



The Butterfly Effect

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: teeny-tiny reference to "In Country" / "Enemy Below"

Summary: Halloween-inspired sequel to "Chaos Theory." Another skirmish in the joke war, and this time, the gloves are off.

Author's Notes: The 'butterfly effect' refers to the idea that small actions can cause big changes - a.k.a. "a butterfly flapping its wings in Tokyo can cause a hurricane in Cuba," or however that saying goes. In this case, Sturgis's supposedly harmless prank in my story "Chaos Theory" is still having an effect on things. To refresh your memory, "Chaos Theory" was an April Fools' Day story. With some encouragement from Harriet, Sturgis decided to mess with Harm, and Mac was an unintentional victim as well. Then, of course, Harm and Mac hooked up. ;-)

For the purposes of this story, assume that the JAG world took a very different turn last spring. If Bud's accident had happened, doing something like this would be really cruel to Harriet, and I dislike being mean to nice people.

October 29, 2002

1412 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, VA

"Lieutenant? Got a minute?"

Harriet looked up at her friend and was immediately curious. Sarah Mackenzie was a relatively cheerful person on average, but rarely did she get the kind of sparkle that currently resided in her brown eyes. "Um, of course, ma'am."

"Then step into my office."

Harriet followed obediently, and discovered Sturgis already seated in front of Mac's desk. They traded puzzled looks as Mac shut the door behind her and perched on the corner of her desk with a conspiratorial smirk.

"I need your help with something," she told both officers. "I want to get Harm."

Sturgis cocked an eyebrow. "Unless I've seriously misinterpreted the situation, you already have Harm."

"Cute, but that's not what I mean. Halloween's in two days, and he's convinced that there isn't a haunted house or a horror movie in the world that can scare him. Believe me, I've

tried to prove him wrong, but he keeps going on about pilots having ice water in their veins. It's driving me up a wall."

"So how do we come into it?" Harriet asked innocently. In response, Mac flashed a devious grin.

"You two are the only ones to have successfully put one over on him in recent memory. I figured I ought to enlist you as accomplices."

"I don't know, Mac," Sturgis hedged. "That incident in April almost blew up in our faces."

"But it didn't, did it?" She leaned in close. "Here's my plan so far. See what you think."

October 30, 2002
1749 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, VA

Harm wandered through the mostly-empty bullpen and saw Harriet getting ready to leave for the day. "Is A.J. excited about his first trick-or-treating adventure?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, you'd better believe it, sir. He's been trying on his costume every day for the past week. By the time he gets to wear it for real tomorrow, he's going to be the world's first peanut-butter-covered Jedi Knight."

Harm chuckled as she gathered up some files, noticing when she hesitated over one stack. "Something wrong?"

"Oh, no, sir," Harriet replied hastily. "I mean, those just have to go down to the basement storeroom, and the lights are out down there again."

"We've got a flashlight around here somewhere."

"Well ..." She looked embarrassed. "You're going to think I'm such a wimp, but when I was down there earlier, I swear I heard ... forget it, sir. It was probably just a rat. I'll take them down tomorrow morning."

"I don't think you're a wimp, Harriet, but if it'll make you feel any better, I'll take them down before I leave. I used to be pretty good at catching rats on the farm."

"Thank you, sir," she said gratefully, grabbing her coat and cover. "Have a good evening."

Harm watched her leave and picked up the files. No sooner had he taken a step toward the stairs than Mac stepped out of her office, a similar stack of files in hand. "Where're you headed?"

He tilted his head toward the stairwell. "Downstairs to file these. Harriet's afraid there might be rats down there."

Mac frowned. "Weird. I asked Tiner to take these down there earlier, and he got all freaked out."

"Maybe he's afraid of rats, too."

"Not Tiner. He was the one who took such great pleasure in setting the traps in the first-floor courtroom, remember?"

Harm shrugged. "Well, whatever it is, *I'm* not going to stress out about it. Give me your files, and I'll take them down there."

"Nah, I want to go, too. Maybe there really is something freaky down there."

