



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: Vignette

Spoilers: "Family Secrets" and beyond: especially "Answered Prayers"

Author's Notes: Oh, for God's sake, don't pull out your calculators. There really are 525,600 minutes in a year. Trust me. Or trust the guy who wrote "Rent," anyway. Bonus points to those of you who caught the reference.

Also - don't expect this story to hang together time-wise. I had it almost completed when "Answered Prayers," the real season-seven Christmas episode, aired and afterward I had to totally rework the second half. (I had Webb bringing Sergei back as well, but in a slightly different way. Honestly, I didn't know that's what TPTB had planned, but I'm very glad they did it.) So these two parts 'book-end' the episode: half takes place before, half after. Once again, I'm picking up on missed shipper opportunities. So what else is new ...

Part I: December 21, 2001

1047 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

"Harm, I've got some errands to run this afternoon. Would you mind taking the Patterson pre-trial meeting at fourteen hundred?"

The look on her partner's face when Sarah Mackenzie sauntered into his office was one of sheer irritation. "On top of the four other cases that got dumped in my lap this morning? Sure, what's one more?"

Mac smiled sympathetically. "Never mind. How'd you get so swamped?"

Harm spread his hands with a long-suffering gaze. "Same thing that happens every December twenty-first or so. Everybody gets ready to bug out for the week, and the Ghost of No Christmas Spirit does the work of an entire office."

She watched the sadness in his eyes flicker just a little stronger. No one knew better than she did how difficult this time of year usually was for him, but this year, things seemed even harder in some inexplicable way. Making an instant decision, she crossed the room to take the chair in front of his desk. "Take a break, sailor," she suggested gently. "Talk to me a sec."

He raised an eyebrow, picking up on her intent, but didn't immediately shut her out. After the turbulent events of recent months, the new turn of their friendship was one of the few constants in his life. "The year's almost over," he commented, glancing out at the scattered flurries of snow without elaborating on his observation.

"And not a moment too soon," Mac added with a wry smile. "I don't know how many more 2001-type adventures I can take."

"It has been a bizarre year, hasn't it? I mean, there's what happened in September, of course. But on top of that, you almost got married - "

"You almost died," she countered quickly, earning a sharp look. Maybe he wasn't the only one struggling with the holidays this year.

But Harm didn't call her on the abrupt change of subject. "Do you miss Mic?" he asked suddenly. "Okay, that's a dumb question. I'm sure you do, at least a little. But do you miss him as much as you thought you would?"

She shrugged, twisting her Marine Corps ring around on her finger. "Truthfully? Not nearly as much as I expected. I guess that ought to tell me something. What about you?"

"What do you mean, what about me?"

"Come on, Harm. You and Renee were together for a year and a half."

"Yeah, we were. Why, I still don't know, but we were. To be completely honest, I've already forgotten what it was like to be with her." He rubbed his eyes and offered a rueful half-smile.

"So no regrets?"

"Regrets? I'm sitting here talking to my best friend - really talking, about subjects that would have had us in shouting matches for most of the last year or two. My only regret is that it took all that insanity to get us back to this."

The sincerity in that statement warmed her, and she returned the genuine smile he offered. "New Year's resolution," she declared. "For both of us. No more mistakes based on miscommunication."

A funny look crossed his handsome features as she said it, but was quickly gone. "Careful what you wish for," he said quietly. But he accepted her hand, and they shook firmly. "You've got a deal."

Their hands lingered together for just a moment: then he slipped his free and looked away. Mac hesitated, still trying to see past his careful shield. As grateful as she was for the affirmation they'd found, there was clearly something hurting him. After a few seconds, she spoke up again. "So start your resolution early and tell me what's going on. Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said automatically, but surrendered under her disbelieving gaze. "No. But there's not a lot I can do about it." He sighed heavily, leaning back in his chair. "A lot has changed this past year. Pretty much everything except the one fact I'd give anything to change."

