



ALTITUDE
CHANGES
EVERYTHING



UNITED STATES
NAVAL ACADEMY

KNOWLEDGE • HONOR • SERVICE

DUTY
COUNTS
STILL

TAKEOFF
IS A
CHOICE

IX

III

SOME
TRUTHS
FIND YOU

SURVIVAL
IS A
SECOND CHANCE

VI

ZERO HOUR

A JAG STORY *by AriDan*

CHAPTER ONE

CHART A -
A BRAVE
TOMORROW

“Zero Hour is when calculation ends and instinct begins.”
— Naval Flight Manual, Cold War Edition

Part I — The Question in the Room

“A mutiny is not always born in the open. Sometimes it begins in the quiet places, in the space between a question asked and an answer withheld.”

— Fragment, Naval Court-Martial Records, 1794

The lecture hall at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, sat like a tiered amphitheater carved from oak and brass. Flags lined the rear wall, their colors muted by age and time. Above the dais, the Academy’s seal glinted under recessed lights, a constant reminder that history and duty never left the room. Hidden vents sighed softly with conditioned air, a contrast to the rustle of uniforms and the scratch of pens. Rows of fixed desks arced toward a low stage where a polished lectern waited, its surface clean except for a glass of water and a stack of primary sources tabbed in neat order, lecture notes spread like a hand of cards awaiting play.

The room smelled faintly of polish, chalk dust, and wool uniforms warmed by bodies. Every surface seemed to hum with memory and the echoes of officers who had once studied here before standing watch on decks and a multitude of lands across the globe. Rich military history pressed in from the paneled walls of Tolliver Hall, training its focus not just on the cadets seated in expectation, but on the woman about to take the stage. Here, every breath was measured against the weight of tradition, and every word was expected to shape the next generation of leaders for the United States Navy and Marine Corps.

Colonel Sarah Mackenzie stood at the center of the stage in service dress blues that fit like a glove and signified the importance of her presence on campus. The high collar framed her jaw. Her cover rested on the lectern, brim shining. The light from the high windows struck the silver on her chest and laid a pale line across the dark cloth of her sleeve. She had a pen in one hand and a small remote in the other. Behind her, the screen showed a black and white engraving of a brig with rigid lines and a hungry sea.

“Good afternoon,” she said. The room answered in chorus.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“Today we discuss the Somers Affair. A mutiny that was not a mutiny. An execution that was either necessity or murder, depending on where you set your anchor.”

Thirty midshipmen leaned forward as one, their attention sharpened in different ways. Some watched with a kind of youthful awe, drawn by the striking beauty of the presenter, stealing glances as though memorizing details they would never admit to noticing. Others were pulled forward by the subject matter itself. The promise of mutiny, trial, and command under fire, far more electric than the usual grind of navigation formulas or engineering equations. Still others leaned in with the practical focus of opportunists; this lecture could be leveraged into a higher mark, a stronger paper, a line of distinction in the eyes of a professor known for rigorous grading.

At the far side of the stage, Dr. Keating settled into his chair, his frame folded neatly into the wood like it belonged there. The tie at his throat was patterned with signal flags, an indulgence in quirkiness against the otherwise buttoned formality of the day. His smile was wide and unguarded, the look of a man who had chased after this guest lecturer for months and now intended to savor every moment. He leaned slightly forward, hands folded loosely in his lap, eyes lit as though the lecture were already a success simply because she stood there, notes fanned on the lectern, commanding the attention of his class with only a few words spoken.

Mac touched the remote. The slide changed to a portrait of Commander Alexander Slidell Mackenzie. A murmur ran around the room. A hand shot up in the second row.

“Yes, Midshipman Alvarez,” she said, remembering how he had been the first to step up after she’d entered, his salute crisp, followed by an unexpected handshake and a nervous but genuine welcome.

“Ma’am, same last name. Any relation we should know about before we judge him?”

Soft laughter. Dr. Keating grinned. Mac allowed the moment to warm the room, then tipped her head.

“None that the family Bible admits,” she said. “Which frees you to be rigorous.”

Another hand lifted halfway up the tier.

“Ma’am, were the documents you requested from the New York Commercial Advertiser helpful?”

Mac stilled, pen poised above her notes. The precision of the question tugged at her in a way the cadets couldn’t know. Of course it had been Harm who’d gotten them to her, slipping them across the table in the Law library without preamble, without explanation, as though it were nothing. She felt the echo of that exchange now, unspoken gratitude threading through her answer.

“They were,” she said evenly, her voice carrying to every corner of Tolliver Hall. “*The Advertiser’s* coverage not only colors public opinion, it reveals how quickly rumor outruns evidence. Keep that in mind as we go.”

Heads nodded. Pens scratched. The cadets heard only the lesson. Mac alone heard the subtext, that his fingerprints were already on this lecture, whether he was in the room or not.

She turned one palm up toward the portrait. “Facts. In 1842 the U.S.S. Somers departs on a training cruise. A small brig, close quarters, hard discipline. Among the crew, Midshipman Philip Spencer, son of the Secretary of War. Spencer collects malcontents and pretends to draw up a list of officers to be killed. He speaks of seizing the ship and turning pirate.”

