



Halves *on a* Baby

— by ARIDAN —

CHAPTER THREE
CLEARED FOR TAKEOFF

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"Clear skies are never guaranteed. But with the right co-pilot, you launch anyway."

The threshold to Harm's loft had never awaited a guest quite like this.

It had seen duty, desire, hesitation, heartbreak, and homecomings, but never the kind of soul-stirring anticipation that now clung to its frame. Not in all its years of quietly guarding the boundary between his private sanctuary and the world outside.

Yet tonight, it held its breath- for her.

Ever since the invitation was spoken, soft, deliberate, asking her to come over for dinner and finalize the "implementation timeline" of their baby pact, the air around his place had shifted, drawn tighter with expectancy, then settled in, as if pulling out a seat to watch the night unfold.

The hallway stood in quiet contrast to her pulse as Mac approached Harm's door, bathed in the warm glow of tired industrial lighting that hummed overhead. Somewhere outside, a car alarm pierced the silence, sharp, distant, rhythmic. A countdown. And still, his words echoed.

This part of the deal happens outside the margins.

She could still hear his voice in her head, low, even, teasing, but charged.

Mac paused just short of knocking, her fingers curling into her palm. The heat of their earlier negotiations still clung to her, like a courtroom argument not yet cooled. The ink had barely dried on the contract, two signatures, bold and opposing yet joined by something far more elevated than legal consensus: hope.

She shifted her weight, and the soft click of her heel against the concrete floor echoed just a little too loud in the quiet hallway. From inside, she thought she heard the faint clink of cutlery, or maybe it was the hum of music, jazz, slow and unobtrusive, drifting like it was extending its own personal invitation to her through the

walls.

She couldn't believe they were really doing this. That he had agreed.

She had drafted the proposal with the ruthless precision of a Marine and the elegance of a woman with everything on the line, each clause a layer of armor against uncertainty. There was no room for ambiguity, no loophole through which rejection could slip. This was no ordinary deal. It was intimate. Risky. And far too sacred to be handled without care.

Her hand, still raised, hovered near the doorframe. She let her fingertips brush the cool surface, solid, unmoving. The metal edge of the apartment number caught the light, silver glint flickering like a challenge.

If Harm had declined, it wouldn't have been for lack of foresight. It would only be because he didn't want to have a child with her. Or couldn't move fast enough given the amended timeline ushered in by her diagnosis.

She leveraged every skill she had: her legal brilliance, her emotional restraint, her calculated charm. She had built the case like she would any other, with facts, with precedent, with strategy honed from war rooms and courtrooms.

But what she hadn't known then, what she was only beginning to understand now, was that Harm hadn't needed much persuading at all. He hadn't hesitated. He'd picked up the pen and strengthened her proposal, sharpening the language, closing every loophole. His amendments hadn't weakened the offer, they'd reinforced it. As if, instead of resisting, he had chosen to fortify the very thing she'd dared to dream.

She had handed him a vision, of parenthood, of partnership, of shared laughter and sleepless nights and the soft rhythm of a child's breath in the next room. She had offered him a blueprint of their future with a child drawn between them like a bridge. By giving him that contract, she'd done more than propose logistics, she'd handed him a brush and quietly invited him to paint himself into the rest of her life not as an accessory but as a cornerstone.

Behind Mac, the screech of the elevator cables signaled its descent. Summoned from Harm's floor to the lobby below with a groaning haul. Life moved on around her.

But here, at this door, time stood still.

Because he had always been there. Somewhere. But the form kept changing. A partner, a rival, a friend, a maybe. Her constant. Her complication. The ache and the anchor. The one man in her life who had occupied every possible role and none of them fully. She had never known anyone so essential and so elusive.

He had stirred in her the full spectrum of what a woman could feel for a man. There was no emotion spared. No corner of her untouched.

Now, standing at his door, they rose inside her one by one, memories flickering through her like a silent movie reel.

Defensiveness, sharp-edged and immediate, the day they met, her uncle's whereabouts buried deep in the Arizona desert, locked behind her tight lips as she guarded his reputation and freedom.

Unease, the moment she caught the ghost of Diane in his eyes, an image she hadn't summoned, but one she couldn't escape.

Competitive rage, hot and blinding, the first time they faced each other in court, when he sandbagged her with that smug calm, a clipped cigar in his mouth, and a smile that burned beneath her skin. He hadn't played fair, and his colossal arrogance made her want to win more than breathe.

