

THE YARD

A JAG STORY

by AriDan

*Some traditions never make sense
until years later —
when they mean everything.*

CHAPTER TWO THE HOUSE WITH NO FLAGS



“Some houses do not fall apart. They simply
stop asking the world to come in.”



THE YARD

The Lexus glided into a quiet, historic neighborhood where the architecture of old Annapolis stood preserved in amber, gold, and crimson.

Murray Hill welcomed them in pieces.

A porch swing moving under no visible hand.

A sprinkler ticking silver across a square of clipped lawn.

A white picket fence crocheted with climbing roses, the vines looped through the slats in careful green knots.

A brass door knocker polished bright enough to catch the yawning light.

A child's bicycle tipped gently against a maple tree, one handlebar tassel flickering in the breeze.

Here, pristine colonial revivals and brick walkways were framed by bursts of hydrangeas, asters, and coneflowers. American flags and Navy pennants stirred lazily on wraparound porches, and uniform rows of black mailboxes seemed to wave as they passed. Every home was manicured, proud, and welcoming.

Except for one.

In the heart of the historic district, one house sat sagging away from the curb, isolated by its own neglect. There were no flags here. No blooming flowerbeds. The mailbox was a dull, rusted tin, stripped of welcoming appeal. It wasn't a home; it was simply a structure occupying space, exhausted by time.

Harm checked the address against the numbers etched into his memory and steered the Lexus into the cracked concrete driveway. From the street, the car's pristine silver coat looked entirely out of place, briefly dialing the landscape up a notch, injecting a cruel reminder of life into the stillness.

He shifted into park and cut the engine. The quiet of the cabin rushed in. "We're here."

Mac had already snapped her briefcase shut, sheltering the packet of papers for later review. For the last two miles, she had sat quietly, watching the invisible weight of a promise settle over Harm's broad shoulders as the road carried them closer to the Severn.

She turned in her seat, her eyes searching his profile behind his sunglasses. “Are you okay?”

Harm took off the glasses, his eyes remarkably clear. “I made a promise, Mac. I’m going to keep it.”

If there was one fundamental truth Sarah MacKenzie knew to be an absolute fact, it was that Harmon Rabb Jr. did not break his word. Ever.

She offered a soft, understanding look. “Are you sure you want me to come inside? I can run a few errands, give you some space if you need it.”

It was a generous offer, the kind of deliberate exit the old version of Harm, from the years before they started dating, would have instantly accepted or even insisted upon to protect his walls. But they were dancing a different dance now.

Without a trace of hesitation, Harm reached across the console, hooked his fingers firmly through hers, and pulled her hand to his chest. “I want you with me,” he said simply.

He leaned across the space between their seats, his lips meeting hers in a brief, lingering kiss. No matter how many times he touched her now, he still possessed a quiet, effortless way of fracturing her defenses. It was a vulnerability she had no intention of fully disclosing to him anytime soon, a woman had to maintain her dignity, after all.

Following his lead, she stepped out into the humid Maryland mid-morning. The heat pressed down on her green sundress, her tan wedges clicking against the concrete as Harm met her at the bumper, immediately reclaiming her hand. They ascended the wooden porch steps, the old timber emitting a low, moaning groan that announced their presence long before Harm’s knuckles struck the front door.

Through all the countless investigations and high-stakes court cases they had dismantled over the years of their partnership, Mac realized this was exactly how she had always hoped they would one day approach a threshold: together, their fingers intertwined, facing the dark rooms as a unit. Now that it was finally happening, she occasionally had to pinch herself to believe the reality of it.

Harm's tall build, clad in khaki shorts and a crisp white button-down with the sleeves rolled past his forearms, completely crowded the narrow doorway. Mac stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him, taking in the drawn window blinds that looked as though they only rationed in the sunlight.

Movement caught her eye. A pair of soft, guarded eyes peeked through the dusty slats of the window.

A moment later, the sharp metallic click of locks shifting echoed through the wood, one, two, three. The door swung inward.

An older woman stood in the dim foyer. Her voice was thin, but it carried a sudden, surprising spark of motherly humor. "Harmon Rabb, Jr. Or should I call you Mr. High-Pockets?"

Harm winced slightly at the old Academy nickname, a boyish grin breaking through his somber demeanor as he released Mac's hand to bend down, completely engulfing the tiny woman in a gentle, protective hug.

"You can call me whatever rolls off your tongue easiest, Mrs. Mercer," he murmured into her pepper-colored hair.

