



A Question Unanswered III: Of Redemption and Forgiveness

Rating: PG-13 for language

Classification: Story, Romance (Mac/Harm)

Author's Notes: If you're only in this for the shipper moments and have no interest in the plot, this might not be the story for you. By request, this is not chiefly a Harm and Mac shipper story. They're certainly involved (and involved with each other, as you'll recall), but the primary POV is Kara's, in hopes of clearing up a few things about her and Scott that the first two parts didn't cover. So read those first, for the love of God ... Apologies for the tech-oriented nature - if you can wade through it, some actual character interaction will eventually appear. Also, another disclaimer: any similarity to real aircraft or aerospace contractors is all in your head. I made up all the aircraft designations in this one, just for continuity's sake. The cause of the accident is based on a real-life incident with a commercial jet, but there's no actual company or program that I'm trying to tear apart here. And after my bizarre coincidence with the spy-plane-in-China theme, if something bad happens to one of the T-6 Texans (our real joint-service trainers), I swear I'll never write one of these again ...

0421 EST

Lexington Park, Maryland

The brash, incessant ringing of the phone brought Kara Donnell only halfway out of her dream-filled sleep. As she hauled herself out of bed and stumbled across the small apartment, her still-fogged brain attempted to figure out what was going on. There were very few reasons for her phone to be ringing at this God-forsaken hour. *What the hell ... are we going to Threatcon or something?*

In nearly four years as a propulsion engineer for the Naval Air Systems Command, Kara had gotten used to dealing with the security issues related to working on a military installation. But she could count on one hand the number of times they'd actually had to implement the alert recall roster. These thoughts and others entered her mind in jumbled form as she felt around in the dark for the persistent phone. "H'lo?"

"Ms. Donnell?"

The voice didn't ring any bells. It certainly wasn't her division chief. "Speaking."

"I'm going to have to ask you to verify your clearance, ma'am."

She rolled her eyes in exasperation, at the same time vaguely intrigued. "Secret-level classification 154712."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm sorry to wake you. I'm Staff Sergeant Larkin, Air Force liaison to the NTSB. Your name came up on our list of investigators. Is your certification current?"

Kara was fully awake now. If the National Transportation Safety Board was calling at

four in the morning, all was definitely not well. "Yes," she answered immediately. "What do you need me for?"

"There's been a mishap, ma'am. Just a couple of hours ago."

She dreaded the next question, but asked anyway. "Class A?"

"Affirm, ma'am. Two fatalities."

Damn it. She wanted to press for more information, but she was fairly sure that this wasn't the time. "All right. Do you have a transport for me?"

"There's a C-20 departing Pax River at 0537. Can you make that?"

"Not a problem. Where am I going?"

"Ohio, ma'am. The aircraft involved was inbound for us here at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Your travel orders and briefing materials will be waiting for you on the plane. I'll meet you on the flight line as soon as you're on the ground."

Barely half an hour later, clothes had been thrown on, her duffel was packed, and she was navigating the deserted roads that led to NAS Patuxent River in her old, weather-beaten Escort. Kara nodded absently at the guard who waved her through the gate, one hand holding her mobile phone up to her ear. "Ensign Coles, this is Kara Donnell. As soon as you get this, I need you to tell Mr. Miller that I'll be TDY indefinitely on a mishap investigation. I'm sorry about the short notice, but I'm literally getting on a plane in minutes. My point of contact is Staff Sergeant Larkin at Wright-Patterson AFB, and he'll be faxing you my orders later this morning. I'll get someone to cover the corrective-action reports I have open, and if any issues come up at the telecon, you can reach me on my cell at any time. Thanks, Alex."

She didn't envy the poor ensign the task of relaying the message to their division chief when he got in. But duty called. The young engineer parked across from the hangar and strode across the tarmac to the waiting jet.

Once they were airborne, she opened the file given to her by the crewman. It didn't say much: the accident was only a few hours old. A T-5 Bearcat, one of a new type of training aircraft recently put into service by both the Navy and the Air Force, had called an inflight emergency on the last leg of its flight from Lackland in Texas. The aircrew had consisted of a pilot trainee and an instructor pilot; neither had ejected, and consequently, neither had survived. Which one of them had been at the stick, and the rest of the story, would be up to her and the rest of the team to discover.

If she'd been able, she would have used the flight to reclaim an hour of the sleep she'd lost. But there was no way she'd get to sleep now. It wasn't because she was on a plane and headed for the site of a plane crash. Flying had never once fazed her - she knew what these machines could and couldn't do, and she accepted it as a fact of life. But mishap investigations were always accompanied by a mild rush of adrenaline. It was a bit like solving a mystery, putting the pieces together inch by inch until the full truth emerged. These answers were real, and gravely important, because the lessons learned here would help keep people alive.

But understanding would come too late for these two pilots. Their families wouldn't receive much comfort from the knowledge that a faulty valve or bad wiring had taken their

lives. Perhaps, though, some closure could be found, and some relief that it would never happen again. That was the idea that sustained Kara at the moment, because she was decidedly not looking forward to getting her first look at the wreckage.

They landed without incident in the faint light of dawn, and she was quickly greeted by Staff Sergeant Larkin. The thirty-ish man did a good job of masking his surprise at her appearance, but she knew it was there nonetheless. Not too many twenty-five-year-olds were certified as aircraft mishap investigators, but not too many twenty-five-year-olds had gotten the type of high-profile experience she'd had with the Phoenix project, either. As an airman retrieved her duffel, Larkin led her into the operations center to meet the remaining members of the group.

The investigative team consisted of about ten people: military and civilian, government and industry, earthbound engineers and experienced aircrew. Only one JAG present, she noticed: a young, anxious-looking Air Force lieutenant. That seemed to suggest that the brass was already leaning toward pilot error as a simple, straightforward cause. Otherwise, they'd have bulldogs like Harm and Mac out here to dig up clues.

Kara had long since learned to be wary of any conclusion drawn by 'the brass'. The fact that the mishap aircraft was a trainer didn't automatically mean that the pilot was at fault. But something had made them declare an emergency, and something had brought them down into a field four miles from the runway. That much was undeniable.

After shaking hands and making introductions all around, the team members sat down around the conference table, and a worn-out-looking civilian man started to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Carlos Sedena. I'm the regional deputy director of the NTSB's military division, and I'll be spearheading this review on behalf of the NTSB and the FAA. I apologize for the rude wake-up call everyone got this morning, but you all know the drill. We've got to do our initial inspection of the crash site before anything can be moved, and the longer we wait, the less conclusive the autopsies will be. So here's what we have so far.

"At approximately 0047 this morning, a T-5 aircraft, call sign 32-Bravo, radioed base ops, reporting cockpit readout malfunctions and requesting an emergency approach. Ops coordinated with Dayton International Airport, which was the closer airstrip, and vectored the aircraft in. Three and a half minutes later, their altitude dropped off, but no further communication was received by controllers here. The base emergency response team acted on Dayton International's call, but by that point, the only thing left to do was put out the fire."

Staff Sergeant Larkin reappeared, distributing files around the table as Sedena continued. "These are the specs for the aircraft, as well as personnel records on the aircrew. Major Timothy Cedrick was an experienced instructor pilot with over one hundred hours in the T-5. The trainee, First Lieutenant Stephen Connors, has a solid record, but up until a few weeks ago he flew mainly T-37s. I doubt I need to remind you that the T-5 is an entirely different and relatively new bird. It is currently in low-rate initial production for both services, so there are less than forty flying, and both training commands are expecting to reach initial operating capability within the next two years. If there's a problem with this aircraft, we need to know, and we need to know now. With that in mind, we've requested assistance from Randall Aeronautics, the prime contractor on the T-5. They've sent some people to join our investigation and provide any details we might need. Before they join us, I just want to say this: be aware of everything that goes on around you. We don't have any reason to suspect that Randall has anything to hide, but they are here for a somewhat different reason than we

are. So use them mainly as a resource, as intended.

“The bus outside will take us to the site, and later we’ll be provided with radio tapes. Hopefully the cockpit recorder will be able to tell us what was going on during those three and a half minutes. Until then, take good notes and good pictures, and we’ll be back here this afternoon to discuss. Let’s get started.”

On the fifteen-minute ride, Kara skimmed the service records of the two pilots. Major Cedrick was married, with a young daughter. Damn. She wondered if either of the families had been notified yet. Although her day had been underway for five hours already, it was still early to the rest of the Midwest. Did the other travelers on this road even know that two lives had ended that morning?

They approached the area, surrounded by officers from the security squadron and half a dozen emergency vehicles. This was always the hardest part. It was close to impossible to look at a crash site without imagining those awful last minutes. Rookie investigators were often overwhelmed by particularly gruesome scenes, but Kara, despite her youth, was no rookie. She steeled herself, pulled out her handheld tape recorder, and stepped off the bus.

The first visual impression that greeted her was the long black scorch marks along the dry field. The wreckage was strewn across a sixty-yard area, the twisted shards of metal following a basically straight path. The main fuselage was essentially intact, though turned on its side with its nose compressed against the ground. Immediately, cameras began clicking, and they fanned out to circle the unfortunate craft with critical eyes.

