



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: U (i.e. the universal set, for my fellow math geeks out there)

Disclaimer: The characters, having now been retired from primetime, are still not mine.

Author's Notes: Two roads diverged in a yellow wood (gosh, I love that poem), and this time I *could* travel both ... so I did. There will be a San Diego story and a London story. This is the first of the two.

The coin seemed to hang in midair for a measureless time, flipping over and over without seeming to lose any altitude. If anything less than the rest of his life rested on the outcome, Harm would have marveled at the apparent suspension of the laws of gravity.

As it began its descent, though, something snapped into place in his mind, and he reached out to snag it out of the air before it could fall into Bud's palm.

Everyone blinked in surprise, coming out of their collective trance. Mac drew back to stare at him, a hint of fear creeping into her sparkling eyes.

"San Diego," he said without preamble.

Mac relaxed a little, but gave him a reproachful look. "Harm, we agreed -"

"It has to be San Diego, Mac. I have my twenty years in -- I can retire with full benefits. Also, there's a decent chance for me to get a Reserve billet in San Diego. And moving Mattie out of the country right now would be substantially harder to do than a move to California. Add to that the fact that my mom and Frank are there ..." He tightened his hand around hers, hoping to make his conviction clear to her. "This is the way it should be."

"And you decided this just now, with the coin in the air?"

"I've been thinking about it." He smiled. "Apparently I'm a deadline kind of guy."

Their audience went ignored for a moment as Mac searched his gaze. Finding what she needed, she nodded once -- then took the coin out of his hand. "Toss it again, Bud."

Harm opened his mouth, but she held up a finger to silence him. "I understand and accept everything you just said. I also know that there are things that favor London, not the least of which is a damn good career for someone who's already made his share of sacrifices. But beyond all that -- I don't want either of us to wake up five years from now and resent each other because we talked ourselves into giving this up, no matter what the practical reasons. The only way I see to avoid that, to level the field, is to take the decision entirely out of our hands. And you know that, or you wouldn't have suggested it in the first place."

From that he knew that no amount of debate would make her back down. *That's my Marine*, he thought; it wasn't the first time he'd had such a thought, but it was the first time it had come with no strings attached.

"Always the one with the dispassionate plan," he murmured for her ears only. To the group, he said, "All right, Bud, go ahead."

Bud drew a deep breath. "Okay, take two. Heads is London; tails is San Diego."

Once again, time seemed to slow and stretch. But the coin did fall back into Bud's hand at last, and he covered it with his fingers. He glanced up with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Can I just say that this is the biggest power trip I've ever --" Harriet elbowed him, and he promptly uncovered the coin for all to see.

"Tails," Mac breathed, keeping her gaze fixed on it lest it somehow change. After a moment to let it sink in, she looked up at Harm, and she knew the bittersweet hue in his ever-changing eyes would be reflected in her own.

"Guess it was meant to be," he commented lightly.

"You're sure you're okay with this?" It had been asked and answered a dozen times -- on both sides -- but it had been theoretical then, and it was reality now.

"I'm sure. And this is why." Harm reached into the pocket of his mess dress jacket and withdrew a simple but striking diamond ring. "This is what matters now. This is what puts everything else in perspective."

Mac tried to keep her hand from trembling as he slid the ring onto her finger. Amid sighs from Harriet and Jen, she reached up to kiss him, and the electricity she'd felt earlier in his apartment was still very much present.

"We'll expect to see you all in California for the wedding," she told the assembled group, reveling in the still-new thrill of his arm at her waist. "Just give us a couple of months to get something organized."

"Trust me," her fiancé commented, "if you put my mother on the job, it'll be planned and executed within a week of our arrival."

Jen's shining eyes suddenly grew wider. "I just realized," she began. "If you're going to San Diego, I'll still get to see Mattie - right?"

"I was hoping you'd see it that way." Harm had to grin as the petty officer launched herself toward him in a flying hug. The group dissolved into laughter, hugs and handshakes.

