



ZERO HOUR

A JAG STORY *by AriDan*

CHAPTER TWO

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

Part IV — Mutual Consent

"A continuance buys time, not absolution. What you do with it writes the true record."

— Naval Court Proceedings, Annotated

They knew the codes by heart, every article, every clause, every unspoken line meant to keep impulse from colliding with command.

Article 86: Unauthorized leave.

Article 107: False statements.

Article 133: Conduct unbecoming.

Article 134: Fraternization.

Each citation lived in muscle memory, drilled through years of courtroom ritual and combat decorum.

And yet, beneath the same discipline that had shaped them, another law stirred, older, wordless, absolute. It did not care for protocol or precedent. It did not recognize rank. So when their weekend began, it was not ignorance that carried them past the threshold; it was consent to fall.

They would brief the rules, then break them, one statute at a time, until the ledger of the Uniform Code gave way to the code of desire.

They were the Navy and Marine Corps at their finest: precision, honor, discipline. And love's greatest fools, forever executing the mission and failing the heart.

Exhibit A — Unnamed Airfield.

Charge: Article 86 – Absence Without Leave.

Intent: Willful.

They didn't just leave the base; they deserted reason.

The runway shimmered like a blade under the noon sun, heat rising from the tarmac, rotors chopping the air into bright floating ribbons. Harm cut the engine and the world exhaled. The trace of fuel thinned in the air, giving way to the clean bite of pine carried on a distant breeze. The propeller slowed, each spin slicing their stolen time into seconds. Forty-eight hours, that was the deal, and the weekend began with the whine of metal easing into silence.

He climbed out and reached for Mac, palm steady, eyes soft. “Last chance to abort,” he said lightly, the undertone anything but.

Mac slid her hand into his, a pulse flickering between them. “Negative,” she answered, the word heavier than it should have been, the kind you couldn’t take back once spoken.

He didn’t let go. “You should know,” his voice dropped, edged with something darker, “I can’t promise you the restraint I’m typically known for. Whatever happens-”

She cut him off, her tone matching his gravity. “Good. I wasn’t planning on holding back either.”

For a beat, silence stretched between them, thick, charged, binding.

He gave a slow, knowing smile. “Sounds like mutual consent.”

“I consented the moment we lifted off the tarmac,” she said, eyes calm and pointed.

To anyone else, it would have looked casual. But his warmth traveled straight through her, igniting the ache she’d spent years trying to bury. Her pulse kicked, and she stepped out of the yellow bi-plane and into the weekend he’d promised.

Shouldering their bags, Harm handed the logbook to the waiting attendant, a stocky man in coveralls who tipped his cap and checked the tie-down lines.

“Full tank for the ride back?” the man asked.

“Top her off, would you? And keep her inside until Sunday,” Harm said, his voice low and easy, like a man trying not to broadcast how personal this trip was.

The man tipped his cap. His eyes flicked briefly to Mac, then back, unreadable but polite. “Yes, sir. She’ll be waiting.”

The echo of rotors faded. Only the pines breathed. The world seemed to tilt toward possibility.

Exhibit B — Across Still Waters.

Charge: Article 107 – False Statements.

Intent: Coordinated.

Deceit is its own form of intimacy.

At the dock, the boatman rowed them across a lake so still it mirrored sky for sky, oars dipping like measured heartbeats. Each pull sent rings widening behind them, as though erasing the past in perfect circles.

“Nights are quiet out here.”

The oars cut again, soft. “...nobody hears a thing.”

Another pull. The hull rocked once. “Best place to leave it all behind.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the couple seated mid-boat, close but not too close. Their knees nearly brushed, yet their eyes refused to meet. A quiet, invisible current pulled between them, not quite affection, not quite distance, something magnetic and unnamed. He couldn't help it; something about the pair had him guessing. They didn't fit the usual pattern. Too composed, too quiet, as if whatever passed between them couldn't bear daylight. The tension hummed beneath the stillness, faint but undeniable, as though they carried a storm no one else could see. He couldn't tell if they were lovers, adversaries, or both, but he knew whatever they were, it ran deep.

“Anniversary?” he asked.

Harm's eyes stayed on the horizon. “No.”

“Birthday?”

“No.”

“Special occasion then, something worth celebrating?”

“Just getting away,” Harm said, tone short but steady. He didn't want to expose them any more than they already were. Two officers out of uniform, sitting too close, crossing still waters under a lie that could ruin them both.

The boatman chuckled, as if he'd made the connection. “Ah, one of those weekends,” he said, grin widening.

“Can’t say I blame you. Sometimes a man needs to disappear someplace private with the woman he loves. If she were mine, I wouldn’t wanna share her with anyone either. Lucky man. I say that respectfully, ma’am.”

The air went still. Mac’s breath caught, eyes fixed on the mirrored lake. Harm’s jaw flexed once, then again, every muscle in his face trained not to react.

“Prettiest spot on the lake,” the boatman went on, his tone drifting into the practiced rhythm of a man who’d given the same speech a hundred times. Filling the silence he thought he understood, but didn’t. Not really. It was too layered, too charged with history for him to read. “Most private too. Lot of space to yourselves out there.” The oars slowed, wood groaning like an old confession. “They say you come once and never forget. You leave different than you came.”

He glanced toward the horizon. “Some claim the lake keeps a ledger. You give it something, an object, a vow, a piece of yourself, and it gives something in return. Nothing free. Nothing owed. Just the wyrd of the water, weaving you in.”

Harm’s arm brushed hers. “Sounds like superstition,” he said, recovering from the awkward exchange, his voice quiet but pointed, a small assertion of control.

Mac looked down at the reflection of their joined silhouettes trembling on the surface.

She swallowed. “Maybe superstition’s just another word for truths we can’t explain.”

The words left her before she could stop them, raw and unguarded. She’d seen too much to believe everything had a rule or reason. She and Harm were proof enough, friends, partners, soon-to-be lovers, opposites bound by gravity no one could chart. Some things defied logic. Some things simply were.

But Harm obviously didn’t see it that way.

He gave a low chuckle. “We’re lawyers, Mac. We explain the truth for a living.” His tone softened, almost teasing. “I’ll leave the mysteries to the lake and focus on enjoying the weekend.”

The boat touched shore with a whisper.

The words drifted over them like oar strokes, smooth, calm, but Mac felt them sink deeper. Leave different than you came. The phrase burrowed under her ribs. She inhaled, tasting cedar and consequence.

Mic had promised her forever, stability, a life built on vows she could climb like steps on a ladder. Harm offered forty-eight hours, a weekend wrapped in fire and desire. And still, she knew where her pulse came alive. She wanted this place to burn them clean, to strip away the endless circles they flew. She told herself she'd leave with Harm out of her system, free to choose a foundation she'd craved since childhood. But part of her knew the truth: once she touched this, there would be no going back.

In Annapolis he'd asked her to weigh fear against prudence. Her answer now was neither. Face the fear. Challenge prudence. Choose the fire.

She reached for his outstretched hand as she stepped out of the boat, the lake whispering at her boots, sunlight flashing off the water like judgment and invitation at once. His palm was steady, hers sure. Consent, in every sense, sealed in that single contact.

She wanted his touch branded into her skin for one weekend, to carry it back into her life like a secret scar, proof of another battle survived. For once, she would tip the scales toward desire, because they had leaned toward duty for far too long.

Exhibit C — Breaking and Entering.

Charge: Article 121 – Unauthorized Entry / Possession.

Intent: Mutual.

The door gave way, but what they stole was each other.

Crossing a threshold before consummation was supposed to be ceremonial, a groom lifting his bride into forever, vows still echoing like bells as he carried her across a doorway meant to sanctify what came next. But this was no honeymoon. This was forty-eight hours stolen back from a timeline where pride had barred the door. The only vows that lingered were the ones at the dock, when Harm tossed a promise to the boatman to find out why the lake was unforgettable.

The words had sounded light, almost ordinary, the kind of thing a couple might say at the start of a weekend meant for cozy mornings and pine-scented afternoons.

But Harm's gaze never settled on the Lakehouse itself. The house was not the focus, only the cover. His true intention was her, the woman stepping into the space beside him, carrying with her every room they had locked and left unexplored. He wanted to trace them all, the chamber of what they had buried, the corridor of near confessions, the hidden stairwell of unspent longing.

