



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Answered Prayers," "Critical Condition"

Summary: Two people face the holidays alone, only to discover that, in fact, they never were alone at all. A Christmas story set in season eight, but separate from and unrelated to "All Ye Faithful."

Author's Notes: Those of you who told me I needed to do another Christmas story -- you know who you are -- don't say I never gave you anything. This story basically pretends that "All Ye Faithful" never happened; also, there will be no mention of Singer's present condition or Mac's posting to the Seahawk. I'm exercising selective memory.

This story was inspired in part by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra's album *Christmas Eve and Other Stories*, specifically the songs "Ornament," "Old City Bar," and "This Christmas Day." Not that I'm getting product-placement fees or anything, but if you haven't heard it, check it out.

Finally, this story is for Stephanie, who was brave enough to ask for it. I think you're a lot stronger than you realize, *ami*.

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*If you'll oblige me for a moment, a quick personal note from an aforementioned friend regarding this story:*

"On This Christmas Day" is not a story like all others stories and I'm not saying it because I asked AeroGirl for writing it. No this story is really different from the other stories. This story gives hope and makes you feel attached the characters. And it sounds very real and believe me I know what I'm talking about. This story is very special to me and I'm sure that it will be a special one to everybody who reads it. This is a wonderful story full of tenderness, love and understanding. It even brought tears in my eyes when I readied it. So you see it is emotional but that's what's so great about this story.

You did a very good job on it and I hope that you're gonna write a lot of stories like that from the bottom of my heart. I thank God for knowing you. You're such a great friend and a hell of a writer. Don't ever lose that gift. You're the best. Thanks a lot for this wonderful story. -- Steph

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**December 23, 2002**  
**1537 EST**  
**JAG Headquarters**  
**Falls Church, Virginia**

"So when are you hitting the road?"

Mac grinned, pointing to the empty inbox on her desk. "Take a wild guess."

"I see." Harm surveyed her office from his vantage point in the doorway. "This might be as neat as it's ever been in here."

"Oh, that's nice. Happy holidays to you, too." She rolled her eyes and stood up, reaching for her briefcase. "Last chance. You're sure you don't want to come with me? It's not going to be anything fancy, and I'm sure Martha would be happy to have you."

"You haven't seen Chloe in ages. You need some sister time." He smiled at the childlike anticipation brimming in her sparkling brown eyes. "Give her a hug for me, though."

Mac watched him, trying to gauge his real feelings. As usual, it was no easy task, but she suspected that he wasn't nearly as content as he pretended to be. "You're really okay with staying here on your own?"

"I'll hardly be on my own. I'll hang with Bud and Harriet and everybody else on Christmas Eve."

"And Christmas Day, when everybody else is doing family stuff? Come on, sailor. You don't have to be the one pulling duty this week every year, you know."

"Mac, the only people I'd go see are out of the country. Mom and Frank are visiting some of his relatives at their place in Spain -- "

"Must be nice," she commented.

"-- and Sergei needs to be with his mother this year. Honestly, it doesn't even matter that much to me. I'll see them all some other time. Why should someone else get stuck here when I'm available?"

She shook her head. "Logic isn't all it's cracked up to be, you know."

"Yeah." He stepped back to allow her through, then caught her in a quick hug. "I'll see you for New Year's, right?"

"Absolutely. We're going to put that new TV of yours to good use and O.D. on football."

“Now that’s something to look forward to. Merry Christmas, Mac.”

“Merry Christmas to you, Harm.”

He watched her disappear through the glass doors, then turned to look over the nearly-deserted bullpen. He’d told her the truth, he reasoned: he really didn’t mind being on duty so close to the holidays. At least there were other things to occupy his mind when he was here. He didn’t have to dwell on things like Sergei’s sudden departure, or his somewhat strained ties with his mother ever since the great citizenship battle, or the nagging questions in the back of his mind about just what the hell he was doing with his life lately.

Then again, like nearly every other office in the District, JAG HQ would be closed on December 25th. For that day, at least, he’d have to find some other method of denial.

At 1800, he performed the end-of-day security checks, returned the salute of the gate guard, and climbed into his Lexus to head for home. As he turned the key, though, the idea of going home to his apartment suddenly held very little appeal, and he decided instead to take a walk on the Mall to think.

It was relatively warm for a Washington December, but there was still enough of a chill to make him button up his uniform overcoat. He walked along the unending black wall for a while, barely looking up. He’d be back soon enough, for his annual pilgrimage on Christmas Eve. It would be thirty-three years ago this year that his father’s name had been added to the terrible roll that now comprised this wall. Thirty-three years. He felt ancient just thinking about it.