"Speaking of Mattie," Mac said a few minutes later, "we still have to tell her about the change of plans, and make sure she's okay with it."

"She's getting a whole family, and a good one," Sturgis offered. "Plus, she's moving to the beach. I think she'll be okay with it."

"If we tell her over the phone, though, she'll kill me." Harm checked his watch, then glanced at Mac. "Would you mind if we made a run out there tonight?"

"Not at all." Her nerves were dancing at the prospect of becoming a parent, but she meant what she'd said to Harriet before. She was up for the challenge - this one more than ever.

"Captain, Colonel, go see your daughter," General Cresswell told them, and they exchanged a warm smile at his description. "As her last duty at Headquarters, Petty Officer Coates will process the captain's retirement paperwork. I think I can safely say that the Navy's loss is the Marines' gain."

"Thank you, sir." Harm shook the JAG's hand, then gazed around at his friends and colleagues, and finally at the amazing woman who now wore his ring. "I can't imagine a greater honor than the opportunity to serve with all of you."

At ten p.m., Mattie gave up on her half-hour-long quest for sleep and lifted her hand slowly toward the iPod that lay at her side. If she was going to be awake, she figured, she might as well have some music to keep her occupied.

London. Maybe it would be perfect for them. Maybe there, she wouldn't constantly be reminded of things she used to do, things now beyond her grasp. Maybe the pity of strangers wouldn't sting as much as the pity of the classmates and teachers who'd come to visit her. Maybe her father wouldn't be able to cause her pain from an ocean away.

Harm had been her guardian angel, and she would follow him anywhere. But now it would be just him and her all over again -- and this time she wasn't sure how strong she could be.

Before she could convince her still-weak fingers to manipulate the earphones, a knock sounded at the door. She looked up, and stared.

In flagrant violation of the visiting-hours rules, Harm stood there in full formal uniform, with a radiant Mac at his side. His bearing was confident, free of the tension that he'd carried ever since she'd first woken up in the hospital.

"You should have warned me. I'm underdressed," she offered with a faint smile.

Harm slid into the chair by her bed, and Mac stood behind him, her hands resting on his shoulders. "There's been a change of plans, Mats," he said gently. "Instead of London, what do you think about moving to someplace warmer? Like, say, San Diego?"

Mattie looked from one officer to the other, comprehending just enough to be confused. "You want me to go with Mac instead of you?" she asked, trying to keep a worried tremor out of her voice.

"No -- God, no," he hastened to reassure her, reaching for her hand. "The plan is for all of us to go. Together."

As realization dawned, she looked up at Mac, who held up her left hand to display the ring. "Are you serious?" the teenager demanded.

"We're serious. We're also morons for waiting until now to make the leap, but we're serious."

"Not only that," Mac added, "but Jen's going to transfer out to San Diego, too."

"Really?" Mattie felt a flicker of real excitement for the first time in weeks. "Harm, that's where your mom and stepdad live, isn't it?"

"That's right. I'll get to show you all my old hangouts."

"What about your job?"

Harm barely hesitated. "I'm retiring from the Navy, Mattie," he said. "I'll have to go to London for a couple of weeks until they can get a replacement for me and process my paperwork. I'm going to see what the Reserve Center can dig up for me, since there are some flying billets out at San Diego that aren't rank-specific. Either way, I can practice law, or I can fly. I won't have trouble finding work."

Mattie shifted her gaze to Mac. "He really does love you," she said with ardent sincerity. "I mean, I'm sure he told you that, but he told me a whole year ago. It's the real thing."

"I know," Mac replied softly, her eyes locked on him. "I love him, too."

Mattie watched them, pleased but still rocked by the sudden paradigm shift. "So we're going to be some kind of normal family now?" she said hesitantly, the statement coming out more like a question.

