



MACKENZIE v. RABB

A JAG Story by AriDan

WINNER TAKES ALL

ONE CASE AT A TIME

Part 1- Rules of Engagement

"Every rule is a line drawn in the sand, every desire is a tide waiting to erase it."

“Objection, Your Honor.”

Mac’s voice cut through the courtroom like a shard of obsidian, precise, unyielding, cool as polished steel.

Across the aisle, Harm didn’t blink. He leaned a fraction closer to the defense table, fingers splayed over an open file, blue eyes fixed on her like a heat-seeking missile. His face remained unreadable, but the slight curve at the corner of his mouth?

That was his tell. And it said everything.

He was enjoying this.

Mac’s pulse kicked up. It always did when he was on the other side. Sparring with Harm was its own kind of foreplay, a dance of intellect and innuendo, where every objection was a challenge, and every sustained ruling tightened the tether between them. Her carefully calculated dissent had been strategic, meant to reel him in, force his line of questioning to stall, like a tailhook snagging a jet on final approach, measured, exact, and designed to stop him cold.

But Harm never stalled.

“I’ll rephrase, Your Honor,” he said, his voice dipping into a huskier register as he distanced himself from the table and closer to the defendant on the stand. His voice tone was smoothed over, deliberate and inducing. “Petty Officer, what exactly were you doing when the order to recalibrate the missile was given?”

He listened as his witness answered, nodding slowly, reading the panel’s reactions but not before casting Mac a look.

One she recognized.

One heartbeat too long. One no one else would notice.

Except her.

He had something. Additional evidence. A loaded gun, figuratively and otherwise, that would tighten his case and, if successful, tilt the balance between them once again. He gave her one long look, sizing her up from head to toe, letting both her mind and body register the shift before he pivoted.

His gaze said it clearly: *If I win this one, you're mine tonight.*

As his client testified, unraveling Harm's freshly minted evidence, Mac began to unravel as well, exhaling through her nose, willing away the images that flared like heat lightning, her body beneath his, his breath warm at her ear, the weight of his control breaking her down piece by piece.

Officially, they were adversaries. Opposing counsel. Professionals, restrained by protocol and the watchful eye of military decorum.

Unofficially?

They'd been sleeping together for months. Their secret was stitched together as tight as the seams of their uniforms, built on unspoken tension and precise terms, *an unfiled Brief of Engagement that lived only between them.* And a code far more primal than any article in the UCMJ:

Subheading A: Only after a trial.

Subheading B: Only after a win.

Subheading C: The victor set the tone.

Subheading D: The loser obeyed.

Protocol: No talk of feelings.

Summation: No touch until the courtroom was empty, and the record closed.

It was airtight. Ironclad. No one. Not the Navy. Not their commanding officer. Not even their closest friends knew a thing.

Because the real rules of engagement weren't written in manuals.

They lived in the space between stolen glances. In the click of Mac's heels down a marble hallway. In the low hum of Harm's voice when he said her name just right.

Their rules hung from the coat rack that bore his Navy jacket and cover, from the hook where her silk robe rested, from the bedroom door like a whispered warning:

Do Not Disturb.

Because nothing could contain the storm that surged the moment they surrendered to the most intimate and forbidden desires simmering beneath the insignias they wore in the name of duty.

But this case, this one was a war.

Arguments were sharp. Objections, relentless.

They circled each other like heavyweight fighters, trading blows with no thought of retreat, the kind of match that had Vegas oddsmakers salivating. One could feel it, the invisible weight of wagers staking like sandbags around them.

Especially for Mac.

She didn't just want to win.

She had to.

Because the last case?

Harm had won. He'd invited her to his place, removed their gloves over laughter and dinner, and claimed his victory in the most devastating ways, stripping her defenses, stealing her breath until her moans of ecstasy became the final settlement between them.

But not this time. She refused to be the one left gasping again.

When they were together, he looked at her like she was more than his rival, like he saw her. Really saw her. Knew every scar beneath the armor, every fracture she kept hidden beneath her rank. That's what terrified her most. *The veil was thinnest in these most intimate moments.*

Her body still remembered the toll exacted by her courtroom loss, every moan wrenched from her throat, every sob muffled against the mattress, every climax that fractured her until she came undone.

He had dismantled her piece by piece, lifted her with his hands, parted her with his mouth, and filled her with a slow, deliberate possession. His voice, the final weapon, coaxing her to the edge... then dragging her over it.

“This is what it feels like when I win,” he’d growled, pressing her into the mattress as she clutched the headboard, undone by every thrust, every command, every moment that made her forget who she was without him.

The next morning, she’d barely kept it together.

Harm had strolled into staff call with smug serenity, his eyes locking on hers just long enough to make her thighs clench beneath the conference table.

Only Chegvidden’s gravel-thick voice had snapped the intimate thread between them.

Now, they were back in the courtroom. On opposite sides. The air between them tight with memory, with hunger, with war.

And Mac?

She wasn’t merely content with prosecuting her case. She was hunting for something beyond power, seeking retribution, pleasure, and the undeniable inversion of their roles.

Because Harm had made her forget every carefully constructed reason she had to keep him at arm’s length.

Because this time, she wasn’t going to be the one unraveling beneath him.

She wanted Harm Rabb undone. Beneath her.

Yet even as that fierce determination consumed her, she couldn’t predict exactly how sweet or savage that victory would taste.

Only that she was going to find out.

On top.

“Colonel Mackenzie, your witness,” the judge prompted, steering proceedings forward with a measured tone.

Harm resumed his seat with a gleam in his eye, a flicker that bordered on a playful wink.

Mac smoothed a hand down her uniform and rose; composed, deliberate.

Like the eagle on the Marine Corps seal, she was ready to strike.

He might've had a smoking gun, but Mac had spent years facing off against him and she'd learned that his greatest weapon wasn't evidence.

It was unpredictability.

She planted her heels in an isosceles stance and launched, ironically, like the torpedo the Petty Officer had mishandled, into her cross-examination.

Each question came fast and clean, challenging the authenticity of the evidence, dismantling its credibility, offering alternate interpretations, cornering the witness in contradictions. She framed the new data as insufficient, incomplete, and without context.

“Walk this panel through the chain of custody, every officer who handled the evidence.”

“Point to the technician who certified these recalibration logs under oath.”

“Explain how a targeting system can ‘self-correct’ without authorized intervention.”

“And finally, tell this panel why they should trust data you can't even independently verify.”

By the time she was done, the Petty Officer looked shaken, brow damp with invisible sweat. He glanced toward Harm like a drowning man grasping for a lifeline.

But Harm didn't move. He couldn't. Because for the first time in a long time, he realized: Mac hadn't just dismantled the witness. She was dismantling him too.

Mac did move, she turned towards the judge with the barest smile. “No further questions, Your Honor.”

“Very well. That witness may step down,” the judge announced.

As the Petty Officer hastily descended from the stand, Mac strode purposefully past the defense table, her stride unbroken. She felt Harm's gaze rake over her, intense and searching.

She didn't need to guess, she'd seen that look before. *And she was about to remind him exactly who he was dealing with.*

Breaking one of their cardinal rules:

*Never breathe a word of it at work.
Never give anything away in the space of fellow officers.*

But she couldn't help herself.

The things that man could do to her, in and out of the courtroom, she'd never admit.

Mac let herself slow. Just slightly.

He'd landed a blow, but she was still standing. And if Mac knew anything, it was how to counterpunch. She moved close enough that the fabric of her sleeve almost brushed his. Close enough that only he could hear when she said, her voice low and lethal:

"If I were a betting man... I'd get used to this view, me on top."

She didn't stop.

Didn't glance back.

Just left the words hanging between them, sharp, smug, and devastating.

And from the way the air shifted behind her, tight and electric, she knew she'd landed the hardest hit of all.

Hours ago, he'd been confident in his strategy, sure-footed in his dress shoes, comfortable in the crisp structure of his uniform jacket, quietly arrogant in the way he'd presented his case to the members.

But now?

She wasn't so sure.

Up until the final cross-examination, Harm's gut told him the panel was split, one hard breath could tip them either way. He'd held his evidence back, played it close to the vest, waiting for the perfect moment.

He let Mac's case temper.

Tested a soft launch.

She hadn't bitten; cool, dismissive, thinking he was bluffing.

And then, he introduced the smoking gun.

He watched her reel. Saw it in the narrowing of her eyes, the sharp tilt of her head, the frantic scribble of her pen across the legal pad.

After years of working beside her, he knew those tells by heart.

She only did that for two reasons: to collect herself or to mask the crack beneath her armor.

He willed her to look at him.

She didn't.

Off balance.

Thinking.

Adjusting.

But Mac didn't stay rattled for long.

She never did.

He should have remembered that, anticipated it, countered before she found her footing again.

Because it reminded him, viscerally, of their last night together.

He hadn't even waited for the door to close behind her. One hand had torn the overnight bag from her grasp; the other had buried itself in her hair, yanking her mouth to his.

Hot.

Demanding.

Unforgiving.

"Five Rabb, three Mackenzie," he rasped against her lips, his voice rough with triumph.

Earlier that day, he'd owned the courtroom.

Tonight, he would own her.

She didn't answer...couldn't.

He swallowed every protest she might've made with the crush of his mouth against hers, backing her into the door, hands fumbling with the buttons of her blouse until the material slid from her shoulders and pooled at her feet.

"Say it," he had growled, his hands traveling the silk of her sides with heated insistence.

"Say I beat you."

Her breath had caught, a mixture of anger and arousal mingling in that charged moment.

"The jury found your client not guilty," she rasped, defiant even as her body betrayed her, arching into him.

"Mac," he warned, dragging his mouth along the exposed line of her throat, nipping at the frantic beat of her pulse.

"I want to hear it."

She tried to hold the line. God, she tried.

But the moment his hands slipped beneath her skirt, possessive and practiced, she shattered.

"You got lucky," she moaned, the sound raw and broken in the space between them.

"Lucky, my ass, I call that damn good lawyering," he whispered against the swell of her breast, tugging the lace of her bra aside. His mouth closed over her nipple, sucking, licking, drawing another helpless gasp from her lips.

"That's the one good point you've made all day, Colonel," he rasped, "and I plan on getting a hell of a lot luckier."

Her legs buckled under the onslaught. He caught her easily, effortless, and lifted her against the door, her legs instinctively wrapping around his waist, anchoring herself to him like he was the only steady thing left, and she was a vessel drifting at sea.

"If I didn't know any better," she panted, "I'd swear you bribed Carolyn to switch cases just to get back into court with me."

He grinned against her skin.

"I plead the Fifth."

"You would. And your client did."

"In a little while, you'll be pleading the Fifth," he promised, voice thick with heat, "the Sixth... maybe the Seventh. Depends on how long you last, Marine."

"You're just impatient," she bit out, nails scoring lightly across his shoulders.

"Damn right," he growled, walking her toward the bedroom without breaking stride. "If it means I get to turn you every which way but loose."

He tossed her onto the bed, Mac bounced once against the sheets, glaring at him with fire in her eyes even as her body betrayed her, arching toward him without thought.

He stood at the edge of the bed, undressing slowly, deliberately, piece by agonizing piece, his gaze never leaving hers, like he was memorizing the moment, branding it into his bloodstream.

"If you move any slower, you'd be putting your clothes back on," she taunted, watching his strip tease with a bravado that faltered the moment her own hands had fumbled with her skirt, a clumsy urgency betraying the desire that made his throat tighten.

He chuckled low in his chest, dark and dangerous, before crawling up the bed toward her, each shift of his body voracious, controlled.

"You want control?" he whispered, crawling up the bed until he hovered over her, one knee nudging her thighs apart. His voice dropped to a growl.

"Then beat me in court."

She opened her mouth, whether to argue or demand, he'd never know, because he kissed her then, hard enough to steal the sound from her throat, swallowing it like it was the only oxygen he needed.

He pinned her wrists to the mattress above her head, threading their fingers together. She writhed beneath him, trying to fight it. Trying not to surrender.

"You objected five times in court today," he rasped against her mouth. His hips brushed hers, teasing, infuriating.

"You want to make it six?"

"No," she had managed to stammer, though it emerged more as a breathless gasp than a firm denial.

"Didn't think so."

The next heartbeat broke the last of her defenses.

He tasted her, tested her, drove into her, slow, devastating, relentless, until her head fell back against the pillow with a broken gasp, too raw to be pride and too helpless to be anything but surrender.

"Look at me, Mac," he ordered, voice wrecked, guttural, dragging her back to him. "I want to see your eyes as you come apart. You don't give me an inch in court. But here, with me-"

He thrust deeper, hips grinding against hers pulling, a sob from her lips.

"-you don't get to hide."

Though her nails had dug into his hands in a silent plea for control, she couldn't pull away. Couldn't look away.

He moved inside her, deliberate, punishing, overwhelming, until she was trembling around him, caught on the precipice of something too powerful to contain.

"This," he growled against her throat, feeling her entire body clench in surrender,
"this is what it feels like when I win."

And she broke.

Came undone with a cry she couldn't swallow,
shuddering under him, her body bowing into his like a confession she would never make aloud.

He stayed with her, kept moving, slow and reverent,
coaxing every last tremor from her until she shattered a second time, falling apart in his arms, as if she had no choice but to trust him to catch her.

The rapid stutter of her heart against his chest was the final act and right on cue, he gave in to her sweet surrender, spilling into her with a groan that grounded them both.

When she finally stilled, when her body melted into his, Harm pressed his forehead to hers, breathing her in like absolution.

In the dim light of his bedroom, their skin damp, their breathing shallow, their hearts beating in a rhythm neither of them dared name.

Their arrangement thrived on these collisions, on the explosive energy of their battles both in court and in the shadows of night. They crashed and collided, because they existed best in war zones and battlefields.

But the truth was brutal, merciless:

The only way they could ever coexist was for one of them to surrender.

And tonight, it had been Mac.