He paused near the corner of the monument, where the wall reached high above his head, and looked down the length of it. It was an awe-inspiring view, and a depressing one at the same time. Each name, only about an inch high, and yet it took something like this to capture them all.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Harm turned, surprised by the voice. He’d vaguely registered the presence of a figure in a wheelchair as he’d passed it earlier, and he’d assumed it to be a veteran, paying respects to a fallen comrade. Now, though, he could see that the chair was in fact occupied by a young woman, cheeks reddened by the wind. “I’m sorry to bother you. If you’d rather not be disturbed, I understand.”

“No, it’s all right.” He smiled and stepped closer. “Can I help you with something?”

“I was hoping you might be able to do me a favor.” She held up a piece of paper and a rubbing crayon, looking apologetic. “The name I want is on that panel right there, and I can’t reach it. Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” He took them from her and moved to the wall. “Just point me in the right direction.”

“Three rows up. Anthony Garrett.” As he held the paper over the correct position and rubbed the crayon across it, recording the name in relief, the girl pressed her gloved hands together for warmth. “I guess I picked a lousy time to come out here. I’ve been in town since September, and I kept meaning to do this, but it got away from me until now.”

"Not to pry, but you can't be old enough for this to have been your father."

"My uncle, actually. Specialist First Class Garrett, to be precise. My mother still misses him. Obviously I never knew him, but ..." She shrugged a little, then smiled as he handed her the finished rubbing. "Thanks very much, Commander."

Once again, he was surprised. "You read Navy ranks?"

"My brother's a comm technician, stationed at Pensacola." She extended her hand. "Leigh Winslow, by the way."

He took it. "Harmon Rabb."

Leigh took another glance at his shoulder. "I'm afraid I don't know all the insignia, though. That's not medical, is it?"

"Sorry -- legal. I'm at JAG Headquarters over in Falls Church."

"Really? I'm thinking about law school. Well, when I get through undergrad, I'll be thinking about it. I just started at Georgetown this fall. Finished my first set of final exams last week. Let me tell you, that was a good feeling."

She flashed another smile, one that told him a great deal. This was a young woman just beginning on her life's journey, and she was unashamedly excited about it. It was somehow refreshing to see that kind of optimism in her.

Harm looked up at the street level and made an instant decision. "Listen, it's freezing out here. If it wouldn't be too weird for you, would you like to go get a cup of coffee?"

Raising her eyebrows, she tilted her head and spoke brightly. "Sounds good to me."

"All right. Do you need, um --" He stopped himself as she deftly released the chair's brake and wheeled around to ascend the ramped sidewalk.

"I don't need much," she answered, still smiling. "Lead on."

There was a small coffee shop across the street, doing a fairly brisk business even in the frigid weather. Leigh maneuvered her chair up to a corner table while Harm placed their order.

"You're not from around here," he theorized, by way of a conversation starter. "No one who grew up in a city like this would let a strange guy twice her age buy her coffee."

"Well, I have to believe that anybody who makes O-5 in the Navy is probably not a criminal," she pointed out, taking off her wool cap and shaking out a mass of dark blond curls. "But no, I didn't exactly grow up in a booming metropolis. I came here for school to give city life a try, and so far I like it."

"You don't have any problems getting around?"

"I have the bus schedule memorized."

"That's not quite what I meant. Being out here on your own - that's impressive."

As he removed his overcoat, her eyes immediately fell on his wings. "Whoa, time out. You're a pilot, too? Somehow that didn't come up before."

"I flew Tomcats for the first part of my career. Don't get to do it much anymore, but it's not something that really goes away."

"I can imagine. Well, maybe not." She took a sip of coffee with a semi-rueful expression. "You can see why a military career wouldn't quite work for me."

Harm weighed his options and chose to press on. "Tell me to mind my own business if you want, but -- "

"Car accident," she replied easily, before he could finish the sentence. "I was eleven. There was some limited spinal damage -- I can feel my legs, but they don't exactly function as designed."

"That must have been difficult to get used to."

"I do all right these days. Like I said, buses really help me out." Leigh gave a dismissive shrug and folded her arms. "But anyway. You were surprised that I said yes to coffee, but I have to say I was surprised to be asked. Most people are running around in a panic two days before Christmas. Don't you have more urgent things to be doing?"

There was a slightly guarded edge to that query, slight enough that he almost didn't catch it. Almost. "Hey, if you're worried that I see this as some kind of charity case -- "

"I'm not. At least, not much." Her confident expression only wavered for a second. "It's just that ... you know, when you spend your life in one of these chairs, a certain amount of pity comes with the territory. What I mean is, if you did see me like that, you wouldn't be the first."

"Well, I don't," he replied in complete honesty. "If anything, you're doing me a favor. I had every intention of going home and basically staring at the walls all evening. This is a far more constructive use of my time."

