



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: Vignette

Spoilers: "Lawyers, Guns and Money," "Pas de Deux," "A Tangled Webb"

Disclaimer: Not mine. Don't have the energy for a snarky disclaimer. Moving on.

Author's Notes: I loved the conversation between Harm and Harriet in "L,G&M" - the whole pushing-the-chair bit was just about the cutest thing in months. I've always liked it when those two go big brother/little sister on us, so I thought I'd try to continue it while also providing some background for the finale's focus on Harriet's reactions.

I can tell already that I'm going to hate this day.

Bud isn't doubting himself as much anymore, but he still feels horrible about letting Commander Turner down. A.J. threw a record-breaking fit on the way to day care. And my feet are so swollen that I'm resigned to doing this ridiculous shuffling thing into the building.

So of course, this would be a perfect time to discover that the elevator's gone out.

When I shuffle into the stairwell and look up at the certain torture of my immediate future, I just can't hold it back, and hot tears start to pool in my eyes. The door opens behind me, making it all worse.

"Harriet? You okay?"

At least it's Commander Rabb. He already knows how miserable I currently am, thanks to that lunch a couple of days ago. But it's still embarrassing to be found sniffing in the stairwell. "It's just -- hormones, sir," I say feebly, gesturing upward. "And those."

He examines the stairs for a moment, looking thoughtful. "What are the odds that someone's going to walk in here and find this strange?"

I don't think I know what he's talking about. "Sir?"

"Never mind. Hold this, would you please?"

I barely have time to take his cover before he sweeps an arm under my knees, lifts me into his arms, and starts up the stairs. I can't help but gasp, startled. "Sir, I weigh a ton --"

"No, you don't," he replies patiently, continuing on without missing a beat.

This is too much for words. I'm not sure I've been carried anywhere since my husband carried me over the threshold. I duck my gaze toward the direction we're moving, afraid to look at the commander for fear that he'll see either my humiliation or my abject gratitude. This clearly isn't the easiest thing he'll do all day, either, but he reaches the upper landing with little difficulty, setting me ever so gently on my feet.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Now the tears are starting for real. I give in to them, seeing no other option, and Harm's hopeful expression falls. "Harriet, you're killing me here," he says helplessly. "Isn't there something I can do to make this better, at least for a while?"

"You just did, sir," I tell him, in between hitching breaths. "But it was just so damn sweet, and I don't want to be crying right now, but I can't help it, and I can't go in there like this, and sometimes it all just hits me at once ..."

"Come here." He steps down and brushes off the top stair with his hand, ever cognizant of our summer whites. Taking a seat, he motions for me to join him. "Nobody's going to miss us for a few minutes."

"Okay." Awkwardly, I sit down on the landing and fish through my purse for a tissue. When I've gotten myself a little more under control, I try to speak again. "I'm sorry, sir. Somehow you keep ending up in the line of fire."

"I'm not jumping out of the way," Harm assures me.

"But you've got plenty of other things to worry about, I'm sure." As I finish that statement, I steal a glance at him and realize abruptly just how true it must be. His face is lined with weariness, and a deep concern that must be somehow related to the colonel's absence. Surprise overrides my sense of tact, and I say, "Sir, you look exhausted."

His lips twist wryly. "It's all right. Just not sleeping that much lately."

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to deduce the reason for that. "I'm sure that Colonel Mackenzie's fine, wherever she is."

"I'm not at all sure about that, Harriet." He leans his elbows on his knees, looking at something far more distant than the blank wall in front of us. Now I'm lost. I thought I had this man pegged, more or less. I've known him for most of six years. He's my son's godfather, the best man at my wedding. I thought I'd seen him in moments of hopelessness before, but I'm starting to realize that I don't know the first thing about it.

"This, um, this isn't quite like that time when she was under fire at the embassy in Indonesia, is it?" I venture timidly.

"No, it's exactly like that. That's most of the problem." He rubs at his eyes for a moment, then fixes a penetrating gaze on me, seemingly searching for answers. "Harriet, I want to ask you something, but it's a pretty terrible thing to ask, and I know it, so if it hurts too much, just smack me and -- "

Amazing. This time *I'm* the one talking *him* down. "Harm," I say, making sure that the use of his name gives him pause. "I trust you. And it's not like you've never come to my rescue before."

"Okay." But he can't meet my eyes. "Last year, when Bud was hurt -- did you ever think about regrets you had, things you wanted to say but never did?"

Well, he was right to warn me before asking a question like that. But it's been long enough, and we're doing well enough as a family that I'm not going to allow myself to come undone at something like this, hormones or no. "A little," I answer truthfully. "With the house and everything, we'd had some problems communicating over the distance."

"Communicating," he echoes, his features briefly unreadable. "But it's not like you parted badly. I mean, the last time you talked, before it happened ..."

"We were chatting online, and he seemed distracted, so I told him we'd discuss the house later. That was it."

And then, belatedly, I get it. True, I'd spent some awful hours wondering whether the last thing I'd ever say to my husband was "We'll talk about this later." But even if the worst had happened, there wouldn't have been anything substantial left unsaid between us. That, if nothing else, would have been something I could have held onto.

Right now, it's becoming clear to me that Harm doesn't have that.

"How did you leave things with her?" I ask, trying to put aside the inherent strangeness of having this conversation in general, and having it with him in particular.

He only shakes his head. "She wanted me to say something, and I couldn't say it," he replies quietly, sounding defeated. "And I *should* have been able to say it."

How am I supposed to respond to that? "You don't think she already knows?" I'm grasping at straws, and we're both painfully aware of it.

