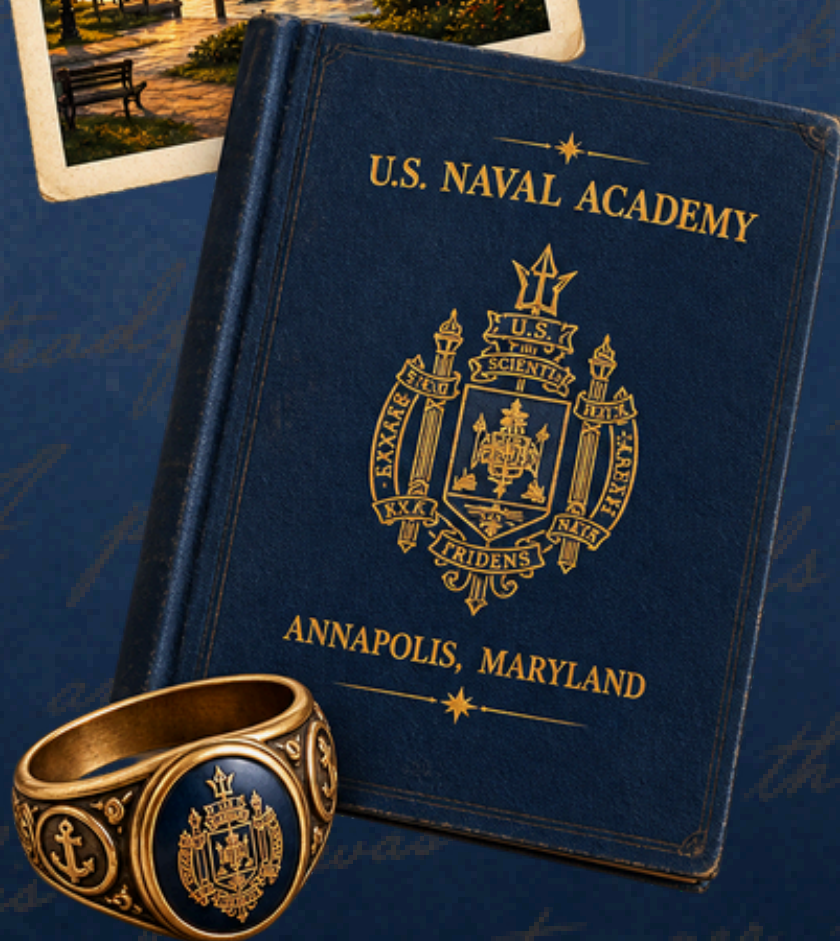


THE YARD

A JAG STORY

by AriDan

CHAPTER ONE THE SCENIC ROUTE



“The scenic route was not the fastest way there.
It was the only way they could have arrived together.”

THE YARD

The sedan held the middle lane north with the kind of cruising that attracted absolutely no attention from highway patrol.

No impatient lane changes. No abrupt braking. No sudden bursts of speed.

The low, familiar hum of the highway beneath the tires of the Lexus was a steady bassline, a rhythm they had shared across hundreds of miles of federal blacktop.

Through the glass, Commander Harmon Rabb Jr. sat upright behind the wheel, left hand loose near ten o'clock, sunglasses hiding enough of his face that anyone familiar with the JAG attorney's profile would have to look more than once. Beside him, Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie held a packet of papers across her lap, one finger resting midway down a page.

To any passing commuter, they could have been headed toward a deposition, an Article 32 hearing, or a JAGMAN investigation waiting three counties north.

The illusion would have easily survived another car length.

But inside the insulated cabin, the air was entirely different. It was thicker, warmer, charged with the quiet, delicious gravity of something newly formed between them.

Harm's leather garment bag was folded over the rear seat beneath Mac's, their service dress uniforms pressed and waiting for the events ahead. Two coffee cups occupied the center console. His was nearly empty, drained to a dull ring of dark brown at the bottom; hers had been ignored long enough for the rising steam to flatten out, leaving beads of condensation gathering at the plastic base. Mac had tucked one foot back beneath the passenger seat, her bare toes flexing against the carpet, a relaxed, intimate posture he would have never seen her settle into on the way to a court-martial or TDY.

But this had become the secret shape of their drives. The packet in her lap had been open to the same page since they passed Bowie. Whenever the morning sun danced off the glossy paper, the upper corner flashed a partially embossed seal before her hand shifted over it again.

Harm knew because he had checked.

Three times.

The first was pure accident.

The second sprang from curiosity.

The third constituted surveillance, a covert aviator's attempt to read over her shoulder without giving her the satisfaction of knowing he had become that curious.

A standard schedule of events didn't require that kind of fierce concentration. You didn't stare at a map or a dinner menu for forty miles without turning the page.

Sunlight ricocheted off the hood of an SUV ahead of them and broke across the windshield. Mac tipped the packet to kill the glare. For an instant, the upper corner flashed part of the Naval Academy seal before her thumb slid back into place, pinning the page down.

Harm returned his gaze to the road, mentally tallying the exits while mile markers and tree lines slipped by in measured distances. He'd assumed she was simply reviewing the itinerary for his twentieth-year Academy reunion. True to her Marine Corps roots, she had been firing questions at him about the Class of '84 as if she were prepping to cross-examine a hostile witness in a high-stakes espionage trial. Harm knew her game of trivia; it was born from an operational need to always be prepared, to map out every player in the room before her boots hit the ground.

But there was a distinct edge to her focus today. A week inside his Academy past, insular history she had no part in, meant stepping onto ground where she didn't hold the home-court advantage.

She wanted to know who still kept in touch. Who had gone fleet and command-track. Who had left the service for corporate money. Who had married whom, which friendships had survived the decades of deployments, which names required advance warning, and which specific stories he intended to prevent from ever reaching her ear.

He had answered her selectively. And Mac, with the sharp, lethal instincts of a woman who made her living dissecting omissions, had absolutely noticed.

It was the game they had always played: withholding just enough data to see how long it took the other side to catch up. But as Harm stole another glance at the motionless page in her lap, he felt a slow, familiar prickle of territorial unease. They were too evenly matched. In this personal arena, the stakes felt entirely different than a courtroom. He wanted her by his side, but he was also acutely aware of how quickly she could deconstruct the social architecture of the Naval Academy class of 1984.