His trademark grin made some impact on her, but rather than being dazzled by it, she seemed to sense something behind it. "No last-minute gifts to buy? No relatives flying in from somewhere to bug you?"

"Neither. My brother's away, my mom and I seem to do better when we don't talk so much, and my dad ... well, he's the reason I go to the Wall in the first place." He reached for his coffee, looking over at her. "You?"

"My gifts are bought, wrapped and mailed. My brother's got duty and not enough leave time to spare. I thought about trying to get home for Christmas, but with school and all, I don't really have the funds. It's all right. All my cousins promised to call on speaker-phone from the big get-together."

"Still, you'll be away and alone for the first time on the holiday," he persisted.

"I won't be alone." Her words innocently echoed his reassurance to Mac, only hours earlier. "Besides, I don't see why it should be any easier for you simply because you've had to do it before."

She had a point, he had to grudgingly admit to himself. "Christmas has never been the best time of year for me. It's when my dad went missing, so ..." He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I don't know. The only times I've even halfway enjoyed Christmas have been the times my best friend has been around, and this year she's not."

"I know what you mean. The Christmas after the accident, Nick -- my brother -- used all his paper route money to buy this great sled with an actual seat on it. He put on his hockey skates and pulled me around the lake for at least an hour. We've done it every year since, too, so it's a little hard to picture Christmas without it."

"The only tradition Mac and I have is running in different directions and still ending up in the same place for Christmas Day. She's a JAG as well, so it's not easy, but typically we're either watching 'It's a Wonderful Life,' or trying to make cookies, or playing cards until one of us falls asleep. But whatever it is, we're always together, somehow."

"And this year?"

"Sucks," he answered promptly, which made her giggle and wince at the same time. "She's with her little sister's family. Chloe had it rough for a long time, and Mac kinda mentored her and really helped her out. No, it'll be fine. Just -- you know, ordinary."

Leigh watched him for a minute, a slow smile lighting her eyes. "I've got an idea," she offered. "Do you have to work tomorrow?"

"We don't get Christmas Eve off, but there's not much to do, so we can usually bail out early. Why?"

She was already writing down an address on her napkin. "If you have time, come by this place tomorrow afternoon. It might help you get a little more into the spirit of things. If nothing else, it'll give you something to do."

He didn't even know her, really, but he believed her. "I'll be there," he said quietly. "Listen, can I give you a ride somewhere? It'd be much warmer than waiting for the bus."

"As long as you don't drive a Miata or something." The look of mock resignation she gave her wheelchair, combined with a sweeping gesture, made him chuckle.

"Not to worry. It's an SUV."

"In that case, a ride would be lovely. Thank you."

He pulled the Lexus up to the front door and looked at her, silently requesting permission. When she nodded, he reached down and lifted her into the passenger seat. Folding up the chair and placing it in the trunk, he slid into the driver's seat.

"I don't let just anyone get away with sweeping me off my feet, you know," she remarked as they fastened their seatbelts. "I get the feeling it would be extremely easy to develop a crush on you, Commander."

At her teasing tone, he had to smile. "Call me Harm. Where to?"

"Actually, it's still early. What is it, eight or so?"

"Or so."

"Then you might as well aim for that address I gave you. Take a right at the second light."

Ten minutes later, he was helping her out of the car in front of a nondescript brick building. "Thank you for the ride, the coffee, and especially the company. When they spring you loose tomorrow, you'll know where to find me. Take care, Harm."

"You too, Leigh." He watched her wheel up to the door, which opened when she pressed the access button. As she disappeared into the building, he finally spotted a small sign in the window: Horizon House.

When he got home, he looked it up on the web. Horizon House was apparently a center for disadvantaged and disabled children, whose parents had either lost custody or simply been unable to care for them in the manner they required. The center had a small full-time staff, but relied heavily on a number of volunteers, of which he suspected Leigh was one. The idea impressed him immensely. Here she was, starting school in a new city, facing more than her share of personal challenges -- and she gave her precious free time to others.

Fascinated by this unique young woman and her cheerful outlook, he found himself looking forward to the coming day much more than he'd expected.

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Christmas Eve was a typical winter day in the District: gray and chilly. Harm was the only senior officer on duty, making him the acting JAG, and he shared the office with only a scattered few of the young enlisted who didn't have leave days to burn. He signed off on a handful of reports left by the admiral, then secured the office for the holiday, to everyone's relief, at 1400.

By 1420, he was walking through the entrance of Horizon House, drawn in by the lyrical sounds of children's laughter. In the expansive front room, Leigh was taking a makeshift obstacle course at top speed, a six-year-old boy sitting on her lap. The boy shrieked happily as she piloted the chair around sharp turns and through tunnels made from chairs and bedsheets.

