



Portraits

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: vignette, angst, romance

Spoilers: "Deja Vu," "Fortunate Son"

Summary: A reporter reflects on his encounter with a troubled young man in a troubled country, over twenty years ago.

Disclaimer: Characters owned not by me, but by Bellisaurus Rex (AeroBoy's oh-so-clever nickname for DPB). I know y'all need money because DJE's new contract cleaned you out, but it'd take me six years to make what that man now earns for one episode ... so don't sue, por favor.

Author's Notes: This story may or may not follow show canon perfectly -- if something doesn't fit, kindly chalk it up to artistic license. It's definitely not the image we have of Harm today, either, so be forewarned. I think the plot owes something to Valerie's "Aftermath" (though I'm definitely not trying to put it up in the same league as that incredible story), and the story's execution owes a TON to Val's expert assistance - thanks, hon. Also, I've had this nagging urge to somehow explain Harm's late sixth-season comment about getting shot ("Yeah, it hurts!"), because as far as I can recall, we've never seen him get shot on screen, unless you count visions. Does it make sense? Am I off the deep end at last? You be the judge.

(Excerpt from *Portraits: America and Americans at a Fragile Peace*, Chapter 4)

"This is a dead story," Mark Worsham muttered as he plopped down at the rickety table. "Literally. I know we gotta pay our dues and all, but Jesus. The jungle, in July? For a dead story?"

His assessment wasn't all that different from mine, but for some reason I didn't feel like voicing that opinion. It was the summer of 1980, and I'd been reporting for the Associated Press for about eight months. They'd been sending me all over the place, to chase weak stories that would only get rewritten by a more established writer if I happened to stumble on something good. Worsham, the photojournalist AP had contracted to babysit me, wasn't much older than I was, but it didn't take a whole lot of experience to resent an assignment like this. The middle of Vietnam had seemingly been forgotten by much of the world for the past few years. It was hot, people were understandably not too fond of us, and the story we'd come all this way to document wasn't being very cooperative.

I glanced over at Worsham and shrugged impassively. "These guys obviously don't think it's dead, or they'd be back home watching the Dodgers."

He snorted. "God-damn Marines aren't exactly known for taking hints. They'll keep looking for their buddies 'til doomsday, which might come sooner than they think if they're not careful."

"Quit bitching, will you? So it's a lousy assignment. But the story practically writes itself. All those American families who've been waiting for years to find out what happened to their loved ones, and when the government repatriation efforts stall out, this group of former servicemen refuses to give up until they bring their comrades home. It's a slam dunk. Find yourself a shot of a local kid holding up a set of dog tags, and we're in business."

At that point, Worsham focused on something over my shoulder and reached for his camera. "Got a better idea."

I turned in my chair and followed his gaze to a small hut across the dusty road. A young man was leaning against the wall, an M-16 slung over his shoulder. His face was smudged with dirt and camouflage paint, but the blue-gray eyes and the brown hair that spilled over his bandana identified him as part of the American group. So they were back from wherever they'd gone today. I wondered why this kid was off by himself.

It surprised me a little to realize that 'kid' was precisely the right word. There was something about him that just seemed spooky. The lifeless expression on his face and the blinding weariness in his eyes were consistent with the few combat veterans I'd met, but --

"If that kid's old enough to have been in country back in '74 or '75, I'm Farrah Fawcett," I commented to Worsham.

"You don't have the legs for it." Worsham lifted his camera, adjusted the lens, and clicked off a couple of shots. "So if he's not a vet, what the hell's he doing here?"

"Don't know, but I like the angle already. Sit tight." I stood up and walked over to the hut, leaving my notebook in my pocket for now. I had the sense that this might require a soft touch.

The young man didn't look up at my approach, staring blankly at the ground. When the shadow of another person crossed into his line of sight, he simply mumbled something in Vietnamese without lifting his head.

"Sorry, I only do English," I replied.

"I said, get lost." The voice was appropriately young and slightly hoarse with pain. I noticed a bloodstained hole in his sleeve and just shook my head in disbelief.

"Christ, kid, how old are you?"