She clicked. A scan of Spencer’s scrawl. Names. A crude skull drawn in the margin. Heads tilted. Pencils moved. The room had that feeling she loved in the courtroom. The oxygen turned crisp.

“First Lieutenant Gansevoort reports to Commander Mackenzie his suspicions of mutiny. Mackenzie arrests Spencer and two alleged accomplices. He intends to bring them to port for trial. Then the atmosphere aboard turns volatile. The crew edges toward open revolt. Mackenzie convenes a council of officers. They choose to hang the three at sea.”

She let that sit. A long second. A longer one.

“In port, a court of inquiry. Then a court-martial. Charges of murder and tyranny. Witnesses disagree. The court acquits. Refuses to commend. Reputation shredded anyway.”

A hand lifted at the back, straight and formal. “Ma’am, Midshipman Singh. What standard of proof did Mackenzie have to meet at sea?”

“Not a courtroom standard. A survival standard,” Mac said. “He had to judge in real time whether the risk of delay outweighed the injustice of acting without trial. He had the authority to hang. The question is whether he had the right.”

She heard herself and tasted the echo. Authority and right. Duty and fear. The minds in the room thought she was describing Commander Mackenzie’s dilemma in 1842. Duty had a name, steady and Australian, with a ring on her finger to prove it. Desire had another. She had felt him watching her intently when she left the office earlier. Neither name freed her from the ache of wondering what her own miscalculation might cost. But the words brushed the raw edges of her own life on shore. A promise from Mic that felt steady, correct, dutiful... and the promise she had once wanted from Harm, the one that never came. Duty pulled one way. Desire the other. The uniform on her shoulders demanded clarity. The ring on her finger demanded fidelity. Neither eased the ache of wanting what she could not name aloud. So she pushed the thought down and moved on.

“Ma’am,” from the front row. “Midshipman Torres. Could Mackenzie have isolated the suspects until landfall?”

“Possibly. On a brig that small, isolation is theory. Sailors talk through walls. Rope passes messages better than telegraph. You cannot quarantine panic.”

She paced a half step, easy on the balls of her feet, no wasted motion, all focus. “Which brings us to evidence. Some witnesses saw Spencer’s plot as theater. Some smelled powder through the ploy. How do you weigh a threat that exists mostly in words?”

Dr. Keating opened his hands to the class. “If you cannot see it, do you assume it?”

Mac tapped the remote again. The engraving returned. She felt every eye on her. She kept her shoulders square, her voice steady, focused only on bracing these cadets against the hard wind of command and the ruin that comes when a captain of a ship miscalculates.

Inwardly, she was bracing against another storm entirely. The weight of his lips still pressed on hers. The weight of her impending wedding, close to her own zero hour, pressed back. And heavier still was the fear of miscalculation, not on a quarterdeck this time, but in the course she had set for her life.

The rear doors swung open on their smooth-jointed arms. A figure slipped into the top row. Tall. Shoulders easy beneath a crisp Navy jacket. A face that had taught her to read weather at thirty paces, storms gathering, skies clearing, the calm before impact. A face that ensured she was always battle-tested, because with him, she never got less than his sharpest out of the gate. He moved down three steps without squeak or scrape and took an empty seat in the shadow under the last flag. He did not take notes. He didn't need to. He simply watched. Fascinated by the case, yes, but more by the woman commanding it, her voice steady, her presence sharper than any brief he'd ever read.

She felt him without turning. Heat and pull radiated from the back row, colliding with the memory of a porch that had smelled of summer grass and the smolder of a forbidden fire stoked by desire. A kiss had happened there, one she'd locked away like evidence, filed under a date and a decision: that whatever they had wanted, it could never work. Her wedding was weeks away. Commitment in a gold band. And yet when she felt him in the back row, the air tilted, familiar and dangerous.

She set her attention back on the class. "Tell me where you stand," she said. "Who believes Mackenzie acted from duty?"

Half the hands rose. "Who believes he acted from fear?" The other half. A few wavered. A few stayed down, eyes thoughtful.

"Ma'am," said Midshipman O'Neill, voice respectful, throat tight with the thrill of the debate, "is it possible it was both?"

Mac smiled. "Yes. And that is why we study him."

She took a sip of water. The glass clicked against the lectern and sounded too loud to her ears. She put it down gently.

A voice came from the back. “Colonel, how can you tell the difference between fear and prudence? Between panicking and making the smart call when everything around you feels like it’s about to tip over?”

Heads turned. The tone was mild. The words cut clean. Mac waited because waiting had always been part of their game. She looked up with the calm of someone holding a gavel. The man in the top row hand raised as if he too were a student.

Dr. Keating’s smile sharpened. He recognized the intruder now and made space for the theater of it.

“Please identify yourself for the class,” Mac said, evenly. The class heard the steady. Only she heard the current under it.

“Harmon Rabb Jr.,” he said. “Former Naval aviator. Currently serving with the Judge Advocate General’s office as a senior attorney.” He added a polite half smile, the kind that disarmed without giving anything away. “Just auditing today’s session, if that’s permitted?”

“Always,” Dr. Keating said, delighted. “Commander Rabb. We are honored.”

