



A Question Unanswered I: Of Honor and Truth

Rating: PG-13 for some language, minor violence

Classification: Action Story, Romance (Mac/Harm)

Spoilers: Pilot ep, "Boomerang"

Author's Notes: Set mid-sixth season, long before 'Lifeline' could turn everything upside-down. A little tech-detailed, but it's all in the name of realism. This one's only getting a "romance" marker for two reasons: 1) there are a few kinda-shipperish moments, and 2) the sequel is going to get WAY more shippy. Wow, I love making up words. Just thought you should know what you're getting into.

0320 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

"Got the Conrad case handled?"

Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr. didn't even glance up from his computer screen as his partner strode uninvited into his office. "Settled this morning. She took the six months." That earned a raised eyebrow from the Marine who stood in front of his desk.

"You actually settled? Is there a full moon or something?"

She'd expected a snappy comeback, but instead received a 'give me a break' half-smile. "I don't do miracles. She slugged her commander in front of half a dozen witnesses at the O-club, and then went after him with a broken bottle. I'm not sure even six months will cool her off."

Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie shrugged. "Cheer up. I'm sure your next one will be more exciting."

"Don't say that," he warned. "Last time those words came out of your mouth, I ended up on a C-130 to Guam in the middle of the night."

"You came back with a nice tan," she pointed out teasingly.

Before he could come up with a comment on why she'd noticed, Tiner appeared in the doorway.

"Sir, ma'am, the admiral would like to see you in his office ASAP."

Folding his arms across his chest, Harm turned an accusing stare on Mac, who raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Somehow this is your fault."

"All the blame, none of the credit ..." She headed across the bullpen, and he followed her into the JAG's office.

"Reporting as ordered, sir."

"At ease." Admiral Chegwiddden looked up from his desk. "Naval Air Systems Command just called to request a JAGMAN investigation into a test failure that occurred two days ago. Apparently the pilot landed safely under emergency power, but there was a major engine malfunction."

"Sir, with all respect," Mac questioned, "what does this have to do with us? Technical problems aren't really our domain."

"Well, someone important at NavAir thinks they need you down there. With the

Phoenix program, the rule seems to be 'better extremely safe than even the slightest bit sorry'. Which is why this make very little sense."

Harm's expression remained neutral, but despite himself, he was intrigued. The Phoenix was the United States' newest and most capable fighter; it was intended to replace the Navy's Tomcats and the Air Force's Eagles single-handedly. He'd read most of the R&D work, but he hadn't expected to see one up close for quite some time.

The admiral knew his officers too well. "Commander Rabb, I know there's been some confusion over the past few months on this topic, but please keep in mind that for the present, you are a lawyer and not a pilot. However, for this particular assignment, it might be useful to look at things from both angles. Just don't get carried away."

"Understood, sir," he responded. Mac hid a smile. Flyboys and their toys ...

"You'll head to Pax River tomorrow morning, and meet up with a couple of NavAir's engineers to compare notes. Don't tell me you don't have any notes yet," he continued, as Harm opened his mouth. "You'll have the report on your desks before you leave today. Better be prepared to stay a few days. I honestly don't know what's expected of you, so stay on your toes. Colonel, keep your partner out of trouble. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir." The pair exited and disappeared into their separate offices. Soon, though, Harm ducked his head around Mac's door. "I have to admit, when you're right, you're right."

"About getting a more exciting assignment?"

"Well, that and my nice tan."

He flashed that irresistible grin, and she rolled her eyes. "Commander, keeping you out of trouble is turning into a full-time job."

1035 EST

NAS Patuxent River, Maryland

The midmorning sky over the Naval Air Station at Patuxent River was alive with motion. Two F/A-18 Hornets were performing a tactical exercise directly over the two JAG officers' heads as they climbed out of Harm's Lexus. Instantly, a familiar light came into his ice-blue eyes, and he seemed to stand even taller. Mac shook her head. "Easy, flyboy. You're not going to get airborne on this trip."

"I know, I know. I just appreciate the atmosphere, that's all." His gaze swept over the complex, watching the activity on the ground as well as in the air. Without turning, he could sense her hesitation. "And before you say anything - no, I'm not changing my mind again. I know where I belong."

"Harm, you don't have to justify anything to me. Of course you miss flying. I'd be worried if you didn't. Your choices are your own."

"Exactly. This time, it is my choice. I love to fly, but I don't want to live that life anymore." He faced her, and she could see that he meant it. "I'm done with being indecisive. That's a promise."

The honesty in that simple exchange surprised them both, and Mac smiled to lighten the mood. "Guess I'm stuck with you, then."

"Yes, ma'am."

They walked up to the entrance of Naval Air Systems Command headquarters, an imposing stone building that seemed as old as the Navy itself. Inside, a petite young woman immediately approached them. "Commander Rabb? Colonel Mackenzie? I'm Kara Donnell, Flight Systems Engineering. Welcome to NavAir."

Despite himself, Harm was surprised by ... well, nearly everything about her. Kara Donnell was petite, dressed in a very nonmilitary black jacket and slacks, and looked to be no more than twenty years old. *Time to get a refresher on your sensitivity training*, he told himself. Mac saved him by stepping forward and offering her hand. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Donnell. Just ignore my partner. Pick up your jaw," she said more quietly, jerking him back to politeness.

"No offense, Ms. Donnell, but you look awfully young to be taking the lead on a mishap

investigation.”

Mac stared at him, aghast, but Kara seemed unfazed. “No offense, Commander Rabb, but you look awfully tall to fit into a Tomcat,” she responded without missing a beat. At his shocked expression, she smiled, and her hazel eyes gave no sign of offense. “Now we’re even. I’d rather people question me for my age than for my gender or my competence, anyway. Age is temporary. Not that it matters, but I’m twenty-three. I’ve been with NavAir for two years, which is plenty long enough to feel a little responsible for this whole thing, for better or worse. And yes, I am a civilian, and I’m not the only one around here, so things might be a little less formal than what you’re used to. Rest assured, though - we take our job very seriously, because we keep your planes flying.”

Harm cleared his throat. “Ms. Donnell, I apologize - ”

“Please, try Kara for a while. And don’t apologize for being surprised. I get that a lot, and it’s usually a lot more rude. As long as you give me a chance to prove I can do my job, you don’t have anything to apologize for.”

Mac sized up the young woman, and her blunt honesty, and decided she liked her. Kara Donnell handed them both visitor’s badges and gestured to the far door. “While we track down my sidekick, why don’t you tell me what you know so far?” And with that, she led them into the Flight Engineering Center.

“We don’t know much,” Mac admitted. “The pilot reported an engine flameout at altitude and used the auxiliary power unit to restart. His statement’s pretty much all they sent us.”

“Yeah, he’s been fairly calm about the whole thing, which is weird. Usually they come charging in here after a failure, wanting to give somebody hell, but Halloway can’t figure out what the big deal is. He keeps saying it’s not an engine failure; it’s a restart success. He thinks we can use this to verify the auxiliary power unit, and skip ahead in the test schedule.” Kara shook her head. “With all due respect, Commander, sometimes I don’t get you pilots.”

“Don’t worry about it. Speaking from experience, the only people crazier than Navy pilots are Navy test pilots.”

“Well, I thought Captain Halloway was relatively stable until this happened. He’s actually one of our best, so I can’t figure out how he lost the engine in the first place.”

“You don’t think there was a mechanical problem?” Mac asked.

“No, ma’am. I know our engines. They’re designed to take anything we throw at them. All I can think of is an integration problem - a bad fuel line, hydraulics routed wrong, I don’t know. None of it makes sense, which is probably why they called you.”

“Do you think there may have been misconduct in the program?”

“I don’t see how. If someone wanted to deliberately sabotage the test, why would they let the plane and the pilot come out of it in one piece?” She shrugged as they reached the Systems Division offices, an expansive room full of cubicles and workstations. “Home sweet home. It’s better than it looks. Once I wake up our aux-power guy, you’re in charge. We’re just here to help, and throw in a semi-informed opinion when asked. Glorified tech support, I guess.”

“Speak for yourself, Kar,” came a voice from around the corner. A young man, older than Kara but still shy of thirty, appeared to shake their hands. “Commander, Colonel. I’m Scott Fairfield from Aux Power, and if she told you anything about me, it’s a vicious lie. Especially if she called me her sidekick.”

“Such trust.” She flashed an innocent smile and turned to the officers. “We’re in your hands. Where do you want to start?”

Harm exchanged a look with his partner. “We’re not in Kansas anymore,” he murmured under his breath.

Unfortunately, he’d underestimated Kara’s hearing. “Not by a long shot. Welcome to Pax River.”

Flight Test Hangar B

After checking in at the Visiting Officers' Quarters, the JAG team met up with their engineering counterparts at the hangar. They had changed into more suitable flight-line gear; Scott's jeans looked as if they'd been used to mop up a paint spill, and Kara's faded T-shirt read "Virginia Cavaliers Football". Her shoulder-length, golden-brown hair was pulled back in a loose braid, and she waved a rivet tool with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Whoever authorized this is going to be sorry they let the engineers get their hands on the hardware."

"We're desk-jockeys most of the time," Scott explained to their wary visitors, setting up a video camera to record the inspection process. "But we know what we're doing, don't we?"

"I'm not going to break anything, if that's what you mean. Besides, the maintenance crew has spies. They'll be in here in seconds if we do anything stupid."

The foursome walked through the crowded main hangar and into an adjoining section. In the center of the bay, apart from the other aircraft, the Phoenix sat silently. It wasn't a particularly large plane; Harm had to duck under the wing as he circled it, taking it all in. The body was far more sleek and graceful than his beloved Tomcat, and its weapons were carried within the frame, making the soon-to-be world leader in air superiority appear almost docile.

"What I wouldn't do to take you for a spin," he said softly, studying the state-of-the-art thrust vectoring system. He could feel Mac's eyes on him, following him as they did so often. It was vaguely irritating, and at the same time strangely comforting, that she always seemed to be watching out for him. Was she worried about him losing sight of this case? He didn't think so - she knew him too well. Then what was it that had her radar up?

Oblivious to the lawyers' thoughts, Kara knelt underneath the engine cowling and carefully removed the access panel. "Okay, here goes. We'll start with the fan blades, then the stators, the compressor, combustion chamber, and we'll check all the lines at the end. Deal?"

"We're right behind you," Mac answered, but she had no illusions about this task. Harm might keep up with their technospeak for a while, but she'd be lost in seconds. *At twenty-three, I was pulling all-nighters in the law library, and sleeping through class the next day, she thought as she watched the specialists perform their detailed analysis. These two are putting the U.S. military in the air.* Thirty-three had never felt so old before.

Nearly three hours later, they replaced the access panel and restored the Phoenix's smooth gray skin. "Nada. What did I tell you?" Kara shook her head, wiping oil from her hands onto her jeans. "Not even a bad connector. That engine looks the same today as it did two weeks ago."

"Maybe it's a wiring problem from the cockpit," Scott suggested. "Have the avionics guys been down here yet?"

"I don't know, but everything checked out on the ground test. I don't get it. This bird was perfect up to this point." Tiredly, she accepted his hand up from the floor. "Commander, Colonel, any ideas?"

"I think we're going to split up tomorrow," replied Harm. "I've got a meeting with Captain Halloway - hopefully he'll tell me more than we've got so far. Mac, are you going to check out the data recorder?"

"Actually, I may need some help with that. Can one of you get me access to all the data taken from the test flight?"

"Sure. I'll meet you in the control center whatever time you want," Kara offered.

Mac was tempted to push her and say 0630, but stopped herself. What had this girl done to deserve that? "How about 0800?"

"Sounds good. I could use the sleep. Here, let me give you our phone numbers." She scrawled quickly on a slip of paper and handed it to Harm. "If you need anything - even restaurant tips - give either of us a call. We have no lives, so if one of us isn't home, we're probably at the other one's place watching TV."

"Thanks. See you in the morning."

2100 EST
Visiting Officers' Quarters

As it turned out, neither officer was all that excited about going out for the evening. They ended up ordering Chinese takeout and sitting on the floor of Harm's room at the VOQ to discuss the case. There wasn't much to go on yet, however, and it wasn't long before work faded from the conversation.

"It's freezing in here. I'm going to run down to my room and grab a sweater."

"Here, don't bother." He tossed her a flannel shirt from his duffel. It hung down to her knees, and she rolled her eyes at the way she looked, like a child playing dress-up.

"You enjoy making me look ridiculous, don't you?"

"Don't be so paranoid. You look better in it than I do. So, what do you think of our young friends?" Harm asked, pulling on a gray USNA sweatshirt. Mac shrugged, reaching for the fried rice.

"As much as I hate to admit it, they seem extremely capable. I just can't figure out how they got that way." She stretched her legs out. "She's twenty-three, for Christ's sake. I had no idea where my life was going at twenty-three. And he's not much better - what is he, twenty-seven? Were you that sure of yourself at that age?"

"As much as it may shock you, partner," he responded quietly, "I've never been incredibly sure of myself. Outward attitude notwithstanding. I've changed my designator three times, remember?"

"Sure, but only between two actual careers. It's not your fault you're good at two very different things." She said it lightly, but a shadow had fallen across his handsome features. "Harm? You okay?"

"Yeah. Just thinking about how much my life *didn't* change between twenty-three and twenty-seven." Although he was speaking to her, his gaze was somewhere far away. "At twenty-seven I thought I was just about the best pilot around. Everything else just seemed secondary. Then I spent my twenty-eighth birthday in the hospital, trying to come to terms with the knowledge that my RIO was dead and that I'd never be a naval aviator again. By twenty-nine, I was a law student with a hell of a lot to prove."