Her mind, her relentless intelligence, and that unyielding Marine toughness, they were the exact things that held him completely captive. The traits that had drawn him in seven years ago and never let him go.

Harm adjusted his grip on the steering wheel, his thumb tracing the smooth leather. "If Keeter tries to tell you how we got the class banner rigged to the lightning rod on top of the Chapel dome, I need you to promise me you'll look appropriately bored. Don't feed his ego."

Mac didn't look up from her lap. Ostensibly, she was still reviewing the packet, but her gaze was locked onto a set of bullet points near the bottom of the page.

Still, a small, wicked smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Why, Harm? Is the actual truth more embarrassing than scaling a hundred and fifty feet of copper sheathing in the middle of the night?"

"I am a pillar of naval tradition," he said, though the mock-gravity in his voice gave him away. "Sturgis will back me up. He stood lookout."

"Sturgis is the one who told me half the stories in the first place," she countered smoothly. "And that was only after suffering a string of racquetball losses where he begged for mercy. I told him I'd let off the gas some if he gave up the goods on you."

She finally turned her head to look at him. The morning sun caught the amber in her eyes, throwing soft shadows across the sharp line of her jaw.

Harm caught her gaze for a split second before returning his eyes to the road, but that split second was enough to send a quiet thrill straight through his chest. It still felt experimental, this new reality. A fragile, brilliant thing they had pulled out of the ether after years of denial.

A green mile marker blurred past.

Then another.

Mac finally flipped the page.

“Which one of your friends is going to try to kill you first?” Mac asked, her voice low, laced with dry amusement.

He checked the side mirror, noting the single black sedan trailing them in the left lane, gliding along at a steady two-car-length distance. “For?”

Her finger skimmed a new line, as though reading from a charge sheet. “Holding out on them.”

“Holding out on them how? In what way?”

“You know exactly which way I am talking about, Commander.” She pinned him with a direct, knowing look across the console.

“Keeter,” Harm answered, the name leaving his mouth fast enough to earn him the smallest, sharpest twitch of satisfaction at the corner of her lips. “Definitely Keeter,” he emphasized.

Mac lowered the packet half an inch, her amber eyes shifting toward him. “Jack Keeter.”

“Yes.”

“Why would Jack care who you date?”

There it was. Clean question. Neutral tone. No visible undertow. He had tried that exact strategic method himself in front of a three-officer panel.

He kept his gaze forward and sighed softly. “He used to ask about you.”

Mac waited, the sun catching the edge of her cheekbone.

“Frequently.”

Still, she offered him nothing but silence.

“I eventually told him you were off-topic.”

This time she turned her body completely, placing her back against the passenger door so she could have every advantage point to isolate his tells. Harm felt the shift in the cabin's weight before he even looked. Seven years had taught him the exact, suffocating density of Mac's attention when she was preparing to peel back a defense.

"Off-topic," she repeated, letting the syllables hang in the air.

He kept his eyes locked on the white lines of the highway.

"It was a clear military instruction."

"I'm sure," Mac said, her voice dripping with skepticism.

"Keeter responds well to orders."

"That must be a recent development," she added, her mind briefly flashing back to the wild, undisciplined pilot they had rescued from the Afghan desert.

Harm smiled despite himself, the tension in his shoulders dropping an inch.

"And what exactly warranted me to be categorized as off-topic between you and Jack?" she asked.

A slight scowl formed behind his sunglasses. He eased off the accelerator as a delivery truck ahead signaled and drifted toward the exit ramp. The Lexus coasted gently, the distance closing with practiced, aviator fluidity. "It became a matter of operational necessity."

"How necessary?"

"Mac."

"Harm."

He looked quickly in her direction. Her eyebrows had climbed a notch. He knew that expression. The question would remain on the record until answered to her satisfaction.

"Keeter had opinions," Harm finally admitted, his throat tight.

"He usually does."

“About you.”

“And?”

“And it was highly irritating.”

Mac tilted her head, her gaze tracing the sharp, unyielding profile of his jaw. “For whom? You or him?”

Images of past phone calls flashed through Harm's mind, years of long-distance static, satellite connections breaking up over the deafening roar of airfield noise hammering somewhere behind Jack's cocky voice.

How's JAG, Hammer? Jack would ask from some transient ready room in the Mediterranean, the line crackling with high-frequency interference.

Fine, Harm would grunt through the phone.

Still flying?

Only for quals in the Tomcat, and when the Admiral lets me.

How's Mac?

None of your business, Keeter.

The first few times, Keeter had just laughed it off, backing away because he could sense Harm's boiling point rising through the satellite link. But as the years ground on, the questions became precise.

You're still pretending?

Pretending what? Harm had snapped.

That you don't have the single most strikingly, brilliant woman in the entire uniform code sitting right next door to you, Hammer. What are you waiting for?

We are partners, Jack. It's complicated.

Complicated? Jack had laughed, a harsh, unforgiving sound. *You land a supersonic aircraft on moving decks in the pitch black of night. That's complicated. This is just you being terrified of what happens if you go after what you really want.*

Harm had found every excuse in the book to redirect the trajectory of those conversations. He would aggressively pivot to an upcoming deployment schedule, detailing the logistical nightmares of their next joint task force. He would dive into the technical specifications of a new avionics upgrade on the F-14s, or bring up a mutual classmate's major life milestone, or recount an old, safe story from their days as plebes at the Academy.

But Keeter had developed the lethal habit of circling back before the carrier operator could disconnect the line.

Once, Jack had listened to Harm stiffly explain that Mac was heavily involved with someone else, an Australian attorney who had literally given up his commission in the Royal Australian Navy to move to Washington D.C. just to be with her.

So? Jack had asked flatly.

So that answers your damn question, Jack. She's unavailable.

No, Hammer. That answers her question. It doesn't answer yours.

Then came another call, a different year, from a tarmac in Japan. *We work together, Keeter. Her office shares a wall with mine. Navy regulations...*

I'm familiar with how office buildings and the UCMJ function, old friend. You're hiding behind the uniform.

It would ruin the partnership, Jack. If it goes wrong, it ruins everything.

From where I'm sitting, it's the only thing that could finally fix it.

Harm had slammed the secure phone down onto the cradle that time, leaving the line dead. Keeter had simply called back forty-eight hours later, opening with: *"I know you are partial to lawyer speak, Commander, so I would like to submit a formal motion for you to reconsider being an idiot."* Harm had hung up again.