"What's it matter?"

"I don't know yet. You got a name?"

"Not one I'm gonna give to a reporter."

"How do you know I'm a reporter?" He glanced up at me with a snort of contempt, and cast a pointed gaze at my clean clothes and lack of visible weapons. I fought the urge to bristle at the suggestion that this punk might be tougher than I was. "Okay, you got a nickname?"

"I don't want a headline, so don't waste your breath."

"Look, G.I. Joe, right now I'd rather give you a Band-Aid than a headline." I was still shaking my head. "I don't know what your deal is, but you don't belong here."

The boy's head snapped up, his eyes glittering. "F--k you," he spat out. "You think I don't know that?"

Neither the epithet nor the malice behind it was much of a surprise, but his apparent level of awareness of the situation was. "That colonel and his men ought to have at least taken care of that bullet wound. Why aren't you guys sticking together?"

"Cause I'm more trouble than I'm worth. And I'm done talking, so either you leave, or I will." When I didn't move, he swung to his feet and immediately staggered. I noticed the pallor of his skin under the dirt and paint, and reached out to steady him. Jerking away, he made it only a few steps before slumping to the ground.

"Christ," I muttered again, finding no other words for the situation. When I dropped to a knee beside the boy, I found him out cold. Pulling the torn fabric away from his injured arm, I discovered a neat but large-caliber hole, pumping fresh blood that had been running, ignored, down his arm for some time. With no better ideas in sight, I lifted his head and removed his bandana in order to tie it around the wound.

"What the hell?" Worsham wanted to know, approaching from across the road.

"Help me get him up. I'm gonna put him in my room for now." I slung the boy's good arm over my shoulders and pulled, surprised at how light he was. "Hopefully Mimi can help him out."

Mimi wasn't her real name, of course. The French soldiers who had come through the region during her childhood had given her the nickname, and she had chosen to keep using it with the Americans. Journalists were decent boarders, she'd told me once: we paid a better wage than the soldiers had, and we usually weren't interested in any of the 'extra' services she'd been forced to offer in the past.

It was for this reason, I suspect, that Mimi didn't object when I brought in a bleeding, unconscious American boy without warning. She was accustomed to seeing the youth of her own country taking up arms, but it was clear to her that I was not. So she herded me into a corner and went to work cleaning and binding the boy's wound.

I watched the layers of hardened defiance being stripped away as Mimi washed his face and arms. With the paint and the facade of toughness gone, he looked for all the world like he should have been playing basketball with his friends and enjoying his vacation from school. He shouldn't have been anywhere near an M-16. But judging by the way his clothes hung on his wiry frame, he'd been here for a while, doing a lot of hiking and very little eating. No wonder he'd passed out.

I felt only a slight twinge of remorse as I rifled through his pack. There wasn't much to identify him: some worn clothes that had once been expensive, spare boots, a canteen, a knife, and surprisingly, a pouch with American currency. Tucked into the pouch, however, was a photograph that had been carefully shielded from the elements. It showed a small child in the seat of an F-4 fighter jet, and a man in a Navy uniform leaning over him. The back was marked, "1968, on the Tico."

I leaned back and studied it, comparing the bright-eyed child in the photo to the young man in front of me. Mimi finished her work and left quietly, and before long, the boy came awake with a start.

He cursed under his breath, the mask locking back into place almost immediately. "Where's my weapon?" he demanded harshly, pretending not to hear the weakness in his own voice.

"Does it matter? You couldn't fire it right now if you tried."

"What'd you do with it, a--hole?"

"That's gratitude. That's real nice." I folded my arms. This kid had a good poker face, but it was obviously slipping, and I knew I could outlast it. "You want to go back outside and bleed some more? Is that it?"

He stared sullenly up at the ceiling for a long moment, and when he finally spoke, he raised more questions than he answered. "Maybe I do."

"You came an awfully long way if all you want is to die," I pointed out, trying to project infinite calm. "You could do that back in Poughkeepsie."

"Right. I must be a spoiled kid who's just pissed at his parents. You've got me pegged," the boy said sarcastically, as he struggled to sit upright against the wall.