What lived between them was not the gentle current of a typical couple but something deeper, more unruly, a tide that had been pulling since the Rose Garden, the spark that altered the course of everything that followed. Here, with hours stolen from a future already slipping away, he meant to step inside it fully. To know what he was truly letting go.

She had opened the door at her engagement party with a goodbye kiss. He'd answered with one of his own, pulling her back in as if refusal itself were a language he refused to learn. He hadn't lied when he said he wasn't ready to let her go, and he proved it by slipping his name into the Lakehouse reservation after a last-minute cancellation, stealing the weekend like a classified mission filed under impulse. She said they were getting too good at saying goodbye. That was an understatement. He'd called her bluff and raised her one.

The Lakehouse readied itself for a polite arrival: a woven Welcome mat beaded with cool air, blinds tilted to frame the lake in orderly slats, walls waiting to offer their curated stillness. But it wasn't ready for the door slammed against its frame, the blinds rattling in protest, or the man who lifted her against the wood before introductions could be made.

They were two officers who had spent years denying the same order: stand down. Years of courtroom decorum and military restraint fractured in seconds.

Harm's hands locked at her waist, his mouth crushed to hers, swallowing her moan before either of them had time to breathe. Their kiss wasn't practiced; it was a breach.

She arched her back into the door, allowing him to cage her there as he drank from her lips with a thirst that bordered on desperation. His mouth moved over hers, slow at first, savoring the taste of her surrender, tongues sliding together in a wet, heated tangle that pulled a soft whimper from her throat.

“Mac,” he growled against her mouth, the vibration rumbling through her chest, igniting sparks that pooled low in her belly.

The welcome mat never stood a chance. It vanished beneath his shoes, trampled and forgotten, as the foyer swallowed them whole. The house could keep its warmth; they had carried their own fire in with them, reckless, uncontained, burning enough to make every room theirs before they even crossed the threshold.

Their bags lay abandoned by the door like the lives they had left behind. Harm shifted her from the door to the wall, the impact knocking a “Home Sweet Home” stag from its mount, wood splintering against the floor, a symbol of steadiness shattered in the first blow.

Every crash sounded like a rule breaking, decorum, duty, denial- each splinter one less barrier between them.

Mac hardly noticed. The pleasure threading her spine eclipsed everything else. What she did notice was how desperately she needed this release, from years of courtroom battles that had worn her raw, from the rejection that had callused her heart in Sydney, from the suffocation of planning a wedding she couldn’t breathe inside.

But as his hands roamed and her breath hitched, reflection flared to the surface like heat through glass. She saw every version of herself he had helped shape and unravel: the friend who’d steadied her, the partner who’d challenged her, the man who’d left her waiting in too many doorways filled with unsaid things. And then he’d shown up at her lecture, uninvited, sitting there like some unrepentant shadow of everything unfinished between them. One look from him and every barrier she had built cracked.

The memory surged now, sharp and blinding, and it made her want to claw at him, to punish and claim all at once. He had been the cause, the wound, the remedy.

“You really have some nerve, you arrogant son of a bitch,” she gasped between kisses, voice sharp and trembling.

He had braced for that line, but not here, not now. Rage bled into want so fast she couldn’t tell where one ended and the other began. Her body didn’t care that her mind was furious; both were aimed at him.

He’d expected it back on the airfield, her storming off, telling him to go to hell before the propeller had even cooled. He’d played out that version a dozen times: her walking away, head high, leaving him in the exhaust of his hesitation. What he hadn’t imagined was her saying it with his mouth still on hers, fury tangled with desire, her body answering every word she threw at him. The contradiction thrilled him. It was so her, fire wrapped in control, breaking in the one place she swore she wouldn’t.

“You always struck me as someone who’d be into dirty talk,” he said, mouth at her jaw, words half choke, half tease.

Her nails raked his shoulders. “I almost threw you out of my lecture on the Somers Affair. You just couldn’t let things alone after my engagement party. You saw an opening and you took it.”

He met her glare with a breathless grin. “Every good lawyer knows the window of opportunity to make your case is slim when you’re placed on the defensive.”

Even now, mid-argument, she thrilled him. No courtroom had ever made his pulse race like this woman spitting fire against his mouth.

She bit his bottom lip, hard enough to draw a hiss. “You should’ve said yes in Sydney. I practically threw myself at you.”

He froze mid-breath, the air between them trembling. He’d replayed that night too many times, every almost-touch, every word he should’ve said. He’d called it honor. It had only been fear.

“I wanted to,” he murmured, voice low and rough. “Believe me, I wanted to.”

Her response came like a verdict. “Then why didn’t you?”

He caught her wrist, their eyes locking. “And if I had?”

“We wouldn’t have spent the last year flaunting Mic or Renee in each other’s faces.”

His jaw tightened. “Not just Mic. You love flashing that damn ring in my face.”

“And you can’t help that your default setting for a girlfriend is set on surface level and blonde. You like easy.” she countered, breath quickening as he pressed her harder against the wall. “I only flash it to push you to say what you want.”

“You know what I want.”

“But you still won’t say it.”

He growled, voice low, guttural. “What do you think this entire weekend’s about?”

“Your oversized ego,” she whispered, eyes fierce. “You can’t stand that Mic has me.”

His hand slipped beneath her shirt, skin on skin, the air shifting between them. “He can’t make you feel the way I do. I know it. I felt it in your kiss at the party. The way your hand touched mine when the cake rolled out.”

Her defiance faltered, pulse hammering at her throat. “If you’re going to marry him,” he said quietly, leaning close enough for her to feel the words against her skin, “then I’m going to make it hard for you to forget me.”

Her fingers fisted in his shirt. As if forgetting were possible. He was already embedded in her, in every victory briefed, every loss survived, every look across a courtroom that made her pulse misbehave. This weekend would only seal it.

She had told herself she wouldn’t come, that she’d buried this under vows and compromise. But pinned here, legs wrapped around his waist, the hard line of him pressing against her through their clothes, denial cracked like that fallen stag, an inevitable verdict.

For five years, every choice had traced back to him, the hidden constant in her life. And now, pressed against this wall, she wanted what she had denied herself over and over. She wanted the one man she never thought she would have, not like this, not raw and real.

The scent of the northeastern sky clung to her hair; the taste of salt lived on his skin. Everything familiar, and nothing safe.

Her hands clawed at his aviator jacket, nails scraping leather. “Off,” she breathed between kisses.

He obliged, the jacket falling in a heavy heap. She tore at his t-shirt next, tangling with the cool press of his Navy-issued dog tags. There was no finesse, no patience. This was overdue.

He stripped her white tee away and smoothed her hair back, framing eyes lit with need. For a split second he froze, struck by what he saw there, the same hunger that had haunted him through every courtroom, every case, every lonely night. Fear twisted under his ribs. She could have walked away. He might have lost her forever without ever knowing what this felt like. His chest burned at the thought, and the sound he made was less growl than plea.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” he murmured, his breath hot against her ear. “You have no idea.”

Oh, but she did.

When he fumbled with the clasp of her bra, his elbow knocked a row of framed photos turned voyeurs from the mantel. They hit the floor in a domino of glass and wood. Autumn leaves, winter snow, spring blossoms, summer light- all scattered like the seasons they had wasted apart.

Harm didn’t even look down. “We’ll clean it up later,” he rasped. “Right now,” his lips brushed her jaw, “I want you.”

His thumb found the clasp and the bra gave way, straps slipping down her arms. Her breasts, tanned and rose-tipped, lifted to meet him as if they had been waiting for this all along.

She guided his mouth to them with both hands, desperate, demanding. The sound that tore from her throat hit him harder than a carrier landing, and he drank greedily, pouring into her every fantasy that had haunted his loneliest nights.

He feasted, slow, worshipful, then greedy, like a starving man finally set loose. Each gasp, each tug of her fingers in his hair, was a verdict he had waited years to hear.

“God, Harm.” Her voice cracked with need. For the first time in months, maybe years, she stopped fighting. She let herself feel. And it felt good.