He reached up, gently pushing the damp strands of hair from her forehead, searching her face.

He couldn't name what he saw there.
Wouldn't dare.

Because if he did, she would deny it, kill it, bury it beneath every wall she knew how to build.

So he let her pretend.

Let her gather the tatters of her pride.

And when she steadied, when the armor slid back into place behind her beautiful, brown, defiant eyes-

He reached for her again, making good on his earlier promise to take her through the Fifth, the Sixth, the Seventh.

To turn her every which way but loose.

By the time the night was over, he wouldn't need a jury to hand down a verdict.

Mac's opening arguments and closing statements, in his bed, in his hands, in the shattered pieces of herself she gave him without meaning to were evidence enough.

Pulling himself back to the present, Harm cursed himself for the lack of mercy he'd shown that night, dominating her so completely, so thoroughly, that now he was at risk of the tables turning.

Mac was a formidable opponent, in the courtroom, in the bedroom and she would make him pay deliciously for every time he had made her beg, made her submit, stripped down the Marine, and left the woman, Sarah Mackenzie, trembling beneath him.

He wanted another night like that, another night breathing her in, commanding her body, making her surrender without conditions.

He hadn't fully admitted it, not even to himself, she had become his new obsession.

But first, he had to find a way to win closing arguments.

And across the room, Sarah Mackenzie was already making damn sure he didn't.

Part 2- No Quarter Given

"In war—and in love—there is no mercy for the willing."

Mac's closing statement was nothing short of a hymn to justice—quiet, fierce, and unforgettable, each word reverberating off the polished mahogany walls of the courtroom.

Continuing the assault she started in cross-examination, she unraveled Harm's case as methodically as one might tease silk from a spool. With each point she drew out- a misremembered detail here, a contradiction there- the thread of his defense slipped free in her steady fingers. The hush in the room deepened; even the hum of the ventilation system seemed to pause, giving her arguments room to breathe.

She dismantled the defense's star witness, cast shadows over the evidence, and struck directly at the panel's core values: discipline, duty, justice. Her tone was unwavering. Her command of the courtroom? Absolute.

And then- she struck.

Harm recognized the stance. He'd seen it before, in the kickboxing ring. Feet planted, shoulders squared, eyes locked. A calculated moment before impact. This time, the target was his case.

She closed with masterful storytelling, invoking the highest principles of Naval service—accountability, honor, order. Her final appeal hit like a war drum: the call to hold every sailor, no matter their rank, responsible for their actions.

“Find the defendant guilty on all charges,” she intoned, voice low and resonant, rolling through the benches like distant thunder.

Harm watched the panel lean in as though drawn by the pull of her words. Their pens hovered over notes; their eyes reflected both the brilliance of her logic and the weight of their impending duty. He sensed, in that collective inhale, that she had delivered a blow he would struggle to mar.

“Defense, you may proceed with your closing argument,” the judge said, nodding toward Harm with a measured solemnity.

Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr. rose as though stepping onto a minefield, each movement deliberate, his uniform impeccable, every crease and medal in place.

His hand grazed the edge of the defense table as he stepped forward, cool oak beneath his palm, but all he could feel was the heat of her skin under his fingers.

The way she'd gripped his broad shoulders or the sheets beneath them as if anchoring herself. The sounds she made in the throes of passion.

He cleared his throat.

"Members of the panel," he began, voice steady, even. "The government has asked you to draw a hard line. To see this case in black and white. Guilt and innocence. Right and wrong."

He glanced toward the floor. Then up again.

"But life, real life, rarely fits into clean boxes. Especially not in uniform."

He held each sentence like a sparring partner, probing for openings.

His eyes flicked, despite himself, to Mac: she sat as immobile as carved granite, jaw clenched, hair tucked behind her ear, lips compressed in that familiar line. Yet in her molten gaze he saw a tremor, a recognition of the stakes they shared.

She was remembering too.

Remembering the sharp heat of his palm against her thigh, the gasps they stifled into pillows, the promise buried in every hush-moaned name.

Remembering how she'd climbed onto his lap, and he had corrected her, whispering against her mouth before he flipped her onto her back—

"Colonel," he rasped, "you don't get to take command without a guilty verdict first."

He cleared his throat, letting the memory scatter.

"This case," he continued, refocusing on the panel, "isn't about perfection. It's about pressure. It's about a man in an impossible moment, who made a call with seconds to spare."

He stepped forward again.

"A call that may have been flawed. But not criminal." He let that sit. Let it breathe.

“We wear these uniforms to serve. To lead. And sometimes, sometimes, leadership is about instinct. The gut. The heart. Not the handbook.”

The word heart lodged in his throat. He swallowed it.

Her pulse had thundered against his lips, her breath catching when he ordered her to look at him- no escape, no shields.

He braced himself against the memory, jaw tightening.

Mac shifted slightly in her seat. A barely perceptible inhale. Not for the court. For him.

“Colonel Mackenzie gave you a powerful argument,” he continued. “She always does. But the truth isn’t a contest of eloquence. It’s a question of integrity.”

He looked at her again.

Just briefly.

Her gaze was locked on him now.

He stepped deliberately from one polished floorboard to the next, shoes quiet as a whisper, the panel’s attention fixed on him.

“Ask yourselves this,” Harm said, voice softening. “Did my client act with malicious intent? Did he betray his oath? Or did he do what many of us have done in our careers—make a flawed decision in the fog of pressure, and then stand by it?”

A memory flickered-

Her hands pressed to his chest.

Him nestled between her legs filling her slowly, delectably, and fully.

Her mouth at his ear.

“The next one is mine,” she vowed, her voice a husky promise.

He’d grinned against her lips. “You said that last time.” Then, a slow thrust.

“But you keep ending up underneath me.”

He turned back to the panel.

“We cannot punish every mistake with a conviction. We cannot turn human error into criminal conduct. Because if we do, then we’ve turned this courtroom into something it was never meant to be- retribution, not justice.”

He paused. Steadied himself.

“So I ask you- don’t just see the action. See the man. See the moment. See the weight of the decision made.”

A final breath.

“And if there is even a flicker of doubt... then I ask you to hold the line.”

He let that land. The judge’s pen scratched, the panel’s members shifted in their seats, and overhead, a faint draft rustled through the papers.

Mac's eyes didn’t leave his.

She remembered. He recalled the words he said against her neck, before everything blurred. *“This is what it feels like when I win.”*

A beat of silence.

“Find him not guilty.”

He held the panel’s eyes a beat longer, then nodded sharply and returned to his seat.

But as he sat, shoulders squared, blood pounding, Harm knew the real stakes weren't just the verdict.

Winning this case meant dominating her.

And he had no intention of losing.

The verdict would take time. But the reckoning between them was already underway.

The judge called for deliberation.

The courtroom exhaled in one simultaneous breath: chairs scraped, uniforms rustled, whispers flared as counsel and spectators dispersed.

Sunlight flooded through the heavy glass doors, igniting the stone courtyard in a sudden wash of brilliance.

Mac didn't linger. She slipped out the side entrance, crossed the courtyard to the bistro, and ordered her usual, Marine-grade black coffee, its aroma sharp enough to cut through the day's tension. Then carried it to a metal table shadowed by a lone umbrella, set her brief on the chair beside her, and opened a manila folder lined with neatly typed notes for an upcoming interview prep for a case she was defending against Mattoni.

Across the courtyard, Harm lingered by the fountain. Water arced upward, droplets glinting like diamonds before they splashed into the basin's stone lips. He spoke quietly with his client's family, measured tones, nods of reassurance, but Mac watched him from afar and needed no words to know he was still fighting, still unwavering.

He'd fought this case from every legal angle available to him- and she had fought just as hard.

They both knew it. The rest was up to the panel.

A dark shadow fell between them.

Admiral A.J. Chegwidden strode through the milling uniforms like a warship under full sail, shoulders broad, arms crossed, face set in that inscrutable mask. He offered Harm a curt nod, then glanced at Mac with the faint lift of a single brow.

Harm excused himself and approached. Mac rose at the same instant; their motions mirrored; two dancers bound by tension.

"Sir," Harm said, voice low.

"I've got to hand it to you two," Chegwidden rumbled, each word dropping like an anchor. "After the way I dressed you down last quarter, I didn't think I'd live to see another court martial where you didn't end up throwing chairs or legal briefs at each other. This was some of your best work."

"Thank you, sir," Mac replied evenly.

"Yes, sir. Thank you," Harm echoed, chin level.

Neither looked at the other.

Chegwidden's stare flicked between them.

"Don't thank me. I nearly TAD one of you for six months just to keep the damn walls from crumbling. God knows my budget can't take another facility crisis because Commander Rabb here can't keep his ego from ricocheting off structural beams."

"Sir, that was years ago," Harm said, teeth nearly clenched.

"Tell the budget that," Chegwidden shot back with a dark chuckle. "You'll never live that one down."

"Good to have my two best lawyers back at the top of their game," he said gruffly.

Carry on," he ordered, and turned away.

Harm and Mac faced each other across a widening gap of sunlight and shadow. Neither spoke. They did not need to.

The silence between them pulsed; hot, volatile, alive. The tension was volcanic. The only thing holding back the explosion was the impending verdict.

Part 3- Terms and Conditions

"Every battle has rules. Even the forbidden ones."

FLASHBACK

That was how it started.

Not with flowers. Not with candlelight.

But with a fight.

A scorcher.

It spilled out of the courtroom and detonated in the hallway of JAG Headquarters- Mac had shredded him in court. Beat him bloody on the record, then walked off without a word while he sulked like a wounded alpha behind the defense table. She hadn't gloated. Hadn't said a word. Just walked out with cool dignity while he smoldered like a lit fuse.

He caught her just short of the elevators.

Before she could utter more than “Commander-,” his cutting sarcasm spewed out:

“Nice work in there, Colonel. If this law thing doesn’t pan out, maybe you can moonlight as a wrecking ball. Lord knows you destroy everything in your path. Explains a lot about your relationships. Or lack thereof.”

Her eyes blazed. The stale corridor air crackled as she snapped back, voice cold steel.

“Funny, coming from the guy who paraded into court like he already had the verdict gift-wrapped. Next time, try leading with evidence instead of ego. That advice might help with the carousel your love life’s been riding on.”

He sneered. “Carrying around that much self-righteousness in heels must be exhausting. No wonder you trip over your own pride.”

“Better than hiding behind charm and call signs, hoping no one notices your poster-boy days peaked five verdicts ago.”

Sparks flew. Their volume rose, echoing down the hall until Admiral Chegwidden burst around the corner, face thunderous, eyes storm-ridden and unforgiving. He ordered them both to his office and chewed them out with the full authority of God and war behind his eyes.

“I’ve seen courtroom brawls with more decorum than whatever that was in the hallway.” His voice boomed, every syllable a cannon shot.

Mac tried to speak. “Sir-”

“Don’t test me, Colonel.” His glare cut sharper than any reprimand. “You may outrank half the damn building with that stare of yours, but you don’t outrank me.”

He turned to Harm.

“And you, Commander- congratulations. You’ve officially weaponized your ego with enough force to qualify for munitions testing.”

Harm clenched his jaw but stayed silent. Mac bristled under the glare that made the Admiral's office feel like a courtroom.

Chegwidden's gaze swept them both.

“For God's sake, I could drag in two first-years from Georgetown and they'd show more composure than the two of you. You're senior officers, not cage fighters auditioning for some Pentagon soap opera.”

Silence.

Tension thick enough to court-martial.

“You're both dismissed for the day. Go home. Cool off. And if either of you step foot in this building before 0800 tomorrow, I will personally reassign you both to opposite coasts- and make sure neither of you see a courtroom again before retirement.”

He didn't wait for acknowledgment.

Just waved them out like an air traffic controller ordering a crash landing cleared.

“Get out of my office.”

And they did.

Shoulders squared, jaws tight, pulse still thundering in their ears.

Their footsteps faded, shoes heavy, hearts pounding with righteous ferocity.

But somewhere, beneath all that fury, something else was burning.

Later that night, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, Harm knocked at her door with a peace offering: her favorite chocolate dessert from a local café and reservations at Le Diplomate.

She opened the door just wide enough to glare at him. “It's not an ambush,” he said, holding up the brown bag like a white flag. “It's a ceasefire. From Dolce- your favorite.”

“I’m not interested in ceasefires,” Her voice was flat, arms crossed.

He tried anyway. “I’m sorry. For court, for the hallway... everything.”

She shifted, eyes narrowing. “You humiliated me, Harm. Tried to sandbag me in court, failed, so you did it on neutral ground.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “And I hate that I did. But if you shut this door, you’ll never hear me say how much I regret it.”

A pause. Tension thick enough to cut.

She’d almost slammed the door in his face.

Almost.

But something in his voice, low, contrite, honest, made her pause.

Instead, she swiped the dessert from his grasp and stepped aside.

That simple act, civil, unspoken, knocked the air out of him. He hadn’t expected her to talk to him. But he hoped.

“If this isn’t a chocolate tiramisu, you can forget dinner.”

“Please,” he scoffed. “I’ve logged enough flight hours in Sarah Mackenzie to qualify as an expert witness. Go get dressed.”

She peeked in the bag and shot him a look.

“Give me ten.”

They both knew she’d emerge in five.

And as Harm waited, something reckless sparked to life deep inside him, a reckless hunger he didn’t bother to extinguish.

He found himself entertaining a forbidden thought: whether she tasted as decadent as the dessert he’d offered in truce.

Lately, Sarah Mackenzie had been inescapable.

She haunted his dreams.

She lingered in the droplets of water that rushed over his skin in the shower.

She threaded herself between the legal briefs he flipped through each day, sat just beyond the wall of his adjoining office, breathed in every thought he couldn't cage.

He couldn't escape her.

And he didn't want to.

Somewhere along the way, he'd started kicking around an idea- one reckless enough to get him flattened with her boot on his throat and his ego offered up as a casualty.

