as a Combat Air Patrol augmentee. They're covering the District most of the time, so they requested whatever spare time I could give them. I turned it down before, but the terror threat level's just been elevated, and to be honest, it's starting to sound better and better all the time. Since the pilots probably won't accuse me of having a bias toward lawyers and all."

"You're going to fly CAP and bore holes in the sky all day just to get away from me?"

"Would you stop saying things like that? It's not you I want to get away from. It's ..." He waved a hand in exasperation. "This. And it's not like I'm going to the ends of the earth. I'll be two hours away and flying over your head every night, so let's not make it out to be any more than it is."

He was reaching for his coat and moving toward the door, and her frustration fully took hold at last. "You're right, Harm," she shot back, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "This is nothing. Why, it's just like going off to do carrier quals, and we all know *that* never causes any problems!"

The unbridled malice in that thrust made her meaning painfully clear. Harm turned very slowly toward her, and although his reply was made with equal fury, the anguish that flashed in his eyes was far older and deeper.

"You don't think I've paid my price for that? You think I've forgotten? I've had plenty of time to reconsider that choice in excruciating detail, believe me. I had four hours out there when all I could see was the next wave. I had two weeks in the hospital, when the only clear, focused thought in my mind was how many people I'd hurt. I had three months when my best friend would barely return my messages. And now, almost two years later, I still end up thinking about it whenever my back knots up or I see the scars in the mirror. So please spare me this unlimited indignation, all right? I get it. Nobody's more aware than me of what a monumental screw-up I can be."

He spun around and headed for the elevators, tossing a comment to the yeoman over his shoulder. "If the admiral has a problem with my request, Tiner, find me on my cell phone."

Mac stood very still for a moment, long enough to realize that letting him go now just might be the beginning of the end for them. Unwilling to take that risk, she summoned her courage and strode purposefully through the quiet bullpen. Just before the elevator doors closed, she stuck her hand in to halt them.

Harm had been leaning wearily against the back wall of the elevator, and now he straightened. "Mac, please. If we just keep hammering away at this, we're going to end up hating each other. Can we just take a break and get back under control?"

"Not this kind of break. This kind of break usually ends with us more distant than ever, and that's unacceptable." With all the resolve left in her soul, she held the doors open. "I'll give you until tonight, but I want your word that you won't leave until we can work some things out. Do I have that?"

"I don't give my word unless I'm certain that I can keep it."

"Damn it, Harm, do you really want to leave it like this?"

"No, Mac, I don't. But right now, the more we talk, the worse it gets. So either take your hand off the door, or I'm taking the stairs."

When she didn't budge, he started to move past her - and she used his mid-motion imbalance to push him back into the elevator. When the doors shut behind them, she dragged his head down to hers and paralyzed him with a searing kiss.

He responded, somewhat weakly, but the reaction she'd irrationally hoped for never came. He didn't move to sweep her up in a passionate embrace, and when they pulled back, the look in his eyes was almost one of disappointment.

"What was that about?" he asked carefully.

The only answer within her grasp was the truth. "Desperation, I think."

"You were hoping that would just fix everything?"

"No, but I was hoping it would make things a little clearer."

"It did."

"And?"

He pulled her in and unceremoniously kissed her back, with such intensity that she nearly lost her balance.

"Did *that* make anything clearer on your end?"

Never before had she felt such a powerful conflict of emotions. That kiss had done something that all their convoluted discussions had failed to do: it had affirmed his feelings. And yet ... it didn't change a thing.

Her voice trembled. "A little, yeah."

"It's not enough, is it?"

"I guess not."

Harm looked as though he needed all the willpower he'd ever possessed just to finish this conversation. "I'll call you from Pax, all right?"

The doors opened on the first floor, and she could only nod as he stepped off the elevator. Every fiber in her being wanted to scream, or failing that, to sink down in the corner and cry until there were simply no tears left for him. But when Petty Officer Coates started to board the elevator, she was left with no option besides stoic acceptance.

"Is everything all right, Colonel?"

Mac blinked rapidly, hoping she appeared at least halfway composed. "Why do you ask, Petty Officer?"

"Because you haven't pushed a button yet, ma'am," Coates replied cautiously.

