



Life Imitating Art

Rating: PG

Classification: Vignette, Romance (H/M)

Spoilers: no major ones - general season 7 stuff

Author's Notes: As the title is meant to suggest, this story is going to deal with some OTHER representations of the U.S. Navy in pop culture. Specifically, you must, I repeat MUST, be familiar with the movie "A Few Good Men" for this to make sense. (I'm a movie-quote freak, as previous fanfics may have hinted.) Some of the quotes and references in here won't even be marked as such - inside-joke points to those who spot them. "Top Gun" and "Crimson Tide" would help, too, but they're not as critical. If you haven't seen the movie, you're going to be really, really confused by this one ... sorry ...

"I still don't get this whole 'icing' concept," Harm complained, studying the motion on the TV with a frown. "If the puck crosses that line without anybody touching it, they just stop the play?"

"Typically, but international rules are different from the NHL," Sturgis replied, reaching for his beer. He'd convinced his friend to come over and watch the Olympics with him, but despite his best efforts both at present and back at Annapolis, he'd never truly been able to get Harm hooked on hockey. The curse of growing up in sunny California, he theorized. "The goalie's allowed to tag it up. And the two-line pass rule doesn't matter, because there's no center line."

"Why?"

"How should I know? Just watch the game."

"Whatever. Did you get the pizza ordered? I'm going to need it if all you have is this dark Belgian stuff." Harm examined the bottle in his hand suspiciously. "I swear, I've had bourbon weaker than this."

"The pizza's on its way, and you just don't appreciate good beer. Either that, or you're turning into a lightweight in your old age."

"I am not. I just didn't have time for lunch today."

"Holtzman case?" Sturgis asked sympathetically.

"Bingo. He's got me chasing down six different officers in his chain of command, trying to find one who'll say they gave the order."

"You really think someone ordered Sergeant Holtzman to discipline his men like that?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know." Harm leaned back and rubbed his eyes wearily. "I guess there could have been an order that he interpreted more liberally than his superiors intended, but I don't see how I can prove anything that way. Forget it. I don't want to think about

Holtzman until 0800 Monday.”

“Yeah, like you’ve ever been good at leaving your work *at* work. You’ll be up in the middle of the night with an idea for some new angle.”

“Jeez, did you invite me over just to hassle me, or what?”

“Just an unexpected side benefit.” Sturgis smirked and put his feet up, returning his attention to the game. “Hey, now that was a nice move.”

A blast of cheering came from the TV, and the American team gathered around to celebrate their goal. “Who scored that one? LeClair?”

“Brett Hull.” The lifelong Chicago Blackhawks fan rolled his eyes in contempt. “He’s such a punk.”

“Didn’t his dad play for your team?”

“He’s a second-generation punk, then. But at least we scored.” The last few seconds ticked off the clock, and the teams went to the locker room for intermission. Sturgis turned his head with a self-deprecating smile. “You realize that we’re pathetic, right?”

“Why, because we’re both single and sitting around the TV on a Friday night?” Harm shrugged. “Well, not completely single. At least you’ve got a chance with Bobbi Latham.”

“Don’t jinx me. And that reminds me - from what I hear, I’m not the only one who’s seen the congresswoman’s charms.” The other man fixed him with a knowing look.

Harm squirmed uncomfortably, realizing he was trapped. “Who told?”

“Bud did. But he didn’t have much of a choice. Mac made some sarcastic comment about the two of you, and I figured I could get the story out of Bud easier than I could out of her.”

“Remind me to thank Mac for that one.”

Sturgis folded his arms. “So all this time, you’ve been on my case about asking Bobbi out, and you weren’t going to mention to me that *you* had a thing going on with her once upon a time?”

“Come on, buddy, it was one week, and it was three years ago. I just didn’t want to make anything more complicated than it already was.”

“Too late for that,” he commented good-naturedly. “Anyway, I should’ve known that you’d have made the rounds of all the strong, attractive women in the greater D.C. area by now.”

“Not all of them,” Harm answered under his breath. His friend lifted an eyebrow, deciding not to pursue that particular topic any further for the moment.

“I’m going to grab another beer. You want one?”

"Sure, what the hell."