The excuses had shifted over the years, but Jack's relentless counter-fire never had.

Every defense Harm raised returned with a hole shot straight through its center. He had hated Keeter for making the argument sound so simple when everyday life, facing off against Mac in the courtroom, navigating the rigid boundaries of the service, and managing their own fraught dating history, was anything but.

When Jack stopped asking why Harm hadn't made a move and instead began wondering aloud if Harm was even interested at all, effectively opening up the field and declaring Sarah MacKenzie fair game for other interested parties.

The first time Jack hinted at it, Harm had forced a tight, hollow laugh. The second time, he had gone cold and silent. The third time, he had used a voice that belonged strictly to a commanding officer, informing Keeter that Mac was permanently off topic.

Apparently, Keeter had understood the exact confession Harm had refused to put into words. But Keeter had also reasoned that Harmon Rabb was too stubborn to ever claim the woman he loved. After years of standing on the sidelines pushing his buddy into the game, Keeter had decided that if Harm wouldn't step up, he would. Sarah didn't belong to Harm; Harm had spent years proving that through his own inaction.

Mac's smooth voice suddenly shattered the memory, bringing him instantly back to the reality of the highway.

"So Jack asked about me."

"Yes."

"You got irritated."

"Yes."

"And you banned the subject entirely."

"This was not supposed to turn into an interrogation, Colonel. But, yes."

Her mouth curved with the ghost of a smile. The sun found the packet again; she twisted it toward the door, revealing a row of colored tabs and notes in a cramped script he'd have to lean over to decipher.

The truck ahead merged back into their lane, and Mac casually dropped the bomb, “That probably explains why he started calling me.”

Harm’s hand froze against the leather of the gear selector. The aviator’s relaxed grip vanished. “He what?”

He risked one quick glance. Mac was watching him now, her eyes dancing.

“Whenever he comes through Washington on Navy business, he calls.”

“Calls you?”

“Yes.”

“For what specific purpose?”

“Lunch. Usually.”

Harm stared straight through the windshield, a sudden, tight pressure seizing his chest. “Usually?”

“Sometimes dinner.”

The median strip ticked beneath the tires, thump, thump, thump, yet he lowered the radio volume by two clicks, even though the music had nothing to do with his hearing.

“How many times, Mac?”

Mac glanced back down at her paperwork, her tone deliberately casual. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

“I didn’t keep an official log, Harm.”

“You’re a Marine.”

“That doesn’t require me to document lunch.”

“With Keeter, it should.”

A small, genuine laugh escaped her throat. Harm hated how much he loved the sound of it, even when his own ego was the direct target.

“We’ve managed it a few times over the years,” she said softly.

“A few.”

“Yes.”

“Define few.”

She turned another page, the paper crisp in the quiet cabin. “It was always strictly platonic, Harm. Always.”

“I didn’t ask if it was platonic.”

“Well, that’s the only answer you’re going to get.”

Silence settled back into the Lexus, thick and heavy. Then, Mac leaned her head back against the seat, her eyes tracking his profile. “I can’t believe you are actually getting jealous of one of your oldest friends.”

“Well, my oldest friend shouldn’t have been trying to make a move on my girlfriend.”

“I wasn’t your girlfriend at the time,” Mac reminded him gently.

Harm knew she was right. The realization stung. He had been too paralyzed by the fear of loss to go after what he really wanted back then, leaving the door unlatched for anyone to walk through.

Mac’s shoulders moved with contained amusement.

“Relax. He learned in Afghanistan that he had absolutely no shot.”

Harm’s attention sharpened instantly, his pilot’s instinct tracking a new angle in her phrasing. “And?”

“And what?”

“You said he learned it in Afghanistan. That implies a second lesson.”

Mac looked out the passenger window, the passing green trees reflecting in her eyes. “One brief reminder in Washington.”

“He never tried anything else?” Harm asked, attempting a casual, detached tone. It sounded thoroughly unconvincing. He knew it; she knew it.

“No,” Mac said softly. A beat passed, and she reached across the console, her warm hand resting firmly over his right knuckles on the gear shift. “And you are not fighting Jack Keeter in the middle of the Academy quad because you think he tried to come onto me when we were nothing more than partners.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Well, you looked like you were mentally selecting the weight of your boxing gloves.”

Damn it. She knew him too well.

“I don’t wear gloves for a street fight, Mac.”

“I know.” Her voice dropped. “You’ve always had trouble with safety protocols when I’m involved.”

He almost looked at her. His pulse spiked, the sudden mental image of her bare underneath the sheets in the bedroom of his apartment threatening to derail his focus on the road.

Mac smoothed the edge of her paper with immense care, completely satisfied with her redirection. Harm considered the reality of the upcoming week, the reunion events, old boyish loyalties, and the profound inadvisability of two grown Naval aviators behaving like unruly plebes in front of the entire Brigade of Midshipmen. He also considered the fact that Jack had been taking his woman out to dinner.

Except, back then, she hadn't been his woman. Technically speaking, Harm had held no official claim from which a betrayal could exist. The correction did absolutely nothing to cool the protective fire in his chest, but Mac's low words had successfully shifted that heat much lower.

“You know,” Mac said, breaking the silence as the Annapolis exits began to appear on the highway signs, “this may be difficult for your ego to accept, Harm.”

“Go on.”

“Jack and I are completely capable of sharing a meal without creating an international incident.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then stop calculating his strike range,” she murmured, her thumb lightly tracing the back of his hand, “when you know all I want is you.”

The last of the frustration in his chest dissolved, settling warm and heavy in his stomach. The things this woman could do to him with a single sentence.

Seven years. Seven years of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her in cramped military courtrooms, dynamic operations centers, broken elevators, stiff Pentagon conference rooms, dark hospital corridors, and too many transient military airfields across the globe. He knew the exact temperature of her anger by how precisely she aligned her legal folders. He knew the distinct difference between her real smile and the diplomatic one she used to manage difficult admirals. And now, he finally got to experience the unarmored, passionate reality of her love.

He squeezed her hand back, his eyes locked on the road ahead as the points of Annapolis began to break the tree line. "Just don't say I didn't warn you about him."