“Last heading approximately east-northeast,” she said quietly into her recorder. “No evidence of ejection abort or misfire. Control surfaces ...” Kara located a shorn-off wing and examined its trailing edge. “... appear functional, deployed in landing configuration. Side note: check mission profile and see how close they were to final approach.” Leaning in to peer at the cockpit, she instinctively recoiled and shut off the recorder. “Oh, Christ.”

A gloved hand was visible on the throttle, leading back to a bloodstained, flight-suited arm. From there, it ended: the rest of the pilot’s body lay a few feet away, shrouded in a gray tarp. Regaining her composure, she studied the severed limb and lifted her recorder again. “Left hand of instructor gripped the throttle. Attempting to pull up, or recover airspeed?”

She stepped back to gather her thoughts as the other team members milled around. Had Major Cedrick been on the stick the whole time, or had he taken over at some point during the emergency? Why had they lost altitude? Squatting down to look at the engine cowling, she didn’t pay much attention to the other person approaching from the opposite side.

“This is eerie, isn’t it?”

“I think ‘tragic’ is a better word.” She stood up to face the speaker - and froze in place as she recognized the one person she’d never expected to see again.

He stared back at her, similar thoughts mirrored in his eyes. After a moment of shock, he extended a hand. “Scott Fairfield, Randall Aeronautics.”

Slowly, she took it. “Kara Donnell, NavAir Flight Systems.”

For a few seconds, there was an awkward silence. “The world must be getting

smaller,” he said finally.

“Stranger, too.” She watched him impassively, determined not to let him see just how much his sudden presence had unnerved her. “You’re working for Randall?”

“As of eight months ago. I’m working engine/airframe integration on the F-21 and the T-5.” Scott ran a hand through his sandy brown hair, shifting uncomfortably.

“Then you’d better hope this wasn’t an engine problem.”

“The crew reported cockpit malfunctions.”

“Pilots have been known to be wrong. Especially trainee pilots.” Kara ducked to shine her flashlight into the compressor blades. “I see you landed on your feet.”

“That’s a long story.” He hesitated. “I’d like to tell it to you, if you’re willing to listen.”

“Some other time,” she replied curtly, finishing her inspection and starting back toward the group near the bus. “Right now, we’ve got work to do.”

As she walked away, he called after her. “After two years, you’re still that angry?”

She paused, but didn’t turn back. “Angry? No. Cautious? You bet your ass.”

1503 EST
Area C, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base
Dayton, Ohio

After the team finished inspecting and cataloguing each fragment of the downed plane, the pieces were packed up and taken to a hangar on base, to be analyzed and re-distributed precisely the way they’d been found. The bodies were taken to the medical center for immediate autopsy. Throughout the return ride to the base, though, Kara’s mind was preoccupied with more than the crash.

Nothing about the infamous Phoenix incident had lingered in her memory as painfully as the knowledge that Scott had kept the truth from her. The former auxiliary power engineer had been her closest friend at Pax River for two years, and the fact that he’d been afraid to come forward with what he knew about the sabotage had forced her to reexamine many of the constants in her life. She’d gone on, of course, and the ache had faded, but seeing him again only brought it back to the surface.

When they filed back into the conference room, she took a seat on the opposite side of the room from him. The past would have to wait a while longer. She would need all of her focus if she were to be any help to this investigation.

“We’ve got the tapes of the radio transmissions to the base controllers and the tower at Dayton International,” Sedena remarked as a senior airman set up the audio equipment. “Unless anyone has any objections, I’m going to play them both straight through, then we can

discuss and repeat as necessary. We'll make copies available at a later time."

Kara opened her notebook and listened intently. Less than one day earlier, the two men whose voices she now heard had been alive and well. Lieutenant Conners was calmly reporting a glitch in their airspeed data and requesting an immediate landing. He was directed by the base controller to perform a reset sequence on the Tactical Air Navigation computer and given a vector toward the airport. The first tape ended there, with a brief thanks issued to Wright-Patt Control.

The second tape was far more unsettling. Almost from the start, there was an undercurrent of tension in Conners's voice. They had data now, but it made no sense. The pilot reported losing altitude and attempted to compensate, but a stall warning filtered through the speakers. The voices rose in pitch and volume, mixing with the alarm signals in a cacophony of sound. The last distinguishable reply was from Major Cedrick: "...the damn thing's fighting itself ...". Then there were a few more unidentifiable noises, and chilling silence.

Kara copied down the major's words, and discussion began.

"So does the problem start with the signal loss or the computer reset?"

"The signal loss was the reason for the reset. The computer was already having problems, so it could have seized up during that procedure."

"Or he could have been distracted by the procedure and lost altitude without noticing."

"With an instructor looking over his shoulder?"

"Maybe he was trying to teach him a lesson about awareness."

"Hell of a lesson."

"We need true and indicated altitude numbers to get any answers. Were they really where they thought they were?"

The dialogue continued along those lines for nearly two hours, but there was little more than speculation to go with the questions. They wouldn't know more until the flight data recorder had been analyzed. Some poor techies were in for a long night.

"Looks like this is a good place to break for the day," Sedena announced. "I suggest we start tomorrow by breaking up into groups to look closer into the various systems. Even though this looks like a crew systems issue, we need to cover all our bases. Your areas of expertise were called out on the NTSB certification list, so if these are out of date, just yell ..."

Kara glanced up when her name was called just after Scott's as the resident engine specialists. *Figures*, she thought ruefully. *Together again. How cute.* She kept her gaze forward, feeling his eyes on her.

"You've all been set up in Visiting Officers' Quarters. The chow hall opens in an hour, and there are half a dozen fast-food places right outside the gate. Thanks for everything,

folks. See you at 0800 tomorrow.”

1753 EST
Visiting Officers' Quarters
WPAFB

She located the gym in short order, and spent most of an hour on the stationary bike, attempting to clear her head and failing spectacularly. How had an experienced instructor allowed his student to lose control of their aircraft? What did 'fighting itself' mean? And how in the name of God was she going to deal with Scott Fairfield?

Walking back up to her room at the VOQ, she slowed up as the object of her concern came into view. He was knocking on her door, a plastic bag in hand. Kara folded her arms and spoke up. "Knock all night, but you won't get very far."

Scott turned, and his eyes widened slightly at the sight of her in a tank top and shorts. "Um, what if I come bearing gifts?" he said timidly, holding up the bag. "Chicken salad sub, no tomatoes, raspberry iced tea, and a chocolate chip cookie."

Her cool demeanor melted a little, remembering the countless lunches they'd shared at Pax. "You've got a good memory."

"Will that get me in the door?"

"Not until I take a shower. Give me ten minutes." She brushed past him, into her room, and closed the door securely.

When she emerged seven minutes later, toweling off her hair, he was still standing there with the same expression of anxiety and hopefulness. He shook his head at her choice of attire, a well-worn University of Virginia football jersey. "Some things never change. You know, Purdue beat Virginia in the Sugar Bowl last year."

"Do you really think reminding me of that is going to win you any points?" Nevertheless, she stepped back and let him in. He set the food down on the table and smiled, a little wistfully.

"This isn't exactly the first time you've shut the door in my face. Remember? You'd been on the job for a couple of months, and I decided you were working too hard. So I showed up on your doorstep and told you to get some shoes because we were going out to dinner. You said thanks, but you had too much to do. I wouldn't take no for an answer, but instead of begging, I just kept informing you that you were going. When you slammed the door, I finally got the message that nobody tells you what to do."

"So I'm stubborn. It's not really the desirable character trait you make it out to be." Kara crossed to the window, twisting the hem of her jersey in her hands. "You know that we can't just pick up where we left off, right?"

"Of course I do. I'm not even sure I know where we left off. But I owe you a couple of major explanations, and I want to get all of it out in the open before we get pulled any further

into this investigation. So will you hear me out?”

After all that had happened between them, and all that had happened since, it barely crossed her mind that she had the option to refuse. “Sure,” she said noncommittally, picking up her sandwich. “You’ve got at least until I finish my dinner.”

“Good enough.” He sat down on the edge of the bed, searching his brain for a place to begin. “After the Navy delivered my proverbial slap on the wrist and showed me the door, I ended up back in Cincinnati to look for a new job. Eventually I met up with an old friend from Purdue who’d started his own computer consulting firm. I knew I had to give him the whole story, considering my last disaster, but he agreed to give me a shot. I started out more or less as tech support, but we worked pretty closely with General Propulsion, and finally I got assigned to them full-time. I really owe Jake a lot. He went to bat for me with Randall, and so did the guys at General. The HR types at Randall were understandably a little worried about taking on someone who’d been kicked out of both the Air Force Academy and the civil service, but they saw that I’d been as much a part of the Phoenix’s resolution as the problem. I basically pledged my undying loyalty, just to make sure. They let me start at the very bottom, and after I worked my ass off, they talked to the Navy about allowing me low-level clearance to work on military programs. So here I am, still working my ass off, because I know I’ll never be able to completely get past it. But I sure as hell learned my lesson. Honesty really, *really* is the best policy.”

She studied him for a minute, her expression still cool. “You’re not looking for sympathy, are you?”

“No, of course not. Well ... maybe a little.” He offered a sheepish grin, and she couldn’t help cracking a bit of a smile.