Mac watched his expressive eyes seemingly burning a hole in the wall just over her shoulder. *It still hurts him*, she realized. *He'll never really be able to let it go. How could anyone let it go completely?* He'd never really told anyone at JAG much about that fateful crash, only enough to explain his flight status and settle any rumors in the office. But every so often, a haunted look rose behind that perfect smile, and she ached whenever she saw it. This time, she took the opportunity to act. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked gently.

"You'll just end up depressed. It's not exactly uplifting."

"I know that. I still want to hear it, the way you remember it."

Surrendering, he raised his head to meet her gaze. She got the message; he wanted to be totally, painfully honest. And she wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

"We'd been doing tacticals for what seemed like days. We were supposed to have landed half an hour earlier, before the weather got rough, but we ended up having to circle for a while because they were having trouble clearing the deck. By the time I called the ball, the visibility was next to nothing, and the waves were getting pretty bad. I remember Brick warning me about the tower - that's when I first started to panic, because I couldn't see it. I tried like hell, but everything was just dark. I started yelling at Brick, at the Seahawk, anyone who'd listen, just trying to get someone to help get me down. Then there was this flash of lightning, and for a split second I could see the deck ... and I knew it was too late to pull up completely."

He stood up and crossed to the window, his expression unreadable. In his voice, though, she could hear the barely-concealed pain as he relived that awful day, nearly ten years ago. "I tried to stop him from punching out - I knew it was too fast, we'd just end up falling back onto the plane ... or what was left of it. I don't think he even heard me. I heard the canopy blow, and after that he was just gone. I only ejected two, maybe three seconds after

he did, but that made all the difference. They told me I hit the side of the ramp - I don't know. I was out before I hit the deck. The next thing I knew, I was in sickbay, in traction. We'd been too low for the chute to open properly, and I cracked three vertebrae on impact. The CAG was there. He told me about Brick."

There was a note of bitter amusement on his RIO's call sign. "The thing is, 'Brick' started out as a stupid nickname the instructor gave him at RIO school. The guy got in his face and told him he was as dumb as a brick. Lieutenant Kevin Mace, from Green Bay, Wisconsin. He was a lot of things, but he wasn't dumb. He wasn't a quitter, either. He took the nickname for his call sign because he wanted people to know that he wouldn't let anything beat him. I'd only been flying with him for a couple of months, but he hung on every word I said. I think he wanted to learn how to be cocky, but I learned his determination instead. He was a great kid."

"You were a kid, too," she pointed out quietly. Maybe he heard, but he didn't respond.

"It wasn't long before the doctors figured out about my eyes, so I knew my flying career was over before the inquiry even started. They kept telling me nobody could've pulled off that landing, but I knew what they were really thinking. Nobody else had to look their RIO's parents in the eye and give them the line about a grateful nation. I did. I made myself do it - I begged the captain to let me go to the service, even though I could barely walk. I wanted to punish myself, make myself live through their pain. I went straight from Green Bay to my grandmother's farm in Pennsylvania, and I didn't leave the house for two weeks. After that, though ... I knew what I had to do, and I was ready to face the world. It sounds strange, but I took the first chance I had to go up again. It was something I just had to prove to myself. After that, I packed up for Columbia and didn't look back."

"Why law school?" Mac asked. "For that matter, why JAG? You could have left the Navy with no disgrace."

"You know the answer to that. This is who I am, Mac. Pilot or lawyer or whatever - it all starts with this uniform. I couldn't give up that easily. Can you see me in one of those big-time firms, defending drug dealers and child molesters and trying to sleep at night? Here, no matter what the crime, the person I represent wears the same uniform I do, and that means something to me." Harm turned to look at her. "As for going into law ... well, the idea had been in the back of my mind for a while, but it was the inquiry into my crash that really made my decision. I had a JAG lawyer from headquarters, and he was amazing. I saw the way he worked, and I could tell that he held nothing higher than the Navy and the truth. I thought that if I could be half as good, my life would be worth something."

"I never knew - JAG's resident hero has a hero of his own. Who was this illustrious litigator? Have I heard of him?"

"Probably. His name was Captain A.J. Chegwiddden."

Mac couldn't help it - her jaw dropped. "Small world," she said finally. "Does he know what he did for you?"

"Maybe. He remembers my case, that's for sure, because he told me when he brought me into JAG HQ. A decision I'm sure he regrets about every other day."

"Right. That's about as accurate as our last budget proposal."

A ghost of a smile flickered across his face, but he was still deep in the past. "I still write the Maces once in a while. They were so good to me, after everything that happened ... and sometimes I need to remind myself, to make sure I still understand where I am. Does that make any sense?"

"Sure," she said, trying to sound reassuring. She rose and joined him at the window, climbing up to sit on the edge of the table. "I do the same thing. Good or bad, it's all a part of who we are."

"Something like that. I'm proud of what I do, Mac. I'm proud of everything we've accomplished over the last four years. If I never get in another jet, I'll still be content with my life. You believe that, right?"

His blue eyes searched her face for a sign of comprehension. She put a hand on his arm and spoke earnestly. "I'm proud of us, too. And I always believe you, don't I?"

"I'm sure I've given you plenty of opportunities to question my word."

"Harm, if you're asking for my trust, I can't imagine why you'd even have a doubt. You have it unconditionally. You always have."

Suddenly she became aware of how close they were standing, and this was definitely not the place to let this discussion wander. "It's late. I should get out of here and let you get some sleep." She started toward the door, but this time it was his hand on her arm.

"I heard a 'but' in there. Have I let you down somehow?"

"No, of course not." Damn his selective perceptiveness. Why was she thinking of that, anyway? "Keeping your feelings to yourself isn't the same as being dishonest. I know you'd never deliberately - I mean, you didn't - " *Aw, hell.* There was confusion and a trace of hurt in his expression, and she knew he wouldn't give up until she explained. "That day when you left for Pensacola, and I was such a mess ... I said I understood, and I did, but it was still hard to watch you leave. And even though I knew better, you seemed so sure, so ready to pack up and move on. Right then, I was afraid to trust you, because I knew that if that goodbye was real, then you didn't see things the same way I did. For a long time, I wasn't completely sure that you'd ever really been happy at JAG. I know it now - I really do, especially after tonight. But you see, that means that you weren't completely honest that day. And that's hard to accept."

Harm let his hand fall from her arm, and he nodded. "You're right. I wasn't willing to let everyone see how tough it was to leave. When I got to my car, and I realized that four years of my life were in that one stupid box ... well, remember that comment about you being the only one crying? Forget it. I could hardly see to drive home. I just couldn't let that be everyone's last image of me. Pride, I guess. So I put up a front. But I didn't realize until later that I'd let you believe it, too. I was too wrapped up in what everyone else thought to tell you the truth."

"And what was the truth?"

"That I had doubts about leaving. Not the flying - that was something I needed to do. But flying wasn't going to bring me another friend like you. Mac, I missed you like crazy, and I hated myself for letting you think I wouldn't look back. I know I can't make up the distance I put between us overnight, but will you ever really forgive me?"

In answer, she smiled, shaking her head. "Aw, stickboy, you can't get rid of me that easily." The look of relief in his eyes was evident, and on impulse, he enfolded her in a brief embrace. The simple act surprised them both; they weren't typically the hugging type. Somehow, though, it felt right. After a moment, she gently disengaged herself, lowering her gaze. "Time to call it a night," she managed to say.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Thanks for letting me unload. I didn't realize how much I needed it."

"Any time. See you in the morning."

It wasn't until she was in her own room, one floor below, that her mind cleared. What exactly had just happened? A few hours earlier, she'd thought that they were as close as ever, but this was almost a new level. He carried himself differently since his return: less cocky, as if he no longer had anything to prove. Older, she realized. Harmon Rabb had finally grown up, and he wore it well. She'd wondered about that day for a long time, but she hadn't let herself hope too hard for him to ever explain. Yet he'd confessed it all, and more - asked for her forgiveness, as if she hadn't forgiven him the second he returned. For the first time in months, a weight had been lifted that she didn't even know existed.

Was that all? There had been a hint of something more, as she'd felt his strong arms

around her. She imagined she could still smell his cologne ... and then she realized she was still wearing his shirt.

"You're losing it, Mackenzie," she said aloud. "Just be happy that you have your best friend back."

She'd give it back to him tomorrow, before he missed it. Now it was time to catch some sleep. The way this case was shaping up, they'd all have a major headache before long.

0800 EST NavAir SysComm Control Center

Mac stepped into the records room exactly on time, and was greeted with a surprise. On the table lay the flight log for the week of March 12, and a computer workstation was already opened to the test database. Kara Donnell was sitting cross-legged on an outdated control board, flipping through a folder. "Morning, Colonel. There's a couple of donuts in the box. Hope you're not a health-food junkie."

"Nope, that'd be my partner. Thanks." She picked up a chocolate-covered one. "How long have you been here setting up?"

"I usually get in around seven. Since my only real assignment for the moment is to help you figure this thing out, I figured I might as well make myself useful."

"I appreciate it. Let's get started."

Kara unfolded herself gracefully and hopped down, her striking blue suit still perfectly unwrinkled. *How did she do that?* Mac wondered. Sometimes the uniform, and the immaculate presentation that went along with it, got on her nerves. "The logbook doesn't say any more than we already know. The only thing it has is the exact times of each event - the pilot's first report of the flameout, the APU activation, and the successful engine restart. It doesn't mean much now, but it might come in handy later."

"Something had better. What does the computer say?"

The engineer slid behind the keyboard and started clicking. "There are separate files kept for each set of subsystem monitors. Let's see, avionics, environmental, fire protection, hydraulics, pneumatics ... here we go. Propulsion." She selected the file, and promptly cursed. "How can it be empty? The download's automatic. What the hell happened to the engine data?"

Before the lawyer could react, she had picked up the phone and dialed. "This is Kara Donnell from Flight Systems. Can you tell me who was on control crew for the April fourteenth test flight? Really? How convenient. Do you have a few minutes to come chat with the investigators?" Her pleasant expression only wavered slightly as she continued, "Lieutenant, I did ask nicely, but if that's not good enough, I have a lieutenant colonel right here who'd be more than happy to ask you with a little more authority. Fantastic. We're on Control Three." She hung up and looked vaguely guilty. "Sorry. I probably shouldn't have used you like that. Some of these people refuse to even think about doing anything that's not an order."

"Don't worry about it. Right now, we have bigger problems." Mac leaned over the screen. "Could the data have been tampered with?"

"I suppose anything's possible if you're a big enough computer-geek. But they'd have to have access. This whole facility's secure, and if you belong here, everybody pretty much knows your face." She explored the other drives on the network, on the slim chance that the files were still recoverable.

In a few minutes, the door opened for a young lieutenant. "Lieutenant Anderson reporting as ordered, ma'am."

"At ease, Lieutenant," Mac said, knowing that behind her, Kara was rolling her eyes. "Were you monitoring the Phoenix test last week?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"We're having trouble locating the data. Do you have any idea what might have happened to it?"

"Ma'am, they didn't tell you?"

"Obviously not, Lieutenant. Why don't you explain it to me?"

"There is no data, ma'am." Kara's head jerked up in disbelief, but the officer was already elaborating. "We lost our link shortly after takeoff. All we had was radio communication. The avionics guys said it was a glitch in their software, and they got it back up in a couple of minutes, but by then, Captain Halloway had already reported the lost engine and initiated restart. He was back on the ground before we were completely up and running again."

"Lovely. Thank you, Lieutenant. You're dismissed." When Anderson was gone, she turned to the younger woman. "Convenient, isn't it?"

"For somebody, anyway. We didn't even have a camera on this flight - some of the actual maneuverability information is still classified. The F-14 who flew chase was told to hang back about half a mile."

"Well, we'd better find him and talk to him, but I think our main source of info about that flight is what Captain Halloway remembers."

"Then I hope Commander Rabb gets something useful out of their conversation."

1130 EST Flight Briefing Room 4

Harm came to attention when the senior test pilot stepped into the room. "Sir!"

"At ease, Commander Rabb. Good to meet you."

"The pleasure's mine, sir. Thank you for meeting with me."

"Not a problem. Have a seat."

Captain Andrew Halloway was a shade over forty, with the weathered appearance of a man who had seen and done more than many men twice his age. He was a decorated veteran of the Gulf War, and his service record detailed nearly ten years of testing the Navy's newest and best aviation technology. In such company, rank aside, even Harmon Rabb, Jr. spoke with deference.

"Sir, with your permission, I'd like to record this conversation for our investigation. Apparently there were some glitches with the flight data, and you're pretty much all we have to go on at the moment."

Halloway waved dismissively. "Go right ahead. Sounds like you could use all the help you can get. And you can drop the formalities. This'll be complicated enough without a 'sir' in every sentence."

"Thank you, on both counts." Harm pressed the red button on the little tape recorder, and wasted no time in getting into the facts. "Can you describe the sequence of events leading up to the engine flameout?"

"There wasn't much to it, really. I was in high-altitude roll maneuvers, at about forty-five thousand feet, when the tower lost their feed. They told me to wrap up what I was doing and turn around, because there was nothing to be gained from a test with no data. So I pulled out of the roll and came around hard, and that's when the engine went. Must've hit my own jetwash or something."

The younger pilot tried to mask his disbelief. "With all due respect, Captain, I've never seen a bird that could hit its own jetwash." Halloway only smiled.