He also knew when she had won a tactically crafted engagement and intended to let him discover his defeat slowly.

Mac turned another page. Harm drove. A green highway sign announced another long stretch of state blacktop. He exhaled a long breath through his nose, throwing up his hands metaphorically.

“So what are we going to do about Sturgis?”

The rustle of paper stopped instantly. Mac glanced toward him, her head tilting. “Do?”

“He works with us, Mac. Right across the bullpen.”

“I don’t think there’s much to do, Harm. He’ll be surprised, certainly.”

“More like completely shocked.” He looked at her before continuing, “You don’t seem nearly as concerned as I thought you’d be.”

“Sturgis has watched us throw down the gauntlet and rip each other to shreds in open court for some time now,” Mac said, her voice turning quiet, steady, and grounded. “I think he’d rather handle a more pleasant, peaceful version of us.”

Harm checked his rearview mirror. There was an effortless ease in her answer that he hadn’t prepared for. No nervous qualifications. No request for ground rules. No anxious suggestion that they act like detached colleagues the moment they stepped into a room full of people who knew them. He had spent the last week anticipating Mac’s standard operational caution for going with him to Annapolis, building elaborate mental briefs to counter objections she hadn’t even raised.

“Sturgis is far more perceptive than you give him credit for,” she added.

“I know he’s perceptive. He just isn’t always flexible.”

“I think Varese is changing that.”

“So they’re still together, huh?”

“Yes, still going strong. She and I meet every couple of weeks for lunch. She is coming down with Sturgis this weekend.”

“You and your lunch dates.”

“Hey, you’re included in plenty of those as well.” Mac smiled, a soft, triumphant expression. “Think of it this way, Commander: we have an entire week for Sturgis to recover from the shock before we have to walk back into JAG headquarters.”

“That’s your operational plan?”

“Yes.”

“Exposure therapy.”

“And if he has questions?”

“As the only Marine in attendance this week, I promise to play nice with the Navy.”

Harm laughed. The sound was so genuinely unburdened that it surprised him, and Mac looked over.

He caught her reflection in the windshield rather than looking at her face directly. Sunlight broke across the glass, placing her profile against the lanes of traffic ahead. For an instant, she looked beautifully suspended there, part of the road, yet completely separate from it.

Months. They had been doing this for months now.

Actual dinners without pretending the reservation was about a case file. Sundays that began late because neither of them needed a professional excuse to leave the other's side. Her lavender-vanilla shampoo sitting intimately beside his in the shower, and then a duplicate version of his shampoo appearing next to hers when she went back to her apartment. His heavy leather flight jacket slung across the back of one of her dining chairs. Two distinct lives still maintaining separate addresses, routines, and ranks, while ordinary domestic objects kept quietly defecting across the line.

Some mornings he woke before her, completely unable to believe they were actually here. Then he would hear her shift beside him, feeling her sleep-warm hand wrap around his arm, silently urging him back down into the sheets beside her. The impossible had a soft, familiar hand.

He did not want to overthink the week in Annapolis just yet. Instead, he redirected his focus to the packet in her lap. Same page. Again.

“You planning to actually read that, or do you just like looking busy?”

Mac glanced down. “I am reading.”

“Mac, it’s taken you forty miles to get through a few pages.”

“You’ve been counting the pages?”

“No, I'm engaging in basic traffic observation. A car to my left, an approaching vehicle on the right, and a beautiful Colonel in the passenger seat. Gotta maintain situational awareness in all directions.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. He kept his eyes locked on the road, a smug, classic Rabb smile stretching across his face.

“Your attention should be strictly on the road, Commander.”

“My situational awareness is excellent.”

“That is precisely what worries me.”

“What are you studying so hard, anyway?”

Her thumb moved slowly over the crisp edge of the paper. “Things I need to review before we arrive.”

“Well, that completely clears it up. Thank you, Colonel.”

“I thought it would.”

The tires crossed a rough patch of grooved pavement. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The mechanical rhythm persisted beneath the roar of the engine, evenly spaced, familiar, and hypnotic. For a split second, the Maryland highway vanished beneath the haze of a completely different sound.

Running shoes pounding against a packed dirt trail. Mac's heavy, rhythmic breathing somewhere just ahead of him. Harm sprinting all out to catch her, every muscle in his body yelling that he was pushing too hard, but he didn't care.

It had happened months earlier, during the first official JAG-a-thon charity race. The command's two senior officers had pushed themselves to the absolute limit. Harm's long stride had finally pounded into place, running lock-step next to Mac's exhausted, fierce pace. As they both stretched to cross the finish line, the official clock captured a brutal photo finish. A dead tie.

Moments later, Sturgis had approached them with a towel draped around his neck, just as Harriet formally crowned him the official winner of the race. Both Harm and Mac had stood there, chest-heaving and shocked, fully believing their tie was the qualifying winning time.

“I believe,” Sturgis had announced with the utmost humility, “that command authority has officially transferred.”

Harm bent forward, completely out of breath, his hands braced on his thighs. “Congratulations, Sturgis.”

Mac, standing beside him, dragged the hem of her sweaty shirt across her forehead. “It isn’t too often that the Navy beats the Marines. Good race, Sturgis.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” Sturgis smiled. “As my first order of business, I believe I have a task for the both of you.”

Unsure of the direction this was going, Harm and Mac traded a quick look before following Sturgis’s finger as he pointed back toward the final leg of the course. “Bud.”

The sheer exhaustion of the finish line vanished instantly. They turned and jogged back down the trail.

Far down the path, Lieutenant Bud Roberts had slowed to an agonizing walk where misery had absolutely no company. The distance between him and the finish line had acquired that ugly, insurmountable size that distance always took when total physical exhaustion got a vote. Bud was practically drowning himself in a wave of self-pity when they reached him.

Harriet challenged him to finish. Sturgis formally ordered it.

“Sir, I can finish,” Bud panted, sweating through his shirt.

“Good,” Sturgis answered with a grin. “We came back to watch.”

Harm encouraged his very next step, and Mac stepped in to set a steady, manageable pace for the group. Bud finally crossed the line beneath a wall of office cheers that made the charity event briefly feel like the most important race on earth.

Then came the inevitable chaos of water bottles, ice packs, photographs, and loud, good-natured arguments about the official times. Ensign Tyler Castillo took his third-place photograph first. Then, Harm and Mac were ushered to the front to take their second-place photo.