“Then ‘a little’ is all you get.” Leaning back against the desk, she picked up her cookie. “There’s something else that I’ve thought a lot about,” she continued slowly. “How did Holloway know how to blackmail you? How did he know that he’d be able to keep you from coming forward?”

“I don’t know how he found out about my expulsion from the Academy. I guess I should have known that anyone who dug far enough would be able to get a hold of those records. When Holloway found out that I was running that auxiliary test, he must have started digging.” He stared at the opposite wall, and she could see the defeat in his dark eyes. “It was a stupid thing to do, cheating on that exam. I knew that even at the time. I still don’t know why I did it. Thermodynamics was killing me, and I was scared I’d wash out, and somehow it didn’t seem like a big deal to just look across the aisle ...”

“I think we’ve all thought that way at some point,” Kara broke in quietly.

“But you didn’t do it. And even if you had, the Academy’s different. They hold people to a higher standard, and they’re entitled to. It’s a place for honor and integrity. I blew my chance, which only proved that I didn’t belong there. But I didn’t want to just give up on everything I’d worked for because of one day of weakness. So I went back home, got through school, and applied to NavAir. Until Holloway started his game, I really thought I’d made it. But every little thing just seemed to pull me deeper and deeper.”

“You should have told me,” she declared, allowing a trace of hurt to slip through. “We could have at least tried to think of something. Damn it, Scott, I would have helped. I would

have done whatever you needed. Why did you hide from me?"

"Because it wasn't just me anymore," he answered honestly. "I think Halloway knew that just threatening my job wouldn't be enough to keep me quiet once I figured out what he was doing. That's why he started threatening to hurt someone."

She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer, but she had to ask the question. "Who?"

"You, Kara." Scott finally turned to face her. "Now do you understand?"

It was a moment before she responded. "Partly," she managed, looking away. "But I should have been allowed to decide for myself."

"I know. I can't justify that. All I can say is, at the time, it seemed like the only way. Then it all went to hell so fast ... Jesus, Kar, when he hit you with that - that thing, there were about five seconds in there where I thought you were dead. I could have killed myself for letting that happen."

"I'm kinda glad you didn't," she said softly, moving to sit across from him on the bed.

He looked up with a grateful half-smile. "I almost called you so many times, but I figured it would do more harm than good. I know I don't have any right to expect forgiveness, but now that we're here ..." He shrugged tentatively. "Can we give this teamwork thing another shot?"

"I'll do my best." Their eyes met, and she was taken back to that night at Mac's apartment, when he'd kissed her gently and vanished from her life. "... *if he'd aimed that gun at you, I'd have stepped in front of it without thinking twice ...*"

No. She couldn't afford to forgive and forget that easily. If she opened herself up to another blow as devastating as that one, this time she'd have no one to blame but herself. "Anyway, I'm not sure we'll be much good to this investigation if they keep us cornered on the propulsion aspect. There aren't any signs of engine failure at all."

He seemed to notice the shift in her demeanor and nodded matter-of-factly. "For once. Whenever a single-engine bird goes down, everybody screams engine failure. This is a nice change. But even so, it doesn't mean we're useless."

"Maybe not, but I get this kind of thing a lot. 'Look at the little girl sitting at the grown-up table.' They assume I can't possibly have any knowledge outside my functional area, so I have to fight like hell to get any cooperation." She glanced sideways at him. "Things probably aren't any better as the newbie at Randall."

"You have a point," he admitted. "What's your gut feeling so far?"

"Some kind of controls-disagree, I think. When they reset the TACAN, the data went haywire immediately. Doesn't that suggest that their numbers were bad from that point on?"

"It is pretty much a fly-by-wire," Scott mused. "There's a lot of electronic control. If the auto-stabilizers started fritzing, a rookie who only knows the old trainers might have some

trouble.”

“More than that, if the major couldn’t level them out either. He said it was ‘fighting itself’. Were they stuck in some kind of invalid auto mode?”

“That’s kind of a stretch, considering the fail-safes in place. But we can’t rule anything out at the moment.”

Kara opened up the schematics they’d been given and spread them out, tucking her legs up under her. “We’ll probably need more detail info on the avionics. I don’t know a thing about the fault procedures.”

Over her shoulder, he examined the cockpit layout and shook his head. “Whatever happened up there, they had to have been disoriented beyond belief.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because as far as we know, they never tried to punch out.”

She had nothing to say to that - it had been nagging at the back of her mind, too. They pored over the charts together for a while, trying to envision a combination of conditions that could account for these results. After an hour, she closed the folder and stretched out her legs. “Forget it. Until we see the actual flight data, we’re at a brick wall.”

“I wonder if we can get any maintenance history on that computer,” he suggested thoughtfully. “Any other reported glitches, that sort of thing.”

“We can ask for it, but it’ll probably take ages. The safety guys here will be swamped with requests, and since it’s not our area, it won’t exactly be high on the priority list.” An idea occurred to her, and a slow grin crept across her face. “On second thought, I may know a shortcut.”

He watched warily as she retrieved her Palm Pilot and cell phone from her bag. “Who are you going to call at nine in the evening?”

“Think about it. Who do we know that can track down anyone or anything in no time flat?”

At the glint in her eye, he understood. “Commander Rabb and Colonel Mackenzie? You’re going to drag them in on this?”

“No. I’m going to call my friends Harm and Mac for a favor. If they get curious and start poking around, that’s their call. And they’re both Rabbs now.”

He blinked, surprised. “You’re kidding. So much for that ‘best friends, chain of command’ argument.”

“Well, they got around the chain of command part, although it was a little dicey. As for being best friends ... sometimes all it takes is the right circumstances.”

“Or the wrong ones,” he stated quietly, averting his eyes. Abruptly he stood up and moved toward the door. “I’ll see you in the morning. Let me know what you hear from the

JAG Dynamic Duo, and if they don't hate my guts, tell them I said hi."

She rose as well, unsure how to close this surreal encounter. "Thanks for dinner," she said lightly.

"Thanks for letting me in." He paused, and for a second, it was as if the past two years had only been an instant. "You look great, Kar," he told her simply. "It's really good to see you."

Before she could decide how to reply, he'd left for his own room. "What the hell am I getting myself into?" she whispered to no one, closing the door and sprawling out across the bed. With a long, deep breath, she reached for the phone.

2052 EST
North of Union Station
Washington, D.C.

Sarah Mackenzie-Rabb had just finished folding the last of the laundry when her husband walked in and tossed his coat on the chair. "Sorry I'm late," he began, wrapping his arms around her from behind and ducking in to steal a kiss. "A couple of people came in at the very end, so it took a while to pack up."

"At least you didn't have to turn anyone away," she responded, returning the embrace. The twice-annual blood drive at JAG had become one of Harm's pet projects. Or one of his crusades, depending on the observer's point of view. Ever since the attack at Pax River that had left him battling for his life, he'd felt strongly about the ever-present need for blood donors, and he was a driving force in the Navy's new donor campaign.

"I didn't see you in there today," he commented, heading for the bedroom to change out of his uniform. "Did you come in while I was over at the Pentagon?"

"No, I didn't donate this time." She curled up on the couch. "To be honest, I felt kind of lousy this morning, and then I was in court all afternoon."

Harm stuck his head out of the bedroom, looking concerned. "Are you all right? You're not coming down with something, are you?"

"I don't think so. I'm fine now." Her smile seemed to reassure him, and he continued unbuttoning his shirt. "Want me to warm up the leftover stir-fry?"

"Sure, thanks."

The phone rang before she could get up, and she gracefully swung around to grab it from the table. "Rabb residence."

"Hi, Mac. How are things in lawyer-land?"

"Kara, hey! Great timing. Harm's half-naked," she teased, earning a dirty look as he

pulled a T-shirt over his head.

"Damn, and me without my spy satellite codes," the younger woman returned with an audible grin. "Face it, Marine, your husband is hot."

"Hands off, civvie. What are you up to?"

"What am I up to? My ass, in a mishap investigation. Did you hear about the T-5 crash at Wright-Patt this morning?"

"Yeah, it was in the Early Bird. They called you in?"

"At about four a.m. I can't believe I'm still coherent. The whole thing's weird. Everybody wants to jump on the 'pilot error' bandwagon because it was a trainer. But they had a glitch with their TACAN computer, and no one really knows what it did to their auto controls. I was thinking that since you and Harm have access to all the deficiency report databases ..."

"... we could go hunting for DRs on the T-5 onboard computer," Mac finished, arching an eyebrow. "Why do I get the feeling we're about to get used and abused?"

"I'd owe you forever," Kara suggested hopefully.

"You already owe me forever. Courtesy of three nights' lodging and two rescues at gunpoint."

"Yeah, yeah. But we'll never get anywhere going through the Air Force Safety Center. We just thought ..."

"Who is 'we'?" the attorney inquired, hearing the hesitation.

There was a sigh on the other end. "Let's put it this way. My life would fit perfectly into a certain Alanis Morissette song."

It wasn't long before the light dawned. "Don't tell me you ran into Scott."

"The one and only."

Mac just shook her head. "Oh, Kar," she said softly. "How do you get yourself into these things?"

"Mac, I don't have the first freaking clue."

"I know the feeling. Are you okay with it?"

