



Of a Grateful Nation

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette

Spoilers: any season 9 Mattie eps

Disclaimer: Wouldn't dare claim these characters right now ... just trying to salvage something of them at this point.

Author's Notes: I could find neither the time nor the inspiration for a shipper-hopeful, chestnuts-roasting-on-an-open-fire fic, so I settled for something a little different. It's a story about service and family that just happens to be set at Christmas. Hope that's okay with everybody.

I know the show is going to wreck this premise almost immediately, but for the purposes of this story, Harm's custody of Mattie won't be decided until the beginning of the new year, mainly because I don't know whether or not to transplant her to D.C. I'm sure Jen will meet her in a different way, too, but go with it for the moment.

Monday, December 22, 2003

1347 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

"Come on. Just one hint? A teeny-tiny clue?"

"Well, it's wrapped in green and gold paper."

"That is not a hint in any sense of the word."

"How very perceptive of you."

"Harm!"

Harm chuckled at the half-indignant, half-pleading voice on the other end of the phone. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed a good Christmas-gift secret. Come to think of it, this year might have been the first time. "I don't know what you're complaining about. It's a whole three days away at this point."

Mattie gave a theatrical sigh, letting him know that her begging hadn't been entirely serious. "Whatever. You're still telling me I can't get you a present?"

"There are way too many other things you need your money for," he reminded her, all teasing gone from his tone. "There's nothing that can be gift-wrapped that would be half as good as spending Christmas with my favorite former boss."

"So I rank above the CIA guy?"

"Most assuredly."

"Cool." Some of the young woman's cheerfulness faded. "I wish you were coming out here tonight instead of tomorrow night."

"So do I. But a senior officer has to be on duty up until Christmas. I was lucky to get Christmas Eve off -- Mac has to come in that day."

"Mac's not almost somebody's guardian."

"I know. But it's that 'almost' that wrecks things up."

"Tell me about it." Her voice was glum.

Harm twisted the phone cord between his fingers, hating to hear her sound like this. "Lonely, huh?"

"Well, it's not like anybody's flying this week. Mrs. Larsen stops by, but she always looks at me like I'm in one of those Save the Children commercials, and it weirds me out."

"Less than thirty-six hours, and I'll be there," he promised. "I've got my grandma's gingerbread recipe, that domino game you liked, and four or five movies to rent from your list."

There was a long pause on the line, and Mattie suddenly sounded a little frustrated. "Harm, I'm sorry, but I gotta ask something. I know you said to trust you, and I do -- I guess it's the Navy I don't totally trust. I mean, if there wasn't any 'almost' -- if you really were my guardian, would it matter to them? They'd still send you off on cases all over the place. I'd still be on my own sometimes."

"They try to be understanding of family issues. There are options." But that sounded weak and vague even to his ears.

"But if they told you right now that you had to go to ... I don't know, Italy or something, you wouldn't be able to do anything about it."

He sighed. "Nobody ever said being in the military was easy, Mattie," he acknowledged quietly. "It means giving up some things, and I know that sucks for you, because you aren't the one who signed up to this. But if some people weren't willing to make some sacrifices, even ones that affect their families, we'd all be in for much worse."

"Yeah, I know. It's just ... like you said. It sucks."

"You'll be okay until tomorrow night?"

"Sure. Call me when you get on the road, okay?"

"You got it. Bye, honey."

"Bye."

Harm replaced the phone in its cradle and let out a long breath, leaning over to rest his head on his hand. Mattie had managed to land right on one of his biggest concerns without even trying. What if he drew a ninety-day TAD somewhere? How could he expect her to not feel abandoned -- how could he keep from going insane with worry?

He'd never tried to get out of an assignment in his life, but then, he'd never had a dependent to consider before, either. The concept of a family had always been a little more abstract in the past. Now, though, he was a little surprised to realize just how much he'd be willing to give up for her happiness.

It wasn't as if he felt he owed JAG any particular favors at this point. Sure, the admiral had taken him back, and in doing so yanked him out of a fairly unhealthy mindset. But he hadn't exactly returned to a comfortable workplace. Sturgis was inexplicably brooding, Bud and Harriet were up to their ears in both work and family responsibilities, and Mac ... he didn't dare give much thought to Mac just yet. It would only depress him or piss him off.