"How that goes is completely up to you, Mattie." Mac was the one to respond, and she stepped closer to the bed as she did so. "I haven't been in your life the way Harm has, and I don't exactly have much experience in this realm, so I don't really know how this will go. I'm not expecting any kind of fifties-sitcom nuclear family. I just want you to know that I care about you, and not just because Harm does. From there, I guess we'll just take it one step at a time."

The choice of words brought her sharply back to reality, and Mattie looked down at her uncooperative legs. "When is the wedding?" she asked.

Surprised by the topic change, Harm exchanged a blank look with Mac. "In a couple of months, I suppose. Enough time to organize something small but memorable."

"Three months" was the girl's response.

Harm frowned. "Why three months?"

Mattie's gaze on him was unflinching. "That's how much time the doctor thinks I'll need before I can walk short distances. Like, for instance, up the aisle of a church."

Harm's expression shuttered; although he masked it well, it was clear that he didn't want her to pin her hopes on an arbitrary date, in case it came and went without the hoped-for progress. But before he could answer, Mac reached across his body and placed her hand on top of their joined ones. "Three months," she said, unwavering. "Let's call it the first week in August. When we get settled out in California, you and I will talk about what our dresses should look like."

Mattie looked up at her, encouraged by her assurance. "California," she repeated, a smile playing at her lips. "This could be good."

"It will be," Harm declared. "We'll make sure of it. We'd better let you get some sleep, Mats. We just didn't want to go any farther before talking this over with you."

"Thank you." She kissed his cheek as he leaned in, and squeezed Mac's hand with what strength she had. Watching them leave the room, Harm's hand at the small of Mac's back as if it had always been there, Mattie closed her eyes. This time, feeling more secure in what awaited her, she knew sleep would come more easily.

Harm picked up his suitcase just as Mac stepped into the open doorframe. "Ready to go?" she asked.

Was he? He surveyed the now empty-apartment, remembering what it had looked like when he first moved in. It had been his home longer than any other place, and so many of the memories that shaped his view of the last decade were contained in its walls. The last of those memories, though, was the one that would guide them from here on, and because of that, there was very little doubt in his mind as he turned to his fiancée and smiled. "Yeah. I am."

He slipped the keys into the landlord's mailbox, and they climbed into their waiting taxi. Their flights were two hours apart, but with a few days' separation looming in front of them -- their first time 'apart while together,' as he'd so eloquently put it -- they'd wanted to spend as long as possible with each other, even if it meant sitting in a coffee shop at BWI.

Which, after negotiating through the ticket counter and the security checkpoint, was exactly where they ended up. "You're sure you don't mind?" he asked one last time as they settled into one side of a booth near the windows.

Mac's lips curved upward in a tolerant smile. "Learn to take 'yes' for an answer, Harm. I think it's sweet that your mother wants to pick me up at the airport. It's a very ... family-ish thing to do, and that's a novelty to me. Besides, it's not like I've never spoken to her before."

"Sure, but now that she knows you're stuck with me, it may be a different story ..."

Abruptly he shook his head and offered a sheepish grin. "I don't know why I keep making cracks like that. Mom and I have never had any problems respecting each other's space. Just the opposite, in fact. It'll be good for us to get close again."

"There's no shame in being a little nervous about how your mother and your fiancée will get along," she reassured him. "In fact, I think it might be a marital prerequisite."

"Actually, I'm more afraid that you'll get along too well. The two of you joining forces, plus Mattie and even Jen ... I'll be toast."

He glanced out at the airliners being readied for takeoff, his expression growing distant, and she pinpointed the source of his sudden pensiveness with little difficulty. "Mattie will be fine staying here for a few days. Jen's going to do her packing for her, and Bud and Harriet are only a phone call away."

"I know. And I know she understands that this is only temporary and that we don't have a choice. It's just -- Tom abandoned her, and here I am leaving, too."

