



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)
Classification: vignette, angst
Spoilers: "Persian Gulf"

Disclaimer: Still not mine, though this is the first time in a long while that I'd even want to lay claim to them.

Author's Notes: Personally, I thought this was the best episode of the year so far. And for a Harm worshipper to say that about a Mac-centered ep, you know I'm not just whistlin' Dixie. But Mac's POV is going to be detailed thoroughly in next week's ep, so I'm going to leave it alone until then and stick with what I know.

Directly after Mattie leaves
North of Union Station

"Sure, Bud. See you tomorrow."

I hang up the phone, and within seconds, the uneasiness that's been building over the past few hours resumes its position in the forefront of my mind. Mac was right -- about damn near everything, it seems. The nightmare that began in Paraguay never really ended. Maybe Sadik really did screw with my car, even. The thought is incredibly disturbing. Garden-variety terrorists don't fixate on individuals, at least not individuals as relatively insignificant as Mac and me. This one has a different plan, and Mac is obviously a major part of it.

I can't believe I let her walk out of here. She's got to be planning to pursue this tonight, and I should have realized that immediately, because she came to talk to me in person instead of picking up the phone. It's not in her nature to allow someone else to dictate terms, as Sadik has apparently tried to do. I don't know what her plan is, but he's been one step ahead of all of us for a long time, and there's no reason to think that's changed. Jesus, what was I thinking?

Snatching up the phone again, I hit the speed-dial for her cell and receive a monotone response. "The cellular customer you are trying to reach is unavailable ..." Mac never turns her phone off, and she never allows the battery to run low. It can only be turned off now for one of two reasons: because she doesn't want to be found, or because someone else doesn't want her to be found. Shit.

I take three rapid steps toward the door before the lingering vertigo catches up to me, and I have to grab for the edge of the desk. Son of a *bitch*. That bastard knows what he's doing. As much as he wants to seduce Mac, body and/or mind, he's not above getting in a couple of jabs at me for my role in the Chaco Boreal fiasco. If he'd struck harder, hurt me worse, I might not have full awareness of just how powerless I am in this situation. As it is, I'm perfectly functional ... if you don't count the occasional drunken stagger if I try to move any faster than the proverbial tortoise.

When all this began last year, I was willing to throw everything I had on the fire to go after her. But if I went after her now, I really would be a liability to her -- which I'm sure was precisely the point. God *damn* it.

There's got to be *something* I can do. It's been a few months since I made contact with anyone at Langley, but someone over there has got to take my call.

Or not. Kershaw's office says he's unavailable and doesn't elaborate. Predictable. Desperate, I try Blaisdell, who apparently either respects or pities me enough to actually come to the phone. All he can uncover and pass on, though, is a confirmation that Kershaw is in fact involved in an operation at present. I can only hope that he and half the Agency are on Mac's wing right now.

There's nothing else left, is there? The admiral won't be able to do anything, and if Mac can't reach Webb, I highly doubt that I could. I'm out of options, other than to sit on my hands and wait for the phone to ring. Do I want the phone to ring? On the one hand, I need to hear someone -- anyone -- tell me she's safe. On the other ... I don't know if I can stand it if the result is anything else.

Wait, where did -- Wasn't Mattie in here just a minute ago?

Before the phone rang, I think she was washing dishes. When I move to the sink, I see that it's still full of water, and a pan is half-cleaned. What in the world made her leave like that, without a word? *Now* what am I missing?

I'm suddenly struck by the need to see her, if only to feel for a moment like I have some grasp on the important things in my life. It takes me a second to find the right pace, one which allows me to move with as much speed as possible without disrupting my equilibrium, but once it's established, I make my way out into the hallway and head for the other apartment.

Jen answers the door, looking puzzled at the expression on my face. I guess that's not a surprise; when she left my place earlier, nothing was really wrong, and she's perceptive enough to realize that that's no longer true. But I don't want to put any of this on her. I don't want to put it on Mattie, either. Man, this is going to be complicated.

