



# All's Fair

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Capital Crime," "Ready or Not"

Summary: Follow-up to the eighth-season episode "Ready or Not." There are times when the relationship between Harm and Mac is absolutely professional ... and then there are times like this.

Author's Notes: If you haven't seen the episode in question, Mac presided over the case of an Army general accused of disobeying orders within the confines of an elaborate war game. Sturgis prosecuted, Harm defended, and golden boy came out on top yet again. For those keeping score, I'm aware that I'm kind of reusing a concept or two here, but I hope you'll agree that it goes in a different direction this time. Also, for the setting, imagine the restaurant Kaffee and Galloway ate at in "A Few Good Men," since that was supposed to be somewhere in Washington.

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1927 EST

M Street Crab House

"I knew this was a bad idea," Sturgis groaned, shielding his face from debris with one hand. "Putting implements of destruction in the hands of the two of you - "

Mac cut him off by banging her mallet down on a defenseless crab leg. "Hey, I was just getting used to that gavel," she pointed out with a grin. "You can't expect me to quit cold turkey."

"Liked wielding that kind of power, did you?" Harm lifted an eyebrow as he popped a French fry into his mouth.

"Well ... yeah, a little. Once I got over being nervous as all hell, it was kind of a rush."

"That's why some of us fly jets."

Rolling her eyes, Mac responded by whacking another claw. A piece of shell flew across the table and landed on her partner's shirt, and she snorted with laughter at the dirty look he shot her. In return, he tossed a fry in her direction.

Sturgis watched them and shook his head. "Good thing we're not in uniform. Dinner in a public place with you guys apparently involves checking your maturity at the door."

"Oh, come on. I said I was paying, didn't I?"

"Nobody likes a sore loser, Sturgis," Harm added, a trace of smugness in his teasing smile.

"I don't begrudge you this win in the slightest, buddy. Although I do see a pattern here - you winning supposedly impossible cases by virtue of a last-minute revelation."

"Hey, better to be lucky than good, right?" Harm's eyes twinkled, and he stood up from the table. "I'm going to go get us another bucket of crab legs."

Mac perked up. "Ooh! Get this one with - "

"Cajun spice," he finished with her. "Relax, Marine. I know what you like." And he wandered off toward the counter, leaving Sturgis slightly puzzled.

"How do you two do it?" he asked Mac once his friend was out of earshot.

"Do what?"

"Go at each other like complete adversaries and then go right back to being friends?"

"Like you've never been in that situation. Besides, we weren't adversaries." At his disbelieving stare, she relented. "Okay, we both reacted a little badly to this whole attorney-judge dynamic. But in my defense, I was much better about it than he was - "

"No argument here."

" - and in his defense, he admitted it and backed off. He even complimented my performance on the bench."

"Did he, now." There wasn't a question in his tone, only mild curiosity. After a few seconds of simply listening to the music that poured from the jukebox, he spoke again. "Rough case, though, don't you think? To follow the set path, or to do what seems right?"

"All's fair in love and war, as they say," Mac remarked.

"Who's talking about war?"

She frowned. "Who's talking about love?" As he cast a pointed glance across the room at an oblivious Harm, her voice hardened. "Sturgis, if you're going where I think you're going, make a U-turn."

"It's impossible to completely separate personal relationships from professional ones, isn't it?" he continued, without acknowledging her comment. "It must be even harder to keep your balance when you're presiding."

Anger flashed in her dark eyes. "You think I played favorites? The guy got off because the judge had a crush on the defense attorney?"

"On the contrary," Sturgis replied calmly. "I don't think it affected the outcome, but Mac, you *were* tougher on him than you were on me."

"You don't play on emotional appeals the way he does!"

"Sure I do. I'm just more subtle about it. Let's face it - subtle has never been and never will be Harm's style. It doesn't bother us when it's working *for* us, but it can be downright infuriating when we're on the other end of it."

"He was pushing me," she maintained stubbornly. "He wanted to see how far I'd let him go."

"I think you're right about that. Interesting that he ended up blinking first."