"I think so. I don't know. It's been two years without a word, and suddenly, bang, he's right there. Am I supposed to be okay with it? I want to believe that fundamentally good people can make mistakes the way he did. I really do. But he lied to me, Mac. I begged him to tell me what was wrong, and he couldn't do it. That hurts like hell."

"I'm sure it does," she empathized. "I wish I knew a way to help, hon. All I can think of to say is that he really did care about you. He screwed up, obviously, but he was trying to

do right by you in the long run. I don't think there was ever a question about that."

"I know. It's just going to be an interesting week." Kara shook off her moment of self-pity. "So what do you say? If I promise to be your slave, will you check the database?"

"All right, I give in. T-5 avionics deficiency reports?"

"Yes, please. Mac, you're my savior."

"Don't thank me - thank Harm. He's more likely to understand this junk than I am, so I'm going to make him take point. We'll call you in the morning. Get some sleep, all right?"

"No argument here. Thanks again."

"You're welcome. Hang in there, Kar."

Harm wandered back into the living room, eating his leftover dinner out of the container. "Did I hear my name?"

"You did indeed. Grab some shoes. We're going back to JAG for a while." Mac took the fork out of his hand and replaced it with his car keys.

"This had better not have anything to do with a previously-confessed fantasy involving the Admiral's desk - oww!" The remark was cut off by a sharp elbow to the ribs.

"Snap to, smartass. Kara needs a favor."

0749 EST
Area C, WPAFB

Scott had gotten very little sleep that night. He'd lain awake for hours, less because of the unforgiving VOQ bed than because of a genuine sense of panic over his current situation. Seeing Kara Donnell at the crash site yesterday had temporarily left him incapable of rational thought. Of all people ... She'd looked amazing, standing there with her golden hair tossed lightly by the wind. Strong, he decided. She'd looked so strong, and strength had always been one of her most attractive qualities.

Conflicting instincts had battled in his mind at that moment: one to damn the consequences and kiss her silly, and one to run as fast and as far as possible. Since he'd never in two full years of friendship found the courage to do the former, and since the latter would undoubtedly have dire career implications, he'd just stood there - and watched a wall of distrust immediately go up behind her eyes.

For someone who tried so hard to succeed, he could be incredibly self-destructive. He'd thrown away his young military career in a misguided attempt to salvage it. He'd betrayed his closest friend in a desperate attempt to protect her. As he stared into the mirror that morning, he wondered if any more of his decisions had been - or would be - as fundamentally flawed.

There was a knock at the door, ending his introspection. He opened it to reveal Kara,

looking far more refreshed than he felt. "Got some info from Harm and Mac," she said, tossing him a granola bar. "I'll tell you on the way over."

As they walked in the brisk April air to the operations center, she outlined the findings. "The T-5 is still in low-rate: the first squadron only came online about a year ago. So there's not a whole lot of documentation out there yet. The only reported problems with the computer were related to a navigational issue. Under a very obscure set of circumstances - a specific combination of altitude, weather, fuel load, all sorts of stuff, the software got turned around and basically forgot which way was north."

"That can't be good," Scott commented. "But it sounds like a textbook reason to do a reset, like these guys did. Right?"

"Right, but it's not that simple. The problem was traced down to a couple lines of code that shouldn't have even been called in the first place. They reprogrammed it and got rid of those cues, so it should be over and done with. Harm saw that, though, and it got his radar up. Turns out he'd seen something similar on a flight test once. He called up an old shipmate who does flight-line maintenance for the S-4, because apparently that class was recently refitted with a comparable computer system."

"Nice catch."

"Yeah, he's good like that. Anyway, this buddy of his says they've seen a couple of problems as well. He's going to get the summaries faxed over as soon as he can."

With that, they took their seats, and Sergeant Larkin began distributing new files that contained the analysis of the flight data recorder. Kara's eyes swept over the pages quickly, and she frowned, disbelieving. "This can't be right. According to the readouts, they were all over the place in those last few minutes, and not just navigational. Airspeed and altitude fluctuated like crazy. If it had happened like this thing says it did, the structural stresses would have been unbelievable. We would have found that plane in a lot more pieces than we did."

"So the recorded data's wrong. The question is where along the line the numbers got screwed up. Either they were right in the computer and got recorded wrong, or they were wrong to begin with."

"Garbage in, garbage out," she agreed. "The cardinal rule of programming. That's a tough call. That data's taken from Pitot probes, I assume?"

"Yeah, there are a couple dozen of them all over the lead and trail edges of the airframe. They measure the air pressure, temperature, and so on, and feed it back into the avionics." Scott was about to elaborate when Sedena approached them.

"How are things looking from the propulsion viewpoint?" the FAA deputy inquired.

"Everything checks out. But we've been doing some thinking about the avionics package, and ..."

"You and everyone else," Sedena smiled. "I guess it's pretty clear where the investigation's heading, but we're not ready to rule out pilot error just yet. Ms. Donnell, there's a call for you from the flight line. Seems you've got some visitors."

Kara and Scott exchanged a not-quite-surprised glance. "Three guesses," she said under her breath, hiding a smile.

"I'll spot you the first two. Looks like you lit a fire under the JAGs."

Ten minutes later, they were waiting on the tarmac for a CH-17 helicopter to land and power down. Kara just shook her head as a tall Navy commander and a beautiful Marine lieutenant colonel climbed down and strode toward them. "See if I ever call you two for a favor again," she called over the hum of the rotors.

Harm flashed his characteristic grin and stepped into her waiting embrace. "Good to see you too, Kar," he replied. "Would you believe we just came out to catch a Reds game?"

"Not for a minute." She turned to hug Mac as well, who was still faintly flushed from the trip. "How long has it been? Four, five months?"

"Something like that." Both officers noticed Scott, hanging back from their reunion by a few steps, almost immediately. The awkward nature of the previous day's encounter returned with a vengeance. They hadn't known him the way Kara had, and so their distrust had to be of a magnitude far greater than hers.

Then again, he hadn't deceived them nearly as badly as he had her.

Harm offered his hand with a cool expression. "Scott," he said pleasantly. "Has she been causing any trouble yet?"

"Oh, give it a rest, Harm ..."

Despite himself, Scott had to smile. Even if he hadn't been around to fill the big-brother role in Kara's life recently, he had no doubt that Harmon Rabb had had no problems stepping into it. "Commander, Colonel," he greeted them, accepting the handshake. "I've obviously been out of the loop, but I guess congratulations are in order."

"Actually, you're right on time for the next round of congrats," Mac said, giving her husband a light push. "Go on, tell them."

Harm shook his head. "I'd swear she's more excited about this than I am," he confided to a curious Kara.

"Promotion lists came out last week," Mac explained.

Kara shrieked and threw her arms around Harm again. "That's fantastic! Way to go, Captain-select!"

"Well, 'Commander' will do fine for the moment," he replied, unable to keep a note of pride out of his voice. "I can't believe I made it on this round - I was so far below zone that I shouldn't have even been on their scope. Anyway, as much as I love central Ohio, this isn't a social call. I've got some information I'd like to go over with you, and we figured it'd be a more efficient process in person."

"I knew you wouldn't be able to resist. What did you find out about the avionics?"

"Well, for one thing, the software problem they say they fixed may not in fact have gotten entirely fixed. But there's a little more to it than that." Harm glanced around. "Why don't we take a look at the wreckage? We are here in more or less an official capacity. Speaking of which, the admiral says hi."

Kara grinned. "In that case, tell him 'thank you' for me. Come on, it's laid out in the hangar over here."

While they walked, Scott still fell back a step, not completely comfortable yet. He wondered just what had happened after that fateful night at Pax that had put Kara on such friendly terms with an admiral. Incredible.

They stepped into the cavernous hangar one at a time, lowering their voices in an inexplicable display of respect. The pieces of aircraft 32-Bravo were carefully laid out across the concrete floor in their final resting places. Kara watched quietly as the former aviator studied the debris, his blue eyes not quite devoid of emotion. They may have been blue-suiters, but they'd been brothers nonetheless.

"I talked to my maintenance buddy this morning," he began, his gaze lingering on the ruined plane. "Deke said they'd implemented the fix we told you about, but he wasn't very optimistic about it. According to his people, the problem is more likely hardware than software. The depot level has seen a couple of reports since the supposed fix, but so far none of them have been major enough to lose data. We don't really know what that means yet, but it doesn't look all that great."

"Especially for the good people at Randall," Kara said under her breath.

Mac, the only one within earshot, only raised an eyebrow as she picked up the narrative. "Also, I dug a little deeper on the history of this particular aircraft. Turns out it was in the Air Logistics Center at Oklahoma City just last week. Don't know why yet, but the chief of T-5 maintenance at Ok-City is on his way out here to tell us exactly that."

"Jeez, you two work fast."

Husband and wife exchanged a knowing smile.

1526 EST
Same location

"It was a routine depot visit, ma'am," reported Master Sergeant Lane with a perplexed shake of his head. "The only thing we changed at all on that aircraft was to give it a new coat of paint."

"Well, what processes are a part of your routine checks?" Mac wanted to know. "Things like checking the oil and putting air in the tires?"