"Are you all right, sir?" Jen asks immediately.

"I'm fine, thanks. Mattie left my place while I was on the phone, and I wanted to talk to her about something."

Mattie appears from the doorway of her bedroom, her features set in a deliberate calm. "Everything okay?"

I lean against the doorframe, fixing a penetrating gaze on her. "Why did you leave a little while ago?"

She shrugs, but her eyes are guarded. "What, I can't come back here to watch some TV?"

"You can. But you did it in an awful hurry."

Her expression falters for just a moment, and she turns partway to toy with something on the shelf, her hair falling in front of her face. "Didn't look like you really needed me around, so ..."

As she trails off, I start to realize the problem. "Needing you around and wanting you around aren't the same thing."

When Mattie responds, her voice is low. "I can't always tell when either one of those things is true."

That sets me back a step. "What would make you think that I don't want you around?" I ask, profoundly disappointed that she'd somehow gotten that impression.

She waves a hand, mildly frustrated. "I don't know. All day I've been trying to do things for you -- you know, be useful. But you kept just kind of shrugging it off."

Oh, damn. "Mattie, it's not that I didn't appreciate it - "

"It's okay," she interrupts, and I can see the walls going up. "It was just nice to feel like I was helping for a while, that's all. I'll come by before school tomorrow."

"Hey, give me a chance to explain, all right?"

Suddenly her eyes flash. "Look, don't fake anything just to make me feel better. I know you'd rather see me as a kid, but I'm a big girl, okay?" She turns to go back into her room, and instinctively I push away from the doorframe and start across the apartment to stop her.

"Mattie, wait." Again the dizziness hits at a very inopportune time, and I halt in the middle of the floor, hoping to regain my balance before looking like a complete klutz. I need to make her understand this ...

"Commander?" Jen takes half a step forward, then hesitates.

Mattie turns back at the concerned note in Jen's voice, and before I know it she's in front of me, steadying me with both hands. "Stop moving so fast," she rebukes lightly, trying to disguise a tremor with a soft laugh.

Without thinking I pull her into my arms, leaning on her for strength in more ways than one. "I do need you," I murmur into her golden curls. "I'm sorry about being kind of a jerk today."

After a moment of uncertainty, Mattie returns the embrace. "Harm, what's wrong?" she asks, bewildered.

"I don't know if I can explain, but I'm going to give it a shot. Can we go back to my place for a while?"

She nods and disengages slightly, keeping one arm around my waist. With an apologetic nod toward Jen, I lead us back down the hall and into my apartment. Taking a seat on the couch, I pull Mattie down next to me.

"I never meant to make you feel like I didn't want your help. The truth is, I don't want anybody's help, but this time I needed it, and I was glad to have yours. As for seeing you as a kid ..." Hmm. How to say this? "You have so much on your shoulders already, Mattie. What I want most for you is to have a normal teenager's life, and when you have to do things like stay home from school to keep an eye on me, I feel like I'm not keeping my promise to you."

Mattie purses her lips, considering her response. "Look, I know you want me to be free to just be a kid. But I spent a lot of time before I met you trying to be an adult, and there were a lot of things about it that I liked. Even if I didn't, I can't just wave a magic wand and go back."

"I guess I knew that." I glance over at her, hoping for some sign of acceptance. "If I promise to stop putting you in roles you don't want to play, will we be okay?"

"We never stopped being okay." She smiles, but in another display of wisdom beyond her years, her eyes continue to search mine for further truths. "There's something else, isn't there?"

God, I don't want to lay this on her, but I need to get it out ...

"Yeah, there is. I told you about what happened last year in Paraguay, about how we were trying to track a terrorist. The part I didn't mention -- well, one of the parts I didn't mention -- was that he got away from us. He's still out there, and now it looks like he's here in the U.S."

Mattie does an impressive job of keeping her expression neutral, but her eyes go wide. "That's what Mac came here to tell you, isn't it?" When I nod, something else clicks in her mind. "Oh, my gosh. Your car?"