Mac nodded once, crisp and measured. “Commander,” she said, letting the title carry its weight. “I happen to know you’re no stranger to the Somers case. Since you’ve raised the question, why don’t you answer it for us.”

Harm leaned his forearms on the desk and looked down along the sweep of seats until his eyes found hers. The contact was a tripwire. The class felt it without knowing what they felt.

“Prudence is the discipline of weighing risk and acting because necessity demands it,” he said. “Fear sees the same risk and acts only to quiet its own pulse. Both might hang a man. The difference is this: only the prudent choice allows you to close your eyes at night.”

Whispers ripple through the rows. A few pens hovered mid-sentence, ink drying on half-formed words. In the third row, a midshipman leaned toward the new guest, murmuring a quiet “sir” with a nod, the kind of acknowledgement reserved for someone who’s just shifted the room’s center of gravity.

As if steadying a ship's wheel against a sudden gust, Mac tilted her chin just so and brought the room back under her hand. "And you believe Mackenzie slept?"

"I believe he pretended to," Harm said. The smile did not touch his eyes.

"Ma'am," Alvarez again, eager. "Is there a case where doing nothing would have been the braver act?"

"There is always such a case," Mac said. "The difficulty is recognizing it when terror dresses as urgency."

She turned a page in her notes without looking down. She didn't need them. The case lived in her head, fully furnished. Every fact polished, every contradiction catalogued. She had spent days inhabiting it, soaking it in as if Admiral Chegwidden himself had handed her the assignment with that no-nonsense glare that brokered no half measures. The notes were just for show. The real lecture was already inside her, every word unfolding as planned, except for Mr. Unpredictable, being himself. Unpredictable. A language she'd learned to speak fluently ever since being partnered with him.

Harm raised his hand again. "Colonel, if the son of the Secretary of War is involved, does that bend the compass of justice?"

"Rank and family connections can influence opinions, but they shouldn't compromise the foundation of command," Mac said, her tone even, authoritative.

From the back, Harm's voice carried his response down the tiers. "And what if the crew already believes the foundation is compromised?"

She understood the double meaning instantly. Every cadet thought they were hearing a question about mutiny. She knew better. Keeping her voice steady, she answered, "Then the captain has to stand firm, take the criticism, and bear the consequences himself - so the ship, and the people on it, can stay intact."

Silence stretched a beat too long. Pens idle. Breaths caught. The class understood they were watching something that belonged less to history than to the present moment, something no book could teach. Dr. Keating, to his credit, didn't break it. He sat back, hands folded, letting the air stay charged a moment longer.

Midshipman Singh rescued the moment. “Ma’am, what document changed your mind the most in your research?”

Mac slid a letter from the folder and held it up. Browning paper, looping hand. “A private account of the council of officers. You can hear, in the margins, the sound of men trying to balance law and weather.” She read a brief passage. The words were measured and frightened. The class listened with their faces.

Harm spoke again, softer. “Colonel, where do you set your anchor when the law says one thing and the sea says another?”

Mac did not look at him now. She looked at the midshipmen. “The law is what we swear to. The sea is what will kill us if we ignore it. You set your anchor where the ship survives and you answer for the rest when you make port.”

Harm felt the line thread through him. He hadn’t told her he would come. He hadn’t told anyone. He’d watched her leave the office with Brumby, only to overhear the urgent phone call that pulled Mic away. An apology, a cancellation. And just like that, Harm’s calendar opened.

He had watched her pour herself into this lecture for days, her focus so fierce it burned. And he couldn’t get close without being scorched. The wedding invitation still sat on his kitchen counter like a flare. He had thought about going to her apartment. He had thought about walking away. He had thought about the kiss on the Admiral’s porch, how the world had tilted then, just enough to show him the edge of the map.

In the end, he’d settled on restraint. On telling her he had overstepped as a “well-wisher,” that he only wanted her to be happy. She had asked if that included with Brumby. He hadn’t found the words for a civil response.

Now, with Mic gone, the door cracked open. Harm had come to show support. But he had also come for something he wouldn’t name aloud. Not yet. In the rhythm of her voice, in the turn of her mind, he heard the word anyway, rising in him like a tide. Mutiny. Not against the service. Not against rank. Against the life that had arranged itself around the absence of her.

He looked like any quiet guest in a room set for order. Inside, he was mapping out new coordinates.

A hand rose near the aisle. “Ma’am, Midshipman Park. Does the refusal to commend after acquittal mean the court wanted to punish anyway?”

“It means the court wanted history to do the work,” Mac said. “Which it did. Mackenzie lived. His name drowned.”

Dr. Keating cleared his throat, eyes bright. “Colonel, would you entertain a brief exercise. A mock council. Two groups. One argues that hanging at sea saved the ship. The other argues that it broke the law beyond repair.”

Mac nodded. “You have ten minutes.”

The room shifted into the choreography of debate. Chairs squeaked. Voices dropped to hushed urgency. Pages turned. Lecture notes outlining highlights from bookmarked sources. Mac kept her back to the wall and watched the small storms build and pass. Harm stayed still and quiet in his upper seat, the way a pilot watches a cloud and waits for a break. She felt it, his patience, his presence...more than she wanted to.

Mac’s internal clock called time before Dr. Keating could open his mouth. She had always known when to call in the troops, today would be no different.