"You've never seen the Phoenix, Commander."

"Fair enough. Why a hard turn?"

"Ego, I guess. I was irritated that we had to cut the test short before I could see what she was really made of. That was my only chance to have a little fun. Course, I got more than I bargained for. That'll teach me to go off-plan, huh?"

"I suppose it would." Harm continued with his inquiry. "Once you engaged the auxiliary power unit, did the restart go smoothly?"

"By the book. Everything did, really. The systems are so integrated that the plane knew how to react before I did. She's an incredible machine. If you ever get the chance, I highly recommend taking one for a spin. You'll never go back to Tomcats again."

"Well, I'll believe that when I see it, but I'd sure like to take you up on that." He fought back frustration. Halloway was easygoing, even friendly, but he wasn't telling him anything new. "So you honestly think the engine lost its air intake because of jetwash? There's nothing wrong with the Phoenix besides being almost *too* maneuverable?"

Halloway shrugged casually. "I do. Sorry, but I think you came down here for nothing. Matter of fact, I can't figure out why JAG got called in on this to begin with. Does headquarters think someone's been messing around?"

"No one's said so, but the fact is, we're here. And the fact that all the data was lost seems to bear that out. Has the control room ever lost power during a test before?"

"Not in my experience, but it sounds like Murphy's Law to me. All systems have a snafu at one point or another, don't they?"

"I suppose so." The lawyer paused. "If you don't mind my saying so, for a guy whose only engine quit on him a few days ago, you don't seem too worried."

"Don't get me wrong - a flameout is a problem in any scenario. But I'm convinced this isn't a hardware problem. We just have to adjust the limits and make sure a dangerous situation never occurs during a mission. The instrumentation will take care of itself when the tech guys do their stuff with it. We've got a flight-ready bird. I'd get back in the seat tomorrow if they'd let me."

"Well, I can't argue with that. Thanks for your time, sir. We'll get back to you if there's anything else."

Heading back to Flight Systems, Harm met up with Scott at his desk. "Any bolts of inspiration?" the civilian asked.

"Nothing. Halloway is convinced there's nothing wrong with the plane. He thinks he hit his own jetwash doing a stick-turn."

The young man frowned. "I think he needs to retake aerodynamics. For the airflow to be disturbed that much around the inlet, he'd have to turn one-eighty practically in place. You can't brake in midair."

"Thanks, I figured that much," he said wryly. "Still, I can't come up with anything better. There's just no solid evidence to look at, and I'm rapidly running out of ideas." The phone rang then, and Scott leaned over to answer it.

"Flight Systems, Fairfield. Hey, Kar. Yeah, he's right here - they just wrapped up. Hang on, I'll put you on speaker." He tapped a button, and Kara's voice filtered through the tinny speaker.

"Are you as frustrated as we are?"

"Twice over. According to our illustrious pilot, our only problem is jetwash."

"Right. And I'm a Laker Girl."

"I'd pay to see that," Scott put in. Harm blinked, but Kara had beaten him to the punch.

"You'd pay to see Janet Reno if she had a two-inch skirt. Listen, I think we all deserve a night out. Commander, would you and the colonel like to join us for dinner? There's a great club just up the road we Systems kids tend to visit a lot."

"Mainly because we're too lazy to try anywhere else," Scott finished. "Food's better than average, and the music's good. Don't worry - it's not a techie hangout. You game?"

Harm shrugged to his partner, then remembered she wasn't right there to see it. He leaned into the speaker. "I'm up for it if you are, Mac. You bring your civvies?"

"I'm ready for anything," came her reply. "Sounds like you two are on. Hope hanging out with the middle-aged crowd doesn't kill your images."

"What image? I'm an engineer!" The men could almost hear her grin. "Okay, we'll come find you at the Q around seven - sorry, nineteen hundred."

"Deal. See you then." The commander deliberately tried to put the unsettling feeling he'd had all afternoon out of his mind. Something about the pilot's statement just didn't ring true, but he couldn't zero in on it. Whatever it was, they'd get to it somehow. They had to if the Phoenix was going to get airborne again.

1856 EST

Visiting Officers' Quarters

Mac knocked on Harm's door a few minutes before they were to meet their civilian teammates. "It's open," he called, and she let herself in.

"I brought your shirt back," she said, tossing it on his bed as he emerged from the bathroom, running a careless hand through his short hair. "Thanks for letting me swipe it for a while."

"Any time." The shirt he wore now was close-fitting, and just blue enough to light up his already electric eyes. He gave her shimmering black top and boot-cut pants a once-over, and she narrowed her eyes.

"Are those kids rubbing off on you?"

"They're not kids, Mac, and I was only going to compliment your taste. I'm not Scott."

"Lucky for both of you."

"Jeez, I surrender already." He gave her an innocent look that instantly charmed the sarcasm right out of her. "You look great, Mac. That's all I was going to say. Promise."

"In that case, thanks. You're not so bad yourself."

"You're a couple minutes early, aren't you?"

"It was on purpose. I'm not losing my touch." She leaned against the table while he located his favorite sneakers. "It's driving you crazy, isn't it? Not being able to figure out what happened?"

"We'll figure it out. I'm just afraid we might do it the hard way."

"You mean by flying another test? Is NavAir likely to do that?"

"I don't know, but they've still got the next test on the books, and they won't give it up without a fight. We'll worry about it if and when the time comes. Right now, I just want to relax and have a decent evening out."

The club, appropriately named "Wings", was better than either of them had expected. It wasn't too loud or crowded, but there was plenty going on. As soon as they sat down, Kara was ordering appetizers for the four of them. "There's some munchies you just have to have. It's tradition."

"Is it tradition to have a triple bypass, too?" Harm eyed the mostly-fried snacks warily. Mac smirked at him and reached for a mozzarella stick.

"Nah, most of us just pretend we're invincible." The young woman flashed a devil-may-care grin, but it was clear from the fit of her jade-green top and flared skirt that she didn't live off of this kind of food. She leaned back and folded her arms. "Okay, time to get acquainted. I'll start, since you've doubtless noticed that I'm not the shy type. I'm originally from Radcliffe, Virginia, so I'm more or less a hometown girl. I went to UVA for engineering because I'd wanted to work on things that fly since I was six. Besides that, I was a dancer in high school, I'm a crazed freak when it comes to college football, and I'd kill for a ride in one of your Tomcats, Commander. That is, unless the wings are just for show."

"Oh, that hurts." Harm clutched his heart and favored her with a full-power 'flyboy' smile. "Guess it's my turn, then. I mainly grew up outside San Diego, went to the Academy, started flying. After a couple of years, I ended up testing the aviator's law of gravity."

"Which is?"

" 'What goes up must come down, and it's not always pretty.' " The engineers winced, but he continued with little reaction. "So I decided to try law school. Now I do a little of both. I like music, I *used* to drive a Corvette, and my antique biplane is named after my grandmother. How's that for a Cliffs Notes version of my life?"

"Works for me. Your turn, Colonel."

"Ah, I'm from Arizona, went into the Marines mostly because of my uncle. I did law school at Duke, and I *do* drive a Corvette." She wasn't overly eager to say more, which Kara seemed to sense.

"Duke, huh? Your boys tend to beat up on my Cavvies in basketball, but we kick Blue Devil ass in football. Okay, Scott, fess up."

"All right, all right. I'm from Cincinnati, Ohio, and I went to Purdue - "

"Big Ten football, three yards and a cloud of dust."

He elbowed his friend, and she shut up. "Anyway, I'm a pure tech geek, so my hobbies are essentially all confined to the computer. I only work with the engine junkies when we have integration issues, but Kara and I happen to live in the same building, so we've learned to put up with each other."

"Most of the time," she deadpanned. "Okay, at least we're not complete strangers anymore. I know we're all off-duty, but I have to ask - is this investigation driving anyone else up a wall, or is it just me?"

"It's not just you." Harm shook his head. "It seems like the more we look, the less we find. I'm starting to wonder if there's a security problem in the program."

"I guess anything's possible, but we're pretty damn careful." Kara hesitated. "I don't really want to think about the possibility of someone working with us being capable of sabotage."

"Let's not think about it at all," Scott suggested. "It is definitely after hours, and I'd personally rather talk about your beloved football team all night than the Phoenix's problems. And that's really saying something."

"I agree. Forget the case for the night. No work and all play." Mac raised her Coke, and they clinked glasses.

Kara listened to the music for a moment and brightened. "Oh, good song. Have to dance. Who's going to come with me?" She tilted her head toward Scott, who signaled his apprehension.

"Oh, no. Come on, Kar, you know I can't dance."

"No, what I know is that you *won't* dance. You are absolutely no fun." She turned to Harm and raised her eyebrows inquisitively. "Commander, you wouldn't make me go out there alone."

Glancing briefly across the table, he shrugged. "Oh, what the hell?"

"All right!" The pair took off for the dance floor, where Santana's "Smooth" was pouring out of the speakers, leaving their partners to watch from the sideline.

Mac studied the self-proclaimed tech-geek for a moment. Scott's gaze followed Kara and Harm with an unreadable expression. She decided she had nothing to lose by being curious. "You sure you don't want to dance with her?"

"Oh, I'd dance with her. If I could keep up. I hope Commander Rabb knows what he's getting into." He gestured toward them, and even the Marine had to admit that the girl had talent. One of her hands was firmly locked in Harm's as he spun her effortlessly. They moved with equal rhythm, and they seemed to be enjoying every minute of it. Kara looked back toward them then, and Scott tapped the side of his nose with one finger, smiling wryly. She laughed out loud and leaned into Harm to hide her giggles.

"Inside joke?" Mac asked with interest.

"Yeah - long, stupid story. It's sort of a code. Working for the government means you can't just say whatever's on your mind ... especially if it could be interpreted as, well, sexual."

"Stealth flirting?"

His face colored. "I guess. Come on, Colonel, everybody's mind goes in the gutter once in a while."

She didn't have any intention of going into *that*. "That's what we have red lights for."
"Well, the civvies don't. Typically we just use it to mean 'hey, I had a hysterical comment to make just now, but I can't tell you until we're off base'. It's innocent. I swear." He attempted to change the subject, nodding in the direction of the dance floor. "I could never understand how she does that in heels."

"What I'd like to know is how she's managing to make Harm look like he knows what he's doing." And he did look good out there, she reflected. Relaxed, even comfortable, despite the complicated-looking steps Kara was throwing at him. It occurred to her that the young man next to her was doing his best to become invisible, and she recognized the expression in his eyes. "So if the civilian engineering corps has no such thing as red lights, why don't you ask her out?"

His head jerked toward her, but a shield quickly went up. "We go out all the time. We're in here about once a week."

"With the rest of your friends, or talking shop. Either way, you're not dancing." She leaned on her elbows. "Why is that?"

"With all due respect, Colonel, you and the commander seem pretty close, but I don't see you out there dancing with him."

"He's my best friend, and we have a chain of command. And I asked first."

"Kara's my best friend, too. You understand why someone wouldn't want to risk that." Mac's unyielding gaze finally got to him, and he sighed. "Come on, let's be honest. Look at her. I mean, as engineers, all of us can run with the best of them, but for most of us, that's all we are. She's not like that. How many engineers do you know that can dance like that?" He shook his head. "She could be with any guy she wanted. Hell, she could have a pilot or a lawyer, or both."

"Harm's a good ten years past eligible, don't you think?"

"I didn't mean Commander Rabb specifically. But someone like him. Why would she even think about me?"

"Because you understand her," she said resolutely. "I bet she's tired of guys looking shell-shocked when she tells them what she does for a living. Sometimes all a girl wants is someone who gets it. Don't count yourself out."

On the floor, Harm was vaguely impressed that he hadn't yet tripped over his own shoelaces. "You're picking this stuff up pretty quick, Commander," Kara said without slowing the lightning pace of her feet. "Have you been conned into dancing before?"

"Not like this," he admitted, smiling broadly. "I can't believe I'm enjoying this. How do you do it?"

"I have experience - lots of first dates. I must say, it's almost a relief to not be under the microscope for once." She deftly hooked one leg around his waist and leaned dangerously backward, and he pulled her back up with surprising grace. "Hope you don't mind being tested a little."

"Bring it on, civvie." And he went on the offensive by lifting her easily three feet in the air, conveniently coinciding with the end of the song.

"Whoa! Okay, you win that round." She shook her head. "Commander, you are certainly full of surprises."

"I think after putting me through that, you get to drop the rank. I'm Harm."

"All right, Harm. Want to have another go?"

He cocked his head toward the speaker, waiting until the introduction of Billy Joel's "All About Soul" began. "Sure, I can handle this one." He held out a hand, inviting, and she rested her hands on his shoulders. "This whole night was a great idea, Kara. Thanks for getting us out."

"My pleasure. I take it your social calendar looks a lot like mine these days?"

He thought about the way he'd left things with Renee, and decided to forget about it for the moment. "Something like that. You know, except for our partners over there, this whole room probably thinks we're on a date, and most of them probably think I'm robbing the cradle."

"If they want to believe that, let them. I've never been much for caring about other

people's opinions of me. Unless I respect them." She looked up at him and asked, "What's your opinion of me?"

He acknowledged the unspoken offering with silent gratitude. "Honestly? I think you'd make a great sister. You want to be mine?"

She hesitated only a millisecond before giving him a half-smile. "Funny you should say that. I'm a little out of practice." He instantly realized he'd said something wrong, but she continued. "That's the part I left out of my little bio earlier. I lost my little brother almost two years ago. He had multiple sclerosis."