"We're starting to think so." As the color drains from her face, I reach for her hand. "He doesn't want to kill me. He doesn't want to do anything to me except force me to watch from the sidelines while he plays out his little cat-and-mouse game with Mac. I'm not very good at watching from the sidelines, Mattie. I don't handle being helpless very well, and I think I took it some of that out on you, and so once again I'm sorry."

She tightens her fingers around mine. "Is he going to go after Mac now? Is somebody protecting her?"

"The CIA, I think. But I don't know what's going on. And I'm worried about her. What happened in Paraguay ... she went through a lot at this man's hands, and it had an effect on her." Probably a lot more than I realized, but there's not much to be done about that now. "I just hope she's prepared for whatever's coming. And I hope that the Agency trusts her intuition more than I did."

Mattie watches me for a moment, as I try not to flinch under her gaze. "You think something's going to happen tonight?" she asks.

"I don't know. I just know that I can't get a hold of her, and ..." I wish I could keep from revealing this fear, this weakness, to Mattie. I don't ever want her to feel as if she has to be strong for me, the way I always felt I had to be strong for my mother. At the same time, though, I can't hide from her; it only hurts her more when I do. "And I'm afraid for her, so I wanted to see you, because I had a hunch that you'd make me feel better just by being here."

Her expression lightens, as if I've given her some kind of gift, and she moves in to settle against my shoulder. And I realize that this is what she wanted all along; for me to let her close.

"You're the best thing that's happened to me in a long time, Mattie," I tell her quietly, wrapping one arm around her and drawing her in. "I want to make sure you realize that."

At that, her eyes get suspiciously bright, and she ducks her head so that her cheek is resting against my collarbone. "Funny," she says, her voice slightly muffled. "Yesterday I said almost the same thing about you."

We stay there for a few minutes, and for a while I'm able to believe that somehow all this will work out all right. Then the phone rings, and the blood freezes in my veins.

Mattie motions for me to stay put and goes for the phone, bringing it over with only a hint of tension in her small frame.

Please, God, let it be her ...

"Hello?"

There's a brief silence before her voice comes over the line. "Harm, it's me ..."

"Mac, are you all right?"

Mattie lets out a sigh of relief, but I'm not willing to believe just yet. Mac doesn't directly answer my question. "It's over," she says, her voice flat and lifeless. "He's dead."

I close my eyes and allow all the anxiety of the past two days -- of the past eight months, really -- begin to bleed away. "Okay," I say, unable to come up with a more insightful response. "I guess I shouldn't say I'm glad, but in a way, I am."

"He did sabotage your car," she continues, in a disaffected way that makes me wonder if she really even heard my response. "He killed another man tonight, and he was going to blow up this nightclub ..."

She sounds as if she's trying to convince herself of something, and slowly I begin to get a picture of just how Sadik's death may have come to pass. A sudden memory assaults me; the sickening crunch of a man's neck under my hands in the Chaco Boreal. I sit up straighter, understanding the truly surreal place she must be in at this moment. "To say nothing of what he did in Paraguay and even before that." If what she needs right now is to rationalize this to herself, I'm happy enough to pitch in. "But he's never going to hurt another person ever again. You did a good job tonight, Marine."

"Marine," she repeats dully, as if the word were foreign to her. "Anyway, I'll -- I'll see you tomorrow."

“Mac, are you -” But the connection has already been cut. I sink back against the couch and stare at the phone for a long moment, trying to reconcile the voice I just heard with the image I have of my partner. For the longest time, I can’t put a name to the emotion that’s starting to overtake my consciousness - and then I realize it’s hatred. Right now, I’m filled with more fury toward Sadik Fahd than ever before, because even though I didn’t witness his final moments, I can already tell that they will endure far beyond the grave.

Sarah Mackenzie is alive. But some small part of her soul is dead.

*** THE END ***