The first group rose in unison, the scrape of their chairs neat, rehearsed. Park, tall and sharp-featured, spoke for them. His tone carried the precision of someone who had practiced each syllable.

“Ma’am, the threat was time sensitive. Delay favored the mutineers. Every hour that passed meant more risk of conspiracy spreading. The commander acted within authority to preserve lives. We find for necessity.”

A few cadets behind him murmured their assent, nodding at the logic. Another added, “The Somers was a training vessel, Ma’am. No seasoned crew, just boys. Hesitation could’ve sunk them all.”

Mac gave a slight nod, acknowledging without agreeing. “Thank you, Midshipmen Park. Be seated.”

The second group rose more roughly, less choreographed but full of heat. Alvarez pushed forward half a step, shoulders squared. His voice carried not just conviction but outrage.

“Ma’am, the accused were hanged without trial while the ship was under command and headway. Courts exist for a reason. Discipline is not the right to kill the inconvenient. We find for law.”

One of his teammates picked up, voice rising. “Three men executed, Ma’am - one the Secretary of War’s son. Evidence uncorroborated, testimony inconsistent. If command acts as judge, jury, and executioner, where is justice?”

A low hum filled the hall. Pens tapped. Pages flipped. Sides were forming, not just arguments. A midshipman near the front turned to whisper, “But would you risk the whole ship for three?” Another shot back, “Better risk than murder.”

Mac let the storm swirl a moment, her silence deliberate, her presence steady at the lectern. She lifted her chin slightly and the whispers ebbed.

“Good,” she said. “Now you’ve each argued the sides. One for necessity, one for law. Both are compelling. Both, in their own way, are right.”

She let that hang, scanning the rows until she found Alvarez’s burning gaze, then Park’s steady one.

“Here’s the truth. In command, you won’t often face choices between right and wrong. More often, you’ll be staring down necessity and law. Discipline and mercy. The lives of the many against the rights of the few. The hardest test is not whether you can decide, it’s whether you can live with what your decision costs.”

She let the silence stretch, scanning their young faces.

“This is the work. One day, you will hold men and women in your hands. And some of your choices will not have a clean ever after. They will stay with you, in the silence of your cabin, in the quiet after battle, in the faces of those who follow you.”

The words landed heavy. A few cadets scribbled furiously, others stared ahead, thoughtful, as though trying to picture themselves on the deck of the Somers with the noose already tied.

“And let this case be a lesson,” Mac added, her voice low, deliberate. “The crew never forgets. Even if the court absolves you. Even if history justifies you. They will remember how you carried yourself in the storm.”

The silence held. Dr. Keating shifted in his chair but wisely kept his peace.

Up in the back row, Harm sat motionless. To the cadets, he looked like just another guest. But his eyes never left her. Every word she had delivered about command, consequence, and living with choices cut straight through him, past the lecture hall, past the Somers, back to a porch where a kiss had rewritten the map of his life.

He knew she hadn’t been speaking to him. And yet he knew she had.

Harm raised his hand again. “Colonel, a final question. If the commander had waited twenty-four hours and nothing had changed, would his decision have been more just?”

Mac lifted her eyes to his, the air dimming like a light turned low. “No,” she said. “It would have been the same decision- but burdened with uncertainty, a weight no one sleeps beside easily.”

Something moved down the rows like a current. It washed past Keating and lifted him in his chair. Even the last row leaned forward.

Harm dipped his chin, accepting the answer and the weight tucked under it. He felt the plan in his chest harden from weather map to flight plan. He did not smile. He did not blink. He only held her eyes for one count more than was professional, then looked away.

“Questions from those who have not yet spoken,” Mac said, and the class roused itself and obeyed. For the last ten minutes she fielded inquiries with the poise of a woman who had lived long at the intersectionality of evidence and consequence. When Dr. Keating called the session, the midshipmen rose as one.

“Attention on deck,” someone said half joking, and they all laughed, and then they were filing down the steps to cluster at the edge of the stage. Dr. Keating shook Mac’s hand with both of his, pleased to the point of glow.

“Colonel, that was superb,” he said. “You must come back next term. They would follow you into a hurricane.”

“They should follow their syllabus,” she said, smiling. “But thank you.”

Midshipmen hovered with careful eagerness. “Ma’am, could you sign my notes?” “Ma’am, did you consult the Gansevoort papers?” “Ma’am, how do you keep from letting fear masquerade as prudence?”

She answered until the cluster thinned. She kept her eyes away from the top row. She kept her gaze anchored to the cadets in front of her, never once letting it drift to the top row. She knew better. To find the seat empty would hollow her out. To find him still there would undo her in a different way. Either outcome carried its own gravity, and she wasn’t ready to absorb the impact.

When the last student stepped back, the room had emptied to murmurs in the hall. Dr. Keating packed his briefcase with the care of a man storing treasure.

“Take your time, Colonel” he said, and left her with the flags and the faint smell of chalk.

A shadow moved in the aisle. Harm came down the steps, hands in his pockets, Navy issued shoes silent on the wood. He stopped at the foot of the stage and looked up at her.

“Excellent class,” he said. “Colonel.”