Sturgis's laid-back attitude was starting to grate on her nerves. Her admission to him that she was in love with Harm all those months ago was rapidly climbing her list of bad judgement calls. "Okay, O wise one, get to it," she demanded, leaning her elbows on the table. "You think I overcompensated because of my feelings for him. What's your point?"

"My point, Your Honor, is that whenever you and Harm have to face off in some context, you both tend to act in much the same way. Given your own reasons for your actions, why do you suppose that is?"

Mac immediately narrowed her eyes at him. "You're going to tell me that he pushes my buttons as some third-grade way of showing affection? Is that it?"

"Let's just say that if you had pigtails, he'd be dipping them in the inkwell."

"You have got to be kidding me, Sturgis."

He leaned on the table as well, trying to make himself heard over the music. "This game is played out, Mac. It's been a year."

Her gaze grew distant, and he imagined he could see sadness there. "No," she said under her breath. "It's been a lot longer than that."

"Why? Is there some barrier visible only to the two of you that keeps you from finally having it out?"

"There are about five million of them, but what pulls them all together is this: I need him too much to risk losing him as a friend. And with the way his psyche works, that would be no small risk."

"I don't think I get it."

She smiled ruefully. "Sturgis, dear ... I love him, but there are times when his stereotypical maleness makes me want to knee him where it hurts."

Sturgis's face fell, and she realized belatedly that her comment had managed to coincide with the end of the music. She further realized, based on her friend's reaction, that the subject of said comment was most likely standing just over her shoulder.

Every nerve in her body was screaming at her to make a run for it, but being the willful person that she was, she dared to look up.

"Okay, then," Harm said quietly, keeping his expression neutral. "I pick the weirdest times to come in on conversations."

He slid back into his seat, setting their food down, and a surreal silence settled over the table as everyone pretended to look at other things. Incredibly, Harm was the first to speak, affecting an exaggerated casualness. "So who watched Monday Night Football this week?"

"Maybe I'd better call it a night," Sturgis said suddenly, starting to rise from his chair. He only got about halfway upright before Harm yanked him back down.

"No, let's finish what you two started."

"No, *you* two finish what we two started. I've had enough fun for one evening." Sturgis resolutely stood up and tossed a somewhat sympathetic glance at Mac. "Thanks for dinner, Judge Mackenzie."

"It's been educational, Commander. See you tomorrow."

After he'd gone, the two partners looked at each other across the table for a long moment. Some voice in the back of her mind told Mac that she should be utterly humiliated at this point, but she refused to take it seriously. After all this time, she had the right to hold her head high. "So do you really want to finish this?" she asked carefully.

"I'm not sure. Am I going to need a protective cup?"

"Harm - "

"You're not going to try and pretend you weren't talking about me, are you?"

"What would the point of that be?" He gave a shrug, his face unreadable. She decided to press ahead. "Which part are you having more trouble comprehending? The part where I said 'I love him' or the part where I expressed a wish to inflict bodily harm?"

There was a protracted silence before he replied. "I honestly haven't figured that one out yet."

She tossed a few bills on the table and stood up. "Come on. If we're going to do this, it's not going to be here."

The parking lot was lit from above with stark streetlights and the occasional flicker of the restaurant's neon sign. The light sharpened their features and gave the situation a confrontational feel over and above the already-heightened tension. They strode toward her car - he'd caught a ride over with Sturgis - but two steps before her key could touch the lock, he grabbed her arm.

"Look, Mac, I know what he said to lead you into all that, so - "

"How exactly do you know that?"

His shoulders slumped a little. "He called me on it earlier. Something about pigtailed and inkwells. I don't get it - did he grow up in a Norman Rockwell painting or something?"

"You're stalling."

"*I'm* stalling? You led us out here!"

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" She whirled toward him and kissed him, hard enough that he had to take a half-step back to brace himself. "There. For once, let's not pretend that nothing just happened. For once, let's actually have the conversation, rather than stalling and tap-dancing and speaking in code. I said I love you, God damn it, and even though I didn't say it to your face, I think I deserve at the very least a serious response. So deal with it however you want, but deal with it!"