"I'm merely teasing you, Harmon," she said, stepping back with a fragile smile, her hands resting on his forearms. "It's what my Chaz used to call you in his letters home. I couldn't help but try it on for size myself, especially after he explained what it meant."

Harm felt Mac's burning gaze on him instantly. He shot a glance over his shoulder. Her grin was the widest he had ever seen it, her eyes dancing with pure, unadulterated mischief. Harm internally groaned. He had no doubt she was going to enjoy this reunion week to the absolute fullest; the sheer volume of embarrassing Academy stories she was about to inherit would feed her blackmail arsenal for a lifetime. It pained him to hand over the weapons, but looking at her radiate in the light, he knew it was his greatest desire to give her a lifetime to use them.

He quickly gestured to his own waistline, silently signaling to Mac that the nickname was purely a reference to his height.

Mac smirked, tilting her head. Oh, I know, her posture answered back. As a Marine, she was well aware of the old-school military jargon for an exceptionally tall man whose waist sat higher than his classmates' shoulders. It fit Harm's classic, vintage aesthetic perfectly, even if it had been thoroughly humiliating when bellowed across a crowded mess hall of midshipmen.

Mrs. Mercer interrupted their silent exchange, her eyes drifting to the doorway. "And who is this beautiful young lady?"

Harm straightened, his hand instinctively finding the small of Mac's back. "Mrs. Mercer, I'd like you to meet—"

"Oh, wait," Mrs. Mercer interrupted, her breath catching as her eyes widened. She stared at Mac's face, her hands coming up to her chest as if a ghost had just walked out of the shadows. "I remember you. You're Diane. I remember your picture from the Lucky Bag yearbook. Of course... it's all coming back to me now. You two were a couple back then."

The old woman smiled warmly, entirely oblivious to the sudden, suffocating freeze that gripped the porch. "And you're still together after all these years. How beautiful. I am so glad to see something survived the Academy."

The words struck like a physical blow.

Harm felt the blood completely drain from his face. In his meticulous planning for the week, he had laid that agonizing part of his past to rest, his heart completely occupied by the woman standing beside him. He hadn't considered the cruel visual geography of this trip, that Mac held an uncanny, legendary resemblance to Diane Schonke, his slain girlfriend who had been two years his junior. He had completely overlooked the devastating implication of bringing Mac into the homes and reach of people who only remembered him with Diane. He was silently cursing himself, his chest tightening with panic as he waited for the fallout.

Mac felt the sharp sting of the error pierce through her armor, but she caught it, processed it, and locked it away within a fraction of a second. She knew the history; she knew the resemblance. But standing on the porch of a grieving mother, she refused to let her own phantom insecurities disrupt the space. She masked the hit so quickly that Harm barely even noticed it.

Instead, Mac stepped forward with absolute grace, extending her right hand. Her voice was steady, professional, yet deeply gentle. “Actually, Mrs. Mercer, I’m Lieutenant Colonel Sarah MacKenzie, United States Marine Corps. But everyone calls me Mac.”

She paused, intending to introduce herself merely as Harm’s friend, uncertain of how Harm would want to navigate the waters after such a brutal mistake.

But Harm didn't hesitate. He stepped into the gap instantly, his voice firm, clearing the record with absolute certainty. “Sarah is my girlfriend, Mrs. Mercer.”

The elderly woman blinked, the fog of memory clearing as she looked between them. A flush of embarrassment colored her pale cheeks. “Oh... oh dear. Please accept an old woman's apology, Colonel. My mind plays tricks on me these days. Forgive me.”

“There’s absolutely nothing to forgive,” Mac said softly, her thumb brushing the woman’s hand in a comforting gesture.

“Please, come inside,” Mrs. Mercer said, stepping back to clear the foyer. “We can have tea in the dining room. I have everything set up for us.”

They followed her into the dim interior of the house. Instantly, the air changed. The home looked like a perfectly preserved time capsule from an eighties magazine, the muted floral wallpaper, the heavy drapes, the pristine but dated furniture. Walking through the hallway felt like stepping backward into a past that had refused to let the outside world in.

In the dining room, a dark mahogany table sat beneath a crystal chandelier. Mrs. Mercer gently ushered them into their seats, shuffling toward a silver tea tray.

