



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: G

Classification: Vignette, Angst

Spoilers: Pilot, "We The People," "Death Watch"/"Skeleton Crew"

Author's Notes: Okay, so it doesn't quite follow the real thing perfectly. So sue me. While we're on the subject of suing, I don't own the characters - not one of them. So please don't come looking for money, 'cause I don't have any. I always thought that Bud isn't nearly as clueless as he often looks, so this reflects some of that. As far as the real show's storyline, I'm of the opinion that Diane was more of a friend than a true love type, but I thought this would be fun. As for the whole not saluting indoors thing - okay, so I took some poetic license. No harm done, right? Also, did it ever occur to anyone else to wonder why the episode was called "We The People," when in fact those words are from the Constitution and not the Declaration?? Didn't think The Powers That Be were that sloppy ...

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0945 EST

This place is intimidating as hell.

Sure, it looks unassuming enough from the outside. With the brick face and the courtyard out front, I'd even call it pretty. But once you step inside, you realize that you're in the Headquarters of the Navy Judge Advocate General Corps. I've been here for most of a week already, and I'm wondering if I'll ever get used to it. And Ops is right at the center of the storm. I've been a line officer for two years, and carrier duty is no walk in the park. Still, having a desk ten yards from a two-star's office makes me as nervous as anything I saw on the Seahawk.

Well, maybe not quite *anything*. Watching a night-blind lawyer land a Tomcat from the backseat was more than a little nerve-wracking. I can't wait to see Lieutenant Commander Rabb again. He'll be the only familiar face in this office, and I could definitely use one. He's been down at Pax River for the last couple of days, wrapping up a flight mishap investigation, so I don't think he even knows I'm here. He'll be here today, though. When the Navy gives you a medal, you don't worry about investigations. You show up and face the fact that the Public Affairs office wants to make you a hero. I should know, since I was one - a PA officer, that is, not a hero.

Commander Rabb, on the other hand, is the genuine article. I've been wondering about him ever since I found out that my transfer had been accepted and that I'd be working with him on a permanent basis. Specifically, I've been wondering how many of the stories are true. Then again, the JAG stories seem pretty similar to the ones from the Seahawk; great pilot, third-generation Navy, lost his father in Vietnam, lost his RIO in a ramp strike. The one the carrier boys missed is that in over a year at JAG HQ, he has yet to lose a case. Of course, the Seahawk's still buzzing about his last visit, for the Schonke murder. That one shook everybody up, enough so that six months later, people are still wondering whether it ever really got solved. And it's no secret that Commander Rabb knew Lieutenant Schonke, but no one knows exactly how well. He knew her a lot better than any of us did, that's for sure. I could see that just by looking at him. When he'd come on board that first time, for the case that had eventually earned him today's honor, I'd been in complete awe of him. He was confident and quick-thinking, and every female crewmember on board practically melted at his smile. That is, every one but his partner, and probably Lobo. And when he returned, to pull Painter out of Bosnia, we all thought he was larger than life.

But life caught up. When he came back for the third time, everything was different. There wasn't a trace of a smile in his being. He was driven by some inner fire, determined to find Diane Schonke's killer. Rumor had it that he took a swing at the lieutenant who'd gone after her that night, only hours before the guy killed himself. What a mess. Somewhere in there, the JAG team left, their investigation complete. Supposedly. But the anger I saw in the commander's eyes wouldn't have been dimmed by that empty conclusion.

I wonder just how much of that case doesn't add up. I wonder why Lieutenant Austin decided to transfer, and why she recommended me. I *really* wonder if I can hack it here. All I know for certain is that in approximately an hour, Lieutenant Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr. will receive the Distinguished Flying Cross from the President. A hero? Absolutely. But also a mystery and a half.

"Lieutenant Roberts, any sign of the commander yet?"

I jumped out of my chair, cursing myself for getting lost in thought. "Sir, not yet, sir. Maybe the traffic is bad, sir."

"More than one 'sir' per sentence isn't necessary, Lieutenant." Admiral Chegwiddden seemed like a good C.O., but his background in the SEALs was obviously not that far behind him. I'd gotten used to taking orders from commanders: having an admiral around would keep me on my toes. "We're not going to be able to stay for the reception this afternoon. There's someone from State coming over to enlist us for a mission. Get familiar with these files so you can get Rabb up to speed."