For the first time since his return from the Patrick Henry all those years ago, he found himself watching the clock on a much more regular basis, waiting for each day to end.

"And I came back to this why?" he muttered in the direction of the file cabinet.

There was a soft intake of breath from the doorway. "I hope you didn't actually mean that, sir."

Harm glanced up at a worried-looking Jennifer Coates and offered a rueful grin. "Of course not, Petty Officer." It wasn't really a lie, he reasoned inwardly. "I didn't realize I was speaking aloud. Do you need something?"

The yeoman relaxed a little, but didn't appear entirely convinced. "I'm sure things will get better around here, sir. I mean ... they have to, right?"

"One would think."

"Um, at least you have Miss Grace?"

He could hear her hesitation on the name and decided to end her rampant curiosity at last. "Coates, if you can keep a secret, I'll put you out of your misery on that score. Deal?"

Jen nodded wordlessly, eyes widening as she realized how transparent she'd been. Harm continued. "All those phone messages you've been taking for me aren't from some girlfriend. They're from a fourteen-year-old girl named Mattie Grace who's in the market for a guardian. If I can ever clear the Social Services board, it's going to be me."

Jen's jaw fell at the unexpected revelation. "No kidding, sir?" A bright smile soon overtook her features. "Commander, if it's not out of line to say so, that's terrific. Why doesn't anyone else know about this?"

"There'll be a better time," he replied, sidestepping the intent of the question and not caring if she noticed. "Did you come in here for something in particular?"

"Oh! Sorry. There's an Ensign Ross waiting at the front desk. He doesn't have an appointment but hoped you'd be able to squeeze him in."

Harm's brow creased as he tried to place the name. "Is he here about a specific case?"

"I don't believe so, sir. He said that a Lieutenant Duchene had recommended you."

That name clicked more securely in his mind. Duchene had been one of the sailors he'd helped out while on board the Coral Sea a few weeks back. In his downtime, he'd mediated a lease dispute between the lieutenant and his landlord back in Norfolk. Apparently word traveled rapidly around the surface fleet. "Sure, why not. There's not much on the docket this week. Send him in."

"Aye, sir." Jen disappeared from the doorway, and in a few moments she was replaced by a young man with a rigid stance and a solemn face.

"Commander Rabb, sir -- thank you for seeing me on short notice."

"Not a problem, Ensign. At ease." Harm offered his hand, which the younger officer accepted after a brief hesitation. "You're friends with Lieutenant Duchene?"

"Went to high school with him, sir. I couldn't figure out where to go for help, and he told me that if it could be done, you could do it."

Harm arched an eyebrow and gestured toward the nearby chair. "What exactly is it that you're looking to get done, Ensign?"

Ross took a seat. "Sir, my grandfather died this past weekend. He was a Marine corporal during World War II, and I'd like him to have military honors at his funeral."

Well, that wasn't a typical JAG request. "I'm sorry for your loss," Harm began automatically. "Veterans Affairs is the place to - "

"I know, sir. That's the thing. Granddad was well past eighty, but it was still kinda sudden, and my mom -- she wasn't really prepared, you know, to do all this stuff. So I called the VA, and they told me that they couldn't find any record under either his name or his Social Security number." The ensign's jaw twitched with restrained emotion. "They basically accused my grandfather of lying about his service."

Harm frowned and leaned forward on his desk. "He'd never made use of any veterans' benefits in the past?"

"Mom said he never felt like he needed anything from them."

"And you're sure he was a Marine corporal?"

"In the Pacific, yes, sir. I never really asked about his unit or anything, but I've seen pictures of him in uniform. He didn't -- he *wouldn't* make that up."

"I'm not suggesting otherwise. Actually, his SSN still should've come up with a hit in the VA system, even if he'd been in one of the other services. So I guess that wasn't a very useful question." Harm rubbed at his chin, the wheels in his head cranking to life.

"I know this really isn't your area at all. It's just that the funeral's going to be in Baltimore on Wednesday morning - "

“Christmas Eve?”

Ross spread his hands helplessly. “Not much choice, sir. I can’t get anywhere at the VA or through the Pentagon’s records department -- they’ve all but shut down for the holiday. Commander, my mother heard me talking to that woman on the phone. She heard someone accuse her father of something awful on the very day after his death. I can’t let this drop. If it takes a week or a month or whatever, I’ll stay with it, but if there’s any possible way, I want him to get the farewell he deserves. I want my mother to have that flag and to know that the country her father served is grateful. I know it’s a lot to ask, but if there’s anything you can suggest, I’ll do it.”