The senior officer let her shoulders slump and jabbed at the button for the second floor. "That just seals it, doesn't it?"

"Ma'am?"

"Everything is a long way from all right. I'll handle it, but everything is pretty much crap at the moment."

Coates frowned hesitantly. "Did I see Commander Rabb leave a minute ago? I had some notes for him from Lieutenant Roberts."

"You'll have to ask the admiral about who's picking up his cases. The commander's going TAD to Pax River."

"Oh." The young woman bit her lip, uncertain where to set her boundaries. "Ma'am, the instant I cross the line here, please go ahead and yell, okay?"

Mac lifted an eyebrow, but waved a listless hand. "If that translates to 'permission to speak freely,' it's granted."

"Okay." Coates took a deep breath. "I don't know if this makes any difference or not, but I think Commander Rabb was really nervous this week, and he was trying so hard to pretend he wasn't that he may have come off a little more, um, flip than intended. And he wasn't trying to side with the defense, either. Just before he realized what it was the pilot mistook for ground fire, he'd given me his instructions to the jury, and he was very explicit about the definition of reasonable doubt. He said that if all they had was a statistical possibility of innocence, then it was their duty to return a guilty verdict."

Mac didn't raise her eyes from the floor. "And then the evidence showed up and rendered all of that obsolete."

"He didn't change the instruction, ma'am. He gave it to them exactly the way he'd written it beforehand, word for word."

At that, Mac looked up. Coates shrugged as the doors opened on the second floor. "Like I said, ma'am - I don't know whether that means anything. I just thought maybe it'd mean something to you, seeing how you two understand each other."

The petty officer hurried away, leaving Mac to wander back to her office without any awareness of her surroundings. *I should have understood him*, she thought hopelessly, sinking into her chair as the tears threatened again. *I should have trusted him, somehow. I've trusted him with my life, and this week I didn't trust him with a case. And because of that, there's no way we can trust each other with our hearts. God help me - how did it come to this?*

Four days later
Naval Air Systems Command
NAS Patuxent River, Maryland

She'd done as he asked. She'd given him space and time to think, and every minute of it was killing her. He'd called, as he promised, but he'd only followed the letter of the law: he'd left a brief message on her home phone at a time when he knew she wouldn't be home. In it, he'd assured her that he wouldn't stay beyond his three-week rotation, and that he'd come home the next weekend so that they could talk again.

His voice had sounded clearer, closer to his usual level of confidence, which shouldn't have surprised her. Flying tended to do that for him. In that sense, maybe it was for the best that he'd gone. God knew he hadn't been the happiest person in the office recently. He hadn't been particularly *unhappy*, either, but she could read him well enough to know when he was preoccupied with something. Possibly a few somethings, even. Now that he was spending much of his time 20,000 feet above those preoccupations, he was decidedly more comfortable.

The idea that he might be happier away from JAG, and her, was frightening enough that she didn't want to wait until the weekend to talk to him. So she called up the NAVAIR Operations office, got the flight schedule from a helpful clerk, and at the end of her duty day, she pointed her car toward Maryland.

It was mid-evening by the time she arrived at the Pax River gates, and even from there, she could see a fair amount of activity around the flight line. Mac parked her car in front of Ops and flagged down a passing maintenance officer. "What's all the commotion, Chief?"

The man almost ignored her, but the flash of silver at her collar caught his eye, and he immediately drew to attention. "Landing mishap, ma'am. One of our CAP aircraft had a bird strike at a hundred feet - lost his port engine. He brought it in, but it wasn't pretty."

The chill that ran through her had nothing to do with the February night. "The crew?"

The chief nodded toward the ambulance that was screaming toward the end of the runway. "Couldn't say yet, ma'am."

"Carry on, Chief." Mac stood next to her car for a moment, torn as to what she should do. *It wasn't him*, she told herself repeatedly. *Not every flight he takes ends in drama.*

How many aircraft had been up there tonight, though? Four, maybe six at the most? Of those pilots, how many did trouble follow as consistently and determinedly as it did Harmon Rabb?

"Mac."

She whirled to see him standing behind her, having just walked out of the Ops building. His flight suit was dark with sweat, and his stance betrayed his weariness. But there was no surprise in his eyes at her sudden presence. "You should have gone to the VOQ. It's freezing out here."