'Us' and 'mission' were not words I'd expected to hear in the same sentence around here. "What's the mission, sir?"

"Read all about it, Mr. Roberts. The world gets stranger every day." The admiral dropped two folders on my desk. "This one's the militia group we're investigating. The other one is from Personnel. We have another lawyer coming in for this one, and depending on how it goes, she'll most likely be sticking around. You'll report to her and Commander Rabb."

"Aye, sir." I didn't relax until his office door was closed. Even then, I had the distinct feeling that he might reappear at any moment. The file on the militia was impressive; all former officers, all the way up to a full-bird Marine colonel. When I got to the recent activities, I almost fell out of my chair. They'd actually hijacked the Declaration of Independence? How the hell did they pull that one off? Suddenly, the word 'mission' started to make a lot more

sense. Commander Rabb had never been one to mind getting his hands dirty, so this new partner of his would have to hit the ground running.

Next file. Major Sarah Mackenzie - a Marine. That ought to do it. Commissioned through OCS, law school at Duke, tours in Bosnia and Okinawa ... okay, so getting her hands dirty wouldn't be a problem. I flipped through the folder in search of a picture so I could put a face to the name

Holy ...

This is Major Sarah Mackenzie?

Bizarre freaking luck.

She was a dead ringer for Lieutenant Diane Schonke.

Jeez, Bud, great choice of words. It was true, though -change the uniform, and they'd be twins. This was downright spooky. Christ, what would the commander say? She'd be at the ceremony, and he'd have no idea what was about to hit him. Maybe it was just the picture. That was it. People look a lot different in person. We'd get there, and she'd look like my brother in a skirt or something. Yeah, right. What were the odds?

"Morning, sir."

"Good morning, Commander."

I looked up and quickly shut the file. Commander Rabb was just coming in, taking long, purposeful strides toward his office. He looked more like I remembered him from that first case, calm despite the mounting pressure. Courage under fire, and all that. Catching sight of me, he broke into a wide smile. "Lieutenant Roberts! Good to see you again."

I shook his hand gratefully. Thank God someone was happy to see me. "You too, sir. Can I help you with anything?"

"Guess you've figured out how late I am, huh? Sure, follow me." I stood in the doorway of his office as he scanned the contents of his inbox. Glancing at his watch, he cursed under his breath. "Well, none of this is going to get done in the next ten minutes. You here permanently, Bud?"

He even remembered my name. I knew there was a reason I liked this guy. "Yes, sir. I'm to brief you on the upcoming case, and also on your new partner, Major Mackenzie."

"They're pairing me up again already? I kinda liked the Lone Ranger thing for a change." Rabb was already elbow-deep in his desk drawer, hunting for something. "A Marine, too. Let me guess - another woman?"

"Affirmative, sir."

"You know what, Bud? I think they always pair me up with the women because they don't trust me not to date them otherwise. I don't know where I got such a lousy reputation."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true, sir."

He looked up with a grin, and I realized he was joking. That'd teach me to think before opening my mouth. "It's going to be good to have you around, Bud."

I didn't know what to say to that. Suddenly I remembered the surprise waiting for him after the ceremony. "Commander, about Major Mackenzie ... sir, I don't really know how to say this - "

"Spit it out, Lieutenant," Rabb replied, checking his watch again. "Our car is probably waiting out front."

"Well, sir, it's just that she looks like - "

"If you say anything other than 'a Marine,' I might have to send you back to sensitivity training." He raised an eyebrow.

"Lieutenant Commander Rabb, report!" The admiral's voice rang through the bullpen. Damn. I'd had a chance to warn him, and I blew it. Both of us hurried out of the office and snapped to attention.

"Sometimes I think you'd be late for your own wedding, Mr. Rabb." Admiral Chegvidden folded his arms across his chest.

"My apologies, sir. I was detained at the OIG while presenting my report to the board of inquiry."

"Even the Inspector General answers to the President, Commander. Let's not keep him waiting."

"Aye, sir."

The admiral was halfway to the door before he paused and turned back. Following a step behind, Rabb slowed up, but my reflexes weren't as good, and I nearly ran into him. Man, I can be a dork sometimes. "Oh, one more thing, Mr. Rabb." The commanding officer raised his voice. "Attention on deck!"