"Kara, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to - "

"No, it's okay. I don't mind talking about him. Sometimes I want to, even. I want to make sure I don't forget anything about him." Her demeanor had changed somewhat; he didn't sense the cool confidence that had been present throughout their investigation. For the first time since they'd met, she looked her age. "Jason's life was very difficult. He'd never complain, but we knew how hard it got. I was so proud of him when he graduated high school - top of his class, even with all the classes he'd missed. He died about a month before he was supposed to start at Cornell."

Harm said nothing, but moved in time with the music, keeping his hold on her waist. She continued, and there was only a trace of wistfulness in her eyes. "I think I've managed to remember mainly the happy times. I can barely see the times we argued. I tell myself things happen for a reason ... but the truth is, I'd give just about anything to hear him laugh again."

"I understand," he said quietly. "Not completely, but I lost my father when I was six. He was shot down over Vietnam. I have very few memories of him at all, but I have tapes he sent to us, hours of them. Sometimes it helps just to hear his voice."

Their gazes met, and each found something familiar in the other. After a moment, Kara forced a smile. "Let's get out of the past, okay? Tell me something about here and now. Tell me about you and Colonel Mackenzie."

He masked his surprise at the query. "What *about* me and Colonel Mackenzie?"

"I don't know. Cases you've worked, tricks you've played on each other. Even I can tell you two have some history."

"Five years of it, give or take. We've had more than our share of crises thrown at us, and some of them have gotten pretty personal. Somewhere in there, she left JAG, I left JAG, and we eventually ended up back where we started. I'm grateful for that, to tell the truth. I don't think I realized until recently just how much I depend on her."

"You don't strike me as the dependent type."

"I don't mean it like that. Mac just understands me. Sometimes I think she knows what I'm thinking before I do. She's like my guardian angel, pointing me in the right direction." He realized what a 'Hallmark moment' he'd turned this into, and his lips twisted in a wry grin. "When I listen, that is. I don't know, I feel safe when she's around, somehow." Kara didn't respond, and he gave her a long-suffering look. "All right, I know there's a smartass comment spinning around in there, so let's have it."

"Give me some credit for tact. I was just trying to picture a Marine with angel's wings." They both laughed, but he admitted to himself that for this particular Marine, it wasn't altogether a bad mental picture.

Back at the table, Mac looked between them and her companion, and made a rapid decision. She grabbed Scott's arm and started toward the dance floor. "Come on, before your mood becomes contagious."

"Colonel, what are you - "

"Doing you a favor. Trust me." She marched him up to Kara and Harm, who looked only mildly surprised to see them. "I think you owe me a dance, partner," she informed him casually. "We never got one at the Surface Warfare ball, remember?"

He read her silent *please play along* directive and smiled. "How could I forget? Kara, it's been a pleasure, but would you mind if I shared you with Scott?"

"Since you've managed to drag him out here, how could I say no?" Kara released him and went over to her friend, who looked a little lost. "Have fun, you two. Don't do anything we wouldn't."

Harm gave her a mock-glare as the engineers moved off to another corner of the floor. Kara wrapped her arms around Scott's neck, and he forced himself to relax. "Do you get the feeling we've been set up?" he asked cautiously.

"So what if we have?" She didn't seem to see the expression of shock that flickered across his face. "If you ask me, they set themselves up. Look."

The next song began, and Mac smiled as she recognized the soft piano as the Eagles' "Desperado". This DJ had some strangely eclectic ideas about dance music, but she'd always found this song somehow comforting. Harm held out his arms, and she stepped into them.

"As I recall, Mac, dancing with me wasn't exactly the first thing on your mind at the Surface Warfare ball."

She ignored the implications of that statement and shrugged. "Scott needed some convincing. Especially after watching you two torch the floor."

"She was, maybe. I was just doing my best to keep up." He rested his hands on her hips, and she reached up to place her arms about his neck. "She's one impressive young lady. You think he appreciates that?"

"And then some. He's nuts for her - just not too sure of himself. I don't know what she thinks, though."

"They're awfully far apart. At that age, four years can change a lot of things."

"As opposed to at our age?" It occurred to her that she was about four years younger than Harm, and she wondered briefly what it would have been like to meet him at twenty-three. "Not everyone's life-defining moments happen on the same schedule. In fact, some of those moments have come rather recently for some of us."

"I take your point." He didn't say more, and she caught a note of sadness in his voice. In another second, though, it was gone, and he cocked his head toward the two civilians. "They do seem to understand each other."

"Working closely together will do that for you."

"Especially when you're not obligated to throw red lights at every corner."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Are you implying something, Commander?"

"Not a thing, Mac." He gently pulled her closer so that his strong arms encircled her waist. "Pull your mind back from wherever it's drifted and dance with me."

They swayed in silence for a while, each lost in their own private reverie. Something about the case still tugged at the back of Harm's mind, trying to convince him that all was not as it seemed. But just then, with her right there, he found that he could let himself relax and ignore the voice of doubt. He felt Mac lean against him, her cheek brushing his chest, and without questioning her motives for an instant, he closed his eyes. Why wasn't more of his life like this?

"It may be raining, but there's a rainbow above you ... you better let somebody love you, before it's too late."

Hearing those words in her ear jolted Mac out of her thoughts, and she pulled back to stare at him. "What was that?"

He seemed startled as well, taking a moment to realize she'd asked him a question. "Sorry. Was I singing? I didn't notice. Just smack me next time, and I'll shut up."

He smiled, and she tried not to blush. Of course, he was just singing along with the song. There was no reason to read anything into the lyrics ... right? She covered her uncertainty and returned the smile. "I wouldn't shut you up. I like hearing you sing." It was true, she reflected. There was something soothing about his warm, clear voice.

"Thank you, Mac." The compliment had caught him off guard, but their young companions, just over her left shoulder, had captured his attention. "Hmm. Trouble at eight o'clock." ...

Scott had spent the better part of the last few minutes trying to decide whether to thank Colonel Mackenzie or kill her. He was used to being one-on-one with Kara Donnell; in the office, in the lab, even over pizza in his apartment. He was not at all used to having her so close. As his mind attempted to analyze what exactly his feelings were, the rest of his concentration was focused on not stepping on her toes.

"So what were you going to say?"

"Hmm?"

"Earlier, when I was dancing with the commander." Kara's eyes sparkled with mischief. "If you give the signal, you have to be able to back it up. Come on, give."

He relented, shifting uncomfortably. "I was just thinking that if you pulled that move on any of the other commanders we know, you'd either get mysteriously fired or mysteriously promoted."

"Quite possibly." She shrugged, with a cavalier smile. "Though I wouldn't be too excited about dancing with Commander Weathers. She'd kick my ass. You might enjoy watching, though."

"So might most of the division. Doesn't it drive you crazy, being so outnumbered?"

"Not really," she said honestly. "There might be jokes, but when it's all on the line, even the old-fashioned chauvinists trust me. And I appreciate that. Besides, I school all the new guys at fantasy football, and that gets respect."

"Don't you see how they look at you sometimes?"

"Is it just me, or is that jealousy rearing its ugly head?" The young woman met his gaze, and saw that he wasn't laughing. "Scott, I'm dancing with *you*. Or didn't you notice?"

"I'm not jealous," he replied defensively, ignoring the second part of her comment. "I'm looking out for you. Just because we all share the same job doesn't mean you can trust everyone in that building."

"What's gotten into you? Is this about the investigation?" She frowned, but didn't pull away. "Look, I can take care of myself. You don't have to play big brother."

"Kar, if there's more going on here than an engine breakdown, we shouldn't even be involved. It's not our job, and it could get dangerous."

"Excuse me? Are you suggesting we bail out and leave the JAG team to clean up after us? That'd look great on our records, just great. 'Sorry, chief, but we decided this one was too hot for us.' Jesus!"

"Calm down already, would you? I didn't say we should just give up. I'm just saying we don't know everything about everyone in the program."

"I'm not interested in knowing everything about everyone. I *am* interested in knowing at least a little something about you, but you're clearly not going to let that happen. What the hell's going on, Scott? I thought we could tell each other whatever was on our minds. But instead of admitting that you're worried, you're pulling this Spy vs. Spy attitude all of a sudden. What gives?"

Not knowing how to explain, he stood silent as she drew back. Neither noticed the other couple's approach until Harm spoke.

"You two doing okay over here?"

"Just fine," Kara answered coolly, stepping away from her friend. "Thanks for the dance, Scott. For a while there, I thought you were actually enjoying it."

The helpless look in his eyes as she strode for the door was evident to all of them. "What just happened?" Mac asked quietly.

"Thanks for trying to help, Colonel, but as you can see, there are still some communication issues to work out."

"You call that working things out? What did you say to her?"

He sighed. "Not nearly enough."

Harm shook his head. "Sounds like it's time to call it a night. Why don't you two head back? Scott, Mac will give you a lift. I'll track down Kara, and try to convince her to come talk to you. Remember, meeting at 0900 tomorrow." He tossed Mac the keys to his car and headed out the way Kara had gone.

She was leaning against the outside railing, watching a T-6 trainer begin its final approach. "Sorry for breaking up the evening," she said as he joined her.

"It's all right. We've got a lot to do in the morning." He waited, sensing that she'd explain when she was ready. After a moment, she proved him right.

"I just don't get him sometimes. My best friend on the base, and he won't give me the time of day when it counts. All I wanted was some kind of justification for this sudden paranoid streak. Is that so much?"

Harm knew she wasn't looking for an answer. "Sometimes people do or say things on instinct that they can't explain. Even to their best friends."

"Not this time. I know him better than that. Something about this whole case is getting to him, and he's going to hide it as long as he possibly can. And that drives me crazy."

"This thing bothering you as much as it's bothering me?"

"Hell, yes. Probably more so. The Phoenix is the first project I've really been able to contribute to, and I don't want to believe that someone's been screwing with it. It's too important, and too many people have worked their asses off for it." Kara stopped, suddenly self-conscious. "I'm sorry. That probably sounds selfish."

"Not really. I'm with you, although my perspective is a little different. I don't fly much these days, but there's a bond between aviators that never really goes away. I don't want to believe that someone is deliberately endangering them, either. But unfortunately, I've been doing this lawyer thing too long to think it can't happen." The hard edge in his ice-blue eyes told her that he'd seen more than his share of difficult cases. She hadn't noticed it before, and she wondered briefly what had happened to him to take every shred of his innocence. "I just wish we weren't so completely in the dark."

"I hear that. Christ, what if we can't come up with an answer? NavAir will have to proceed with the test schedule, and if there's a real problem ..."

"Yeah. Forty-five thousand feet is a bad place to be depending on a restart."

"Excuse me? Angels forty-five? That's way past bad. That's impossible."

He turned quickly. "Impossible? Captain Halloway said in his statement that it was a high-altitude test. He didn't say anything about descent."

"Come on, Commander, you know better. At that kind of altitude, the air's too thin for a restart, even on stored energy. The pressure differential's too weak to open the inlet valve. Are you sure he said forty-five?"

Slightly embarrassed at having passed over a critical point, he frowned. "Positive. I thought maybe you guys had come up with a way around that, or something."

"Flattering, but we can't fight nature. You have come down to at least thirty-five before you even think about firing up the auxiliary. He must have just glossed over the descent part."

"I don't think so." Suddenly an idea dawned, and despite its ugliness, he knew he couldn't ignore it. "I don't think he did it."

"Didn't you hear me the first time? He had to come down at least ten thousand feet -

"Which is a lot of air to just 'gloss over'. I think that engine never flamed out in the first place."

She stared at him, shocked, and he waited for her to accuse him of jumping to conclusions. Instead, comprehension flooded her features. "Holy ... why the hell didn't we think of that before? We don't have any way of proving what happened one way or the other, so why not?"

"You don't have a problem with seeing Halloway as a liar?"

"Well, I didn't say I like the concept, but as theories go, it's the best we've got. But like I said, we still don't have anything to back it up."

As he focused intently on his Academy ring, the wheels in his head were in overdrive. *Think this through, Rabb. You're about to go after one of your own.* "We can't prove the engine didn't fail, but we might be able to prove there was no restart. If the Phoenix had dropped through angels thirty-five, she'd have been right in the middle of commercial traffic. Which means -"

" - she would have been on FAA radar. Commander, you're a freaking genius."

"Wish more beautiful young women thought so." Harm flashed a quick grin, but it was tinged with apprehension. "Can we get a hold of the radar from Dulles?"

"Nothing to it. Although I think we both know what it'll say. If anything even resembling the Phoenix had crossed their scopes, we'd have heard about it in six seconds flat. Either from them, or ZNN. You know how it was with the Stealth out in California."

"Yeah, the zoomies caught hell for that one. We still need the records, though."

They'll be admissible." He checked his watch. "It's 2240. Can we still get into the building?"
"That's what they give as the fancy swipe cards for. Let's go." No hesitation, he noticed. Maybe they were more alike than he thought.

2256 EST

Flight Engineering Center

The typically-energetic building was eerily silent after hours. Not even a janitor or a security guard roamed the halls as the pair made their way back to Kara's desk in the Systems division. She slid into her chair, Harm at her shoulder, and turned on her computer.

"We deal with airports all along the coast on a regular basis, so we can access their radar at any time. Of course, the reverse doesn't hold. They have to jump through all sorts of hoops to get a hold of ours." The young woman's fingers flew over the keyboard, and within minutes, they had their confirmation. "There you have it. No reported incidents. He didn't bring her down through thirty-five until he was in Pax airspace."

"Are you absolutely sure? What about low-observable capability?" But she was already shaking her head.

