



A Question Unanswered IV: Of Duty and Sacrifice

Rating: R (language)

Classification: JAG Story, Romance (Harm/Mac)

Spoilers: "Heroes" (slightly), "The Black Jet" (ditto)

Author's Notes: Yes, Kara and Scott are back for yet another installment, but they won't completely be the focus this time. If you don't know who they are, you need to go back and read the first three stories in this series, preferably in order. Also - and far more importantly - I once again offer the disclaimer that I don't know nearly enough about world politics and cultures to pull this off accurately. I'm going pretty much by current events and the seat of my pants. The things these characters say under stress (especially Harm and Kara) aren't intended to be taken as gospel - they're not even necessarily my actual opinions. That being said, if they say something utterly ignorant (or worse, insulting), I sincerely apologize.

1723 EST
Rossllyn, Virginia

"Oh, no, you don't, silly girl! Ellie! Get back here!"

Seven-month-old Noelle Rabb giggled and continued on her way, scrambling across the kitchen floor as fast as her hands and knees would carry her. Her mother hastily shoved aside the box she'd been rooting through and chased after the little girl. "I swear, you move faster than a recruit at chow time..."

"Da!" Noelle replied triumphantly, pointing to the door. Mac scooped her up and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Daddy's not home yet, sweetheart. Soon, I promise."

"You promise what?"

"Da!" Noelle cried delightedly, her tiny hands reaching toward the sound of her father's voice. Harm set his cover and briefcase on the table and cheerfully greeted the two women in his life. Mac only shook her head, amused.

"I think she heard you come in. God knows I didn't."

"She's just unusually perceptive. Not to mention brilliant, beautiful..."

Mac smiled as her husband swept their daughter out of her arms and spun her around. Noelle squealed happily and waved her arms. After a few minutes of playing 'airplane', Harm kissed the baby and gently set her down in the playpen so that he could direct his full attention to his wife.

The past few months had changed nearly everything about their lives. They'd moved into the new house shortly before Noelle's birth, and with the responsibility that accompanied having a newborn, more than a few of the home-improvement tasks had fallen behind schedule. Still, it was a real home, with all the warmth and comfort that a real home should have. Mac had taken an open-ended leave of absence from JAG to stay with Noelle, temporarily rendering the 'married officers in the same chain of command' question obsolete. The semi-transfer that had 'officially' taken Harm out of Headquarters had been revoked, and he was often asked to fill in for Admiral Chegwidden, who'd been spending more and more time at the Pentagon lately.

"Any more entertaining rumors about the admiral's next post today?" Mac asked, stepping out of Harm's embrace to check on dinner.

"Forget the rumors. We're on to actual facts now." Taking off his jacket and tie, he went over to open his briefcase. "Word came through this morning - he's getting his third star in April, in preparation for assuming the office of Deputy Chief of Naval Operations."

"Fantastic! Tell him I said congratulations."

"Yeah, it's perfect, since the current CNO is set to retire in less than a year. There's more, too. The new Navy Times has an article on his possible successors at JAG." He handed her the paper, and she scanned down the page. It wasn't a long list, and at the top of it was a familiar name.

" 'Captain Harmon Rabb, Jr. has ten years of service at Headquarters, and his distinguished record includes - ' "

"Skip down a bit. You'll love this part."

She raised an eyebrow, but continued. " ... 'The only factor that might work against Captain Rabb is a number of minor disciplinary marks, the most notable of which involved the firing of an automatic weapon in the courtroom..."

The rest was lost as she dissolved in hysterical laughter. Harm shrugged with an embarrassed grin. "Some things never get forgotten, I guess."

"I bet some PA officer had lots of fun researching that one," Mac replied, wiping tears from her cheeks. "Seriously, is there any reason to think you won't get it?"

"I don't know - I don't want to assume anything." He paused a minute, deciding how best to proceed. "Hon, if you went back to work, your name could be on that list. It's not too late."

"Sure it is. I missed the last round of promotions because of maternity leave, and by the time the next round comes up, all of this will be decided. Besides, right now, being home

Athletics', a backpack lying at her feet, she looked no different from the dozens of other University of Virginia students milling around. Mac, however, knew better. Kara Donnell was in fact an employee of the Department of Defense and the Naval Air Systems Command, with a well-earned reputation for knowing her way around the engines of the Navy's fighter aircraft.

"I'd forgotten how much college sucks," she replied promptly, rolling her eyes. "It's just like undergrad all over again. Granted, I like getting up late and wearing jeans every day, but if it's not homework, it's a program, or a midterm ... I'm telling you, if the Navy hadn't picked up the tab for this, I'd be back at Pax River so fast your head would spin."

"It's only for another term," Mac pointed out with a smile. "After that, you'll have enough school to last you for a while."