At once, every officer in JAG Ops fell in at attention. The admiral continued. "Commander, in a few minutes, you will receive one of the highest honors this Navy can grant. With it comes the gratitude of your country. Know also that you have the respect of your crew. Present arms!"

The bullpen staff saluted crisply. "Congratulations, sir!" we chorused.

Surprised and touched, Commander Rabb just looked around the room for a moment. "Thank you," he said quietly, and returned the salute.

"All right, folks, nothing further. Get back to work." The admiral strode for the door, but not before I caught a hint of pride in his eyes. So the old man had a heart, after all. Rabb followed, utterly professional, but he too was attempting to cover his emotions. Not used to praise, maybe. For an aviator, that was saying something.

I hoped to God that the coming surprise wouldn't hurt him as much as I feared it would ...

The ceremony was nice. Well, it was more than nice. I mean, it was the *President*. I think it's safe to say that in my entire naval career, I will never get a medal from the President. Commander Rabb just seemed to take it all in stride, though. Incredible.

I'd managed to get comfortable with my temporary post as the admiral's assistant, just in time for the commander to rejoin us. He didn't appear overly disappointed to be missing out on the lavish reception. It was the past, and the assignment was the present. My first assignment. I was just praying that I wouldn't screw anything up.

There was a woman in Marine Class-A uniform waiting by the car, and I tried not to look tense as we approached. Here we go ...

"Lieutenant Commander Harmon Rabb, Major Sarah Mackenzie."

"Mac," offered the major, extending her hand. Damn. Her voice, her posture, everything about her suggested that she was indeed a completely different person. But all I could see was Lieutenant Schonke.

And Commander Rabb - when he met her gaze and recognition flooded his features, I wanted to kick my own six. I could have spared him this; not all of it, of course. But still ... damn.

To his credit, he kept his composure. Mostly. Her outstretched hand went unnoticed as he stared at her, his eyes changing from shock to undisguised pain. Then, just as quickly, a door seemed to slam shut, and he stiffly shook her hand. "Harm," he managed to say.

I'd never felt sorry for a Marine before, but then again, I'd never been in a situation quite like this before. Mackenzie didn't question, but she'd clearly noticed his reaction. Why couldn't someone explain to her that it wasn't personal, it was just that she looked exactly like a dead woman? Why couldn't someone explain it to *me*?

The admiral's confused expression was slowly morphing into one of suspicion, and he grumbled something about the two of them having to work together. Apparently he'd never seen any of the pictures from the Schonke case. The tension was surreal. Could this go on for the rest of the assignment? What about after that? She wasn't going anywhere, and she certainly wasn't going to look any different tomorrow, or next week.

I couldn't take it anymore. Someone had to break the ice. So I did my best bumbling-lieutenant routine and flubbed the whole vehicle-entry thing. Sometimes being a dork has an upside. The admiral and the major looked vaguely amused, but the commander's face was a guarded mask. It was similar to the one he'd worn while searching for the killer, but this one held no rage - only tightly-controlled anguish.

And somehow, wouldn't you know, he ended up sitting across from her in the limo. Mackenzie wasn't dumb: she could see him looking at his shoes, out the window, anywhere but at her. She could have backed away, but she didn't. Good for her.

"That's an impressive piece of hardware," she began cautiously, indicating the new DFC.
"Would you mind - ?"

"No, go ahead." He unpinned the medal and handed it to her. As their fingers brushed, he jerked back as if burnt. That time, a flicker of hurt crossed her graceful features, but she recovered quickly.

"Must have been a hell of a mission," she said quietly.

Noticing the continued awkwardness, Admiral Chegwidden decided to weigh in. "Come to think of it, Commander, even I don't know all the details of that one. You'll have to fill us in sometime."

"Aye, sir. As long as you can put up with pilot stories. I've heard they can be hard to take." He smiled, but it was an empty smile. Soon, it was silent again.

The poor major. She didn't know anything about him, did she? She didn't know why he wasn't on flight status anymore, and she definitely didn't know his background. I did, and I still couldn't figure him out. What chance did she have?