“Earl Grey for you, Harmon,” she murmured, setting a porcelain cup on a coaster before him. “And a vanilla chai for you, Sarah.” She paused, looking down at Mac with a soft, apologetic smile. “I’ll have the same,” she added, filling her own cup to the brim. “A wonderful choice.”

They sat in silence for a long moment, allowing the rising warmth of the steam to settle the awkwardness of the entrance.

From where Mac sat, she could see that the house had been arranged around Chaz Mercer's absence.

The first photograph hung in the entryway, positioned where any guest stepping through the front door would have no choice but to meet him before they met the room. Chaz stood in uniform against a formal blue backdrop, shoulders squared, chin lifted, eyes bright beneath the careful seriousness of a young man trying to look older than he was. The frame had been polished more often than the surrounding woodwork. A small brass lamp beneath it kept the glass warm with light, turning the photograph into the first welcome and the last goodbye.

The table held the rest of him.

A worn Naval Academy cover rested near the center, its brim softened and creased from years of careful handling. Beside it lay the actual uniform from the entryway portrait, folded with reverent precision, the shoulder boards aligned, the brass belt buckle polished to a mirror shine. A Brigade program sat beneath a folded acceptance letter, its corners thinning from being opened and closed too many times.

There was a sweater, navy blue and pilled at the cuffs.

A calculator sat beside it, old and blocky, with a strip of masking tape across the back where someone had written Forty-One in sharp black marker. The label should have been unnecessary. Instead, it felt like a joke preserved past its natural life, a nickname held in place because the boy who had earned it was no longer there to answer to it.

A stack of letters tied with a faded blue ribbon lay within easy reach.

Near the top of the photographs was one taken down by the Severn shore, the glare of the water bright behind a cluster of midshipmen who looked too young to understand how quickly memory could harden into artifact. Ten of them stood shoulder to shoulder in summer whites, grinning into the sun, sleeves sharp, covers tilted with the careless confidence of boys who believed the future would wait for them. Chaz stood near the center with one arm hooked around a classmate's neck, his smile open and reckless.

Harm was impossible to miss even then, taller than the rest by half a head, standing at the back with his aviator's posture already beginning to show. A younger Jack Keeter leaned into the frame with mischief written plainly across his face. Sturgis Turner stood straighter than anyone else, as if the camera itself had issued an order.

It should have been a simple Academy photograph.

In Mrs. Mercer's house, it had become a roster of survivors.

At the far edge of the table sat a detailed blueprint drawing for a Class of 1984 Naval Academy ring that had never been cast.

Harm and Mac rested their mugs on the coasters. Mrs. Mercer held her cup in both hands, letting the heat warm her frail fingers as she stared blankly at the blueprint of her son's unfulfilled life.

"I miss my Chaz every single day," she whispered, her eyes fixed on a horizon miles away from the dining room.

Deeply sympathetic to her loss, and carrying the profound weight of his own grief for a brilliant classmate who had died just weeks before graduation, Harm leaned forward across the mahogany. He gently placed his large hand over her thin forearm.

"I know, Mrs. Mercer," Harm said, his deep voice filling the quiet room with absolute sincerity. "He was a phenomenal midshipman, and an even finer man. He was the absolute best of us. I am deeply honored that you asked me to read his name and present his tribute at the Class Memorial Service this week."

Mrs. Mercer looked down at his hand on her arm, taking in his words before her eyes lifted to meet his.

"And I am so very grateful that you said yes, Harmon. I know my phone call must have surprised you after all these years. But whenever Chaz wrote home from the Academy, he used to say the numbers were easy. People were harder."

Her smile trembled.

“And according to my son, there was only one man in the company who could read both.”

She held his gaze.

“That was you.”

She stared at him with an intense, maternal pride, mentally balancing the towering, decorated commander sitting before her against the nineteen-year-old boy her son had respected.

“He wrote to me that you had grand plans to become a legendary aviator and follow in your father’s footsteps,” she continued, a faint smile touching her mouth. “But Chaz was convinced that anyone with your zeal for doing things properly would end up in a pulpit or a courtroom.”

Her eyes warmed with the memory.

“He said you had too much conscience to stay out of either.”

The smile trembled slightly.

“Imagine my surprise when I looked up your name in the naval registry and found you in the Judge Advocate General’s office.”

Harm swallowed the sudden irony of her words. Becoming a JAG had never been his initial choice, it had been a desperate detour forced upon him by a diagnosis of night blindness that had stripped him of his wings. He caught Mac's eye across the table. She was giving him a knowing, incredibly soft glance. It was a look that acknowledged how beautifully his life had rebuilt itself from the ashes of his first dream. Harm clocked the look instantly, feeling a surge of profound gratitude for the woman beside him.

