



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13

Classification: Story, Romance (H/M), Angst

Spoilers: up through "Guilt": mainly "Adrift", "Lifeline"

Author's Notes: Plot? Not much. This is primarily a conversation: one that could actually take place if it weren't for TPTB's new pastime of shipper-teasing. This is my opinion of what should happen (have happened?) upon Mac's return, based on the "wait, they said WHAT??" scene from Mac's stateroom in "Measure of Men". I had to do a few hasty repairs after seeing "Guilt", so my apologies if it doesn't hang together quite right. And I created a little personal challenge somewhere along the line: to see if I could do this the way I wanted without using the word 'love', seeing as our heroes seem to regard it as a four-letter word. I did break down and use it once, but in a way that had very little to do with the relationship in question. Anyway, hang on tight ...

" ... was it everything you wanted to find
And did you miss me while you were looking for yourself out there ..."

-Train, "Drops of Jupiter"

0804 EDT

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

After weeks of wearing primarily battle-dress, it felt slightly odd to be in Class-A uniform again. Sarah Mackenzie took off her cover and strode into the bullpen with a smile that was only partially forced. It was something of a relief to be back, especially after the nightmare at the embassy, but she wondered if the questions she'd managed to escape in June were still there waiting for her.

At least one of those questions hadn't faded, she knew. It had screamed out at her from the moment she'd seen Harm's car in the parking lot, but it would have to wait a while longer. The fact that he'd been willing to confront it - them - on the *Guadalcanal* had been surprising, but when she'd pushed, he'd faltered, and she simply couldn't push any further.

Not with any shred of her dignity still intact.

“Colonel!” Bud was the first to spot her, and approached with a wide smile. “Welcome back, ma’am. Glad to see you’re safe and sound.”

“Thanks, Bud. I’m looking forward to things settling down a little.”

“If you’re looking for the commander, he’s in court - ”

Before she could open her mouth to tell him that she wasn’t in fact looking for Harm, a six-foot-four blur of white flew past them. “The commander is *not* in court - the commander is *late* for court ...” Harm paused long enough to recognize who Bud had been talking to. “Welcome back, Colonel.”

He said it easily but formally, without the slightest blink of emotion. After taking a moment to process that, Mac responded in kind. “Thank you, Commander. It’s good to be back.”

“Sorry to run, but Turner thinks he can kick this one down to a C misdemeanor, and if I walk in late, Sebring’ll probably give it to him. See you two later ...”

And he was gone again, with no sign at all that the surreal conversation on the *Guadalcanal* had ever taken place. Where exactly did that leave them at this point? Friends? It certainly didn’t feel that way. Mac sighed and headed for her office. This was likely to be a long day.

That afternoon, she stepped into the kitchen in search of lunch, and immediately came face-to-face with an unfamiliar officer: late thirties, with the three stripes of a full commander. The man smiled and extended his hand.

“I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure yet. Sturgis Turner, the new kid on the block.”

“Sarah Mackenzie. Nice to finally meet you.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t around for staff call - I had to nail Rabb’s ass to the wall in court this morning.” The last part was said in a raised voice, and Mac turned to see Harm walking past, shaking his head.

“Gloat all you want, Turner - it won’t get you a deal on the Rossen appeal.”

Turner grinned. “Who says I need one? Colonel, we should compare notes on this guy. You must have some secret ways around his strategies.”

“Hell, you’ve beaten me more times in the past three weeks than she has all year,” Harm tossed back with a similar grin. “We still on for tomorrow night?”

“Just bring your game, buddy. It’s been ages since I played anybody with skills.”

Harm laughed and continued on toward his office. It took Mac a moment to realize that he hadn’t directed a single remark toward her. And that smile - a real, honest ‘flyboy’

smile, with no underlying tension. When was the last time she'd seen one of those? Better yet, when had she last been the cause of one? Unnerved, she looked back at Turner. "You warmed him up awfully fast."

"Oh, Harm and I go back a ways. Annapolis, actually. Believe it or not, he's actually mellowed out over the years." Turner picked up his coffee mug and tipped his head briefly. "Good to meet you, Colonel. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around."