"God, I hope so. You'd think a graduate degree in aeronautical engineering would be enough for a lifetime." Kara reached down and pulled Noelle onto her lap. "It'll be worth it, though. After I wrap this up, I've got a decent shot at getting the lead for propulsion integration on the Phoenix program."

"Wow. Nice going, civvie."

"Thanks. Now I just have to actually get it. How about you? Is this little princess keeping you busy?" She tickled Noelle's feet, eliciting a high-pitched laugh.

"Oh, most definitely. I swear, every time I turn around, she's doing something new. The rolls of film are piling up, but I never get around to developing them." Mac leaned back in her chair and took a sip of water. "And she's got her dad absolutely wrapped around her little finger. God help us when she gets old enough to figure that out."

"Speaking of Harm, I hear he's the top choice to take over for Admiral Chegwiddden."

"Word travels fast. Yeah, it'd be a big step, so he's kinda nervous about it. But it'll work out."

Kara didn't respond for a moment, studying her friend a little more carefully than before. "You miss it, don't you?" she asked quietly.

"JAG? Of course I do. But I couldn't pass up the chance to watch my daughter grow up, could I?" Under the younger woman's unflinching gaze, she surrendered. "Sometimes I get a little stir-crazy," she admitted. "I go over Harm's cases with him a lot, and I start thinking about how I'd argue them differently, and ... sometimes I just want to feel useful, and doing laundry doesn't cut it. Does that make any sense?"

"Sure it does. But you're being a mother. There aren't many things more useful than that."

"Did your mom stay at home with you and your brother when you were little?"

Kara nodded with a shrug. "For a few years. She's a teacher, though, so even when she worked, she was home pretty early, and the summers were easy. But I don't believe you have to be at home every minute to be a good mother. It's a balancing act, I guess. Like

everything else.”

“How long do you think you’d stay home with a baby? Hypothetically speaking?”

She gave a short, rueful laugh. “Hypothetical is the only language in which that concept works at the moment. Right now I’m more worried about passing turbomechanics than any major life-changing events.”

Mac raised an eyebrow, picking up on the note of resignation there. “How’s Scott, by the way?”

“The usual. He just got back in town from Chicago - they were investigating a runway incident at O’Hare.” She didn’t offer anything further, which only confirmed Mac’s suspicions.

“All right, fess up. What’s going on with you two?”

“It’s not a big thing. It’s just - I moved up here at the beginning of the school year, and for a while, everything was going great. We could see each other more often than just weekends, and I really felt like we got a lot closer. Then things sort of ground to a halt. I mean, we’ve been together for over a year, and before all that craziness, we’d been friends for two more. I realize that we don’t have what you’d call a normal relationship, but am I really jumping the gun by wanting to know where we stand?”

“As in where you’re headed for the future?”

“Something like that. I’m twenty-six, and Scott just turned thirty. I’m not asking for a ring or anything, but I can’t get him to even acknowledge the possibility of life beyond ‘dating’. It’s just frustrating.”

“Guys are idiots sometimes,” Mac offered sympathetically, and Kara grinned wryly.

“Tell me about it. Anyway, like I said, it’s not that big a deal. I’ll get some info out of him eventually. Moving on. You said you had a favor to ask?”

“Looking for a last-minute babysitter for tomorrow night. Our regular one canceled.”

“No problem at all. We’ll have a blast, won’t we, Ellie?” She lifted the baby up for a hug, and Noelle’s chubby arms did their best to comply. Mac watched her and smiled wistfully. This was a side of Kara Donnell she wouldn’t have initially expected. Despite her one-of-the-guys attitude and sports expertise, the young engineer was a natural with kids. Maybe she - or Harm, probably - should to talk to Scott, try to knock some sense into him. It would be worth a shot, anyway.

After lunch, Mac offered Kara a ride to class in her relatively-new, decidedly non-Corvette-like Jetta. Yes, life was different these days. She continued home to Rosslyn by way of the community park, and while Noelle scooted around on the grass, she leaned against a tree with her new book.

Before long, the shadow of an approaching figure put her parental sensors on instant alert. Reaching for the baby out of instinct, she raised her eyes to meet those of Clayton

Webb.

"Christ, Webb, you scared me. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," the counter-intelligence director of the CIA replied easily. Noelle beamed up at him with a wide grin, and he shook his head. "God, she really is 'daddy's little girl', isn't she?"

"Just your luck - more Rabbs to drive you up a wall." Mac smiled, but there was suspicion in her gaze. "Come on, out with it. You tracked me down for a reason, I assume."

"I did. Care to take a walk?"

Still wary, she packed up the toys and strapped Noelle into the stroller. They started down the path that led away from the busy street nearby.