He shot her a long-suffering look. "You've been getting way too into the Halloween spirit. Grab the flashlight from the kitchen, though - apparently the lights are out."

The basement storeroom could only be accessed from one inconvenient set of stairs, and it hadn't exactly been a priority on the facilities-maintenance list. When Mac opened the door and turned on the flashlight, nothing happened. "Damn. Batteries must be dead." She moved to enter anyway, but Harm held out a hand to stop her.

"I'll go first."

"My hero," she replied mockingly.

"Hey, you're wearing heels, and this stairway sucks. Once again; not macho, just practical."

She sighed and waved a hand. "Go ahead, Butch."

Harm took a tentative step into the darkness, feeling around for the railing. Although he never would have admitted it, the silence spooked him a little, and he decided to talk to Mac in order to break it. "This stupid light's always out. I tried to come down here once before I had my eyes fixed, and I almost -- "

An unearthly growl came out of the black, and something seized his arm. He shouted in alarm - not quite a scream, but close - and jerked back. Unfortunately, the sudden movement caused him to lose his balance, and he tumbled down the stairs, falling into a motionless heap at the bottom.

"Oh, shit!" Mac clambered down the stairs as soon as Sturgis and Harriet turned on the lights, worried. "That was definitely not supposed to happen ... Harm, come on, honey, wake up. God, I hope he didn't give himself another concussion."

She knelt down beside her partner and reached out to pull him into her arms -- and yelped as her hand came into contact with a pool of something warm and wet. Shaking, she reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and withdrew his pocketknife, partially opened and now stained with blood.

"Oh, Jesus -- " Her voice came out as a strangled sob, and she looked up at her friends helplessly.

"Oh, my God!" Harriet shrieked, all the color rushing away from her face. "Oh, my God, this isn't happening ..."

"Call an ambulance!" Sturgis ordered tensely, fumbling for his cell phone at the same time. Mac threw her body over Harm's, begging tearfully for forgiveness, while Harriet continued to shriek wordlessly. After dropping his phone twice, Sturgis noticed that his supposedly wounded buddy was smirking rather uncharacteristically, and he stopped in his tracks. "What the hell?" he demanded suspiciously.

Mac glanced down and smacked her boyfriend's shoulder. "Dumbass! You swore you could hold it longer than that!"

Harm lost it then, laughing hard enough to curl himself into a ball on the floor. "Man, you guys should have heard yourselves," he choked out between gasps. "That hurt like hell, but it was worth it ..."

Harriet was using the wall to hold herself up. "You were in on this together?" she accused. "You had us set him up so *you* could set *us* up?"

Mac offered a sheepish shrug, breaking into a grin. "Come on, did you really think that we'd work against each other?" She helped Harm up, and wiped the fake blood from her hands onto his already-stained shirt. "Hope that stuff's as washable as it claims to be."

"Like I said, worth it." Harm folded his arms smugly. "That's for last April, you sneaks."

Sturgis turned a murderous glare on his friend. "This means war, Rabb."

"Bring it on, buddy."

The two men tromped up the stairs, with Harriet trailing behind, still trying to regain her composure. Mac stayed behind to clean up the puddle of fake blood, still giggling to herself. *That was harsh*, she thought, *but really, really fun*.

As she got down on her hands and knees with the paper towel, the lights went out again, and she rolled her eyes. "Very funny, Harm." The only response was the door swinging shut. "Come on, flyboy, any time we spend here is time we won't get at home ..."

Another light turned on: this one a dim, naked bulb in the back corner of the room. Deciding to play along, she went over to investigate. The light was dangling above a file cabinet, and the cabinet had one drawer conveniently left ajar. She reached inside and withdrew a small envelope. On the outside was written, in familiar script:

I never was a Valentine's Day kind of guy. Does Halloween count as a Hallmark holiday?

She shook the contents of the envelope into her hand - and stared, utterly shocked, at the diamond ring that lay against her palm.

"Harm!!"

*** THE END ***