The ring on her finger pressed against the lectern like extra weight on a scale. Mic Brumby was weeks away from waiting for her at the end of the aisle. Yet when Harm’s eyes held hers, she felt the scales tilt, unfair and undeniable.

Her mouth curved into something that passed for a smile, though it burned at the edges. “You didn’t RSVP,” she said, the words dressed for the lecture but carrying something far heavier.

“I never did like seating charts,” he answered, light on the surface, but in his eyes the refusal stretched past the hall, past the day, to the aisle she would soon be walking.

“You came to show support.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

He considered. “And...I came to ask a question.”

She set both hands on the lectern and met his eyes with the gaze she reserved for problems that demanded an answer. The porch kiss filled the silence like a witness neither of them could strike from the record.

“Ask,” she said.

He did not. Not yet. He let the silence sit between them and grow its own storm cell. Outside the high windows, a gull crossed the rectangle of sky, neat wings set to the wind.

He glanced toward the hall. “Late lunch,” he offered. “There is a quiet place two blocks off the yard. I can ask my question there.”

The invitation was so ordinary it felt like mercy. She let out a breath she had not meant to hold.

“Make it five blocks,” she said. “We could both use the walk.”

He nodded. “Lead the way, Colonel.”

They stood there one second more, two officers on a stage with a history of mutiny at their backs. Their own future facing them. Then she took her cover from the lectern, he stepped aside, and they left together, not touching, not speaking, letting the corridor swallow them, while behind them the Somers still braved a hard sea- frozen in time, unresolved as ever.

Part II — Flight Risk

“The danger is not in the flight itself, but in what compels a man to take it.”

— Anonymous, Captain’s Log

The Lantern Room had no idea it was about to become an accessory to an uprising, not charted in logs, not compassed at sea, but of the most personal proportions.

The host’s smile, rehearsed and efficient, became the first unknowing witness. The brass handle of the door gave way beneath Mac’s hand with the weight of surrender, as though she’d given up home-court advantage and stepped into contested waters. The awning outside had waved them in, less of a welcome and more as a signal flag, and once inside the collusion tightened around them. Cutlery clicked like coded taps on steel. Amber sconces flickered against brick, shadows arranging themselves as if told to stand by. Even the menus felt complicit, heavy as sealed orders sliding across the table.

A corner table waited, tucked deep enough to promise privacy yet angled toward a wide-paned window that framed them as if for display. From the sidewalk no one could catch a full view of her. Only he had the vantage, and Harm occupied it with the quiet possession of a man who would not share once he had her attention. On the surface he was all composure, posture loose, voice easy. Beneath, his thoughts moved like squadrons mapping strike coordinates. The napkin across his lap looked harmless, restaurant issue and forgettable, but in his mind it already read like an affidavit waiting for ink. His Navy pen rode in his pocket like a sworn witness, ready to put his revolt on record.

Mac opened the menu, though she barely saw the offerings. Words like seared, caramelized, reduced blurred as her mind retraced the lecture, cadets’ questions, her answers. To her, the language was food.

Across from her, Harm scanned the same words and saw something else. Seared read like skin under heat. Caramelized read like sweetness slow-burning into something dark and inevitable. Reduced did not mean sauce at all. It meant time tightening, weeks compressing into one last chance before vows and rings shut the door.

“Ready to order?” the waiter asked.

Mac glanced up, already settling on an entrée. Harm did not lift his eyes. The real question in the room had not yet been asked.

He nodded for Mac to go first, then inquired, “What is the special?”

“Rebel’s Garden Tartine, sir. Grilled sourdough with charred eggplant, blistered cherry tomatoes, wilted spinach, a soft-poached farm egg, finished with saffron lemon aioli.”

Harm’s brow ticked, the name of the dish landing with an irony too sharp to ignore. Rebel, of all words, on this table, in this moment. His eyes flicked once to Mac, as though the menu was an ally.

“I will have the Lantern Room special,” he said, handing the card back. “With one adjustment, substitute arugula for spinach.” His smile was polite, edged. “Some substitutions do not compare.” He paused. “And a little more heat, please. A drizzle of chili oil.”

“Of course, sir.”

The exchange passed without ripple, ordinary to anyone else. But Mac caught the flick of his eyes across the table, felt the undertone slip beneath the words. She saw a vegetarian special; he saw a field of choices, substitutions that changed everything, heat that burned through restraint.

For Harm the food was nothing but staging. He let her appetizer and her pointed critique of the morning’s session fill the space, and her voice warm the air. The plates arrived, delicate portions arranged with simple precision, and even these became more than food. The breadbasket was a test of restraint. His ale was a poured truth. The small lantern over their table reminded him of every unspoken thing that still burned.

The bistro, without meaning to, had become his accomplice.

The room had given them cover. The mutiny was his alone.

The room had given them cover. The mutiny was his alone.

Harm didn't ease them in. He didn't test the water. He broke it.

"I want a weekend with you," he said.

The words hit like glass breaking.

Mac's hand froze with a spoon full right at the edge of her mouth. She looked up, dark eyes searching his face, daring him to repeat it.

"One weekend," he said again, quieter but sharper. "Just us. No uniforms. No cases. No witnesses. One chance."

"You can't be serious," her heart skipped a beat.