He drank her in until hunger pushed them forward again. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer, her heart pounding in sync with the pulse between her thighs. She kissed him deeper, pouring years of unspoken longing into it, her tongue exploring his mouth as if mapping every hidden corner of his soul. He groaned into her, the sound vibrating through her, and she felt him harden further, his erection straining against the zipper of his jeans, rubbing against her.

They stumbled down the hallway, bumping into tables and frames, wrecking the house the way they were wrecking every boundary they’d kept. He’d spent years convincing himself honor meant distance. But if this was dishonor, he wanted no acquittal.

A lamp rocked dangerously. A framed print rattled against the wall. A bowl spun across the dining room as he set her on the edge, his hands already peeling her jeans away. Her thighs parted instinctively, his arousal pressing hot and insistent between them.

She teased him with each button she loosened, nails daring, teeth catching his jaw, biting just hard enough to make him growl. “You’re wound too tight, Commander.”

“Five years too tight,” he rasped, truth spilling raw. Then he silenced her with a kiss that wasn’t request or permission but a claim.

She made a claim of her own, slipping her hands inside his boxers, wrapping him in her palms so she could feel the hardened truth, years of denial surging against her grip like something caged too long.

“Can you feel what you do to me?” he whispered. Her smirk was half-broken, half-sigh. “You’re doing the same to me.”

With a sudden whirl, he gathered her up, wrapping her legs around his waist. Welcome brochures and papers slid off the table like confetti, a centerpiece clattering to the floor. He stumbled toward the stairs, lips locked to hers, stealing her breath, his balance thrown by the ferocity between them.

“Stairs,” he panted. “We need to get upstairs.”

But his foot caught on a rug, his body jolting hers, making them both gasp. He pressed her harder against him to keep from falling, too lost in her mouth to care.

“We won’t make it,” she gasped through her ragged breathing.

Mac tipped her head back, a flash of every secret fantasy she’d ever buried. “What’s wrong with the wall right here?”

For one suspended heartbeat, they both saw what this was, a beginning disguised as an ending.

Harm’s eyes darkened. “Not a damn thing.”

He pinned her there, panties shoved aside, his fingers finding her wetness, sliding through her folds with a gentleness that contrasted the feral hunger in his eyes. “So ready for me,” he said softly, dipping one finger inside her, then two, curling them to stroke that spot that made her clench around him. Mac’s head fell back, a moan escaping as he worked her slowly, building the tension with intimate precision, his free hand cradling her face to keep their eyes locked.

Just as Mac felt herself spiraling, he withdrew his fingers, the loss making her whine, but then he freed himself, thick and throbbing, positioning at her entrance. With a shared breath, a moment of suspended intimacy where their foreheads touched and breaths mingled, he pushed inside her, slow, inch by inch, letting her feel every ridge, every pulse. Her walls fluttered around him, welcoming him after all this time.

The world went still, just them, joined, weightless before the fall.

A rough groan tore from his chest. He shoved deeper, filling her completely, and she wrapped her legs tighter, pulling him impossibly closer. Then a different kind of dance began, its first step shattering the house's quiet. His hips drove harder, rhythm reckless, their sounds echoing off walls that had known mornings and families but never this. Every stroke was a confession. Every grind a declaration.

He held still, buried deep, forcing the words out steady. "You weren't coming," he ground out, each thrust a question he already knew the answer to. "I know you weren't. Why?"

Her breath hitched. "The world doesn't revolve around you," she gasped, though her hips betrayed her, rising to meet him.

"You can't always have your way," she tried again, voice unsteady. He caught her words with another deep thrust, rough, unrelenting.

"Then what do you call this?" he murmured against her ear, his thumb circling where she ached most. "God, you feel so good. What is this, Mac?"

She clawed at his shoulders, voice splintering. "Not you," she managed, fierce but trembling. "For me. I had to know."

He stilled, chest heaving. "Know what?"

Her nails raked down his back, eyes squeezed shut under the weight of everything- their history, her vows, every denial they'd ever sworn by. She opened them again, locking on his, tears glinting under the dim light.

"I had to know what it feels like," she whispered, her voice breaking as he began to move again, slow, tender, inevitable. "For one weekend, I want to feel everything."

The words undid him. For a heartbeat he watched her face, the air between them thickened, her pulse answering his.

Then he thrust sharper, testing her confession. Her moans blurred into something raw, stripped of control. Her thighs locked around him, chest pressed tight.

"Mac."

She silenced him with a kiss, biting his lip to seal her vow. “Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.”

The room answered with silence, the kind that lives inside a storm.

He obeyed rougher, until a frame crashed to the floor. Neither flinched. They were too far gone. Her voice broke. “Years... Harm, I—” But the rest dissolved into a cry as he drove her higher up the wall.

Her surrender was total, the hunger of years unraveling in the sound of her breaking. He kissed her hard, devouring the cry, tasting denial and confession at once. She convulsed, shattered. He followed, their finish crashing like a wave too strong to fight.

Then came the quiet, raw and enormous, the kind that follows impact.

They slid down the wall, collapsing at the base of the stairs, tangled in sweat and slanted sunlight. A trail of discarded clothes and broken objects lay behind them. Mac’s gaze caught a small wooden plaque, knocked askew. Harm followed her eyes.

The plaque read like a warning now. WELCOME HOME. Prophecy in paint. What began here would not stay contained.

Home wasn’t a place. It was this, her body tangled with his, the collision of friendship and partnership that had always been their safest space and their most dangerous. Their ruin and refuge, written in the same breath.

He wasn’t ready to say it aloud.

The Lakehouse groaned, beams shuddering as if it understood what had been unleashed within its walls. It had seen summers fade, lovers drift, families gather. But this was different. This was a firestorm. Passion had never been just passion. What began here would not end quietly. It would burn. It would echo. It would refuse to extinguish. This was detonation disguised as desire.

Exhibit D — Hunger Games

Charge: Article 133 – Conduct Unbecoming.

Intent: Deliberate.

They built their case in heat and motion, each touch a testimony, each breath another piece of evidence neither could suppress.

Two lies, one truth.

She told Mic she needed a weekend away with friends. He told Renee he was going flying. Both lies carried just enough truth to sound believable. The flight was real, and the invitation to meet a friend existed. What neither said aloud, what the truth held back, was that the coordinates of their getaways matched.

The first thing they tried to put out was the fire between them. It followed them in through the door, licked along the walls, and seated itself at the table like a third-place setting. Extinguishing it had been the plan. Feed their bodies, quiet their pulses, gain control. The lake house heard the lie and held its breath. The second Harm tried to provide sustenance, the kitchen answered with its own omen. Flame up, yes, but only to be doused for another kind of hunger the minute she walked in and looked at him.

He stood at the oven range bare-chested, heat rising against his face, a skillet glossed with butter just beginning to brown. He added a crushed clove, then another, the flat of his knife pressing garlic into a paste that hissed when it hit the pan. A ribbon of olive oil chased the foam into a nutty sheen. He shook the pan once, wrist easy, then reached to the cutting board where cherry tomatoes beaded with water. Halves fell like coins, scattering into the sizzle. Salt between his fingers. A crack of pepper. He shaved a curl of lemon zest and let it snow over the heat. Behind the glass of a see-through cabinet the white bowls and thick diner mugs mirrored him in fractured panes, a dozen small Harms cooking for a dozen small Mac reflections that watched from the counter.

He felt her before he saw her. The prickle of a gaze tracing his back like fingers that still yearned to touch. The light draft that slipped in when she did, carrying the faint taste of her skin mingled with the lake air seeping through the open window. He turned.

She was there, perched on the polished wooden countertop, one leg folded, one foot dangling, his t-shirt loose and indecent on her thighs. The paneled cabinet doors held duplicate versions of her, knees peeking, dark hair tumbling wild, eyes held storms he remembered too well, as if the house itself craved every angle of her presence.

“Funny,” she said, voice playful, lined with challenge, lips curving just enough to pull at him. “I don’t remember you advertising this trip with a personal chef.”

He slid the spatula under the tomatoes, heat climbing his chest that had nothing to do with the stove. His gaze locked on hers, the air between them thickening like the steam from the pan. “You didn’t read the fine print?”