"We're weeks away from being operational on the LOs. There was nothing remotely stealth about that flight." Leaning back, she ran a hand through her slightly-tousled hair. "I think we have to face the fact that Halloway lied about the restart, and probably screwed with the data records. The thing is, what reason would he have to do it? Convincing everyone there was a failure when in fact there's nothing wrong ... it seems like an awfully inefficient way to stop the program."

"Trust an engineer to look at the efficiency of a crime." He smiled, but there was no humor in it. "We don't know there's nothing wrong. We just know there's nothing wrong with the *engine*. If Halloway lied about the restart, it's safe to assume that he lied about other things as well. And most of his comments seem to be centered around one specific point." He raised one eyebrow, and she immediately understood.

"How great the auxiliary was. You think he's covering up a problem on the APU? Why would he do that?"

"Who knows? Maybe he wanted to cause a catastrophic failure on the next flight. Maybe he's working for Iran or North Korea or something. Right now, the why doesn't matter. What matters is finding evidence."

"We could do an inspection, but we'd have to dig pretty deep to be able to tell if the unit's been activated. The airframe folks crammed it in a little compartment under the tail. Command might make us wait for a service crew to do the work."

"I'm not so sure we should tell Command."

She swiveled to face him, almost knocking him over. "Really? When they find out we took a wrench to a sixty-five million-dollar aircraft without permission, which one of us do you think will get drop-kicked out of here first?"

"Neither, if we're right. Look, we can't arouse suspicion. If Halloway's not the only one involved in this, it might not be a good idea to broadcast the fact that we're on to him." He sat on the edge of her desk and looked directly at her. "I'm willing to take the risk, but I won't force you to do the same. It's your choice, but if we're going to do this, it needs to be now."

He must want this badly, she thought. *But damn it, so do I*. "I'm in. You're screwed without Scott and me. Besides, if we get busted, I'll just say you intimidated us into it. I'm good at looking naïve."

"Fair enough. Let's go get our respective partners and meet at the hangar in an hour."

He walked her out to her car, then went back inside to take another look at the service record of one Andrew R. Halloway, captain. Exemplary service in the Gulf, extensive test experience, divorced, no children. Nothing to suggest a man bent on destroying a career, a program, or a life. What had happened to him - and what was he trying to accomplish?

Troubled, he started toward the VOQ to find Mac. He was too preoccupied with his thoughts to notice the shadow that trailed him to the residential area. As he turned to cut between buildings, someone launched into him, slamming him sideways into the cinderblock

wall.

Dazed, Harm tried to react, but his assailant was prepared. He swung at the taller man, and only when Harm felt the streak of fire across his midsection did he realize that the attacker had a knife. He gasped involuntarily, in surprise and pain, and pressed a hand to his side in a vain attempt to slow the flow of blood. With the other hand, he blocked the next lunge, and kicked at the weapon. It only stalled the assault for a moment. Before he knew what was happening, he felt the knife again, this time buried deep beside his left shoulder blade. The searing agony drove him to his knees. He tried to look up, to identify the shadow, but was greeted with a crushing blow to the side of his head. He fell hard, and lay still.

As quickly as he had come, the mystery assailant vanished, leaving a naval commander semiconscious and bleeding on the sidewalk.

2315 EST

Pine Valley Apartments

Scott had been rehearsing his apology in his mind since he got home. He wasn't sure how she would take it, since he really didn't deserve her forgiveness. He'd kept secrets, sure. And he'd continue to keep them, whether she ever understood or not, because some things were better left unknown. *You should have known this would get complicated. Hell, you did know. But like a schmuck, you thought you could handle it. Brilliant.*

There was a sharp knock at the door, and he steeled himself for the imminent confrontation. "It's open."

Kara flew in, picked up his jacket and handed it to him before he could even open his mouth. She had changed into dark jeans and a plain gray T-shirt, and he knew that her night wasn't over. "Come on. We've got to meet Commander Rabb and Colonel Mackenzie at the hangar."

"Right now?" Perplexed, he shook it off and tried again. "Aren't you interested in discussing what happened earlier?"

"Why, are you sorry?"

"Yeah. Am I forgiven?"

"Yeah. You were right about not trusting everyone. Captain Halloway lied about activating the APU. Rabb wants to check it out, see if he's covering up a defect, or worse. We have to get a look at the unit without anybody noticing. At this point, God knows who's involved."

Scott remained expressionless, but terrible truths were falling into place. He shook his head. "Kar, we can't do that. Aside from the fact that we'll get fired, this could be dangerous. If Halloway thinks we've got his number, he might try something. Going onto the base in the middle of the night is an awfully big risk."

"Jesus, you really are paranoid. I was just over there, and everything's quiet. Besides, I don't think we can afford to wait."

"Yes, we can, and we should. This isn't like a high-school prank. This has repercussions."

She pulled back, stung. "Well, thank you very much for that insight. You've never treated me like a kid before, Scott. Don't start now."

God, how could he do this? "Kara, even though I can't explain it right now, I do have a reason for this. Please, if you have any trust in me at all, don't go in there."

Their eyes met, and she saw the genuine fear behind his gaze. "I do trust you," she said quietly. "But right now, my loyalty to the Navy has to outweigh my loyalty to my friend."

In desperation, he let frustration take over. "Your loyalty to the Navy? Give me a break. This is a job, for Christ's sake. Or are you wearing dog tags under that microscopic shirt?"

"Oh, don't be an asshole. This is the future of American air superiority we're talking about. Doesn't that mean anything to you? If this is 'just a job' to you, stay here and watch the Tonight Show. Better yet, go hand in your application at Microsoft or something. But don't stand here and tell me that what we do doesn't matter. It matters a hell of a lot to the families of those pilots, and it matters to the people they protect. That includes ungrateful

assholes such as yourself.”

He was losing, and he knew it. “Damn it, Kar, you know me better than that.”

“Yeah, I do. And if you’re half the person I think you are, you’ll get in that freaking car.”

He stared at her for a long moment, then surrendered. He’d never be able to dissuade her, and if he didn’t go, there would be no one to protect her. “All right, already. Let’s get this over with.”

2320 EST

Visiting Officers’ Quarters

Mac had been reading a lousy mystery novel for most of an hour, waiting for some kind of word from her partner. Of course, it didn’t really matter to her what had happened between the two engineers, and Harm certainly had no obligation to check in with her. Still, she was curious, and she’d expected to hear from him, if only a quick stop on his way to his own room.

Absently she hummed to no one, catching herself as she recognized ‘Desperado’. *Some Marine I am tonight*, she thought. Whenever she admitted to herself just how compelling a figure Harmon Rabb, Jr., could be, her analytical judgment tended to get somewhat clouded. Instinctively she reached for the phone and dialed his room, just wanting to hear him tell her to go to sleep.

There was no answer, and she frowned. Kara Donnell didn’t seem like the type to need this much counseling, especially from a JAG lawyer fourteen years her senior. What was he up to? She wanted to believe that she was overreacting, but something in the back of her mind nagged at her, and she pulled on a pair of jeans to go investigate. What exactly she was investigating was still unclear, but she’d start by going upstairs and pounding on his door.

Just as she completed that thought, there was a brief knock at her own door, startling her. A soft voice called, “Mac?”

“That you, flyboy?” She went to let him in - and was confronted by a nightmare. “Oh, God!”

Harm looked like he’d been through absolute hell. Blood trickled down the side of his face, and he leaned heavily on the doorframe. He hugged one arm tightly to his abdomen, more blood seeping through his fingers. There was a feverish look in his eyes that frightened her.

As he tried to take a step forward, he all but collapsed into her arms. She half-dragged him over to the bed and lowered him as gently as possible. In the process, she jostled his left shoulder, eliciting a cry of pain. “Harm, talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

“I was on my way over to find you when I got jumped.” He bit off a moan as Mac unbuttoned his ruined shirt to examine his injuries. She caught her breath sharply at the sight of the jagged slash across his stomach, but she quickly masked her horror.

“Lie still. I’m going to call the paramedics.”

“Wait, Mac - ” He struggled to rise, giving her full view of the deep shoulder wound. Exhausted by the effort, he fell back.

“Harm, this looks bad. You need help.”

“Listen, I didn’t get mugged by some stupid seaman. Holloway did this, or someone with him. He must have known Kara and I were on to him - ”

“Easy, sailor, you lost me.” She grabbed a facecloth and started washing the blood from his temple, stroking his pale, sweat-soaked brow with the cool fabric. “The pilot is behind this?”

He nodded, closing his eyes, and she was afraid for a second that he’d passed out. Soon, though, he looked up at her, and his eyes were clear and lucid. “Trust me, Mac. Go grab the med kit from the stairwell, and I’ll explain everything.”

“Harm, you’re - ”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not that deep. Kara and Scott are the ones in trouble.”

Don’t let him talk you into this, her mind screamed, but she dashed down the corridor and retrieved the first-aid kit. Returning, she sat down beside him on the bed and began

dressing his wounds. "Okay, you've got five minutes to convince me, and then I call for an ambulance."

"Tough crowd. Okay, here goes. Kara and I started talking, and we figured out that Halloway lied. He never lost the engine, so all his praise for the auxiliary is completely false - oww ..." He stiffened as she cleaned the ugly gash. She hated to hurt him, but he couldn't afford an infection, especially if he had no intention of seeing a doctor in the immediate future. "We'd planned to get you and Scott and meet back at the hangar to look at the APU. Someone must have followed us, heard us talking or something."

She did her best to bandage his lower torso, and helped him to sit up so she could similarly wrap his shoulder. He continued, squeezing his eyes shut against the burning torture. "If they could get the drop on me, they'll get Kara and Scott just as easily. We can't let them walk into a trap."

"You're going to suggest we go down there ourselves, aren't you?"

"Would you expect any less? Think about it. We can't bring the MPs in to break the door down. We have no idea if we're going to find one man or a dozen, and we don't have time to try and figure it out. Those two civilians are going to look pretty expendable to somebody with an agenda like this. Someone's got to protect them."

"Someone who's leaking like a faucet? You won't be any good to them if you can't even stand up. Right now I could hold you down myself without breaking a sweat."

"Yellow light, Colonel ..."

"Not funny, Commander. I'm not going to let you charge in there out of some misguided sense of honor." She softened her tone, knowing that he'd never back down. "You know I'll follow you anywhere. Just promise me that you're not sacrificing yourself."

"I'm not. I swear to you, Mac. We'll do this right."

He touched her arm, and behind the pain, she could see his inner strength. "Okay. I'll be back in a minute."

She returned with another shirt from his room, the one she'd borrowed the night before. Had it only been one day since then? She suddenly felt so tired. Along with the shirt, she brought his weapon in its holster. Slumped against the headboard, Harm straightened when he heard her approaching footsteps, but not before she could see his weariness. This was not going to be easy. As she helped him into the shirt, she noticed blood already staining the white bandages. *Shit. Clock's ticking.*

His knees nearly buckled as they stood up together, and she locked an arm around his waist to keep him upright. "I'm okay," he said unconvincingly. "That was just a little fast."

"You're sure about this."

"Absolutely." He took the service pistol from her and fastened the holster at his belt. "You'd better drive."

2325 EST

Flight Test Hangar B

Kara was out of the car practically before she'd fully parked it, heading for the hangar doors. Scott followed with a growing sense of dread. He didn't know how this was all going to end, but the options weren't very appealing. Unaware of his reticence, she jammed her ID card into the reader and headed for the Phoenix bay at a speed that he'd long ago termed 'warp Donnell'.

Silence greeted them in the cavernous hangar. "Wonder how we beat the JAGs here," she said quietly, scanning the area with narrowed eyes.

"Maybe the colonel put up a better argument than I did," he said dryly. "They are lawyers, after all."

"Could be, but I'm not starting without them. They represent the only shred of legitimacy we've got." She ducked under the Phoenix's wing to peer into the air inlet. "Tell me where it hurts, girl," she murmured, laying a hand on the aircraft's sleek metal fuselage. "We tried so hard to make you perfect."

A sound from across the bay caught their attention, and Scott tensed. "That sound like our partners-in-crime to you?"

"Not really. Get out of sight, will you?" She yanked him under the Phoenix with her and hopped into his lap, going for the buttons on his shirt. "Play along - just in case."

Since his eyes were currently level with her breasts, 'playing along' wasn't a stretch. Too bad he was hardly in a position to enjoy it. As footsteps approached, he shut his eyes and wondered how the hell his life had gotten so bizarre.

"Oh, for Christ's sake."

Kara scrambled up, feigning guilt and embarrassment. "Captain! I mean - sir, please don't tell anyone. We just ... you know how it is." She straightened her shirt and leaned close to her bewildered friend.

Captain Halloway shook his head. "Sure, I know how it is." And he drew his service pistol. "I also know that you've got the radar records, so don't bother with the stupid-whore act. Come out here."

Damn. Scott watched her as they slowly rose. Surprisingly, she looked fairly calm, if a little wary of the gun trained on them. Did nothing faze this girl?

"Okay, so you tailed us. What now?"

"Now, you sit down and shut up for a while so I make sure this all goes as planned. This was supposed to be a lot less complicated, but fortunately, I think pretty well on my feet. Well, maybe not so fortunate for you."

"Oooh, good line," she replied with no small amount of sarcasm. "Which James Bond movie did you swipe it from?"

Halloway folded his arms over his chest as Scott looked on in disbelief. "Didn't anyone ever teach you to respect your elders?"

"I did respect you. Up until the moment I found out the truth."

