



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Vanished," general seasons 8 and 9

Disclaimer: Don't own JAG, don't own Hallmark, and I certainly mean no disrespect to either one. So please don't tear up my Gold Crown card.

Author's Notes: Lee, this one's your fault, even though I know you would have liked it to be less fluffy. **shrug** The whole Hallmark thing has become almost as ubiquitous in fic as the "ninja-girl" and "stickboy" thing; none of the three ever got more than one on-screen mention by my count. It gave me a goofy little idea, so I'm going to play with it for a while. The card slogans I'm using here are mostly from actual Hallmark cards (yes, even the last one), though a few came from 123greetings.com e-cards. I figure, why spend time trying to think up my own cutesy stuff when I can borrow from the big boys and call it realism?

1824 EDT

Walgreen's Pharmacy
Falls Church, Virginia

Mac turned down the far aisle of the store, scanning the overhead sign. Her after-work shopping list that evening had only four items on it -- milk, bread, shampoo, and pantyhose -- and she had only the shampoo left to find. She'd set herself a personal challenge, for no underlying reason other than her own entertainment, to be in and out of the store in under eight minutes. So far, she'd used up four of them.

On a mission, she didn't realize there was someone else in the aisle until she was almost on top of her. "Mattie," she greeted, stepping back in surprise. "Hi there."

Mattie looked up from the greeting cards and smiled. "Hey, Mac. Small world."

"I'll say. What are you doing in this neighborhood? Harm didn't make you hang out at JAG all day, did he?"

"Nah. Jen picked me up from my dad's ... the treatment center." The teenager faltered slightly on the explanation, but soon squared her shoulders. "She's over in the makeup aisle, looking for the same shade of lipstick as the one she accidentally melted in the car yesterday."

"Ooh, the summer car heat trap claims another cosmetic victim." Mac gave a somewhat exaggerated grimace, glancing down at the card in Mattie's hand. She could see that it was a Father's Day card, and she nodded cautiously. "It's great that things are going so well for you and your dad."

Mattie followed her gaze and immediately shook her head. "This isn't -- I mean, yeah, things are going pretty well, but this isn't for him. I was, um, trying to find something for Harm."

At that, Mac felt a twist of bittersweet emotion, as she so often did where Harm and Mattie were concerned; happiness for her best friend but envy of what he'd found, pride in his newfound parenting skills but sadness for the loss he'd inevitably feel. "That's really nice, Mattie," she said sincerely. "He'll like that a lot."

The girl reached up to tuck her thick curls back, casting a self-conscious gaze downward. "The thing is, there aren't exactly cards for guardians, you know? No one at Hallmark ever dreamed up something that says, 'Thanks for not dumping me on Social Services, and for straightening things out with my alcoholic dad.' Wouldn't really be a hot seller."

"I guess not." Mac's lips curled in a wry smirk. "If it makes you feel any better, I doubt they make too many cards for 'Thanks for saving me from being tortured,' or 'I'm sorry you had to go work for the CIA,' either."

"Nontraditional at every turn, aren't we?"

"You'd better believe it."

The two women in Harmon Rabb's life regarded each other for a moment. Before the silence could get too awkward, Mattie spoke up again. "Harm said you two had a joke about 'Hallmark moments' once, a long time ago," she began tentatively.

"I'm surprised he even remembers that. It was ..." Mac searched her memory. "Damn. Over six years ago."

Mattie looked as though she wanted to comment on the fact that Mac obviously remembered the conversation rather well, but she held back. Instead, she replied, "He said he thought that you wanted more Hallmark moments in your life, and that he didn't know how to give them to you. But he wished he could."

That statement set the Marine back a step. Regaining her bearing after only a moment, she said, "Mattie, I don't know if Harm would want you to be talking about this with me."

"Probably not. But that particular conversation was one that he didn't make me promise to keep to myself, and given that he's kind of an expert on loopholes, he can't get too mad at me for finding one of my own." The teenager's smile didn't change, but a glint of satisfaction shone in her eyes. "I'd better go rescue Jen from the Cover Girl aisle. Good to see you, Mac."

"You too," Mac responded absently, her mind elsewhere. Hallmark moments, Mattie had said. Harm thought she wanted more of them ... meaning what? That she wanted her life to have a semblance of normalcy? She'd admit to that, especially now of all times.