Sturgis came back into the living room with a bottle in each hand and reclaimed his chair. "You get the invitation to the reunion this summer?"

"Oh, yeah. I don't know if I can handle all that concentrated nostalgia, though. Couldn't they just wait until twenty years comes around?"

"That's only three years away."

Harm looked at him in disbelief. "Christ, it is, isn't it? We are so damn old, Sturgis..."

"The way of the world, my friend. Look at us, though. When we were kids rooming together at the Academy, we were headed in absolutely opposite directions. You wanted to be above the water, and I wanted to be under it. And we both ended up here. Doesn't that defy all laws of irony?"

"To detours," he agreed, and they clinked their bottles together. A glimmer of an idea crept into Sturgis's mind just then, and he grinned suddenly.

"Pop quiz. Who do you identify with more, Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*, or Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men*?"

Harm took one look at him and snorted in amusement. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Come on, give."

"They're both unrealistic to the point of being ridiculous."

"You know that, and I know that, but that's what the general public thinks we are. I mean, when some civvie off the street sees you in your spiffy white uniform, chances are he or she will automatically identify you with one movie or another."

"It works both ways," he retorted. "I might as well ask you if you identify more *with A Few Good Men* or *Crimson Tide*."

"Why, 'cause I look so much like Denzel?"

"You wish. I should've said *Hunt for Red October* instead. But you know what I mean. Are you more a lawyer or a submariner?"

"That oversimplifies the issue a little. In the context of those particular movies, I still go with Denzel in *Crimson Tide*. But you still have to answer the question, and not just from a 'lawyer or fighter jock' standpoint."

"What is this, Truth or Dare?"

"Fine, be that way. You want to know what I think?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Sturgis calmly ignored the sarcasm. "I think you've got more in common with Lieutenant Kaffee than you do with Maverick Mitchell."

"How do you figure? The backstory with Maverick's father, and the accident with his RIO ... the guy's emotional baggage matches mine down to the tags." He said it with little emotion, but his friend was already steering away from the topic.

"Only up to a point, and I'm talking about real characterization, not random plot junk the writers dreamed up in an attempt to make the story more interesting. For better or worse, that movie had tunnel vision - it was all about the flying."

"You've never seen me fly," Harm pointed out. "Sometimes that's the way it is."

"Yeah, but I know you. You aren't the type to break rules just for the hell of it."

"Says you. I boomed Pax River last fall when I was flying chase for the Stealth tests," he tossed back, mainly to be difficult.

"Nice try, but I remember that case, and it doesn't count. Maverick's a caricature - nobody really resembles him for long, or they wouldn't last. Maybe that was you when you were twenty-five, doing the real Top Gun, but not now."

Harm spread his hands in a mock gesture of surrender. "Okay, all-knowing one, fill me in. Why am I Lieutenant Kaffee? Since you're obviously leaving aside the fact that I'm a foot taller than Tom Cruise."

"He's prettier, though."

He picked up a pretzel and chucked it at his friend. "The guy was right about one thing. I do hate the whites."

" 'Nobody likes the whites,' " Sturgis quoted, snickering. "Granted, you're not a punk j.g. who plea-bargains everything, but that's just the beginning of the movie. He's something completely different at the end. He's prepared to risk everything to get to the truth. You've fired an H-and-K in the courtroom, for God's sake. I don't think staring down Jack Nicholson would faze you for long."

Harm didn't respond for a minute, gazing off into nothing. "Kaffee had issues with his father, too," he remarked quietly. "He couldn't get out from under his father's shadow."

"Yes, he could. And eventually he did, by doing exactly what he felt was right and making damn sure that he saw it through. That has to be a familiar concept."

After a moment, he smiled. "I really wanted to drop-kick Kiefer Sutherland's character throughout most of that movie. Freaking Marines."

"You would've nailed him just like Kaffee did. And I can just see you snatching that book right out of the prosecutor's hand."

"Except Mac would've killed me."

"Mac wouldn't be the prosecutor. Mac would be Commander Galloway."

Harm shot him a look of disbelief. "No, she wouldn't. Galloway couldn't litigate her way out of a paper bag."

"Okay, ignore that part. But she and Kaffee were a good team because of their different strengths. And they didn't take any crap from each other."