As she handed the medal back, he placed it in its box rather than back on his lapel. "You know, you can actually wear it for the day," she pointed out lightly, trying to sound natural. "Might as well enjoy it while you can."

Rabb shrugged, deflecting the unspoken inquiry. "If my guess is right, we're not going to have time to enjoy much of anything. Am I wrong, Admiral?"

"You're awfully perceptive when you choose to be, Commander."

When the car pulled up outside JAG HQ, Mackenzie followed the admiral inside at a brisk pace. I figured it was as good an opportunity as I would get to speak to the commander privately. "Sir, perhaps I should explain to the major - "

He whirled, and for a split-second, the full force of his emotions escaped. "Not one word, Lieutenant," he hissed.

"Aye-aye, sir." I should've known better.

Immediately, though, his anger diminished. "I know you're trying, Bud," he said softly. "Now I'm really glad you're here. Let's go to work, all right?"

And that was it. From then on, it was all business for the duration of the assignment. The awkwardness faded, but every so often I caught a hint of something ... well, *different* between them. He'd turn to her with a familiarity that spoke of years of closeness. Then, instantly, reality would set in, and the door would slam shut again. Did she notice? Maybe, maybe not. Even when less than completely focused, he was still a great investigator. And as it turned out, she'd had her own problems to deal with.

As for the mission ... well, it was insane. There's no other way to describe it. Were all JAG assignments like this? Made my time on the Seahawk look like a ROTC parade. Sure, I essentially got ditched by my superiors and left with that pompous wanna-be-spook Webb for the night, but what can I say? Those two made a pretty impressive team. I still have no idea what happened out there in the desert, and I'm not sure I want to know. The important thing was, the Declaration was still in one piece, and therefore we got to keep our jobs. Good enough for me.

The flight back to Washington was far less strained than the previous one. Major Mackenzie took a seat next to Commander Rabb, and he smiled back at her without hesitation. A real smile, not one of those charm-her-socks-off deals. I don't know what it was, but something

must have happened out there to bring them a little closer. Thank God. I don't know how we all would have survived otherwise.

Admiral Chegwiddden had left all three of us instructions to "clean the hell up and be ready to debrief at 0900 tomorrow." So after landing at Andrews and bidding a not-so-fond farewell to Webb and his cohorts, we prepared to go our separate ways.

"Well, Major," Rabb said finally. "Welcome to the crew."

"Thank you, Commander. I can't say much for the initiation process, but I'm glad to be here." Mackenzie quirked an eyebrow, and her lips twisted wryly. Not quite a smile, but close. "Just don't play trapeze-artist with a Huey next time, all right?"

"You've got a deal."

Holy cow. Was *that* what happened? "Sir, did you really - "

"She's exaggerating, Bud."

"No, I'm not." She shook her head. "See you in the morning." A few steps toward her car, she turned back. "Harm?"

He looked up, and I noticed that she'd used his name. "Yeah, Mac?"

"She must have been special."

This time, he didn't try to hide the pain. "She was."

The major nodded understanding. "Good night."

We both watched as she left. I remember thinking at that moment that I would like Sarah Mackenzie, and that the commander would, too. As long as he could see her for who she was.

He didn't say anything, gazing off into the distance long after she was gone. Maybe he wanted to be alone with his thoughts, but it didn't feel right to just leave. So I spoke up. "You told her, sir?"

"Not exactly, Bud."

"But she figured out enough to understand. And you don't want to tell her any more than that?"

"Not if I can help it." He drew a weary hand over his eyes. "I think I could use a drink right now. Want to join me?"

Drinking with a senior officer. I wasn't entirely sure about the concept, but it was clear that alcohol wasn't the first thing on his mind. "Sir, you don't have to."

"Bud, I said I didn't want to talk to *her* about it. That doesn't mean I don't want to talk to anyone."

Somehow I felt more needed right then than I did during the entire situation in Arizona.
"Understood, sir."

That's how we ended up at the corner table of some Georgetown bar, lagers in hand. I hoped I was only expected to listen - I didn't have the first clue what to say. It wasn't as if we could change anything, make it better somehow. That wasn't possible.

Fortunately, Rabb - Harm - spoke first. "Bud, I'm not overreacting, am I? Mac really does look just like her?"

