



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: through "Trojan Horse"

Disclaimer: Not mine. Not feeling creative enough for a smartass disclaimer at the moment. Don't sue.

Author's Notes: For the record, I have a suspicion that Harm did see Catherine Gale on a non-professional level (this show seems loathe to call anything short of exchanging rings "dating"), but for the purposes of this conversation, I'm covering my eyes and pretending certain things don't exist. Oh, and 'paso doble' is a type of dance done in pairs, Spanish in origin; it has its roots in the 'dance' of the matador with his cape. I'm not trying to get too literal with this, at least not to the extent of the male taking the lead and the female being almost accessory -- I just thought this story needed a dance reference.

Directly following the episode

"If you love him, it doesn't matter what I want."

Shocked by his simple, blunt reply, Mac could only watch him turn and walk away. That hadn't been the reaction she'd expected at all. She'd been picking up brief flashes of ... well, *something* from him over the past few days, and she'd interpreted that as a signal that their status was evolving yet again. When he'd pushed her to define her relationship with Webb, she'd instinctively pushed back, thinking that such a response might actually force some motion on the issue.

You should have known better, she thought ruefully. *When it comes to this, has Harmon Rabb ever given any information willingly?*

That thought made her stop to consider the question more carefully. In this skirmish, there had been clear echoes of conversations past; the admiral's porch, the Guadalcanal. In

both instances, they'd skirted the real issue, choosing to focus on the other people involved rather than themselves and what they might or might not have meant to each other. History was repeating itself, and she was sick to death of it.

Turning sharply, she changed course and headed after him. He'd long since outdistanced her, but in all likelihood, he'd headed back to his cabin, and she could easily corner him there. The extra few minutes would give her time to choose her opening salvo as well.

She reached the correct hatch and pounded on the metal surface. When he opened the hatch, his uniform blouse untucked and unbuttoned, she gave him no time to react before firing at him. "Why does it always have to be this way with us?"

"What way is that?"

"The dance. The constant, never-ending high-wire act. The relationship limbo."

Harm blew out a breath and reached out to pull her into the room. "We're not doing this in the passageway."

He closed the hatch behind them and folded his arms, and suddenly she felt as if she was the one trapped. Damn it, how did he keep turning things around on her? "I don't have any better answers than you do, Mac. I figured that was obvious."

"No, your answers are flawless, as always." Mac wasn't about to cede any ground. *She'd* confronted *him*, not the other way around. "You've managed to sit right on the fence without so much as a wobble in either direction. Call me out on Webb, but don't even come close to revealing anything about yourself."

He didn't react to the challenge in her tone, keeping his own voice level. "I think I've revealed about as much as can be considered appropriate, under the circumstances."

"And what circumstances would those be? What planets have to align for us to finally have an open conversation about this?"

"Well, for starters, it would help if both parties were in a position to actually discuss a relationship in something other than hypotheticals. Third wheels can be something of a liability."

"So all this time, you've been holding back because I deigned to give Webb a second glance? From the moment you showed up in Paraguay onward, there's been some kind of neon sign around my neck that says 'Danger, keep back' or something?"

"Yes," Harm answered matter-of-factly. "As a rule, I try to stay out of other people's relationships. You can't throw everything in the mix together and expect to figure it all out at once, Mac. Either you want to be with Webb, or you don't. If you're not sure, trying to drag me into it can't make it anything other than more complicated."

"I don't think I'm dragging you into anything. You're there, whether you like it or not." Mac stared him down, and he flinched, turning away to gather up the files strewn across the small desk. She shook her head, a wry grin twisting her lips. "This is the stuff of farce. You give up because I'm looking elsewhere. I look elsewhere because you're giving up."

"That's about the size of it, with a couple of extra words like 'never' thrown in for good measure." He didn't look up at her as the jab hit home, continuing to focus on his superfluous task. "You're right; I didn't fight you on that. I didn't fight because a 'yes' is a joint decision, but a 'no' only needs one vote to be binding. You need to be the final arbiter of what you want, not me."

"Well, that's all very noble, but I'm not going to be the final arbiter of what *you* want for you. Isn't that what it always comes down to? You stepping back, telling yourself that you're being altruistic and sacrificing what you want for someone else's benefit. Isn't that what this is, this 'it doesn't matter what I want' crap? That might work in some cases, but when it comes to my life, I would much rather know what you actually want, and not what you think the most honorable answer should be. Otherwise, how can we ever *get* anywhere?"