"Yes, ma'am, believe it or not. This was a five-hundred-hour inspection, which is mid-range for an ALC visit. We changed out some filters, tested all the power lines, and took a look at all the engine stages for heat-cycle damage. I've got a whole book of procedures, if

you'd like to go through them, ma'am."

"We'll take you up on that, Sergeant," Kara put in. "Thank you for coming out here to help us out."

"I'd go to Siberia if it would give us some answers," Lane replied earnestly. "Losing guys always hurts, but if there was a problem my shop didn't catch ..."

"We don't want to point any fingers, Sergeant," Mac reassured him. *Not yet, anyway.* "We'll be in touch."

The two women got up to join their counterparts, studying a wiring diagram on the other side of the hangar. "Unless a paint job can fritz avionics, I don't think we're looking at a botched depot visit," Kara began, peering over Harm's shoulder. "Any bolts of inspiration on your end?"

"More of a tentative theory," Harm answered thoughtfully. "The last thing the instructor said was that it was 'fighting itself'. The data from the recorder makes no real sense. Both of these suggest to me that the computer was attempting to control the airplane based on bad information. It would automatically try to compensate if it thought there was a problem with altitude, airspeed, or angle of attack. The aircrew couldn't convince the computer that it was wrong, so they were fighting with it."

"Like HAL," Scott mused, referring to the unbalanced cyber-entity of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "But he said it was fighting *itself*. What does that mean?"

"The computer takes an average from the data provided by sets of Pitot probes. If one probe gives erratic numbers, it usually gets ignored. But if a whole set of them disagreed wildly with the other sets, it might confuse the hell out of the system. How would it know which one to believe?"

Kara frowned. "How could something like that happen?"

"I have no idea. That's why it's a theory." Harm unfolded another schematic. "But we might as well start by checking all the probe locations for damage."

The four of them spread out among the rubble, examining the torn gray skin of the airframe for any clues contained within the slender, three-inch probes. After a few minutes, Scott called over the fuselage, "Hey, how many probes were supposed to be on each side of the horizontal tail assembly?"

"Port side's got five. Why?"

"Starboard's only got four."

Kara hurried around the tail to see for herself. Sure enough, there was a small, empty hole where the outermost probe should have been. "I'll be damned. But one missing probe wouldn't be enough to upset the system, would it?"

"That's why we love redundancy. Besides, who knows whether the probe was missing

the whole time, or broke off during the crash?”

“Good point.” Kara absently rubbed at a tight muscle in her neck.

Mac watched, half amused and half sympathetic. “You two look beat. Want to call it a day?”

“We can get some pizza and take over the lounge in the Q,” suggested Harm. “It’ll be like old times. Except no loud music and hopefully no major bleeding.”

Scott tried not to flinch at the unintended reminder.

“Sounds like a plan.”

1937 EST
VOQ

“... so we hold up our wedding rings, and in the middle of the conference room, in front of the entire senior staff, Bud Roberts blurts out, ‘Holy shit!’”

Kara smirked, and Scott shook his head. Harm sat on the floor, leaning up against the couch with an embarrassed grin. “And that’s not the end of it. After about ten seconds of total silence, Admiral Chegwidden burst out laughing. It was bizarre.”

As he reached for another slice of pizza, Scott asked, “So how did you deal with the fallout?”

“It wasn’t pretty. I had to take a letter of reprimand for supposedly perjuring myself during the court-martial, for which the SecNav came *this* close to hanging me out to dry. I accepted a semi-official transfer to Special Investigations, which was really just a semantics issue, but things have been going really well there. And my mother damn near killed me when I told her I’d gotten married without telling her.”

“I don’t blame her!” Kara exclaimed. “I just about hyperventilated when you called me!”

“So, all’s well that ends well,” Mac decided, leaning over to place a brief but sweet kiss on Harm’s smiling lips. “Obviously the Navy forgives, or at least understands, considering the promotion board. Anyway, the important thing right now is to find out why that plane went down. I have to admit that I don’t entirely get the concept of these probes. I see how conflicting information could screw up the computer, but I don’t know how such a conflict could come up. I mean, can it be possible to have one side of the airplane think it’s at a totally different temperature and pressure than the other side?”

“Maybe the probes in one location were fouled somehow,” Scott suggested. “A bird strike, or some kind of foreign object damage.”

“There’s no evidence of that,” Harm pointed out. “And there’s still the problem of the computer actually going down for a moment. That’s where this all starts. I hate to be the one to say this, but we may have to recommend a full teardown and analysis of the avionics

unit. This problem may not be an isolated incident.”

“They’d have to ground the fleet,” Kara chewed her lower lip. “The training commands will be thrilled to hear that.”

“The training commands will get over it - they’ve got T-37s and -38s to fall back on. It’s Randall that will take the hardest hit.” Scott stood up and paced the length of the room. “This is a make-or-break program for the company. If the Navy and Air Force demonstrate that they don’t trust their contractor to make a quality product, the rest of the industry will hear it loud and clear.”

“If they’re at fault, than that’s the way it has to be,” Mac said quietly.

“Well, ‘they’ is ‘us’ for me, so you can understand why my perspective’s a little different.” Slowly, a realization struck him, and he turned to face the two lawyers. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? You didn’t come all the way out here just to give us a hand. You want to investigate Randall for negligence - or worse, intentionally cutting corners?”

“Only if it’s the truth,” Harm answered honestly. “That’s what we do, Scott. Legal responsibility is a factor, whether it’s an airman on the flight line or a multi-billion-dollar contractor. We can’t ignore any possibilities.”

“Oh, great. Freaking terrific.” The young man shook his head. “Look, I realize that this may not mean a lot, but I believe in these guys. If money and PR were all that mattered to them, they wouldn’t have given someone like me a second thought. It’s not so different from being at NavAir sometimes. Everyone just wants to put the planes in the air. Really.”

“We’re not accusing you,” Mac hurried to say. “No one person is the face of Randall Aeronautics. But sometimes things go on in the back rooms, things that the regular workers don’t see - ”

“But it all ends with the airplane,” he maintained. “I’m telling you that I’ve seen all the specs, and I’ve been on the production line. So I guess it comes down to how much you trust *me*. The irony’s hilarious.” His gaze rested solely on Kara, almost challenging her. “How about it, Kar? Are we back where we started, or what?”

After a moment, she replied as steadily as possible. “I don’t think you want to ask me that question.”

The hurt that resulted from that quiet statement was evident. “So that’s how it’s going to be?” he asked flatly. “No matter what I do, I’m always going to be a day late and a dollar short with you?”

Her eyes blazed. “After what you did, you have the balls to be insulted by this? How the hell do I know they didn’t hire you specifically *because* of your track record? Maybe they needed a good patsy!”

“For the love of God - I do *not* get pilots killed!”

“I think that’s our cue,” Harm murmured, quickly rising to leave. “You know where to

find us.”

He and Mac closed the door behind them and just stood in the hallway for a minute. “They’re in rough shape, hon,” he said softly. “This could get a lot worse before it gets better.”

“But it *will* get better,” Mac reassured, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her head against his shoulder. “She’s strong. And he’s getting there.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I usually am.”

... Inside, the two civilians had barely noticed the couple’s hasty exit. Scott stared back at his onetime friend, raw pain reflected in his eyes. “Is that really what you think of me?” he asked, his voice wounded. “That I could willingly put lives at risk?”

“No, it’s not. I mean, I hope not. I just - Jesus ...” Kara turned away, pushing her hands through her hair in frustration. “I’m trying to believe you, Scott. Everything would be a lot easier if I could just accept it all and move on. But I can’t. It doesn’t work.”

“Kara, I’ve tried to explain everything the best way I know how. I honestly do want to solve this thing, whether my employer suffers or not. What else can I do?”

“I don’t know, all right? Maybe nothing.”

His frustration began to creep through as well. “Is everything really that black and white in your world? Second chances don’t exist? You’ve never made a decision you’ve regretted? If that’s true, I don’t know whether to be jealous of you or pity you. Life isn’t always going to be pretty and perfect, babe. Sometimes there aren’t any good ways out. The sooner you learn that, the better off you’ll be.”

He expected her to slap him in the face, or scream at him. It was a hurtful remark, and he knew it, but at that moment he didn’t care. He just wanted to break through somehow.

But he had no idea what he’d done until she turned back to face him, and he saw right through to her soul.

“You insensitive bastard,” she whispered, her features pale. “You think my entire life has been a walk in the park?”

Thrown off by her uncharacteristically severe reaction, he was at a loss. “I - I didn’t say that.”

“Well, keep on not saying it. I would have expected you of all people to know better.” Kara’s hazel eyes glittered with an emotion somewhere between anger and grief. “My brother was a good kid, God damn it. He did everything that was ever asked of him and more, and he never once complained. Where’s his second chance? Where’s his *first* chance, for Christ’s sake?”

Scott's heart twisted with fresh remorse. So often he managed to forget that she'd lost her younger brother only months before they'd met. She so rarely spoke of Jason, who'd been only eighteen when he died, but Scott knew that his illness had defined a large part of both his childhood and hers. The bond that had been broken that day four years ago was something no one, especially Scott, could ever hope to truly comprehend.

"Kar, I'm sorry - I didn't think ..."