"She does, sir. The voice, though, and the mannerisms, they're completely different."

"I know. Whoever said 'seeing is believing,' anyway?" He gave a rueful smirk. "You're keeping me sane, you know that? Anybody else would write me up for a psych eval if I told them my new partner looked identical to a lieutenant who's been dead for six months."

"You knew her, didn't you, sir? Lieutenant Schonke, I mean?"

"I figured everybody on the Seahawk had pretty much guessed that much by now. Besides, if you hadn't, you wouldn't have tried to warn me about Mac. Thank you for that."

"Don't bother thanking me, sir. I blew it."

"That wasn't your fault. And you can ditch the 'sir' for tonight." He took a sip of beer and leaned his arms on the table. "I knew Diane, all right. I'd known her for twelve years."

That was a curveball. I'd expected to hear that they were simply ex-shipmates, even ex-lovers. But twelve years ... "Wow," was all I could say.

"We met at the Academy, my third class year. My aerodynamics class was kicking my six, bad enough that I swallowed my pride and got a tutor. By the time I figured out that she was a class younger than me, she'd already gotten me through the exam. Took me a while to live that one down. We ended up helping each other through a lot of things. I edited all her papers ... she came with me to my mom's wedding ... I went with her to her mom's funeral. When I was commissioned, after graduation, she gave me my first salute." He smiled faintly at the memory, his gaze growing distant. I couldn't even picture a twenty-one-year-old Ensign Harmon Rabb.

"After that, we stayed as close as we could, but it got harder. I was in flight school, she was at tech school for crypto, and after that we were on different ships. You know how it is. We got really good at writing letters, and occasionally talked on the phone, but I only saw her maybe twice in almost five years. Then I had my crash, and suddenly I was re-evaluating my entire life. Diane took leave as soon as her cruise was over. I was still in the hospital in Italy, and one day I woke up, and she was just there. I'd never been so happy to see anyone in my life. She stayed with me through my inquiry, and helped me decide to go into law. She was right there when I needed her most, and all she said was, 'That's what we do. We get each other through.' Have you ever known anyone like that, Bud?"

"No," I replied honestly. "I haven't."

Harm leaned back, shaking his head. "I don't know when it was that I realized I loved her. All I remember is standing there, watching her get ready to leave for her next assignment, and knowing that I couldn't let her go again. Something made me just walk over there and kiss

her. I think I surprised the hell out of her, but she looked me right in the eye and said, 'If I'd known you were going to do that, I'd have tried to leave weeks ago.' Of course, she still had to go, but we managed to see each other more while I was in law school. I think those few weekends we had were some of the happiest days of my life. After that, though, when I went back on active duty ... we finally decided that it was useless to carry on a relationship if there was no future in it. Neither of us was willing to put our careers on hold, and we couldn't think of any other way. So when she left on the Seahawk, we agreed not to hold each other down, and at the end of the cruise, we'd decide once and for all if what we had was worth fighting for."

He laughed softly, humorlessly. "You know, I was thrilled to be sent down to Norfolk that day. After trying to live the past year without her, trying to date other people, I knew I wanted to be with her more than ever. I thought maybe this would give me the chance to see her a few hours earlier, and tell her how I felt. When I *did* see her ... well, everything came crashing down." His features were carved in stone, but the ache in his eyes betrayed him. What must it be like, I wondered, to love someone that much - and lose her?

"Do you believe Lieutenant Lamm killed her?" I asked hesitantly.

"I don't know what I believe. She never told me about being stalked, and honestly, the whole investigation was a blur. Every time I thought I'd cleared my head, I'd see something else of hers, or meet someone who'd known her, and all I could think was that I'd never see her again. I went to the funeral, but I stayed out of sight. I couldn't face her family. I'm not sure I ever really grieved for her. In some way, I think I've been pretending it never happened. As if she's just been on deployment for the last six months, like always, and somehow we'll magically find a way to be together. But I guess I knew reality would hit me eventually, and it just did. In the form of Major Sarah Mackenzie. Fate has one hell of a sense of humor."

Harm took another long swig of his drink. "Tell me, Bud. I never had time to see her when I was on board for those two cases. In those last few months, you saw her more than I did. Did you know Diane at all? Was she happy?"