Fierce loyalty, deep and relentless, so deep that it pulled her to the ends of the earth in search of his father.

Admiration, quiet as a snowfall, for the way he commanded a courtroom. He was brilliant, unshakable, and built for the game of persuasion.

Devotion born from long nights, whispered orders, impossible missions, mutual protection, and the kind of trust only earned between partners in uniform.

She remembered holding his girlfriends' gazes with a ***steady calm***, even as they looked at her with wary suspicion.

The ***grief*** of him choosing to go back to a fighter squadron over staying grounded with her in the courtroom. The sound of his decision was quiet, but the

loss had echoed loud throughout the halls of JAG.

Sydney still ***stung***, the ***rejection*** sharp as ever. She'd made her move like a calculated bet, heart on the table, all chips forward. And he'd folded, discarding what could've been without even looking at the hand.

She remembered the ***resentment*** of watching him burn with jealousy over her relationships, only to retreat into ones of his own that never quite fit.

The ***fresh wound*** of that night on the Admiral's porch during her engagement party, when his eyes held her too long, too deep. When she felt the smothering desire of a man with feelings he couldn't name, let alone act on. When she wanted to scream at him, to just say something, anything, before it was too late. Instead, he kissed her as if she was his only lifeline, then let her go... straight into the tide of her fiancé's waiting arms without a word.

The bitter ***sadness*** when Harm informed her that he would miss her rehearsal dinner.

The ***gut-wrenching fear*** when his jet went down at sea as he rushed home for her wedding.

The weariness of trying. Truly trying, with Mic. Only to drown in the hollow weight of being in a relationship with a man who wasn't him.

The ***grief***, all over again, when he turned her away the night Renee's father died. Promising to talk. Later.

The ***irritation*** of him showing up in Guadalcanal, uninvited and unrelenting, asking questions she'd already buried.

The ***humiliation*** of confessing her love for him to Sturgis and making him promise never to speak of it again.

The ***betrayal*** of hearing Harm say any man who'd been with her was either dead, or wished he was. As if her heart carried a curse no one survived.

And the ***quiet heartbreak*** of learning, through someone else, that he had ended things with Renee, and hadn't told her.

She inhaled slowly, tasting rosemary and something buttery in the air. He was cooking. Preparing. Not just heating something up. The scent grounded her, pulled her back to the surface just long enough for her mind to dive again, spooling through memory after memory, each one sharper than the last.

She remembered the *fire* in her chest during the JAG-a-thon, not just from the sprint, but from the challenge. The way he had casually dismissed her athletic ability, as if he hadn't learned by now that underestimating her was a mistake. Trying to out race him had been more than pride, it had been principle. A reminder that she could match him stride for stride, in the courtroom, in the field, and yes, on the track.

And yet, when the finish line blurred behind them and the adrenaline faded, what lingered was not rivalry, but the ache of something unresolved. They'd stood there, breathless and exposed, and finally admitted they didn't know why they couldn't make it work. There was no argument, no grand declaration, just a quiet, tired truth.

And in that silence, a fragile resolve, to try again.

To begin where they always seemed to circle back to-each other.

They buried the longing, the loss, the almost, as their private moment gave way to reality.

Sturgis had won the JAG-a-thon, and with it, the honor of serving as Acting JAG. His first order of business was not measured in titles or ego, but in footsteps, his request that they help Bud cross the finish line when he faltered and nearly gave up.

So they did. Harm and Mac jogged beside him, their own rivalry set aside, their silence filled with purpose. And as they crossed the finish line a second time, this time not as competitors, but as cohorts. They remembered what mattered most.

They were a family.

Not always aligned, not always understood, but fiercely loyal in the ways that counted. People would come and go. Relationships would fray and sometimes fail. But this, what they had built in shared missions, inside jokes, and late-night courtroom prep, this was theirs.

Mac knew Harm cared for her in ways she could never fully name. She also knew they couldn't keep circling the same unanswered questions forever. They needed to frame their history, not as a burden, but as a foundation. To recommit not just to each other, but to the broader fabric of the team they loved.

And so, with that quiet armistice came the rebuilding.
The peace.
The steady return to partnership.
To friendship.
To something solid.

And now, this.

A new chapter, not only scribbled in the margins, but headlined.

She knew she wasn't just showing up for dinner. She was showing up for a new phase of life they were about to build together.

What carried her to his door tonight wasn't punctuality, or even the weight of their agreement, it was the possibility. The fragile, miraculous idea of life. Of creating something between them that could outlive them both.