"Which doesn't make any sense, considering she outranked him by a whole stripe."

"Could you let go of your perfectionist streak for two seconds, please? Sheesh. Besides, Mac ranked you for a while in there, didn't she?"

"For a grand total of three months, or something. And given the multitude of other issues we had at the time, that one was only the tip of the iceberg."

Sturgis took a long drink of his beer before replying. As much as his curiosity was pushing him to clarify that statement, he got the distinct feeling that heading in that direction would land him in the middle of a minefield. Therefore, he simply took a different path. "What do you think happened to all those guys after the movie ended?"

"Tom Cruise made *Mission Impossible*, right?"

"Not the actors, genius. Hypothetically, do you think Kaffee would've ended up staying in and becoming career Navy after a case like that?"

"You're going to tell me yes, I assume."

"I think he would've. I think all three of them would've had a renewed dedication to the service. They would've realized that it wasn't infallible, that it needs people to protect it just as much as anything else. That's what we do, you know. Some people stand on a wall and say - "

" 'Nothing's going to hurt you tonight. Not on my watch.' " Harm finished the line, and for once there was no sarcasm in his voice.

Sturgis nodded solemnly. "We used to be the ones who defended the walls. Now we defend those who still do."

Harm gave a short nod of agreement, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity to make another comment. "And we sit at home drinking on a Friday night."

"God, you're impossible." The former bubblehead rolled his eyes. "You know, I read somewhere that they did a version of the movie where Kaffee and Galloway hooked up. There was some big climactic kiss in the rain after he chased her down and told her he was going to put Jessup on the stand."

"You know what always bugged me about that scene? Kaffee was drunk out of his skull, and yet he was out driving in the pouring rain," Harm stated, missing the point entirely.

"Maybe Weinburg was driving. Anyway, supposedly they did a screening of that version, and everyone hated the fact that they hooked up, so they ditched the end of the

scene. You think that would've totally ruined the movie? To have them together at the end?"

"Ever heard of fraternization, counselor?"

Sturgis threw up his hands, exasperated. "For the last time, Rabb, this is Hollywood we're talking about. Can you please forget about the UCMJ, just in theory?"

"No, *Turner*," he responded in kind, "I can't. The whole damned movie is about military justice, so you have to be consistent. You don't just get to toss out the parts you don't like."

"What if they'd been on equal footing? Would it still have been unreasonable? There was obviously some kind of chemistry going on, and they obviously respected each other - "

"They fought constantly."

"Because they were both passionate about the case. They both made mistakes, but they didn't use them as an excuse to give up and hate each other. Maybe it wouldn't have been so great for the movie, but hypothetically speaking, I think they could've made it work."

"When did you become such a sap? There's got to be a hundred different issues involved with making a relationship work within the chain of command. The whole 'appearance of impropriety' thing would come knocking whenever they had to oppose each other on a case. It could affect the decorum of the workplace, and other officers would always wonder if there were ulterior motives behind their decisions..."

Sturgis merely watched his friend carefully, not surprised by the rising intensity of his tone. "So it's an issue of office decorum?"

"It could be. We all do this job for a reason, Sturgis. We believe in what we're doing so strongly that we don't allow other things to jeopardize our purpose. You said it yourself five minutes ago. We defend the service that defends the country. You don't screw around with that responsibility, hypothetically or otherwise."

"I don't think that's the whole reason it didn't happen for them," he returned calmly. "Part of the reason, maybe, but it's not enough for them to have turned their back on something they both wanted. I think maybe Kaffee was afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of letting himself get completely involved. He was a golden boy who was used to getting everything he wanted, with a few exceptions. Suddenly this woman storms in, and he can't get past her with a smile and a wink, and it throws his whole sense of reality off-balance. He's so accustomed to being in complete control that someone as strong as her seems like a threat to his whole outlook. So he keeps ignoring and denying every single little sign, no matter how insignificant, that they might be attracted to each other."