He hadn't found the nerve to voice it- until tonight. Because whatever this thing between them was, it was careening toward a collision.

And if they didn't find a way to bleed off the pressure, it wasn't just protocol they'd destroy, it would be each other.

He had a plan.

Whether she'd go for it?

That was a gamble he was finally ready to make.

He didn't know if it would save them or destroy them. He only knew one thing. He wasn't leaving her door without an answer.

The night out should have been a peace offering. Instead, it lit the fuse.

They ended up at a corner table tucked into a private nook of Le Diplomate- a French bistro styled like a snapshot of Paris itself.

The walls were soft cream, adorned with vintage mirrors that caught the candlelight and shattered it into glimmers across the polished wood floors.

The scent of butter, old wine, and something decadent hung in the air, wrapping around them like a second skin.

The muted clink of cutlery and the low murmur of conversation blurred into background music.

Their table was small, round, bracketed by a velvet-backed booth on one side and two chairs on the other, half-shielded by heavy red drapes.

It was intimate. Unforgivingly so.

Candlelight kissed the sharp line of her jaw, while the dark corridor caught the arch of his brow.

The tension between them?

Thick enough to spread on the fresh baguette at the center of the table.

Mac cut into her steak with the precision of a surgeon, her knife biting a little too hard into the porcelain plate.

She didn't speak.

Harm listlessly nudged his vegetables around his plate, no real appetite for anything but the impossible woman seated across from him.

Then, he set down his fork, leaned back slightly, and studied her for a long moment before saying, voice low but clear:

“I came here to apologize. Not just for being a sore loser but for letting it get personal.”

Mac looked up- cool, composed, still armed.

“You humiliated me,” she said again- but this time, it landed with something colder. Something that stuck. Not with anger, but as a simple fact laid bare.

“You out-lawyered me,” he replied. “I deserved it. What you didn't deserve was me taking it out on you.”

A tense silence pooled between them.

She chewed. Swallowed.

“You think dessert and candlelight make up for dragging me into the Admiral’s war path?” she asked, cutting into her steak with quiet ferocity.

“That seat is usually reserved for you. What do you think it makes me look like when the Admiral has to send his Chief of Staff home because she can’t play nice with the Commander next door?”

“No,” Harm said, voice steady. “It doesn’t make up for it.”

He paused, watching her.

“But I figured it was a start. The apology is the main course.”

Mac arched a brow. “So this is penance?”

He leaned forward, voice low. “No. This is me showing up, Mac. As a man who knows he screwed up, and wants to fix it.”

That silenced her, just for a breath.

She studied him then said softly, “That’s new for you.”

He offered a slow apology smile. “Well today wasn’t one of my finest moments.”

Under the restaurant’s dim lights and Mac’s unwavering gaze, Harm found himself remembering what he did after being dismissed, how his feet had carried him aimlessly into Rock Creek Park, the hush of nature wrapping around him like a reprieve. The rustle of leaves underfoot, the quiet murmur of wind through the trees, it all seemed to draw him deeper into the green, offering him the solitude he needed to think.

How had the day gone so wrong?

He knew the answer.

He had provoked her- pushed her buttons on purpose to get a rise out of her.

In the courtroom, his usual tactics had failed. She hadn't even reacted when the verdict was read, barely acknowledging his presence.

That hurt more than he cared to admit.

And in that silence, the anger had built within him, but it was more than just that. It was a need for control.

He wanted her to feel the same heat, the same boiling tension he felt. To spin out of her usual composed self, just as he had.

Because when his mind was consumed with her, nothing else made sense.

He needed her to be as caught up in him as he was in her.

"I've out-lawyered you before, Harm," Mac said, breaking into his thoughts. "You've never reacted like this."

"Like what?" he asked, even though he knew.

"Like a self-serving, pompous jackass."

A grimace flickered across his face, chased quickly by the ghost of a smile.

"Easy on the names."

"Why? All of them earned."

"Touché."

"I usually am."

He exhaled slowly, hands flattening on the table as he wrestled down the impulse to argue, to tease, to kiss her just to shut her up.

"See, on one hand, I'm trying to apologize," he said.

"And on the other- you say something that makes me want to rescind the whole thing. You're infuriating, you know that?"

She lifted a brow.

“Let’s not pretend that word only applies to me. Why did you really bring me here, Harm?”

His gaze didn’t flicker.

He hesitated. Just long enough for her to notice.

“Because I’m tired of pretending this thing between us doesn’t exist.”

Her fork froze mid-air.

“What are you talking about?”

“Tension. Frustration. Chemistry. Take your pick. It’s swallowing everything in its path- and we’re next.”

“I trust we can remain professional.”

“Good. Then we agree.”

A pause.

“I have a solution to make sure it stays that way.”

Skepticism sharpened her stare.

“I’m listening.”

He smiled, slow and dangerous, candlelight glinting off the mischief in his eyes.

“We’re competitive. Stubborn. Hyper-focused. We drive each other insane. What if we redirected that energy?”

“Into what?”

“Into each other.”

She blinked, sharp and slow.

“You think that’s the solution?”

“I think it’s inevitable.”

“I don’t know, Harm. Did you see us today? Why throw us straight into each other’s crossfire?”

“Because we’ve tried everything else,” he said, voice dropping an octave. “And nothing else works.”
She sat very still.

“You’re suggesting we... sleep together.”

“We already want to. I'm just giving it structure. A winner take all approach.”

“Pretty cocky to assume I want you.”

“Presumptuous, maybe. But wrong?” His eyes gleamed.

“No.”

“And if I don't?” she challenged.

He shrugged.

“Then we forget this conversation ever happened.”

He leaned in, low and steady:

“Should we forget, Colonel?”

Her pulse skipped.

“Forget what?”

“Forget that you want me just as badly as I want you.”

She exhaled slowly, her mind racing, but she didn’t look away.

Her jaw tensed. In that moment, staring across the candlelight into the bluest eyes she’d ever known, she should have called for the waiter, asked for her half of the check, and walked away. Buried the temptation in cross-examination and contempt.

But instead-

“Terms,” she said.

His brow lifted.

He presented the terms as if she was a client he was counseling, “After a trial. Winner sets the tone. Loser submits. No outside entanglements. No exposure. No emotions. The second one of us wants out, it ends.”

He softened slightly, voice quieter now:

“And if you're worried it'll ruin our friendship- think about how close we came to a permanent transfer after our earlier... disagreement.”

Mac's instincts screamed caution. Marines did not surrender ground easily.

But something deeper, wild, hungry, reckless, whispered that she was tired of pretending she didn't want this. Want him.

She tilted her head, studying him.

“You're willing to give up control?”

“If you beat me.” His voice dropped to a growl. “I'll do whatever you want.”

The heat between them thickened.

“But it cuts both ways,” he added. “If I win... you're mine, Mac. Can you handle that?”

Mac tilted her head, slow and assessing, the way she did before issuing a motion that would dismantle a case. Only this time, the case was him.

Silence stretched between them, tight as a wire, thrumming with everything unsaid.

Mac smiled. Slow. Dangerous. Testing the idea like a blade against her thumb.

“Only after trials. Winner sets the tone. No catching feelings.”

A beat.

“I can handle it.”

And somewhere in the shadows of Le Diplomate, the deal was struck-

They didn't shake on it.

Didn't need to. Not after the baby deal. This was like adding in an addendum to an already drawn contract.

The agreement hung between them, electric and unspoken, burning hotter than any signature ever could.

“Just so we’re clear,” she whispered, staring at him intensely, “this ends the second it gets messy.”

“It won’t,” he said, voice low and husky, laced with the faintest tremor.

Harm caught the flicker of something else in her gaze.

Anticipation.

Challenge.

Surrender, not yet given, but inevitable.

As they sat across from each other, the last of their meal forgotten, close enough to feel the ghost of each other's touch- the world outside their charged bubble blurred into nothing.

No flowers. Only flickering candlelight and the weight of everything unspoken.

For all their rules, all their discipline, all their desperate attempts to contain it...
they had just set a fire.

And whether it ended in ruin or revelation-
neither of them would walk away unscathed.

Part 4- Burden of Proof

“Some victories come with a cost.”

The flash of memory shimmered and then vanished- and the world snapped back into the rigid geometry of military precision.

The courtroom had retaken its breath.

Uniforms straightened.

Chairs creaked softly as officers settled in with rigid anticipation.

Harm sat at the defense table, posture perfect, hands folded, eyes forward-
but inside, tension coiled through him like a spring wound past its limit.

Across the aisle, Mac sat poised, a study in crisp control. Her spine razor-straight, her expression carved from granite.

Only the faintest flicker in her eyes hinted at the storm beneath her control.

The panel filed back into the courtroom, faces impassive as stone.

Sunlight bled through the tall windows behind them, casting long shadows across the paneled walls, flooding the chamber in gold.

Mac rose smoothly. Harm followed.

The battleground had returned.

The judge nodded toward the senior member.

“Has the panel reached findings?”

“We have, Your Honor.”

Every breath caught.

Every heartbeat suspended in the weighted pause.

The senior member stood, unfolding a slip of paper in trembling hands-
a quiver barely visible to trained eyes.

“In the matter of United States v. Petty Officer Second Class Samuel Bauerley, on the charge of dereliction of duty, the panel finds the accused: guilty.”

A ripple pulsed through the gallery-
soft gasps, a whispered shift of bodies.

But within the well of the court, discipline held.

Harm didn’t flinch.

He absorbed the blow with the detached grace of a seasoned warrior taking a hit he had seen coming.

Across from him, Mac dipped her gaze once, barely.

A blink.

Not triumph, but respect for the uniform the defendant wore.

When she looked up-
her eyes were steady. Sharp.
Victory, tempered by duty.

The judge thanked the panel.
Dismissed them.

Court was adjourned.

A single crack of the gavel split the air-
final and absolute.

The courtroom dissolved into low voices and rustling
papers, the heavy door yawning open to the merciless
sunlight beyond.

Mac gathered her folders with efficient calm.

She didn't look at him.

Harm crossed the aisle, unhurried, every step deliberate.
He stopped just shy of her.

For a moment-
silence.

Then Harm leaned in, his voice low enough for only her:
"You really wanted this one," he said, a half-smile
tugging at his mouth, not quite smug, not quite gentle,
somewhere between admiration, knowingness, and a
quiet warning.

Mac didn't move except for the slow, deliberate lift of
her chin.

"I wanted justice served, Commander," she said, her
tone perfectly even, but the glint in her eyes promised
something sharper, more dangerous.

His smile deepened, wicked at the corners.

"Sure," he murmured, "justice." He paused, letting the
word hang between them like a challenge.

"I'd ask if you have plans to celebrate," he added, his
breath brushing the shell of her ear, low and casual-
"but I already know the answer."

He straightened, the gleam in his eyes unmistakable
now.

Mac said nothing.

Just gathered her papers, tucked them under her arm,
and brushed past him-
her shoulder grazing his in a touch so faint it could have
been imagined.

But he knew it wasn't.

Because the look she threw him over her shoulder-
casual, dark, electric-
said everything.

She was coming for him.

And she was coming to collect.

Harm watched her go, his pulse thundering against his
ribs.

Yeah.

He was in trouble.

And for the first time in a long time-
he couldn't wait.

He planned to let her have her way. A win is a win, after
all.

Part 5- The Art of the Raincheck

“Desire deferred is a special kind of torture.”

He should have known.

From the moment he pulled up beneath the flickering
streetlamp outside her apartment, the beam of his
headlights slicing through the night like expectation,
he'd been certain he'd feel the weight of her victory.
Specifically, undone by the press of her mouth, the
warmth of her skin, the gravity of her need, until the
night surrendered them to morning light. His leather
jacket was freshly pressed, the grain smooth beneath his
fingers; his shirt clung to the cut of his shoulders and
chest, accentuating every sinew, every hard-earned line.
He smelled of cedarwood, smoke, spice, and a quiet
warning, and he'd convinced himself it would be
enough. Enough to make her go just a little easy on him.

Mac opened the door looking maddeningly calm in jeans and a soft navy sweater, strains of her tapered hair tucked behind her ear, her bare feet silent on the hardwood. She was beautiful.

For a moment, just a moment, something flickered in her eyes.

Want.

Need.

He felt it like a charged fuse between them, hot enough to burn.

But she just smiled, polite, infuriating, and stepped aside to let him in.

Dinner was simple. Steak, potatoes, roasted vegetables, a bottle of Santa Lucia sparkling water bubbling between them.

Conversation was lighter than it should have been. Safer than it needed to be. It drifted between weather forecasts, office gossip, half-hearted jokes- while his senses screamed in protest.

Harm barely tasted a thing.

Every time Mac leaned across the table, every casual smile, every brush of her hand against her drinking glass, it shredded what little control he had left.

He thought for sure- any second now- she'd make her move.

She didn't.

Instead, when she set her fork down and reached for her water glass one last time, she said it so casually, he almost missed it.

"I have to be in Norfolk early tomorrow. Working a case where Mattoni is prosecuting."

He blinked.

Processing.

Slow.

“That’s...early,” he managed.

“Five a.m.,” she said with an easy shrug, rising from the table and gathering the plates. “So...tonight’s not a good idea.”

He stared at her, not comprehending.

She smiled sweetly. Almost pitying.

“Raincheck?”

The word sliced through him like a reprimand. Usually harmless. Tonight, it landed like a gut punch.

He pushed back from the table slowly, trying to read her. Surely she was bluffing.

Surely she didn’t mean-
She met his gaze head-on.
No mercy.

“You’re serious,” he said, half-laughing, half-pleading.

Her smile widened just a fraction, the way a Marine might grin before landing the final blow.

“Dead serious, Commander. Orders must be followed.”
She tapped the edge of her glass in mock salute.

Harm opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again.
Words failed him.

He was...dumbstruck.

Mac gathered the dishes with terrifying efficiency and disappeared into the kitchen.

The message was clear.

Night over.

