



The Letter

Rating: PG

Classification: Romance (Harm/Mac)

Spoilers: "Goodbyes", "Boomerang", "Legacy"

Author's Notes: Okay, I admit it - ending "Country" the way I did was pretty cruel. But hey, at least I didn't leave you hanging for long. I really didn't want any shipper stuff to take over that story's plot, but when I got the idea for this follow-up, it was just too much fun to pass up. So hopefully this works for all concerned: the true-blue shippers get their gratification, and the non-believers can simply sit this one out. Enjoy ...

1610 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

She knew she was in trouble from the very first line.

Dear Sarah.

It wasn't as if she'd expected a joke or anything. The look in his eyes when he'd given her that unassuming envelope had left no room for doubt. For once in his life, Harmon Rabb was actively expressing what he felt, not simply reacting to what happened around him. But the magnitude of this confession could be captured in that tiny signal: he'd called her by her given name.

Mac closed the door to her office and shut her blinds before settling back into her chair. More than anything she could currently remember, this deserved her undivided attention.

Dear Sarah,

This is ridiculous. As I write this, you're a grand total of two floors away. I could walk up there and say all this to you in person. But I'm fairly sure I'd screw it up, considering my mind is somewhat occupied with this crazy mission tomorrow night. Actually, I'd probably screw it up regardless. Besides, if you're smart - at least, smarter than me, which is pretty much a given - you're already asleep.

At the same time, I can't risk you never knowing the things I'm about to say. Or write, I mean. Christ, if I were this inarticulate in the courtroom, I never would have made it through law school. But I'm determined not to do five million revisions of this. Not only would it take all night, it would seem less honest somehow. So I'm just going to keep writing until it all makes sense, or until I fall asleep at my desk, whichever comes first.

All right, I did have a point here somewhere, so here goes. In the last few weeks, since I've really gotten to know Sergei, I think my outlook on a lot of things has changed. I've always been pretty reluctant to open up, even to my closest friends - I'm sure you know that

better than anyone. But with Sergei, it was different. It may just be the fact that after thirty-seven years, I had to learn how to be a brother in a matter of days. Then again, once he was here, I was really surprised at how normal it all felt. I guess some of it comes naturally. We understood each other, never made judgments, and just knew that we'd always be there for each other, no matter what. I was even more surprised when I realized that Sergei wasn't the only person like that in my life. I've had that kind of trust and support for five years, and I took it for granted for far too long. For that, I am deeply sorry.

The most important thing to come out of all this madness is actually very simple. I learned that I could love someone, completely and unconditionally, without even realizing it. I know it could end up hurting me, but I don't care. I guess my brother showed me how to let go. I'm not afraid of it anymore, and so I'm not afraid to say this.

I don't know when it was that I first fell in love with you, Sarah, but right now I can't even imagine a time when it wasn't true. I think each of the storms we've weathered has made me fall a little harder, a little further. God, that makes no sense - but you'll probably get it anyway, won't you? Maybe that's the whole point. You understand things about me that no one else ever could. You make everything so much clearer, and brighter - you pull me through the days that make me want to give up and run away. I don't think you have any idea how incredible you are, or how many times I've wanted to ignore the regs and all the other baggage we've got between us. But things never seem to work out in real life as well as they do in my head, and now all I can do is apologize.

I'm sorry for so many things, Sarah. I'm sorry about the way I left two years ago. I knew I had to do it, for my own peace of mind. But every time I closed my eyes, I saw you standing there crying, and I wished I'd been able to make you understand. I'm sorry about practically everything that happened in Australia, and everything that resulted. I couldn't say what you wanted me to say that night - I just wasn't ready - but I could have done more to explain, so that you wouldn't have been so hurt. Sometimes I feel like an expert at hurting people I love, and that's a big part of why it took me so long to admit all this to myself. I wanted so badly to keep myself off that long list of people who'd hurt you. But now, of course, I've managed to do it yet again.