Harm still didn't turn toward her, but she saw the paper in his hand crinkle under the force of his grip. "I'm not the one with the choice to make here."

"And I'm trying to tell you that you *always* have a choice. I'm not asking you to challenge Clayton Webb to a duel at twenty paces. What I'm asking is for you to give me something real, something I can understand, that tells me what it is you want from me -- from us. Can you really be so afraid of that?"

At last, he turned around, and the look in his turbulent cerulean eyes stopped her in mid-breath. "Wow," she said simply, as soon as she'd found her voice again. "You are, aren't you?"

He fixed her with a disbelieving stare. "How can that surprise you, after all this time? Of course I'm afraid, and obviously I'm not the only one."

"I'm the one who came in here to talk about this!"

"And if you weren't the least bit afraid of what might happen, you wouldn't have bothered to come down here to try and wrestle an admission out of me. You'd have made a decision about what you want from Webb regardless of what I say or don't say. But you are afraid, so you're here trying to pin me down while still holding onto him in case this conversation goes the way of all those that came before."

"That's just about the most self-indulgent thing I've ever heard out of your mouth, and that's really saying something."

He spread his hands, undaunted. "If I'm wrong, then what are we doing here?"

"Did it occur to you at any point that things between Clay and me might not be quite as simple as you think? Jesus ..." Without warning, her eyes began to sting, and she paced the length of the cramped room, hoping to keep him from noticing the threatening tears.

She couldn't disguise the slump of her shoulders, though. When Harm spoke again, the defiance in his voice was replaced by concern. "Mac, Webb's not ...?"

"He's not hurting me, if that's what you're thinking. But he's not doing himself any favors." She considered for a moment whether or not she really wanted to get into this with him, but quickly pushed aside her doubts. No matter what might be happening between them on another level, she had always been able to trust him to help see her through anything. Maybe this would give her what she'd been looking for when she'd gone to Simon for insight.

"Paraguay almost destroyed him," she began quietly, still facing the far bulkhead. "What Sadik and his men did to him may have looked simply barbaric and haphazard, but it was methodical -- pathological. They knew he wouldn't break easily, and so they were very thorough about their efforts. He's done a lot to overcome it, but it can't ever be too far behind him, you know?"

"He's only human." She heard the surprisingly empathetic comment over her shoulder and nodded, grateful that they'd both managed to table the previous discussion for the moment.

"The thing is, at the beginning, I really thought that Paraguay was the whole problem. It isn't. It started long before that, and I'm an idiot not to have realized it. I mean, for God's sake - he's been a field-trained intelligence officer for most of twenty years. People like him and Simon have to see and do things specifically so that the rest of us never do. We can't possibly imagine even the start of what they've experienced."

Harm didn't reply, and she glanced back at him. "You're not going to try and tell me I'm overstating things, to make excuses for him?"

"You're not overstating anything. The very intent of undercover ops is to become part of a culture and a life for the sole purpose of exploiting it. They have to become all the things our social programming tells us to reject. It's arguably the hardest thing a person can be asked to do, because it can never be fully erased."

His features seemed to shutter even as he spoke, and suddenly it dawned on her. "Oh, God," she breathed. "You were in the field?"

"Only a couple of times, and never for longer than a week or two. I would never claim to have made the kinds of sacrifices true field agents do."

"I suppose you can't tell me -- "

He shook his head, resigned. "I wish I could." And she could see that he meant it. Quickly, though, he shook off the memories. "I realized pretty early on that I wasn't built to work intel. It wasn't until a little later that I realized that no one's really built for it. The people who do it anyway, knowing that sooner or later it will tear them up, are a unique brand of patriot."

She hadn't expected such an endorsement from him, of all people. "You don't blame Clay for putting everything in motion a year ago?"

"I did, for a long time. Now that I've seen the way it happens, I don't anymore. But we've already been through this once. What I think isn't the issue. You have to decide if being with him, and dealing with the repercussions of everything he does, is something you can do, and something you want to do, now and in the future."

"I know. I realize that a normal relationship is basically an impossibility ..." Mac gave a listless wave. "Then again, I probably wouldn't know a normal relationship if it hit me in the face."

"Hey, at least you've been on a date in the past two years."

She narrowed her eyes at him, finding his self-deprecating implication hard to believe. "You're not serious."

"Would I lie about something so pathetic?"

"Not even with Catherine Gale?"

Harm shook his head again, this time with a closed-lipped smile. "I wouldn't describe anything we did as a date, no."