Victory?
Still hers.

A minute later, she walked him to the door, barefoot, beautiful, untouchable, and placed a hand lightly on his chest.

“Goodnight, Harm,” she said, voice low, fond...and devastatingly final.

He stood there like an idiot for a full second after she closed the door behind him, breathing in the last hint of her perfume as it teased its goodbye.

He made it to his car.
Barely.

And then he just sat there.
Hands on the wheel.
Heart pounding like he’d run a mile in dress shoes.
Breath uneven.

Earlier that day, he’d been so sure. Certain he’d win. Certain he’d be the one holding the cards, pulling her into his arms, stripping her down like he’d dream about for days.

Because nothing had ever thrilled him more than facing off with her by day, her spine straight, her jaw tight, her eyes daring him to try, only to have those same eyes half-lidded, pleading for more by nightfall. There was nothing more addictive than peeling the Marine off her, piece by stubborn piece; her rank, her rules, her armor, until there was only Mac.

Touching her.
Tasting her.

Watching her fall apart around him, mouth open, breath caught, only his name left on her lips. Their bodies had collided, raw, relentless, transcendent. It was the most intense experience of his life.

But he hadn’t won.

She had.

Now she was calling the shots.

Making him wait.

And God help him- it was killing him.

She was right. He was one impatient son of a bitch.

And she? She was the spark. The strike in his storm.
And he’d never wanted anyone more.

The Next Few Days:

Mac was everywhere and nowhere.

He caught glimpses of her at JAG- grabbing coffee on the fly, flashing him a polite smile but no invitation.

He watched her disappear into Chegwidden's office for a meeting, across from his office her blinds snapping shut, shutting him out.

Lunch?
Unavailable.

Conversations?
Minimal.

Every time he looked up, it seemed someone else, someone not him, was sharing her attention.

Once, he caught her laughing with NCIS Agent Darin Sterling in the hallway. That laugh. Low, throaty, the kind she usually reserved for the late nights and private moments.

The sound twisted in his gut.

Agent Sterling didn't have more of her than anyone else. He wasn't special. Harm knew she wasn't interested. And they'd agreed: no outside entanglements. But in that instant, he hated the man with a venom that startled even him. She was still his partner. Still Mac. And yet-

It felt like she was slipping through his fingers. And the part that scared him the most?

It wasn't just about sex anymore.

It was her. He *missed* her.

Her voice. Her presence. Her ridiculous way she stirred her coffee counterclockwise like it was a regulation. Her dry sarcasm. The quiet, unguarded moments when her armor slipped and she looked at him like he was the only man in the world. And the idea that someone else, anyone else, might ever get close enough to touch that laugh, that fire, that fierce, impossible woman?

It was unraveling him.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore.

Late in the day, Harm stalked to her office, heart hammering harder than any courtroom cross-examination. Each step echoing his mounting desperation.

He paused outside her door, steadied his ragged breath, then knocked once.

"Enter," came her smooth voice.

He pushed inside.

She looked up from her paperwork, arched a brow- and smiled.

A smile that said she knew.

"Hey," he said, standing stiffly just inside the doorway.

"Hey yourself." She leaned back in her chair, arms folding casually.

He closed the door with a soft click and crossed the room to stand before her desk. The distance felt too great, then suddenly not enough.

"So..." He glanced around, searching for neutral ground.

"We never...settled up."

She tilted her head. "Settled up?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You know what I'm talking about."

She tapped her pen against the desk, innocent, dangerous.

A quiet threat wrapped in composure.

"No," she said, voice smooth. "Please- clarify."

He walked closer, lowering his voice.

"I'm talking about...terms. Victory."

He gave her a look thick with meaning.

Her smile grew.

“Oh. That.”

His jaw flexed.

She was toying with him.

He wanted to growl. He wanted to drag her out of that chair, onto that desk, and show her exactly what overdue meant.

Instead, he stayed locked in place.
Drowning.

Mac leaned forward slightly, resting her chin in her hand.

“I’ve been busy,” she said, feigning regret. “Norfolk. Meetings. NCIS consultations.”

“I noticed,” he said tightly.

Another long, deliberate silence.

“I missed you,” he said finally, voice rawer than he intended.

“I need to see you. Not just like this,” he gestured to the bullpen beyond the door.

Mac studied him, something flickering in her eyes.

Mercy.

At last.

She dropped her pen.

“Fine. Tonight. My place.”

Relief punched through him so hard he almost staggered.

He turned, ready to bolt before she changed her mind.

But her voice stopped him cold:
“And Harm?”

He turned back, breath catching.

“Bring a seabag and your dog tags,” she said, her voice low and wicked. “You’re going to need them.”

For half a second, he just stood there, staring.

Then gave her a casual salute with two fingers.

“Yes, ma’am,” he rasped, nodding in her direction.

And walked out, heart pounding, skin burning, soul already halfway gone.

Because his Marine had *finally* called in her victory.

And he would *gladly* surrender, lay himself bare, served upon a silver platter, hers for the taking.

Part 6- Chain of Command

"Some orders are given. Some are surrendered to."

Harm stood at her door, breathing in the cool evening air, steadying himself.

Leather jacket, black jeans, dark shirt. Every line of him sharpened to ruthless perfection, a living, breathing weapon dressed to kill.

And he smelled good- God, he smelled dangerous-cedarwood and something darker, something uniquely him that Mac would never again be able to untangle from her memory.

He lifted his hand and knocked once, sharp and certain.

A few seconds later, the door cracked open.

And there she was.

Sarah Mackenzie stood framed by the glow of her living room hearth, the silk of her emerald-green robe pooling around bare ankles. The fabric caught the flicker of flame in rippling highlights, following the gentle curve of her hips and waist like liquid light.

Jazz murmured through the room, low and sultry, piano keys and brushed drums flirting in the warm haze.

And the scent- something floral and devastatingly feminine- wrapped around him, pulled him inside before he could remember how to breathe.

Mac didn't step back.

Didn't invite him in.

She stood tall, arms crossed lightly over her chest, chin tilted just enough to remind him who was in charge tonight.

"State your business, Commander," she said, voice a sultry velvet timbre.

He swallowed hard, pulse pounding as he imagined all the possibilities this night held.

"Reporting for duty, ma'am."

A single arched brow. "And you acknowledge the chain of command for tonight?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. If I give an order."

"I follow it," he rasped. "To the letter."

A long beat.

"Permission to come aboard."

Another long beat.

Then- her smile. Slow. Seductive. A sin in silk.

"Permission granted."

He crossed the threshold.
The door closed with a soft click that sounded suspiciously like a lock being thrown.

He barely made it three steps before Mac's voice, low and commanding, stopped him.

"Jacket off."

Eager, aching already, Harm slid the leather from his shoulders, draping it carefully over the coat rack.

He stood still. Waiting.

Waiting for her.

She prowled closer, one slow step at a time, her bare feet silent against the floor.

She circled him. A victor. A colonel. A goddess.

He felt her gaze graze his skin, hotter than the fire, sharper than any blade.

“Socks and shoes off,” she ordered.

He bent, sliding shoes and socks from his feet. His toes flexed on the cool floorboards.

“Watch.”

He unclasped his wristwatch, the metal cool in his palm.

She held out a slender hand, palm up. At her sign, he dropped the timepiece into it.

Her fingers closed around it. “Dog tags.”

He stilled for a heartbeat, then unclasped the chain at his throat. The silvery discs clinked as he placed them in her outstretched palm.

“You’re not Navy property tonight,” she whispered, running her thumb along the chain before setting it aside. “You’re mine.”

He swallowed hard.

She stepped back, letting her robe slip from her shoulders an inch, revealing a flash of matching lace beneath. Her eyes roved across his chest, landing on the taut ridges of muscle under his shirt.

“T-shirt,” she said.

He lifted the hem and peeled it overhead, the fabric whispering against skin until he stood bare to the waist, the firelight sculpting every line of his torso. Mac’s breath caught, he could see it in the slight parting of her full lips, but her composure never wavered.

“Turn around,” she said.

He complied, the muscles along his back flexing in slow, measured motion. She drank him in, the rigid planes of muscle, the curve of his spine, the strength coiled beneath flawless skin. He felt her hunger in her gaze, hotter than the flames behind them, but she held him at bay.

Because tonight he was hers to undo.

“Face me,” she ordered.

He pivoted, heart thudding as his eyes found hers.

“Thirsty?” she asked, voice deceptively light.

“For you,” he said without hesitation.

Her smile sharpened.

“Slow down, Commander. You’ll get your fill- but only when I say.”

She closed the last of the distance between them, green silk brushing his skin with every step. He inhaled her scent, smoke and silk and something infinitely feminine, and it made him ache to touch.

“Ready to play?” she purred.

Mesmerized by the sight of her- so intimate, so tempting, so herself- all he could do was nod, surrender written in every line of his frame.

“Take a seat, Commander.”

He sank into the couch, legs splayed, chest rising and falling to a frantic rhythm. Mac remained standing, the robe slipping looser around her curves, revealing the lace of matching bra and thong that clung to her like a second skin.

“Like what you see?” she teased, letting the robe fall in a slow whisper to the floor.

“You already know the answer,” he rasped, eyes locked on hers.

She stepped forward, knees pressing to the plush rug between his thighs. He watched the subtle sheen of sweat at her collarbone, the gentle flex of muscle in her

thighs, the curve of her hips shifting as she inched closer. His breath hitched.

God help him, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Her lips, slightly parted, full and flushed, hovered just inches from where he throbbed for her. And those eyes. Those eyes didn't just look at him. They commanded.

He'd flown into enemy fire and walked away unshaken. But this? This was the moment that unmade him.

Because from this angle, kneeling, lit like a goddess, victorious and wicked and so painfully his for the night, she wasn't just beautiful.

She was unstoppable.

He was hers. Every inch, every nerve, every beat of his pulse. And she hadn't even touched him yet.

"Rule," she whispered, voice a taut thread. "I can touch you. You can't touch me."

He clenched the couch cushions, unable to look away as she traced a finger down his chest, worshipful and possessive. Then she hooked a thumb inside the waistband of his jeans, gliding them and his boxers down in one fluid motion until he sat fully exposed.

He was already throbbing.

"You won last time," she said, boldly wrapping her hand around his hardness. "Took me apart. Owned every second."

Her palm was warm. She stroked, slow and deliberate, drawing a groan from his throat as he arched into her touch.

"This time?" she teased, leaning in to kiss the tip, slow and reverent. His pulse thundered. "It's my turn."
"Eyes on me," she commanded, voice a whip in the haze of desire.

He obeyed, mesmerized by the curve of her neck, the dark pool of her gaze. She took him deeper, inch by inch, until her lips and tongue engulfed him in slow, exquisite torture. "Oh, God, Mac," he panted, jaw clenched tight.

He fought the urge to close his eyes shut, to lose himself in the sensation, but she held him with that unblinking stare. She worked him with her mouth, tongue teasing, sucking, licking. Her hands moved with purpose, with rhythm, with power.

“How does my win feel?” she whispered between strokes, voice mischievous and smug.

He tried to answer, but she swallowed him deeper, and the words turned to noise.

All he could offer were broken groans, low moans, sharp curse words and desperate gasps.

She increased the pace, watching him come undone.

Watching him grip the couch like a man moments from losing control.

His hips jerked. His breath caught. When he felt the first tremor of release, he tried to warn her—“Mac—I...”

But she pulled back, lips swollen and glistening, leaving him gasping and pulsing for more.

“Oh no you don’t, Sailor,” she purred. “You don’t get to come yet.”

She finally rose from his lap, licking her bottom lip like she was savoring the taste of victory, leaving him desperate and throbbing, he thought he might actually come undone from nothing but her absence. She disappeared into the bedroom with a flick of lace and bare skin, her hips swaying like the promise of much more to come.

He sat there. Bare. Tense. Completely wrecked.

Waiting.

Waiting for the woman who had dismantled him- heart and soul.

Waiting to be summoned.

Waiting to surrender.

The fire crackled behind him, but Harm barely heard it over the thundering of his pulse.

His skin still ached with her mouth, her hands, her voice.

His body, hard and desperate, waited for her like a soldier waits for the sound of battle.

And then, finally, he heard her.

“Commander,” she called from the bedroom. “Consider your loss a lesson in patience.”

He sat straighter, the sound of her voice anchoring him like a steel hook.

“First, you traded cases with Carolyn to face me. Rookie move. You should’ve let the Admiral assign it.” We can’t have our arrangement catching the wrong eyes.”

A beat. The tension grew.

“Second, if you’d anticipated how I would prosecute instead of trying to throw me off balance, I’d be the one waiting right now.”

Another beat.

“Third, that raincheck? That was strategy. I wanted you starved.”

His grip tightened on the couch.

“Fourth...” Her voice turned to silk-wrapped steel. “Tonight, I cash in on my win.”

A beat.

She stood in the shadows for a moment, unseen but watching. Her fingers brushed her pulse. One deep breath. Just one. Then-

“Come to me, Commander.”

It wasn't barked.

It wasn't even loud.

But it hit him harder than any command he'd ever received.

He rose like a man summoned, not by duty, but by need-and crossed the threshold of her bedroom.

He stopped short, breath punched from his lungs.

The room was dim, bathed in low lights spaced out along the floor like an airport runway. The air was heavy- ripe with anticipation, layered with heat and history.

Mac was already on the bed, sprawled like a goddess in command, ankle crossed over knee, a smirk playing at her lips, every inch of her draped in green lace and invitation.

Her lingerie didn't just tease, it detonated, a direct hit against blood-red satin.

Harm stood at attention at the edge of the bed, bare, breath tight, hands clenched at his sides, dog tags discarded on her dresser. "Every muscle held in check. Coiled. Waiting.

"Tell me what you thought about, every night you waited for me."

He swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Eyes open, Commander."

He opened them, finding her gaze locked on him.

"You," he said hoarsely. "Only you."