A somewhat uglier thought occurred to her, stemming from her harsh words at the taxi stand in Paraguay. "We both want to be on top." Even to her own ears, her comments throughout that fiasco now sounded suspiciously like she'd been dictating terms. At the time, when everything had been in chaos, she'd needed to feel in control of something, and she'd taken aim at her unpredictable relationship with her equally unpredictable partner. Did he think she'd been trying to dictate terms all along, though? *Had* she?

It was true that she wanted -- no, needed -- a fair amount of control over what went on around her. Too many years of feeling helpless in her own life had instilled in her a strong instinct to defend, and the best defense, as the saying went, was a good offense. Every time something happened that was "nontraditional," to borrow Mattie's word, she'd tightened her grip on her ideal - the life she wanted to have, rather than the one she did have.

A realization occurred to her, one that should have been obvious a long time ago. Her life, and his, would never fit the rigid constraints she'd held onto for so long. Attempting to force either of them into a fairy-tale, Oprah-book-club mold was futile and ultimately unfair to them both. If she wanted her Hallmark moments, she couldn't expect them to fall at her feet; she'd have to take some responsibility for making them happen.

With a new sense of purpose, Mac turned to the rack of greeting cards in front of her. By the time she'd finished her task, her eight-minute trip had stretched into a full hour.

2117 EDT North of Union Station

Harm answered the knock at his door with no surprise evident in his expression. "Hey," he greeted her easily, opening the door wide to allow her entrance. "Everything okay?"

It was a reasonable question, given the turmoil that had been plaguing her life of late, and she appreciated the fact that he'd asked it so casually. He'd managed to strike a surprisingly good balance; when she asked, he was there without question, but when she needed to handle things alone, he stepped back without having to be told. Maybe he'd learned those skills from having Mattie, although it would be slightly embarrassing if there was any more than a minor similarity between supporting her and parenting a teenager.

"Yeah, fine. I just felt like stopping by. As long as you're not busy or anything."

Harm spread his hands. "I'm open. Mattie and Jen rented the last Lord of the Rings movie, which I kind of wanted to see, but they informed me in no uncertain terms that they were going to be freeze-framing every scene with that elf guy they think is so hot, so I decided to cut my losses."

Mac had to grin at the image of the two young women lunging for the remote at the first sight of Orlando Bloom on-screen. They moved into the living room area, and she set her purse down on the floor as she slid onto the couch.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

She considered for a moment. "Got any more of that raspberry iced tea?"

"As long as the girls haven't finished it off. Let me check." He crossed to the refrigerator and did a quick scan. "Aha. Coming right up."

He poured two glasses and returned to the living room, taking a seat in the chair opposite her. He sipped his drink for a moment, allowing her the opportunity to choose the direction of the conversation. She had been the one to show up on his doorstep, after all. Still, she didn't want to leap into the abyss right off the bat.

"I ran into Mattie at the store earlier," she began. "It sounds like she's doing pretty well with her dad lately."

"Yeah, I think so too. We haven't talked about her moving back with him yet, but I know it's coming." His eyes remained on his glass, as if focusing on something inanimate would keep him from having to fully face the ramifications of the concept.

"How are you doing with that idea?"

"I'm okay with it. I mean, I'm glad -- this is what we've been aiming for, you know? It's the best possible outcome, especially for Mattie." He made only a token attempt at fooling her with false bravado. If -- when -- Mattie did go back to her father, no amount of reassurances about 'what's best' would fill the gaping hole left behind.

Mac reached out and squeezed his hand once, earning a brief smile of gratitude. Quickly, though, he shook off the self-pity. "You have a doctor's appointment tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yeah, after work. They want to do another ultrasound to make sure I'm not developing any adhesions since the surgery." She'd grown more comfortable talking about her medical issues with him over the past few weeks; they both had, she supposed. When she'd first explained the details of endometriosis to him, she'd barely gotten through the basic description before pulling away to get control over her tears, and he'd sat shell-shocked, with no idea how to react. The next couple of conversations on the topic had been stilted, the next few less so, until they'd reached a level of understanding that worked for them both.