“Tied for second,” Mac corrected sharply when the civilian photographer tried to frame only Harm in the center of the lens.

“Second is second, Mac,” Harm said, looking down at her and reaching out to pull her firmly into the camera’s frame.

“Tied, Harm. We crossed the line together.”

“The photo doesn’t need a legal asterisk, Mac. Let’s just take the damn picture.”

He continued, “Plus, I technically gave you a three-minute head start at the staging area, so I wouldn’t say we ran it together.”

“Your bad tactical intelligence isn’t my fault.”

“Not correcting my perceived coordinates is, though,” he shot back.

“I tried to give you your three minutes back.”

“A bet is a bet, Colonel.”

Sweat had darkened the loose edges of her hair. One cheek carried a streak of dark dust she had missed when wiping her face. But her smile had absolutely no restraint in it, and his own expression was a fierce challenge. Another classic Rabb and MacKenzie battle ending in a beautiful stalemate.

The shutter clicked. That was how the picture captured them, still posturing and debating long after the official race was over.

Then Harriet started calling everyone together for a massive command group photo. The positions changed at a frantic, chaotic pace. Bud was placed near Harriet. Sturgis stood dead center, humble but proudly holding the trophy in the rush. The tallest officers were shoved to the back row. Someone aggressively nudged Harm to the left; someone else pulled Mac to the far right.

The frantic photographic instructions came from three directions at once.

Harm stepped into his designated slot. He adjusted his stance, looked across the crowd of laughing faces, and found her on the absolute opposite side of the group.

That was all it took.

There was no sudden gunfire. No catastrophic aircraft crash. No devastating medical diagnosis delivered across a metal desk. No unexpected transfer orders breaking up a partnership. Just a simple command photograph. A few colleagues rearranged by a photographer's impatience.

Mac had been right beside him. Then, she wasn't.

The emotional reaction hit Harm before his rational mind could even prosecute the data. I don't want her over there. The thought was so primitive, so utterly plain and possessive, it actively embarrassed him.

Harriet was talking. Sturgis was complaining that Harm's massive shoulders were blocking the trophy light. The photographer waved his arms, telling them all to crowd closer. Harm barely heard a single word of it. Mac stood four people away, angled slightly toward the lens, still beautifully flushed from the heat of the trail. Between them were shoulders, sweaty t-shirts, running shorts, and laughter, an ordinary arrangement produced entirely by social chance.

He recognized that configuration instantly. It was the exact blueprint of their last seven years.

A boyfriend. A girlfriend. A sudden deployment. A mutual misunderstanding. An engagement ring. An ocean. A dangerous black-ops mission. Bad timing repackaged in brand-new uniforms. He had treated every single one of their physical separations over the years like bad weather, inconvenient, frustrating, but ultimately beyond his control.

The photographer adjusted the resolution in the camera. Mac looked across the gap toward him, only briefly. Just long enough to catch him staring. Her brow creased into a familiar, silent question.

You okay?

He knew the question without ever needing to hear the words. He winked at her, then looked straight into the camera lens. The shutter snapped.

By the time the group photo broke apart, he had a tactical plan. It wasn't a good one, good plans required time. This one relied entirely on Mac's complete inability to resist a direct challenge.

He intercepted her at her car. She had one hand resting on the open door frame of her Corvette, a cold water bottle tucked tightly beneath her arm.

"We tied," he said, leaning casually against the adjacent vehicle, which happened to belong to the Gunny.

Mac looked over the hot fiberglass roof of her car at him. "I know the score, Rabb. What's your point?"

"Let's settle it properly."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. There it was. The hook set itself flawlessly. "How?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Where?"

He gave her the exact location of the isolated state trail. The exact time. Mac took a slow drink of water, never breaking eye contact.

"You know I've been training with the Admiral, Harm. I can do this every day if need be."

"Well, this needs to be. I won't accept a draw."

"Good. Me either. Try to keep up," she said as she slid into the driver's seat.

Harm stood in the dusty parking lot, watching her car pull away. He had spent most of his adult life planning complex flight paths with far more detail than this. Still, the first critical phase of the mission was accomplished. She would be there.

The following morning began with a calculated insult. Mac arrived early.

“You’re late,” she said the exact moment his running shoes hit the pavement.

He checked his watch. “Three minutes early.”

“I’ve been stretching for twelve.”

“You’re a jarhead. It takes your muscles much longer to unwind.”

“Well, a jarhead is about to kick your ass, flyboy.” She braced one long, toned leg against a nearby wooden bench, leaning deeply into the stretch.

Harm’s eyes drifted toward the dark trailhead. “Ready?”

“I told you, I was ready twelve minutes ago.”

“Keep talking, Colonel.”

“You’ll need the conversation as a distraction when I pass you up, Commander.”

They started hard. Far too hard for two people pretending this was a casual weekend run. The trail climbed sharply through thick, green summer shade and jagged patches of blinding morning sun, the red dirt packed firm beneath their running shoes. For the first grueling half-mile, Mac held a narrow, aggressive lead.

Harm purposefully let her keep it. She looked back over her shoulder once.

“Psychological warfare, Rabb? Remember, I know all your tactics.”

“You think far too highly of your pace, Mac.”

“You’re drafting off my stride.”

“We’re running a race.”

“One that I am currently winning.”

He passed her smoothly on the next steep incline. She stayed right on his heel, their heavy footfalls striking the hard earth in an alternating, perfectly synchronized rhythm. Mac pulled back alongside him as the trail leveled out.

“You know,” she panted between labored breaths, “you’ve already been hit by one car trying to outrun me.” Harm shot her a sharp look through the glare. “That was because you fell down an embankment and into the middle of the street.”

“I remember the sequence of events.”

“I was actively saving your life, Mac.”

“You should’ve paid more attention to your own,” she joked, accelerating hard.

Harm laughed once, a raw, competitive sound, and went directly after her.

The race became completely uncivilized after that. Constant lead changes. Their elbows bumped more than once, always close enough to count and clean enough to deny. Mac taking the dangerous inside line around a blind bend. Harm using his longer stride on the straightaways to claw back the lost ground. Neither spoke a word for the next ten minutes because oxygen had acquired immediate tactical value.

At a shallow, rocky descent, Harm surged past her. Mac came roaring back on the next steep climb.