"Can you blame him?" Harm fired back defensively, not stopping to realize that this discussion was beginning to lose all resemblance to the movie in question. "How is he supposed to know what she really thinks when all they do is either tease or fight? They trust each other in every other way, but as soon as things get too close for comfort, it's back to the best-pals option, because anything else would just be too complicated to even confront. He has issues, sure, but so does she, and it's not like they can just wish all that away and start

over - ”

Abruptly he broke off, the faint buzz of alcohol slowing his dawning realization of just how personal this had become.

“We’re not speaking hypothetically anymore, are we?” Sturgis asked, a little too innocently.

Harm fixed him with an accusatory stare. “You son of a bitch,” he said, more impressed than angry. “You set me up.”

“All the direct routes through this particular subject seemed to run into roadblocks,” the other attorney replied, folding his arms in satisfaction. “It’s called leading the witness. Remember the line in the movie? ‘I think he *wants* to say it. I think he’s pissed off that he has to hide from this ... So we put him on the stand and lead him right where he’s dying to go.’ ” He studied his friend’s conflicted expression, the earlier smugness fading into compassion. “I think you want to say it, buddy. I can keep a secret. You do love her, don’t you?”

“We are talking about Mac here, aren’t we?”

“Sure as hell hope so. Otherwise we’d have to be more drunk than I thought.”

Harm sighed, and all the tension drained from his body as he collapsed back onto the couch. “Of course I love her. I’d be an idiot not to.”

“You’re still an idiot.”

“Sturgis, there’s five years of history there that you can’t even begin to understand - ”

“I’m not sure I need to. From where I sit, you’re both being idiots, but I think you’re worse. This isn’t Shakespeare: there’s no point in suffering through all this melodrama when you could just walk right up to her and figure it out, once and for all. Don’t worry so much about what’s happened in the past. Office decorum is what you make it, and as for the appearance of impropriety, you deal with it on a case by case basis.”

Despite feeling very much like a deer caught in headlights, he raised an eyebrow. “Are you trying to plea-bargain me into dating my partner?”

“Will it get me a set of steak knives?” Sturgis teased, but soon sobered. “Listen, I realize I’m hardly qualified to give relationship advice, so I’ll stay out of it from here on. I just wanted to know.”

Harm shook his head and tossed back the last of his drink, still annoyed that he’d been so easily tricked. He’d managed to deny what he felt, even to himself, for so long - how the hell had Sturgis managed to work the truth out of him in twenty minutes flat? “You know me too well, buddy,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Ain’t that the truth.” The doorbell rang then, and Sturgis got up to answer it. “That’ll be our pizza.”

He opened the door to reveal a Marine colonel holding a pizza box and a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke. “You squids order a half-meat, half-rabbit food pizza?” she asked with a

sly grin.

Recognizing his partner's voice, Harm only rolled his eyes. "And the hits just keep on coming," he muttered under his breath. Of course Sturgis would invite her without mentioning it. It was crystal-clear just who was in control of this round. He'd simply have to roll with the punches. Twisting around to lean over the back of the couch, he drawled, "Wow, Sturgis, your pizza guy's hot."

Mac narrowed her eyes at him, tossing her jacket over a chair. "You didn't get him drunk already, did you, Sturgis?"

"For Christ's sake, you two, just give me some freaking food..."

Sturgis reclaimed his chair, and Mac set the box down on the coffee table before elbowing Harm aside. "Shove over, Navy. Just 'cause you're tall doesn't mean you get the whole couch."

"Did somebody forget to tell me that the President declared a national day of harassment towards me?" Harm grumbled good-naturedly, sliding over to give her space. She tucked her legs up gracefully and reached for a slice of pizza.

"I would've been here earlier, but the Richardson interview ran way late. I think there's a rule about half the workload for the week coming in at 1600 on Fridays. So who's winning the game?"

The two commanders exchanged a blank look. "Um, it was 2-1 at the end of the first," Harm offered lamely. Mac frowned and glanced at the TV.

"It's the start of the third! What in God's name was so utterly enthralling that you guys missed an entire period?"

"The meaning of life," Sturgis deadpanned with a confident smile. "That, or a discussion of the finer points of various portrayals of the military in Hollywood."

"Give me a break," Mac replied skeptically, leveling a curious stare on her partner. There was something different in his eyes, and it wasn't just the fact that they'd obviously been drinking. But he simply shrugged and flashed a smile at her.