"Oh, that's right, you know everything about right and wrong, don't you? There are lots of different truths, sweetheart. What you see at twenty is a lot different from what you see at forty, believe me."

"I don't believe that changes the truth. What do you see now, Captain? A nice, big check, written in Chinese?"

"Hey!" He pointed the gun accusingly, and it took all of her willpower to hold her ground. "You don't know the first thing about me."

"And it's a damn good thing," she shot back, contempt dripping from her voice. "I've seen just about as much betrayal as I can stand."

Without warning, he seized her arm and roughly jabbed something into the base of her neck. With a strangled cry, she crumpled.

"No!" Scott lunged to catch her, terrified that he'd killed her. But as he knelt, protectively cradling her limp, trembling form, he found no sign of blood. "What the hell did you do to her?"

"Relax, loverboy. She's fine. I was just sick of listening to her." Their captor held up a palm-sized device. "Just gave her spinal cord a little jolt. It'll be a few minutes before she can feel anything below her neck. Isn't technology wonderful?"

"Yeah, just great. You get that little toy from whoever's funding this operation?"

"Why are you so convinced that there's some huge conspiracy here? Look, I've got news for you: I can't be bought. This means a lot more than money."

"Whatever you say." He turned his attention to Kara, who seemed to have heard and understood. "Gotta learn to keep your mouth shut, Kar," he said softly, brushing her tousled hair back. Her hazel eyes expressed her gratitude, and a kind of faith that made his chest ache. He didn't deserve that from anyone right now, least of all her.

Maybe now was the time to stop hiding.

He touched his lips to her flushed cheek, knowing that once he did this, once he let her go, there would be no going back. "Please forgive me," he whispered in her ear, and carefully laid her against the main landing gear.

Some sensation had returned to her extremities, and she tried to grab onto his sleeve as he moved away. "Scott?" she asked in a voice so weak it sliced into his soul.

"I'm sorry," was all he could give her. Then he tore his gaze away and stood, facing

Halloway. "Okay, it's confession time. For both of us. You might as well tell me exactly what it was I helped you do."

He heard the sharp intake of breath behind him, and he imagined he could hear Kara Donnell's perfectly-ordered world shattering.

2335 EST

Outside Flight Test Hangar B

It was barely a five-minute ride to the hangar, but every second increased the tension. In her periphery Mac watched her partner's handsome features, drawn taut with an agony she could hardly imagine. His head rested against the passenger-side window, and he didn't move to open the door after she parked the Lexus behind a neighboring building. "Harm," she said quietly.

"Yeah," came the listless response. Impulsively, she leaned over and kissed him full on the lips. Awareness flooded back, and his eyes flew open. "What was that all about?"

"Just making sure you're still with me. Come on." And she got out of the car, leaving him to shake his head in wonder. Just when he thought he had Sarah Mackenzie figured out ...

He followed her up to the side of the hangar, and they flattened themselves against the wall. Mac angled to get a clear line of sight through the frosted window. "Doesn't look like there's much going on over here," she reported. "Want to move in?"

"As quietly as possible," he warned, earning him an amused look.

"This is me, remember?"

"Right. Sorry."

"So how exactly do you suggest we get in?"

Harm pushed the pain to the back of his mind. It hurt to move his left arm; it hurt even to draw a breath; but he couldn't let himself feel it right now. If he did, it was all over. "Maybe we can get through the main bay doors."

Mac eyed the towering aircraft entrance doubtfully. "You did mention being quiet, didn't you?"

"Well, it's not secured, is it?"

"Good point." They approached the edge of the huge sliding door, which, surprisingly, was ajar by about eight inches. Someone was apparently looking out for them. Mac exchanged a glance with Harm, then slipped through the small space. A few seconds later, she opened the side door from the inside and sketched a bow.

"You are extremely handy to have around." The smile had lost its usual brilliance, but it was there. It faded quickly as he drew his weapon. She readied her own, and they crept toward the Phoenix bay.

What they found was both good news and bad. Halloway appeared to be on his own, but he was holding a gun on a soon-to-be-restrained Scott. Kara was slumped under the Phoenix's wing, struggling to sit up but apparently not badly hurt. The two officers ducked behind a maintenance cart to appraise the situation.

"Now, this ought to be interesting, but I think I'll play it safe," Halloway drawled, tearing a nylon strap from the cockpit and tying the young engineer's wrists to the aircraft's nose gear. "Why don't you explain it all to the lady?"

Scott steeled himself and spoke dispassionately, not looking at his friend. "Two months ago, I got an action item on the bleed-air system. The control valve wasn't opening as designed, and the guys over at General were worried that their engine wouldn't get enough airflow pressure for a restart. I was told to do a ground test on the lines. The test would've worked with anyone in the cockpit, just to watch the boards, but our friend here decided it should be a pilot. He verified that everything checked out, but we were wrapping up, I saw him reset the board, so any warning lights wouldn't be recorded. When I confronted him about it, he said that the low pressure would be our little secret, and if I tried to tell anyone or get it corrected, NavAir would find out about *my* little secret."

Harm glanced over at his equally-startled partner. Whatever this secret was, it couldn't be good.

"Don't stop now," the pilot prodded with a smirk. "Tell her what it was you've been

covering up all this time, 'Cadet' Fairfield."

The shock in Kara's eyes was evident, but her face was a mask of control. Mac recognized it; she'd used it far too often.

Scott avoided her direction entirely, focusing instead on his anger toward Holloway. "I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy. I got kicked out during my junior year because I cheated on a final. I didn't mention it on my application, and Personnel never asked. I lied in my security interview about having no military service record. I knew I'd get fired the second the Navy found out, so I covered my ass. Is that what you wanted to hear?" The older man only shrugged.

It took all of his courage to turn and face her. "I know this is hard to believe, but I swear that I never knew what he was up to. When the preflight inspection went through clean, I thought the engine guys had picked up the glitch on redundancy, but he must have had some hand in that, too. I figured he couldn't be crazy enough to screw with a plane and then fly it himself. But mostly, I just didn't want to believe that a stupid mistake I made at nineteen could follow me so far as to hurt this program. I believe in the job we're doing, and I know I do it well. I wouldn't have risked what I did to come here if I didn't believe in that. I swear on everything holy that I would have come forward the second I thought someone was in danger." His eyes pleaded with her, but he stood tall, refusing to lose that last inch of self-dignity. "I realize that you have absolutely no reason to accept this, but I am sorry, for all of it ... mainly for keeping the truth from you. You deserved far better from me, and I failed you. I hope someday you'll be able to forgive me."

"You're asking for *my* forgiveness?" Kara's voice had partly returned, and she had every intention of using as much of it as she could. With a short, bitter-sounding laugh, she replied, "You're part of a plot that you don't even understand, because you didn't want to tell the Navy that you never should have been on the program in the first place. You've got much bigger problems than me."

"It's all a moot point, anyway."

The pilot's words brought her sharply back to the present, and their very tenuous situation. "So you're going to graduate from sabotage and blackmail to murder? Pretty big step."

The comment earned barely a shrug. "It's not like I have any great desire to hurt either of you. I just don't have much of a choice right now. Try not to take it personally."

"That's a little hard to do, don't you think?"

"You're not exactly inspiring me to come up with a better option," he warned, and for the first time since the standoff began, the gun barrel wavered dangerously in her direction.

The slight movement didn't escape Mac's notice. "We can't wait for this to play out," she hissed. "We have to get in there. If I keep him occupied, can you sneak them out?"

"And trade you for them? No way. That's a certified wacko in there."

"Which is why one Marine is better than two civilians," she maintained. "Look at Kara. I don't know what he did to her, but she's going to need help. Once you guys are out of the building, you can call for the cavalry."

Harm purposely tried not to think about the implications of Scott's revelations. He also wasn't thrilled about sending his partner into the lion's den while he stood by, all but helpless. The immense weight of fatigue that he felt at that moment, however, forced him to concede. "Okay, you win."

She glanced over, surprised at his uncharacteristic surrender. If they didn't end this, and soon, Harm might be in more danger than any of them. "All right. Hang in there, flyboy."

He squeezed her hand once, and that was all that they needed to say. He slowly moved along the wall and disappeared from sight. Mac closed her eyes, counted to ten, and stood up quickly with her weapon raised.

"Mind if I join the party?"

Holloway whirled, but he knew she had him in her sights. "Good evening, Colonel," he said in a level voice, lowering the gun but not dropping it altogether. "Looking for your partner? He's not here."

"And you wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you, Captain?"

"Well, it's not safe to wander around alone at night. I mean, even a big guy like Commander Rabb would have a hard time against someone with, say, a knife."

Mac glared viciously at him. Kara, comprehending, paled and seemed to shrink back. The officer wanted to reassure her that Harm was alive, but she couldn't afford to tip their hand. Besides, it pained her to admit, right now she couldn't be absolutely certain that he wasn't lying on the concrete floor somewhere, out cold.

Halloway moved toward her, practically daring her to fire. "You here to play hero, Mackenzie? Try to talk me out of my oh-so-dastardly plot? It doesn't quite work that way." And suddenly, inexplicably, the balance of power shifted. Somehow he'd managed to knock her gun hand aside, and was now aiming directly at her with no trace of compassion. "Drop it or I'll shoot. I have no real incentive to keep you alive right now."

Inwardly cursing, she carefully laid her weapon on the floor and stepped back. How the hell had he gotten the drop on her like that? *Because you care about resolving this peacefully, and he obviously doesn't. And you should have known that from the moment you found your partner bleeding on your doorstep. Damn it.*

The Marine option was now off the table. All that remained was the negotiating option. Mac kept her voice calm and tried to keep Halloway's attention focused on her, praying that Harm would be able to get to Kara and Scott.

"So what now, Captain? Are you going to get rid of all of us, or do you have something else in mind?"

"I'm working on it, all right? It's not like I meant to get you all involved. You're just too damned dedicated for your own good."

"What *did* you mean to do?" she asked honestly, more to get to the truth than to stall him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a tall figure creep up behind the Phoenix, and she slowly backed up, drawing the gunman away from the aircraft. *Please, let this work ...*

Harm crouched low behind the gear blocks, taking a moment to reassess the situation. Mac could hold her own, but he didn't trust this guy not to flip out and start shooting. He'd follow the plan, but it'd have to be fast. For more than one reason, he reflected grimly, as he realized the pain was fading into a dull ache that encompassed his entire body. *You won't be any good to any of them if you run out of blood, he told himself. Better get going.*

To her credit, Kara understood the opportunity Mac was giving them. She pulled herself over to Scott and tried urgently to loosen the straps around his wrists without alerting their captor. She froze when a hand grabbed her arm, but sagged with relief when she saw its owner. Harm quickly started to work on the straps with his pocketknife.

"Christ, Commander," she said, her voice barely audible, "are you - "

"Not as dead as he thinks," he replied. "Let's hustle. I'd rather not give him the opportunity to finish the job."

Meanwhile, Mac had seen something familiar in Andrew Halloway's dark eyes - something that spoke of a long-buried anguish. In that fraction of a second, she knew that he was telling the truth. This wasn't about money or politics. That only left one motive.

"This is about revenge, isn't it?"

His gaze narrowed, and some of the cocky demeanor wavered. "And what brought you to that brilliant conclusion?"

"I've seen traitors, and you don't really fit the profile. You've served your country with distinction for twenty years. I can't understand why you'd sell them out now."

"I haven't sold anybody out. Losing one airplane is not going to destroy America's air superiority."

So he was planning to bring down the Phoenix. "It'll do irreparable damage," she protested. "Even if there's no real malfunction, it'll be months, maybe years before the program recovers. Some of the aircraft we're flying right now are older than the crewmen working on them. If we end up in a full-scale conflict five years from now, and we're still flying Tomcats instead of Phoenixes - rest assured, we'll all feel it. Can you live with that on your conscience?"

He flinched, but didn't back down. "I can't do anything about that now. You couldn't possibly understand my reasons, so don't bother trying. I have to do this."

"It doesn't matter whether I understand. I just want to know. Come on, Captain, we both know that you don't really want to pull that trigger, so let's talk about this. You have options here."

"You're not getting this, are you? Giving up is not an option. I'm not suicidal, but I'm very determined. And that's all you really need to know."

She nodded, feeling a bizarre combination of empathy and revulsion. "Could you at least tell me why?" she asked simply.

An angry reply began to surface, but he stopped when he realized that this wasn't merely a stall tactic. She truly wanted to know. "Oh, why the hell not. My wife left me about four years ago. One day I came home, and she was packing her things. Said she couldn't take the lifestyle, but that was a lie. You don't stand by someone for fifteen years, through a war, and then suddenly decide you can't take the lifestyle. I knew it was something else, but I didn't find out until much later that it was someone else." His weathered gaze seemed to lose its focus as he recalled. "She was seeing another officer, another pilot. I'd introduced them when we went through Flight Test School together. I'd considered him a friend. A good friend, and he betrayed me."

"Not just him. They both did." But he was shaking his head vehemently.

"No. Not her. She wouldn't do that. He was the one. He convinced her that I - I don't know what. But he tricked her somehow. He took her away ... he took the best thing in my life, and he pretended like those were the breaks, like he did nothing wrong." His voice was still distant, but the fury burning behind his eyes was all too close.

"I don't think I understand," Mac said tentatively. "How does the Phoenix - " In mid-sentence she stopped, suddenly comprehending. "This other pilot - he's flying the next test flight, isn't he?"

A slight, humorless smile gave her confirmation. "Making sense now, counselor?"