"In that case, I guess I don't need to ask about the story behind this." I held up the photo, and watched my guest's eyes flash in a primal display of territorial defense.

"Give it back," he said threateningly.

"Tell me what you're doing here, and I will."

He lunged for it, but fell back, exhausted, as I held it out of reach. His head drooped onto his chest in defeat, and as I watched, all his bravado disappeared into thin air.

"La Jolla," he mumbled.

"Say what?"

"I'm from California, not New York."

Well, that was a start, at least. I surreptitiously dropped my hand down to activate the tape recorder in my duffel. The recording would probably be muddy, but it was better than tipping the kid off.

"Yeah? I'm based out of L.A. Name's Chuck DePalma." I held out a hand, which was ignored. "Am I going to have to keep calling you G.I. Joe?"

"The guys have been calling me Jack."

"Any particular reason?"

"Short for jackrabbit." He didn't elaborate.

"Okay, I can work with that. So why aren't you with 'the guys' now, Jack?"

"They're helping a local woman bury her daughter. Seeing as I'm the reason she's dead, I don't figure I should be hanging around."

I decided to hazard a guess, based on the hole in his arm. "Border patrol?"

The kid -- Jack -- gave a brief, silent nod.

"So how was it your fault?"

"She only came along because of me. She said if I was old enough, then so was she."

"You're not old enough," I said quietly, without thinking first. "Not for this."

Jack met my gaze squarely for the first time. "Who is?" he asked simply.

"Good point."

"I'm sixteen. There were U.S. soldiers over here who weren't much older than me."

"There are a couple of flaws in that argument. For one thing, those soldiers were soldiers. They were trained -- maybe it wasn't much, but it was far better than you've got. And when they were here, you were still learning how to ride a bike. So what was it that brought you all this way now?"

Jack nodded toward the picture in my hand. "You're a reporter. It won't stretch your brain to connect the dots."

"This pilot is your father. I'm guessing he went down in country and was listed MIA."

"Brilliant deductive reasoning."

"When?"

"December 24, 1969." He recited it tonelessly, as if it were nothing more than a statistic, but it was clearly burned into his mind.

"Hell of a Christmas for a five-year-old."

"Six, but who's counting?"

"So ten and a half years later, you're out here tracking him yourself. Ambitious. Any leads?"

He just looked at me with a 'you're kidding' expression. "Do I *look* like I have any leads?"

"So are you going to keep trying?"

"I don't know. Everything's screwed up now ..." Jack leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, and I realized just how many of his ideals had been utterly destroyed by this place. He'd honestly hoped to accomplish something, but he'd found only the same disillusionment that so many of his father's comrades had found here. It was a sad realization, the idea that this war was still claiming souls.

I got him some food, and in return he told me a little more of his story. He'd read news articles about groups of former soldiers investigating reports of American MIA sightings, and tracked down a retired colonel named Stryker who had organized one such group. Stryker had wanted no part of bringing a minor along, but Jack had flown separately to Saigon and met them at the gate, essentially refusing to leave. Once it became clear that he had no intention of capitulating, the men had given him some weapons training and the necessary survival skills for their mission.

"Where'd you get the money for the flight?" I asked him, tossing over a small loaf of bread. He caught it easily with his uninjured arm. "I doubt a paper route would cover a trans-Pacific plane ticket."

"A couple of summers of lifeguarding at the local pool got me most of it. The rest was my stepfather trying to buy my respect. He thought I was saving up for scuba gear."

"So your parents don't know you're here?"

Jack's eyes narrowed, and I immediately realized my misstep. "My 'parents'? You mean my mom and her husband. And by now, I'm sure they've figured it out."

"But you haven't talked to them."

He gave a short, rueful laugh. "What do you figure that would accomplish? They'll just beg me to come home, and maybe scream at me for going in the first place. It'd be a huge litany on how awful this place is and how I shouldn't be here, and since none of that is new information, I don't see the point."

I still don't know what it was about that situation that brought out the responsible adult in me, but I pointed out, "At the very least, you could reassure them that you're still alive."