Her diagnosis had sharpened the timeline, but not dulled the dream. She was a Marine. A lawyer. A woman who'd fought through courts and combat zones across the many terrains of the world. She knew how to execute a mission. And this?

This was the most sacred one yet.

They just needed a plan. A path. A timeline. And each other.

Because they were going halves on a baby.

Somewhere in the apartment, a timer beeped, short, muted.

Dinner was done. Or just warming.
Either way, it called her in.

She felt ready.

Or at least, ready enough to look stillness in the face and let everything unfold.

The kind of ready that trembles beneath the skin but doesn't break.

His signature, bold, deliberate, had told her he was too.

She looked down.

A sliver of light slipped out from beneath the door,
warm, steady, waiting.

She lifted her hand.

The same one she'd once raised in uniform.

To swear to serve.

To protect.

To follow orders.

And maybe,

just maybe,

to create something undeniable with him.

A life. A beginning.

This part of the deal happens outside the margins, he'd said.

But standing here now, she saw it clearly,
that had always been the divide.

Their relationship, confined by rules, regulations,
professionalism,
all bound tightly within the margins of military
protocol.

She was the margin.

And tonight, and in the many nights to come,
she would have to step outside herself
to realize what they'd dared to draft into existence.

Something unseen nudged her forward.

The loft watched as Harm moved through its space like a
full kitchen staff preparing for a dignitary, but this was
no guest.

He drifted from station to station with quiet focus, his
movements efficient but controlled, as if walking the
edge of memory itself. Each step brought something to
the surface. Each surface murmured Mac's name.

She was etched into the room, not as a visitor, but as
something the walls had learned to expect.

Over the years, the loft had grown so accustomed to her presence, it began adjusting itself in anticipation.

It set the clocks five to ten minutes fast, trying to match her early arrivals.

It nudged the thermostat up a few degrees because once, while staying overnight, she'd pulled an extra blanket around her shoulders and muttered something about it being cold.

It shuffled to the front of the closet the few casual shirts she'd offhandedly said made him look "almost tolerable."

And somewhere, in a drawer Harm rarely opened, the loft quietly protected the stash of dark chocolate she'd hidden there. Her fallback, in case he ever forgot how to sweeten the night with dessert.

She was everywhere.

And tonight, for once, he wasn't chasing that fact.

He was preparing for it.

The jazz floating from the speakers was smooth, Gladys Knight, smoky and low, the same track that had played years ago in that tiny club in Georgetown when he, Mac, Mic, and Renee had tried too hard to enjoy each other's company. Four chairs, one small table, two couples faking comfort while time did slow circles around them. The Roach's band had been late, an hour, maybe more, then never showed. The music stalled, and so had the smiles. But not the current. Not the invisible line stretching between him and Mac as their partners tried to pretend they weren't sitting in someone else's shadow.

He had watched Mac lean into Mic, watched the way her voice softened when she spoke about wedding details like she was already halfway down the aisle. He had nodded through his drink, jaw tight, every laugh from her mouth directed toward someone else, and still, every part of him burned to be the one beside her. That night she belonged to someone else. And yet, everything about her had felt familiar. Close. Like she was his.

The jealousy had wrapped itself around his chest like a harness pulled too tight.

Now, the song curled through the room like a knowing spectator, while he prepared dinner in a space that knew her better than anyone.

The oven light cast a soft amber glow on the chicken, golden and steaming beneath a sprig of rosemary. The scent, buttery, herbaceous, faintly citrus, rose like memory and settled over him.

He stirred the sauce, then wiped his hands on a towel. It was old, worn. Familiar. Like the one she used to steal from his shoulder during clean-up, launching impromptu towel fights that had nothing to do with drying dishes and everything to do with their inability to not compete.

The kitchen remembered those nights.

So did he.

The kitchen had its stories, ones never told out loud but tucked close to the tiles and into the corners. One of them peeked out now, barely visible behind the canister of stir sticks. A folded piece of paper. Mac's handwriting, fading. Worn and yellowed from time. A joke-turned-keepsake. "Marine-Grade Coffee Instructions for Squids." *Step one: burn your Navy tastebuds to the ground. Step two: whatever the instructions list below-double it!*

He had hidden it once. Renee had found it and asked who it was from even though he suspected she already knew the answer. He just didn't want to fight with her about it so he'd lied. Told her it was an inside joke from Gunny. Renee held his gaze for a beat too long suspicious of his response but he had planned on holding his ground if she tried to get rid of it. He couldn't bring himself to throw it out. Not even then.