"I've never been more serious about anything," he said. His voice had that courtroom cadence; calm, logical, undeniable. "In a few weeks you'll marry Brumby. I'll stand there, dress whites, smiling trying to be happy for you. But inside it will be a different story. I can't let you go without knowing what it's like to be with you... I'll regret it every day of my life. And I can't carry that."

"So this is your RSVP?" she asked.

"Mac, I was always going to be there," he said.

The air cracked. Heads turned and turned away again, drawn less by volume than by the presence of the two of them together, the kind of pair who belonged on a screen.

She leaned forward, elbows braced. "Do you hear yourself. You are asking me to betray Mic. You are asking me to betray myself."

"No," he said, matching her lean. "I am asking you to stop pretending you do not feel this. I am asking you to stop betraying what is between us."

Her mouth parted, then the waiter arrived with water and to clear a few of the plates. Neither of them looked away while the glasses touched down. Neither of them moved until the waiter was gone.

She sat back, fingers laced tight. “You think one weekend rights the ship we have been sailing?”

“No,” Harm said. “I think one weekend gives us the truth. And then... you marry him. No regrets.”

The lantern above their head burned brighter. The temperature in the room kicked up a notch.

“What do I tell Mic?” she asked, lifting her water and setting it down again.

“The same thing you told him about the kiss on the Admiral’s porch,” Harm said. “Nothing.”

Her laugh was short, incredulous. “You’ve got some nerve.”

“Says the woman who stood outside her own engagement party and kissed me first.”

“I was saying goodbye.”

“I am not ready to say goodbye.”

Silence pressed in.

“Tell him what you want,” Harm said. “You have been creative in court when the stakes demanded it. These are the stakes. You, me, forty-eight hours.”

A napkin appeared. The Navy-issued pen clicked. Harm wrote down a date, a time, an airfield. He slid it across the table. The white square glowed like contraband. “Pack light.”

She did not touch it. Her hands stayed flat. Her eyes did not leave his. “What you are asking is not honorable.”

His jaw tightened, but his voice was steady. “What I’ve learned, Mac, is that when it comes to you... there’s nothing honorable about me.”

She flinched at the admission, the blunt force of it. “I tried before. Sydney. I wanted us. You said no.”

His hand cut the air between them, not angry but certain. “I said *not yet*.”

Her eyes sharpened. “And now, weeks before my wedding, you decide it is yes. Why not on the ferry when I asked?”

“Because I was not ready,” he said, lower now, rougher. “Too proud, too afraid. I was not the man you needed.”

“And you are now? What about Renee?”

“Mac, I am trying...”

“Trying to what.” Her fingers pressed into the table until the knuckles paled. “It is too late.”

The tremor at the edge of her voice betrayed her. He heard it and did not push. He only tipped his chin toward the napkin, its ink beginning to blur.

“You are reckless.”

“You’re engaged to a man you don’t love,” Harm said softly. “Which of us is more reckless?”

She inhaled sharply, as if the air itself might steady her.

A shadow fell across their table. Two midshipmen from her lecture, flushed from the walk.

“Colonel Mackenzie,” one said, breathless. “That was an incredible class. Thank you, ma’am.”

She smiled, professional, flawless. “Glad you found it useful, Midshipman.”

The second cadet glanced at Harm, eyes wide at the sight of him. “Commander Rabb, sir.”

Harm nodded, polite. The cadets left, whispering, casting looks back.

As soon as they were gone, the silence snapped tight again.

“You asked me if I could be happy for you even if it was with Brumby,” Harm said, voice low. “If you show up this weekend, I will be. Because I will know.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I will stand in the audience at your wedding,” he said. “But I will wonder. Every day. So will you.”

The napkin lay between them, small, ordinary, volcanic.

When the check came, Harm reached for it without hesitation. He signed, pocketed the pen, and rose to his feet.

At the edge of the table, he paused. Looked down at her. His voice softened, but his eyes never wavered.

“The ball’s in your court, Mac... or should I say, the stick. Whether we take off is your call.”

Then he left, the silence of his departure leaving her in the left seat of the revolt he had just declared.

“Damn you, Harm,” she said under her breath.

Mac sat motionless in the booth, hands folded on the table as if she were bracing against turbulence. The food cooled in front of her, the steam thinning until it was nothing. Only the napkin remained alive, white, sharp-edged, loud as an indictment against the dark wood. Her fingers twitched toward it, then pulled back. She hated herself for the tremor. She hated him for putting it there. And most of all, she hated the part of her that wanted to reach out, fold it, hide it like illegal goods.

Outside the window, the Yard went on with its order. Cadets moved in formation across the brick paths, shoes clicking in practiced rhythm. Flags whipped sharp in the wind, their snap as unforgiving as what he was asking of her. The sunlight slid through the leaves overhead in fractured lines.

She had always prided herself on control. Courtroom control. Field control. Even self-control. But control in this booth felt like a mask.

Her ring pressed against her skin, gold biting into flesh. A promise to Mic. A promise she had told herself was right, was steady, was safe. But the napkin glared back, reminding her that safety wasn’t the same as happiness.

She thought of the engagement party and the kiss that should never have happened and the fire it lit anyway.