Relief flowed through her, but she didn't move toward him. "I might have, if I hadn't been worried about the possibility that you were the one in that ambulance."

Harm shook his head. "They'll be okay. When they lost power on the one side, it screwed up their center of gravity - almost clipped a wing. But the arresting wires did their job." He rolled his shoulder a couple of times, working out some tense muscles. "You could've mentioned that you were coming."

"We don't seem to be doing a whole lot of communicating lately."

"Yeah. Well, come back to the Q. I'll be in better shape to talk coherently once I've had a shower. Meet me in the lounge in half an hour?"

"I'll be there."

Mac was the only person in the Visiting Officers' Quarters lounge when he arrived twenty-six minutes later, wearing a T-shirt and jogging pants and running a hand through his still-damp hair. He sat down in the chair next to hers and glanced at her uniform. "You didn't want to change?"

"They're booked up. I'll have to go to one of the motels outside the gate for the night."

"You can use my room to change, if you want."

"Are you stalling me?"

"I'm offering you a chance to get out of your Class-As, Mac. Rarely do I think things through far enough to have a hidden agenda like that." Knowing that the statement wasn't entirely true, he offered a wry smile, but his eyes were dull and lifeless.

She sighed. "I'm sorry. Thanks for the offer. Maybe I'll take you up on it later."

"Okay." He turned his head toward the window, seeing only a few runway lights in the distance. "I have to give you credit for determination. I leave town, and you come after me."

"You came after me when I left. All the way to the Indian Ocean, if I recall."

"True," he acknowledged. "And it got us approximately nowhere. So why do we keep trying to do this?"

"Do what? Move beyond being partners and friends?"

"No, I know why we keep trying to do that. What I want to know is why we keep letting ourselves get caught up in these worthless, petty arguments that drive us apart and make us say things we don't mean." He glanced over at her. "At least, I've been saying things I don't mean. I guess I can't speak for you."

"Oh, God, yes. The way I threw your accident back in your face - you didn't really believe that I meant that, did you?"

"I'd hoped not. But I also know that I can't ever make up for what happened."

"You don't have to. There were a lot of mistakes made at that time, and even though most of them weren't yours, you paid the heaviest price for them. I'm not going to make you relive that any more. I promise."

Harm lowered his gaze. "Thanks," he said softly. "Anyway, I think I'm starting to figure it out. The fight, I mean."

She watched his face, searching for any small clue as to his meaning, but there was nothing. "Well, don't leave me in suspense," she said, vainly attempting to keep her voice light.

"Last week, I was angry when you tried to have me removed from the case. I really felt like you'd betrayed me."

"I'm sorry for that. I shouldn't have judged you as quickly as I did, and I didn't think about what it would have done to your career - "

"That's just it. You weren't supposed to be thinking about my career. Your responsibility is to the court, and you acted with its best interests in mind. If you felt I wasn't being impartial, you had to go to the admiral. That's just the way it works. We always have to put duty first. That's why I'm not sure I can do this anymore."

She tensed. "You're not sure you can do *what* anymore?"

"I'm not sure I can be in love with you and still be your partner."

He said it with so little emotion that she wasn't entirely convinced she'd heard him correctly. When she met his gaze, though, she knew there'd been no mistake. "Me, either," she whispered. "But what's our alternative?"

A glimmer of dark humor crept into his eyes. "You're going to kill me."

"Sailor, considering the fact that you just admitted to being in love with me - a sentiment which I return wholeheartedly, by the way - killing you wasn't the first thing on my mind. What's our alternative?"

"I'm thinking about leaving JAG."

Mac blinked, feeling her heart sink to the floor. "Okay, I've changed my mind."

"Hold on a minute and let me explain. As long as we're both in the same office, under the same command, there will always be a conflict of interest. We fight because we're constantly being put on opposite sides, and we're both trying to do our jobs to the best of our ability. I don't want to have to make choices between you and my duties, and I don't want you to have to do it, either. The only way out of that situation is for one of us to transfer."

"And already you've got one foot out the door?"