After they broke up, he pulled it back out, smoothed the edges, and set it where it belonged.

Now a small defiant piece of her in plain sight. Never to be explained or hidden away again if he could help it. He placed the worn paper on the countertop in front of the coffee maker anticipating the instructions would come in handy at some point during the evening.

The miniature yellow biplane on the shelf caught the light and made him pause. It reminded him of the version of himself who left JAG to reclaim the sky.

He hadn't told her the truth then, that flying again felt like the only way to remember who he was, even if it meant walking away from her.

He'd realized that while piercing through the clouds, she had become so entrenched in his life that he couldn't remember who he was without her on the other side of the courtroom, seated next door to his office in the bullpen, or lunch breaks blending into late night calls to try out strategies on one another.

The silverware shimmered as he placed it on the table, fork beside knife, clean and precise. And suddenly he was on a ferry in Sydney, the harbor glinting like glass beneath them. She had asked, so boldly, so convincingly, if they could give it a real try. If they could take all those nearlys and almosts and make something tangible out of them.

He'd told her no. Not directly. But enough. He said he couldn't let go. Not yet.

So she did.
For both of them.

She walked away wearing someone else's ring.

On the plane ride back, his stomach churned the entire flight. He never looked at her. Not once. Not when the drink cart came by. Not when she fell asleep. Nor when the cabin took on a stream of turbulence. He was afraid that if he did, she'd see it, how gutted he was.

At the departure gate, the Admiral said, *don't look back*.

But he did.

And what he saw was the future he secretly wanted but could never admit, tangled in the arms of someone else.

He swallowed. Adjusted the fork.

The pictures above the shelf only spilled more memories.

There was the one from little A.J.'s christening. Harm and Mac side by side, smiling in a way that felt less posed and more prophetic. Like the picture already knew the future, as if it wanted to whisper, *this is what it could look like*.

Next to it sat a group shot from the JAG-a-thon. Sturgis in the center, proudly flashing his medal. And there they were, Harm and Mac, side by side. Again. Even though he swore they'd entered the photo from opposite ends of the crowd.

They always ended up next to each other.
Even when they weren't trying.

Especially then.

He remembered telling her after the race that they could start fresh. From the beginning. What he hadn't said, what he couldn't say, was that he didn't want a clean slate.

He just wanted *her*.

Then. There. In that moment.

He'd drawn her close during the photo, arm around her back, and let the lens capture something he'd never confessed.

He hadn't gotten his wish.

But going halves on a baby? That was a close second.

And maybe, just maybe, it would be enough.

The scent of dinner thickened, homey, indulgent. A new favorite of hers. He still remembered the way she moaned through each bite as they crashed the new Italian five-star restaurant, La Vita Capri, on her most recent birthday.

She had devoured that dish like it was better than sex.

And watching her? It might've been.

Candlelight had glossed her lips, her lashes, her skin. She didn't have a clue what she did to him that night. How many times he'd had to shift in his seat, adjust the napkin in his lap, stare at the ceiling, or gulp down his drink. She never noticed. Or maybe she did—and pretended she didn't.

He'd promised himself, right then and there, that he'd learn to make that dish. Not just because she liked it. But because he wanted to be the one who gave her that experience next time. Not a waiter. Not a chef. *Him*.

And tonight was that night. They were embarking on a new journey. One that he wanted to be the only person to ever give to her.

Here in his space, every object knew her. Every corner bore the echo of her laugh, her opinions, her scent. Only the bed remained untouched. Yet in his dreams, this devastatingly brilliant woman had surrendered to its comfort, again and again, meeting his hunger with her own, dissolving together into the language of want.

And then, came the footsteps.
Just beyond the door.

Soft. Measured. Familiar. Welcomed.

He could feel her there.
Not knocking. Not moving.
But present.

Still measuring whether the threshold was worth the step.

So he did the only thing he could do.

He stepped back from the door.
Back into the warmth of the kitchen.
Back into the light.
And waited, amid rosemary and jazz, two plates and candlelight, and a chance he didn't plan to miss this time around.

Knock. Pause. Knock knock.
A heartbeat rendered in wood.

The threshold wasn't the only thing waiting for her.
The whole loft had been holding its breath, waiting for its cue.

The lights dimmed slightly, as if conspiring with the city grid to set the mood. In the kitchen, the oven gave a low hum, its temperature rising a fraction, as if reacting to the shift in atmosphere. Jazz trailed softly, notes dialed into something sweeter, softer, more intimate. The couch shifted in its cushions.

