



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: Vignette, angst

Spoilers: "Webb of Lies," all of Season 9

Disclaimer: If TPTB kill off a character, does that terminate their rights to him? What, you mean I still can't claim Webb, even now? Sheesh.

Author's Notes: I personally think that poor Webb has in fact met his demise, despite the door left slightly ajar by "H&F." But even though that gets him out of Mac's bed, I'm still bummed about it, and I wish we (and Mac) had been able to get more closure on the whole affair. Therefore, I'm playing around with a very, very unlikely idea.

This can either be set before Mac has her surgery, or after the episode entirely; it's up to you. I vote for earlier, because that way I can pretend Harm's well-intentioned but ill-timed baby deal comment wasn't quite so lacking in tact, given that Mac's grief has been somewhat mitigated.

2113 EDT

North of Union Station

Harm dried the last of the dishes and once again contemplated wandering over to Mattie's apartment. Once again, he decided against it. She'd been quiet during dinner, which had become the norm recently. He couldn't blame her for it. The worldview she'd clung to for the past eighteen months had been turned upside down by the police report on her parents' accident. Such a change would be difficult for an adult to assimilate, let alone a fifteen-year-old.

Lately he'd begun to feel rather ineffective in the lives of the people he cared about. Not helpless, really, but at the very least secondary. He couldn't help Mattie mend ties with her father; that was best left to the two of them. He couldn't help Mac understand how or why another person had been ripped out of her life. All he could do was stand to the side, waiting to be needed, hoping that he'd be adequate to the task if or when the occasion arose.

As he moved toward his desk in search of the paperback he'd read only halfway through during his last TDY, the phone rang. He crossed the remaining two steps and picked up the handset. "Hello."

"When you figure out who this is, do not say my name."

It took only a moment for the voice to click in his memory. Harm stumbled a bit in unmitigated shock, catching himself on the edge of the desk. "Oh, holy *shit*," he breathed, the soft curse the only coherent thought that found its way out.

"Yeah," Clayton Webb said, his voice sounding distant and worn. "Evening, Harm."

When the initial surprise wore off, it was replaced by fury, both at the other man for perpetrating this insane charade and at himself for not seeing this coming. Through gritted teeth, Harm asked, "Why would I use your name, when there are so many other things I'd like to call you at the moment?"

"I know. All of them deserved." Webb sounded like he meant it, which was another surprise unto itself. After all of the stunts they'd pulled, both as colleagues and adversaries, he'd never known the agent to admit to even a hint of remorse.

Harm gathered his wits and forced himself to acclimate to the situation as rapidly as possible. So Webb's death had been faked. Again. And more effectively this time, it seemed, with more striking consequences -- at least to them. That was the situation. He might as well deal with it. "LT Abby Cowen, I presume?" he intoned, his voice reaching Arctic levels.

Webb reacted more to the comment than the tone, a rueful smile creeping into his voice at the mention of the clumsy code name he'd used the last time he'd had to play dead. "You have a good memory."

"Better than I'd like sometimes. She cried for you last time, too, believe it or not. Although I have to assume the circumstances are somewhat different now."

He didn't have to identify the 'she' in his statement. There was only one woman who bridged these two men's lives. "That's why I'm calling you. It'd be too obvious to call her directly ... and I figured it would be kinder coming from you."

Harm heard the inferred request, and his fist involuntarily tightened. "No -- God damn it, *no!* I am not going to her and obliterating whatever order she's managed to find in her world. I am not letting you destroy her twice in one week. I am *not* looking her in the eye and telling her that you've just been screwing with her mind! Just what kind of callous bastard *are* you?"

"The kind that would rather live with her anger on my conscience than her misplaced grief," Webb answered simply, his voice tinged with defeat. "I'm not telling you this so that I can waltz back into her life. That option no longer exists."

They'd shared an employer once, not too long ago, and because of that common experience, Harm began to understand. "You really are dead," he realized.

"The man you knew, the one she trusted, is. I've spent the last few days in surgery to make sure that no one would even be able to recognize me on the street. I can't even call my own mother until things calm down, which could be months."

Harm scrubbed at his eyes, suddenly bone-weary. This changed surprisingly little; it didn't give his partner back the man she'd cared for, might even have loved. "I don't suppose you could give me any hint as to why," he said flatly, ever the lawyer -- asking a question with the answer already in hand.

Webb knew they were both aware of the rules, but chose to answer anyway, explaining just as far as he dared. "No. But I won't be setting foot back in the States for a long, long time. If ever. The stakes are that high."

"Was it worth it?"

"The Agency would tell you that it was worth all this and more. But don't ask me to come up with an answer. I don't know if I'll ever be able to do that."

"So that's it." Harm collapsed into his desk chair with an awkward thud, overwhelmed by the surreal conversation. "How can it work like this, We-" He cut himself off a beat late, recalling that the agent had been trying not to give any potential eavesdroppers a free pass. But he couldn't *not* ask the question. His curiosity, and his duty to his friend, demanded it. "How could you even start something with her, knowing ..."