Harm shook his head, an expression of resignation shadowing his features. "Let's be honest, Mac," he said quietly. "These past couple of months haven't been the most fun I've ever had. I've had trouble keeping my balance lately. I got kicked off that airman's case last fall for pretty much the same reasons that had you worried last week. And ordering Ridley to a FENAB was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in the courtroom. Not because I wasn't convinced it was right - I knew he needed to be evaluated. But I had to look another aviator in the eye and essentially end his career, and that was almost more than I could handle. It's not like I don't want to practice law anymore, but - I don't know, maybe a change would be good for me."

A sudden thought occurred to her, and she instinctively reached out to grab his arm. "Harm, tell me you're not thinking about flying full-time."

He gave a short laugh. "At almost forty years old? Other than maybe the CAP guys, who'd want me?"

"With two DFCs and a Silver Star, you could have a shipboard post if you wanted it. But I'm telling you now that if you do that, you'll hurt me far worse than any stupid courtroom skirmishes ever have."

His eyes held hers. "I know," he replied solemnly. "I learned that one the hard way, but I learned it. I'm not looking for an aviator slot, aboard ship or anywhere else. I was actually thinking more seriously about a Pentagon position."

"On the CNO's staff?"

"Yeah. Their investigative division gets involved in everything from mishaps to intelligence gathering. It's hands-on, but at a higher level. I think I could do that. I'd probably even end up back at JAG occasionally. But I wouldn't want to do something like that without your approval, because it would change a lot of things. So I guess I'm asking your opinion now."

Mac lifted her chin and spoke in a calm, reasoned voice. "No."

"No what? No, don't go to the Pentagon?"

"Don't leave JAG. Harm, you belong there. You know you do. And so do I, which means we've got some issues to work out. But we *can* work them out. It could be as simple as not opposing each other in court. Hell, after what's happened lately, the admiral would probably endorse that one out of hand. And besides that, things could be different from here on. There won't be any more misunderstandings about what we really mean, because we won't be trying to hide anything anymore. I want to be with you, you want to be with me, and we both know it. Don't you think that will solve half the problem by itself?"

"Maybe." He still looked unconvinced, but was slowly warming to the idea. "Maybe just coming down here and flying for a few days will be enough to help me clear my head and get back in the game."

"So stay and fly for a while. Finish out your rotation."

That surprised him. "Really?"

"Yeah. If it means that I'll have you back - really back - when it's all said and done, then do it." She gave him a small smile. "You belong at JAG, but you belong up there, too. As much as it scares me sometimes, I wouldn't ever try to change that."

Harm reached over and linked his fingers through hers, the sincerity of her words making a definite impact on him. "Okay," he said simply. "Two and a half more weeks on patrol, and then we find a way to explain to the admiral that we're together and need to work apart. Is that the plan?"

"That's the plan." Suddenly, a smirk broke out on her face, and she shook her head, trying to repress a snicker.

He looked at her, perplexed. "When did life-changing decisions become such a laugh riot?"

"It's not that. Well, it kind of is, but - I was just thinking that we did this in a completely ass-backwards order."

"How's that?"

"We established the fact that we're in love with each other, and then we moved right into how to maintain our careers without so much as a single kiss!"

He paused, reconsidering. "We did, didn't we?"

"We did. And while I realize that you needed to get all that off your chest, I - mmphh ..."

The end of the sentence faded as his lips descended on hers with stunning swiftness. With a sense of grace she didn't know he possessed, he slid into the oversized chair with her, not breaking the contact between them, and enfolded her in his powerful arms. If she hadn't already been sitting down, her legs would have buckled almost immediately.

"You sure you're ready for this?" he asked in a low voice.

"Ready for what?"

"Loving someone as hopelessly confusing as me."

She looked up at him with shining eyes. "I've been doing it for years. I think I can handle it."

The next kiss was even more urgent, and when he finally drew back to speak again, there was a hitch in his breath. "Can I reintroduce my offer from earlier?"

At that moment, she wouldn't have been able to recall what he'd said ten seconds ago, let alone ten minutes ago. "Remind me," she said unsteadily.

"I offered my room for you to change in. There's a catch now, though."

"Oh, there is?"

"Yes. Once you come in, you're not allowed to leave."

"Those are terms I can live with."

And just like that, everything and nothing was different between them.

*** THE END ***