On the dining table, two glasses of sparkling water shimmered with tiny bubbles, each one lifting toward the surface like they, too, were rising to greet her.

The candles flared gently. Shadows shifted.

The plates, arranged with deliberate, purposeful hands, gleamed beneath their own candlelit spotlight. Pasta curled in a nest of steam. Roasted vegetables sweated under rosemary and olive oil. The aroma was rich. Inviting. Every flavor stood vibrant as it fought for space with the real tension simmering beneath the surface.

Even the bed in the background stirred in its sheets.

And then he opened the door.

“Hey,” Harm said, voice low, steady, like an opening line in a story already written.

She was beautiful in ways no clause, no redline, no contract had ever dared to imagine.

“Smells amazing in here,” she said, then hesitated, like the words had arrived ahead of her composure.

“Figured if dinner and discussion led to another round of negotiations with you, I should lead with my best weapon,” he said, stepping aside.

She smiled, the kind that softened everything, even her armor. Her heels clicked against the hardwood as she entered, an elegant percussion. Familiar, yet disarming.

“Good,” she said, teasing. “Because I brought my appetite.”

He hesitated. Just for a second.

“I counted on that,” he replied, his tone lower now, eyes darkening with the memory of how she sounded when satiated. The innuendo was his alone.

His gaze swept over her, slow, appreciative, reverential.

Wide-leg charcoal pants that moved like liquid, her stride sure and unhurried. A red swoop-neck camisole, delicate straps resting against warm skin, fabric clinging to her curves in all the places that made boundaries irrelevant. Her earrings glinted. Her cheeks held a flush. Her hair flirted with the frame of her face.

Her perfume was faint, just a whisper of spice and something floral he couldn’t name but had always associated with her.

She wasn't dressed like a colleague.
Or even a friend.
She looked like a woman coming for dinner.

And Harm wasn't the only one staring.

The loft saw her, and it approved.

He closed the door behind her with the kind of finality that felt like a beginning.

"You look—" Harm began, but stopped himself before he gave away too much. His eyes held what his mouth would not.

So did hers.

She watched him cross the room toward the dining table, her gaze trailing him without shame. The way the shirt clung to his back. The roll of his sleeves, forearms flexed and exposed. The ease of his movements, the kind of lean frame a woman didn't forget in uniform or out. It was as if their signatures had given her gaze license to linger.

Delicious, she thought. The man and the meal, waiting in the center of the table, framed in soft glow.

They approached the table like a duet unfolding.

He pulled her chair back.

She moved to her seat, then watched as he took his own, across from her, the hush between them thick with things unspoken. They moved with the same precision they'd used in courtrooms and command briefings, the silent choreography of two people used to standing on opposite sides, yet always circling back to the same center.

But no amount of structure could dilute what was happening.

This wasn't just dinner. It was wheels-up, on everything they'd once grounded.

This was their next mission.

And Harm had already silently named it.

Operation: Cleared for Takeoff.

The loft, with all its corners and textures, had always been a witness to solitude. But tonight, it leaned in. Curious. Awake.

The flicker of candlelight pooled in her eyes, casting gold along her cheekbones, tracing the shape of a woman he had known in every version- except this one.

This version?

He couldn't wait to get acquainted.

Mac placed the napkin in her lap, one brow lifting as she waited for him to catch up, courtroom-trained patience in full display.

He did, mirroring her with a faint, knowing smirk. In quiet synchrony, they lifted their forks, each gathering a helping of the Tuscan flavors spread before them, rosemary, garlic, lemon... and something warmer rising between them.

Like dinner, cloaked in hunger and heat.

Her top caught the light when she leaned in for her first bite.

One forkful in, she stilled again. Chewed. Swallowed.

And then, she moaned.

It was quiet. Unintentional.

But it hit him like a gut-punch.

Her lashes fluttered closed. Her shoulders tipped back slightly. One hand lifted to her mouth in mock reverence. "Oh my God."

He didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Just watched.

Exactly what he'd hoped for. A dish that drew pleasure from her so honest it almost felt indecent.

"That good?" he asked, the smile tugging at his mouth edged with something darker.

She opened her eyes, heat flickering behind them. "You made this?"

He reached for his glass, but not before his gaze dropped again.

To her lips.

Her throat.

The way candlelight sculpted her into something soft, golden, and entirely unforgettable.