Mac nodded absently, stealing a glance in the direction of Harm's office. Somehow it seemed that no matter how much she learned about Harmon Rabb, it was never enough to really understand him. Shaking her head, she started back toward her own office.

"So we just started running like hell, and - wait, Colonel Mackenzie could tell it way better than me." From the crowd of officers around his desk, Gunny Galindez called over to her. "Ma'am, do you have a minute?"

She sighed, knowing that she'd probably have to relate this particular story a dozen times. Scuttlebutt had it that she was up for a commendation for the evacuation of the embassy, but she would have rather forgotten about the whole thing. Every time it came up, visions of that bright-faced little girl swam before her eyes. But she looked up and nodded resolutely, determined to get past it. If the Marines wanted to make a poster out of her, so be it. "Sure, Gunny."

Harm leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Somewhere in this damn file was the reported timeline of the robbery, and he was sure it clashed with the guard's deposition. Problem was, out of the dozens of single-spaced pages that made up the investigators' report, the all-important timeline was the proverbial needle in a haystack. And the animated discussion outside in the bullpen wasn't helping matters.

There was a knock at his door, and he barely looked up. "Enter."

Harriet stuck her head in. "Sir, the colonel and Gunny are telling the story of their little adventure in Indonesia, if you're interested."

"I'm in the middle of something right now, thanks."

She hesitated. "I'm only asking because the colonel - "

"Thank you, Lieutenant, but would you please close the hatch?"

Harriet sighed, recognizing the same polite yet distant tone he'd been using around the colonel all day. "Aye, sir."

Outside, Mac noticed the young lieutenant moving away from the office door with an expression that resembled defeat. Trust Harriet to sniff out the problems of this place in mere seconds. When their tales were finished, and everyone had gone back to work, she made a decision and boldly walked up to his door. *Here goes nothing*. Squaring her shoulders, she knocked twice.

"Enter," came the mildly-irritated reply.

"You didn't want to hear our sea stories?" she inquired lightly, causing him to glance

up in surprise. Then, instantly, a hard edge came into his eyes, and she knew the shield was firmly in place.

"I'm up to my ears in the Rossen case. Besides, we got the basics from ZNN, and I don't particularly care to hear the gory details."

Mac waited a moment, translating his response. Taking a calculated risk, she asked, "You were afraid, weren't you? When all of it was happening?"

"Is that a serious question? Of course I was afraid. You were getting shot at on the other side of the world. Does that really come as a shock?"

"That you care? Not really. But it's refreshing to know that for once, you've finally given me the courtesy of admitting it."

Harm fixed her with a sharp glare. "If you want to kick me around, can it wait until after work? You'll probably be first in line for once."

"For Christ's sake, Harm! Can we at least try to have this conversation without decoder rings?"

"I'm just playing by your rules, Mac," he returned. "You made it perfectly clear that you didn't want to have 'this' conversation at all. Did the ROEs change when I wasn't looking?" (*Note: ROEs = rules of engagement.*)

"That was only because it was obvious that you couldn't handle it!"

"Obvious to you, in five seconds flat. I didn't get much of a chance, much less a vote, did I?"

The words echoed in another voice, and it turned her dark eyes cold. "Watch yourself. You're starting to sound like Mic Brumby."

"Yeah, well, maybe I should have given the guy more credit."

She stared at him, unable to believe what she was hearing. "Is this the way it's going to be now?" she asked quietly. "We can't even be civil at work, now that this is hanging over our heads?"

"It's been there for a long time. We're just now getting up the courage to admit it." He rose from his chair and came around the desk, his blue eyes intense. "We can't keep running, Mac, and we can't go back. So either we deal with it, or we stay miserable indefinitely. Make a choice."

Oh, no. She wasn't about to go quietly. "'Deal with it'? While you're still in a year-and-a-half-old relationship with someone else? We're not on my schedule here. If she's important enough to hold on to, we have nothing to talk about. I'm not going to even entertain the possibility of being the other woman." She turned to leave, but he swiftly blocked the door.

"She's gone."

That stopped her dead in her tracks. "Excuse me?"