“Hmmm... must not have.” She shifted, the t-shirt fabric whispering against her skin, revealing a glimpse of bare thigh that made his pulse thud. “I don’t remember seeing it on the napkin you left me at the Lantern Room.”

That napkin. Scrawled in his unmistakable penmanship with the coordinates of their undoing, the map that promised escape and guaranteed betrayal. Her words hovered between them, a magnet that drew him closer without a single step.

His mouth went sly. “Maybe you just didn’t read between the lines.”

“Oh, I read it. Loud and clear.” Her gaze dropped, lingered on the cut of his abs, the jeans riding low on his hips. The cabinet glass caught that too and doubled it back at him.

“I’ve always enjoyed cooking for you,” he confessed, voice quieter now, something deeper showing under the ease.

Her smile curved, softer, sadder. “It’s been a while.”

He tipped the pan and basted the tomatoes with garlicked butter, then reached for a bundle of basil, tore it by hand so the oils perfumed the steam. “I figured your fiancé wouldn’t appreciate me showing off my culinary skills once you were engaged.”

She watched his hands like she watched them in court, detail by detail. The way he palmed the knife. The way he kept up heat and tempo without looking. Her response was quiet but light. “He may not have. But it’s one of the things I miss about us.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really.” Her voice lowered, threaded with a past that still lived in the room. “Scattered case notes across the table. You and I arguing over strategy, negotiating deals, making peace over dinner. Those were the best days. I didn’t know how much I’d miss them until they were gone.”

His eyes softened. The ladle paused. “I miss that too, Mac.”

Plates and cutlery hummed faintly in the cabinet as if they wanted in. He killed the flame under the rear burner, set a pot of water to a rolling boil on the front, and tossed in a handful of salt. He moved like a pilot reading wind patterns, precise without effort, and all the while she watched him, admiring him in ways she hadn’t allowed herself to in years. The lawyer who could make a jury lean in. The aviator who trusted coordinates and instinct. The man who could plate a meal with one hand and unmake her with the other, a more recent observation.

She did not leave the air tender for long. She never did. “Mic isn’t the only one who’d have a problem with our dinners, and you know it.”

His jaw flexed. Renee’s name did not need saying. It lived under the tiles of the floor he tried to sidestep. “I suppose not.” He moved closer, towel still hooked in his fingers, voice slipping rough, stripped of defense. “But neither of them are here, Mac. Just us. This weekend, we write the rules. If I want to feed you, I get to feed you.”

Looking straight into the sea of his eyes, she found the truth folded inside his tone, he wasn’t just talking about dinner.

Steam tapped at the hood. Water rattled the pot. He stirred the tomatoes once more and tossed in a knob of cold butter to gloss them. Then he turned, fully now, taking her in like a man who knew exactly what he wanted.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, voice low, eyes dark.

“Yes.” Her gaze traveled his frame, deliberate, unashamed. “Just not for food.”

The air thickened; the room forgot its purpose.

He set the spatula down. The front flame stayed on for a stubborn heartbeat, then he turned the knob and watched the blue ring gutter into nothing. Two strides erased the space. She threw him the same glare she used in court, sharp, unyielding, daring him to cross the line, and he met it with the look he always gave her there, steady, assessing, waiting. But this time there was no aisle between them, no rules, no bench or gavel to keep them in check. His palm found her hip, dragged her forward until the counter’s edge pressed under her thighs and his stance filled the space between.

Their kiss started slow, exploratory, lips parting with a soft sigh, tongues meeting in tentative strokes where they had left off a little more than a half hour ago. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him flush against her, the counter creaking under their weight. He groaned into her mouth as her heat pressed against him through his jeans, her hips rocking in a subtle grind that sent sparks racing up his spine.

He broke the kiss to trail his lips down her neck, sucking gently at the pulse point thumping under his tongue.

“This is a new side of you, Marine,” he murmured, eyes flicking from her mouth, swollen by his kisses to the shirt hanging off her shoulder. “You’re always hungry.” He placed a kiss on more of her exposed skin.

She tilted her head, smile dangerous. “A girl can change her order, can’t she?” Her gaze roamed him slowly, the tan-sheen on his chest, the cut of muscle at his waist, the hint of arrogance still glinting in his eyes. “I’m craving something a little more off-menu.”

She yanked the tee shirt over her head, baring her breast and slender curve of her body to the cool kitchen air, nipples hardening instantly. He cupped one, thumb circling the peak before leaning in to suck it deep into his mouth, tongue flicking relentlessly while his other hand kneaded her backside, fingers digging into the firm flesh.

She moaned. The cupboards caught the sound, bounced it off their wooden frames, and sent it skimming across the room until it vanished into the dark mouth of the pantry.

His dog tags swung and kissed her skin, cool sparks against heat. “Oh, I think I can come up with something that will satisfy your appetite,” he mouthed against the weight of her flesh. His other hand rose, thumb at her jaw, tilting her face toward his. The window threw a pale stripe across her mouth. He met it with his own.

The kiss wasn’t soft. It landed hard, hungry, a collision of forbidden taste. For a heartbeat, he forgot the world. Then the truth sliced through; Mic had full access to this side of her, the one she only let surface behind closed doors. Another man got to live where he was only allowed to trespass. The thought hit like turbulence. He broke away just far enough for breath, eyes storm-dark, voice roughened by something deeper than jealousy.

“Tell me, Mac. What story did you give him? What’s the official version of this weekend?” It was the wrong question, the one he’d sworn he wouldn’t ask, but the shadow side of him needed the truth.

Her breath hitched. Her fingers tunneled into his hair and tightened. “That it was a weekend with friends. That I just needed to get away.”

He huffed a humorless curve of mouth. “I’m surprised he let you go- he’s always been a hound on your scent.”

“You exaggerate.”

“Hardly.” His thumb slid to the hollow of her throat, felt the jump there. “He was on you the moment he stepped foot in JAG.”

Memory tried to unspool. Brumby with his blunt questions. Harm with his careful answers. His mind replayed Brumby cornering him, openly asking if Mac was on the market. He had brushed it off, said she was free, and he had no claim to her. And maybe then that was true. But part of him had wanted to claim her, yet had been too bound by rules and fear to try. Mic had never held back. He had gone full throttle after her. And Harm had lost ground without ever entering the fight. Damn if he did, damn if he didn’t. Now, he just didn’t give a damn. He was done with that math. Not tonight.

He kissed her again, slower, voice rough against her mouth. “Admit it. You liked him chasing you.”

Her nails raked down his spine, a line of heat. “Perhaps. Or maybe I just liked that at least one man made his intentions clear.”

His hand slid higher along her thigh, then dipped into the flatness of her belly button, then between her legs, fingers confident and sure as if he had been mapping this route for years. He found her and stroked, gentle first, then firmer until her hips answered. “I’m making mine clear right now.”

Her head tipped back against the cabinet door. The glass inside hummed again. Her lips parted on a shiver. “The parameters of your intentions come stamped with an expiration date, Harm. Forty-eight hours. No strings. You can’t give me what Mic can. Commitment.”

He held her gaze through it, steady while his fingers kept their slow rhythm. “How do you figure?”

“Annie. Jordan. Renee.” Each name fell like a stone on tile.

He stilled for one beat, took the weight. Then his hand pressed deeper and stole her breath. His voice broke with it. “None of them are you.”

Her laugh cracked, brittle but brave. “You’re right. They’ve all been your girlfriends. I’m just your partner.”

He caught her face and kissed her like he meant to change the definition. When he pulled back his voice was sanded raw. “You are so much more. You know that.”

“Do I?” Her eyes did not blink.

He started to answer, something inside him unsheathing like a blade he’d kept hidden too long. “It isn’t every day the woman I lo...” The word fractured against her skin. He swallowed it, breath rough. “The woman I want is about to belong to someone else.”

The house heard that and went quiet. The pot’s boil softened to a murmur. Outside, wind moved the pines and sent a thin draft over the floor that raised gooseflesh along her legs.

She steadied her hands on his shoulders, felt the iron there, and decided for both of them.

“You promised to feed me,” she whispered, voice shaking and sure at once. “And I’m still waiting.”

Her hand slipping between them to fumble with the buckle of his pants. “Harm,” she whispered, his name a plea as she freed him, stroking its thick length with a grip that made him buck against her palm.