"What good would that do if it might not be true tomorrow?"

That one still had me stumped, so for a moment I shut off the reporter side of my brain entirely. "Jack, you don't really want to get yourself killed out here, do you?"

He drew his long legs up to his chest, as if in some kind of defense against the concept. To me, it only made him look younger. "No."

"Then you're going to have to go back and face them and everything you left behind at some point, right?"

He didn't respond for a moment, and I wondered if maybe he actually hadn't thought about it. Then he spoke, and there was a catch in his voice. "I don't know which'll be worse -- being here and having to face everybody who knew Jin, or going home and having to face everyone who knows where I've been. Both of them sound pretty terrible to me."

For some reason, I felt the need to reassure him, so I gave it my best shot. "You know, the woman who runs this little slice of heaven, the one who patched up your arm, she was one of six children. By the time she was twenty-five, she was the only one left. Death isn't greeted with the same outrage here as it is back home. Sorrow, sure, but more acceptance than you'd expect. It sucks, because it just reminds you of how bad things are around here, but I honestly doubt that that girl's family or anyone else is going to lay all that blame on you."

Jack stared hard at me, from underneath that mop of dirty brown hair that fell into his eyes. "What about me?" he asked flatly. "Am I supposed to stop blaming me, too?"

"I don't know. I don't write opinion pieces." He didn't laugh at the weak joke, nor had I expected him to. "Listen, obviously you don't have to answer this, but what do you think about the war?"

I'm not sure why I asked the question, and I'm not sure why he answered it. But he did so with no apparent reservations, and with more insight than I'd expected to find in a teenager. "Good plan, not so good execution, I guess."

"Yeah?"

He shrugged. "Attempting to provide freedom to those who don't have it is a noble goal in any circumstance. But that's the only part of it that's clear. How far we should go, as an outside force, to accomplish that -- the guys doing the fighting didn't even know that, so how should I?"

"You think your father agreed with all of it?"

"It doesn't matter. It was his duty, and he wouldn't have refused that for anything. That's the way service works: you don't just pick and choose what you think is worth fighting for. If nothing else, the people who serve with you are worth fighting for, right?"

Slowly I began to comprehend. "That's basically why you're here, isn't it? To fight for those who fought?"

His eyes flashed with determination. "Of course it is. Strange as it might seem, I actually believe in all that stuff that everybody's so ashamed of these days, about serving a higher goal and having a bond with those who serve it with you. I might have ruined it all by coming here, but I'm going to try for the Naval Academy next year, and if I don't make that, I'll go ROTC. And if I don't make *that*, I'll just walk into the recruiting station and enlist, because believing in something means being willing to stand up and defend it. That's the only perspective that makes any sense to me -- otherwise there's just no point. That's what I got from knowing my father, and since he gave me that, I think I owe it to him to make sure he doesn't get forgotten. He's *out* there somewhere, alive or not, and somebody has to remember that ... somebody has to fight for him. I mean, if I don't, who else will?"

When he finished, he just stared me down with a strange combination of defiance and fear, as if daring me to challenge his tightly-held beliefs. But I had no intention of doing that. Rather, I was thoroughly impressed by his convictions. "Seems to me, if you can still talk like that after the staggering degree to which your world has changed over the last few weeks, then your reasons are solid. So even if some pretty awful things happened here, it seems like you can still focus on the job you came to do."

"I haven't found him," Jack said softly, the fire in his eyes dimming. "And -- I'm starting to think that maybe I won't."

"Maybe. But all that stuff you just said about making sure he isn't forgotten -- I think you've got that covered. And after being here, you probably have a better understanding of his experiences. That ought to count for something." Not sure of my footing, I decided to stop philosophizing, and instead offered a shrug. "For what it's worth."

Jack looked pensive for a while, then swung his legs underneath him and carefully stood up. "Can I have my stuff back now?"

I handed him his pack and then the picture, which he immediately tucked away. "Your gun's outside with Mimi. Try not to use it if you can help it, all right?"