"Even though the suggestion that I would do that to either of you was probably the most insulting thing you've ever said to me, I'm going to ignore it and just move on. Renee is gone. Staying with her mom for a while. She asked me where we stood, and I finally told her. So I guess you have your answer."

Mac struggled for words for a few seconds. When she'd confronted him with that question - "*What would you give up to have me? Would you give up your girlfriend?*" - she hadn't allowed herself to believe that he might actually do it. If she had, she would have been forced to contemplate his question in return. "*What if I did?*"

He leaned closer and spoke in a lower voice. "Here are the terms. Tonight, somewhere neutral and fairly quiet. I get to ask the first question. After that, there are no rules. What do you say?"

Swallowing hard, she attempted to block out the effects of his cologne, and realized that she hadn't been this close to him since that fateful night on the admiral's porch. "1930, on the Lincoln steps," she managed to say. "If you're so much as a minute late - "

"I won't be."

He was early, as it turned out. When she walked up, he was sitting on the stone railing, one long leg folded up to his chest. He was staring out at the Washington Monument in the fading evening light, and she stole a moment to just watch him. No one she'd ever met would dare deny that Harmon Rabb was amazingly attractive. And in those jeans and that shirt, unassuming yet somehow enticing ... it was one of the things she'd realized about him early on. He always looked the best when he wasn't trying.

"This isn't fair," she murmured without realizing it. Hearing her voice, he turned slightly.

"I thought this was about as fair as we could make it."

She wasn't about to admit that what she perceived to be unfair was the distraction his brilliantly-blue eyes and perfect muscles were providing. "So," she commented, taking a seat beside him. "You said you wanted to ask the first question."

"I do. But first I want to say I'm sorry." She blinked, but he was already elaborating. "Gunny told me about the little girl at the embassy. You want to talk about it?"

"Not much to talk about. She basically saved our lives, and she's most likely dead because of it. I'm not going to break, Harm."

"I know. Still, I jumped on you earlier, and I wasn't thinking about what you just went through. So before we get into anything else, let me apologize for neglecting my duty as a friend."

"Apology accepted," she said simply, and he went back to gazing out across the glassy

water.

"I was kind of surprised at the way things went around here," he mused, his mind elsewhere. "While it was all happening, I mean. The admiral kept pulling me aside to give me the best updates he had, but other than that, we had to keep doing business as usual. By the end, only Harriet and Bud even had the guts to come into my office. I don't know - I guess I was expecting something more like what I hear happened in May."

A chill ran through her as the events of that fateful night flashed through her memory. Feeling so helpless, hundreds of miles away, left only to imagine what must be happening to her dear friend ... "It was a different situation," she maintained, forcing her voice to stay level. "But apparently we get into just as much trouble apart as we do together."

"More, in my case." But he'd noticed the slight change in her demeanor, and he brought them swiftly back to the here and now. "Anyway, if you still want to do this, so do I. But I'll understand entirely if you're not ready."

She was far from certain, but she folded her arms across her chest. "Take your best shot."

Meeting her gaze squarely, he began. "Why did you really take the assignment?"

"To clear my head. To step back from the rubble of my personal life and figure out what I wanted. You of all people ought to understand that."

He frowned slightly. "How's that? I've never been one step from the altar, as far as I can recall."

"No, you'd never let it get that far. But you certainly have experience with running."

"We covered this once already, didn't we?"

"I'm not talking about Sydney, although I'm sure we'll find our way back to that eventually. Right now I'm talking about the six months before that."

"I guess there is an element of *déjà vu* in all this, isn't there?" He was silent for a moment, considering how best to reply. "Mac, when I left to fly, I wasn't running from anything. I was running *to* something. I thought you understood that."

"Harm, do I ever really understand you?" Seeing the flicker of hurt in his eyes, she sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. "Never mind. I didn't mean that. It was just really hard not to take it a little personally, you know? All the time I thought we'd had such a great partnership, and a great friendship -and then suddenly all of that took second place to a tin can in the middle of the ocean, full of strangers ten years behind you, all because that's where the planes were. So yes, it's been hard for me to know exactly where our relationship stands."