Despite her precarious situation, she was incensed. "No, damn it. It doesn't make sense at all. If you're that bent on revenge, why couldn't you just kill him? Why do you have to destroy a multi-million dollar plane to do it?"

"Because I don't just want him to die. I want everyone to see that he failed. I want everyone to know him as a pilot who lost control and couldn't operate a perfectly-functional unit. When that engine flames out for real, and he can't do a thing to restart it ... I want him to know what it's like to feel that helpless. I want my wife to hear him screaming for help, at his absolute weakest. I know the stakes, Colonel. I'm not that far over the edge. But if I've done my job right, the program will go on, because the only viable explanation will be pilot error. If not ..." The coldness in his tone was almost more frightening than the gun in his hand. "Sometimes innocent people get hurt."

"Like Harm?"

Halloway gave a short laugh. "Somehow Harmon Rabb doesn't strike me as the Boy Scout type. He looks good in the uniform; I'll give you that. But I've been watching him work, and a man who devotes himself so completely to the pursuit of the truth ... well, it makes you wonder what truths he's denying in his own life."

"I don't have to wonder," she countered. "I know my partner. He denies nothing."

A raised eyebrow was the response. "Oh, you know him, do you?" He shook his head. "I'm not sure there is such a thing as true innocence anymore. And I think you know what I'm talking about."

Only a few feet away, the subject of their conversation was barely aware of it. As the straps restraining Scott fell away, Harm turned to Kara and locked his good arm around her waist. It was soon clear to them, as they silently moved behind a row of Hornets toward the exit, that the tall, proud commander didn't have the strength to support her all the way to safety. But he was determined to try.

"It's okay," Kara whispered, her legs seemingly recovering with every agonizing step. "We're getting there." And together they pushed ahead, leaning on each other, until at last they slipped outside to the relative freedom of the tarmac.

Harm sagged back against the building, squeezing his eyes shut to ward off the pain. Not pain, actually - it was more like weight. It felt as if his body was too heavy for him to hold

up any longer, and his vision was fading to gray around the edges. *Not yet, damn it. Mac still needs you.*

Next to him, Kara was leaning on a handrail, but she was standing on her own. Scott was right behind them, and once all three were safely out, the senior engineer felt their icy stares on him. Now wasn't the time, though.

"You two head for the guardpost and get some help down here. I'm going back to help Mac."

"Harm, you won't last a minute. Can't I do something? I'm fine now, I swear."

She'd used his name this time, some part of his mind registered. This girl had just come out of what was most likely the most hellish experience of her life, and now she was volunteering to go back in. Incredible.

"Have you ever fired a gun before?"

She shook her head, knowing that even if she'd been an expert, he never would have let her go. Carefully, so as not to hurt him further, she reached up to embrace him. "Go save your friend. I'll get help."

After he'd headed back inside, she started in the direction of the guardpost, as fast as her weakened legs could manage. Scott moved to take her arm, but she stepped out of his reach. "You should go," she said shortly, not looking at him. "Halloway will implicate you. You should resign before they can file charges - you might not be totally screwed."

"Kar - "

"Don't. I don't have time for it, and I don't think I'd want to hear it if I did." She turned to resume walking.

"I swear to God, Kara, I didn't know until it was too late. I was trying to figure out what he was up to, but I was afraid of what he might do. I wasn't ready to risk anyone else getting hurt. Especially you. I promise you, I had no idea he could bring down the Phoenix."

She whirled back, standing tall for the first time since Halloway had found them, and the anger flashing in her hazel eyes nearly hid the hurt that lingered there. "Scott, a half-turn on a two-inch bolt could bring down the Phoenix. If you don't know that, you're a fool. If you do, you're just a coward. Right now, I can't decide which one is worse, and I can't tell you whether I'll ever be able to forgive you. This is all I can tell you for sure: if either of those officers in there dies, it will be on your conscience. Now, please, get the hell out of here."

Stiffly, with pride bruised but intact, she took off at a rapid jog. He watched her go, knowing that all that was good in his life went with her. Saying a silent prayer for the others - and one of forgiveness for himself - he went in the other direction and disappeared into the night.

Inside, Mac had witnessed their escape with a relief she didn't dare show. Halloway had revealed himself to be more than dangerous, and somewhat less than stable. His breakdown was inevitable, and she had no idea how to stop him from taking it out on her.

Come on, Harm, she pleaded silently, willing him to hear her. This guy's not going to last until the cavalry shows up. At that moment, her concern for her partner was at least as strong as her concern for herself. She'd never seen him so weak, and it had killed her to let him go without help, but she knew she couldn't have kept him away. Not with two other lives in the balance: he would save them even at the cost of his own. It was his way, after all. She forced the sense of dread out of her mind. Until she found a way out of this, there was nothing she could do to help him.

The vengeful pilot was still raving about the injustice of the world when he suddenly thought to check on his prisoners. Upon seeing the torn straps, his face contorted with rage, and he spun back to her, raising the gun. "You lying little bitch," he hissed, all traces of human kindness gone. "I'm going to kill you slowly for that."

Shit. Time to bluff like crazy. "Give it up, Captain," she called with far more confidence than she felt. "They're long gone, and the MPs will be here any minute. You can't get out of this. Your only hope is to cooperate. If you do, I can help you. Nobody has to die here." Belatedly, she realized she wasn't really bluffing.

"Help me?" he answered with a short, bitter laugh. "I don't think so. Lots of people say they want to help, but they never do. They just tell me I'm wrong, or to get over it, or ...

you know what? Forget it. I'm sick of this whole thing. I just want to get this done." He cocked the pistol. "Get ready to join your partner, Colonel."

A shot rang out, echoing through the expansive, silent hangar. She shut her eyes, waiting for the end.

The end never came. A moment later, she looked at Halloway and saw that he himself had been hit. With a stunned expression, he fell soundlessly, and the weapon dropped from his hand. It wouldn't be a fatal shot, but his disturbed quest was finished.

Mac turned to see Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr., lowering his own sidearm. Blood had soaked through the makeshift bandages and was trickling down the side of his face, as well as staining his flannel shirt. His arm trembled as he holstered the gun, and it was all he could do to remain upright on his feet. "You okay?" he asked, his voice betraying his weariness.

All the tension left her body, and she tried to smile. "Am I okay? Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

He didn't respond as she retrieved Halloway's weapon and restrained the saboteur with another nylon strap. "Christ, Commander, you have fantastic timing."

"Mac ... "

She glanced up in time to see him collapse to the floor, at last succumbing to overwhelming fatigue. "Harm!" she cried, suddenly seized with fear for him. Sprinting across the hangar, she fell to her knees by his side. "Hang on, flyboy," she implored him, tearing open his shirt. The ugly gash under his rib cage was bleeding badly, and the loss had left him drained of color. His pulse was thready, his breathing ragged.

Half-conscious, he struggled to speak. "I did ... my best ..."

"Don't talk," she said softly, blinking back tears. He needed much more than she could give - perhaps more than anyone could - but she gathered his motionless body in her arms and held him tightly. "Don't you dare give up, Harmon, don't you dare." But he had already surrendered to the darkness. "Damn it! Somebody help me! I need an ambulance!"

"Help's on the way," came the almost immediate response. An exhausted Kara had run to the guardpost and back without faltering for a second, but now she stopped dead upon seeing the iron-willed Marine cradling her partner and friend. "Jesus," she breathed.

"Medical team! Right freaking now!"

The military police and base paramedics burst in at nearly the same moment, quickly taking control of the situation. Mac released Harm to the EMTs' care, watching with a bizarre sense of detachment as they placed an oxygen mask over his face and packed him efficiently onto a stretcher. Another team was working on Halloway's shoulder, but it was clear that he'd be receiving his treatment in the brig. Almost as an afterthought, she started toward the ambulance. "I should go with him - "

Kara laid a restraining hand on her arm. "It'll be okay," she said calmly but firmly. "It's been a long night, Colonel, and it's not even close to being over. How about letting me take you back to the Q real quick so you can grab a shower and a change of clothes? We can head for the med center from there. The commander will be fine without you for fifteen minutes."

Hesitating only for a second, Mac took her up on the offer, and she handed over the keys to the Lexus. Her shirt was stained with Harm's blood, and she felt as if she hadn't slept in days. Changing into a sweater and fiercely scrubbing her hands clean, she let Kara drive her to the base hospital, and only put up a token protest when the engineer took a seat with her in the waiting room.

"Ma'am, the two of you saved my life tonight. If you think I'm leaving now, think again."

Mac only shook her head. "Kara, when someone your age calls me 'ma'am', I feel positively ancient. You're a civilian. Act like one and call me Mac."

"Okay, Mac. Sorry - it's just force of habit. We try not to rock the boat for our military supervisors." The young woman met her gaze and continued sincerely. "Also, I have a great deal of respect for you, for everything you've done. To be a female Marine *and* a successful attorney ... that's pretty remarkable. I could understand if the magnitude of that weighed heavily sometimes. But every so often, it might be nice to remember that you earned

it, and that there are still mountains out there to climb. If you want to, that is.”

Surprised and somewhat amused, the colonel studied her. “Do you moonlight as a motivational speaker?”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to go Hallmark on you. Sometimes I think I need a tact filter.” She flashed a quick grin. “Really, Mac, you’re amazing. And I know I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

“Kara, that might just be the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in weeks.” She tried to smile back, but couldn’t put the hopelessness of their situation out of her mind. The other woman saw and understood.

“Commander Rabb?” she asked gently.

“I shouldn’t have let him come. I should have taken him straight to the hospital.”

“Is there any way he would have let you?” interrupted Kara reasonably. “What if you had? Would either of us be sitting here right now? The commander did what he felt was right, just like you, and I bet he’d do it again.”

Mac looked at her, pain glistening in her dark eyes. “Is that what I’m supposed to tell his mother if he dies?”

“Let’s not think about that until he have to.” Lowering her voice, she changed the subject slightly. “I won’t pretend to understand how hard this is for you. He told me how close you two are.”

She nodded, her voice growing distant. “He’s the best friend I’ve ever had. I can’t imagine what I’d do if I couldn’t talk to him about anything, anywhere. We trust each other with our lives. What more could I want from a partner?”

“I wish I had that.” A shadow crossed her face. “Turns out I can’t even trust my partner with *his* life.”

A flicker of guilt struck her as she realized that she’d forgotten all about Scott. Despite currently being the epitome of composure, Kara Donnell’s day hadn’t been a walk in the park, either. “What Scott did was obviously wrong - beyond wrong. But I believe that he honestly didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Especially you.”

“I know, but ...” Unsure how to explain, she suddenly looked no older than her twenty-three years. “Even if he wasn’t in enough trouble to bury him alive, I don’t think I’d ever be able to trust him again.”

Mac could think of nothing to say to that: she would have felt the same way. Instead, she stared blankly at the opposite wall, thinking about the evolution of her trust in Harm.

“Mac,” Kara said a few minutes later, “please tell me if I’m getting too personal, but something Commander Rabb said last night ... well, it surprised me.”

“What’s that?”

“He called you his guardian angel.”

Her head swung around in astonishment. “Harm said that?”

“And more. ‘Mac just understands me. Sometimes I think she knows what I’m thinking before I do. She’s like my guardian angel, pointing me in the right direction. When I listen, that is. I feel safe when she’s around, somehow.’”

The words were unmistakably his, and yet somehow she couldn’t believe it. Harm knew better than anyone else how un-angelic she was. Did he really care that much? Did he care that way? “I don’t know ...” She trailed off, lost.

“If I didn’t know better,” Kara said quietly, “I’d suspect that there is a charming, handsome pilot-turned-lawyer with some very strong feelings for his partner. And I’d further suspect her of feeling the same way, despite that ring on her hand. But I do know better, and the chain of command is a real bitch sometimes.”

“Yes, it is, and that’s why I can’t afford to think about it too much.” Relieved that she’d come up with an answer, she relaxed a little. But Kara wasn’t giving up so easily.

“You’re going to leave it at that? Four years you’ve known each other, and you’re willing to ignore the possibility of being happy together because of a *rule*?”

“Hey, rules mean something to us,” Mac answered defensively, but quickly backed off. “Sorry. That was unfair. But it’s not the type of thing you can do without being absolutely sure. Once it’s started, right or wrong, you can’t go back.”

"Have you ever talked to him about it?"

She sighed. "Once. He said he wasn't ready to let go. What exactly that meant, I'm not sure. I don't know - I think he's afraid of really opening up, and then getting hurt."

"That's rational," her companion allowed. "I'd be afraid of that. Wouldn't you?"

Suddenly it was as if a piece of the mystery was revealed. Of course she was afraid of being hurt by someone she loved. What else had she ever known? Her father, in a perpetual drunken fury; her mother, gone in a cloud of dust; the men who'd floated through her life, none of them finding a real emotional bond. Even the ones who lived. But Harm -

Harm, and his decades-long search for his father, only to find a grave; the fiery crash that taken his RIO's life and his sense of purpose; the brutal murder of the one woman who'd broken through his carefully-built shield. He'd suffered, too, and although his pain was different from hers, it was no less real. One cruel blow after another; why in the world would either of them want to risk another, deeper one?

But we already have, she realized. *We've let each other in closer than ever before, but we're terrified of taking that last step.* Aloud she replied, "We're just screwed up enough to balance each other out."

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it." The civilian glanced toward the door. "Heads up. Two-star at three o'clock."

Mac turned, and leaped to her feet, hurrying to greet him. "Admiral Chegwidden!"

"At ease, Colonel, you've been through enough." The JAG's expression was as unyielding as ever, but concern lined his face. "I got here as soon as I could. How's Rabb?"