Harm gives a short, rueful laugh. "Obviously she doesn't." He shoves his fingers through his hair, the pain hovering in his eyes almost blinding me. "It was the same on the Guadalcanal, and it was the same in Sydney -- "

Sydney? Good lord -- just how much has been going on here? For how long?

"-- it's like we get so close, but something always wrecks it up. Maybe I always wreck it up. I don't know." He looks up, his gaze helpless. "I can't keep doing this, Harriet. To her or to myself. I can't."

This entire situation is severely testing my abilities as a sounding board. Summoning a type of courage I wasn't sure I had, I reach over and grasp his hand, causing him to turn partway in surprise. "You won't have to," I say, as firmly as I can manage. "She'll be back. Any day now, for all we know. Then you can say whatever you need to say."

"It's not that simple."

"It can be, if you choose to make it that way. If you're both here, and you're both honest, then the rest is just semantics."

Harm glances sideways at me, the corner of his mouth tugging upward. "Your optimism is really amazing, you know that?"

Somehow, I can't help but smile back. "Stick with me, sir. I'll have you whistling Dixie before you know it."

"I thought I was supposed to be cheering you up, not the other way around."

"One of the benefits of pregnancy. I'm not required to have an explanation for my emotional state or the changes therein."

He still looks troubled, but there's a glimmer of admiration in his eyes that's making me self-conscious. "I'm serious," he says. "I don't know how you do it, but I wish to God I had your faith."

I duck my head, sure that I'm blushing. "It's no big deal. It's just that whenever I make myself step back and look at everything as objectively as possible, I usually come to the conclusion that I'm pretty lucky to have what I have."

"You surely are," he agrees readily. "That family of yours is something special. I expect that the new addition is going to be well worth the swollen ankles and all that stuff."

"That it is. And that's exactly what I need to keep telling myself." As if in response, I feel a familiar fluttering motion from within, and instinctively grin. "I think the 'new addition' heard that."

Without even thinking about it, I pull his hand over and rest it on the baby, and the clouds seem to clear away from his face as he feels the movement. For a fleeting moment, I have to wonder if he might be imagining me as someone else -- imagining what could be.

Quickly, the moment passes, and he stands up. "We'd better get to work. Somebody's going to think we're playing hooky."

He helps me to my feet, no easy task in my current condition. "Thank you, sir," I tell him, waving toward the stairs. "You're a lifesaver."

"Likewise, Lieutenant."

As we start toward the stairwell door, Tiner comes barreling through it. "Commander, the admiral's looking for you," he reports, looking relieved to have succeeded in finding Harm. "He wants you in his office ASAP."

Harm lifts an eyebrow. "Am I in trouble, or has something come up?"

"He's not mad, sir -- he's just ..." Tiner hesitates, then seizes the opportunity provided by Harm's choice of words. "Yes, sir, I think something's come up."

Despite all my supposed optimism, this immediately makes me suspect the worst. I know I'm not the only one, either.

Harm nods curtly, his features hardening into a mask I've seen far too many times. "On my way. Thank you." Tossing a quick glance in my direction, he disappears through the door, and I have no choice but to shuffle into the bullpen and go on with the rest of my day.

Mac's got to be okay. The admiral wouldn't have allowed her to be dragged off on a badly-designed mission, even by Clayton Webb, and if the mission was planned well, Mac would be able to handle anything. I'm sure of that.

At least, I'm trying my damndest to be sure of it.

Harm reappears within a few minutes, and I can only glimpse a flash of pure determination as he strides back to his office and closes the door securely. He hasn't been in the office long enough to open his blinds yet, and from what I just saw, he's not going to take the time to open them now. God, I feel like I've been given about seven pieces of a hundred-piece puzzle.

His office door opens again, and after making a two-second stop at the printer, he strides right back into the admiral's office, a file folder in hand. He doesn't even pause at Tiner's desk, and the yeoman doesn't bother to open his mouth to object. A terrible sinking feeling is gnawing at my insides, and I look around for Bud, sensing that now would be a good time to have him close by. Damn it, he's in court this morning. What now?

After what feels like an age, the admiral's door opens, and Harm steps out into the bullpen once more. This time, his stride isn't so sure, but there's still a fire in his blue eyes as he gazes around the room for a few seconds, as if fixing it in his memory. When he enters his office this time, he doesn't bother shutting the door: he simply moves around the desk, gathering a few things I can't identify and shoving them into his briefcase.

Maybe I'm no investigator, but it doesn't require a whole lot of deductive reasoning to conclude that he's leaving in an awful hurry. If Mac were dead, there'd be no reason for haste. That ought to make me feel better. Somehow, it doesn't.

Desperate to catch him before he bolts for the door, I haul myself out of my chair and move toward his office. He finishes his gathering expedition and steps out into the bullpen just as I reach his office door, and our gazes lock.

"Sir, can you tell me anything?" I plead quietly.

Torn, he flinches before settling on his answer. "I have to find her, Harriet," he says in a voice that's nearly inaudible. "I have to get her out of there."

I know you do, I want to tell him, but that doesn't feel right. All I can manage is a weak "Good luck."

He responds impulsively, leaning down to place a light kiss on my cheekbone. "Take care of yourself, and this place. Tell Bud I ... " At that, he falters ever so slightly. "Just -- take care."

As he walks purposefully through the glass doors and out of the office, I'm struck by his choice of words -- so final. A new kind of dread closes in, and I suddenly realize with a sickening lurch that something was very wrong with the mental snapshot I'd just taken of this galvanizing moment.

There had been a blank white space over the ribbons on his chest, where a pair of gold wings should have been.

Oh, God.

I was prepared to hate today, but now I think I honestly fear tomorrow.

*** THE END ***