For the first time, his lips twisted into something resembling a faint smile. It didn't mask the pain that still resided in his features -- as if anything really could -- but it was something. At first, I'd written him off as hopeless, sure to be permanently screwed up, but that clearly wasn't the case. Scarred, perhaps, but he was anything but hopeless. "Yeah. Thanks for ..." He waved a listless hand. "This."

"Sure. What are you going to do?"

"Go back to the guys -- for a while, anyway. Somebody's probably wondering where I went. They'll need all the hands they've got until the next group gets here in a week or so. I guess maybe by then I'll know if I'm ready to go home and try to fix what's left of my life."

"Good luck," I told him, and I meant it. He picked up a notebook I'd left on the table, scrawled a name in it, and slid it over to me. "What's this?"

"My father's name. It happens to be mine, too."

I couldn't help lifting an eyebrow. "Oh, so now you trust me not to put you on the front page?"

He shrugged with his good arm. "Maybe. And maybe you'll find out some information on him that I couldn't. For that, you can have all the front pages you want." Turning toward the door, he added, "Besides, you already read it off the plane in the picture, right?"

Called out by a teenager. I *had* tried to read the tiny letters stenciled under the jet's canopy, but I'd only managed to make out the first name. Now, reading the surname, I understood where "Jack" had gotten his nickname. "Take care of yourself, kid."

He gave a short nod and hitched his pack up over his shoulder. As he was just about out the door, he called back, "And you can turn off your tape recorder now ..."

Only slightly irritated that I hadn't been nearly as smooth as I'd thought, I popped the cassette out and labeled it succinctly as "Jack, 7/80." The tape came home with me from that assignment and went into a file I kept for pickup stories, ideas that I could develop into a feature later on if I ever felt the need. I pulled it out on a few occasions, and even started to write the story once or twice. But I always stopped before I could get too far. Whether it was out of respect for his privacy or his experiences or something else entirely, I don't know, but somehow it didn't feel right to drag it all out before the world.

I met up with him again, years later, after he'd worked his way through the Naval Academy, earned his own wings, and suffered an ugly crash. The determination was still there, even then, and these days nothing he does can surprise me anymore. He's a full commander now, a genuine hero in his own right, and I'm willing to bet that he still doesn't trust me much further than he could throw me. Which is only natural: I am a reporter, after all. But while others in my profession might see someone like him as a uniform and nothing more, I still see that dirty, prideful kid from twenty-some years ago who somehow showed me more about duty and loyalty in a few minutes than any uniformed sound bite ever will.

So why am I finally at peace with the idea of writing about all this now? Simple. He did it. A couple of years ago, after battling two governments and countless attempts to dissuade him, kill him, or both, he discovered the circumstances of his father's imprisonment, escape, and final resting place. Against unimaginable odds, a child's search for closure and truth was finally completed. Maybe it's not splashy enough for today's headlines, but to me it's a clear signal to those who claim that this generation's leaders, especially in the military, don't have an appropriate grasp of their place or the lessons of their own history. I think they listened. I think they learned just fine. If you happen to disagree ... well, then I know a person I'd really like you to meet.

(Present Day)

It was after ten p.m. when he heard the knock at the door. The rhythmic beat of rain against the roof had masked it for a few seconds, but the knocking was persistent, and it eventually worked its way through his concentration. Harm set aside his notes for the Wellman hearing and went to the door, vaguely surprised to have a visitor on a night like this.

He opened the door to reveal Mac standing in the hallway, hair and jacket dripping. "Forgot my umbrella," she offered, with a self-deprecating smile that seemed somehow forced. "You busy?"

"No, come in." Harm closed the door behind her. Just as he reached to take her jacket, she withdrew a hardcover book and thrust it at him.

"Chapter Four," she said simply.

Puzzled, he looked down at the cover. Seeing Chuck DePalma's name, a glimmer of understanding set in. "So he went and did it, huh?" He gestured toward the sofa. "Let me get you a towel."

"I'll get the towel. You read Chapter Four."

Harm cocked an eyebrow. "Mac, nothing in there is going to come as any great shock. I was there, remember?"

"Just read it, flyboy. Trust me."