"Be specific," she whispered, her voice so intimately soft making him shudder in anticipation.

"Your mouth," he ground out. "Your hands. Your voice when you say my name."

She smiled, slow and seductive.

"And what did you want me to do with those things?"

"Anything," he groaned. "Everything."

She sat up slightly, the lace of her bra and panties framed her body in a maddening tease.

"You imagined surrendering to me?"

"Yes," he said, voice strained. "Only you."

"Good," she said, tracing the line of his chest with her heated eyes.

"Because you're going to give me everything tonight, Commander."

He shuddered, helpless, wrecked, desperate for her.

Her eyes raked over him, gleaming with control. Her voice came low, smooth, layered in heat and command. And tonight, Harm was her mission.

"Climb in, Commander," she said, voice low. "We're flying a night op in hostile airspace. Cockpit's tight, visibility's low. You'll need hands-on control."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, stepping closer. He climbed onto the bed, every movement precise and measured.

She sat up slightly, fingers trailing over his thigh like a targeting reticle locking on.

"I'm your RIO tonight," she whispered, brushing her lips over his jaw, his throat, his collarbone, tasting, teasing, branding him. "You fly. I guide."

The words hit him like a punch to the gut—and he loved it.

Loved that she could command him like no one else ever had.

Mac tilted her head, admiring the view. "You've got good structure. Strong airframe. Responsive handling."

Harm gave a tight smile, arousal front and center. "But you've got the radar, ma'am."

"Exactly." She beckoned him forward with one finger. "Straddle the fuselage. I'm inputting coordinates."

She shifted, guiding him between her thighs with her legs bracketing his hips.

He froze, nearly trembling with restraint.

His hands gripped the sheets.

Mac reached up, her palms trailing down his chest, thumbs brushing over his nipples before dragging lower.

"Hands on the yoke," she ordered, placing his hands on the headboard. "And don't let go until I tell you."

He braced himself, eyes already dark with need. “Copy that.”

She leaned in, lips just grazing his neck. “You're cleared for insertion. Throttle to idle.”

“Mac...” His voice cracked.

“I said idle,” she repeated, pulling back. “RIO’s in command. You know the rules of engagement.”

He clenched his jaw, shivering under the restraint. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She ran her fingers over his abs, nails trailing down until they hovered just above where he wanted her most.

“Pre-check complete,” she whispered. “Systems armed. Fuel at full. You’re holding back thrust- but you’re going to give me everything on command.”

“I always do,” he rasped.

She kissed him then, deep, exploratory, like she was mapping his mouth for terrain. Her hands were everywhere. Over his shoulders, his ribs, down to the backs of his thighs as she pulled him flush against her. Their bodies met in a slow slide of heat and friction, but still she didn’t let him in. Not yet.

“I’m going to walk you through this,” she said against his lips. “One step at a time.”

He nodded, dazed. “God, please do.” He couldn’t believe this was real. Mac. Here. His most vivid fantasy turned to flesh and fire, on a night in which the spoils were hers for the taking.

“Altitude check,” she murmured, rolling her hips into his. “You’re rising fast.”

“Yeah,” he groaned.

She let her fingers trail between their bodies, stroking him once, just once, and it nearly undid him.

“Easy,” she said. “We’re in sensitive airspace. No sudden thrusts. Follow my lead.”

She shifted, lining him up, and hovered there. Not taking him in. Just letting the heat of her body brush him.

He was trembling. Breathing ragged.

“Mac—”

“Shhh.” She kissed the corner of his mouth. “You’ll know when it’s time.”

She rocked against him, slick heat torturing them both with restraint. Her hands returned to his chest, palms flattening just above his heart.

“Pulse is spiking,” she teased.

“You’re killing me.”

“Negative, Commander. I’m reviving you.”

With that, she sank down onto him, slowly, completely, a deliberate claim.

"You belong to me tonight," she whispered, her breath hot against his ear.

"Say it."

"I belong to you," he gasped, heart pounding against his ribs.

"Again."

"I belong to you," he groaned, straining to keep his hands anchored where she'd ordered.

"Good," she whispered, her voice cracking with her own pleasure.

"We’re just getting started Commander, so buckle up."

He let out a low, guttural moan, his head falling forward to rest against hers.

“Oh my God.”

She inhaled sharply, grounding herself. “Engaged. Locked in. Maintain heading.”

He held still, every nerve in his body lit like a cockpit at night.

“Now...” Her voice dropped into something sultry and sure. “Follow my instructions exactly.”

He nodded, dazed.

“Thrust, quarter power.”

He obeyed. Slow. Measured.

She gasped, rolling her hips to meet him. “Flaps extended. Full contact. Pressure optimal.”

His breath hitched.

“More,” she ordered. “Give me twenty percent.”

He thrust deeper. Her hands dug into his back. “Again.”

He did, eyes locked to hers.

“Maintain Focus, Commander,” she bit out. “We’re at 30,000 feet and climbing.”

Their rhythm built. Gradual. Controlled. Firelight flashing across sweat-slick skin. She guided him like a seasoned RIO, every command exact, every moan another recalibration of their altitude.

"You're flying smooth, Commander," she whispered.

"But the storm's coming. Brace for turbulence."

“Already there,” he groaned.

She kissed him, hard and full. “Throttle up.”

He obeyed, pace accelerating, each movement more desperate, more consuming.

“You’ve got permission to break formation,” she gasped, nails biting into his shoulder blades. “Take me higher.”

“Roger that,” he panted, driving into her now, wild with need, out of control, exactly where she wanted him.

“Harder,” she begged.
He gave her everything.

She held onto him mercilessly, allowing him to drive her to the edge, pulling back, driving again, controlling every pulse, every thrust, every flicker of friction.

"Climax approaching," she gasped. "Final target locked."

"God, Mac—"

"Now," she cried, body arching as her release shattered through her. "Now, Harm—"

"He followed her over the edge, groaning her name like a lifeline, every muscle taut as he poured into her—something inside him breaking wide open."

He was hers. She was his.

Completely.

Utterly.

They collapsed into a tangled, breathless heap, skin flushed and trembling, sweat slick against silk sheets. For a long, long moment, they stayed locked together, bodies humming, hearts racing, souls tangled.

A long, pulsing silence.

Then, softly:

"Mission complete," she whispered, dragging her fingers through his hair.

And Harm, God help him, wrapped his arms around her without permission, holding her like she was the last person in the world.

Because tonight wasn't just about surrender.
It wasn't just about pleasure.

It was about the terrifying, beautiful truth he couldn't unsee anymore:

He hadn't just let her lead. He'd needed it. Craved it. Not just her body—but her certainty. Her command.

Mac hadn't just won the trial.

She'd won him.

Every broken, battered, brilliant piece of him.

And he wasn't sure he ever wanted it back.

The fire in the living room had burned low, casting a dim golden wash across the bedroom entry stretching into the dimly lit room.

For a long time, they didn't move.

Harm lay back against the pillows, breathing deep and slow, Mac sprawled half across his chest, her hand resting lightly over his heart.

No words.

No orders.

Just breathing, heartbeat to heartbeat.

It should've felt transactional, like all their unspoken rules insisted it must be.

But it didn't.

It felt... inevitable.

Like everything before had only been foreplay for this.

Mac shifted slightly, the tip of her finger tracing idle, lazy patterns across his chest, over his dog tags, still resting on the nightstand. She'd return them to him later, over the faint scar just above his heart.

Harm tightened his arm around her, unable to help it.

Needing her closer even after he'd had all of her.

She didn't pull away.

Instead, she let him.

Another tiny crack in the walls they always rebuilt too fast.

"You okay, Sailor?" she murmured after a long, indulgent silence.

He huffed a low, wrecked laugh, tilting his head to look down at her.

"You're asking after you spent the last hour turning me inside out?"

She smiled against his skin, lips brushing lightly over his chest.

"You handled it."

A pause.

"Mostly."

He chuckled again, softer this time.

"I'm not sure I'll walk straight tomorrow."

"You'll manage," she said, but there was a glint of something proud in her voice.

She traced idle, looping patterns across his chest, the mischief in her eyes warm and dangerous.

"You know," she murmured, "with all these... questionable tactics... maybe we'll have to take this up in court someday, Commander."

Harm chuckled, low, catching her wandering hand and bringing it to his mouth for a kiss.

"Bring it, Marine," he rasped. "I'll file a countersuit for irresistible force and reckless endangerment."

Her laughter, warm, real, and devastatingly beautiful, washed over him, and for a fleeting, impossible moment, he let himself believe they could have mornings like this forever.

And maybe, just maybe- she felt it too.

As if she liked knowing she'd brought a man like him, well-ordered, stubborn, impossible- to his knees.

He tilted his head, letting his nose brush lightly through her hair.

She smelled like heat and home and something sweeter he didn't have words for.

"You're dangerous," he murmured.

She lifted her head slightly, resting her chin on his sternum, meeting his eyes.

"And you're just now figuring that out?"

He smiled, slow and real.

"I think I knew it the first time you shot me down in court and called me a bilge switch."

"And yet... here you are," she said, her voice low, almost wondering.

"Here I am," he agreed quietly.

The weight of it hung between them.

He didn't say why he was still here.

Didn't say what it was he felt fracturing and rebuilding itself inside his chest every time she looked at him like this, unguarded, unarmored, unmistakably his.

He didn't need to.

Because for once, she didn't run.

She leaned up, brushing a kiss, light, unhurried, over the corner of his mouth.

A kiss that said: I know. I feel it too.

Harm closed his eyes against the fierce, aching swell in his chest.

Nothing, nothing, had ever terrified him more than the feeling blooming right now.

Because it was real.

And permanent.

And not even Navy orders could save him from it.

Mac settled back against him with a soft sigh, and Harm tightened his arms around her like he could hold this moment, her- forever.

Maybe he couldn't say it yet.
Maybe she couldn't hear it yet.

But deep down, where truth lived beyond pride and fear,
he already knew:

He didn't just want Sarah Mackenzie.

He *loved* her.

And no court in the world could argue him out of it.

The first light of morning seeped through the sheer
curtains, soft and gold and indifferent to the war that
had been waged in that bed the night before.

Harm lay still on his side, one arm folded beneath his
head, the other stretched out where she had been hours
ago.

The sheets were warm.
But she was gone.

He heard the faint sound of a kettle whistling from the
kitchen. The low murmur of a morning radio. He could
smell coffee, the strong kind she liked- a bitter dark
roast.

But he couldn't move. Not yet.

His body ached in that sweet, well-earned way. His lips
were still swollen from her kisses, his skin marked by
her mouth and nails, her command.

She had owned him last night.

And not just in the way they'd agreed.

She had seen him.

Laid him bare, stripped him of every carefully
constructed wall, and touched something he didn't know
was still breakable.

He stared at the ceiling, jaw tight, pulse steady now, but
his chest a battlefield.

This was supposed to be a game.

It started that way. Regulated. Clean. Built on rules and
timing and pride.

But last night had blown the rules to hell.

It wasn't just the way she moved, slow and devastating, deliberate in every touch. It wasn't just the way she held his gaze as she undid him with nothing but a whisper and a breath.

It was the way she looked at him when she thought he was too far gone to notice.

Tender.

Raw.

Like she didn't want to admit it either.

He rolled onto his back and covered his face with his hand, exhaling hard.

He loved her.
He loved her.

God, how long had he known?

The feeling had always been there, buried under uniform regulations, layered beneath courtroom tension and years of missed timing.

But last night... she'd cracked something open.

And now he couldn't put it back.

He heard her bare feet pad across the apartment.

Then her voice, soft, from the doorway.
"You awake?"

He dropped his hand and turned his head.

There she was- her robe loosely tied, hair tousled, mug in hand. No makeup. No armor.

Just Mac.
His Mac.

He nodded. Swallowed.
"Yeah. Didn't want to move."

She raised an eyebrow. "Sore?"

He smiled. Barely.

“Humbled.”

She laughed, low and warm. Walked over and set the mug on the nightstand.

“I let you sleep in. Figured you earned it.”

He sat up, sheets pooling at his waist, and caught her wrist as she turned to leave.

“Mac.”

She stilled.

“Last night...” He hesitated, the words crawling up his throat. “I know what it was supposed to be. I know what we said this was.”

She looked down at his hand on her skin. Didn’t pull away.

“But it’s not that. Not anymore.”

She met his eyes then.

Guarded. Careful. But not cold.

He took a breath.

“It’s you. It’s always been you.”

For once, she didn’t answer with a quip. Didn’t deflect. She just stood there, letting the silence fill everything he couldn’t say yet.

And in that silence, something shifted.

Something fragile.

Something real.

She’d rewritten the chain of command, and somewhere between surrender and survival, he’d stopped resisting.

He didn’t just want Sarah Mackenzie. He needed her.

And now, he finally understood, he always had.

But all too soon, reality crept in, the day pulling them apart, the uniform pulling him back into line, the words he hadn't said still burning on his tongue.

Harm stood alone just outside in the courtyard, breathing in the fresh air, the polished brass doors to the JAG building just beyond, behind him.

The sunlight caught on the ribbons of his uniform- but inside, he felt stripped bare.

Their arrangement wasn't supposed to feel like this. Neither hollow nor haunted.

Mac had started preparing for her day without looking back. And yet, he felt the pull of her everywhere, in the frayed edge of his control, in the echo of everything they hadn't said.

Staff call would start in minutes.

Orders would be given.

The next battle would be assigned.

But standing there, with the weight of silence pressing down on him, Harm knew:

He wasn't fighting for another case anymore.
He was fighting for her.

And for once, he wasn't sure if even winning would be enough.

Part 7- Reopener Clause

"The deal was survival. The renegotiation was love."

Staff Call

The weight of it, the words he hadn't said, but felt, hung between them like a tattered rope pulled too tight.

Mac sat across from him at the conference table, cool and composed in her crisp uniform, her focus pinned squarely on the Admiral as if nothing inside her was cracking open.