She thought of his voice in the lecture hall, the way his questions had cut her open in front of a class, and how she had let it happen because it was Harm, because he always knew which button to press and when to go all in.

She imagined the weekend he had written down. The day. The time. The airfield. She could picture him waiting by the plane, jacket unbuttoned, grin unrepentant, confidence worn as easily as his flight wings. And she could picture herself stepping onto the tarmac, knowing that one step would undo every vow she had promised to keep.

Her fork clattered against the plate, loud in the quiet nook. She shoved it aside, appetite gone.

Her thoughts turned dangerous. Reckless. What if she said yes? What if she let herself have forty-eight hours that belonged to no one but them? Would it ruin her? Or would it finally free her?

Mac pressed her hands flat to the table, forcing them still. She inhaled, long and slow, steadying the tremor in her chest. She had walked into courtrooms with her career on the line, into combat zones with her life at risk, but nothing had ever terrified her like the thought of pocketing that napkin.

Finally, she slid out of the booth. Her cover waited on the bench, brim bright. The napkin stayed where it was.

Mac stepped through the bistro's door, sunlight breaking across her cover. Behind her, the napkin lay abandoned on the table, ink bleeding like a wound. She'd left it there on purpose, proof that she could walk away. Just as he had in Sydney.

"Ma'am, excuse me."

The waiter's voice chased her down the steps. She turned. He held it out, folded neat, Harm's scrawl dark as an order across the paper.

"You forgot this."

Her pulse snapped hard in her throat. For a beat, she almost denied it. Almost told him it wasn't hers. But cadets in whites passed on the path, flags cracked overhead, the world demanded composure.

So, she took it. Slipped it into her briefcase. Nodded once.

“Thank you.”

The waiter vanished inside.

Mac stood alone in the sun, her cover shading her eyes, the napkin in her case burning like evidence she could not bury. The Yard stretched wide, the flag whipped above, and her face settled into something no one could read, not even her.

Part III — Runway Bride

“The runway is where you decide: takeoff or abort. Once in flight you’re married to the sky.”
— *Flight Training Manual, Annotated, 1961*

Mac sat in her Corvette with the engine idling low, hands wrapped so tightly around the wheel her knuckles ached. The late-morning sun struck the windshield, dazzling her eyes, but not enough to obscure what lay ahead. The airfield shimmered in the heat, the yellow biplane waiting outside its hangar like an artifact polished for display. Beside it, Harm stood tall, hands tucked into his flight jacket, his profile sharp against the horizon.

She had pulled over twice on the drive in, convincing herself she wasn’t going to do this. The napkin in her briefcase had felt like a dare she could ignore. But the morning came, and she had packed anyway, light, as instructed.

Mic hadn’t questioned her much. She had told him she wanted to get away to see old friends before the wedding. He had offered to take her, suggested meeting them, folding himself neatly into her past as if proximity could guarantee their future. She had kissed his cheek and told him she needed some space for herself. He had smiled, said he’d miss her, whispered how he couldn’t wait to call her *Sarah Brumby*.

The name had made her stomach clench. Not with joy. With recoil.

That was the moment she knew she would come.

Now, parked at the edge of choice, her thoughts looped back to the engagement party, the porch's dim light cutting shadows across Harm's face.

Why did you go to him so fast? he'd asked.

Because you pushed me away.

Do you love him?

You don't get to ask that question.

Mac, you'll always have someone who loves you.

And you have someone that loves you.

Once, those words had sounded like truth. Now they felt like unfinished business. And unfinished business was the most dangerous thing to bring into a marriage.

Her heart tilted toward him. It always had.

She killed the engine, slid her shades into her hair, and stepped out into the sunlight.

The airfield wrapped her senses; cut grass, hot metal, the faint trace of fuel. The biplane gleamed like it had been waiting just for her, its yellow wings catching the sun in a golden flare. Harm turned at the sound of her shutting the car door. His eyes found hers, locked, held, and for one dangerous heartbeat it wasn't an airfield at all. It was a chapel aisle. He was the groom. She was the bride. Each step toward him carried the weight of unspoken vows.

And Harm saw it too. For a breathless instant, Sarah Mackenzie wasn't a Marine officer weeks away from wearing another man's ring. She was his, veil imagined by the sunlight, walking toward him. He drank her in, the wind teasing her dark hair, her jaw set in defiance and destiny all at once. The white t-shirt clung with an alluring simplicity, jeans cut sharp along the length of her stride. The sun did the rest, softening her edges, gilding her like something holy and forbidden. Beautiful didn't cover it. She looked untouchable, yet she was walking toward him. Towards forty-eight hours of them. She was here.

She watched his eyes dance as she closed the distance. He looked better than he had any right to, flight jacket open over a navy shirt, designer jeans, aviator confidence worn like second skin. A man who belonged in the sky. A man who, against her better judgment, she had come to.

She stopped in front of him, pulse ricocheting. He reached for her bag, fingers brushing hers, brief, electric. He hoisted it, one brow lifting.

“This all you brought?”

“You told me to pack light,” she said, chin lifting. “From what I understand, I won’t need much.”

His composure cracked just slightly, his grin breaking wider than he meant it to. Her cheekiness caught him off guard, and he found it devastatingly attractive.