"It's a guy thing, Mac," he said easily.

Shaking her head, she returned her attention to the TV. "Well, at least we're still winning. What's the deal with there being no center line, though?"

"International rules. There's no two-line pass." Harm shot a 'so there' look at his friend, who merely watched the game without comment.

As the final period went on, Sturgis noted that Harm had given up on the beer in favor of sharing Mac's Diet Coke. He rarely drank when she was around, come to think of it; did she ever drink? *Stay out of it, Turner*, he told himself firmly, but he couldn't help noticing that his two guests had slowly but surely gotten more comfortable on the couch. Harm had one leg folded up, and Mac was leaning against it, her hand idly resting on his knee. Occasionally they'd make a comment about the game, but mainly they just sat in silence, relaxed in each

other's presence.

Okay, so I shouldn't have interfered, Sturgis said inwardly. But they're so damn good together, and because they're not really together, they're driving the rest of us nuts. In this case, interfering is practically an act of duty.

When Team USA had officially won the game, Mac stretched out and stood up. "Thanks for having us over, Sturgis. Since *someone* had to go and miss the Super Bowl, this was a decent substitute."

"Hey, I go where the Navy sends me," Harm protested, rising as well. "What do you say, Marine? What does a guy have to do to get a ride home?"

"Dangerous question, flyboy. Tell you what - if you take a look at my car this weekend, I'll give you a ride tonight *and* spring for lunch tomorrow."

"Your engine knocking again?"

"You say that like it's my fault or something," she answered, pouting as well as a jarhead could. It wasn't fooling him, but he simply reached for his leather jacket and shook his friend's hand.

"I'm going to find a way to get back at you, buddy, but thanks for tonight. See you Monday?"

"As always. Good night, you two." Sturgis watched them leave and shook his head. He had answers from both sides now, as clear as day: Harm loved Mac, and Mac loved Harm. But that was as far as he was going to go. From this point on, the rest was up to them.

How could two obviously bright individuals be so amazingly dense?

... They were a few minutes into the drive back toward Union Station before Mac spoke up, with the inevitable question. "So what were you guys really talking about for half an hour in there?" She had that look on her face, the one that usually made him raise his hands in surrender. He could withstand her piercing cross-examinations, but when she turned on that perfect, natural grin, reminding him of the depth of their friendship, that was the end of it. "I know it wasn't the meaning of life."

"We really were talking about movies. *A Few Good Men*, specifically."

"Hmm ... lousy in terms of accuracy, but good dialogue." She glanced over at him. "What about it?"

He briefly considered lying. He could easily have brushed it off and found a way to steer them back toward a safer topic. For some reason, though, the 'safe' path, the escape route that he'd taken so often, didn't seem nearly as attractive anymore. In the back of his mind, he'd known it would all eventually come back to this point. Tonight was as good a time as any.

Sturgis, if this blows up in my face, I'm going to kill you for putting the idea in my head.

"We were discussing a hypothetical situation," he answered cautiously, gazing out the passenger-side window. "Whether or not a couple of dedicated JAGs like Kaffee and Galloway could have made a relationship work."

She didn't respond right away, warning bells immediately shrieking in her mind. Had Sturgis betrayed her confidence after all? No, he wouldn't. Then what precisely was happening here? "Really," she stated, her voice carefully controlled. "Did you come to a conclusion?"

"Not exactly. Sturgis thinks yes. I'm not so sure."

They weren't looking at each other, but it was as if he could feel her wilt ever so slightly beside him. That was all the reaction she'd allow herself. It was enough, though, to strengthen his resolve.

Before she could find a response, he continued. "Not the way they were scripted, at least. The thing is, life doesn't follow a script."

As they pulled up to his apartment, she put the car in park and steeled herself to turn and fully face him. "No, it doesn't," she agreed tentatively. "I guess we're supposed to write our own."

"That's part of my problem, I think. I've been trying to write mine completely on my own, without relying on anyone else's help. And I don't want to do that anymore." With a deep breath, he looked her squarely in the eye. "I'm not sure I have any right to ask you for anything, given the way things have gone for us in the past, but if I did ask ... would you help me?"