“You’re fading, flyboy,” she wheezed.

“Wishful thinking, Marine.”

“You sound winded.”

“You’re talking too much. Save your breath so you can congratulate me at the finish.”

Her response was to dig deep and pass him by half a length. Harm chased. There was a profound, intoxicating pleasure in the pursuit, something pure and deeply familiar. Mac ahead of him. Harm closing the gap. Her shoulder pressing right beside his. Then his narrow lead. Then hers.

For seven long years, they had played this exact game everywhere in their lives except where it actually mattered.

In courtrooms, over promotions, during late-night arguments, on dangerous joint operations. Partners. Officers. Each professional challenge had given them explicit permission to move aggressively toward one another and call it something else.

This time, Harm knew exactly what he was doing. The raw knowledge made him faster.

Near the final turn of the loop, Mac tried to break away. He expected the move. Harm held her blistering pace until the final straightaway, then lengthened his stride to its absolute limit. Mac heard him coming; he saw it in the sudden, sharp angle of her head.

She pushed. So did he.

The white finish marker at the edge of the trail rushed toward them. Harm crossed a mere half-step ahead. Mac followed, her momentum carrying her another twenty yards down the path before she could slow down to a walk.

Harm bent double at the waist, hands on his knees, his chest burning. “No... question,” he panted.

Mac turned around, walking backward to keep her lungs open. “You leaned.”

“You lost.”

She grabbed her water bottle from her running vest and drank deeply. Harm watched the rapid, steady pulse moving at her throat before forcing himself to unscrew his own cap.

“You’re taking defeat remarkably well.”

“I’m not in an appellate court to overturn the results, Harm. No, seriously, you won fair and square. Good race.”

They walked slowly along the edge of the tree line while their breathing finally settled. The morning had warmed up quickly, the humid air thick with the scent of damp earth and pine. Sun filtered through the canopy, fracturing into bright spots over the crushed gravel.

Somewhere far beyond the tree line, highway traffic moved at a distance, the sound softened by the dense woods.

“Let’s head this way,” Harm urged, pointing toward an old stone gazebo tucked into a small clearing.

Mac took another drink and started in that direction, a few steps, then stopped dead in her tracks. Harm nearly walked right past her before he caught himself.

A crisp, white linen cloth covered the small iron table inside the gazebo. High-end catering dishes had been meticulously arranged beneath clear glass covers. Fresh coffee. Fruit. Pastries. Two iron chairs waited, and a park aide stood near the steps, close enough to guard the setup, far enough not to intrude.

He gave Harm a discreet nod.

Mac’s pace slowed to a crawl. “Harm, somebody set up a private event here.”

He said absolutely nothing.

“We should turn around. We’re trespassing.”

“It’s for us, Mac.”

Mac stopped and looked at him. He stayed exactly where he was, refusing to break eye contact. For once in his life, he allowed her the full, uninterrupted time required to understand his intent. Her attention moved slowly from his face to the white linen of the gazebo, then back to him.

“You set this up.”

“Yes.”

“This morning?”

“A little earlier. It’s why I was late.”

Her eyes narrowed, the wheels in her mind turning.
“The entire rematch was a setup.”

“The race was legitimate. I ran my ass off.”

“You challenged me to lure me here.”

“'Lure' is a highly aggressive word, Mac.”

“Manipulate?”

“Worse.”

“Deceive?”

“I’m a decorated officer of the court, Mac. I don't deceive.” Harm smiled. She didn't. Not yet.

He felt the first genuine, terrifying edge of personal risk. The gazebo waited behind her, far too carefully prepared to pass as casual improvisation. He had argued complex capital cases before hostile military panels with far less concern over his opening statement than he felt right now.

Mac looked at the table again. “Why, Harm?”

He could have made a joke. Several safe, defensive options presented themselves to his brain. None of them survived the look in her eyes.

“After yesterday’s race, I started thinking,” Harm said, setting his water bottle down on the wooden trail rail. “And after that comment I made about you the other day...”

“The one about men who date me ending up dead or wishing they were?”

“That exact one,” Harm said, still visually embarrassed. “Look, Mac, I am not proud of it. I was trying to find a way to get you to have a simple breakfast with me without any more of my stupid words getting in the way.”

“You could have just asked me, Harm.”

“Or I could have just challenged you to a rematch. It’s the only thing I knew for a fact you wouldn’t turn down. It’s not like I am on the best footing with you these days.”

Mac waited, her hands dropping to her sides. Harm looked toward the gazebo. The coffee was steaming faintly inside the glass carafe.

A linen napkin lifted at one corner in the warm breeze, then settled back down. He had built this entire moment with logistics because logistics obeyed effort. Reservations. Food. Time. Routing. But Mac did not obey logistics, and she constantly tested both effort and intent.

He looked back at her. Really looked. No courtroom walls. No desks between them. No other man waiting for her phone call. No other woman waiting for his. No high-priority assignment due to the Admiral in an hour. Only him and Sarah.

His mouth went completely dry. “I’m tired of circling you, Mac.”

She went absolutely still, her breath catching. Harm let the next words come straight from his heart without trying to improve them.

“I want more.”

The leaves above them moved softly in the wind. A small bird landed on the gazebo’s shingled roof, scratched twice, and disappeared into the brush. Mac’s gaze stayed locked on him, intense and unblinking.

“I was hoping you’d finally let me try,” he whispered.

There it was. No cross-examination left. No amended legal argument. He had absolutely nothing left in his arsenal after that.

Mac looked down at the plastic water bottle in her hand, her thumb tracing the edge of the paper label once, twice. Then, without a word, she turned and walked toward the stone steps of the gazebo.

Harm didn’t follow her until she had stepped entirely into the shade. Mac stopped right beside the table, fingering the linen, her back to him for a second before she turned around. “You really did all of this.”

“Yes.”

Mac smiled then, small, dangerous, and beautiful. Harm took the iron chair directly across from her.

They ate. At first, they talked about safe, professional topics. Sturgis and his impending week acting as JAG. Bud crossing the finish line with so much pride and even more fatigue. Harriet's absolute certainty that the charity event needed a formal committee next year to discourage betting, manage medical emergencies, and track runners on the course. They laughed over the fact that most everyone had taken the event so seriously, especially given that Admiral Chegwidden had been secretly training Mac on the weekends without Harm's knowledge.