"How ...?"

He offered a small shrug, no hesitation in his warm voice. "Somewhere in there, I figured out what it was I really wanted, and I decided that settling for something else would be a waste of time."

Mac swallowed around the growing lump in her throat. "And now we're back to where we started, aren't we? Neither of us willing to come out and actually say what it is we want."

When she looked up at him, the conflict was again rising in his gaze. "I can't do that to you now," he said quietly. "Not while Webb is still ..."

"I know," she interrupted. "The thing is, you've asked me if Webb is what I want. You asked me if Mic is what I want ... What you've never once asked is if *you're* what I want."

There was a long pause, as he searched her features for confirmation. "You're right." Then he caught her off-guard, by taking a step toward her and lowering his voice. "Am I?"

Lost in a sea of possibilities, she could find nothing to cling to for safety except the truth. "Yes," she whispered.

"What a staggering coincidence," he replied, leaning in closer still.

The kiss seared her lips, the final thrust of the attack. She ached to give herself over to it fully, knowing instinctively that they were on the brink of a shared goal. If only ...

Sensing her hesitation, Harm quickly pulled back. "I'm sorry," he stated carefully, tearing his gaze from hers. "That was a line I just said I wouldn't cross. Even if ... even if it's what we both want."

That was a start, but not quite an admission of the same magnitude of hers. In a deceptively calm tone, Mac asked, "Is it?"

Allowing himself a wistful smile, he answered, "On so many levels, I can't even begin to tell you."

Silently she willed her knees to hold fast. At her hesitation, his expression faltered. "Do you still have doubts about how I feel?"

"No -- of course not. I just know how hard it can be to say it, even to yourself."

"Well, parenting a teenager can do wonders for your self-awareness."

"Remind me to write Mattie a thank-you note." She hated that she had to break this spell, but there was no other option. "I do want this, more than anything, and I can't believe I'm about to screw it up, but ... I can't just leave Clay right away. There's some kind of major op going on, and some days it seems like he's barely holding it together. He says they're making him take leave after this one, and that he's going to see someone besides the Agency shrink to work through some of this. I don't know how it'll all go, but if we break up now, even if it'll be healthier for all concerned in the long run ..." She decided not to voice the end of that thought, which was that she might represent one of more stable aspects of Clayton Webb's life, and that she feared what effect removing that stabilizing force might have. Instead, she finished uncertainly, "It would feel like kicking him while he's down. But I know I can't ask you to -- "

"Sure you can." She looked up at him, uncomprehending, and he wrapped his long fingers around her hand. "I asked you once to wait, ostensibly until I'd figured myself out to the extent necessary to move forward. I'm not sure that request was reasonable -- in fact, I have serious doubts about it in retrospect -- but since I asked it of you, I have to be able to offer it in return."

"I didn't come through, though." Even as she said it, she wondered why on earth she was arguing the point. "I didn't wait."

He seemed unconcerned by that detail. "You didn't get married, did you?"

"That's not -- "

"In this case, let's agree that the ends justify the means." A hint of amusement flickered in his eyes, but it didn't overshadow the sincerity. "It took me far too long to get my head on straight. I can admit that now. But now that I'm here, I'm willing to give you whatever time you need. Do what you need to do to settle things the right way. When you're ready, I'll be here."

That sealed it. She'd known subconsciously for half a decade that this was the man for her -- but now, at long last, they were well and truly *right* for each other.

"It won't be long," she promised. "Just -- until he gets back, and gets his feet under him. There's nothing to be gained from pretending."

"All right," he said quietly. "In the meantime, 0600's going to come awfully early tomorrow."

"I suppose so." She moved toward the hatch in a comfortable fog, hovering somewhere between delight and disbelief at what had just transpired. "I'll see you in the wardroom."

He nodded, reaching out to brush back a stray lock of her hair; the most intimate gesture he could allow himself for the time being. "Good night."

"Good night."

She started down the corridor, attempting to mentally prepare herself for the days ahead. It wouldn't be easy, God knew. Clay deserved better than to be essentially thrown over for another man, even one he'd recognized as a rival from the start. But he also deserved better than to remain tangled in an awkward, ultimately damaging relationship, and the sooner they both came to terms with that, the better off they would all be in the future.

Harm's kiss still burned on her lips, and she lifted her chin, navigating the path ahead with more confidence. It was only a matter of time. Soon, the life she'd sought for so long could begin.

*** THE END ***