Harm nodded, having seen the fire behind this young man’s eyes and judging it to be true. “All right. At this point, I have two suggestions. One is that you gather up everything you can find that relates to your grandfather’s service. Pictures are good, medals or uniform patches would be better. I’m assuming you’ve already looked for paperwork, but look again. Bring whatever you’ve got here first thing in the morning, because I’m acting CO tomorrow and can’t really leave the building. The other suggestion is probably going to require some selective application of rank. Hang on a minute.” He punched the intercom button on his phone. “Petty Officer, could you come in here for a moment?”

When Jen arrived, Harm immediately addressed her. “What’s your workload like this afternoon and tomorrow?”

“Light, sir. The admiral leaves tonight with Ms. Cavanaugh, so there’s not much left on my plate.”

“Well, I’ve got a hunting expedition for you. Fill out a blanket request form for the Naval Historical Center that will get you access to pretty much everything, and bring it to me to sign. Better yet, if you can sneak it in before he leaves, give it to the admiral to sign - tell him we’re researching precedent on whatever the hell you feel like making up. The more rank on the form, the more helpful those bookworms are likely to be. When you get it, head over there and start looking for information on Marine units in the Pacific in - ” He glanced over at Ross. “Got a time frame?”

“Um, forty-three, I think.” The ensign appeared embarrassed by his uncertainty.

“Like he said. We’re looking for a corporal who doesn’t show up in the VA records. Ensign, name?”

“Robert Michaels, corporal. I honestly don’t think he had a middle name.”

Jen scribbled on a notepad. “Anything else, sirs?”

“I’ll call you if and when there’s more.” Harm smirked faintly. “Better turn your cell phone to vibrate. They get really, really touchy about noise in there.”

“Aye, sir.”

As she smartly took her leave, Ensign Ross fixed Harm with a look of gratitude. “Thank you, sir - ”

The senior officer waved it off. "Consider it a fraternal gesture from someone who didn't get to bury his father or his grandfather," he replied quietly. "Go home, and take care of your mother and whatever else you need to do. I'll see you at 0800 tomorrow morning."

Tuesday
1521 EST
Same Location

Harm leaned back in his chair and surveyed the conference room table, now strewn with boxes and disordered stacks of paper. Ensign Sean Ross had dutifully gathered up everything he could find relating to his grandfather's life as a young man, but there was precious little to go on. The former Corporal Michaels had obviously not been one to keep sentimental items -- or even documentation. There was no birth certificate, and although his daughter had recalled that he'd originally lived in West Virginia, she'd been unable to pin his birthplace down even to a specific county. No draft notice, either; Sean stated that his grandfather had volunteered in 1942, but there were no enlistment papers.

A call to the Social Security Administration informed them that the number listed for Robert Michaels had most likely been assigned after the war, as the program had been new when the war began, so it wasn't unusual for there to be no VA record linked to it. Still, it left them with little more than a name. Jen Coates had tried a number of different spellings, working off Sean's statement that his great-grandparents had emigrated from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the century, but to no avail.

There were a few pictures, at least; of young men in olive drabs and khakis. Sean's grandmother, who'd passed away three years ago, had saved those. They mostly showed moments of rest or recreation, nothing more telling, but Harm felt sure that they were exactly what they purported to be. A unit patch was partially visible in just one of the photos, which they promptly scanned and emailed to the Archives. The lone historian on duty had helped narrow their search to a few possible units, but that still left hundreds of men and thousands of possible trails to follow.

"There's no way we'll get this figured out in time for tomorrow, is there, sir?" Sean asked wearily, fighting back a dejected expression.

"Well, we're not completely out of time yet," Harm pointed out. "Petty Officer Coates might strike gold over at the Historical Center, or we might stumble onto something here." But his tone didn't disguise his assessment of their chances.

Sean's shoulders slumped a little as he gazed at a picture of four Marines playing cards outside a mess tent. "Everything he did over there can't just be lost, can it? The places he went, the guys he bunked with ..." He shook his head. "I should know these things about him. I'm his family. Why didn't I ever ask about any of it? It's not like I wasn't interested. I'm in the Navy, for God's sake. But he never really brought it up, so I never brought it up, and now ... he's never going to know how much I respected him for it."