The baby deal hadn't been mentioned since his distressed apologies for bringing it up at the admiral's retirement dinner, which was probably best for all concerned. To say she hadn't thought about it would be an egregious lie; it had been on her mind often. But she didn't dare raise the subject, for fear of setting him on another impossible quest, this time to ensure her happiness by giving her the child she wanted so badly.

Then again, all of his other impossible quests had, in the end, revealed themselves to be not so impossible after all.

"Actually, there was a reason I came by," she said, watching his eyebrows lift in curiosity. "Mattie and I happened to meet up in the greeting card aisle at the store, and somehow we got to talking about Hallmark moments."

Harm's gaze sharpened, recognizing how that conversation must have gone. "Remind me to have a chat with that girl about discretion."

"She wasn't telling secrets, assuming she knows any. She just jogged a few things in my memory, and because of that, I decided to try something." Mac reached down to retrieve her

purse and withdrew a stack of pastel-colored envelopes. She handed them across to her friend, who accepted them with obvious puzzlement.

"What are they?"

"You were right," she said, not immediately answering his question. "I do look for Hallmark moments, more so than I probably should. I've tried to make everything in my life fit this nebulous ideal, and I finally realized that I'm never going to reach it, at least not by just sitting back and hoping for things to change. So this is my first step toward getting it all in order." She gestured toward the cards in his hand. "Those are the Hallmark moments we should have had. They're the things that I should have said over the past year or so that might have kept us from going so wrong."

His sea-green eyes were troubled as he responded, slowly. "Mac, it hasn't exactly been a one-way street -- "

She held up a hand, and he fell silent. "I know. The thing is, you're fairly adept at the art of self-flagellation. When you're blaming yourself for something, we all tend to pick up on it. So I already have a pretty good idea of where your regrets lie." She allowed herself a half-smile, hoping he'd understand. "Just let me do this. When it's over, if there are things for which you really feel the need to publicly accept responsibility, the floor will be yours. I just -- I need to set some things right."

Still uncertain but willing to do whatever she asked, Harm set the stack down on the coffee table and opened the first envelope. *I wish I could undo what I did*, read the printed message on the front of the card, accompanied by a sad-looking puppy. On the inside, a note in Mac's handwriting said: 'For questioning your judgment when you were on the bench.'

Startled, he looked up and started to speak, but Mac shook her head. "No excuses. You deserved better from me."

Looking reluctant to accept that, he reached for the next card. This one featured a heart with a crack down the middle being sewn back together. *Let's patch up*. Mac's note on the inside read: 'For the Singer case.'

She knew a protest was coming and tried to head it off, but he would not be dissuaded. "Mac, my own actions put me in that situation. If I hadn't been so determined to go it alone in the first place -- "

"That's why the card says what it says," she replied patiently. "We both wish we'd done things differently, but it is what it is, and it's behind us. So let's not apologize. Instead, let's just ... patch up."

With a hint of a smile, he nodded. "Okay."

The next card had the word 'thanks' stamped all over it in various languages. "*Thanks just doesn't seem like enough*. The inside message bled the smile from his face. 'For Paraguay.'

"I didn't do it for gratitude," he said in a low voice.

"I know. But I was grateful, and I wish I'd said so."

"I wish I'd said a lot of things."

"I know that, too," she said softly. "But greeting-card rules don't always apply in the real world, much less in our real world. So let's just keep going."

Harm reached for the next card. *Things I thought about today: 1) You. 2) Some other non-you stuff.* Mac's note said, 'For while you were gone.'

This time, he didn't question or try to explain his side. He simply held her gaze for a long moment, and she knew without hesitation that the sentiment was returned.

Next: *A shoulder to lean on, anytime, day or night.* 'For the night you came to tell me about Mattie.'

"You managed to turn that one into a Hallmark moment all on your own," he pointed out, his voice wavering for a brief second. "There's nothing I'll ever be able to say or do that could repay you for giving Mattie and me a chance."

Visions flitted across her mind's eye, of beautiful, beaming children with green eyes and dazzling smiles, but she held her tongue. Opening the next card, he chose to read this one aloud, eyes twinkling. "Just wanted to say / A friend like you / Is as rare to find / As a moon that's blue." Turning to the inside, he stopped reciting and simply absorbed the message. *Thanks for being there for me!* 'For right now.'