As she began to understand what he was saying in his own awkward way, tears stung at her eyes. "Harm," she said slowly, "where is all this coming from? Just tonight?"

"No, of course not. You know better than that." He sighed, wondering if any explanation would really make sense. "When I was arguing with Sturgis, trying to give him all the reasons why us being together would be a bad idea, I sort of stopped and listened to myself ... and I realized how weak they all sounded. I guess I've been trying to convince myself for so long that I took it for granted, and I forgot what the real reasons were. I still can't remember. I mean, we could make it work at JAG, if we wanted to ... couldn't we?"

Still figuratively holding her breath, she managed a hint of a smile. "Yeah," she said softly. "I think we could."

"So what were the other reasons? Just circumstances? Other people?"

"Maybe fear ... fear of losing what we have now - "

"That isn't going to happen," he broke in firmly. "I'll do whatever it takes to make certain of that. I told you once that what I want most in this world is to never lose you."

"And I believed you. I still do." Fully aware of what a monumental step they were contemplating, she reached over to place a gentle hand on top of his. "What were you afraid of? Letting go?"

She half-expected him to falter, to back off like he'd done so many times before, but he didn't. "Something like that," he said honestly. "I've never been good at letting myself feel that much, since it usually comes back to haunt me some way or another. But somewhere along the line, between floating in the Atlantic and chasing you out to the Indian Ocean, I realized that I couldn't stop myself from feeling the way I do about you, no matter what I did to deny it. It just took an outside influence to make me realize that I could do something about it."

"Amazing how familiar that sounds," she replied, her voice falling to little more than a whisper. "So where does that leave us now?"

In response, he leaned in and captured her lips with a delicate but meaningful kiss, and in an instant, everything was right with the world. "In a place where I can do that more often, I hope," he finally answered. "I'm not sure how to start this, really ... but would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"I'd like that very much."

They climbed out of the car, and despite herself, Mac found herself harboring the slightest of doubts about this new revelation. Why, after everything they'd said and done before, should she trust that this would suddenly work? As they started toward the building, though, his hand instinctively moved down to catch hers, and she marveled at how natural it already felt to be with him. It would work, she decided, if for no other reason than because they wanted it to. They'd fought countless battles with nothing to rely on but each other. This would simply be a new test.

Lifting her gaze to meet his ice-blue eyes, she found a fire there that she'd never fully recognized until this moment. It had been a long while since a man had actually made Sarah Mackenzie weak in the knees, but as they stepped inside, out of the frigid February air, she found herself wanting much more than a cup of coffee. Better late than never? Most definitely.

On Monday morning, Sturgis strode into the bullpen at his usual early hour and was surprised to see that his friend's door was already open. Harmon Rabb was many things, but punctual, especially on a Monday, was not a word that could ordinarily be used to describe him. Glancing around the bullpen, Sturgis quickly located him, leaning over Mac's shoulder from the safety of her office. They were deep in discussion about the affidavit in her hand, and the other commander wondered how the ride home on Friday night had gone. Quickly, though, he forced the idle questions from his mind. This was a workplace, for God's sake. If he wanted intrigue, he could watch soap operas.

"Morning, sir," Bud Roberts greeted him as he exited the kitchen with his coffee mug. "Do you think you'll have any spare time this morning? I'd like to go over the Hammacher case with you when it's convenient."

"I'm free until staff call, Lieutenant. Grab your files and come find me as soon as you're ready." Sturgis grabbed his own mug, and headed toward his office.

He'd already stowed his briefcase and cover before he noticed the long, flat box sitting in the center of his desk. Perplexed, he snatched up the folded note that lay on top.

"You definitely earned these."

It was signed with a familiar block "H" and a more graceful script "M". Beginning to get suspicious, he peeked inside the box - and started to laugh out loud, hard enough that his eyes watered. "Way to go, you two," he managed to say.

He was still laughing five minutes later when Bud came through the door, mildly surprised at the display of emotion. "Commander? What's so funny?" When the senior officer didn't reply, he lifted the box lid, and his confusion only grew. "Steak knives, sir?"

Sturgis wiped his eyes and shook his head. "Lieutenant, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

*** THE END ***