"A new record!" she cried triumphantly as they crossed the 'finish line.' The boy put his arms around her neck for a quick hug before scrambling down from her lap. As he neared, Harm could see that the child had the characteristic features of Down's syndrome. Other children were in wheelchairs themselves, and still others had no impairments that were visible to him. But each of them lit up when Leigh looked at them with a smile that was clearly meant for them and no one else.

Eventually, she noticed the visitor hovering in the doorway, and she waved him in. "Hey, gang!" she called to the group. "Remember how I said that we might get a new friend today? Can you give him the special welcome we practiced?"

Dutifully, most of the kids jumped to their feet. "Merry Christmas, sir!" they chorused.

Smothering a grin, Harm decided to play along and snapped to attention. "Merry Christmas, everyone," he replied smartly. Amid a smattering of giggles, Leigh wheeled up to him, still faintly flushed from the earlier race.

"You made it."

"I said I would." Harm tossed his overcoat and cover on a chair. "This is quite a place."

And it was. Christmas lights and decorations were everywhere, covering the room with a chaotic, multicolored glow. It wasn't fancy by any means: the furniture was worn in places, and the walls could have used a new coat of paint. But the children's artwork hung everywhere, creating a warm scene. Leigh gestured around. "Well, it's not much, but it's ours. I just kinda stumbled on it soon after I moved out here. It gets a little crazy, but the kids are just wonderful. They don't realize they have it tough, so it's like they don't really have it tough at all."

Just then, a little girl hurried up to them with a rapid, limping gait and hurled herself at Harm's legs. "Cassie, say hi," Leigh instructed, and Cassie looked up shyly, as if rethinking her actions.

"Hi," she repeated softly.

Harm bent down to her level and smiled. "Hi, Cassie." The little girl immediately began to play with his ribbons. "Okay, maybe I'd better ditch the jacket."

"Good idea," Leigh agreed. "She'd find a way to mess it up somehow."

He took off his uniform jacket and tie and laid them on top of his coat. "So all these kids live here?"

"Not all of them. A few have foster families and just come here for daycare. Right now there are fourteen in residence, until families are arranged for them, too." She watched in amusement as Cassie reattached herself to his leg. "We were just about to start some Christmas carols. Want to help out?"

Harm wasn't particularly well-versed in Christmas lyrics, but somehow it didn't seem to matter here. "Why not?"

"Excellent. Hey, everybody! Find a spot on the rug, okay?"

The kids raced to the center of the room, and other staff members positioned the wheelchairs around the edge of the carpet. Harm sat down on the floor and impulsively pulled Cassie into his lap, much to her delight.

Leigh started them off with "Jingle Bells" in a strong, clear voice. Some of the children knew enough to join in, and others bobbed their heads or sang wordlessly along with the adults. Harm watched their faces and thought that he'd never seen such pure innocence in his life. Before he knew it, they'd run through half an hour of carols, and it was time for the kids to move into the kitchen area for their afternoon snack.

When they were settled, Leigh and Harm went back into the main room. "They really get to you, don't they?" she commented with a knowing look.

"They do," he agreed. "You do, too."

She looked startled. "Me?"

"Leigh, where's home for you? Where's the big family get-together?"

"Indiana, to both questions," she replied, puzzled. "Why?"

"Because I think you ought to be there." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and started dialing. "What's the closest airport to home?"

"Harm, no." She grabbed his arm and took the phone from him, ending the call.

"Leigh, I want to do it, and you really do deserve it. What you do here is amazing, and I believe that one good turn deserves another. Especially at this time of year."

"So get me a sweater. Not a plane ticket."

"It's not a big deal. I rack up a lot of frequent flyer miles."

"It isn't the money, Harm. I had the money. I just decided it would be better spent here. Come on." She led him down the hall and opened a door, revealing a small room full of beautifully wrapped presents. "Tomorrow morning, all those kids are going to have presents to open. They're going to have stockings with their names on them. And I'm going to be here to see their faces. I'll probably use up about a million rolls of film in the process, but God, it's going to be worth it. I swear, I haven't been this excited about Christmas since I believed in Santa Claus."

He could only shake his head, awed. "You did all this?"

"It wasn't just me. The staff bought some, too, and the Lions Club donated a lot. But the stockings, and all those boxes in red, those are mine. I'm proud to say it. This was an easy choice, really. My family will get their gifts in the mail, and I'll see them at the end of the school year. Besides, it's Nick I really wish I could see, and you know how it is in the military. Little sisters, no matter how much they adore their brothers, don't get a say in duty assignments."