Sensing that the ensign was profoundly bothered by this, Harm didn't hesitate before weighing in. "I don't think that's true at all," he said. "You followed in his footsteps by joining the military. There's a kind of understanding inherent in that -- it shows that you believe in the same principles he did. I think that implies a lot of respect all by itself."

Sean gave a small, closed smile, remembering. "In my last year of ROTC, when I finally had to decide whether to go Navy or Marine, Granddad actually did talk about the war a little. Nothing real specific, but I think he wanted me to know that I didn't need to choose the Marines just because he did. He said something about not going into the Corps to be John Wayne or get a Silver Star or anything like that. He just felt like he should do his share of what needed to be done, for a country that had done so much for so many people. The color of the uniform didn't matter. He just wanted to do his part."

Harm nodded, the idea giving him a moment's pause. He, like his father and grandfather before him, had felt that same obligation, but for him, like them, it had been paired with a strong desire to fly. Somehow this man's call seemed just a little more pure for having had no such conditions attached.

"Your grandfather sounds like a good guy," he said at last.

"He was." Sean's lips twisted in resignation. "A little late for me to tell him so, I think."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Harm glanced skyward and offered a slight shrug. "What you're trying to do here has to count for something, right?"

The younger man seemed to accept that, and turned back to the book in front of him, a volume from JAG's own library on troop movements during the Pacific campaign.

When Jen came through the conference room door a while later, her arms were full of books and files, and her expression was apologetic. "I stayed as long as they'd let me, sir," she began, awkwardly setting the pile down on the table. "They had to lock up at 1630, so I used the request form the admiral signed and got them to loan me some documents on the three units we're looking at. But none of the ones I've checked so far has a comprehensive roster."

Harm recognized the note in her voice; she was frustrated at having been unable to complete her task. "Thanks for all the work you've put in," he told her. "We made some headway, at least."

"But everything's closing for the night, and the funeral's tomorrow ..."

"It's all right," Sean asserted, resolutely lifting his chin. "It would have been nice to have had an honor guard there, but my mom's tough. If I can straighten this out eventually, she'll accept it whenever it comes."

"We're not giving up either, Ensign," Harm assured him. "I'm going to take these files with me over the holiday and give them a look. When we nail this, there will be an apology and a public acknowledgement of your grandfather's service. Count on it."

"Thank, you, Commander. Thank you both for all your help with this." Sean started to repack the boxes he'd brought, and the JAG officers moved to assist. "I, ah, need to get back to my parents' house and make sure everything's set for tomorrow. After the holidays, I'll be back at Norfolk - my email address is on the global list. Don't feel like you have to rush on this. I know you've got bigger and better things to do."

"That's a matter of interpretation." Harm shook his hand, and Jen followed her senior's lead. "Take care, Ensign. Tell your mother we wish we could have done more."

"I will. Merry Christmas, Commander, Petty Officer."

When he'd gone, Harm waved Jen toward a chair, and she flopped into it. "That was depressing, sir," she said unhappily. "I was so sure we'd be able to dig something up."

"Well, the time limit was pretty severe. You did a lot today. Sometimes we can only go so far."

"I guess. Were you serious about taking that stuff home with you?" When he nodded, she unconsciously lowered her voice. "Is Miss -- um, Mattie going to be okay with that?"

Harm raised an eyebrow. "Anybody ever tell you that you're frighteningly perceptive?" As Jen flushed with the unexpected praise, he continued. "I promised her a nice Christmas, and I have every intention of giving that to her. But I know I can make some time for this. It's no less important now than it was two hours ago."

"Are you taking off soon, then, sir?"

He checked his watch. "As soon as I secure my office and change clothes, I'm hitting the highway. Mattie lives in Blacksburg, so it's kind of a hike." He paused for a beat. "Jen, you've got somewhere to spend the holiday, right? Because - "

"I've got some friends to visit," Jen assured him with a smile. "Thank you, sir, but go have fun with her. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

2203 EST
Grace Residence
Blacksburg, Virginia

As the credits rolled across the small TV screen, Mattie hit the power button on the remote and popped the last few kernels of kettle corn into her mouth. "For the record, *The Muppets' Christmas Carol* was not on the list of movies I gave you."