Harm wasn't so lucky.

He shifted slightly in his chair, his dress shoes silent against the polished floor. His hands were folded neatly on the table, but every muscle in his body was queued up with the need to look at her.

To reach for her.

He didn't.

Rules.

They were all that stood between him and losing everything that mattered most.

Admiral Chegwidden's voice cut through the air like a gavel.

"Good work on Bauerley," he said, glancing between them. "Both of you. Especially you, Colonel."

Mac inclined her head respectfully, her voice even, "Thank you, sir."

Harm offered a tight smile, the compliment carving deeper than it should have.

The Admiral's gaze narrowed.

"Don't make me regret keeping you two assigned within a hundred feet of each other."

A few scattered chuckles around the table broke the tension- but not for Harm.

He felt it in his blood, something was coming.

Chegwidden shuffled a few files, then lifted a thick folder and dropped it on the table with a solid thud.

"Your next case," he said, sliding separate files down toward them. "Rabb, you're defense. Mackenzie, you're prosecution."

The impact was immediate.

Another collision course set in motion.

Chegwidden's mouth twisted into something that might've been a smirk if you squinted.

"Just like Bauerley, keep it clean," he said. "I don't need any complaints because you two decided to redecorate the walls with court exhibits."

"Understood, sir," Mac said crisply.

Harm nodded once. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Chegwidden closed his folder with a snap.

"Dismissed."

Chairs scraped. Officers shuffled papers and spoke softly about pending trials, interrogations, sea duty, and lunch meetings.

Mac was on her feet instantly, retrieving the case file with composed swiftness. She didn't glance at Harm.

Didn't have to.

He felt her withdrawal like a door slamming shut inside his chest.

She strode out without a backward glance.

And Harm, desperate, reckless, in love, followed.

Mac's Office

The door clicked shut behind him, the latch sealing them off from the rest of the world.

Mac stood by her desk, setting the new case file down with a casualness that was too exacting.

She didn't look up.

"You can't keep running from me, Mac," Harm said, voice low, raw.

Her spine stiffened.

"I'm not running," she said coolly. "I'm working."

He took a slow step closer. "You're hiding."

She finally turned.

Sharp. Composed. Alluring.

"The rules," she said, voice swiftly piercing the space between them, "exist for a reason."

"Mac—"

"If you can't follow them," she continued, as if he hadn't spoken, "then we need to end this. Right now. Before it costs us everything."

The words hit like shrapnel.

She didn't flinch.

"Our work is better," she said evenly. "Our friendship is stronger. Our partnership is intact. The rules keep it that way."

She lifted her chin slightly, daring him to contradict her.

"Complicating this," she said, voice dropping just slightly, "complicating us, would destroy everything we've built."

Harm's heart hammered against his ribs, painful and real.

He didn't want to destroy anything.

He just wanted her.

He took another step closer, holding her gaze steady.

"I'm still in," he said, voice rougher than he meant it to be. "I'll play by the rules, Mac."

He saw the flicker in her eyes then.

Relief. Pain. Something else.

"You're sure?" she asked, softer now, almost... uncertain.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm sure."

Silence stretched between them, taut and fragile.

Finally, Mac exhaled. Slow. Under control.

She tapped the new file once, grounding herself.

"Then I suggest," she said, voice back to serene professionalism, "we get to work, Commander."

Harm smiled faintly, something dark and intrinsically complex flickering behind his eyes.

He knew the truth.

He was already working-
Not just on the case.

But on breaking every wall she thought would save them.

One look.
One touch.
One heartbeat at a time.

Because Mac wasn't just a battle he wanted to win.

She was the one person he was willing to lose everything for.

And sooner or later—
He would put everything on the line.

The door to her office clicked shut behind him, the soft sound slicing through the thick silence of the corridor.

Harm didn't move.

Didn't breathe.

He just stood there for a moment, hands clenched at his sides, his heart pounding so hard he could hear it in his ears.

She didn't even flinch when she gave him the out.

Offered him a clean break like it wouldn't gut her too.

Because she would rather survive alone than risk falling.

He knew that about her.

Hell, he admired it even as it tore him apart.

But this wasn't just about control anymore.

It wasn't even about winning anymore.

It was about her.

And it was about them.

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, willing back the memories, her voice at his ear, her body arched beneath him, the way she clung to him when she thought he wasn't looking.

She felt it too.

She just didn't trust it.

Didn't trust them.

Didn't trust him.

Not yet.

But she would.

If he could win this case, he'd have his night.

His terms.

His command.

And when that moment came, when she was stretched out beneath him, flushed and glorious and his, he wouldn't waste it on teasing or torment.

He would show her.

Prove to her.

That it wasn't just about surrender.

It was about belonging.

About choosing each other.

About building something that wasn't just nights of victory and loss- but a lifetime of battle-forged loyalty and devotion.

He would strip her defenses the same way she stripped him bare:

Slow.
Precise.
Unrelenting.

Because Sarah Mackenzie wasn't just the best damn lawyer he'd ever known.

She was the best damn thing that had ever happened to him.

And this time-

He wasn't just fighting for one night.

He was fighting for forever.

Part 8- No More Rainchecks

"You can postpone a moment. But you can't postpone destiny."

The gavel cracked through the charged silence like a shot, piercing, final.

"Not guilty."

The words rang out with the sophisticated precision of judicial authority, but they hit like thunder between them.

Mac didn't move. Didn't flinch. Her spine was straight, shoulders squared, her expression carved in the unyielding granite of military decorum.

But Harm saw it, the split-second flicker in her dark eyes. That barely-there shift in her jaw. Emotion, expertly suppressed. Pride? Yes. Frustration? Maybe. But beneath it all was something deeper, something not quite nameable. Not yet.

He didn't smile. Didn't gloat.

He just caught her gaze across the courtroom and lifted two fingers to his temple in a mock salute.

A silent challenge. A private promise.

Your move, Colonel.

After the adjournment, as the courtroom emptied into the corridor and blended amidst office buzz, Harm waited, leaned casually against the muted doorway outside her office. A study in polished arrogance—jacket buttoned up, hands tucked in his pockets, like the world hadn't just tilted beneath them.

When she finally approached, folders tucked tightly against her chest, he straightened.

“Weekend's mine, Mac,” he said, voice low, unmistakable.

She stopped short, one brow arched with military skepticism. “And what exactly do you have in mind, Commander?”

He stepped forward, close enough that she could smell the faint scent of cedar and something distinctly him.

He didn't blink. Didn't waver.

“You'll see. Pack a bag. Civilian clothes only.”

A flicker of resistance crossed her face, habitual, instinctual. But when her mouth opened, ready to fire back, he touched the small of her back with just enough pressure to guide her past him.

His lips brushed her ear.

“For once, Marine... you're just going to have to trust me.”

It wasn't an order.

It was something riskier.

An invitation.

And for reasons she didn't entirely understand yet, she didn't say no.

The Flight

By the time the next afternoon gilded the sky in soft spring light, they were airborne.

The Stearman biplane cut across the clouds like a sunlit arrow, its wings gleaming bright yellow against the endless blue. The wind whipped Mac's hair back from her face, tangled it in loose strands that danced along her neckline.

She sat behind Harm, strapped in tight, her sunglasses nudged into her hair, her eyes wide behind aviator lenses she'd borrowed from his collection. She gripped the edges of the seat tighter than she'd meant to, her knuckles pale beneath the sun, but her mouth curled faintly, somewhere between apprehension and awe.

Flying still made her nervous, too much open air, too little control. She hated not having her boots on solid ground. But Harm? He came alive in the air. His shoulders relaxed, his expression softened, and his voice, when it crackled over the headset, carried a tone she only ever heard above the clouds.

So she let herself lean in. She allowed the sky to do what it did best, dissolve the edges of her defenses.

Let the wind carry her fears into the atmosphere. Let the clouds become vaults for every worry she was tired of holding onto. She tipped her face up toward the sun and saw the world not from the ground up, but from above, where everything felt clearer.

Below them, the earth sprawled out in soft waves of green and gold. Tiny roads curved like silver threads. Barns and silos looked like matchsticks. Rivers curled like ink strokes across colored canvas.

The horizon ahead glowed in gilded blues and purples, bleeding into each other like watercolor.

And still- Harm flew on.

The view was breathtaking.
And she meant that in more ways than one.

His grip steady on the controls, the hum of the engine thrumming beneath his skin like a second heartbeat, his profile etched in sunlight and focus. But every so often, he turned, just a little, stealing a glance back at her. A quick check.

A quiet hope.

She didn't know it yet, but he wasn't just flying her out of D.C.

He was flying her into the future they'd always circled around.

Into the heart of the storm they'd both avoided.

Into a weekend that wasn't about escape.

But about arrival.

And this time, he wasn't planning to land short of it.

And Mac, without realizing it, placed her hand over her heart.

As if something in her already knew-

This trip was going to change everything.

They touched down on a narrow airstrip bordered by dunes and wild grasses, just outside a coastal town so quaint it looked torn from the pages of a forgotten novel, in another century.

The main street was a cobblestone ribbon winding through whitewashed shops and cafés with lace-curtained windows. Flower baskets swung from the lampposts, red geraniums, lavender, ivy cascading like laughter in bloom. A breeze carried the scent of salt and citrus, mingling with the distant crash of waves.

Harm loaded their overnight bags into the back of a waiting jeep, then stole one last look at the sky before turning toward her. She had her hands in her jacket pockets, squinting up at the clocktower in the square, the corners of her mouth lifted, not quite a smile, but something softer.

Their villa sat high above the town, perched on a bluff overlooking the restless sea. It was carved from white stone that caught the sun like firelight, its deep blue shutters flung open to welcome the breeze. Ivy curled over the wrought-iron balcony like something out of an oil painting.

It wasn't fancy.

It was better.

Private.

Secluded.

A place where time slowed down.

Mac stood at the threshold for a long moment when they arrived. She didn't speak. Just breathed it in, eyes drifting from the wood-beamed ceilings to the sea crashing against the rocks below.

And for once, she didn't put up a wall. Didn't question the timing. Didn't brace herself for the retreat.

She just stepped inside.

And for the first time in years, maybe ever, Harm let himself believe:

Maybe this time, she wouldn't run.

They wandered down into town at sunset, their footsteps unhurried, the warm glow of lanterns flickering to life in the dusky haze. The restaurant was tucked down a narrow alley, stone steps, a hand-painted sign, and a single golden candle flickering in the window. Inside, it was quiet and warm, the tables close together, the air thick with the scent of saffron, garlic, and slow-roasted lemon.

They dined without hurry, the kind of meal that wasn't about food so much as the experience of being together in each other's presence.

Harm teased her gently about her cautious order of grilled sea bass; she retaliated by stealing the crispy edge of his flatbread when he wasn't looking. They shared sparkling water, laughter, and the occasional glance that lingered too long to be innocent.

After dinner, they wandered toward the sound of music, a tiny bar where a jazz trio played just off-key enough to feel alive. Strings of lights glowed overhead. Inside, the dance floor was barely more than polished wood and shadows.

Harm reached for her hand without asking.

And Mac, for once, didn't hesitate.

He pulled her into him, their bodies fitting together like an old story they'd both memorized by heart but never dared to speak aloud. Her head rested naturally on his shoulder, her breath warm against his neck. Her fingers curled into the soft cotton of his shirt like she'd been reaching for him in her sleep, for years.

He held her like that. Long after the song ended. Long after the other dancers melted away.

Long after the bartender called last call.

The moment didn't demand anything.

It just was.

And in that silence, filled with nothing but the sound of her breath and the press of her body against his, it began to settle, undeniable and unspoken.

They weren't circling anymore.
They weren't dancing around what might be.

They were falling.
Together.

And for the first time, neither of them felt the need to stop it.

The Villa

They barely made it inside the villa before Harm caught her hand, gentle, insistent, his thumb brushing the soft center of her palm in a silent question. The moment their skin touched, the world outside ceased to matter.

The door clicked shut behind them with a whisper. Moonlight poured through open windows, bathing the villa's bedroom in silver and shadows. She could hear the sea, steady and sure in the distance, as if the earth itself was exhaling around them. White gauze curtains stirred like breath around the canopy bed, its carved wood frame a quiet cathedral to the sacred thing neither of them dared name.

He didn't speak.

Didn't press.

Didn't try to claim her with heat or hunger or history.

He simply stepped forward and lifted one trembling hand to the curve of her jaw. She felt it then, the difference. He wasn't trying to possess her. He was trying to honor her.

Mac's chest rose with a breath that wasn't steady. Her eyes darted over his face, looking for the edge, the expectation, the trick in the light that would reveal some hidden motive. But Harm only looked at her like she was something he never thought he'd be allowed to touch again.

And then, softly, reverently, he reached for the straps of her dress.

She didn't stop him.

He peeled the fabric from her shoulders like he was unwrapping a gift he wasn't sure he deserved. It slipped down her arms, pooling at her feet in a whisper. His hands trembled slightly as they traced the lines of her, but he didn't rush. He didn't dominate. He didn't take.

He gave.

Every kiss was a benediction.

Every brush of his lips against her skin was an act of devotion.

Mac stood trembling under his touch, her breath caught somewhere between disbelief and desire. Her armor, layers of control, sarcasm, and steel, fell away like petals in the rain.

When he finally laid her back against the cool sheets, the fabric clung to her skin like it knew the weight of the moment. The canopy framed them like a secret the world had no right to witness.

He hovered above her, shoulders tense, eyes searching hers for something deeper than permission. Something like trust.

She looked up at him, her heart a fragile thing pounding against the cage of her ribs.

Looking for the trap.
The power play.
The hook.

But there wasn't one.

There was only Harm.

There was only love.

His mouth met hers, slow and deep and soul-stealing. There was nothing rushed about it, nothing performative. Just heat and reverence, breath shared between parted lips and unspoken devotion. Mac arched into him, her fingers threading into his hair as if she needed the contact to tether herself to the moment. His body settled into hers, familiar and electric, until the silence between them shattered into sighs.