“I did,” he said. “Courtesy of La Vita Capri.”

“The Tuscan Tsunami entrée?”

He nodded once. “That’s the one.”

“It’s my favorite.”

“I know.”

Her eyes narrowed, amused. “How’d you get the recipe?”

“A little reverse engineering. A lot of trial runs.” He lifted his glass to his mouth, watching her over the rim.

“Well.” She leaned forward, fork poised, voice velvety with warmth. “I’d say you nailed it.”

His smile curved slowly. “That was the plan.”

Another innuendo.

Still his alone.

But barely.

Her gaze dipped as she gathered the next bite, smothered in the rich sauce that clung to every curve of the dish.

The spices hit her tongue, bold, balanced, overwhelming.

A low, involuntary sound escaped her again, somewhere between satisfaction and surrender.

Harm didn’t stand a chance.

He looked.

Twice.

And didn’t bother looking away the third time.

What once felt forbidden, he now let himself savor, like he’d signed a waiver just to admire her freely.

Mac lifted her glass, met his gaze across the flicker of candlelight.

One brow arched.
“What?”

Without thinking, he brushed a crumb from the corner of her mouth. A casual touch, justified, but the graze of his finger lingered a half-second longer than it should have. Her breath caught. She swallowed it down with water.

And just as quickly, the air shifted and they began to dance.

A verbal tango they had perfected long ago. A seduction veiled in debate, flirtation camouflaged as familiarity. One would lead, the other would spin, then switch. He’d tease; she’d deflect. She’d open the door slightly; he’d retreat before walking through it. Around and around they went, anchored by a strong current.

Harm let himself watch her more freely tonight. The dip of her neckline, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear with one finger, how her smile softened when she wasn’t thinking. All things he’d catalogued over the years and buried beneath professionalism. But tonight? Tonight, he let them surface.

And Mac noticed.

She noticed how his gaze lingered when she laughed. How he brushed her hand unnecessarily when passing the bread. How his voice dipped lower, grew slower, more deliberate.

She felt it in the way her skin tingled beneath his attention. In how her laughter came a little too easily. In the quiet, deliberate charm he wore, the kind a man offers when he’s hoping a first date turns into a second.

They talked, as they always did, about Bud’s latest motion in the Ferguson case, strategizing on how to present a case in front of the judge with a record for dismissing charges too early, Chloe’s new boyfriend, the one who wears a fedora and plays bass in a high school jazz trio.

Mac wrinkled her nose at that last bit. “He makes her mixtapes. Actual, burned CDs. With titles like ‘Eighteen Ways to Love You.’”

“Mac, she’s seventeen,” Harm reasoned.

“That’s the problem. I know what I was doing at seventeen. And I just worry sometimes.”

“I know things were rocky with Chloe early on, but she’s got a good head on her shoulders now. You just have to trust her to make her own choices. Stay close, lend an ear, but let her stumble a little. You did, and look how you turned out.”

My teenage years? Cautionary tale at best. Honestly, it feels like a lifetime ago, like it happened to someone else.”

“That’s because it did. You pulled yourself up, step by step, and became the best version of you. I don’t think you need to worry too much. Chloe’s smart. Besides, everyone deserves one lovesick, mixtape-making phase, it gives adulthood better perspective.”

“He calls her ‘baby’ in texts.”

The real reason for the evening had finally slipped out.

Harm raised an eyebrow. “Should we deploy a SEAL team?”

“I already have Gunny on speed dial,” Mac joked.

They both laughed, and somewhere between the sound and the stillness, something tender caught flame.

Nestled among the greens in a small crystal vase, was a single pale blossom. Babies’ breath. Subtle. Almost invisible. *Another nod to the evening.*

“Nice centerpiece,” she said, running her fingers along the tiny sprigs.

“Felt appropriate.”

Mac nodded, holding his gaze.

Eventually, words gave way to silence. Not heavy, just understood.

Dinner wound down in a slow-motion closing act, a quiet choreography of old partners. Dishes were lifted, footsteps echoing in practiced rhythm toward the kitchen. They moved together, cleaning plates, brushing shoulders, exchanging glances.

Harm rinsed. She reached for a towel. He handed her one without asking.

Everything between them moved like second nature.

“Anything else I can do?” she asked, shoulder grazing his as she passed behind him to return the towel to the sink.

“Coffee?” he offered.

She nodded. “On it.”