"He wasn't perfect," she continued distantly, as if she hadn't heard. "But if he had a fault, it was that he tried too hard, expected too much of himself. I wonder sometimes if it would have been the same if he hadn't been sick. When you face something like that, everything else just looks a little different in comparison. My parents did so well at putting on a strong front for us, but still - we saw weaknesses children aren't supposed to see, and I know I saw more than he did. They first knew something was wrong when he was six and I was nine. After that, it all happened so fast - it was a way of life before I ever knew there was any other way to be. And then, suddenly ... one day it wasn't.

"I couldn't tell you the moment it all changed for the first time, but I can pinpoint the exact moment that it all changed again. It was three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and my professor called me out of the lab. I walked into that room and saw my parents standing there, and I just knew ... No one needs to tell me that life isn't always fair."

Tears brimmed in her eyes, and she looked very much like the little girl she must have been when it all began. All he could think about was easing her anguish, and he reached a tentative hand out to her.

As if waking from a dream, she jerked away. "No, I'm okay," she stammered, refusing to acknowledge the tremble in her voice. "I'm okay, damn it," she repeated, and stumbled blindly toward the door. Torn, Scott watched her go, then slumped into a chair and buried his head in his hands.

In the hallway, Kara scrubbed fiercely at the moisture in her eyes and rushed in the direction of her room. It didn't matter who saw her now. She just had to get out of there, away from the questions in his gaze ...

She nearly ran over Harm, leaning against the wall. Empathy radiated from his handsome features. "You don't always have to be okay, Kar," he said simply.

With that, her last defenses crumbled. She fell into his arms and cried bitterly for the helplessness that had overtaken her. He held her silently, understanding her pain and fear in a way few others ever would. When the sobs abated, he brushed her hair back from her face. "See?" he told her gently. "The world won't end if you let down your guard once in a while. Take it from someone who knows."

She lifted her head from his chest and offered a small, grateful smile. "How did you know I'd need you?" she asked.

"The same way you knew to be there for both me and Sarah during the trial. It's what friends do." Harm hugged her tightly for a moment, then pulled back. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure where all that came from. One minute I was yelling at Scott, and the next ... I guess something must have triggered all those memories." She shook

her head as if trying to clear it. "It used to happen a lot more often. Anything that upset me would just remind me of the other things in my life that I couldn't control, and I'd get stuck in this loop where all I could think about was the fact that Jase was gone ... But now it's been so long - he never knew about my job at NavAir, about the Phoenix or anything that's happened in my life since. Every once in a while, I get scared that I'm not the same person he knew ... that somehow I'm leaving him behind."

"That's not true," he answered firmly. "It never will be. Not if you can remember him calling you 'Kar-bear' and throwing animal crackers at you. From everything you've told me, I can pretty much promise that he looked up to you, and that he'd be proud of who you've become."

She only sighed. "He wouldn't be so proud of me tonight. He was always more willing to trust than I was. But I can fix this, I think. It's just going to take some work." She leaned up to brush her lips against his cheek. "Thank you. I think I know what I need to do."

The young woman turned around and walked back into the lounge with bright but clear eyes. Scott leaped up from his chair, uncertain how to react. "Kar, I'm sorry, I'm an idiot - "

"No, let me start. I owe you an apology for hitting you with all of my issues like that. I know it came totally out of left field. It happens sometimes, and it's not your responsibility. I hope you can understand that."

"I'll do my best." He shrugged a little, with a hint of a smile. "I have to admit, it was a new experience."

"What, seeing me completely fall apart in front of you?"

"Seeing you be less than perfect," he replied sincerely.

She stared at him for a minute, trying to read the subtext behind his statement. "Why do you say things like that?" she asked quietly. "Why do you find ways to make me sound so much better than I am?"

Despite his affirmation to be honest with her, this was an answer he couldn't fully give. Not yet. "I just call 'em like I see 'em," he said lightly, trying to laugh it off. But she wasn't laughing.

"This wouldn't be so hard if I didn't care about you so damn much," she whispered. "Scott, I believe everything you've told me, today and yesterday. I really do. I know you never wanted anyone to get hurt. I just can't get past the fact that you kept those kinds of secrets from me. That's what hurts, more than anything Holloway ever did. I don't know if I could stand that ever happening again."

Hearing her admit that she cared was enough to lift his courage ever so slightly. Swallowing hard, he asked, "What would you say if I swore on everything holy that I'd never lie to you again? That even if I wanted to protect you more than anything else in the world, I'd let you make your own decisions?"

Sensing the depth of emotion in those words, she turned to directly meet his gaze. "I'd believe you. But I'd still want to know why," she maintained cautiously. "Why is my forgiveness so important? Why am I worth that much?"

Her eyes begged him for the full truth, and something told him that it was now or never. So he took a deep breath and bared his soul to her.

“Because ever since you walked into Flight Systems that first day, I’ve been completely in awe of everything about you. Because I’ve spent a good part of the last two years trying to recapture what it felt like to spend the day watching your precious football games over pizza in your living room. And because even if we can’t be together in any sense of the word, it would still kill me to know that the only woman I’ve ever loved couldn’t trust me with her heart.”

New tears were streaming down her face as she stared at him, searching his features for any sign that his confession might have been false. Almost inaudibly, she said, “Please tell me that was something more than a last-ditch attempt to play on my sympathies.”

“You know it was.” Unsure how to interpret the shock that had overtaken her, he bowed his head. “I’m only saying this now because I owe you the truth. I’ll completely understand if you don’t feel that way anymore, or if you never did. I’m not looking for any kind of answer ...”

“Well, you’re getting one anyway.” In those few seconds, Kara Donnell had made a conscious choice to stop dwelling on the regrets and mistakes of the past. After what he’d just said, she no longer had to convince herself that he’d truly been trying to save her from Halloway. She could see it in him, as clearly as anything. With that knowledge, and the images of what they could have been still sharp in her memory, she crossed over to him in two decisive strides and melded her lips to his.

For a moment, he was paralyzed, stunned that the barriers between them had vanished so quickly. But as the sheer bliss of it registered in his mind, he wrapped his arms around her, knowing instinctively that this time, he’d battle hell itself before he’d let her go.

At long last, she broke the contact, eyes shining. “Not exactly how I pictured that happening,” she admitted. “But I’ll take it.”

Scott was still reeling from the idea that she’d ever pictured it at all. “Now I think I’m the one who needs to ask why,” he managed to say.

“Because the hardest part of it all for me has been believing that I’d let myself fall for someone who didn’t care about me enough to give me the truth. And because now that I know the real truth, I want more than just my best friend back. I want to prove that second chances do exist. For both of us.”

Relief and tenderness evident in his expression, he reached out to brush the tearstains away. “Why couldn’t we have figured this out two years ago, before all this started?”

“Like I said before. Circumstances.” Kara smiled, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “Do you have any idea where to go from here?”

“Not really. You?”

“Not a one. But I think we should try to get through this investigation before we make any decisions, all right?”

“I guess after all this time, a couple more days can’t hurt.” He shook his head, the

corner of his mouth turned up in a rueful smirk. "But if that's all that stands between us and a long-overdue conversation, I vote we just patch the damn plane up with duct tape."

Something clicked in her mind then, and an idea began to take shape. The transformation was clear to him: he'd seen her inspiration strike before. "What is it?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure yet. Something I saw at the crash site." Stepping back from his embrace, she picked up her notebook from the table. "I'm sorry. I have to check this out, or it'll bug me all night."

"Anyone ever tell you that you have a knack for killing the mood?"

She smiled apologetically. "Come with me?"

"You think I'm letting you out of my sight now?"

2108 EST Flight line

After showing their IDs to the young airman standing guard, Scott followed Kara over to a large bin on a table in the hangar. In here, the smallest pieces of debris, no matter how seemingly insignificant, had been collected and catalogued. "What are we looking for?" he asked, watching her scan through the neatly-filed plastic bags.

"Duct tape. Or something close to it. I remember seeing a ball of it on the ground a ways from the wreckage. Hopefully these guys were thorough enough to pick it up."

"If it was part of the crash at all, it must have been from inside the cockpit. There's no way the Air Force would let a plane get off the ground with one of its components jury-rigged together with tape."

"I don't think it was holding anything together. I'm afraid it may have done just the opposite." She lifted one bag out of the stack, and they examined the twisted strip of plastic adhesive tape inside. It was folded back on itself over and over, but as she held it up to the light, a glint of metal poked out from within.

"Is that what I think it is?" Scott asked in a low voice.

Unconsciously holding her breath, Kara took the knot of tape out of the bag and pulled it apart to reveal a tiny cylinder, smaller than a pencil: the missing Pitot probe.

"I don't know why I noticed it, but I should have put it together before. Airspeed data would be pretty out of whack if one set of probes was covered by a piece of tape, don't you think?"

"If that were the case, how could they have flown for two hours prior to the accident without any problems?"

"Maybe the computer realized it wasn't getting any data during preflight and blocked

that set.”

“But when the system dumped in flight, without the weight-on-wheels conditions ...”

“ ... the reset started *everything* over, and as soon as that data came in, the computer panicked.”

“It makes sense,” he said thoughtfully. “It doesn’t get Randall entirely off the hook. The system reset still shouldn’t have been necessary. But if the probes hadn’t been fouled, there wouldn’t have been an emergency.”