"What I do? Who I am?" There was a pause on the line as Webb searched for his explanation. "I don't have a good answer for that. I'd never allowed myself to get anywhere near that far with anyone in the past. But she has a way of making you want to break your own rules, doesn't she?"

Pulling back from that implication, Harm let his voice frost over again. "Now is not the best time to be trying to bond with me over her."

"I know. I can't explain why -- Paraguay is a lot of it, but in a way it's also kind of an excuse. In reality, it was ... just her. Because I *do* love her. If there was any other way -- *any* other way ..."

He shook his head sharply, not willing to accept that response. "After all this, after the staggering magnitude of this deception, do you think she's really going to believe that?"

Webb's reply was low and resigned. "It's a risk I have to take."

"Is it? Which is the larger betrayal: for her to believe that you're dead, or for her to believe that you lied and didn't love her?"

"She'll believe it from you. As long as you believe *me*. Do you?"

The other man's tone was carefully controlled, but Harm knew better. This was a man on the edge of desperation, and no desperation would be needed here if he weren't telling the truth.

After a long moment, the willful commander relented. "Yes," he admitted quietly. "I do. That doesn't mean I won't shoot you in the kneecap for doing this to her, should our paths ever cross again."

"That's fair. You'll take care of her?"

"You know I will."

"All right. As much as I love her, she ought to be with you, and somewhere in your mental attic, I think you know that just as well as she does." Before he could protest, there was a sound from somewhere past the receiver, and Webb's voice grew sharper. "I have to go. Be safe, Harm."

At a loss for a way to close this bizarre encounter, Harm simply replied in kind. "You too."

The line went dead with its standard click, severing with harsh finality a connection that had begun nearly eight years ago. He stared at the receiver for a few seconds, exhaling slowly. Should he have refused this request, despite whatever dysfunctional kinship he still shared with Webb? Would it only make everything even more tangled and agonizing for his closest friend?

He sat there for most of an hour, considering the question. In the end, though, he knew he could no more keep the truth from Sarah Mackenzie than he could stop breathing. Cursing again, he snatched up his keys and headed for the door.

When the knock came, Mac suspected her partner before even approaching the peephole. It wasn't a sixth sense so much as it was a recognition of the limited pool of possibilities. Before this week, it might have been Webb, appearing out of nowhere with an exotic flower and a wry tale of some ostensibly dull State Department trip. Now ... it could really only be Harm.

And of course it was. "Hey," he said tentatively, one hand behind his neck. It should have been a casual gesture, but here it came off as if he had to physically force himself to look her in the eye.

"Hey," she echoed, stepping back to let him in. She could easily have seen something semi-patronizing in his act of showing up unannounced to offer comfort, but it also spoke to wellsprings of caring that did, somehow, give her comfort. "Don't tell me you were in the neighborhood."

"I wasn't. There were just some things I was thinking about, and ... I figured that since your light was on, I wouldn't be waking you up."

The logic was a little disjointed, but if he was willing to drive all the way over here, there must have been something significant occupying his thoughts. "That investigative mind," she commented dryly. "Want some coffee?"

"That's all right. Thanks." Harm shoved his car keys into his jeans pocket, his gaze focused on a small framed print that had up to this point never earned so much as a second glance from him. "How're you feeling?"

"Decent, on the relative scale." Mac folded her arms across her chest, conscious of the fact that she was shielding herself and not bothered by the concept. "You didn't come over here in the dead of night to ask me how I'm feeling, though."

At that, her friend's expression changed, morphing from one of tense uncertainty to one of resignation. Quietly, he asked, "Mac, would it make you feel better or worse if you learned that Webb wasn't dead?"

It took her a moment to regain her bearings; it wasn't his way to be so direct about a delicate topic such as this. She wondered what that should be telling her. "That's one hell of a loaded question," she responded with enforced calm, "and I can't see how the answer makes any appreciable difference."

"But if in some way he were trying to protect you, recognizing that he'd have no way of contacting you -"

She cut him off before he could get any further, feeling not-quite-healed wounds beginning to reopen. "Harm, I see what you're trying to do, but this style of comfort isn't working for me."

Belatedly she heard the sharpness in her own voice and wished she could try that line over again. When she glanced over at him, though, the look in his ice-blue eyes halted her thoughts.

"Mac, he called me. Tonight."

She could feel the blood draining from her face as she stared at him. "Don't you dare joke about that," she said, her voice low and grave. "I stood there while his secretary bawled her eyes out ... I *felt* it."

Harm didn't flinch from her accusing stare. "If you've ever trusted me before, trust now that I would not -- I *could* not lie about this."

And she believed him instantly; there was no other option. "Jesus," she whispered, taking an involuntary step back and steadying herself. Harm didn't follow, unsure of his place. Two instincts warred in her mind -- between curling up into a whimpering ball and seething calmly. She chose to seethe. "That manipulative son of a bitch."

Harm leaned forward on the back of her armchair. "There's more. He can't come back to the U.S. I don't know how or why, but the man you knew can no longer be Clayton Webb, which means he can't associate with anyone Webb knew. Dead or alive, he's gone from our lives."