"Give it up -- you liked it."

"Yeah, actually, I did, but I'm just saying." She looked over to the other end of the couch, where Harm had an encyclopedia-like book open on his lap and notebook beside him on the table. "You're not going to sleep until you find that Marine, are you?"

He glanced up, guilt flickering across his features. "Just for tonight. Tomorrow and Christmas will be all about you."

"I don't need it to be all about me. That's not what I meant." Mattie shrugged, looking uncertain. "I just don't know how you're ever going to find him, is all."

"There's a way. I just have to figure out what it is." Harm put the book aside for a minute, gazing intently at her. "Hey, Mattie, does this make sense to you? That it might be important to someone, especially someone in the military, for the government to get this right? Or does it seem like it shouldn't be this big a deal?"

"No, I get it. As much as I can, I guess. I know I'm kinda clueless about the military, but I think the main thing I don't understand ..."

She trailed off, eyes searching for answers. "They tossed you out, Harm. I know you quit, but it doesn't sound like they did any cartwheels to get you back. This guy's grandfather fought a war, and they can't be bothered to even give him a flag for his funeral. I know it's all about higher causes and everything, but isn't it hard to just keep going when you're not being appreciated?"

He was fairly impressed at the way she'd cut so cleanly to that critical point. But even so ... "You're right," he admitted. "It can be hard, especially when things don't work out the way they're supposed to, or the way you expect them to. But you deal with it and keep going, because like you said, it's about higher causes. Plus, you learn to hold onto the good moments -- when you've performed your duty well, when you see the gratitude of someone you've helped, or when you know your crewmates can depend on you and you on them. Those things have more meaning than getting a pat on the back every once in a while. And what's happening with Corporal Michaels is bigger than just being appreciated. Simply put, we all owe it to men like him not to forget."

"So you keep looking."

"So I keep looking, yeah."

"Then I'm just gonna hang out and read my book while you stress yourself out."

"Okay by me."

Mattie retrieved a worn library paperback and settled on the couch next to him. As he continued to read, her eyelids drooped lower and lower, and eventually her head sank against his shoulder. Harm smiled and dropped a kiss onto her dark blonde head. *I ought to wake her up and make her go to bed, he thought, but so help me, I'm going to enjoy this for a little while.*

It was most of eleven when it happened, and it happened in the simplest of ways. Mattie shifted in her sleep and fell forward a little, just enough to bring herself awake with a start. As she did so, she knocked the book in his lap open to a new section -- and suddenly a familiar face was looking up at him from the page.

Harm blinked and lifted the book for a closer inspection. It seemed too fortuitous to be real, but he was certain that the third man from the left was the same man Sean had identified in one of the earlier pictures as his grandfather.

Disoriented, Mattie squinted up at him. "Crap. That was slightly embarrassing."

"It was perfect. You've got the magic touch." He pointed to the picture. "That's our guy."

"No way."

He scanned the page for a caption and came upon a list of names. Parker, Grady, O'Boyle, Miklas, Foster -

Abruptly he saw it. *Miklas ... Michaels.* He flipped back and forth through those pages, looking for more information, and discovered just enough to put the pieces in place. "I'll be damned," he breathed, reaching for his cell phone.

Jen answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Coates, it's Commander Rabb. I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"No, sir," she replied immediately, sounding alert enough to be telling the truth. "Did you find something?"

"I did, and it was either by sheer luck or divine intervention. Remember how Ensign Ross said that his great-grandparents had emigrated from Europe? I think he had the timeline a little wrong. Robert Michaels was actually Corporal Roban Miklas."

"No kidding?"

"Hand to God. The account in here, from one of his platoon mates, said his English was very good, but that he'd probably only stepped off the boat three or four years before joining up. I think he changed his name when he became an American citizen after the war."

There was distinct awe in Jen's voice. "He wasn't even a citizen? And he *volunteered* to join up?"

"It happens to this day. Immigrants feel they owe the U.S. a debt of gratitude for taking them in. Impressive, isn't it?"

"I'll say. But why didn't he hold onto his enlistment notice or his discharge papers?"