"True enough." Harm held out his hand, and she gave him back his phone. "All right, so the last-minute trip to Indiana is out. As an alternative, would you like to come to a holiday party with me tonight? The JAG crew always gets together at someone's house before heading out to Christmas Eve services."

"Wouldn't I be intruding on your friends' party?"

"Are you kidding? Last year I ended up bringing along a petty officer accused of petty theft, all because the brig was closed."

"Well ... I'll need to go home and change first."

"That can be arranged."

He went home to change as well, and at 1700, he picked her up and took her back to her campus apartment. While she was inside, he took out his cell phone again. After letting Harriet know that they'd have another guest at the party, he dialed another number, one he hadn't used in a while. Maybe he couldn't get her home for Christmas, but there were other miracles that could be arranged.

"Is Commander Skiles available? Thank you ... Blue, what the hell are you doing on duty tonight? Yeah, me too. Listen, I have a huge favor to ask. Who do you know down there that can cut travel orders rapidly? Like, say, tonight? Don't worry about authorization -- I can handle that part. What I need is a one-day TDY for a Petty Officer Nicholas Winslow."

He'd already stowed the phone by the time she reappeared, wearing a forest-green dress with gold accents. "Acceptable?"

"You look lovely," he assured her. "That was pretty fast -- you know, all things considered."

After he'd said it, he immediately regretted it. But she didn't take offense. "Like I said before, I can feel my legs. Enough to almost stand up, actually. But it's hard to keep my balance, so I do everything in stages. You get used to it after a while."

Not knowing how to respond to that, he simply helped her into the car, and they rode in near-silence to the Roberts' house.

Harriet greeted them at the door with a wide, welcoming smile. "Merry Christmas, sir! And you must be Leigh. I'm Harriet."

"Thank you for having me," Leigh said sincerely, shaking her hand.

"It's our pleasure. I'm getting used to the commander bringing dates that aren't dates."

"Behave yourself, Lieutenant," Harm warned good-naturedly as he helped Leigh ease her wheelchair over the threshold. "So who's here for the inaugural Christmas party in the new house?"

"Ah, it looks like you're the ranking officer tonight. The admiral left this morning for Italy, as I'm sure you know, and Commander Turner is helping his father get ready for the service."

"Sturgis's father is a chaplain," he explained to Leigh. "All right, Harriet, where's that godson of mine?"

As if on cue, A.J. Roberts made his way through the jungle of legs crowding the room and beamed up at Harm. "Hiya!"

"Hiya, yourself, kiddo. This is my friend, Leigh. Leigh, this is A.J."

A.J. gazed at the girl in the strange chair for a moment with a quizzical expression. Just as Leigh opened her mouth to try to explain, he said, "Are you like Daddy?"

She looked to Harm and Harriet in confusion. "Sort of, sweetie," Harriet told him as she took their coats. "Help yourselves to everything, you two. There's punch in the kitchen."

A.J. followed his mom through the living room, and Leigh frowned up at Harm. "A.J.'s dad is in a wheelchair?"

"Not anymore. He was injured in Afghanistan this past summer and lost part of his leg. He's walking now, with a prosthesis, but I'm sure A.J. remembers the wheelchair from Bud's stay in the hospital." Harm glanced over at the doorway to the kitchen. "Speaking of which, here he comes. Bud Roberts, Leigh Winslow."

Bud transferred his cane to his left hand so that he could reach out his right to shake hers. "At last," he greeted with a self-deprecating smile. "Someone who appreciates my hatred of stairs."

Harm blinked, but Leigh immediately started laughing. "Most definitely," she agreed. "It's nice to meet you."

They chatted amiably with Harm's colleagues for a while. While he was engrossed in a work-related conversation with another officer, though, she looked down to find A.J. standing next to her, a book in his hand. "You read my mind, honey," she told him. Quietly they went into the other room, and she carefully eased herself onto the couch to read the little boy *The Night Before Christmas*.

He was asleep before Santa could even call his reindeer, curled up against the couch cushion in his flannel pajamas. As she pondered whether to leave him there or go find his parents, Bud stepped into the room and surveyed the scene.

"I think you've made a new friend," he remarked, moving across the room with only a slight limp and taking a seat across from her. "Thank you for paying attention to him."

"It was no trouble." She studied her wheelchair, wondering if she should have stayed in it. "Your friends are all so ... accepting."

"They are," he replied. "I was afraid they might not be, right after I got hurt. But I underestimated them. I think maybe I underestimated people in general. It's not so bad most of the time, being a little different."

"Most of the time, sure. But there's always one person giving you that look, the one that says, 'Oh, you poor dear. You must need so much help.' Or there's the one that says, 'You can't possibly do this or that because you can't walk.' You can ignore them, but they're always there."