He nodded. "Okay, I can accept that. I don't think I can ever really explain why it was that I had to go. Some of it was just like you said - figuring out what I wanted. But I did figure it out, and it turned out that sea duty wasn't it. Didn't it occur to you that you might have had something to do with that?"

That revelation caught her slightly off-balance. "I don't know," she finally answered, glancing down at her hands twisted in her lap. "I guess I was afraid to hope, in case I was wrong."

"That's been our problem all along, I think. We're both so afraid that the other one doesn't feel the same that neither of us is willing to go first. But what is there really to be afraid of? You know how I feel, Mac. If you didn't know before that night on the admiral's porch, surely you do now."

New frustration surged through her. "That's exactly the point! You can't do this with a look or a kiss, Harm! I don't care what the sappy songs say - none of that tells me what I need to know. You have to be able to look at me and say it, or you risk letting me misinterpret any number of things."

"Such as 'not yet'?" he asked quietly. Her head swung around in surprise, but she recovered and nodded.

"Okay, I deserved that. But yes, a little elaboration might have gone a long way back there. Let's not start there, though. We need to start from the beginning, as soon as we determine where the beginning is. Plain English, nothing less. If you can do it, then I can, too. What do you think?"

Unexpectedly, he smiled and shook his head. "I should have known better," he mused. "That's where I keep going wrong with you. Most of the other women I've known were willing to let me slide on this type of thing. At the beginning, anyway. They figured out that I had the emotional awareness of a six-year-old and didn't force me to define things."

"Must've been because you were so good in bed," she remarked without thinking, earning a dirty look.

"Jeez, the gloves are off tonight, aren't they?"

"Brutal honesty, sailor. Now or never."

"I know. Anyway, I should have realized a long time ago that you weren't like most women." He stood and offered her a hand. "Shall we walk for a while?"

After a moment, she accepted it, and he helped her up. His hand was warm, and strong, and for a brief second she contemplated holding on to it a while longer. Not yet, though. They started down the steps in the direction of the Reflecting Pool.

"So where did all this get started? At what point did we start thinking that maybe there could be something there?"

"I'm not sure. For all I know, it could have been in the Rose Garden."

She stopped walking. "No. You didn't see me that day, Harm. You saw Diane. Don't try to make either of us believe otherwise."

"You're probably right. In some ways, I don't think I completely stopped seeing her until that night at Norfolk." He turned back to face her, and she could see his sincerity. "But

after that, it was a different story. I promise you that.”

“I believe you,” she said softly, and they continued walking. “I don’t know when it was for me, either. All I know is that when you came to my door and told me you could fly again, something just broke. I could see how happy you were, and I wanted to be happy for you, but I just couldn’t. I realized how much I’d come to depend on us being together, and it hurt to know that you didn’t see it the same way. I understand that it wasn’t about us, but for me, that’s where it started. And then everything was so bizarre when you got back ... I think that’s why I hit you with all of it in Sydney.”

“ ‘Hit me with it’ is right,” he admitted. “I had no idea where that was coming from. I thought you were still getting over hating me. Those few months in there, after I got back, it just seemed like nothing was going right ... I didn’t know where to start when it came to us. I’m not sure I ever have.”

She smiled a little, her gaze wistful. “Complications. A friendship on the line, and a possible court-martial offense. I wish I could tell you why I decided I could risk all of that in one night, but I honestly don’t know. I guess I felt like I needed to be in control of my life, rather than watching it all go by. So I took a chance, and when it didn’t work, I wanted to move on as quickly as possible. But it wasn’t just because you said no. It was more about *why* you said it. I know you too well, Harm. You might throw caution to the wind if it’ll help solve a case, but you’d never dream of doing anything so rash in your own life, even if it had the slightest chance of making you happy. It’s just not in your nature. And I think I realized that your ‘not yet’ was really open-ended - that the next day and the next week would all look the same. It didn’t matter how much you cared or didn’t care - when the time came to put your heart and your way of life on the line, you wouldn’t be able to do it.” She turned slightly away from him, knowing that he’d hear the quiet pain anyway. “That’s why I was afraid to wait. And it’s why I’m still afraid right now.”