"I mean this one even more," she told him quietly, keeping a firm grip on her spiraling emotions. "These past few weeks would have destroyed me if I didn't have you."

"I wish there was more I could do," he said, sincerity and concern evident in his handsome features. "There are times that really test my belief in the fairness of the world, and watching what you've had to go through ..."

As he trailed off, she reached over and placed the last card in his hand.

The front displayed a cheery drawing of apples and oranges, bearing the message *The best relationships can't be explained.* Harm turned to the inside. 'For always.'

She watched him struggle with his response, a new kind of serenity overtaking her. She'd done what she'd set out to do. If it changed nothing between them, then so be it. At the very least, for the first time in what seemed like forever, there was nothing hanging over them.

"I don't know what to say," he finally managed, looking up at her with wide eyes. "All of this is ... well, overwhelming, I guess, is the word I'm looking for."

"You don't have to say anything. This was a way for me to take control over the situations and events that I let get away from me. But the thing is -- and I should have realized it before -- the unexpected, convoluted, inexplicable moments that seem to be the norm for us are just as significant and infinitely more meaningful than any idealized concept of what 'should' have happened. I've missed out for not having understood that. We shouldn't need Hallmark. That isn't us."

His lips twisted in wry amusement, and he shook his head. "You know what's weird?"

"About us? Any number of things."

He continued as if the wisecrack hadn't even reached him. "I found a card a long time ago that I thought was perfect for you. I just never figured out when or how to give it to you."

As Mac waited, feeling the tables starting to turn on her, he stood up and crossed over to his desk. Taking a plain white envelope out of the second drawer, he turned back toward her. "I never wrote anything in it, because I knew I'd just change my mind about what to say a million times before I ever gave it to you. A couple of times I almost tossed it out, even, but somehow I never actually forced myself to do it."

Taking the card from his hand and sliding it out of the envelope, she attempted to prepare herself for whatever lay ahead -- and failed.

I love you. It's as simple and complicated as that.

The breath rushed from her lungs in one huge, shuddery release as memories of conversations past came back to her. "*You make simple things complicated.*" ... "*What I want is actually very simple.*"

When her tears started to fall, the anxious light faded from his eyes, and he moved to kneel down next to the couch. "Okay, that wasn't what I was going for," he said lightly, attempting to disguise a sense of uneasiness.

"No, it's -- I just -- " Scrubbing the moisture away, she shook her head. "At any other time, this would've been so perfect ..."

"What's wrong with right now?"

"What's wrong with it?" She stared at him in disbelief. "You expect me to let you sign up to ... Harm, I'm -- I've always been damaged goods of a sort, but especially right now -- "

"Please tell me you don't actually believe that." He slid onto the couch beside her, clearly determined. "Mac, you having an illness doesn't change a damn thing. Not in my mind. Did you honestly think I'd only want you if a -- if our deal came with some kind of guarantee? That's not how this works. You don't have any standard to live up to other than your own."

Searching for a way to explain, she took a deep breath and waited for her pulse to decelerate. At last, she said, "In a strange way, I think that's what a lot of this was about. For whatever reason, because of the various things that have happened in my life, I feel like I basically have to convince myself each and every day that I'm not beyond repair. I know you don't normally see it, but it's not a trivial thing to continually have to measure one's self-worth."

She braced herself for his pity, but it never came. Instead, he looked at her with the warmth and depth of feeling that had always been there, but was now finally unmasked. "I can help with that," he replied, reaching up to trace her cheekbone. "I can tell you how strong, and intelligent, and world-endingly beautiful you are, every day for the rest of your life, and the best part is, it'll all be true."

The tears welled up again, but she held them back as she felt herself being drawn toward him. "Yours is hardly an unbiased opinion," she pointed out softly.

"Minor detail," he murmured just before his lips found hers.

There was more to the evening, of course; another hour or two of conversation which confirmed for them both that despite the many dysfunctional aspects of their lives, this was meant to be. What lingered in her memory, though, was that first kiss, the way it had melted away all the insecurities and uncertainties of the here and now and set them at last on the path toward a shared future, in whatever form it might take.

It wasn't until much later that she realized that kiss had been their first real, live, no-kidding, honest-to-God Hallmark moment.

*** THE END ***