“I see we’re on the same page then?” he asked, voice low, threaded with heat.

“So far,” she shot back, eyes glinting. “Let’s see if you can keep up.”

He studied her, head tilted, then asked, “What changed your mind?”

“How do you know I wasn’t always coming?”

“Because I know you.”

Her throat tightened. She forced the words out, clean and sharp. “When Mic and I get married, I don’t want anything between us- including you.”

He didn’t flinch. His gaze dropped to her hand, to the gold band that hitched her.

“Then take it off.”

Her breath caught. “What? Why?”

“Because this is my forty-eight hours, and there isn’t room on this plane for a third person.”

The world stopped. She stared at him, chest rising too fast. He stared back, gaze unwavering. Then slowly she slipped the ring free. For a moment it trembled in her palm. She closed her fist, hiding it, but Harm had already seen it.

When she handed it over, her ring caught the sun, flashing like an alarm. Inside, she tried to silence the weight of its accusation.

She rubbed the bare groove it left, startled by how light her hand suddenly felt and how the heaviness she'd been carrying in her chest seemed to vanish with it, leaving her free, terrifyingly free.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered, then hesitated. "Wait."

Before he could react, she seized him, pressing him back against the fuselage. Her body locked to his, her mouth on his, hard, searing. His hands rose, found her waist, pulled her closer. The kiss was a storm breaking, a desert man finding water, years of restraint combusting in one unholy, unstoppable moment. The kiss wasn't polite. It was reckless, and all consuming.

When she pulled back, her breath was ragged. Her forehead rested against his. Neither one of them showed any ounce of regret except that the kiss had ended.

What stunned her most wasn't the betrayal, but the absence of guilt. Her pulse roared with something worse, or better, than shame. Aliveness. The kind she hadn't felt in years, not even in Mic's arms. Maybe this was always going to happen, she thought, the collision they had been circling since the start.

"Now I'm ready," she said. Her voice was a promise. "You get us to our destination in one piece, and I'm all yours."

That was all the clearance he needed.

Minutes later, they were strapped into the cockpit. Goggles snug. Wind clawing at them. Harm's hands steady on the stick as the engine thundered to life beneath them. The plane rolled forward, bouncing along the runway, faster, faster, until the ground surrendered.

Her stomach lurched as the wheels left earth, but instead of fear she felt something tear loose inside her, the last of her defenses falling away with the runway.

The earth dropped away. The Chesapeake stretched wide below, hammered glass scattering the sun into a thousand shards. White sails dotted the water like confetti. Roads tightened into threads, trees into brushstrokes. The horizon opened, merciless and endless.

Mac gasped, the rush of flight tearing the ground from beneath her doubts. For the first time in years she wasn't a Marine, or a fiancée, or a woman bargaining with compromises. She was herself. Free, weightless, unencumbered.

She turned, eyes drawn to him. Harm's profile cut against the endless blue, steady as the man she had always known. But for a split second, the light bent, playing tricks through the goggles and windscreen. He didn't see her in her flight gear. Again, he'd conjured a vision of her in a veil, see-through white, streaming in the slipstream, her face half-hidden like a bride just stolen from the altar. The image hit him like a tailhook catch, sudden and binding.

For one impossible heartbeat, it wasn't just a weekend. They had just been married, and he was carrying her away, not to trial, not to duty, but to a honeymoon written in sky.

The vision dissolved with a blink, but the ache of it stayed, sinking into him with the same permanence as the horizon stretching before them.

He gripped the stick tighter, because for the first time in years, the landing didn't matter. He was already gone.

She told herself it was just forty-eight hours, just a weekend to silence the shadows that haunted her engagement. But as the plane banked and the horizon opened wide, she couldn't ignore the way her heart answered his, steady as an engine in rhythm.

He told himself it was just one flight, one chance to know what it was like to be hers before letting her go. But as the altimeter ticked upward, he felt the truth in his bones: he could no longer live with the unknown.

He told himself it was just one flight, one chance to know what it was like to be hers before letting her go. But as the altimeter ticked upward, he felt the truth in his bones: he could no longer live with the unknown.

She had once asked him what he wanted most. He'd told her never to lose her. But what he really wanted he gave to the sky, whispered into the slipstream, stolen by the roar of the engine and bound into the lift itself.

ZERO HOUR

“You. I want you.” The words didn’t vanish — they rose, riding the air, propelling them higher, carrying them toward whatever waited beyond the horizon.

THE SOUND OF THE CHAPTER



Treat You Better - Shawn Mendes

For the tension beneath the surface. Harm is watching Mac stand inside a life that does not fully fit her, and the song carries that quiet conviction that he could love her differently, more completely, if she would let him.

Gravity — Sara Bareilles

For the force they keep trying to resist. No matter how carefully they manage distance, duty, timing, or other relationships, they continue to be drawn back toward one another as though something stronger than logic is pulling the line tight.

Rewrite the Stars — James Arthur & Anne-Marie

For the central question of the chapter: whether the lives already mapped out for them are truly fixed, or whether two people can decide that timing, circumstance, and expectation do not get the final word.

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REVIEW ON FANFICTION



RETURN TO CHAPTERS

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