"You should've legally disclosed that, Colonel," Harm said around a pastry.

"Why?"

"Competitive integrity."

"Harm, you gave me a three-minute head start without asking a single question."

"I was being generous."

"You were being profoundly arrogant."

"Those two traits can easily coexist in a cockpit, Mac."

"Apparently so."

The conversation moved, slowed, and deepened. Mac asked how long he had been planning the picnic. He answered honestly. She asked why he had chosen this specific hidden trail. He answered that, too. When she became quiet, he didn't rush to fill the opening. The warm morning breeze moved through the stone arches, lifting a loose strand of dark hair against her cheek.

Mac tucked it back behind her ear, her expression turning serious. "Harm."

He looked up from his coffee. "Yeah?"

"If you're serious about this..." She paused, studying him over the rim of her cup. "About us."

"I am."

"Then take me on a real date next weekend."

His hand paused around the warm ceramic of his cup.
“I’d like that.”

“Me too.”

He smiled, the warmth spreading through his chest.
“Next weekend it is.”

“Next weekend.”

The agreement sat there between them among the coffee cups, half-eaten fruit, and pastries. It was simple. Binding. Harm had signed international treaties with less attention to detail.

The week that followed had been strangely, agonizingly long.

Work at JAG did not stop. The cases remained completely inconsiderate of their personal lives. Phones rang off the hook. Bud needed a legal opinion on a salvage matter that rapidly became three conflicting opinions, two procedural questions and one argument no one remembered starting.

Sturgis occupied Harm’s office doorway twice in his capacity as acting JAG, staring at him with a level of interest Harm considered unnecessary, intrusive and far too perceptive.

By Friday evening, Harm had changed his civilian shirt three separate times in front of his mirror. The sheer knowledge of his own anxiety annoyed him.

This was Mac, for God’s sake.

But when Mac opened her apartment door wearing a deep blue dress he had never seen before, all professional vocabulary abandoned his brain entirely. She knew it, too; he could tell by the slow, delighted lift of her left eyebrow.

“Is there a problem, Commander?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“You look...” Harm stammered, recovering just enough to complete the sentence. “You look beautiful, Mac.”

Her expression changed by a single, soft degree. That specific degree followed him through the entire night. Dinner at a quiet restaurant. A long walk through the city afterward. Conversation that felt perfectly familiar until one of them suddenly remembered why they were sitting there. Then it became unfamiliar in the best possible way.

Harm could look at her. Openly. He had spent seven long years collecting tiny details of her existence through his peripheral vision, the way her hands wrapped around a glass, the specific angle of her smile when she was genuinely happy, the sharp line of her shoulders when she laughed. Now, he could simply let his attention remain. Linger. Sit awhile. She noticed every single time he stared, and she did not retreat.

At her apartment door, the evening stubbornly resisted ending. Mac unlocked the deadbolt. Harm stood right behind her at the threshold, close enough to smell the faint, intoxicating trace of her perfume, far enough to leave the next decision entirely where it belonged.

She pushed the door open, then paused, looking back over her shoulder.

“You won the rematch, Harm.”

Harm frowned slightly, caught off guard. “Yes.”

“And we never did discuss you claiming your prize.”

“The prize was breakfast.”

“That was for me.” Her eyes held his. “What about you?”

“Our date tonight.”

Mac’s smile changed.

“How about coming inside?”

For one brief, humiliating second, his pilot’s brain failed to process the clearance he had been given.

Mac watched comprehension arrive on his face.

A slow, warm smile touched her mouth.

Then she walked inside, leaving the door wide open behind her.

Harm followed her in and closed the world out behind them.

The tires of the Lexus crossed another long strip of grooved pavement on Route 50. The vivid memory loosened its grip. The harsh road noise returned first, then the low jazz on the radio, then the blinding sunlight hitting the windshield.

Harm blinked once, finding the familiar flat green landscape of Maryland moving beneath them. Mac had closed her packet of papers. It rested flat across her knees now, her hand resting quietly over the cover.

He glanced at the highway sign ahead. Annapolis was growing closer by the mile.

He had accepted the Academy reunion invitation more than a year ago. At the time, the upcoming week had seemed simple. Classmates. Meet and greet. Opening ceremony. Formal events. Memorial Service. A nostalgic return to the Yard. Then Mac had officially become his girlfriend, which remained an absurdly inadequate word for the massive amount of emotional territory she now occupied in his life. He had added her to the RSVP list immediately, though actually asking her to come had taken him longer.

He had chosen a quiet weeknight dinner at his place, waited until they were nearly finished with dessert, and tried to make the invitation sound casual. Mac had stared at him over their shared carton of ice cream.

Your Academy reunion, she had noted.

Yes.

For the entire week.

If you can get away from the office.

Mac, understanding just how big of a deal it was for Harm to ask her to step into a space like that, had smiled beautifully. *If the Admiral approves the leave, then yes.*

He had been carrying the weight of that yes ever since.

Annapolis held the oldest, most rigid architecture of the man he had spent his youth building. Before JAG. Before the courtroom battles. Before Mac. Bancroft Hall. The Yard. Keeter. Sturgis. Names and historic places that remembered him younger, sharper in some ways, and completely unfinished in others.

Harm glanced toward the packet on her lap again. It was firmly closed now. Her fingers rested over the gold Navy seal on the cover. Whatever had held her attention there for the last fifty miles had finally lost the competition to her own thoughts. Or perhaps she had never been reading the text in the first place.

He returned his eyes to the asphalt. The highway began to widen, splitting into dedicated lanes. A large green sign announced their approaching exit. Harm felt the tires change pitch as the pavement shifted beneath them, the hum turning into a low growl.

Mac looked out her window, watching the outskirts of the historic town appear. He tracked her reflection briefly in the glass. Calm. Interested. Absolutely no sign of emotional retreat.

Still, the silent question had been flying in tight formation with him for miles. He had taken seven years to finally begin this with her. Then they had moved incredibly fast. The first date. The first night. Months of learning the deeply private, vulnerable version of a woman he had already trusted with his life in war zones. Now, a full week in Annapolis, surrounded by the people who knew the earliest, rawest version of him, felt like he was letting her into the last frontier of who he truly was. It left him vulnerable, but completely ready.