"Then why tell you?" Mac demanded, allowing a harsh edge to attach itself to the obvious question.

His reply was solemn. "So that you'd know the truth. He said he'd rather you hate him than grieve for him. His own mother doesn't even know yet. He didn't mean for this to happen, Mac. I could tell he didn't."

"How does that matter now? A lie is a lie, and one like this, compounded from the original lie about where he was going ..." She tossed her hands up in an exaggerated gesture of indifference, knowing Harm would see through it for what it really was. "I guess whatever it was we were starting wasn't quite what I thought it was, huh?"

"I think he wanted it to be. But the Agency forces its people to bend in ways they thought were impossible one day, then demands absolute rigidity the next. It's not very compatible with having any kind of personal life."

"I suppose you'd know, wouldn't you?"

"Suffice it to say that there were reasons why your messages weren't returned last summer." Harm didn't elaborate, instead redirecting the conversation back to its original heading. "He recognized that he shouldn't have tried to have it both ways. He just ..." A hint of an apologetic smile curled the corner of his mouth. "In a screwed-up way, you have to take it as a compliment. You're a very difficult woman to walk away from, Mac."

The remark stung, in a way she would have been hard-pressed to describe. As the shock of this revelation began to recede, the pain crept ever closer, and tears pricked at the back of her eyelids. "I guess it's all the same in the end," she said unsteadily. "He still goes on the list of dead or otherwise damaged men who've had the misfortune of crossing my path."

She was reluctant to look at Harm as she said it, unsure how he'd react to the reminder. She didn't want to push him away right now; he'd been so understanding through all this, and the more her world tilted, the more she held fast to him.

After a moment, his quiet voice broke into her thoughts. "You really should have kicked the shit out of the insensitive jerk who said that. I never completely understood why you didn't."

"Maybe because you were right," she answered, her voice wavering traitorously.

He did step closer to her then, closing the distance so that avoiding his gaze became all but impossible. "I wasn't right. Even if I was, it wouldn't excuse the comment. But I wasn't right. I was off-balance and over-defensive and generally being stupid. You don't need to look any farther than me to find the antithesis of my own statement."

Memories of all they'd experienced together marched through her mind, and the tears began to slip free. "You can't say that knowing me hasn't hurt you. Trying to get back for my wedding -- giving up everything to come to Paraguay ..."

"Both of those were my choice. I have a full range of free will, and so does Webb, incidentally. But that's not what matters right now."

"And what does matter?" she whispered, keeping a tenuous hold on her composure.

Harm's ever-expressive held hers prisoner as he answered, as if swearing an unspoken allegiance to the truth. "The fact that I'd sell my soul before I'd give up a minute of the time you've been in my life. Maybe not all of it has been a bed of roses, but I would *never* risk losing any part of the effect you've had on me. Everything that's good, everything that's helped me grow or see more clearly -- for the past eight years, it all comes back to you. And if I'm wrecking up your streak of unfortunate timing, then so be it, but that's the way it is, and you'll never convince me otherwise."

That earnest, almost defiant confession was her undoing. She crumpled, weeping, against his chest, and he gently eased them both down onto the couch. She wasn't sure why she cried, exactly; some of it was for losing Clay all over again, some for the recognition of how incomplete their relationship had been, some for the fear of an uncertain future ... Most of

it, though, was abject gratitude for the man who now held her, who had never failed to make her feel safe.

“Thank you,” she said softly, when she’d regained control. “For saying that, and for everything. There’s so much I owe you - ”

His hold tightened, and he shook his head, causing her to fall silent. “I’m not looking for anything like that,” he told her. “It should never be about keeping score with us. Just let me be here.”

Willingly, she allowed her head to sink back onto his shoulder, and for a long time they stayed there, reinforcing the bond that had been so often tested but never broken.

After a few minutes, she spoke up, not moving from his embrace. “I suppose I’ll never really know what happened to him, will I?”

Harm’s reply was quiet but resolute. “Diane’s trail got me to Hobarth after two years. With both you and Webb on my side, I found my father after nearly thirty. Never say never.”

“Even so. I did love him, in some way, but ... I guess we both loved each other as much as we could. I wouldn’t call it the real thing, but it was something.”

“If you can even identify the real thing, you’re a step ahead of me,” he commented lightly.

At that, Mac drew back to look at him intently, wanting to make sure her meaning got through. “I’m getting there.”

His expression mirrored hers. “Yeah ... I suppose I am, too.”

It was another half-hour before he finally left her apartment, and she watched from the window as he walked unhurried toward his car through the beginnings of a spring rainstorm. There were a great number of uncertainties remaining in her life; she’d purposely avoided mentioning her next appointment at Bethesda. But even though she’d doubted it in the past, there was one assured constant, and it might just be enough to see her through what lay ahead.

A glimmer of faith restored, Mac turned off the lamp and moved toward her bedroom, believing for the first time in days that sleep might come without fears or regrets.

*** THE END ***