"He's in surgery. There may have been some internal injuries, and ..." She trailed off, leaving the sentence unfinished. "Sir, I take full responsibility for the circumstances. I should have gotten Commander Rabb medical attention much sooner -"

"Now, there's a first; you taking responsibility for the commander's actions. As stubborn as he is, he's still a grown-up, Mac. You know that." The older man smiled sympathetically. "I know I told you to keep him out of trouble, but I'm well aware that's impossible."

For some inexplicable reason, the bleak situation hit her at full force right then, and all her training couldn't stall the tears brimming in her eyes. "Sir, I -"

Chegwidden took her in his arms and let her cry. He was a stern, uncompromising man by nature, but these two officers were closer to him than anyone under his command had ever been, and that changed all the rules. "He'll be all right," he comforted quietly. "Sometimes I think it would take a carrier group to beat Harmon Rabb."

"That's what I thought. Right up until the minute he passed out in my arms. It's been a long time since I've been this scared."

There was no response to that. After a few seconds, she disengaged herself and dried her eyes. "Thank you, sir. Don't tell any Marines what a mess I can be, okay?"

"I wouldn't dream of informing the Corps that one of their own was acting human." That earned a grateful half-smile.

"Sir, if you wouldn't mind, there's someone I'd like you to meet - the civilian engineer who assisted us with our investigation. Her courage and dedication throughout this mission would rival any service member's."

He raised an eyebrow at the compliment. "By all means, Colonel. Lead on."

In a corner of the waiting room, Kara had stretched out across two chairs and laid her head on the less-than-cushioned arm. She'd washed up and pulled a comb through her hair at the VOQ, but the streaks of dirt and blood on her shirt were a testament to the ordeal of the last few hours. Her eyes were closed, but nothing about her posture suggested sleep. Mac couldn't blame her.

"Kara?"

Instantly she was alert. "Any word?"

"Not yet. Kara Donnell, I'd like you to meet my CO, Admiral A.J. Chegwidden."

Startled, Kara jumped to her feet. "Sir, it's an honor -"

The word died as her legs promptly gave out. The admiral reacted first, catching her against his body as she sagged. "I'm flattered, Ms. Donnell. What would you do if a four-star

walked in?"

"Sorry, sir. I, ah, met up with some kind of nerve-paralyzer a few hours ago." The engineer winced as he eased her into a chair. "God, this is embarrassing."

"That's what happened to you?" Mac asked, shocked. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I thought it had worn off." An apologetic shrug was all she could muster. "Besides, we had enough to worry about."

"And you ran to the guardpost like that?"

Admiral Chegvidden shook his head. "Look out, Mac. She's starting to sound like your partner."

At that, Kara straightened. "Thank you, Admiral," she said solemnly. "I will take that as high praise indeed."

"Higher than you know, Ms. Donnell. You might learn to quit while you're ahead, though. Let's have someone take a look at you." He lifted her easily and escorted her to the nurses' station, her feet barely touching the floor as they went. Mac watched her commanding officer, noting his protectiveness with little surprise. Whatever else Kara was, she was younger even than his daughter; and if he could do nothing for Harm, at least he could do something for her.

She took a seat and leaned her head back against the wall, unable to think any more. The conversation with Kara had hit her hard, but she couldn't allow herself to explore those possibilities right now. Not while half of their partnership was lingering somewhere between life and death. *Stop that*, she scolded herself. Harm was going to be fine. Wasn't he? After all, he'd stayed on his feet for nearly three hours after the attack. That had to count for something, right? Then again ...

"God," she whispered, closing her eyes, "I don't ask you for much. I thought I was doing pretty well just to still believe in you after all this time. I think I've earned just one favor, so I'd really appreciate it if you'd let Harm stay with us a little while longer. He's too important to too many people - he still has mountains to climb, too. Please don't take him from us. Not yet."

Falling into a restless doze, she jerked awake at the sound of the opening door. A weary doctor glanced in her direction. "Are you here with Commander Rabb?"

"I'm his partner. Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie." She rose, her fists clenched unconsciously at her sides. "How is he?"

"He came through surgery very well. The abdominal wound was shallow, fortunately, but it'll be a while before he can breathe without effort. The shoulder wound was actually more complex. It was extremely deep, and cut through a lot of muscle. I think it's safe to say, leaving aside all other issues, that he won't be using that arm for much of anything for a good four weeks."

Somehow this didn't sound like entirely good news. "Leaving aside *what* other issues?"

Commander Joseph Arnold had been a Navy surgeon for over twenty years. As he watched this young colonel hanging on his every word, he could see that these two - lawyers, were they? - had taken the word 'partnership' to a completely new level. Then again, not many lawyers could do what these two had supposedly done tonight. He looked her directly in the eye, and called it precisely as he saw it.

"He's lost an incredible amount of blood. Frankly, I'm still thanking God that he didn't crash on the table. We're replacing it as fast as we can, but until his blood volume's up to seventy-five percent or so, I can't upgrade him to stable. There's still a risk of arrest."

She held firm, but her face went white. "How big a risk?"

"Not very big. I just can't make guarantees. Give us about three more hours to finish up the transfusions, and then you should be able to relax."

"Can I sit with him?"

"Sure. They just moved him into the ICU a few minutes ago. As long as you promise not to get in the nurses' way."

"On my honor." There was a hint of an exhausted smile in her voice. "I'll just tell my friends where I'm going, and I'll be right up."

"Fair enough." Dr. Arnold paused. "Colonel, is it possible that your commander has a

guardian angel?"

At that, she froze. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, right now he has a stab wound to the left shoulder, but another three inches and it would have been a stab wound to the heart."

As the surgeon walked away, Mac stood very still, letting his words sink in. Then, as if waking from a dream, she turned quickly toward the nurses' station and went in search of her commanding officer.

Admiral Chegwidden was standing beside Kara in the exam room, waiting patiently as an intern finished testing her legs. The young engineer glanced up. "Mac - you've got news?"

"He's out of surgery," she reported, "but he's still critical. They need to get his blood volume back up. I'm going up to see him in ICU."

"Hang on. We'll go with you -"

With a firm hand on her shoulder, the JAG ended her attempt to get up. "I don't think so, Ms. Donnell. Not until the nice lieutenant in the white coat says so."

"That's okay, sir. She'll be fine as long as she takes it easy for a while. It's all done but the paperwork." Kara rolled her eyes. "Sorry, ma'am, but civilians get our system all confused. It'll just take a minute."

"Figures. Go on ahead, Mac. We'll catch up once this is all sorted out."

Gratefully, she hurried out and took the stairs two at a time up to the intensive care unit. There was no logical reason for her sudden haste, but logic had been thrown out the window a long time ago. Right now, the only thought in her mind was irrational but clear: *He needs me.*

Stepping inside the small, starkly-lit room, her heart shattered at first sight of him. As he lay unmoving on the bed, as pale as the pristine white sheets, he barely resembled the strong, vibrant Harmon Rabb that she admired so much. A thin blanket was drawn up over his bare chest, concealing his bandaged torso but not his immobilized shoulder. IV tubes snaked along his good right arm, pumping life into his weakened body. Machines beeped and hummed all around, keeping watch over him. Somehow, amid these imposing surroundings, even a six-foot four-inch frame seemed small.

She steeled herself and slid into a chair by his side, gently taking his cool, limp hand in hers. "Hey, Navy," she said softly, searching his face for any sign that he could hear her. But his features appeared to be carved in pale, chiseled stone. "I just wanted to let you know I'm here. Kara's fine, thanks to you - she's on her way up. The admiral's with her. He dropped everything and drove out here in the middle of the night as soon as he heard. And you thought he was still pissed at you." She smiled and brushed back his tousled hair, so dark against his ashen skin. "Well, if you wanted to be the center of attention, you sure got your wish. But I know you better than that. Come on, Harm, you're already a hero a dozen times over. You don't need to go for martyrdom, okay? Just hold on a little longer, and this will all be over. We can go home, and you can give Sarah that new paint job you've been talking about. Okay?"

There was no response, of course. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she forced them back. "I'm not letting go of you, so get that straight," she said fiercely. "I'd go crazy without you. You know that. Nobody to make me eat right, nobody to listen to my gripes about Lieutenant Singer ... nobody to find that one muscle in my neck that always knots up ... So don't even think about ditching out on me, all right?" She sighed, feeling helpless. "I'm begging you, Harm. Don't make me watch them give the flag to your mother. I don't think I could stand it."

Not knowing what else to do, she leaned down and left a feather-light kiss on his forehead. Then, still holding his hand, she settled back in the chair for the longest few hours of her life.

Kara reached the door just in time to see that brief yet tender kiss, and she hastily tightened her grip on the admiral's arm. "Sir, maybe we should give her a few minutes alone -"

"Don't worry so much, Ms. Donnell." A.J. Chegwidden's expression was placid, but there was no doubt that he'd seen exactly what she had. Kara, who prided herself on letting nothing throw her, was caught speechless. He only shook his head. "Kara, anyone who thinks

that there's something wrong with what we just saw is uninformed. Those two are the best partners I've ever seen. I've seen them work together, and I've seen them work apart. Trust me, together is much better. They read each other perfectly. You don't get that way without having a bond. Do you really think I'd punish them for that?"

It was a good story, but he knew she wasn't entirely buying it. "With all respect, sir, is that all you see when you look at them?"

He turned to her with the most innocent stare she'd ever seen from a two-star. "Why, of course. And I know you're not suggesting otherwise, because I don't have any intention of seeing anything that I'd have to take action against, no matter how long I stand here and look."

She understood his meaning and nodded with a hint of a smile. "You're a good man, Admiral. I can see why your officers work so hard for you."

He acknowledged the compliment silently. "I suppose we might as well give her a few minutes after all. Want to get comfortable?"

"Well, that couch over there is starting to look pretty good," she admitted.

"It's all yours."

Moments later, Kara was asleep, curled up on the couch with her arms hugged closely around herself. It hadn't crossed her mind to grab a jacket, A.J. guessed. Without another thought he took off his own and draped it over the girl - regardless of what she had done tonight, she was still a girl in his eyes. He wandered over to the window into the ICU, where Sarah Mackenzie was staring into nothing, Harm's hand clasped tightly in hers. "Don't do this to her any more, son," he said quietly. "Come on back to us."

0542 EST

Patuxent River Medical Center

Mac shook herself awake. She didn't recall exactly when she'd fallen asleep, but she'd been having a delightful, if slightly odd, dream. They were in the park, and Harm was tossing a Frisbee for Jingo. The dog had outsmarted him, though, and jumped on him before he could even wind up to throw. They'd been wrestling in the grass when a hand on her shoulder brought her swiftly back to earth.

Dr. Arnold smiled down at her. "I thought you'd want to know as soon as possible. His blood volume's up to seventy-eight percent, and all his vitals look at least as good as we'd hoped. Better, in some cases. I think it's safe to say that the commander's out of danger."

She sagged with relief, offering a silent prayer of gratitude. "When do you think he'll regain consciousness?"

"Shouldn't be too long now. He might not be too with it, though. We've got him on some pretty strong stuff. But I expect he'll be happy to see you, regardless."

"Thank you, doctor. For everything."

"My pleasure, Colonel. Just take care of him."

She glanced up at the admiral, who'd stood just outside the door like a sentry guard for the past four hours. An unspoken message passed between them, but as Harm's fingers imperceptibly tightened around her hand, she returned her attention to her friend. "Harm, it's me," she reassured him, stroking his cheek. "I'm right here, and I'm getting lonely out here. Come keep me company, okay?"

Slowly, his eyelids flickered, once, twice. Then, after an agonizingly long stretch of time, he stirred ever so slightly, and his expressive eyes fluttered open. A moment of disorientation passed quickly before his gaze came to rest on his partner's face. "Hey," he said simply, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey, yourself." She let her hand linger against his perfect cheekbone, not stopping to wonder which one of them the touch was supposed to comfort. "Would you mind not scaring me like that again?"

"Sorry ..." He drew a shaky breath, and she shook her head.

"Don't try to talk too much. You remember what happened?"

He nodded once. "Kara?"

"She's okay, just asleep out in the hall. The admiral's with her. Everything's fine, all

right? Don't worry about a thing. Just rest, and get better so I don't have to do all your paperwork."

There was a faint smile on his lips, but a strange expression clouded his eyes. She hesitated, concerned. "Harm? Are you in pain?"

He shook his head slowly. "Just trying to ... figure out how ...you can look so ...good while I feel ... so lousy."

Mac laughed. She was well aware that she resembled something the cat dragged in. But her flyboy was definitely back. "You're drugged, sailor."

"Yeah ... I imagine I am ..." He was already fading, but his gaze never left her. "Don't go anywhere ... okay?"

"Like I said before, you can't get rid of me that easily." She leaned close to his ear and spoke softly. "I promise you that I'm not going anywhere. Now or ever."

"I know ... Thanks, Mac ..."

As he slipped back into unconsciousness, she closed her eyes with a long sigh. The sun would be up soon, and with the new day, life would slowly begin returning to normal. There would be charges to file, reports to write, publicity to deflect, and endless explanations all the way up to the Secretary of the Navy. Because of this night, her dear friend had a long recovery ahead, and one young woman had lost a few of her ideals. But the Phoenix program would go on, and truths had been found. All was certainly not right with the world, but she felt sure that each day would look a little brighter.

Starting with today.

*** THE END ***

(Sorry it ends somewhat abruptly - you'll just have to check out Part II to find out what happens next ...)