Then- he began his descent.

His mouth left hers in a slow, provocative trail, tasting every inch of skin as though it were scripture. When he reached the delicate swell of her breasts, he paused, just long enough to look up at her, eyes dark with awe and hunger.

Then he lowered his head.

His lips closed around the first nipple, pink, pebbled, already begging for attention, and he licked, then sucked, lavishing her with long, sinuous strokes of his tongue. She gasped, her back arching in response, pressing herself closer to his mouth, her hands fisting in his hair with abandon. He alternated between both peaks, mapping her with his tongue, teasing her with just enough restraint to make her ache.

She tasted like a secret he'd waited years to uncover. She smelled like something uniquely hers, something he could find in the dark, something that had been imprinted on his senses long before he ever tasted her this way. Her scent, floral and earthy and undeniably Mac, made his pulse hum in his ears.

As he continued his slow, downward journey, his mouth left a heated path over the silk of her olive-toned skin.

He kissed her ribs, her navel, the inside of her hipbone, whispering vows in the form of breath and lips. His hands caressed her thighs, spreading them gently apart, and she opened for him instinctively, willingly offering herself with a gasp and a shudder.

Harm settled between her legs like a man finally allowed to kneel at an altar he'd only worshipped from afar. He kissed her inner thigh, then again, higher this time, and then he was there, at her center.

One slow stroke of his tongue, and Mac nearly levitated off the bed.

Her moans were unrestrained, beautiful, the kind of sounds that would echo in his head long after this moment ended. He licked her again, slower this time, drawing long, measured circles around her clit before teasing it with maddening care.

He knew her body like he knew a flight path, learned from turbulence and touch, from every trial and every time she'd nearly broken him in the courtroom. She was his greatest rival, his greatest victory. And here, in this sacred place between her thighs, he gave her everything.

He poured every ounce of love, of need, of knowing into each flick of his tongue.

Her hips lifted off the bed as her hands tangled in his hair, trying to pull him closer, to anchor herself against the oncoming storm.

“The things you do to me,” she breathed, half-moan, half-confession, a whisper too raw to be anything but truth.

“Tell me,” he coaxed, voice husky from between her legs, eyes locked to her face.

She only moaned.

“Tell me, Mac,” he growled, his grip tightening on her thighs, drawing them higher over his shoulders. His tongue stroked harder, faster, more deliberate.

“This... you... me... oh my God,” she cried, her voice high and cracking, her legs shaking violently. “It shouldn’t feel this way.”

“Or maybe it should,” he murmured, voice vibrating against her clit. The sensation sent her spiraling, her moans turning primal, uncontrollable. She pulled him closer, grinding into his mouth as the orgasm hit, hard and unstoppable, ripping through her like lightning across water.

And Harm didn’t stop.

Not until her cries faded into tremors. Not until she was gasping his name like a benediction, her body boneless and sated.

Only then did he move up her body, slow and deliberate, placing kisses along the path he'd just traveled, anchoring her back into her skin.

By the time he slid inside her, she wasn’t just ready.

She was completely undone.

And still, she reached for him, welcomed him home. Her warmth wrapped around him like heaven and fire, her slickness drawing a groan from deep in his chest as he sank into her inch by inch. He stilled, just for a moment, to let her adjust, his forehead resting against hers.

“I’ll tell you exactly what you do to me,” he whispered into her ear, voice raw and trembling. “You bring me to my knees, Mac. Turn me inside out- every damn time I’m inside you.”

He began to move, slow and steady, his hips rotating in a rhythm only they knew. She whimpered beneath him, and he caught the sound with his mouth, swallowing it like sacrament.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he murmured against her throat, pressing a kiss there as he drove deeper.

“I want you all the time,” he said, kissing her chin, then her lips.

“I want to make you mine,” he whispered, as he bottomed out inside her, their bodies fully joined.

She gasped, her hands sliding up his back, her nails scraping him.

“I belong to you,” he said, voice tense and strained. “And you belong to me. No outside entanglements. Remember?”

He caught her wrists, guiding her arms above her head, pinning them gently into the pillow as he thrust again, deeper this time. Her back arched in exquisite pleasure.

“You versus me, you plus me- it’s all the same now,” he said, kissing her like he could pour his soul into her mouth. “We were never enemies.”

“Tell me how that feels,” he growled against her lips, increasing the pace. “Right now. With me inside you. Tell me.”

“You,” she panted. “Me...”

She cried out as he shifted his angle, his hips hitting the place inside her that unraveled everything. “Can’t put into words,” she breathed, voice nearly breaking, her eyes fluttering open to meet his.

“This is exactly how it’s supposed to feel,” he whispered. “Beyond words.”

She nodded, trembling, undone.

He worshipped her with every thrust, every breath, every vow given in the quiet cathedral of her body.

They moved together, no longer with urgency but with sacred rhythm. Every breath. Every sound. Every connection forged not in domination, but in devotion.

They weren't just making love.

They were making a promise.

And it wasn't a conquest.
It wasn't a battle won.

It was a surrender.
His.

Every thrust was a vow wrapped in breath and skin and ache.

Every exhale against her neck was a truth he was too afraid to say aloud.

He didn't push her to give more.

He just gave.

All of him.

He let her take what she needed, and when she shattered, soft and gasping, her hands curled into the small of his back like she was anchoring herself to the moment, he didn't pull away.

He stayed.

He held.

He loved.

Her name fell from his lips like a prayer, raw and reverent.

And when she buried her face against his throat and whispered his name—not “Commander,” not “Rabb”—just Harm—

He knew.

Knew she was falling, too.

Maybe not all the way.

Maybe not with abandon.

But she was falling.

And for the first time in forever, Harm wasn't fighting to win or to stay in control.

He was fighting for them.

In the hush that followed, time seemed to suspend itself. Their breaths came slow and shallow, the kind of silence that wasn't empty but sacred, filled with everything neither of them had dared to say out loud.

They lay tangled together beneath the linen sheets, their skin still warm from the slow unraveling of everything they'd been holding back. The fabric clung lightly to their limbs, damp in places, twisted in others, but neither moved to fix it.

Mac rested her head against his chest, her cheek rising and falling with the steady rhythm of his heart.

One of her hands was splayed across his sternum, the pads of her fingers lightly tracing the cold edge of his dog tags where they lay against his skin. She followed the chain up to the hollow of his throat, then back down again, absentminded, but tender. Like a memory she wanted to memorize with her touch.

Outside, the sea whispered its steady lullaby, the waves rolling in soft, patient percussion just beyond the open windows. The air was thick with salt and the scent of jasmine climbing the villa walls. A breeze stirred the gauzy curtains, sending shadows dancing across the moonlit floor like half-formed thoughts they were too exhausted to chase.

The silver light poured in from the sky, painting everything it touched in shades of forgiveness. It caught the curve of her shoulder, the curve of his jaw, the faint sheen of sweat cooling between them. Their bodies fit as though they'd been carved to hold one another, curved and curled like parentheses around a truth they hadn't quite spoken but had lived.

Harm kissed the top of her head, barely a brush of lips against tangled hair. But the way his arms tightened around her, the way he pulled her into him like something precious, said more than words ever could. His thumb traced a slow line across the small of her back, anchoring her.

He didn't say it.

Didn't need to.

Because this moment wasn't about declarations.
Wasn't about victory.
Wasn't about the rules they'd both spent years hiding behind.

Tonight had been about surrender.
To trust.
To feeling.
To each other.

It had been about breaking every invisible chain she still wore like armor—the fear, the guilt, the impossible standards. The voice that always told her she had to be strong, that vulnerability was weakness, that needing someone would cost her everything.

And somehow, Harm had made space for all of that.
For her.
It was not as a challenge.
Nor as a conquest.
But as a choice.

He had chosen her, over reason, over pride, over every
instinct to protect himself.

And though she hadn't said the words either, though she
hadn't moved beyond this quiet tangle of limbs and
breath and warmth, he could feel it.

In the way she clung to him without flinching.
In the way her hand stayed at his heart.
In the way her body softened against his without the
tension that had always lingered before.

She was still learning how to stay.
Still learning how to trust that it was safe to be held.

But she was here.

Still.

And for the first time, he didn't feel like he was waiting
on the edge of goodbye.

Because somewhere in that moonlit quiet, she was
starting to choose him back.

Part 9- Is Forever Enough?

*"The real battle was never the courtroom — it was
choosing to believe that love could be enough."*

The morning light came in slow and honey-thick,
bleeding across the villa's terra cotta tiles and climbing
the edge of the wide bed in molten gold. Curtains stirred
lazily in the salt-laced breeze, ghosting across the floor
like the memory of last night. Somewhere beyond the
cliffs, gulls called low over the sea, and waves collapsed
against the rocks in soft, steady percussion.

Harm woke first.

He didn't move.
Didn't even blink.

Mac was curled into him like she'd always belonged there, her bare leg tangled over his, her cheek pressed just above his heart, the fall of her dark hair splayed across his skin like ink spilled in reverence. Her breathing was slow and even, mouth parted slightly, one hand resting at his ribs as if anchoring him in place.

His arms were wrapped around her like instinct. Like prayer.

And maybe... like fear. The quiet kind. The kind that came only after you realized you'd finally found what you couldn't bear to lose.

He stared down at her, at the soft line of her jaw, the sleep-flushed skin of her shoulder, the faint shadow of lashes against her cheek. There was something holy about the sight. Fragile. Real. Undeniable.

God, he loved her.

Not in the way he'd loved others. Not in the way he'd chased victories or respected orders.

This love was deeper. Messier. Quieter. The kind of love you didn't shout or stake a claim to. The kind you earned one breath, one touch, one terrifying moment of vulnerability at a time.

He pressed a kiss to her crown, letting it linger in her hairline. Then another, just above her temple.

And he let himself feel it. This. Her. *Home*.

Mac stirred slightly, letting out a soft sound, more exhale than word. She burrowed deeper into him before slowly blinking her eyes open, gaze finding his in the golden quiet.

They stared at each other for a beat suspended in amber. No ranks.

No uniforms.
No past to outrun.
Just Harm and Mac.

She shifted to prop herself up slightly, her hand drifting lazily down his chest, tracing the chain of his dog tags before splaying her palm over his heart.

She looked down, then up again, her expression unreadable—but unguarded.

"Morning," he said roughly, voice cracked with sleep and everything he hadn't said yet.

She smiled. Slow. Soft. Devastating.

"Morning, Sailor," she whispered, her voice husky with sleep, and with everything they'd become overnight.

He caught her hand against his chest, holding her there. "Mac..." His voice caught. "Last night—"

She silenced him with a kiss.

It was not rushed nor frantic. Just sure.

She pulled back barely enough to speak. "We don't need the rules anymore."

Six words. Quiet. Casual.

And yet they hit like a seismic shift.

Harm stilled beneath her.

He hadn't realized, truly realized, how much of him had been braced for goodbye. For the inevitable walls she would rebuild. For the retreat she always executed so precisely, so devastatingly, after they got too close.

But now—

We don't need the rules anymore.

Something in him cracked. And healed.

Mac rose onto her knees slowly, straddling his hips, the linen sheet slipping to her waist. Sunlight bathed her bare skin, casting golden strokes over every freckle, every scar, every inch he'd worshipped last night like a man who knew the honor of what he was being given.

Her fingers ghosted across his jaw, featherlight.

"No more wins needed," she said softly. "No more keeping score. No more pretending this is strategy or unresolved tension or a hundred courtrooms' worth of deflection."

Her voice dipped lower, vulnerable and sure.

“I just want you.”

Harm closed his eyes against the ache rising in his chest. And when he opened them again, she was still there.

Choosing him.

He reached up, threading his hand into the back of her hair, drawing her mouth down to his with aching need.

The kiss that followed was deep and slow and full of every word neither of them had dared speak aloud. It wasn't desperation. It became more than need.

It was devotion.

He rolled her gently beneath him, bracing his weight so he could look down at her- see her.

“I don't want to win anymore, Mac,” he rasped against her lips. “I just want you.”

Her eyes searched his. Then, with a breath that seemed to break something loose in her ribs, she whispered, “You have me. You always have.”

And then, no rules, no armor, no clock ticking down, they made love again.

It was slow and intentional like the sunrise.

His mouth worshipped every part of her, her clavicle, the slope of her shoulder, the curve of her waist. His hands held her like she was a truth he could finally touch. She arched into him with eyes wide open, letting him see her. All of her.

And when they shattered together in the light of day, it was not a surrender or a conquest-

It was a homecoming.

Mac dozed again, draped across his chest, her fingers curled loosely at his collarbone. Her hair spilled over them both, wild and sweet-smelling.

Harm stared up at the villa's exposed beams, heart impossibly full.

He didn't need courtroom victories anymore.
He didn't need walls.
He didn't need to win.
Not when he had this.
Not when he had her.

Mac woke slowly, cocooned in Harm's arms, her body deliciously sore in all the best ways, her heart... unguarded.

The sunlight was warmer now, higher, kissing her bare skin in soft gold.

For the first time in years, she didn't feel the weight of armor between herself and the world.

Only his hand, spread possessively across her bare waist like a claim, gentle but firm.

Only his breath, warm and steady at her temple.
She smiled into the curve of his chest. It was small.
Private. Almost shy.

The realization hit her with startling clarity and truth:
She was in love with him.

Had been, maybe, for far longer than she'd admitted.

And now, there was nothing standing between them. No orders. No battles. No pretense.

Just Harm. Just love.

She shifted slightly, feeling him stir, his hold tightening instinctively.

"Hey," he rumbled, voice sanded and rough with sleep.

She tilted her head back to meet his gaze.

God, he looked good like this, hair tousled, stubble shading his jaw, blue eyes softened by the morning and whatever miracle they'd found in each other overnight.

"Hey yourself," she whispered.