Harm's right thumb rested lightly along the side of the gear selector. The exit sign grew massive in the windshield. He could ask her directly if she was ready for this. He chose not to.

"You doing okay over there, Mac?"

Mac turned her head toward him. Harm kept his eyes locked straight on the road. One second passed. Two.

The paper whispered softly. Her hand left the packet. Warm, steady fingers settled directly over his. There was no hesitation. No nervous adjustment.

Her palm covered the back of his right hand exactly where it rested on the leather gear selector, anchoring him.

“Everything’s perfect, Harm.”

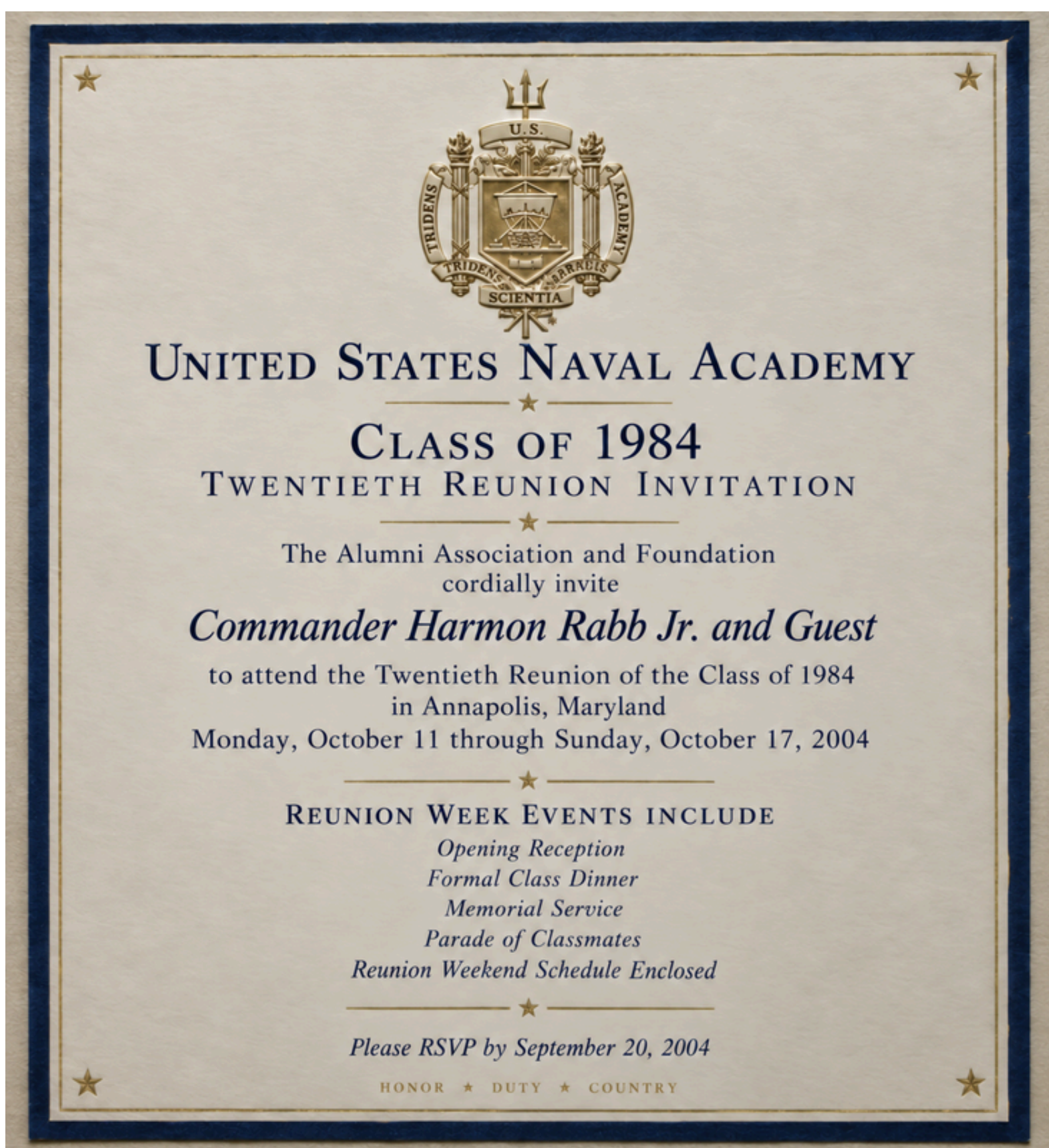
The turn signal began to click beneath the low road noise, a steady, rhythmic pulse in the quiet cabin. Harm checked his mirror, moved the wheel, and steered them onto the off-ramp. Their hands remained tightly joined over the gear shifter as the car sloped downward, the highway curving away behind them, toward Annapolis.

As the car sloped downward, the highway curved away behind them.

For the first time, Harm thought maybe they had needed every mile it took to get here.



CHAPTER COMPANION





THE SOUND OF THE CHAPTER

Music for the roads taken, the chances risked, and the invitation that moves it all forward.

CHAPTER ONE TRACKLIST

Fast Car
by Luke Combs

For the opening drive to Annapolis, a song about life in motion, where shifting gears, changing lanes, and unexpected turns carried Harm and Mac to where they were meant to be.

One and Only
by Adele

For the moment Harm finally chooses courage over caution, knowing Mac is the one woman he wants and at last taking his shot.

Come Away With Me
by Norah Jones

For Harm's invitation to the twentieth reunion, asking Mac to step into that meaningful corner of his past and come away with him.

Click to Listen:



THE SCENIC ROUTE

THE YARD- CHAPTER ONE

 LISTEN ON SPOTIFY 

Or Scan to Listen:



WRITER'S NOTE



The initial premise for *The Yard* grew out of a simple question: What if Harm and Mac finally got it together right after the JAG-A-thon? Imagine Harm inviting Mac to his 20th Naval Academy reunion, stepping onto campus for the week not just as colleagues, but as an official couple.

Just as they begin navigating this new shift in their relationship, a mystery from Harm's past resurfaces. To protect their future, they have to do what they do best: team up and solve the case. At its core, this story is about how two people safely close a chapter from the past so they can step into the future together; blending everything I love about slow-burn romance and investigative suspense.

Ari Dan



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RETURN TO CHAPTERS

CREATOR NOTES AND DISCLOSURES

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