The intensity of her gaze made an immediate impact on him. With a nod of acquiescence, he took a seat and opened the book.

Mac studied his face as he made his way through the pages. Initially, he was guarded, wary of returning to that place and time, much as she'd expected. Then, slowly but surely, curtain after curtain was lifted away from his soul, in the same manner that the reporter had described. The subtle changes in his expression would have been lost on nearly anyone but her. Before long, he had forgotten that he was being watched, and she forgot about the towel.

Finally, he put the book aside and leaned his elbows on his knees, absorbing it all. He didn't speak, and for a moment he looked so lost that Mac began to rethink her actions.

"I should have just let you do that on your own terms. I'm sorry I forced it on you like that."

"No, it's all right. It really is. I just ..." Shaking his head, he fell silent.

Mac smiled a little. "Didn't know he saw you like that, did you?"

Harm glanced up, and his blue eyes were brighter than she'd expected. "No, I didn't," he said honestly. "I'm rarely certain of how to look at all that myself, let alone him."

She moved to sit down next to him. "It must have been so hard to be there," she said quietly.

"It was. But - it meant something, you know? Even then, it meant something." He turned to face her. "It didn't take you very long to figure out that he was talking about me, did it?"

She shrugged. "I know you."

"True enough." Their gazes met and held. "I should have told you a lot of this earlier. You deserved to understand."

"I hope you weren't afraid I'd judge you for anything."

"Well, regardless of intent, running off to Vietnam at sixteen has to rank pretty high up there in the global database of misguided plans."

"Above or below running off to get married at eighteen with a bottle of vodka in hand?"

"Mac ..."

"I know. We're not going to go back over all that. I guess I just want to say that our trust in each other runs deeper than anything either of our pasts can dish out. You weren't deliberately keeping anything from me. I know that. I understood that you'd tell me what you wanted me to know when you wanted me to know it, and I didn't need anything more. You are who you are in part because of what happened over there. That in and of itself has meaning."

He stared at her for a long moment, then leaned in to kiss her softly. "Thank you."

Surprised, Mac didn't move as he stood up and crossed the apartment. "For what?" she called after him.

He didn't reply, finally returning with a towel for her hair and a sweatshirt. Her brow furrowed, perplexed. "My blouse isn't wet."

"No, but this'll be more comfortable than that in the long run."

"Am I staying a while?"

"Unless you have someplace better to be." Harm sat down next to her again. "I thought maybe you'd like to talk."

Talking. It seemed like such a novel concept, but an attractive one. "About Vietnam?"

"Seems like as good a place as any to start. The rest we'll make up as we go along."

"In that case, no - I definitely don't have someplace better to be."

The crowd had dissipated a while ago, and store employees were starting to fold up the tables and take down signs. Chuck flexed his writing hand a few times, pleased that it hadn't cramped up completely. Having never done a book tour before, he'd found the afternoon to be a fascinating study in sociology. The attendees had mainly been either college students with journalistic ambitions or older people who watched entirely too much TV news. There hadn't been much of a middle ground.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but the book signing is over."

Chuck glanced up to see an employee attempting to steer someone clear of the area, and smiled as he recognized the woman. "Somehow I don't think she's here for my autograph, Jimmy. Are you, Colonel?"

Mac shrugged gracefully. "Well, I did buy the book." She stepped around the boxes, looking at him with a friendly but intent gaze.

"What did you think of it?"

"Good, so far. I'm only partway through. I keep going back to re-read Chapter Four." She cocked her head. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

Somehow he wasn't surprised by either her presence or her request. "Sure. Thanks for your work, everybody."

The coffee shop was a little cozier than the ones found in the larger bookstore chains, but it still lacked a certain ambiance. They both ordered medium black coffees, knowing that this wasn't meant to be a social meeting, and settled at a table in the corner.

"It's been a while since we've crossed paths," Chuck remarked. "Are you two getting into less trouble these days, or am I just getting stuck in the studio more?"

"A little of both, probably."

"I expect you're right. So how long did it take you to recognize your partner in the book?"