For a moment he almost said it, the rest of the sentence, the word he had bitten back for years. But the part of him that lived in touch, not talk, won out.

His response tangled with a groan, words dragged from somewhere low and helpless. “I’ve... got all you can handle, Colonel. Coming right up.”

Her sigh broke into a moan as his mouth found hers again, hungry, unrelenting. Words slipped out before thought could catch them. “Amadeh, sarāshpaz,” she breathed, the phrase fractured by want as she locked her legs around his waist and drew him in.

The air changed temperature between them as if the dial on the stove had been turned up. He hooked her legs higher, positioning himself at her entrance, the heat of him heavy and insistent against her center. “I’m going to need help translating that,” he murmured, teasing at her ear, but his hand had already found the line of her and his body already knew the answer.

Biting her lip she guided him in with a sigh that trembled through both of them, eyes locked in a vulnerable intensity. “I don’t think you will, Commander.”

She was right. No translation was needed. He sank into her warmth and the kitchen changed state. The cabinets held their reflections and multiplied them, the cups and bowls a silent jury that saw everything and said nothing. The counter took her weight. The floor complained with a small creak each time he drove her higher. Heat rose off skin and pooled under his hands. Her fingers made crescents in his shoulders, then found his tags and held them like a rope. His mouth found the place beneath her ear that made language fail.

His hands gripping her thighs to hold her open, exposed. Each thrust argued and confessed at once. Each gasp wrote a brief the law could not hold. He tasted her name like a verdict and she gave him his like an answer. The pot on the stove ticked as it cooled. The pan hissed once and went quiet, butter and garlic surrendering to the stronger scent of sweat and breath.

The lake house could not speak, but it listened. It kept their voices in its seams, kept the thud of counter against hip, kept the soft shattered sound she made when he angled just right, burying himself deeper. Their foreheads pressed together, breaths mingled in ragged harmony. It let the window light paint their shoulders and let the draft cool their overheated skin. It understood the trade being made in its kitchen. They had chosen a meal the mouth could not chew and there would be no leftovers.

Harm felt her tighten around him and the careful parts of him let go. He did not fall into hunger. He surrendered to it. She rose to meet him in a rhythm older than language, and whatever words they could not say found a home here, in heat, in pressure, in the universal grammar of a man entering a woman and both of them finally telling the truth the body had been trying to say for years.

Two lies had bought them forty-eight hours.
The truth would cost them everything after.
Yet the only debt they cared to settle was the one
burning between them.

Exhibit E — Heat of the Night

Charge: Article 134: Fraternization and Deception.

Intent: Premeditated.

Each gasp a sworn confession neither could withdraw.

The deck was still, the lake whispering against the pilings in soft, private laps. Harm sat on the edge of the hot tub, his palms bracing his form, navy trunks collecting the condensation in the air, head tilted back to the scatter of stars. The wood beneath him was cool and faintly damp, carrying the night's hush through every board. Steam rolled up from the water in steady breaths, curling past his chest and disappearing into the dark, each wisp a question he couldn't answer.

Guilt tightened in his chest, sharp and familiar. The forbidden heat of his time with Mac still clung to his skin like a brand. It had been his idea, but as the day unfolded the blame belonged to both. Together they'd built a fire too hot to contain, and the outside world had simply fallen away. Every attempt to douse it only birthed new flames, smaller, and hungrier, finding air between them.

He'd once believed that crossing the line would cool whatever burned between them, that naming it, touching it, living it, would make it manageable. He'd been wrong. It only grew. Every time he touched her, he fanned it. Every kiss ignited him. Every time he was inside her, molten current surged through his veins, forging new fires in its wake.

He drew a long breath, the air thick with cedar and lake mist, a silence as heavy as it was soothing.

He thought to himself, What was he doing? Mac was getting married. She had made her decision. Yet that very truth turned on its axis because her engagement was the reason he had thrown away his lifelong pilot's code, the book that governed every action, every reason, and drawn his own map in the sky straight to her. He had to have her. He could no longer fight it. Yes, he knew it was wrong, but every second with her felt dangerously, beautifully right. He was conflicted. He was satiated. He was ashamed and exhilarated, restless and at peace, burning and whole.

And despite every warning siren in his head, he leaned toward the feelings only Mac could summon, the pulse, the purpose, the unbearable sense of being exactly where he was meant to be. Even if it was in a Lakehouse hidden and stolen away, living out sequences of fantasy his mind had never dared to script, doing things he never imagined, saying things he never thought he could. Mac was redrawing the coordinates that made him, rewriting his compass until every line pointed to her and no one else.

Guilt still circled, patient as gravity, but what was unraveling between them had already taken control of his senses. The taste of her, the echo of her voice, the memory of her breath, all of it flooded him until remorse became another form of wanting. He knew the balance would tip eventually; every indulgence called its reckoning. Even the night seemed to know it.

He knew the night wasn't absolution; it was record-keeping.

His shoulders eased, but only on the surface. Above him, the stars held their posts like a jury, patient and unswayed. The dock cross-examined with every cooling tick, the lake whispered testimony, and the night recorded it all. He was already in the middle of a verdict he couldn't escape, evidence mounting in the hush around him.

His phone buzzed against the rail. He didn't need to look at the name. He already knew.

Renee.

He hesitated, weighing whether he should answer, then swiped. "Hey."

Harm," her voice lifted, warm but edged. "Did you get in?"

"Made it just fine," he said, keeping his tone flat, neutral, the night air doing little to cool the heat crawling under his skin.

If I'd known you were flying," Renee said, a note of chiding threading through, "I would have cleared my weekend. It's been a while since we've spent real time together."

He shut his eyes. The stars seemed too close, sharp as judgment. "There'll be another weekend," he said as easy as he could manage.

She paused, and he heard the weight before she dropped it. "You've been distant. Is this about Mac? Her wedding is a few weeks away, and you haven't been the same since Mic and her engagement party."

Harm shut his eyes. The jets hissed, bubbles thumped against his ribs. "It's not that."

"Then what is it? Because Mic and I figured if we gave you two time to say your goodbyes it would put an end to the two of us always being on the outside looking in. Yet the moment she calls, you run, and I'm still on the sidelines." Her accent sharpened when she pressed.

"Renee—"

“Oh, I know,” she cut in. “You’ve been over this a hundred times.”

He tried again, softer. “Listen, that’s not-”

“Mac and I are only partners,” she mimicked, the words brittle with memory. “Mac and I are partners,” she mimicked, brittle with memory. “We work together.”

“Renee, that’s not fair-”

“When you leave, it’s because of a case. Because of your duty to the Navy. Because Mac relies on you.” Each phrase landed sharper than the one before, her accent hardening with every repetition.

“Stop,” he said quietly, but she didn’t.

“And through all of it, I’m still here,” she finished, her voice breaking around the edges. “Still waiting. Still watching from the sidelines.” Her breath caught. A small, startled laugh slipped out. “Oh God... when did I become one of those *pick-me* girls?”

He said nothing.

She exhaled a shaky sigh, softer now. “Guess it’s since you’re the person I actually want to pick me.”

The confession landed between them like static, then gave way to silence heavy enough to drown in. Harm stared at the lake, the phone hot against his ear, jets hissing softly in the background, bubbles rising like evidence against him. He pressed a palm to his forehead, eyes shut, guilt curling low and sharp in his chest. The truth pressed at his throat. He already knew who he wanted to choose, and she was about to marry someone else.

He didn’t answer. Then.

“Look, I’ll be back in a few days.”

“What’s a few days?”

“Sunday.”

“Then dinner Sunday night.” Her tone left no room for exit.

He tried anyway. "Renee, I might be wiped-"

"Harm." Firm now. "At some point, you need to remember I'm your girlfriend."

His jaw worked. "Dinner," he agreed finally.

The word tasted like betrayal.

The phone pressed against his ear, his reflection in the dark glass faint and damning, a man tuned to one frequency of love and two competing ones of loyalty.

"Good," she said, brightening. Then softer, almost coaxing, "I love you."

He didn't answer. Silence stretched until it hummed in his ear. He hung up, dropped the phone onto the deck, and let out a breath that clouded into the night. An owl hooted somewhere up in the black.

