



Graphic by [Steph](#)

**Rating: PG**

Classification: vignette

Spoilers: "A Merry Little Christmas"

Disclaimer: Can't take credit for the characters or the situation. The episode left this door wide open for fic writers.

Author's Notes: Well, I was going to just write a more generic Christmas fic and leave it at that, but then this episode came along ... and I would've been annoyed with myself if I hadn't written just a teensy-tiny reaction to it. For anyone who cares, my personal opinion is this: while I'm not leaping back aboard the shipper bandwagon just yet, this episode went a long way toward improving my outlook on the show in general. And with that, I move on ...

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*Directly following the Christmas Eve service ...*

Mac's gaze followed the taillights of the old pickup as they slowly disappeared from view. Looking to Mattie, she suddenly felt a pinprick of discomfort, alone with this young stranger who now held a rather prominent place in Harm's life. "My car's over here," she said, awkwardly jerking a thumb in the direction of her Corvette. "I can take you to where Harm is."

Mattie's expression betrayed little, other than a hint of confusion. "You don't think he went home?"

"He always goes to the Vietnam Memorial after the service. Christmas Eve is when his father was shot down."

The girl's eyes flashed with surprise, though she was still clearly making an effort to control her reactions. "He didn't mention that before. I thought he was just, you know, bummed out about me going to foster care."

The note of uncertainty in her voice didn't escape Mac's notice. "He was. Very much so. You're very important to him."

There was really nothing to be said to that, so Mattie simply dug her hands a little deeper into the pockets of her coat. "Um, yeah, that'd be great if you could take me to him. Thanks."

They climbed into the car and pulled away in silence, each staring out at the scattered snowflakes blowing across the road. Mac weighed a decision in her mind, wondering whether to

speak up. Harm had made it painfully clear to her, as he stalked out of her apartment a few days ago, that a gaping chasm lay between them at the moment. Even after what she'd said in court, it was more than likely that he wouldn't want her intruding on his relationship with Mattie, and in truth she couldn't really fault him for that. Still, she had a wealth of experience that he didn't, and this might be her only chance in the near future to use it for a noble purpose.

"Listen, Mattie," she began carefully, "I realize that you don't know me from a person on the street, but for what it's worth, I have some clue about what it's like to be you right now. My dad was a drunk who beat my mom so badly that she finally ran off, around about the time I was your age. I'm not telling you what you should feel or anything, but if you ever want to talk, you can give me a call."

Mattie didn't respond right away, turning her head to study the officer who sat beside her. "Why did you come to court?" she asked, with wary curiosity. "Harm said you weren't going to."

Mac kept her focus on the road, trying not to wince. "Did he tell you *why* I wasn't going to?"

"He said he'd talked to you and that you'd both decided it wasn't necessary. How much was he lying?"

*Perceptive little thing, aren't you?* Mac thought. "Well, if deciding it wasn't necessary sounds like a bitter argument, then he wasn't lying much at all." She sighed, trying to select the best approach for this. "I came to court because I realized after said argument that Harm hadn't been keeping secrets from me in order to get back at me for anything. He hadn't told me what was happening with you because he was honestly afraid I wouldn't support him. I realized that he no longer trusted me, and I wanted that trust back. I'm not sure I have it yet, but I think this helped."

Mattie cocked her head, her guard still firmly up. "He gave up a lot for you," she remarked coolly. "It took a long time before he would even tell me how he'd ended up working for the CIA, and most of it he still won't talk about. I'm not trying to be rude, Colonel, and I know I don't have all the facts, but I'm sure you can understand why it might be hard to see you just as a knight in shining armor here."

"Yeah, I guess I can."

She turned back to gaze out the window. "Whatever happened, he was really hurt by it."

Mac sighed. "I know. I think I'm just starting to realize how much. But without trying to turn this into a he-said, she-said thing, I have to state for the record that he wasn't the only one."

"Fair enough." Mattie put her hands up to the dashboard vents to warm them. "Did you mean what you said in court, or were you just trying to come up with the best answer for the judge?"

*Damn it.* "I meant it," Mac answered, her voice low. "We're not in a great place right now, but I'm never going to stop believing in him as an officer or as a man. He's going to take

such good care of you, Mattie, you won't even believe it. He's going to move mountains for you. You can count on that."

"I know." They pulled up to the curb then, and Mac turned off the engine. "And thanks for talking to my dad tonight. You're, um ... more than I expected you to be."

"I'm not sure how to take that."

"Call it a compliment." Mattie climbed out of the car, and Mac followed her down the sidewalk to the seemingly endless Wall.

A few minutes later, the young girl was safe in the arms of her guardian, and Mac was walking away from them, feeling somehow both satisfied and profoundly empty. There was no doubt in her mind that she'd done the right thing tonight, and she held some hope that a thaw was imminent in the cold war between her and Harm. But the fact remained that she was walking away from him tonight -- and more importantly than that, there was very clearly someone else in his life now. No longer could she just drop by his place with a pizza and work on cases with him until all hours; his time would be defined by homework and phone curfews. Tomorrow he would most likely be giving Mattie as magical a Christmas as he could design on short notice, whereas Mac would be having brunch with Clay and his mother and then treating herself to an afternoon phone call to Chloe from an otherwise-quiet apartment. Whatever else Clayton Webb was -- and he could be so many things -- his holiday plans lacked a certain warmth. As their relationship often did, she was forced to admit.

Maybe that's what it all came down to. She wasn't entirely accustomed to having warmth in her life, but more and more she found herself wishing for it. Harm had sometimes burned too hot for her to approach, but when he wasn't there, either physically or emotionally, she honestly felt the chill. She'd felt him slipping away from her during the skirmish at her apartment, and it had terrified her. There had to be some way to restore at least their friendship, if not whatever feelings might have once existed between them.

Except they *did* still exist. She was sure of it. Maybe this wasn't the time to explore them, but they were still there, just under the surface, the way they'd always been. He needed to focus on his new family right now, but while he did, she would have a chance to examine just what Clay meant, and should have meant, to her. And in the meantime, JAG would be there, offering more opportunities to demonstrate that she and Harm would always be able to depend on each other.

At the highest point of the walk, she turned back to see Harm still holding Mattie, his head bent down to hers, as if still afraid to fully believe their fortune. Mac smiled, finally allowing herself to just be happy for her friend. "Merry Christmas," she said softly, and continued on toward her car.

\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*