For a second, they just looked at each other.

There was no rush or urgency. Just the intimacy of *them*.

His thumb brushed lazy circles against her hip, his eyes tracing every detail of her face like he was memorizing it.

“Did you sleep okay?” he asked.

She nodded. “Better than I have in a long time.”

His mouth curved. “Me too.”

Another stretch of quiet wrapped around them, this time, full and warm, like a blanket.

And then, because she had never been good at standing still for too long, Mac teased lightly, "You realize, Commander, our agreement is officially null and void."

He arched a brow, the lazy smile playing at his mouth.

"No more battles?"

"No more battles."

"No more needing to win?"

She traced the line of his jaw with her fingertip, feeling the slight scrape of stubble.

"No more needing to win," she confirmed softly. "Not if it means losing you."

Something in his face shifted, deepened.

Harm shifted too, rolling onto his side so they were face to face, their bodies tangled beneath the sheets.

"I don't want to win against you anymore, Mac," he said quietly. "I want to win with you."

The words settled into her chest, sweet and devastating all at once.

"You already have," she whispered.

Harm's hand cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking over her skin with aching tenderness.

"Then let me prove it," he said. "Every day. Not just after a verdict. Not just here in borrowed time. Every damn day, Mac."

Her throat tightened.

"I want that," she whispered. A pause. Her voice trembled. "I want you."

He smiled, this beautiful, relieved, boyish smile, and leaned in to press a kiss to her forehead, her nose, her mouth.

Slow, reverential.

"I'm in this," he said against her lips. "All in. No verdicts. No scorecards. Just us."

She blinked fast, tears threatening.

"God, Harm," she murmured, "you drive me crazy."

"That's part of my charm."

She laughed, really laughed, and he kissed her again just to taste it.

"Besides," he added, voice dropping low and mischievous as his hand slid beneath the sheets to curve around her thigh, "I've still got plenty of ways to drive you crazy. Without needing a court order."

Mac gasped when his fingers teased a slow, deliberate path up her skin.

She tried to glare at him.

And failed spectacularly.

"You're insufferable," she said breathlessly.

"And you're stuck with me now," he murmured against her throat, his smile a brand.

"Promise?" she whispered.

He stilled, just for a second, and then pulled back to look her full in the eyes.

"No more rainchecks," he said.

Just to reassure-

"No more rules."

Just a lifetime of mornings like this.

Of loving her like breathing.

Of choosing her, again and again.

He kissed her, deep and sure, sealing the promise between them.

And when they finally rose from the tangled sheets to greet the new day, hand in hand, Mac knew—this was more than a ceasefire.

This was forever.

Part 10- Rabb v. Rabb (Epilogue)

"Verdict: Forever."

It started in the courtroom—

With raised voices and cross-examinations that weren't in the transcript. With challenges leveled not with objections, but with glances held a beat too long. With tension that curled around them like legalese: binding, inescapable, and entirely unspoken.

It didn't end in a verdict.
It ended here.

Or maybe—finally—it began.

Sunday morning unfurled across Harm's loft in golden sheets of sunlight, slipping through the slats in the blinds and painting everything it touched in warm, honeyed light. On the floor lay a scatter of clothing, her pumps, his belt, the navy-blue blazer she'd worn to court the day before, all discarded like evidence of a battle neither had won nor lost.

On the couch, they were tangled.
Limbs and laughter. Heartbeats and heat.
Two stubborn souls who had finally stopped fighting long enough to fall.

Just to reassure-

"No more rules."

Just a lifetime of mornings like this.

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Two stubborn souls who had finally stopped fighting long enough to fall.

Mac sat astride him, wearing nothing but one of his white Academy shirts, sleeves rolled, hem skimming her thighs. Her hair was a wild, unruly halo, her skin still flushed with the kind of exertion that had nothing to do with legal sparring. She wore a smile, not smug, not practiced. Victorious. Earned.

Harm lay beneath her, shirtless, arms folded behind his head like he'd surrendered willingly to whatever judgment she delivered next.

"You know," Mac said, idly tracing a finger down the center of his chest, stopping just above the waistband of his boxers, "I always suspected you'd be a sore loser."

He arched a brow, his mouth tilting into that signature Rabb half-smile, equal parts amused and infuriating. "And I always suspected you'd be a worse winner."

She leaned down until her mouth hovered over his, her breath a tease against his lips. "You love it."

He stilled. Just enough to make the air shift.

"I love you," he said.

The words weren't strategic. They weren't part of some emotional cross-examination. They just... were.

Mac froze, her pupils dilating, her breath caught mid-air like a clause waiting for a closing sentence.

And then, no shields, no quips, no retreat, she kissed him. Softly. Surely. With the kind of certainty that didn't require a ruling.

"I love you too," she whispered against his mouth.

That was the final verdict.
Unanimous.
No appeals.

Still, Mac sat back on his hips with a wicked smirk and placed her hands squarely on his chest. "For the record," she said, teasing, "today's score? Mackenzie: 1. Rabb: 0."

He narrowed his eyes, lifting his hands to catch her wrists in a loose, warm grip. "On what grounds?"

"I got you to say it first."

He laughed, a low, dangerous sound, and without warning, rolled, flipping her onto her back and pinning her wrists above her head. The couch cushions shifted beneath them, a rustle of fabric and heat and memories.

“Careful, Marine,” he warned, mouth hovering at the shell of her ear. “Keep that up and we might have to take this back to court.”

Her laughter spilled out a, gorgeous, reckless sound that made his chest ache.

“Objection,” she whispered, just as he lowered his head to kiss the slope of her throat.

“Sustained,” he murmured, lips trailing higher.

Then, he stilled. Pulled back just enough to meet her eyes.

“This court recognizes,” he said, his voice rough and low, “the case of Rabb v. Rabb.”

Mac blinked, her brow arching.

“On what grounds?” she echoed, breath catching.

His hand moved then, slow, purposeful, as he reached behind a throw pillow and pulled out a small velvet box.

He brought it between them, flipping it open with a quiet click.

A ring. Simple. Elegant. Timeless.

A platinum band with three stones, one for the past, one for the present, and one for every future they’d fought so hard not to want.

It sparkled quietly in the morning light. But it was his eyes, naked, waiting, that stole her breath.

“On the grounds,” he said, steady now, “that you’re about to become my wife.”

Mac didn’t speak.

Couldn’t.

The air around her thinned, shimmered.

He held her gaze. Didn't press. Didn't plead. Just... waited.

She stared at the ring, and then up at him, at the man who'd once been her rival, her partner, her pain, her peace.

And with a shaky breath, she smiled.

"I don't even have to think about it," she said. Her voice cracked right down the center.

She pulled him down into a kiss that was all answer.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

When he slid the ring onto her finger, his hands trembling ever so slightly, it fit like it had been waiting for her all along.

"Looks like we need to amend the case title," she whispered as he kissed her knuckles.

"Mackenzie v. Rabb?" he offered, his voice husky.

She shook her head. "Rabb v. Rabb."

He smiled, brushing her hair back from her forehead.

"And this time," she whispered, pulling him closer, "we both win."

His arms locked around her like a promise. A lifetime promise.

And in that quiet, sun-warmed loft, filled with echoes of old arguments and new beginnings, Harm kissed his fiancée, his equal, his home, with everything he had left to give.

No one surrendered this time.

No one needed to.

They had chosen each other.

Every battle.

Every verdict.
Every heartbeat.

Together.
Forever.

And somewhere, in the chambers of a higher court than any they'd ever served in, the matter of *Mackenzie v. Rabb* was dismissed—with prejudice.

The new case—*Rabb v. Rabb*—was hereby entered.

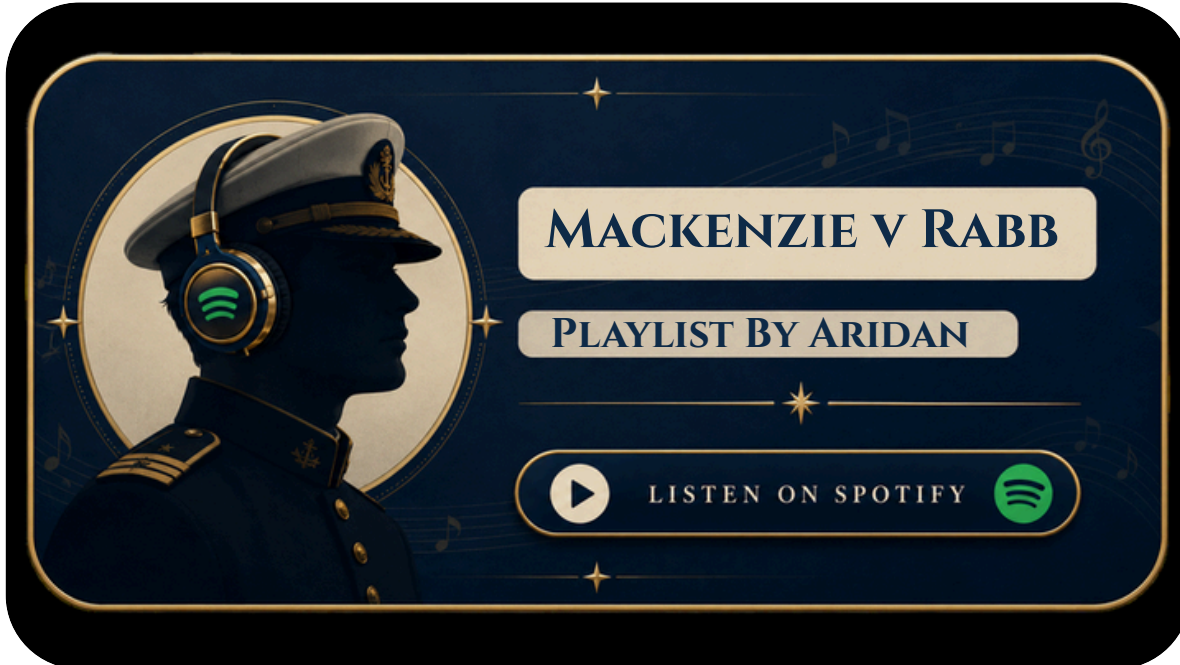
Judgment:
Love.
Life.
Always.

FIN

THE SOUND OF MACKENZIE V RABB



Click Here to Play the Story Music Playlist:



Or Scan to Listen:



Dangerous — Royal Deluxe

The story opens with Harm in command. He is dominating the courtroom, carrying the confidence of his last victory over Mac into another case, and remembering exactly what winning meant once the courtroom doors closed. Mac has one problem; if she wants to change the terms, she has to beat him first.

Glory and Gore — Lorde

Competition becomes seduction. Mac finds her opening and begins fighting her way toward the next win. In court they are ruthless, strategic, and relentless. Somewhere along the way, winning stopped being the foreplay to their game and became the foreplay itself.

Love and War — Fleurie

All is fair between Mackenzie and Rabb. They challenge each other professionally, personally, and emotionally, seemingly incapable of surrender anywhere except the one place where their rules have always been clear.

Love Is a Battlefield — Pat Benatar

For two people trained to fight, love becomes another field of engagement. Every argument, challenge, victory, and retreat raises the stakes. Their arrangement was supposed to produce a winner. Instead, it keeps exposing everything neither of them wants to lose.

Mercy — Shawn Mendes

Mac wins. Harm remembers exactly how thoroughly he collected on his own victory, which means he understands what is coming. Unfortunately for him, Mac remembers too. His best strategy now may be the one thing he rarely asks her for: mercy.

Dangerous Woman — Ariana Grande

Harm expects retaliation. Mac gives him anticipation instead. She lets him wait, wonder, and unravel until he is nearly asking her to collect the victory he once thought he could handle. When he finally calls her dangerous, Mac has only one question: You're just now figuring that out?

Earned It — The Weeknd

Mac's victory is not handed to her. Every moment of control is fought for, anticipated, prolonged, and earned. By the time she claims it, Harm understands exactly what it means to lose to someone who knows him this well.

I Found — Amber Run

The game finally knocks Harm off balance. Beneath the rivalry, rules, and negotiated victories, he recognizes something neither of them ever agreed to: love. Deep, inconvenient, undeniable love.

The Sweetest Taboo — Sade

Mac retreats from Harm's declaration while he is left examining everything they have become. Their relationship has always existed in dangerous territory: intimate yet undefined, loyal yet hidden, intoxicating precisely because neither of them has dared ask what happens if they make it real.

Heavy in Your Arms — Florence + the Machine

Love becomes heavier once Harm admits what it is. Mac is not ready to leave the safety of their game, and Harm finds himself carrying the emotional weight for both of them. He decides that if she cannot yet believe his words, he will find another way to make her feel the depth of his devotion.

Untitled (How Does It Feel) — D'Angelo

Desire and vulnerability finally occupy the same space. Harm takes Mac somewhere beyond competition, beyond rules, beyond winning, trying to show her that what exists between them does not disappear when the game ends. What they have is real.

Say You Won't Let Go — James Arthur

Harm stops arguing about who wins. Mackenzie versus Rabb. Rabb versus Mackenzie. None of it matters anymore. Beneath every case, every challenge, every year of almost, it has always been them.

Cover Me in Sunshine — P!nk & Willow Sage Hart

Morning changes the emotional temperature. Sunlight slips beyond the curtains as Mac wakes inside something gentler than their old arrangement. For once, she is not Harm's opponent, partner, or rival. She is simply the woman he loves, and she begins allowing herself to imagine staying there.

You Are the Best Thing — Ray LaMontagne

Their relationship becomes something transformative rather than competitive. The qualities that once made them formidable opponents become the foundation of a partnership neither of them could have built with anyone else.

At Last — Etta James

The final surrender belongs to both of them. Harm asks Mac to marry him, bringing their legendary Mackenzie v. Rabb rivalry to its most fitting conclusion: not one defeating the other, but both choosing the same side. Rabb v. Rabb.



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CREATOR NOTES AND DISCLOSURES

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