Realizing his lingering gaze on Mac was perhaps too intimate for the gravity of the room, he quickly shifted gears, clearing his throat.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harm said respectfully. “I gave everything I had to the fleet as an aviator, but life had different operational plans, and I transitioned into the law. Looking back... it’s one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

“I am so glad to hear that, dear,” Mrs. Mercer said softly. She turned her eyes back to the polished brass buckle on the table. “My Chaz wanted to be a nuclear propulsion engineer. It was all he talked about during summer recruitment. I know he would have been a magnificent officer.”

“The fleet lost a fine leader,” Harm agreed instantly, remembering Chaz’s brilliant mind, which had consistently kept him at the top of their academic rankings.

It was the reason their entire company had taken to calling him Forty-One, after the old HP calculator he carried everywhere, though the joke had never been entirely fair to the machine. The calculator needed batteries, keystrokes and time. Chaz only needed to glance at a problem before the answer began arranging itself behind his eyes.

Course loads. Navigation problems. Engineering formulas. The impossible arithmetic of Academy life. Chaz had solved all of it with that quiet, almost apologetic brilliance that made men twice as loud feel half as capable.

Mrs. Mercer carefully pushed the stack of keepsakes toward Harm, detailing exactly how she wanted the tribute to be handled at the chapel. Her voice trembled as she admitted that attending the service would be too painful for her to bear, but she wanted him honored alongside the men he had marched with, even if he hadn't lived to see graduation day. She hadn't been able to set foot on the Academy grounds since the morning Chaz’s body was recovered from the dark waters of College Creek.

She stopped talking. The silence stretched, heavy and sudden.

Mrs. Mercer looked at her hands, her fingers trembling against the porcelain of her teacup. When she spoke again, her voice had dropped to a fragile, frightened whisper. “Harmon... I asked you to come here today for more than just the memorial tokens.”

Harm leaned closer, his legal radar instantly snapping to attention. Beside him, Mac’s posture straightened, the easy comfort of the sundress vanishing as her body language reverted instantly to a seasoned investigator.

“What is it, Mrs. Mercer?” Harm asked.

The old woman looked dead into Harm’s eyes, then shifted her gaze to Mac, her face pale. “I have spent thousands of nights sitting in this dark house, re-reading every log, every letter, every official report from the naval investigators. And I do not believe my boy accidentally drowned in that creek all those years ago.”

Harm froze. “Ma'am?”

“I believe my son was murdered,” Mrs. Mercer said, the word cutting through the quiet dining room like a blade. “And I believe the person responsible for his death is going to be sitting in that chapel with you this week.”

Harm’s voice abandoned him completely, his mind reeling as decades of history violently rearranged themselves in his head.

Before the silence could suffocate the room, Mac stepped into the breach, her sharp Marine mind taking immediate command of the room. She leaned across the table, her eyes locked onto the widow's.

“Mrs. Mercer,” Mac said, her tone authoritative yet profoundly focused. “What evidence do you have that Chaz was murdered?”

The old woman reached into her cardigan pocket, her trembling fingers pulling out a thick, weathered stack of unaligned letters tied with a frayed black ribbon. She placed them flat on top of the Class of '84 blueprint.

“Because when I finally cleared out his hidden locker in the attic last month,” Mrs. Mercer whispered, “I found these.”

THE YARD

Click to Listen:



Or Scan to Listen:



[EMAIL ME YOUR REVIEW](#)



[REVIEW ON AO3](#)



[REVIEW ON FANFICTION](#)

[RETURN TO CHAPTERS](#)

THE YARD

CREATOR NOTES AND DISCLOSURES

This story is an unofficial, noncommercial fanwork based on JAG. Canon characters, settings, and source material belong to their respective rights holders. No affiliation or endorsement is implied. All story material begins with and is first drafted by me. AI-assisted tools may be used during parts of the creative process for brainstorming, editing support, refinement, organization, and selected visual elements. The story direction, character choices, emotional architecture, themes, curation, and presentation remain my own. When you read something created by me, look for the fingerprints I care most about leaving behind: theme, emotional depth, character perspective, and a point of view that makes the story distinctly mine.

Unofficial fan-created work • Shared freely for noncommercial enjoyment

This story contains mature themes and is intended for readers 18+.