Her arm brushed his as she reached for two mugs. At the coffee maker, she caught sight of a worn note still stuck to the counter. Her laugh was soft, familiar. It was her handwriting, scrawled from a moment long ago when she’d teased him. She glanced over her shoulder.

“Are you telling me the topic for tonight requires Marine-grade coffee?”

Harm’s eyes glittered. “It just might, Mac. I figured I’d let you decide how much caffeine we’d need.”

She nodded as the machine purred to life, leaning back against the counter while silence settled between them. But even silence had language here.

She could read him in the way he wiped the counters. He could hear her in the soft click of her fingernails against ceramic.

The scent of dark roast drifted through the loft, and the space seemed to exhale. The air grew silkier.

When the mugs were full and the dishes stacked, Harm gestured toward the living room. “Shall we?”

Their fingers brushed as she handed him his mug. “This cup is sailor-approved.”

They were no longer dancing.
They were circling.

Her heels tapped a slow, deliberate rhythm toward the couch. The wide-armed, well-worn cushions made room for her. Mac slipped off her shoes and curled into place with quiet grace. One hand cupping her mug, the other tucked in her lap.

Harm took the armchair opposite her, leaving space, not out of distance, but to give form to the gravity hanging between them.

Now came the part they couldn't pour into a glass or plate on the table.

For a moment, silence held court. The mugs warmed their hands, but neither spoke. Just looks passed between them, silent understandings, unspoken cues. She cocked her head slightly. His brow lifted in that knowing way.

Mac's eyes sparkled over the rim of her mug. Harm responded with a slow grin.

"You're thinking something," she said.

She looked at him. Sparked. Mischief in the glint.

He met her stare, dry amusement twitching at the corner of his mouth.

This silence, they'd never had one like it.

They could read each other across courtrooms. Across continents. In crowded rooms. And now, the loft watched them do it across upholstery and steam.

"How about we do something to break the ice," he offered, finally.

She arched a brow. "What do you have in mind?"

He sipped his coffee. "Let's take a page from your playbook. Peel back the layers—nice and easy."

Her smile turned amused. "That's part of my playbook, sailor?"

"Mac," he said, leaning back, "you practically invented strategic unraveling. It's methodical. Subtle. And when someone's under cross-terrifying."

He looked at her then. Really looked.
"And it works."

She tilted her head, thoughtful. "Okay."

They sat. A beat passed. Another.

"I have a question," he said.

"I'm listening."

“How do you like your breakfast?”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You told me once, guys you spend the night with always cook you breakfast. I don’t want to break tradition when we make good on our deal. So... What’s on the menu?”

The jazz hiccupped.

Her mouth parted slightly. “You remember that?”

“I remember everything,” he said softly.

Mac realized he was serious.

She realized he meant it.

And for a moment, she forgot how to answer.

His gaze didn’t move.

So she swallowed, steadied herself with a sip of coffee.

“Pancakes. Bacon. Scrambled eggs. Fruit. Coffee,” she said quietly, cheeks turned pink.

He nearly grinned himself to pieces. He liked that shade of red on her.

Mac recovered quickly.

“Your place or mine?” she asked, her tone suddenly daring.

Without hesitation, “Yours,” he said with a glint in his eye. “I know how much you like home court advantage.”

She tilted her head. “This isn’t court.”

“Doesn’t matter. The results will be the same.”
Smug.

She practically threw a pillow across the room at him.

He slightly moved to sidestep the phantom pillow while balancing his cup of coffee as they both laughed at their antics.

The tension had settled.

She was right, it wasn’t court.

But like all their best legal work, they were in the middle of discovery, gathering evidence, building toward the inevitable.

“Let’s go with your place,” she said, sneaking a glance toward the bedroom behind him.

He nodded. “Works for me.”

She studied him. He returned it.
The air between them smoldered.

Then he asked, “What’s off limits? Your no-fly zone?”

She didn’t hesitate. “You’re Navy. I trust you to navigate. I’m a Marine- I’ll hold my ground. And signal if you drift.”

“If you toss me overboard,” he said, grinning, “at least throw me a life jacket.”

“No can do,” she said, taking a sip. “That would leave you overdressed for this mission.”

He nearly choked.

She grinned, victorious.

“When I signed the contract,” he said, voice low, “I cleared you for takeoff. All systems go.”

Then, voice even lower:
“Mac, at least tell me what you like.”

She leaned in. “The real question,” she said, “is what don’t I like?”

He choked on a laugh. She smirked.

They were finally in it.
The game.
The slide.
The slow descent into something deeper.