“Problem is, what the hell was a four-inch piece of tape doing on the horizontal tail in the first place? And please don’t suggest sabotage, or I’ll lose all faith in the world.”

He didn’t answer right away, peering a little closer at the tape, and a sudden, terrible idea occurred to him. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he breathed. “Kar, you’re not going to believe this.”

2114 EST
VOQ

Harm glanced up from his notes on the Allister court-martial to see Mac hovering near the foot of their bed, looking hesitant. “Don’t tell me you’re hungry again after five slices of pizza,” he commented good-naturedly, but the teasing manner faded as he realized she wasn’t sharing in it. “Hon? Something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. Do you have a minute?”

“For you? I hope that’s a joke.” He shoved aside the open files and pulled her down to sit next to him. “Talk to me, Sarah. You’ve been too quiet lately.”

“I do need to talk to you about something,” she began. *Why is it that I have no idea how to say this?* “But it’s nothing bad. I promise.”

“Then why do you look so nervous?” he asked gently.

Before she could respond, the phone rang. Harm pointedly ignored it until she shook her head, picked up the receiver and handed it to him. “Duty calls. This can wait.”

He narrowed his eyes, still skeptical, but acquiesced. “Rabb. Kar, your timing still sucks. Say that again? Now? You do realize the extreme déjà-vu factor in this, don’t you? All right, just a sec.” He covered the receiver with his hand and spoke to his wife. “Kara and Scott apparently called a truce and subsequently had a brainstorm. They want us to track down Master Sergeant Lane and meet them at the hangar.”

Mac shivered a little. Déjà vu indeed. There was something eerily similar between this night and one two years earlier, the one that had nearly taken the life of the man she loved. Sensing her thoughts, he laid a hand on her arm. “This isn’t like that,” he said resolutely. “But if you want to finish this conversation first, just say the word. Those two can

take care of themselves for a few more minutes.”

“No, we should go,” she insisted. “Don’t worry. We’ll have plenty of time later.”

“Whatever you say.” Reluctantly, he lifted the handset again. “We’re on our way.”

2155 EST Flight line

The engineers were standing in a corner of the hangar conferring when the other three arrived. Harm went directly to Kara and folded his arms. “This had better be good, civvie,” he informed her quietly.

“Did I interrupt some hot VOQ lovin’?” she returned, with neither humor nor malice in her voice.

“I still don’t know what you interrupted. But I repeat, this had better be good.”

“Not good. But important.” She tilted her head toward Scott. “You start. It’s your theory.”

“Sergeant, when this plane was in the Air Logistics Center last week, you said your crew gave it a new coat of paint?”

The depot chief nodded, puzzled. “That’s right, sir. It’s standard procedure every eighteen months. This was one of the first ones to hit that mark.”

“What is the procedure for painting an aircraft?”

“What you’d expect, I guess. We clean all the surfaces, cover up the stuff that shouldn’t get painted, and spray the whole thing down with a pneumatic paint gun. It’s high-pressure; gives it a nice, even finish. There’s even a spec on how thick the paint has to be.”

“The ‘stuff that shouldn’t get painted’ would be?”

“The canopy, the landing gear, some of the control surfaces. And the Pitot probes. You get paint in those, your day’s wrecked.”

“Same result if they’re blocked by tape,” Kara stated.

Lane frowned. “Ma’am?”

“Your crew covers the probes with tape to make sure they don’t get clogged by paint, and they remove the tape when the work is complete. But if a piece of tape never got removed, the blocked probes would give incorrect data to the flight computer.”

Lane paled slightly, but kept his composure. “We do all our check-out procedures by the manual,” he said unconvincingly. “We look over every inch of those birds - I do the final

checks myself ... something like that would get noticed ...”

Silently, she handed him the broken probe, mired in a strip of tape with tiny flecks of paint.

The realization that shattered Master Sergeant Anthony Lane’s world at that moment was awful to watch. He struggled for words, attempting to comprehend how such a minuscule oversight could have brought about such devastating consequences. “We all checked it,” he repeated, looking from Kara to Scott and back. “I don’t understand.”

“Everyone makes mistakes, Sergeant,” Mac offered, the explanation sounding weak even to her own ears. “Even the aircrew missed it on their walk-around. We try to do everything we can to keep these kinds of things from happening, but nothing and no one is perfect.”

“With all due respect, ma’am, that doesn’t help a whole lot.” He turned to the attorneys with dull, lifeless eyes. “What’s going to happen now?”

“No one is blaming you,” Harm asserted, his tone leaving no room for doubt. “There were other contributing factors in the crash. But there will have to be an investigation of the T-5 shop at Ok-City. If everything was done according to the tech orders, the impact shouldn’t be too severe, but a lot of people will want to know how something like this could go undetected.”

“I’m one of them, sir,” Lane replied softly. After taking a few seconds to recover a semblance of decorum, he drew himself to attention. “Permission to get out of here and get all this straight in my head, sir?”

Harm nodded. “Dismissed.” As the NCO turned to leave, the senior officer spoke up again. “Sergeant, you didn’t get those men killed.”

Lane paused, but didn’t turn back. “Maybe not, sir. But it was my duty to keep them in the air, and I didn’t do that, either.”

When he’d gone, the foursome stood there, unsure how to proceed. “A piece of tape,” said Mac, almost in disbelief. “Some kid on the crew forgot to strip off a piece of tape, and this is the result.”

“It’s a business of inches,” Harm mused. “Sometimes it takes something like this to remind us.”

“Do you think Kimberly Cedrick will ever be able to understand the fact that her father died because of a simple mistake?” Kara wondered aloud.

“He died serving his country. Nobody can deny that.” Scott leaned against the wall, exhaustion beginning to set in. “I guess we might as well wait until morning to present all this to the board.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Just then, the door banged open, and the security guard stumbled in. “Sir, ma’am,”

he gasped, catching his breath. "We've got a situation."

The officers shared a look of surprise. "What kind of 'situation', Airman?" Mac demanded.

"Ma'am, the master sergeant asked me for my weapon. I told him I wasn't allowed to lose possession of it while on duty, but he ordered me ... Once I gave it to him, he just said, 'I'm sorry', and whacked me over the head with it. He took off up the access ladder - I think he's still on the roof."

Harm closed his eyes. This night wasn't over. "Have you reported to your C.O.?"

"Yes, sir - another detachment's on its way."

"Make sure they send a counselor of some type," Harm directed, already moving toward the door. "The master sergeant just learned that he was involved in this mishap. He's not in the most stable place right now."

"Watch your step up there, sir. It's not reinforced everywhere."

"You're not going up there," Mac exclaimed, suddenly worried.

"I don't think we have much choice." He squeezed her hand. "If he really intends to kill himself, or if he's lost it, we might not have much time."

"I'm going with you," Scott stated bluntly.

"I don't think that's - "

"Commander, I've got plenty of experience with guilt. Let me do at least one positive thing with it."

After a brief pause, he relented. "All right, come on."

"Be careful," Kara added impulsively, not knowing what else to say. The young man flashed a reassuring smile, then disappeared through the doorway.

Harm moved to follow, but at the foot of the ladder, Mac seized his arm. "You have to be more than careful," she pleaded, the fear in her expression stronger than he'd seen from her in years. "You have to promise me that I won't wake up tomorrow without you. Promise me, Harm."

He was shocked to see her tears. This was hardly the first time either of them had willingly entered a tense situation. They'd never been particularly happy about it, but ...

"Sarah, please tell me what's going on," he implored her.

"It's different now," she whispered. "It's not just you anymore. It's - not just us."

Their eyes locked together, and through that inexplicable connection, he understood

what she'd been trying to tell him.

"Oh, God," he breathed. "You're - ?"

Through the tears, she gave him the slightest trace of a smile. "Yeah, flyboy," she said softly.

The flood of emotions that coursed through him in that instant threatened to block out any other logical thought. He desperately wanted to forget where he was and just focus on the amazing, overwhelming thing he'd just learned. He wanted to tell her a hundred different things at once. But he couldn't afford to do that just yet: and besides, she already knew. So they continued to say it all with their eyes.

"I love you," he declared, his voice nearly breaking.

"I love you. Go on, go."

Without another word, he climbed up the ladder and was out of sight. Kara watched Mac with a wary look, but said nothing. She had enough on her mind. The two women waited silently, each lost in their own private prayers.

... High above them, Scott approached the figure on the roof with caution. Lane was sitting on a small ledge, staring out into nothing, the nine-millimeter pistol all but forgotten in his hand. "You don't really want to die today," the engineer began.

Lane jerked up and instinctively raised the gun toward him. Almost as quickly, he slumped back and dropped his aim. "Sorry," he said listlessly, gesturing with his other hand. "Don't know why I did that."

"It's all right. I know you don't want to hurt anyone." Scott kept his voice level, standing a few yards back.

"How do you know I don't want to hurt *me*?"

"Because you don't need the gun for that. You could just step off the edge."

Lane's mouth twisted in a humorless grin. "Yeah, well, maybe I want to make sure I do it right the first time."

"You don't have any sins to atone for," Scott told him. "Being human isn't a crime."