Bud saw her eyes glisten with a kind of pain that she'd obviously been trying to keep hidden, a kind of pain he recognized. "Are they?" he asked honestly. "Are those people here tonight? If so, I don't see them."

Leigh stared at him and thought hard about the question. Of the people she'd met tonight, had any of them really looked at her with pity? "Maybe not," she admitted in a low voice, managing a small smile. "I know Harm doesn't. I mean, he doesn't always know what to do for me and what to let me do myself, but at least he doesn't assume anything. He lets me make the decisions, and I appreciate that."

"He's a good man. You can't do much better in the friendship department."

She leaned forward and peeked around the doorway, finding Harm deep in conversation with a young man -- Bud's brother, she recalled. "I think he really misses Mac," she hypothesized, and Bud's eyebrows shot up.

"Does he talk about her to you?"

"A little. He said they usually spend Christmas together, but she's away with her little sister this year. I don't know, it just sounded like they're really close. Am I way off?"

"No, I wouldn't say that." Bud leaned over to grab a photo album off the shelf. Finding the correct page, he handed the album over to her. "In case you were wondering, that's Colonel Mackenzie."

The picture was one of Harm and Mac at A.J.'s christening. Leigh looked at it for a long time, trying to decipher the meaning in the gaze shared by the handsome officer in dress whites and the graceful, striking woman with the dark hair. "I see," she said finally.

"You do? Then explain it to me, because I still haven't figured it out."

She frowned. "You mean they're not -- ?"

"Not as far as anyone can tell. Commander Turner's the only one who seems to have a clue, and he's not talking either." Bud shrugged. "All I know is that they depend on each other."

She paged through the album for another minute, admiring the extended family. Then she looked at him with a twinkle of an idea in her eye. "Do you happen to have her sister's phone number?"

"Chloe? Sure, we've probably got it in the book by now." Starting to see the wheels turning in her head, he got up to retrieve the address book on the desk. "We've got the colonel's cell phone number, too, if you want."

"No, I think I want to talk to Chloe. How old is she?"

"Fourteen or so, but she acts like she's twenty."

"That'll do. It's not a long-distance call, is it?"

Bud handed her the cordless phone and smiled. "Don't worry about it. Tell them Merry Christmas for me."

When Harm came looking for her, fifteen minutes later, she was just hanging up the phone. "Who was that?" he questioned.

"I was just checking my final grades on the automated line," she fibbed smoothly.

If he thought the timing was strange, he didn't say so. "They must've been good. You're practically glowing."

"Am I?" she asked innocently.

He shook his head, mystified. "Come on. Time for church."

When the service concluded, he took her home before making his visit to the Wall. She made him promise to come to Horizon in the morning, and he tried to keep a straight face while acquiescing. He'd be there, all right. Then he made the trip he'd made every December twenty-fourth since moving to Washington, the trip he'd made nearly every year since the memorial's creation twenty years ago.

"It's just me this year, Dad," he began quietly, setting his small candle down in front of the stark black panel. "Sergei won't be magically appearing like last year, and Mac won't be chasing after me like the year before. I'm a little ashamed to admit it, but I miss my partner more than my brother, and she's only been gone for a day. Maybe I'm feeling sort of guilty about Sergei because I see how much Leigh misses *her* brother. I don't know. But at least I'm doing something about that. Actually, the fact that I'm doing anything at all is pretty much a shock to me. I haven't been sitting around feeling sorry for myself like I usually do, and it's completely because of this one incredible person. I can't believe I just met her yesterday. She can't walk, and it's almost like it doesn't even matter. I mean, I know it matters -- I know things are hard for her, but the way she just keeps smiling through it all ... how could I feel sorry for myself if she can be like that?"

He jammed his hands into his coat pockets, but the cold wasn't really bothering him. "I think I needed a wake-up call, and somehow, she was it. A few things are starting to make a little more sense now. There's really nothing holding me back from being happy except myself, right? I just wish I didn't have to wait until New Year's to see Mac, because if she were here right now, I'd - well, I'm not sure what I'd do, but it would be decisive and totally different from all those other screw-ups of mine. I'd do something about this holding pattern I put us in. I'm still going to do something about it, no matter when or how. That's a promise this time."

He reached out to trace his father's name, feeling stronger than he had in months. "I still miss you. That's never going to change. But I'm all right. Right now, I really am."

"Merry Christmas, Dad."

As he backed away, a slight sound startled him; and for a brief, blissful moment, he held the hope that perhaps God had been listening and that Mac had come back to be with him. When he turned, though, he saw only an older man shuffling along the snowy sidewalk. Mentally chiding himself for the fanciful, romantic thought, he started back to his car. He had a schedule to keep in the morning, and a Christmas surprise to complete.