"I suspected it as soon as you described him. The odds of there having been more than one American teenager doing that kind of thing in country that summer weren't too high. When you mentioned the picture, I knew for sure."

Chuck took a sip of his coffee. "He's told you about it -- about having been there."

"In true Harmon Rabb fashion, it didn't come up until recently. He was working a case last month that involved Vietnamese girls being used for sweatshop labor, and it hit close enough to home that he came looking for a sounding board." Mac smiled, with a trace of wistfulness. "You've answered a few long-standing questions for me, actually. Back when he and I first started working together, we did a case where Harm went undercover as a Marine gunnery sergeant. I kept giving him a hard time about what a miracle it was that anybody had bought his cover, and eventually I trash-talked us into settling it on the firing range. The Recon squad timed us in a race to see who could assemble and fire an M-16 faster."

Chuck couldn't help breaking into a grin. "And the swabbie went and beat you?"

"Cleanly. I couldn't believe it. I tried to ask him where he'd picked up that particular skill. I was also pretty curious about where he'd picked up the scar on his arm, too, but he wasn't too inclined to explain either one. I understood, since we barely knew each other at the time, and somehow it never came up again. I was still curious as hell, though. I even looked up his service record once, but nothing in there explained anything. Now I know why. He got the scar before he entered the service." She shook her head. "Out of curiosity, how much did you tell Harm about what you were writing?"

"I cleared it with him originally -- figured it was only fair -- and then I offered him a read before it went to final edit. He basically shrugged it off, under the rationale that it was supposed to be my viewpoint and not his. I didn't get the impression that it mattered much to him."

"It matters now that he's read it," Mac replied quietly. "More specifically, it matters now that I made him read it."

Chuck wrinkled his brow, uncomprehending.

"I think he'd kind of put a lot of that stuff out of his mind, for whatever reason. Maybe it was too painful, or he wasn't that type of person anymore. I don't know. But when I read Chapter Four, I immediately got in my car, went to his apartment and just handed it to him. When he read it, his reaction wasn't at all like I'd expected. I thought he'd try to shut down on me, but he seemed - I don't know. Moved, I guess. Enough so to start to really open up about a lot of things."

"You're not saying that you never realized he had feelings before, are you?"

"I think Harm is a person who feels very deeply. In fact, I know it for a fact. But I also know from experience that it takes a lot for him to reveal them to anyone. You're part of a somewhat exclusive club." She set down her coffee cup and rested her chin on her folded hands. "He never wavered in his conviction to find his father, but going over there changed something for him. I don't think he ever really got over his regrets about the choices he made that summer. He saw the trip as a worthwhile effort in theory, but a mistake for him personally. This reminded him that you saw it differently, and it meant a lot to him."

Chuck took a moment to digest that statement. "Colonel, I didn't write all this stuff to blow sunshine up his ass, or anyone else's for that matter. It's just the best way I know of to get my point across."

"And what exactly is your point?"

"If you finish the book, maybe you'll figure it out for yourself." He smirked a little at her look of mild annoyance. "Seriously now. It seems like lately, a lot of ink has been dedicated to waxing poetic about ages past. My point is just that, with all due respect to the 'Greatest Generation,' there are a lot of worthwhile and very telling stories in this generation, too. From what I've seen, I'm willing to bet that you've got some yourself, but Harm's is the one I had, and it's a good one, so I decided to tell it."

"That's about what I thought. And I'm grateful." Her dark eyes were serious as she reached into her purse and withdrew a copy of the book. "I think I'll take that autograph now, if that's all right by you."

Chuck obligingly took a pen from his pocket and opened the book to its title page. "So is that why you came out here on a Saturday to talk to me? Gratitude?"

"Something like that. People need an outlet to voice their feelings. The book was yours. Maybe I'm trying to be Harm's." She shrugged. "You talk like you learned a lot from what happened out there. I just wanted you to know that you weren't the only one."

She picked up her book and headed for the doors. Chuck shook his head. Apparently Harmon Rabb's ability to surprise the hell out of him was still a universal constant. Something about that seemed strangely comforting. Picking up his briefcase, he started toward the parking lot.

*** THE END ***