It was a few moments before he spoke again, and she knew the words had cut deep. “I understand why you would feel that way,” he answered, his voice low. “You’re right. I wasn’t willing to risk what we had, both professionally and personally. But a lot has happened over the past couple of years. I watched you nearly slip away from me, all the while telling myself that I had to let you make your own decisions, regardless of what we might have been. It wasn’t just that I was afraid, although that was certainly part of it. I had to trust you: I had to trust that you were following your heart. Anything less would have been unfair to you. Then I came a little too close to dying, which threw everything into a tailspin, and that carried with it a whole new kind of introspection. Now ...” He prepared himself as best he could for this next step, the one that would cross the line forever. “Things change, Sarah. People can change.”

And there it was - a virtual neon sign saying that he was honestly willing to try, just by using her name. Hearing it sent a flush of warmth through her, but she steeled herself against it. They weren’t quite there yet.

“Have *you* changed?” she asked, almost inaudibly. “Can you stand here and tell me what it is you want?”

“I think I have to. Otherwise I run the risk of letting it slip away for good.” His eyes pierced through to her very core. “But you have to promise that you’ll do the same. Not because I’ll back out otherwise, because I won’t - I can’t. Just ... for the sake of my sanity. What’s left of it.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, she smiled, a little anxiously. "I promise."

He stopped near a bench along the path and looked back at her with surprising clarity. "I want to be with someone who understands me. You have no idea how well you do that, no matter what you think. I want to spend more of my life feeling the way I feel when we're together, whether we're working or hassling each other or whatever. I want to have you there when everything else is going wrong, and when you need someone, I want it to be me. Most of all, I want you to believe me when I say that you're the most incredible person I've ever known, and that if I had the power, I'd go to the ends of the earth to make sure that no one - me or anyone else - could ever hurt you again."

He'd said it purposefully, but averted his gaze at the end, as if his confidence was faltering. He'd said it, though, and that was what mattered.

"Thank you," she breathed, blinking the tears out of her eyes. "I can't imagine how hard that must have been for you."

"No, you probably can't," he confessed, his voice taut with apprehension. He'd done what she asked: he'd laid his very soul out in front of her. Now, for him, there were only questions. "Your turn."

"Okay." She took a few breaths to gather herself, then stepped directly into his line of sight. "I want to be with someone who knows and respects exactly who I am, who'd never try to change me to fit his expectations. You've always been that, and I'm grateful, because there have been plenty of other people who never quite got it. I also want to be the one who knows the parts of your life that you never let anyone else see. You guard yourself so closely, but I want to make you understand that you never have to be afraid of letting me in. I want ... I want the same thing as you - to be there for each other, even more than we always have been. I want to be able to shut out the world just by being in your arms."

Not trusting himself to speak, he lifted a hand to her cheek. She closed her eyes at his touch. "But there's more," she continued tentatively. "I want a future, but I don't want it now. I just spent a year and a half of my life trying to make what I had into what I wanted, and a lot of people ended up getting hurt by it. I'm not going to say I didn't love him, because I did. It just - wasn't right, somehow. And I know I can't afford to go into another relationship at full throttle just yet, for the sake of *my* sanity. All that said, though ... I'm not in this for kicks, Harm. I *do* want a future. If we're going to do it, we had damn well better do it right."

She was almost afraid to look up into his eyes at that point, but she had to know. What she saw, however, stunned her more than anything they'd previously said. There wasn't a flicker of hesitation in his handsome features: only tenderness. "My thoughts exactly," he said simply.

It took her a moment to fully comprehend the meaning of that quiet statement. This man, who used to flinch at even the idea of commitment, seemed to be ready and willing to step over the edge. With her. "Do you mean that?" she whispered, half in disbelief. "Can you actually envision a real, honest-to-God future for us, with everything that comes with it? Up to and including an off-the-wall promise made two years ago on the steps at JAG?"

She literally held her breath until he smiled, shaking his head. "Sarah, not only can I imagine that ... there is no one else in the world I can imagine it with."

That clinched it. She'd promised herself coming in that she wouldn't let herself be

swept away by the emotions of the moment. But as they stood there, so close to making everything perfect, it registered in her mind that getting swept away was precisely what she wanted just then. "Flyboy, sometimes you are just unbelievable."