More than anything, I'm sorry that you have to find out about all this in a stupid letter. If you're reading this at all, it's because I've hurt you by not coming back. I wanted to be able to tell you everything, even if you don't feel the same way. I promised myself that I'd do it in person once all this is over, but I guess that wasn't enough to get me through. I hope you'll be able to forgive me for leaving you this way. All that's left to say is this: please don't hurt yourself any worse by dwelling on what might have been. I don't regret a single moment I ever spent with you. I only wish there could have been more. Take care, ninja-girl.

Love always - Harm.

By the time she'd read it through for the third time, her tears were blurring the script. For a while, she just sat very still, too stunned to do much of anything. Then, abruptly, she stood up from her desk and brushed the moisture from her eyes. If he could suddenly be enlightened and speak his mind, then damn it, so could she.

"Gunny, is the commander in his office?"

In the bullpen, Gunnery Sergeant Galindez straightened. "I think he went outside,

ma'am ... are you all right?"

"Fine, thank you," she replied distractedly, already halfway to the door. Realizing she'd forgotten her cover, and choosing not to care, she strode quickly out to the courtyard. Getting written up for a breach of uniform protocol was hardly foremost among her concerns.

When she came around the side of the building, he was there, standing next to the small fountain. He'd forgotten his cover as well, and didn't seem to notice the brisk air whipping through his khaki blouse. Feeling her gaze on him, he turned, and for a long moment, they just stared at each other.

"This doesn't count," she said flatly, gesturing with the letter in her hand. "You have to be able to look me in the eye and say it. I - I need you to say it."

He nodded slowly, seeing the conflict in her graceful features. "Do you mind if I skip to the important part?"

"You had damn well better."

"All right." With a deep breath, he faced her squarely. "I love you. I love you even more now than when I wrote that letter. If you want me to, I'll not only let go, I'll dive in headfirst. I don't care what it takes."

After five years of miscommunication and missed opportunities, the simple honesty of that declaration was astounding. Her defenses were rapidly eroding, but she forced herself to maintain control.

"Mac," he begged. "Please say something."

She arched one eyebrow and folded her arms. "'Mac?'" she echoed. "The letter I read was addressed to Sarah."

A hint of his mesmerizing smile shone through in his eyes. "Sarah," he said quietly. "Just tell me what I have to do."

"Nothing. It's my turn."

In four steps, she crossed the courtyard to him, and the sheer force of her kiss nearly knocked him over backward. Instinctively he wrapped his uninjured arm around her and drew her close, relief and joy washing over him in equal parts. At long last, somehow, they'd made it.

Finally, she regained some of her composure and looked up at him. "Sailor, if I'd had to read all of that in the intended context, I would have killed you again."

"I would have deserved it," he admitted. "Can I make it up to you?"

"I'd sure like to see you try." She leaned in to kiss him again, but he pulled back slightly.

"Time out. I just laid my heart out for you to trample. Don't I get some small

concession in return?"

"God, you're demanding, aren't you?"

"But you love me anyway, right?"

The almost-childlike hope in his eyes made her laugh. "Yeah, I do," she said softly. "I love you, Harm."

"Thank God." And he kissed her again, effectively blocking out the rest of the world - including the two officers walking out of the building toward their respective cars.

Bud Roberts's eyes grew huge as he spotted his two mentors and friends locked in a powerful embrace, not entirely out of sight. His original reaction, delight, was immediately replaced by panic. If he could see them, then so could ... "Admiral! Sir, I just remembered - "

"It can wait, Lieutenant," Admiral Chegwidden remarked calmly, his gaze also on the couple.

"But, sir, I - "

"We'll deal with it on Monday, Lieutenant," the JAG repeated in a lower tone. "But if you happen to see your son's godparents this weekend, kindly remind them what the better part of valor is."

"Aye, sir."

The admiral watched him hurry away, shaking his head. And to think he'd almost given up on those two ...

Bud climbed into his minivan and went straight for his cell phone. "Honey, you'll never believe what I just saw ..."

**** THE END ****