Harm watched her. Really watched her. And memory stirred in his gut. All the others flashed through his mind. Annie. Jordan. Renee. All the women who sat on this couch, hoping for him to choose them. To stay. To become something more. None of them ever stood a chance.

Because it was always her.

She was the one who'd been standing between him and everyone else. And now, finally, she was here, sitting where she belonged, not as a colleague. Not as a friend. But as the woman he wanted to build a future with. In whatever form that took.

A desire he'd once buried under rank and rules. Now alive.

He blinked. Refocused.

“So... when do we start?”

Mac set her mug down.

“Well,” she said, lawyer mode sliding in, “according to the clause you added- H. Rabb is to complete a fertility screening prior to natural attempts.”

“I already scheduled it. End of the week.”

“Good. That times perfectly. I'm ovulating Friday. We have six days to make it count.”

Her tone was all business.
Her eyes were not.

“Friday,” Harm repeated. “My place.”

Then it hit her.

“Wait—you scheduled your appointment before we even signed?”

He nodded, sheepish. “I already knew my answer.”

She grinned. “Still negotiated anyway?”

“What kind of lawyer would I be if I didn't?”

“We made a good deal,” she agreed.

“That we did.”

They sat with it. This future they'd both just spoken into being.

Mac's gaze dropped. “So we're really doing this.”

Harm's voice lowered. "Yeah. We are."

He set his mug aside and crossed to the couch. Sat beside her.

"I have a confession," he said, taking her hands in his.

Her eyes lifted.

"But don't kickbox me into next month," he joked.

"No promises, sailor. But since we're trying to make a baby, I need you present and healthy by Friday. So... unlikely."

He smiled.

"I've always wondered what you taste like... after a cup of coffee," he said, just before the nerves could stop him.

Before she could overthink it, he leaned in and kissed her, slow and sure, like it had always been coming.

The kiss deepened. Intensified.

Her breath hitched.

And just before she let it carry her away, she murmured against his lips-

"Clause 6."

He groaned into her mouth. Pulled back.

"Damn lawyer."

She smiled against his lips. "What's the verdict?"

His thumb brushed her cheek. "Delicious. May I request a refill?"

She nodded her head, and he kissed her again, deeper, slower, before she finally pulled away.

Lips swollen.
Breath unsteady.

"I should go," she whispered.

He walked her to the door, every inch of his body protesting the distance.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said softly.

“Next time,” he replied, “it’ll be breakfast.”

And in the corner of the loft, the bed still untouched, stirred beneath its covers.

It had waited patiently through years of cold sheets, of meaningless entanglements and relationships, quietly eavesdropping as Harm whispered Mac’s name into pillows while he slept.

Tonight, it waited still.
But not for much longer.

THE SOUND OF CHAPTER THREE



Click Here to Play the Story Music Playlist:



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First Day of My Life — Bright Eyes

Mac is coming to Harm's apartment because they have agreed to talk about what happens outside the margins. On paper, they already know what they are doing. There are terms, expectations, boundaries, a plan. But none of that can fully prepare them for what it means to sit across from one another in his home and realize that this decision is going to alter the shape of both their lives.

They are not young or inexperienced. They have careers, shared history, heartbreak, complicated choices behind them. And yet there is something about this moment that almost feels like a beginning in the most literal sense.

A first day.

It carries vulnerability. Uncertainty. And ultimately, transformation.

Two people who have already lived so much suddenly realizing they may be standing at the first day of something new.

Talk — Khalid feat. Disclosure

Two people who have known each other for years, suddenly have to learn how to talk to each other differently.

There is a purpose to the evening.

They have to talk about what happens next.

Some conversations happen in words, and others happen in the pauses between them. In the way someone holds your gaze. In how long the laughter lasts before the room goes quiet again. In the awareness that the person sitting across from you is no longer simply someone you know incredibly well.

They are someone you are about to know differently.

The conversation is open, but the emotional truth is still arriving in pieces.

And some of the most important things being said that night are never actually spoken.

Teach Me How to Love — Shawn Mendes

Harm asks Mac what she likes. That question changes the temperature of everything.

Suddenly this is no longer about what the agreement permits or requires. It is about her.

What makes her comfortable. What she wants. What pleases her.

It is him saying, in essence, show me how to meet you here. The plan stops being theoretical and becomes intimate, personal, and specifically theirs.



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RETURN TO CHAPTERS

CREATOR NOTES AND DISCLOSURES

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