He withdrew a newspaper article from a stack of files on his desk and handed it to her. Immediately her breath caught upon seeing the headline: *Chechen Peace Talks Stalled Again*. Suddenly she felt horrible. "Oh, Christ, Harm," she said softly. "It's been almost exactly a year ... I think I'd almost managed to forget that Sergei was even out there. I hate myself."

"Don't say that. It's not like I've been keeping everyone updated. There's nothing to tell. Every day they argue some more, and the fighting continues. Checking the Russian news sites has turned into part of my morning routine."

He stood up and wandered over to the window, his face expressionless save for the ancient ache behind his pale blue eyes. "History repeats itself," he mused, almost to himself. "For the first year or so after my dad went down, we were addicted to the news. It became a normal part of daily life, and it got to the point where we did it out of habit rather than hope. By the time the war ended, there really wasn't much hope left to lose."

Mac rose and went to her friend, laying her hand on his arm. "This is different. Sergei's alive. We know that much."

"Sure, but for how long? There are days when my phone rings, and I'm actually afraid to pick it up. Maybe it's good news, and he's free - or maybe it's not, and the Chechens have decided to kill off their prisoners ... Then I do pick it up, because I'm desperate to hear anything at all..."

Hearing the slight catch in his voice, she mentally shoved aside all their emotional baggage and wrapped her arms around him. Only a moment passed before he returned the embrace, pulling her close until she could feel the steady rhythm of his heart against her ear. "I don't even know him," he whispered. "I've only met him once, and you know what that was like. But damn it, Mac, he's my *brother*..."

"Exactly," she answered, with as much determination as she could summon. "That's why you can't give up on him. That's why he'll make it. He's like you."

They stayed there for some time: three minutes and fourteen seconds by her reckoning, but she had to admit to letting her mind wander a bit. Eventually, he pulled back just enough to meet her eyes. "Thanks," he said simply.

She didn't respond right away, as they continued to hold each other's gazes. "Awkward moment number two hundred and nine," she remarked finally, attempting to keep her voice light.

"More like three hundred and nine," he returned, with the barest hint of a smile. "But I'll take awkward moments over no moments at all."

0053 EST
Georgetown
Washington, D.C.

Mac pulled her fleece cardigan on over her pajamas and padded over to the door, trying not to disturb the petty officer on the couch. It was probably a wasted effort: they'd been home for only an hour or so, but Jennifer Coates had fallen asleep almost immediately and had barely moved since. The soft yet insistent knocking on the door, however, was a complete mystery. Who in God's name would need to see her in the dead of night on Christmas?

Recognizing the tall figure of her partner through the peephole, she relaxed slightly. Harm had made his traditional visit to the Wall, and probably just needed someone to lean on. She opened the door - and was startled when he grabbed her arm and pulled her into the hallway, shutting the door behind her. "Harm, what the hell?"

It was then that she got her first real look at him, and what she saw floored her. Only hours before, he had been simply going through the motions, as he did every year. He'd put on a smile and chatted with his friends, but the stress of Jennifer's case and the newest chapter in the Corvette saga had only added to his burden. Now, though ... the difference was as clear as night and day. There was a light in his blue eyes that she hadn't seen in months, maybe years. It was the same spark that glowed when he was flying, or when he'd discovered the scrap of truth that would save a dedicated officer's career. Right now, Harmon Rabb looked *alive*.

"He's here," he said simply.

"Who's here?" she asked, bewildered. He only beamed at her, waiting for understanding to dawn. Within seconds, she began to comprehend. Given the events of the past few days - the past year, really - there was only one person whose presence could rescue Christmas for him. "Oh, my God," she whispered, hardly daring to believe. "Are you serious?"

Harm nodded triumphantly. "A present from Clayton Webb."

"He's *here* here? As in, he's here in Washington?"

"As in, he's downstairs waiting in the car. He's head over heels in love with the 'Vette - we've been driving around for forty minutes, with the top down and the heat blasting so we won't freeze..." He paused for a moment to catch his breath. "I'm taking him home with me for a few days, but I couldn't wait until morning to tell you. You weren't asleep, were you?"