"He didn't know they were important. This file says that he plotted artillery coordinates for the unit, but he always did the math in his head, because the charts they gave him were obviously in English - "

"And so he couldn't read them. Wow," Jen said softly. "So what do we do now, sir? Can we wake up an honor guard somewhere, or are we too late?"

"I'm not sure. But I'm going to give it a try. I'll call you back in a little while." Harm clicked off the phone and turned to Mattie. "You're going to hate me for this."

"You want to go back to D.C., right?" As he searched for a way to justify this to her, she surprised him by shrugging. "It's okay. Just as long as you take me with you."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I can crash on your couch, and we can just spend Christmas at your place instead of here."

"It's going to be two in the morning by the time we get in."

"I'll sleep in the car on the way."

Harm still wasn't convinced. "The thing is, I'm going back because I want to try to pull off some magic with regard to the funeral, which is tomorrow morning in Baltimore. If I went, you'd be alone at my place in D.C. for a good three or four hours."

She cocked her head. "No one's broken into your apartment yet, right?"

"No, just my car, but that's not the point. I promised to spend Christmas with you, and if I ditch you for half of Christmas Eve, I'm going back on my word."

"Then don't ditch me. I'll go to Baltimore. I have a dress to wear and everything."

He just looked at her, not quite comprehending. "Why would you want to come to the funeral of a man you didn't even know?"

Mattie spread her hands, chewing on her lower lip. "Maybe I just want to see this part of what you do," she offered. "If I'm going to be a military brat, I probably ought to get a handle on what it is that makes people join the military in the first place, and this seems like a good a place as any to start."

He shook his head, amazed once again at this girl's strength. "You're almost too smart for your own good," he told her, pulling her into his embrace. She responded by leaning up to kiss his cheek.

He was grateful when she ran off to pack some clothes, because it gave him a moment to blink the stray moisture away from his eyes. If Mattie ever figured out just how badly he was wrapped around her little finger, there'd be trouble, sure enough.

Harm reached for his cell phone again and searched through his contact list for a number he hadn't called in a while. Pulling this off was going to require far more weight than he had available to throw around.

"Admiral Boone, I'm sorry to call so late. I was hoping that you could do me a favor and wake up some people at the Naval Support Facility at Andrews."

Wednesday - Christmas Eve
1046 EST
Pine Creek Cemetery
Baltimore, Maryland

They made an interesting trio; the tall commander and lovely petty officer in dress uniforms, accompanied by a fourteen-year-old girl in a long wool coat. Together they stood near the honor guard of Navy and Marine enlisted personnel, preparing for their duties, and waited for the family to arrive.

Sean Ross stepped out of a dark sedan and opened the passenger door for his mother, intent on the task in front of him and nothing more. Even though his quest had stalled out the previous day, he'd chosen to wear his uniform to the service. If no other honors could be given, at least he could pay his own respects the way his grandfather deserved.

As they made their way toward the chairs, Sean finally noticed the presence of the honor guard and stopped in mid-stride, unsure whether to believe his eyes. After a moment, he saw Harm and Jen, and a look of sheer wonder lit his features. "Mom, look," he prodded.

Maureen Michaels Ross followed her son's gaze, and tears sprang to her eyes as she caught sight of the honor guard, waiting patiently to fulfill its duty. "How -- I thought --?" she stammered.

Sean had to smile. "Jim Duchene gives pretty good advice." He left her side for a moment to approach the JAG officers, admiration glowing in his eyes as he snapped off a salute to the commander.

"I don't know how you did it, sir."

"You can thank Miss Mathilda Grace," Harm replied, placing a hand on her shoulder. "She knocked exactly the right book open to exactly the right page."

"Miss Grace, I definitely owe you one." Sean extended his hand, and Mattie shook it. "You and your dad make a great team."

Both Harm and Mattie waited for the other to correct that assumption, and when neither did, they exchanged a glance. Unseeing, Sean continued. "Sir, why didn't his name appear in any of the records?"

Jen answered for them. "Because, sir, at the time of his enlistment, your grandfather was named Roban Miklas, born in a town near Prague in 1921. His citizenship file is on record with INS. You can get a copy of it any time you'd like."

Sean stared, struggling to grasp this new knowledge. "I assumed he'd picked up what little accent he still had from his parents," he said finally. "I knew even less about him than I thought."

"That's going to change," Harm assured him. "You'll get a complete service record in the mail early next year, and along with it the decorations he earned while fighting with his unit on Okinawa."