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**Christmas Day**  
**0949 EST**  
**Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland**

Petty Officer Second Class Nicholas Winslow hurried into the terminal, shaking off the chill he'd acquired on the hundred-yard walk across the tarmac. A man in jeans and a Navy flight jacket started to approach him, and he instinctively straightened. "Commander Rabb, sir?"

"Merry Christmas, Petty Officer." They shook hands, and Nick stood hesitantly until the commander quirked an eyebrow. "You have no idea what you're doing here, do you?"

"Not really, sir. All the duty officer told me was that I was to meet you here for a TDY assignment. Thing is, sir, I work on air-to-ground communications links, and you're right up the road from the Naval Air Warfare Center, so I don't know why you'd need somebody like me, on a day like this ..."

"I'll explain on the way." Harm headed for the parking lot, and the young petty officer obediently followed. "I trust I'm not making you miss out on any major Christmas plans?"

"No, sir -- I was just going to hang with a buddy of mine at our host family's place. They find host families for us single guys for the holidays, you know. Probably so we won't complain about getting a lousy Christmas dinner from the mess." Nick tossed his duffel into the backseat and took off his cover. "Tell you the truth, sir, this is a great trade. My sister's in school up here, so maybe I can take a few minutes and track her down -- I mean, if I have time."

"I'll go you one better. I'll take you to her right now."

Nick's head swung around just as Harm put the Lexus into gear, and he noticed the faintly smug look in the other man's eyes. "Commander, respectfully, what exactly is my job here today?"

"Your job, Petty Officer, is to spend Christmas with a wonderful young woman who misses you like crazy. One of the perks to being the acting Judge Advocate General is the ability to authorize travel orders for just about anything, especially when there's already a scheduled MIL-AIR flight and you don't need lodging money."

Nick just watched the trees pass by for a minute, trying to grasp the situation. "You worked this out just for Leigh and me?"

"Your sister is a special person. Since she worships you, I can infer that you're a decent guy, too. All I'm doing is a little something for somebody who earned it."

They pulled up to Horizon House in just under twenty minutes. The door was unlocked, and inside, a wild party seemed to have taken over the living room. Discarded wrapping paper, ribbons, and boxes littered the floor. The children were all focused on whatever toy or game had been under the tree for them, and all of them looked to be nothing less than ecstatic. Most of the staff was standing off to the side, watching with satisfaction, but Leigh was in the middle of it all, cheerfully playing Chutes and Ladders with two of the kids and ducking the occasional foam football that sailed past. The mischief in the air was contagious, and Harm signaled for Nick to wait by the door while he approached.

"Quite the celebration you have going on here," he called over the noise. Leigh looked up at him and beamed.

"Isn't it great? I've never seen so much concentrated happiness in my life!"

"Well, how about cranking it up a little further?" Taking hold of the arms of her wheelchair, he turned it so that she could see the uniformed young man waiting in the doorway.

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. Huge tears welled up in her eyes: this was perfect. Better than perfect - this was the one thing she hadn't dared to hope for. As the kids played around her, oblivious, she wheeled toward her brother, threw on the brake, and launched herself out of the chair at him.

Nick caught her easily and tightened his arms around her. "Easy, Scoot," he said quietly as she sniffled against his shoulder. "You're getting soggy."

"Shut up," she mumbled tearfully, suddenly seeming much younger. "God, Nick, what are you *doing* here?"

"Ask the commander. He made it happen."

She turned a wide-eyed, watery stare on Harm. "You didn't."

"I didn't do a single thing that would impact anyone else. The flight would've happened whether he'd been on it or not." He smiled. "The way I see it, just because a selfless person can find happiness in the joy of others, it doesn't mean that they shouldn't get a little joy of their own."

The tears spilled over, and she clung even more tightly to her brother as he lowered her back into the chair. "Harm, I -- wow, you've completely thrown me off. I can't even put together a sentence here, but thank you. Thank you so much ..."

"Leigh, I can tell you honestly that it was my pleasure. Just remember, Petty Officer, that your flight back to Pensacola leaves at 0840 tomorrow. Otherwise your commanding officer is going to keelhaul us both."

"Aye, sir." Nick grinned at his sister. "So, did you bring the sled with you from home? There's got to be a park around here somewhere."

Harm left them together and headed home, feeling somehow lighter in his step. That had felt good. Really good. So what if he still had most of the day to waste? Last night, he'd gotten out the box that contained the few Christmas decorations he had, and a strange part of him was considering putting them up this afternoon. Just for fun, and for something to do. At the very least, he now owned a TV, so he could probably find a football game to watch.