For a long beat, he sat there, the truth burning his chest. Then he pushed off, lowered himself into the water until it closed over his shoulders, bubbles churning against his back. He sank deeper, ducked his head under, and let the heat scald away the ache in his chest. A baptism. A drowning. A futile cleansing. He came up gasping, water streaming from his hair, but nothing had changed. The sin was alive and breathing. He was already in too deep.

The sliding door whispered open. He turned his head and forgot how to breathe all over again.

Mac stepped out in a deep purple bikini. Moonlight carved her shoulders, her ribs. The sight of her rewrote every wish he had ever made.

For one suspended second, guilt and gravity canceled each other, and only her outline remained, moonlit, inevitable.

"Everything ok?" she asked, tucking her hair behind her ear, eyes flicking toward the phone abandoned on the rail and the drench aftermath of his body being completely submerged.

"It is now." His voice was low, ragged with truth, as he wiped drops of water from dripping over his eyes.

"You look tense."

“It’s nothing a Jetstream and company cannot fix.”

She smiled at that and moved toward the tub, bare feet whispering on damp planks. When she set her palm on the rim and swung a leg over, he took the whole of her in like a prayer he couldn’t keep to himself. The water caught her at the thigh; steam rose to meet her. She slid opposite him and settled, arms draped wide, head tipped back as the jets found her spine.

“Why are you all the way over there?” he asked.

“I want to enjoy it before you change the setting and kick the tempo up... again,” she said, teasing, a knowing glint in her eye. “It’s been a day. Haven’t had this much cardio since boot camp. I need the jets to work its magic.”

He conceded with a nod and a crooked smile, even as his body silently argued that it could work some magic all its own.

Her eyes lifted to the sky. “Beautiful night.”

“Quiet,” he answered, though he hoped it wouldn’t stay that way. His mind was already mapping every surface yet to test their weight.

She lowered her gaze, studying him through the steam. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“I bet you do.” He was thinking about all the ways she’d said his name in the last twenty-four hours, and how he’d never hear it the same again once they went back to work.

“You’ve never been easy to read, Harm. But after all these years?” Her lips curved. “I’ve got you pegged.”

He smiled back. “You didn’t see this coming?”

“No,” she said, soft and bare. “I didn’t.”

“Stick around, Mackenzie. I’ll keep you on your toes.”

“Or off them,” she shot back, that newly familiar spark lighting her eyes.

He caught it and threw one back across the clouded stream of heat. Their silent communication hadn't tempered.

For a while they talked, a tease here, a confession there, the steam, the jets, the lake itself complicit in their trespass.

And then she was straddling him, the steam swirled thick and sultry, water sloshing high on the rim. Her mouth was hot and unyielding on his. His palms traced her slick back, nails grazing before sliding lower to grip the firm curve of her hips, pulling her tight against him. His hands mapped her body like a territory he'd been denied too long.

She rolled her hips in a deliberate grind, the rigid length of him straining against his swim trunks, pressing insistently into her core, leaving no doubt what she wanted. "No matter how many times, I can't seem to get enough," she confessed, her words a hot gust against his ear lobe. Harm's growl rumbled low in his throat. They weren't just aligned in court anymore, they were in sync here, too.

He caught her mouth again, urgency erasing thought. His tongue plunging in to tangle and claim as he yanked the knots of her bikini top free. The scraps of fabric drifted away on the vanishing bubbles and waves, baring her full breasts to the steamy air, her nipples stiffened into tight, aching buds from the sharp temperature shift.

His thumbs rasped over those sensitive tips, testing and rolling them until she arched with a throaty whimper. *How many times had he envisioned her this way while she cross-examined witnesses? Made opening and closing statements? Tangled him into knots of his own flight gear every time they negotiated?* In truth he had lost count. But the actual vision was beyond comparison. She was both passionate in the courtroom and the bedroom. And it was silent confirmation on every level that he indeed had met his match.

Mac's fingers dove beneath the water's surface, shoving into his trunks to encircle his swelling length. She pumped him with a firm twisting grip, savoring the heavy throb against her palm as she hiked her hips higher and he moved her bathing suit bottom to the side. A swift pull placed him right at her wet entrance.

The bubbling water lubricated every inch as she slid over him, descending in a tortuously slow glide until she swallowed him to the hilt, stretching around him.

“Damn, Mac,” Harm rasped, his fingers digging into her hips to dictate her rhythm as she started to move. The tub’s jets hummed against their submerged bodies, sending electric pulses that made her inner muscles flutter and squeeze him tighter. She threw her head back, wet strands of hair plastering to her skin like dark silk as she rode him, and him allowing himself to push deeper inside her.

Then.

Her phone lit on the deck rail, vibrating sharp against the wood. She barely noticed until Harm shifted, keeping her down on him, his mouth grazing her ear. “Ignore it,” he rasped.

She tried to protest, knowing it could be Mic, she almost said, “I should take it,” but the words broke apart when he rocked into her again, relentless. Her slick fingers fumbled, meaning to shove the phone aside, but her thumb swiped across the glass.

“Sarah.” Mic’s Australian vowels spilled into the night, warm and practiced.

Her whole body seized, but Harm didn’t falter. He held her hips, kept her moving, his gaze locked on hers like a dare, as if scolding her for answering the call.

Her body betrayed her first; her breath hitched on his name, and he watched the lie form on her lips like a sin they’d both already rehearsed.

“M-Mic,” she breathed, her voice uneven, too breathy, her body shuddering against Harm’s.

“You made it in?” Mic asked obliviously.

“Yes,” she whispered, forcing steadiness even as Harm’s mouth traced fire along her neck.

A pause stretched, long enough for him to notice, not long enough to worry. He mistook the unevenness in her breath for a poor signal rather than the fight for composure.

Mic's chuckle filled the air. "That does not tell me much love. How is the place?"

"It's quiet," she managed, fingers threading through Harm's hair in a plea for restraint that only spurred him on. The harder she tried to steady them, the more deliberate his rhythm became, a wordless defiance that turned her attempt at control into another invitation.

"...and secluded." Harm closed the space between them, his body enclosing hers, the motion more claim than comfort, possession disguised as embrace.

"Just what I needed." Her breath hitched when he thrust deeper, deliberate, deliciously punishing.

"And your friends?" Mic asked. "How are they?"

Mac looked down into Harm's moonlit eyes, glazed with overflowing desire, and her as its only focus.

"Good." She let the word sit, then added, softer and richer for Harm alone, "Famished... but we're handling it."

Mic filled the pause with easy approval. "That's good. You needed the break. Now you can come back to me clearer and stronger."

The words struck her like a cue. As if on command, Harm's pace changed, slow at first, then harder, faster, his body speaking the truth she could never voice. She was having two conversations now: one carried through the phone, the other through touch, both demanding answers.

Mac wouldn't allow it. She countered the sudden onslaught of pleasure and dug her nails into Harm's shoulders, clamping down on their broadness to stifle her response. She tried to keep her voice level, but the moan that slipped out rode the word. "Y-yes."

The line crackled softly, the lull stretching long enough for her heartbeat to sound like interference.

"I love you, Sarah," Mic said.

She bit her lip, eyes locked on Harm's. He stared back, unblinking, as if he wanted her to hear herself, to feel the lie as she said it.

“Me too,” she whispered, the words catching on a gasp as she ended the call.

The phone fell silent, sliding onto the deck. Silence swallowed the intrusion, but their bodies roared louder, hungrier. Mac crashed her mouth to Harm’s, and the scandal of what they’d done didn’t slow them, it fed them. She braced her palms against his shoulders, his fingers laced her hips, grounding her as they found a cadence that made the tub slosh and the deck tremble beneath them.

The boatman had promised nights were quiet. Nobody hears a thing, he said. Tonight, the lake learned otherwise. Tonight, it learned the sound of Mac’s breath breaking into pieces, the groan that ripped through Harm’s chest when she angled her hips just so, the slap of water against wood.

They rode the edge until the night itself seemed to break open around them, cries scattering across the water, groans swallowed by steam, stars watching unblinking.

When it was over, she collapsed against him, both of them shaking, breathless. He cupped her face, his thumb brushing damp strands of hair from her cheek.