Mac laughed out loud - his euphoria was contagious. "Harm, are you kidding? Sergei's here, and you're worried about waking me up?" She threw her arms around his neck, and he spun her around delightedly. They held on to each other for a few minutes, all the tension and pain fading into utter relief and joy. She kissed his cheek gently, feeling the wetness of a stray tear under her lips. "I'm so happy for you," she murmured, her own tears welling up. "Both of you. This is amazing."

"Easily the best Christmas of my life," he agreed, still smiling broadly. "I've already decided - we're going to go out to San Diego for New Year's, so Sergei can meet my mom. Say you'll come with us."

"Me? I couldn't - I'd be intruding on your family - "

"Never," he interrupted firmly, unwilling to be dissuaded. "You're coming. It's sixty-five degrees out there, and the house is huge, and you're coming with us. Deal with it."

At that moment, she couldn't have refused him anything in the world. "All right," she said quietly, and before she could continue, he'd swept her up in his arms again.

"I can't even tell you how incredible this feels, Mac," he was saying, the words nearly tripping over each other in his rush to get them out. "It's like everything works now. There are so many things I want to show him - all these things that I took for granted, but now they seem so much more important. More special, somehow. God, I'm not even making any sense, am I?"

"You're making perfect sense, flyboy," she replied softly, reveling in the feel of his powerful embrace. "It's just - in six years, I don't think I've ever seen you so excited."

"I know. It's going to be different from here on," he vowed, the smile fading ever so slightly. "I've got a second chance to get to know my brother, and I'm damn well going to take it. But that's not all. I'm starting to realize how many second chances I've gotten in my life - especially this year - and how many of them I've let slip away. So at the risk of getting decked, I'm going to try and get one of them back."

And before she could even realize what was happening, he'd lowered his lips to hers and kissed her softly, delicately. Mac closed her eyes, knowing instinctively that this kiss was miles away from the mistletoe kiss they'd shared only hours before. That moment had been a reaffirmation of the best kind of friendship: this one was a pledge of much, much more.

"Harmon Rabb," she breathed, "don't you dare make a promise you don't intend to keep, or I swear I *will* deck you."

He only shook his head, not releasing his hold. "Never been so serious in my life," he whispered. "Consider it part of our New Year's resolution. Not tonight, and not tomorrow, but someday ... someday soon, we're going to get this right."

When she'd finally managed to stop the world from spinning, she pulled back, eyes shining. "Go on. Take care of your brother. I'll see you in the morning, right?"

"Of course. Merry Christmas, ninja-girl."

"Merry Christmas," she echoed quietly as he disappeared down the stairs. For a minute or so, she just stood there, wondering if this whirlwind had actually been a dream. Then, hurriedly, she let herself back into the apartment and rushed to the window in time to see a bright red '68 Corvette pull away from the curb. *Better than a sleigh*, she thought happily as she climbed back into bed.

For the first time in years, Sarah Mackenzie lay awake as Christmas Eve faded into Christmas Day, enthralled by the possibilities that came with the dawn. The events of the past few months played through her mind as she stared up at the ceiling.

"Commander Rabb and his RIO, Lieutenant Hawkes, ran into some trouble on a bingo to Andrews ... they're believed to have gone down at sea ..."

"Let me tell you why you're pleading with me to stay ... it's because you don't want to be alone ... Goodbye, beautiful ..."

"Wait, Colonel ... you forgot your picture ..."

"Military installations across the country and around the world have been put on the highest state of alert as America struggles to comprehend these horrific attacks ..."

"So where does that leave us?" "I don't know. The end, I guess." "How about the beginning?"

At last she allowed herself to sleep, secure in her belief that if they could get through a year like this, they could do anything. The year to come wouldn't be without its hardships, of course: nothing worth having ever was. But it seemed as though they were off to a pretty good start.

*** THE END ***