When he put his key in the lock, the doorknob turned easily, taking him by surprise. Never in eight years had he forgotten to lock his apartment. And there were only two people in the world who had a spare key: Sergei and --

Mac turned around at the sound of the door, looking faintly guilty. Her coat and suitcase were sitting by the couch, and a string of lights was in her hand. "I figured, wherever you were, you'd have to come home sooner or later," she explained simply.

Harm stared at her for a minute, trying to convince himself that she was indeed real and not a figment of his imagination. At his reaction, her smile faltered slightly. "You don't mind that I came in, right? Harm? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he answered, finally coming back to himself. "It's just ... I think my dad actually heard me."

"What?"

In lieu of a response, he strode across the room and enfolded her in a crushing embrace. Mac was a little taken aback, and although it was a pleasant kind of surprise, she could hardly let it pass without comment. "Sailor, I've only been gone for two days."

"Sure, but they were two really world-altering days." That only confused her further, but he released her and took the lights out of her hand, reaching up to string them over the windows. "I have no idea what you're doing here, but I'm really glad that you came."

"It was Chloe's idea, actually. She's got her dad with her this year, and last night she suggested that I could come back mid-day today and have Christmas with both her and you." Something about his bearing made her feel safe enough to go a step further. "I think maybe she could sense how much I missed you. Um, anyway, traveling on Christmas Day is really a breeze."

He turned around, wearing an expression of hope that made her melt. "You missed me?"

She glanced down, almost shyly. "And you missed me, huh?"

"Great minds think alike." Abandoning the lights, he took a step toward her, but halted as a sneaking suspicion entered his mind. "Wait a minute. About what time last night was it that you and Chloe discussed this?"

"1930. Just before church. She'd been on the phone with a friend or something, and ..."

"I'll be damned." Without elaborating, he went over to the phone and dialed. Not surprisingly, the answering machine picked up. "Leigh, it's Harm. I cannot believe that you called Chloe, and I don't know how in God's name you figured it out ... but thank you. You don't know how important this is to me. Whenever Horizon needs some repair work or anything like that, I'm your guy, and when spring comes around, I'm taking you for an airplane ride. Well, anyway, hope you're out having fun. Merry Christmas."

He hung up and went back to Mac, who had her arms folded and her eyes narrowed. "You need to explain a few things, flyboy. Who is Leigh, and how exactly does he or she fit into this?"

"In the context of the season, I'd have to classify her as an angel." Harm smiled, with more openness and contentment than she'd ever seen in him. "We met Monday evening at the Wall. This morning I gave her a gift, and now it's apparent that she had one for me as well."

"She gave you me?"

"Even angels don't quite have that much pull, Mac. Nobody can give you away except you. And that's part of the point, I think. What she gave me was a better perspective on things -- that, and a perfect chance to do something that I've wanted to do for a long time."

As he drew closer, her breath caught in her throat. "What's that?" she whispered.

"To let go and finally give myself away. To you." Lifting her chin with a finger, he placed a tender kiss on her trembling lips. "Unless you'd rather have another bottle of perfume instead."

"No, I like this better," she replied shakily, when her voice decided to function again at last. "Harm, not to look a gift horse in the mouth or anything, but where did this come from?"

"Does it matter, so long as it's real?"

"I guess not, but ..."

He kissed her again, ending her train of thought, and then pulled her into his arms. "Someday I'll be able to explain it better than this," he promised, "but for now, all I can say is that I'm ready to make my life really work. And I know for a certainty that I need you for that. I promised myself last night that I'd make things right as soon as I saw you again, and here you are -- so what do you say?"

This time, she was the one to initiate the kiss. "I say that either your friend Leigh really is an angel or there's another one up there somewhere for us," she said softly. "I've been waiting for some kind of opportunity to try and break this long-standing stalemate of ours, I think, but I didn't know what that opportunity was supposed to look like. And here it just fell into my lap ... It's safe to say that I'm a little overwhelmed. But happy."

"Good. Everybody should be happy on Christmas."

She stared at him, searching his features for some sign that he recognized the incongruity of that statement coming from him. But there was no veiled pain to be found there anymore. A bright-faced young woman and a house full of children had wiped it all away, leaving only the strong, determined side of him that she admired so much ... the part of him that she'd always loved the most. So she kissed him yet again, reveling in the sensation.

"Want to finish decorating?" she asked.

"Sure. Then we can try making cookies again. I think I figured out what we did wrong last year."

"What we did wrong last year was trying to make gingerbread from scratch, instead of going to the store for a packaged mix."

"Oh, where's your sense of adventure?"

As the snow settled over the District of Columbia, two friends spent the day discovering each other anew, while a young man pulled his sister all over Rock Creek Park on a well-used sled. All four would later confess that they'd never had a better Christmas in all their lives. And that, of course, had been the angel's plan all along.

\*\*\* The End - Happy holidays to all. \*\*\*