“From now on,” he rasped, forehead pressed to hers, “cell phones off.”

She laughed, shaky and undone, her voice nothing but truth. “Agreed.”

The lake hushed itself to listen. The pines swayed. And the night folded them into its scandal, holding their secret like an old accomplice who’d already promised never to tell.

Exhibit F — The Sunrise Belongs to Us
Charge: Article 118: Premeditated Misconduct
Intent: Premeditated.
The light that refused to judge them.

The first thing Harm felt was not the sun. For thirty-something years, the light had been his alarm, rising with it, chasing it in cockpits, measuring his days by the angle of its climb.

But this morning, the thing that pulled him from sleep wasn't light. It was heat. Wet, velvet, living heat.

His breath hitched before his mind had even caught up. A low sound broke from his throat, more raw than he would have allowed if he'd been awake enough to guard it. For a fleeting second, he thought he was dreaming. The kind of dream you wake up cursing, alone in a too-cold bed.

But no. This was real.

Beneath the covers, beneath the slow spill of early morning light that crept across the Lakehouse master bedroom, Mac was there. His partner. His friend. The woman of his dreams. Not a fantasy conjured by a restless body, but flesh and breath and intention.

He lifted his head from the pillow, chest tightening at the sight of her form beneath the blanket, her hair a dark spill, her shoulders moving with a rhythm that made his spine bow. Then the sensation reached him again, hot, slick, all-encompassing, and he dropped his head back with a groan. His fingers found the sheet, gripping hard.

She was stroking him with her mouth, tongue working him as though she'd mapped him long ago and had only been waiting for permission to explore. She took him deep, no hesitation, no holding back, her throat relaxing around him until he thought the sun itself had lodged under his skin. He let out another sound, less groan now, more letting go.

"Mac..." His voice cracked against the ceiling beams. His hand slid under the covers, finding the crown of her head. He threaded his fingers through her hair, not pushing, just holding, guiding her into the rhythm he was already losing himself to. She quickened at the touch, her mouth drawing tighter, her tongue tracing, lapping, coaxing every ounce of restraint from him.

He cracked his eyes open. Light stretched across the room, slow and golden, painting the floorboards, catching her shoulders, glinting off her cheek when she shifted, casting them both in something otherworldly. Harm had woken with dawn countless times, but never like this. Never with the sunrise claiming his body and his soul in the same stroke.

Before he lost himself completely, he tugged her gently up toward him. She rose with a glint in her eyes that made him dizzy. Her lips, swollen and wet, curved in a smile that was pure mischief.

“Morning, Sailor,” she whispered.

He pulled her down, kissing her like it was the only way to say her name. His tongue swept into her mouth, tasting himself, tasting her, tasting the sunrise itself. He rolled her beneath him, the sheet twisting, the light catching them both now, unashamed.

“Mac...” His forehead pressed to hers, his breath ragged. “God, Marine. Is there anything you can’t do?”

Her hand framed his jaw, thumb brushing the corner of his mouth. “A few,” she murmured, her smile softening into something secret. “But I’ll never tell. A girl’s gotta keep some secrets.” *It seemed to be the theme of the weekend*, she thought, heat flickering behind her eyes.

He entered her slowly, deliberately, like writing his name into her skin. She gasped, her back arching, and he swallowed the sound with another kiss. His hips found a rhythm, not frantic, not desperate, but deep, steady, adoring. Each thrust a promise; each pull a revelation.

The light climbed higher, spilling over the bed, gilding her skin until she looked carved from the very dawn. Her hands slid up his back, nails grazing lightly, anchoring him. Her eyes stayed on his, wide and unflinching, as if she were memorizing the man he became in this moment.

He brushed his lips down her throat, over her collarbone, tasting salt and warmth, murmuring low between kisses.

Her breath broke into a moan as he sank deeper.

The bed creaked beneath them, keeping time with the pulse of the sunrise. The world outside faded, the lake, the trees, the silence. There was only skin on skin, heart against heart, a rhythm older than either of them could name.

She whispered his name like a mantra, every syllable stitched with unspoken love, with ache, with release.

He answered with hers, his voice low and spilling. Their bodies moved in sync, unhurried but unstoppable, building toward something beyond climax.

When it came, it was as though the sun itself had broken inside the room. She arched beneath him, her cry lost against his mouth, her hands clutching him close. He followed, shuddering deep within her, every nerve lit with fire and light.

After, he collapsed into her, his chest heaving, his face buried in her hair. She stroked his back, slow and soothing, the way you might calm someone after battle.

The room glowed with morning. The sheets tangled around them, their skin damp with sweat and sunlight. She pressed her lips to his temple. "I'll never forget this," she whispered.

"Forget what?" he asked.

"This," she said softly, eyes turning toward the open window where the lake caught the light. "The sunrise. It belongs to us."

He kissed her shoulder, her jaw, her lips. "And you belong to me," he confessed. He didn't know how the world would look once this weekend ended, only that after this morning, some part of her would always be his.

And outside, the lake caught the light, reflecting back the truth of them, two people who had stopped running, if only for the moment, who now reveled in the fire and had given the morning new meaning. A sense of belonging. Together. Rising with the sun.

Exhibit G — The Lakehouse Ledger

Charge: Addendum — Environmental Contamination of Evidence.

Intent: Self-inflicted.

It kept the tally but not the telling, the memory sealed in its walls.

The Lakehouse carried the evidence, room by room, board by board. It would never speak, but it remembered.

On the glass of the sliding door, fog bloomed in frantic bursts, her palms braced wide as his body drove her forward, their reflections colliding and blurring with every thrust. The glass held the heat until it vanished into dew.

Upstairs, the four-poster bed bore its testimony. Sheets twisted into knots, wood scarred by their nails, the headboard thudding until the echoes buried themselves in the beams. Her voice rose, raw and pleading, the sound sinking into the grain.

By morning, two coffee mugs cooled on the deck rail, steam rising once, curling into the mist before disappearing. Below, the lake mirrored them back, smooth, glassy, unbroken, as if mocking what had truly spilled across its shore.

At the waterfall, their cries folded into the thunder. The cave amplified the sound, carrying it like contraband downstream. The water erased their footprints but not the way her legs locked around him in the spray, or how his voice broke saying her name.

Even the library betrayed them. A book lay facedown on the rug, pages bent like wings. She'd tried to read, lips shaping words, until his mouth parted her thighs and rewrote every line. Her gasp shattered the paneled silence, louder than any sentence carved there.

They had even tried to fix what they'd broken in their first reckless entry. The stag remounted, the frames rebalanced, the clock nudged back into place. But passion dragged them down again, this time onto the living room couch, cushions skewed, a lamp rattling its sculpted curves bracing for a second coming. Literally. She rode him shamelessly, hands gripping the back of the couch, her moans spilling into the rafters, his mouth fastened to her breast, resigned to the fact that the deposit was already gone. He cared less with every lick, more with every thrust, until the room itself mirrored how complicit it was in their undoing.

The Lakehouse didn't argue. It simply added the couch to its growing ledger of passion, another mark in wood and fabric.

Everywhere they touched, glass, wood, water, paper, bore the proof of them. No place left untouched, no surface innocent.

For forty-eight hours, they had been everywhere, everything, leaving behind a map of ruin and hunger.

And when the house finally stilled, it held their secret in its bones. Weekends would come, guests would go, but somewhere deep in its timber it knew, this one was different. What began here would not stay contained within its walls.

Exhibit H — Weeping under the Willow

Charge: Article 119: Voluntary Manslaughter of Self.

Intent: Premeditated.

The willow cried in their place, mourning what neither could keep once morning came.

The willow sheltered them, its branches trailing the water like green curtains, swaying with the night's slow breath. It felt like the world had conspired to give them this one hidden place, the roots pressed deep into the earth, the lake glinting beyond, the branches falling low enough to erase everything but them.

Mac lay beneath him, her back against a blanket spread over the grass, her body open and warm beneath his. His weight pressed her into the earth, her legs locked around him, pulling him closer, deeper, as though she could hold him here forever. The ground was cool, the air damp, but between them there was only heat. Their moans tangled in the hush of the willow's veil, raw and unashamed.