The look in his eyes was tinged with shock and fear, but also with something deeper. "Sturgis was right. I do push you because I'm trying to compensate for how I feel about you." He said it rapidly, almost defiantly, and suddenly she wondered if maybe a direct threat wasn't such a bad idea.

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, it is. But there's more to it. I push you because you want to be pushed. If I stood back and never challenged you, I wouldn't be any good to you, and I swear to God I live in constant fear of the day you figure out that you don't need me in your life."

"I just told you I do need you!"

"No, you didn't. You said you loved me."

"It's the same damn thing!"

"No, it's not! I need you because you're smarter and more rational than me, and I love you because you're you, and I'm telling you that they're not interchangeable!"

She stared at him, feeling her pulse begin to race. "Did you just say - "

"Yes! Jesus!"

"Then why the *hell* are we arguing about this?"

After an immeasurable time of standing there, tempers burning hotter than ever before, he abruptly tore his gaze away. "Because that's what we do," he replied in a low voice. "We fight. We push."

"It's ridiculous."

"A little bit, yeah." He raked his fingers back through his short hair, a tinge of nervousness creeping into his voice. "We could always try *not* arguing for a while."

"Think we could pull it off?"

"If we make an effort to confine our battles to duty hours, maybe it could - " He stopped and amended himself. "Maybe we could work."

For a moment, she had to remind herself to keep breathing. This was the sort of shift that could give a girl whiplash. But from him, it made a strange sort of sense, because he'd finally made himself admit what he'd asked her to take on faith until now. Nothing else could be even half as important as that. Still -

"You sure, flyboy?" she asked tentatively, already primed to raise her defenses if he chose to back off.

Fortunately for them both, he didn't. "I'm sure," he said softly, reaching out to brush a hand across her cheek. "I mean, don't get me wrong - I'm completely freaked out right now. But for once, I'm more afraid of missing this chance than I am of trying and failing miserably."

"What a romantic sentiment."

"Oh, shut up." He pulled her in for a deep, longing kiss, and instantly the world melted away. It was a solid two minutes before they broke apart, and when they did so, it was with identical expressions of surprise and awe.

"That was nice," he stated, his vocabulary failing him. "I mean, that was really, really nice."

"I agree." She wondered if she sounded as breathless as she felt.

"We should do it more often."

"I agree with that, too."

The next kiss was longer than two minutes. After that, she stopped keeping track.

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At approximately the same time, A.J. Chegwiddden was taking M Street at a somewhat higher speed than he would normally choose. He attempted to be surreptitious about curling his fingers around the door handle, and smiled tightly at Meredith as she cheerfully sped through the District. "A couple of my officers are pretty good mechanics," he commented, watching the nose of the convertible waver back and forth in the lane. "I'm sure Commanders Rabb and Turner would be happy to check out your alignment if I asked them to."

"You worry too much, A.J.," Meredith called over the wind. "This car handles better than the day I bought it."

*So much for that*, he thought ruefully. Turning to look out the window, he spotted a familiar car in the parking lot on the corner. "Slow down," he requested.

"Whatever for?"

"Well, for that red light, maybe!" She looked up and jammed on the brakes, causing them both to lurch forward. "Your seat belts work," he offered, still trying to determine whether or not the red Corvette in fact belonged to one of his people.

That question was answered when he caught sight of the couple standing just behind it, locked together in a clinch that could only be described as passionate. Even from forty yards, the identities of the car, its owner, and her companion were clear - especially since he recognized the string of beads that young Chloe Madison had once insisted on hanging from her big sister's rearview mirror.

"Go figure," A.J. muttered under his breath. Meredith followed his gaze, and a smile spread across her face.

"What did I tell you about those two?"

"I think I'm still going to schedule those counseling sessions for them," he grumbled, expertly masking his amusement. "The light's green."

She stomped down on the accelerator, and with a squeal of rubber, they were gone.

\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*