



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette

Spoilers: early ninth-season eps, primarily “Back in the Saddle” and “Posse Comitatus”

Disclaimer: If I had the money to acquire these rights, I wouldn't be running all over the country for this job of mine, would I? Actually, you know what? I probably still would. I'm that rare species known as a satisfied government employee.

Author's Notes: Know what happens when your friendly neighborhood fic writer goes TDY to a place where her cell phone doesn't work and her hotel has a limited selection of cable channels? *This* happens. I know this isn't exactly the way we've seen Mattie act, but I'm working under the assumption that she's not quite as fearless as she projects.

(Directly following the episode)

1809 MST

MCAS Yuma, Arizona

“Think we could get on an earlier flight?”

Mac tossed Harm an odd look as they pulled up in front of the visiting officers' quarters. “Earlier than 0645?”

“No, like a red-eye tonight, rather than waiting until morning.”

“You have a hot date waiting at home?”

Harm shrugged, putting the rental car in park and killing the engine. “Just a question. 0645 would be fine, too.”

His decision not to answer hadn't escaped her notice, and for a moment, Mac wondered if she might have hit close to home. Ever since the admiral had let him off the hook, it seemed like Harm had been spending a lot of time elsewhere. He didn't bolt for the door as soon as 1700 rolled around, of course, but she'd expected him to be putting in more hours than he was. He'd always been a borderline workaholic before, and he carried himself like he still had something to prove. But she couldn't shake the sense that his mind was simply somewhere else.

For the first time, she wondered if he needed JAG quite as much as she thought.

“You just want to get out of town before the sheriff's department finds some way to pay you back for this,” she guessed, arching an eyebrow as they climbed out of the car. He cast a dirty look at her, but didn't respond. She pressed further. “You can't honestly believe that Marine didn't earn himself a court-martial with that insane stunt.”

Harm shook his head. “I'm not going there. What I *will* say is that while the book deal looks shady at best, I do believe that the major's true intent was to help save lives.”

“Well, intent isn't always good enough.”

“Yeah, I'm learning that.”

Before she could determine what he'd meant by that comment, he'd pushed through

the double doors of the VOQ.

“Oh, Commander,” called the front desk manager as they passed. “I have a phone message for you. Your daughter says that it’s not an emergency, but that she’d like you to call her at home.”

Mac frowned and waited for Harm to tell the woman that she had the wrong commander. To her shock, he only rolled his eyes. “I’ll just bet she would. Thank you – I’ll go do that.”

And he casually continued on toward his room. After a moment of utter bewilderment, Mac hurried after him. “What the hell was *that* about?” she asked, trying to keep the confused, hurt edge off her tone.

He paused in the hallway, a faint smile playing at his lips. “It’s obviously not what it sounds like.”

“I surmised as much. Would you care to tell me what it *is*?”

All traces of the smile slowly faded away, as he appeared to be weighing a decision. “Some other time,” he replied at last, turning toward the stairwell. “I’ll see you at 0500, all right?”

Mac was stunned. *Is this the way it’s going to be for us now?* She wasn’t about to accept that. “Are you serious?” she demanded, grabbing his arm before she even knew she was doing it. “Someone calls you on TDY and says she’s your daughter, and you’re actually going to walk away without offering any explanation?”

His gaze hardened. “I don’t think we’re in particularly good shape to be sharing personal issues right now, do you?”

Not knowing what else to do, she dropped her hand from his arm. He softened ever so slightly. “When I said ‘some other time.’ I didn’t mean never. I just meant some time other than now.”

He started up the stairs, and in a flash of frustration, she called after him. “Is this because I didn’t leap at the chance to express my enthusiasm for the prodigal’s return?”

Harm paused again, not turning back. “You know, when I asked you if you were glad I was back, I wasn’t fishing for a compliment. I asked because I honestly didn’t know the answer. I’m starting to think that maybe I’d be better off not finding out.”

He left a speechless Marine standing at the bottom of the stairs and found his way back to his room. After hanging up his uniform and changing into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, he stretched out across the square-ish, unforgiving bed and hit a speed key on his cell phone.

“Grace Aviation.”

At her voice, Harm smiled involuntarily. “What’d you call me at the Q for? I was pretty clear about giving you that number only for emergencies.”

He could almost hear Mattie shrug. “You said your cell might not work out there.”

“Well, it does, so try it first next time, all right?” He drew his feet up onto the bed, legs bent. “Unless you really only did it to mess with me, but of course you wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“Did it work?”

“No, all you did was out me to Mac, so nice going on that one. Now she’s under the impression that I have a secret daughter, or at least some kind of secret ... but I guess maybe I do, so never mind.”

Mattie sounded hesitant. “You *are* going to tell your friends about me sometime, right? I mean, isn’t it kind of inevitable?”

“Of course I am,” he hastened to reassure her. “And the reasons why I haven’t done it yet have nothing to do with you. It’s just ...” He sighed. “I’m not even sure I want her in *my* life just yet. Why would I want her in yours?”

“I understand. She was pretty much a bitch to you.”