"Tell that to the major's wife and daughter. I mean, Christ - I thought I was so good at what I did. We got a unit commendation two months ago, you believe that? But if I can't find a God-damned piece of tape, what the hell good am I? How am I supposed to look at myself in the mirror knowing that I was responsible for the deaths of two good men, men who wore the same uniform I do?"

"I know that's what it feels like now," he said quietly. "It's not something that goes away, but it can get better. That much I know."

"Oh, you do? Did you ever make a mistake that cost lives? Do you have personal

experience with having the deaths of your own people on your conscience?”

“No, he doesn’t,” came Harm’s voice from behind them. “But I do.”

They both turned slightly, and Scott was as surprised as Lane. “There was a reason I gave up flying,” the commander continued, as calmly and dispassionately as if he was reciting a legal statute. “About twelve years ago, I came down with a bug while my ship was in port. I was sick as a dog for a while, but after a week or so, the flight surgeon cleared me for duty, and I got back in the air. Problem was, the virus damaged my vision, and it was the kind of thing that not many instruments can detect. One night I was coming in for a trap when I realized I couldn’t focus on the deck. The Navy has a name for it when you come in too low: a ramp strike. You blue-suiters would probably just call it a crash. When the smoke cleared, I had a few broken bones. But my RIO was dead.”

There was a pause before Lane responded. “After something like that, you stayed in?”

“Believe me, there are still times when I wonder what I should have done differently - if I could have recognized the problem earlier, if I could have controlled the aircraft better on the way down. For a long time, I didn’t even want to get near another F-14. But here’s the thing you have to realize, Sergeant. As horrible as that day was, it didn’t erase the five years I’d spent performing my duty well. And it didn’t keep me from finding a new way to continue my duty. It took a long time, and a lot of pain, but eventually I realized that the only thing holding me back was my own guilt.”

Lane shook his head. “I just keep hearing the lieutenant in my head,” he murmured. “He clapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘That’s a good-looking ride you’ve got there. Mind if we take it for a spin?’ That’s the last I saw of either of them. I can’t keep hearing that - I’ll go insane.”

“I know. Sometimes I still hear Mace complaining about the baked chicken we had for dinner that night. But I’m still here, Sergeant, and I’m okay. I don’t relive it every day anymore. It’s just something that will always be a part of me, like everything else.” Harm moved closer, wanting the other man to see just how serious he was. “Don’t let anything convince you that you don’t have anything to offer this world. Even this.”

He held his hand out and waited patiently. After a long time, Lane handed him the gun, and he removed the clip. “You won’t be alone,” Scott promised. “Where you go from here is up to you, but as long as you wear the uniform, you won’t ever be alone.”

With a defeated nod, the master sergeant rose and started down the ladder. A small crowd had gathered, but he was met not by a squad of security police, but by a kindly-looking major from the medical division. She spoke quietly to him and led him away, toward a waiting car. The other two men followed him down the ladder, and Scott drew a weary hand over his eyes. “Well, Commander, I think - ”

But Harm wasn’t listening. He scanned the crowd anxiously, his gaze finally coming to rest on the most important person in his life. As she started toward him, he closed the distance in an instant and kissed her powerfully. “You’re sure?” he asked without preamble.

Mac nodded, a shy grin creeping into her warm brown eyes. “I’m sure. I just couldn’t figure out how to tell you.”

“Sweetheart, you could have stapled a note to my forehead and I’d still be ecstatic.”

Any reply she might have given was silenced by his lips on hers again.

A few yards away, Scott made a path through the huddle of people to find Kara. The young woman was leaning on the railing of a nearby access ramp, turned away from the activity. "Hey," he said simply.

She looked up, and although her expression remained carefully neutral, there was immense relief in her eyes. "Is it really over this time?"

"Not for Sergeant Lane, fortunately. But for us, there's nothing left to do but tie up loose ends. Which means we've got time to have that conversation."

"That was only a couple of hours ago, wasn't it?" She shook her head and straightened up, taking a deep breath. "To borrow a favorite word from Mac, this is going to be complicated."

"You have a gift for the understatement," he replied dryly. "For one thing, I currently live in Texas, and you live in Maryland. For another ... I don't want to put any pressure on you. At this point, I'm just glad we're on speaking terms."

"I'm not wild about the long-distance idea, either," she confessed. "I'm not sure how we'll figure much out that way. But if that's the way it has to be, then so be it. Otherwise we may not get a chance like this again."

Allowing himself a flare of hope, he asked, "So you want to give it - us - a try?"

"I'm not saying it'll be a bed of roses. But if anything was ever worth fighting for ..."

She trailed off, not sure how to finish. It didn't matter: he understood, and silently thanked whoever might be listening for this chance. Oblivious to the scene playing out, the NTSB deputy wandered up to them.

"Nicely done, you two," Sedena commented. "The security commander called me out, and Lane just filled me in. This is going to start a firestorm on the Air Force end of things, but at least we've got some answers now. You wouldn't by any chance want to come do this for a living, would you? The Midwest NTSB office could definitely use some new blood."

Kara smiled. "Thanks, but I'm so Navy by now that my parents think I've enlisted."

A light bulb went off in Scott's head, and he decided to keep his answer in the same half-joking tone. "Got any openings at headquarters?" he inquired.

Sedena's brow wrinkled. "Friends in the D.C. area?"

"Something like that."

Kara began to comprehend the implications of that idea. After all, the District was less than two hours from Pax River.

The older man realized his seriousness and matched it. "If you're really interested, I'll

call headquarters tomorrow, once all this settles down. We can discuss options.”

Scott hesitated. “The thing is, my record’s not exactly spotless.”

“What are we looking at? Traffic tickets, or armed assault?”

“More like cheating on an exam and getting blackmailed into staying quiet way too long on something.”

Sedena studied him for a minute, unfazed. “After something like this, I think your batting average is about to go up. Come talk to me in the morning.” He shook their hands and returned to the group.

Finally, Kara spoke up. “Am I egocentric, or did you just offer to change jobs and move halfway across the country to be closer to me?”

“Well, to be honest, I wasn’t really loving life in the greater San Antonio area.” He offered a self-deprecating smile. “After the career moves I’ve made, I wouldn’t consider this a sacrifice.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

Scott looked down at his feet, then back up at her. “Kar, I’ll get as close as you want me to,” he said honestly. “No more, and definitely no less.”

In response, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck, resting her cheek against his. “This is how close I want you,” she whispered.

They just held on to each other for a measureless time, clinging tightly to the promise of a brighter future. After a while, they walked hand in hand back to their friends.

Alone near the hangar doors, Harm and Mac were entwined in a decidedly unprofessional embrace, lips still locked. Amused, the two civilians waited a few seconds before Kara cleared her throat. “Good lord, you two. Is making out suddenly about to go out of style?”

“Stuff it, Kar,” said Harm cheerfully, not releasing his hold. “I am exactly where I want to be.”

Mystified, she looked to Scott, who only shrugged. “Don’t ask me. Guess the spark doesn’t fade for everyone.”

Mac looked slyly up at her husband. “What do you think? Should we tell them?”

“You couldn’t figure out how to tell *me*, and now you’re all gung-ho to tell them?”

“You *guys* ...”

Mac laughed out loud at Kara’s impatience and leaned back against a broadly-grinning Harm. “I’m pregnant.”

Kara's jaw dropped, stunned and delighted. "Oh, my God!"

"Funny, that's what I said," Harm remarked, right before she launched a flying hug at him. The couple happily accepted congratulations from both of them, fairly glowing at the prospect.

"Christ, what a day, huh?"

"Again, the understatement of the century."

Mac smiled and gazed out at the quiet flight line with an expression of contentment. "I think it's time to get some sleep. We'll have to wrap all this up in the morning, and after that ... well, we've got a lot to do. And a lot to look forward to."

Kara cast a glance over at Scott, only to find her thoughts reflected in his eyes. "Yeah," she said softly. "I think you're right."

As they began the walk back to the Q, she linked her hand through his again, thinking about the strange twists their lives had taken in the span of a few days. Rather than feeling emotionally drained, as she'd expected, there was instead a feeling of anticipation. Hope, even. One step at a time, they were getting closer to something special. A lot to look forward to, indeed.

Epilogue: months later
0502 EST
Lexington Park, Maryland

The brash, incessant ringing of the phone brought Kara Donnell only halfway out of her dream-filled sleep. As she hauled herself out of bed and stumbled across the small apartment, her still-fogged brain attempted to figure out what was going on. "Deja freaking vu ..." she muttered as she reached for the phone. "Hello?"

She listened for a moment, scrawling a few notes on a pad, and was back in bed before her boyfriend's awareness could catch up. "Who in God's name was that?" he mumbled, squinting up at her.

"Harm."

Waking up a little more fully, Scott propped himself up on one elbow. "Yeah?"

"Noelle Elisabeth Rabb, six pounds, thirteen ounces. Everyone's fine, although Harm sounded like he was coming down off a major meltdown. I told them we'd be up to see them on Sunday."

He smiled and pulled her in closer. "You could always stay Sunday night up there with me ... take Monday off ..."

"Hold that thought until morning. I need some more sleep." No sooner had she rolled over than the phone rang again. "Oh, for Christ's sake ... Hello?"

"Ms. Donnell?"

"Speaking."

"Would you verify your clearance, ma'am?"

*** THE END ***