She loved him. God, she loved him. But love hadn't kept her parents from walking away, hadn't stopped every other promise in her life from breaking. Mic offered vows, stability, something she could lean on. Harm... Harm offered everything but words. He offered fire, loyalty, laughter, a soul she had come to know better than her own, but he couldn't say it. And if he couldn't say it now, under this willow, then how could she gamble her life on him?

Still, her nails clawed his back, her body arching into him, because walking away without this, without knowing the weight of him, the feel of him, would kill her just as surely. If he wouldn't speak, she'd let his body burn the truth into her one last time.

Harm drove into her with the strength of a man trying to break his own walls. Every thrust was a plea, every kiss a confession he couldn't voice. His heart pounded with the words he couldn't release, I love you, I've always loved you, but fear choked them down. He had lost too much already. His father. His childhood. Too many people he had let himself need. To love her openly meant risking the worst loss of all. He had spent his whole life guarding against that ache.

And yet here she was, the one person who had ever made him want to open the gates, even if it destroyed him. His forehead pressed to hers, his breath ragged. He nearly said it. The word sat on his tongue, heavy, dangerous. His lips brushed her ear and instead all that came out was a broken groan of her name.

Her thighs tightened, pulling him deeper, her breath stuttering in his ear. She wanted him to say it. God help her, she wanted him to stop her life with a single word, to claim her and tear down every promise she had made Mic. But she knew him. She knew the way silence had always been his armor. If he hadn't spoken in five years, he wouldn't now. So she kissed him hard enough to erase it, to remind herself that if she couldn't have his words, she could still have this.

The willow swayed above them, whispering like a witness to their undoing. Harm's hands clutched her hips, his thrusts turning frantic, almost punishing, as if he could carve the truth into her body if not her ears. Her cries rose with his groans, louder, rawer, until the night itself seemed to tremble around them.

When release broke, it ripped through both of them, wild and merciless. She clung to him as though drowning, her voice breaking his name, and he shuddered inside her, his mouth at her throat, his whole body shaking with what he couldn't say.

They collapsed together in the grass, slick and breathless, her cheek pressed to his chest, his lips against her temple. Neither spoke. The willow bent with the wind, branches sweeping low, sealing their secret.

She thought: I'll never forget this, not as long as I live.

He thought: If I could give you forever, I would.

But all they had was tonight, and the willow knew it.

Exhibit I — The Crossing

Charge: Article 119 — Willful Departure from Regulation and Article 92: Failure to obey order or regulation.

Intent: Reflective.

The lake received what pride let fall.

He said nothing as the oars dipped and rose.

Behind them, Wyrdwater blurred into a mirage of trees and memory.

The lake carried them. He'd seen the aviator's jacket shift against the bags, the faint glint as something small slipped free, gold wings, falling soundlessly, lost to the planks. Bright metal sleeping in shadow, a relic of a pilot who had fallen willingly, and the legend that had claimed its due. He marked it the way one notes a storm's first drop and felt the current between them, heavy, alive, unspoken. Something had been offered without their knowing, and fate would see it through.

He didn't know their story, but he knew the lake's. No one ever left the same as they came; the lake always took its tithe.

Part V — The Shattered Horizon

“A horizon is a promise. When it breaks, men must learn to fly blind.”

— Naval Flight Manual, WWII

The sky had been endless when they left the lake house, a clean blue sheet stretched taut from wingtip to wingtip. Harm's hands settled on the stick with the unconscious grace of a man who had spent his life translating instinct into flight. Mac sat in front of him, headset snug, sunlight catching in her hair. For a time, there was only the steady hum of the propeller and the intimacy of silence between them.

They were not ready for it to end. The weekend had felt like stolen hours, like air borrowed from some great reservoir, and now the return flight was the slow drip back into reality. Harm banked them southeast, the world tilting beneath; patchwork fields, rivers curling like veins, highways glinting with cars that seemed impossibly far away from their cocoon in the sky.

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Then the sound changed.

At first it was subtle, a cough in the engine, a tremor he felt through the stick more than heard. Harm's jaw tightened. He checked the gauges. He cycled the fuel pump and switched tanks, listened to the sputter smooth for a breath, tapped one with his gloved knuckle, and listened hard.

Mac noticed. She always noticed. "That didn't sound routine."

His voice stayed level. "Probably just a hiccup in the fuel line. Nothing to worry about yet."

The second cough came sharper, followed by a stutter in the prop's rhythm, as if the sky itself had inhaled wrong. The plane jolted, then recovered. Mac's hand closed over the armrest, knuckles white.

"Harm."

He looked down at her in the front seat, only a fraction of a second, but long enough for her to see what was in his eyes: calculation. Angles. Risk. A pilot's math.

"I've got it," he called out over the wind and the dying engine, keeping his voice steady. He moved the throttle, adjusted pitch, coaxing the vintage engine like a stubborn child. For a few moments, the hum smoothed out again. The horizon stretched, calm and endless, daring them to believe it would hold.

Then the engine surrendered with a sharp metallic crack.

The prop seized, windmilling violently before coming to a dead stop. Silence rushed in to fill the void, replaced instantly by the scream of wind rushing through the biplane's struts and wing wires. Altitude bled, two hundred feet, then three. The nose pitched downward. Harm fought the stick with both hands, muscles straining against the dead controls, trying to buy altitude, to steal seconds.

Mac turned in her seat, her voice tight against the slipstream. "Talk to me!"

"Rudder's unresponsive! She's not holding!" Harm shouted over the roar of the air.

“We’re out of glide, Mac- we have to get out!”

She didn't hesitate, but her eyes locked onto his, wide and fierce. Beneath the steel of her Marine training was the same raw adrenaline clawing through him.

“Remember what I told you on the ground!” Harm ordered, his hands locked on the stick, fighting the plane's urge to roll. “Belts off, disconnect the comms, climb out onto the wing, and push off hard clear of the tail! Don't pull the cord until you're clear!”

Mac reached down, slapping her harness buckle open. She started to stand in the front cockpit, the wind tearing at her jacket, then paused, turning back to him.

Harm's chest ached with an agonizing weight. *I brought her here. I wanted this weekend. If she dies because of me...*

“Mac!” His voice broke against the wind. “If I don't-”

“Don't!” Her eyes burned into his through her goggles.

“You’re jumping right behind me! You hear me, Harm? Right behind me!”

“I’m right behind you!” he roared over the rush of air. “Now GO!”

She didn't waste a second. Mac hauled herself up over the cockpit combing, swinging a leg out onto the lower wing. The slipstream battered her, but she stayed low, moved to the edge, and pushed off into the open sky.

For a split second, Harm watched her body tumble into the blue, then saw the white canvas of her chute blossom open above her.

Relief slammed into him, but the Stearman was already rolling into a steep dive. Harm unbuckled his harness, fought his way up out of the rear seat, and threw himself out into the slipstream.

The world spun into violent chaos. Air clawed at his chest, gravity wrenching him into freefall as the yellow biplane spiraled away below.

ZERO HOUR

His hand found his ripcord handle. As he pulled, his last coherent thought was a prayer, frantic and raw: *God, keep her safe. Let her land. Please, let her live. Don't take the woman I love away from me.*

The silk hit the air with a deafening crack, snapping him upward, and then everything went black.



THE SOUND OF THE CHAPTER



Restraint burns away. Intimacy deepens. Then the sky breaks open.

Set Fire to the Rain- Adele

For the decision to stop measuring the consequences and step fully into the forty-eight hours they have given themselves. Harm and Mac let caution burn away long enough to discover what exists between them when duty, timing, and restraint no longer get the final say.

Take My Breath Away- Berlin

For the intimacy of the weekend itself. They move past the familiar language of partnership and into something more exposed, more tender, and more consuming than either of them has allowed before. Every new layer of closeness feels startling enough to leave them breathless.

Skyfall- Adele

For the moment their private cocoon ends and the horizon fractures. They leave believing they are returning to ordinary life, but nothing ahead of them is ordinary. The sky becomes the first warning, then the first betrayal, as everything they thought was holding begins to fall with them.

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RETURN TO CHAPTERS

CREATOR NOTES AND DISCLOSURES

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