Before he could even begin to respond, she'd surged forward and stilled his lips with a dizzying kiss, one that somehow managed to propel them both out of the self-doubt and fear that had shackled them for so long. When it was over, they simply looked at each other, the same thought mirrored in their eyes. Finally, she found her voice. "Maybe I was wrong ... Maybe you *can* tell me everything I need to know with a kiss."

"Not everything." He didn't recall how his arms had gotten around her, but nothing and no one would be able to move them now. "We need to decide what we're going to do about work."

"I guess you're right. Might as well get it over with before we end up having to defend each other on an Article 32." She rested her head against his chest and discovered that it was just as she'd hoped - she very nearly could shut out the world. Somehow, in this place, at this moment, even the uncertainty of their careers seemed trivial. "We have to talk to the admiral. There's a chance he might be able to work something out so that we can both stay at Headquarters."

"Only if we're lucky. It worked for Bud and Harriet, but they don't have to face off in court. I think we have to be ready for the possibility that one of us will have to transfer."

There was a brief silence, and then they both spoke in unison.

"I'll do it."

After the surprise wore off, he shook his head. "You're chief of staff, and you have more time in rank than me."

"You're the better litigator," she returned, "and this would be your fourth change of designator."

"That's not true, but even so, I wouldn't necessarily have to change. The judge advocate's office at the Pentagon is just up the road."

"And it would be just fine for either of us." She raised an eyebrow, making it clear that she wasn't backing down, but there was a sparkle in her warm brown eyes that he hadn't seen in a long time. "I suppose we ought to just wait and see what happens. Maybe the admiral will have some ideas." Suddenly realizing the implications of this conversation, she pulled back slightly to stare up at him. "Wait. All of a sudden we're both willing to give up our lives at JAG, which was the primary roadblock to this whole thing in the first place? How the hell did we get here? How did we manage to end five years of total confusion in twenty minutes?"

"I think we finally figured out that being afraid is a lousy way to live," he answered honestly. "Other than that, I have no idea. Maybe we just needed a shove in the right direction, and Indonesia was it."

"Or about six dozen shoves in the right direction." She shook her head in amazement. "I guess I don't see how today is any different from any of the other times. I mean, it's not

like we've never been in dangerous situations before."

"But usually we're in them together," he pointed out. "This time, you were out there, and all I could do was wait, and think about all the things I could have said or done to make things right. At the risk of being presumptuous, I have to assume that you were doing the same when I was in the water. Maybe that was the shove we needed." He took both of her hands in his and spoke solemnly for a moment. "Sarah, I can't promise you that this is going to turn into 'happily ever after' overnight. Neither of us is exactly used to the kind of compromise this is going to take. But I *can* promise you that I've never wanted anything so much in my life."

"That's more than enough for me," she said softly. "We don't have to set the future in stone right now. Let's just focus on tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure. Should we go see the admiral in the morning?"

"First thing, I think. Before either of us has time to piss him off regarding anything else." She flashed a grin and squeezed his hand. "Got any plans for after work?"

"Other than a basketball game with Turner, in which I'm likely to get my six handed to me, not much. How about you?"

"I was thinking about asking out this guy I know. He knows I'm crazy about him and everything, but we've never managed to get it together before now. I don't know - dinner, and maybe a movie or something?"

He smiled. "Sounds nice. If this guy continues to be an idiot, look me up, would you?"

"Pick me up at nineteen hundred."

"Deal. Good night, ninja-girl."

"Night, flyboy."

With a gentle kiss on her cheek, he released her hands, and they turned to go their separate ways. Within four steps, though, both had turned back, and without another word they came together in a crushing, passionate kiss.

"I missed you," she said breathlessly. "When I was out there. I think I missed you even when you were there with me."

"I think I've been missing you my whole life," he replied, pulling her close again.

In the five years since their partnership had begun, there had been exactly two kisses between them before this night, and both had been driven by pain and doubt. Now, there were two more to add to the list, and the sheer power of them threatened to erase the previous two from existence. This was what mattered - this was how it was meant to be. At that moment, there was no truth in the world stronger than that kiss.

*** THE END ***