“She was not, and watch your language. It’s not like she’s the only one to blame for us ... drifting. But it happened, and I’m still not sure how to deal with it.”

There was a pause on the line, and Harm immediately regretted getting started on that subject. A fourteen-year-old wasn’t likely to be able to relate much, and this particular fourteen-year-old had far more important things on her mind. Before he could apologize, though, Mattie’s voice came back, amused. “Did you just tell me to watch my language?”

Suddenly he felt rather self-conscious. “Hey, I’m new at this,” he defended. “Did it sound at least a little bit parental?”

She thought for a moment. “It kinda did, actually. But you probably should’ve tried something a little more attainable. I hang out with pilots, remember, and the only one who ‘watches his language’ is you.”

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying.”

There was another pause, and her voice was wistful when it returned. “You’re coming back soon, right?”

“We’re on the first flight tomorrow morning,” he answered, “and I’ll be out to Blacksburg by Friday night. We have a Thanksgiving dinner to plan, after all.”

“There’s going to be planning involved?”

“You’re the one who wanted to try deep-frying a turkey. I personally think it’s a terrible idea, but if it’s going to happen, there are going to be some basic precautions taken.”

Mattie sounded tickled. “You’re seriously giving in on the turkey? You’re gonna let me do it?”

“You? Not a chance. Unless you get in a biohazard suit before getting within ten feet of the hot oil, I’m handling all turkey-related issues.”

“See, that right there — that was much better on the responsible parent scale.”

He grinned up at the ceiling from his sprawled-out position on the bed. “You think?”

“Absolutely. Just the right balance between being conscientious and being paranoid.” The teasing note in her voice faltered, and her youth once again shone through. “How often do you have to go out of town like this?”

Hmm. How was he supposed to answer this one? “It’s kind of hard to predict,” Harm said truthfully. “But it’s usually just for a couple of days.”

“It kinda sucks.”

She sounded so glum that he quickly sat up. “Well, I’m still a phone call away whether I’m in D.C. or Arizona. So it’s not that much different, right?”

Her sigh suggested otherwise. “But if I need you, you can’t just hop on the highway and get here from Arizona like you can from D.C.”

He sat up straighter. “Do you need me now, Mattie?”

She sighed again. “I guess not right this second. But the bank keeps sending more nasty-grams, and it freaks me out. And -- I don’t know, I just have this picture in my head ... if something bad happened, and I called you, you’d just drop everything and come to help. And you’d fix it, whatever it was.” Suddenly, he could sense her pulling back. “Okay, that didn’t sound nearly as lame in my head.”

“It didn’t sound lame out loud, either,” Harm insisted, feeling his heart tighten in his chest. If he’d needed confirmation that she trusted him, that was it. But at the same time, it scared the hell out of him. “Mattie, the thing is, I don’t want you to get the idea that I’m ... more than I am. I’ve screwed up plenty of things before. I don’t know if I can fix everything that comes along. I don’t even know if I can fix what already *has* come along.”

After a moment, she finally asked, with a note of guarded hope, “But if I called, would you come?”

He closed his eyes. “Honey, I’d get on a plane right now if you asked. Four hours flat. Maybe five.”

“Good enough for me,” she said quietly.

That simple assertion warmed him to the core, and made the other events of the week look a little smaller in the metaphorical rearview mirror. “I’ll call you when I get home

tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay. And, um, just as fair warning -- I know we haven't really been all that into hugs or anything, but when you show up on Friday, I may or may not hit you with a running start."

"Can't wait," he replied softly. "Night, Mattie."

"Night."

Harm hung up and fell back on the bed. For a long moment, he stared through the ceiling, wondering what it might be like to come home at the end of a long day to the pure comfort of that hug. Somehow, just talking to her brought a bit more light into the day.

After a few minutes, he made a decision, and reached for the room phone. Mac answered on the second ring. "Mackenzie."

"I wanted to make amends for earlier," he said without identifying himself, preventing her from possibly shutting him down. "I didn't exactly handle that with grace."

Her sigh was heavier than Mattie's had been, but no less genuine. "It's okay. I haven't really figured out what our rules of engagement should be right now, either."

Having no response to that, he decided to extend another olive branch. "The young lady who was trying to get a rise out of me with that message was my boss at the airfield in Blacksburg. I've been ... looking after her, I guess."

"On the face of it, that doesn't make a lot of sense."

"I know. I'll do better when I figure it all out myself. But for the time being, I was wondering if you wanted to grab some dinner."

He could hear her hesitation. "Okay," she said finally.

"Good," he returned, exhaling. *One step at a time.*

"Harm?"

"Yeah?"

"I *am* glad you're back, you know. I hoped you'd recognize that, because I ... don't really know how to demonstrate it right now."

"I'm trying," he replied simply. "Meet you downstairs in ten."

Scuffing his sneakers on, he hung up and picked up his keys and cell phone. The battery was starting to get low, so he started to switch it off, but thought better of it. After all, he'd given his word to a young girl in Virginia.

Just in case. Mattie might call.

Sticking the phone into his pocket, he headed for the door.

*** THE END ***