Mac leaned in closer to him, drawing strength from the contact for as long as she could. "She's strong, Harm. All this is a nightmare for her, but she's getting through it. Mostly because of you."

He nodded his gratitude as she took a sip of her mocha. "How did you picture this ending?" he asked, changing the topic. "When you first came to D.C., did you think you'd be here for the usual three years, or what?"

"Less than that, even. The CIA brought me in to back you up on Uncle Matt's case, remember? I thought I was temp help at first. I basically took it one day at a time for the first year. After that ..." She shrugged, unsure. "I guess I still wasn't convinced that I deserved anything more than a mediocre get-by career. This has been so much more than I could have hoped for."

"The career, the man, and the comfortable shoes?" Harm couldn't help commenting. She flashed a grin at the reference.

"I *could* use some new shoes."

"Get 'em in California. Hell, Mom would probably take you to Rodeo Drive if you asked."

"I won't, but I appreciate it." Mac looked up at him and turned the question around. "What about you? What did you expect out of your time at Headquarters?"

He took a moment before answering. "Redemption, maybe," he said quietly. "Something to prove that the ramp strike wasn't the sole turning point of my life. In that way, this assignment definitely lived up to expectations and then some."

"I feel like we're in a theater intermission right now," she suggested. "For me, Act One was getting drunk and then getting sober for good. For you, flying and the ramp strike. Act Two was here. Now we're waiting for Act Three to start."

"That's a good analogy." As if on cue, a polite voice over the loudspeaker announced the pre-boarding of Mac's flight, and Harm smiled wistfully. "Sounds like they're about to dim the house lights."

They walked to her gate hand in hand, and as the passengers began to board behind them, he drew her into an embrace. "Is it insensitive of me to say that I'm excited about this?" she murmured into his shoulder.

"Of course not. That next act is waiting, and we'll never get there unless we start moving toward it."

The simplicity of the kiss was belied by the depth of feeling behind it. At last they released each other, and as she recognized the new serenity in his eyes, she fell in love all over again. "Call me when you get in," she told him.

"It'll be the middle of the night where you are."

"I'll live." She reached up to stroke his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Safe travels."

"See you soon."

As she walked up the narrow jetway and turned back to wave at him one last time, it occurred to her that of all the goodbyes she'd ever said, this one felt the most like a hello.

When she stepped off the plane a few hours later, the sun was gloriously warm on her face even through the airport windows. She followed the signs to the baggage claim and soon spotted a graceful older woman coming toward her with a broad smile.

"Mac," she greeted effusively, looking pleased beyond measure. "It's wonderful to see you."

Mac found herself returning the bright smile. "You too, Mrs. Bur—"

"Don't even think about trying to call me 'Mrs. Burnett,'" Trish warned her, eyes twinkling. "You're marrying my only son, so it'd better be Trish or Mom."

"I can work with that."

Trish pulled her into a hug. "Welcome to your new home."

Mac felt the instant acceptance, and her heart swelled. *Act Three*, she thought. *I'm ready.*

"Ten minutes until showtime, folks."

"It's a wedding, not a Broadway premiere, Frank." Trish's voice floated back toward them as she headed toward Mac's dressing room. Listening to them, Harm smiled and shook his head. He turned to Bud, who was fiddling with the medals on his dress-white tunic.

"Everybody made it in all right?"

The young officer nodded. "Sturgis and Varese got in last night, and General Cresswell and his wife came in this morning. I haven't seen the admiral yet, but Harriet assures me he's here. He managed to track down Tiner somewhere along the way, too. I think we're all glad to have a break from the summer heat in D.C."

"Yeah, that is one of the perks of southern California. The weather's remarkably consistent."

"The flying probably isn't all bad, either." Bud lifted his eyebrows, and Harm had to grin at his enthusiasm.

"No, the flying is definitely not bad." It had taken a while for a suitable post to become available, but it was a good one: he was an instructor pilot for the Reserve Center's air combat maneuvers course. It was nearly a full-time job, despite its Reserve status, and in his off-time he'd been doing some work at a local family law practice on a per-case basis. The best of all worlds, it seemed.