"I knew her a little, I guess. PAs get around a lot, so I knew just about all the officers. Plus, the crypto kids were a memorable bunch, always playing tricks on each other. One time they figured out how to hack in and encode a message on the ship's electronic bulletin board. I think it said something like, 'Another casualty of Windows 95'." Belatedly, I glanced up, wondering if it was inappropriate, but he was smiling at the joke. "She was a good officer, and a strong woman. Lots of guys did their best to impress her, but she always told them that she had a guy at home. If you're wondering what her decision would have been, I think it would have been the same as yours."

For a moment, he was silent, and I thought the legendary Harmon Rabb might actually break down. But he only nodded, staring into his glass. "Thanks, Bud," he whispered. "I think I needed that."

I waited a minute before speaking again. "So what now, sir?" Damn it, he told me not to call him that right now. Conflicting orders could be such a pain.

"Now, I have no choice but to get on with my life. To be honest, it doesn't scare me as much as it used to, because I've already gotten this far. I owe it to her not to screw up what I've got going for me. And I owe it to Mac to be able to look at her without seeing ghosts. She deserves at least that much. I think I can get there before too long. I've survived enough hard times to know that I can survive one more. The thing that *does* scare me ... I'm terrified that one day I'll try to remember Diane as she was, and all I'll hear is Mac's voice - all I'll see is

Marine green. I want to know Sarah Mackenzie. I really do. But I don't want to lose Diane. She was an amazing person, and I don't ever want to forget a single part of her. I know I will, though, and I already hate myself for it."

Before I knew it, I was talking. "Sir, that's part of being human," I said sincerely. "But I think maybe you should look at it the other way. You won't forget Diane by getting to know Major Mackenzie. In fact, you have an extraordinary opportunity to keep Diane's memory alive through her. Even if you're the only one who sees it, and even if you don't see it every time. Sure, it'll hurt a little less every day, but that doesn't mean you're losing her. It just means that you're letting go of the what-ifs and the might-have-beens. And eventually, whether you see Diane or Mac, all you'll see is the good memories."

As soon as the words were out, I was mortified. Now I'd really done it. I'd officially overstepped my bounds. What the hell did I know about losing the love of your life? How could I have been so presumptuous as to think I could help ... Soon, however, I realized that he hadn't dismissed my after-school-special speech entirely. He was looking at me with the faintest ray of hope in his eyes; hope that some of what I'd said could be true. Maybe that was all he needed right now.

"You're a good man, Bud Roberts," Harm said quietly. "You think you could handle being friends with a senior officer?"

I did my best not to let my surprise show, and nodded solemnly. "I'd be honored, Commander."

He shook my hand briefly, and we both got up to leave. When we reached the parking lot, I looked at the red Corvette convertible and realized that it represented everything the world saw in Lieutenant Commander Harmon Rabb; fast car, perfect record, Hollywood smile. An outside observer would be stunned to discover that none of those things made him what he was. I knew that I was now one of the few who understood that, and I was grateful to have the chance to be his friend.

He stopped for a moment and leaned on the 'Vette's hood. "You know, that bulletin-board hack wasn't the crowning achievement of the Seahawk crypto kids. Not by a long shot."

"Yeah? What topped it?"

"A couple of years ago, the Seahawk and the Teddy Roosevelt cryptos played an entire chess game through codes in the regular ship-to-ship transmissions. Nobody ever figured out what the code words were, but after about a month, one of the Seahawk's transmissions included the word 'checkmate', and suddenly there was a lot of swearing going on below decks on the Teddy."

I had a feeling I already knew, but I asked the question anyway. "Whose idea was that, sir?"

Harm smiled, and this time there was only pride and satisfaction in his voice. "I never did beat that girl at chess. Good night, Lieutenant."

"Night, sir."

It was nearly 2300 by the time I got back to my little temporary apartment north of town. In ten hours, we would all be standing in front of the admiral, giving our report on the events of the past two days. Ten hours earlier, I had been on the adventure of my life, and it was clear

to me that it wouldn't be the last. I was currently serving under a SEAL, a jetjock, and a jarhead, and every one of them expected me to keep up. When I left the carrier, they all told me I was crazy to want to come to JAG. I'm not so sure they were wrong.

But I think I'm going to like it here.

The End