Sean shook his head, astounded. "Commander, Petty Officer, thank you. You have no idea what this means to my family."

"I think we have a pretty good idea, actually. But you're very welcome."

The ensign nodded once, then came to attention and saluted his senior officer. Harm returned it in kind, and they took their places in anticipation of the start of the service.

Mattie took in the solemn precision of the honor guard and the gravity of the flag presentation with interest. She'd seen such things in movies before, and so she'd expected no surprises here, but the movies had never managed to convey this kind of power. She felt as if she could almost reach out and take hold of the respect that hummed in the air. She'd sensed that respect in Ensign Ross, Jen Coates, and the members of the honor guard when they addressed Harm, and she could tell that it wasn't by default; they believed it. Earlier, while Harm had been conferring with the honor guard leader, Mattie had asked Jen about the meaning of the ribbons Harm wore below his wings, and the petty officer had launched into a summary of airborne heroics and other tales, in a hushed yet bright tone that made it clear she thought the world of Mattie's almost-guardian. All these sights and stories began to coalesce in Mattie's mind into a new understanding, and she held her head high, barely flinching when the rifle volley sounded.

They took their leave soon after the service ended and headed back to Washington, feeling fairly good about their deeds this week. Harm dropped Jen off at her apartment, then turned to the passenger seat. "Since we're already dressed up, what do you say to an early Christmas dinner at Harbor House?"

"In your uniform?"

"Not like I haven't done it before."

"Okay, but, um, before we do that, there was something else I was thinking about." At his inquisitive look, Mattie hesitated. "You said your dad was shot down in Vietnam, right?"

"That's right," he answered, not sure where she was headed.

"So his name's on the Wall?" Receiving another nod, she charged ahead before she could lose her nerve. "Could you take me there?"

Taken aback, Harm just looked at her. "You want to go to the Wall?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

"Mattie, it's Christmas Eve, and already I've dragged you to a funeral. Don't you want to do something a little less -- I don't know, depressing?"

"Nah, I'm on a roll." She tried a lopsided grin, but the dark humor didn't seem to register with him, so she dropped it. "I don't know. I guess I felt bad for that guy today, finding out so long after the fact that there were all these things he didn't know about his grandfather. And I figured that if I'm going to be in your family, I want to know at least a little about it." His surprised silence immediately unnerved her. "Is that hopelessly cheesy?"

"No. Not even close." Without another word, he put the SUV in gear, and within a few minutes they had arrived on the Mall.

As she walked down the sidewalk and the long ebony monument came into view, Harm slowed to a stop and seemed to collect himself. "Mattie, I'm pretty bad at telling people how I feel," he said suddenly. "You're going to find that I can screw up a Hallmark moment with the best of them. I just want to make sure you know it means a lot to me that you wanted to come here."

He turned slightly away for a moment, and she thought she might have actually seen tears in his eyes. "This place is that special?" she asked, not knowing what else to say.

"It's not just that. It's -- today." He offered a wan smile. "You had no way of knowing, but this is the day he was shot down. Every year since I moved to Washington, I've come out here on Christmas Eve."

Now it was her turn to be surprised, and touched. "You were going to miss it this year to be with me in Blacksburg."

"Yeah, I was. And then you led me back here anyway, so there's got to be some kind of deep significance to that."

"Why didn't you say something before?"

"Because I promised you a happy Christmas. Because on top of everything else you've had to battle, you've had to put up with me stopping by and then running off, sometimes

disappearing for days at a time -- and for once I wanted to just focus on giving you a couple of days of whatever you wanted. The way all fourteen-year-olds should get to spend Christmas.”

“It’s okay,” she said, looking up at him with an earnest smile. “This is a happy Christmas.”

He drew her into a fierce hug then, and for the first time in ages, Mattie felt blissfully safe. “I love you, you know that?” he murmured into her hair.

Cheeks flushing, she leaned into his chest. “Bet you say that to all your strays.”

“You’re right. That’s exactly what I do.” He let the sarcasm melt away. “But you’re in a class by yourself.”

She tried valiantly not to snifle. “I love you, too.”

Hand in hand, they walked down to the correct panel, and Harm reached out to trace the familiar name with his fingers.

“Dad, this is Mattie.”

*** THE END ***