"We do miss you both a lot." Bud sobered for a moment. "It's not nearly as exciting in the office as it used to be."

"There are benefits to that, Bud." Harm offered his hand, and Bud shook it. "All things change."

"Too true. I just can't believe you're getting married!"

"Believe it -- if Mac asked him to, he'd run headfirst into a brick wall." That was Mattie's voice, and the men turned to see her maneuver her wheelchair into the room, resplendent in a pale blue dress and upswept curls. She turned her head from side to side, modeling the style. "Like the hair? There are enough bobby pins in it to conduct radio frequencies."

Harm crossed over to her and hugged her tightly. "You look gorgeous. You'd better save me a dance tonight."

"Don't think that'll be a problem. I just wanted to come see if you were freaking out yet."

"Thanks a lot for the vote of confidence."

"All right, all right." The teenager straightened his shoulder-boards before he stood up. "Out of curiosity, do you know why Mac started giggling when your mom gave her a pair of ballet slippers for her to wear at the reception?"

Harm did, and he chuckled. "Sure," he answered. "It was the last thing on her to-do list. Comfortable shoes."

Mattie still looked doubtful about the humor potential in a pair of shoes, but she blew him a kiss and made a shooping motion with her hands. "Time for you to get out there."

"All right. I love you, kiddo."

"Love you, too. Don't trip on your shoelaces or anything."

From there on out, he blamed her for making him paranoid about his shoelaces.

With confidence born of absolute certainty, Harm took his place at the altar, Bud standing alongside him. The church was small, with seating for maybe a hundred people, but most of the rows were full. So many people whose paths had crossed theirs -- Chloe, Sergei, Skates, Gunny Galindez, Tom Boone -- each one an integral piece of their shared mosaic. This was the final step in letting go of their 'other' lives, the ones bound by carefully-constructed walls and enforced, prideful independence. Their faith in each other, so often tested, had held fast to bring them safely here, to this last leap of faith.

When the music began, a movement in his peripheral vision drew his attention, and he saw someone slide a chair up to the other side of the altar, where Harriet and Mattie would be. Only a second passed before comprehension set in, and he focused on the aisle, not quite daring to hope.

Mattie appeared first, and the sight of her standing -- and, God, actually *walking* -- was enough to bring tears to his eyes. Frank was with her, one of his hands gripping hers and his arm locked around her waist. Slowly they moved down the aisle, each step carefully placed, and Harm could see the determination etched on her young features. She'd vowed to do this, and she would not fail.

When she reached him, she offered a small smile. "Wedding gift," she said softly.

Harm forgot about their carefully-rehearsed procedures for a moment and stepped forward to sweep her into his arms. "I am so incredibly proud of you," he murmured as he helped her into the waiting chair.

When he'd returned to the proper position, Harriet appeared next, the blue of her dress chosen perfectly for her eyes and coloring. Jimmy, sitting in the back row with Jen Coates acting as babysitter, reached toward his mother as she passed him, but Harriet swiftly shot a warning look toward his older brother, who pulled his hands away. Harm watched the fidgeting toddler with a contemplative smile. *Four percent be damned*, he thought. *One way or another, that's going to be us.*

And then suddenly she was there, and all other thoughts vanished from his mind.

As she stepped into the aisle -- the same woman he'd known for nearly ten years, whom he'd seen in every possible circumstance, and yet more stunning now than she'd ever been -- it struck him just how right this was, and how much time had been wasted in cryptic miscommunication and overanalysis. Almost before he could complete the thought, however, her dark eyes locked onto his, and a silent message was conveyed. *Don't look back; look ahead.*

And when she reached out one strong, delicate hand to grasp his and they turned as one to the altar, the road ahead looked better than it ever had before.

*** THE END ***