"For a couple of weeks now, we've been keeping an eye on a group of students at American University. Ostensibly, they're a society for minority political science majors - primarily of Arabic and Middle Eastern descent - but some of the members have been linked to a series of interesting Internet postings."

"There's nothing illegal about words," Mac pointed out mildly.

"Very true. These words, however, take the form of threats. Specifically, threats against elected officials and military personnel here in Washington. Remember Senator Lakehurst's car accident last spring? We traced the other driver back to these guys."

"You're kidding. A student group? That's a little conspicuous, isn't it?"

"They've been extremely careful about covering their tracks so far. It took us until last week to positively connect one of the messages to a registered member of the group, but when we did, a lot of things clicked. And they're not all students. Some of the aliases that are coming up have been connected with the Iranian dissident group Jaban."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Isn't that one of the factions that cropped up after Al Qaeda supposedly disbanded?" At his grim nod, she let out a long breath. "Jesus. What are they doing at American U?"

"Hiding in plain sight, apparently. Students can get access to a lot more information than you'd expect, under the guise of research. The thing is, they don't act like your typical garden-variety fundamentalists. They don't seem to go in for splashy, media-frenzy stuff. They're more likely to simply target the higher-ups that push the policies they don't like, and do so fairly quietly."

"Like Lakehurst."

"And Admiral Reynolds. We think he's next on their list."

Mac took a moment to let the concept sink in. Admiral Warren Reynolds had just been confirmed as the Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he had been one of the key planners of the recently-ended action in Afghanistan. He was a vocal advocate of

military action against terrorist networks in other countries, which made him an unsurprising target.

"If they're aiming for the Vice-Chairman, they'll either have to move fast or get him while he's overseas. Last I heard, he was scheduled for a major conference with the European Union military folks."

"He leaves a week from Monday. If our information is accurate, they'll make a move before then. So you can imagine how short we are on time."

She stopped walking and met his gaze squarely. "Clayton, I'm almost afraid to ask what this has to do with me."

"I had a feeling you'd say something like that. Before you yell at me, though, keep in mind that this comes from somewhere way above me, all right?" He sighed. "We're looking for someone to sniff around on campus for us, using the cover of being a new faculty member. Both the Agency and the Bureau are stretched to the limit right now operationally, and the list of outside people we can depend on is pretty short. Adding the requirement of being able to eavesdrop in Farsi, and - well..."

"Is this a joke? Not that this would fit into my job description anyway, but I'm temporarily on reserve duty, remember?"

"So you ought to have more time to come out and play," Webb suggested wryly, receiving a sharp glare in response.

"More time. Clearly you have no experience with children. And this is decidedly not 'play' time we're talking about. I'm not qualified for the kind of undercover work this is shaping up to be, and even if I was, I have a daughter who needs me. I'm not quite as expendable as I used to be."

"I have never thought of you as expendable, Mac. I tried to tell the powers that be all of this, but they insisted I come out here anyway. The fact is, we simply don't have any other good options. We need to know what these guys are capable of. The political climate right now is pretty unstable. If the action in Afghanistan hadn't ended when it did, we might have been facing a serious shift in public opinion. These guys know that. They know that if they keep sniping at specific VIP-types and keep away from generalized mass murder, we won't be able to get enough public support for retaliation. We'll be hamstrung, and they'll have carte blanche to do whatever the hell they want. We have to smoke them out before things get ugly."

Mac gazed off into the trees for a moment, considering the implications. This would be far from an easy task, but it was a vitally important one. Her earlier words about wanting to feel useful were ringing in the background - but this wasn't about her. It was about protecting the security of a country and the life of a fellow officer. Active or not, a Marine's duty was unwavering.

"All right," she said quietly. "I'm not promising you anything, but I'll discuss it with Harm tonight."

"Mac, he's not your protector."

At that, her eyes flashed. "Webb, take what you can get, all right? I don't make decisions that affect my family without discussing it with them. I'll call you tonight, and we'll figure out where to go from there. That's all you're going to get out of me."

"All right. Thank you. I'll talk to you then."

He wandered off, leaving her to contemplate just what she was getting herself into.

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1822 EST
Rosslyn, Virginia

Harm realized that he was staring like a fool, but he'd chosen not to care. His wife shook her head, amused. "It's just a new dress, flyboy. Nothing here you haven't seen before."

"And a few things I wouldn't mind seeing again," he countered, pulling her in for a deep kiss. She responded, but soon stepped back and gave him a shove toward the bedroom.

"Come on, get a move on. Our reservations are at seven."

"You said Kara's on her way over?"

"She'll be here in eight minutes." Kara's sense of timing was not as finely honed as her own - the younger woman did rely on a watch, after all - but in their experience, she'd never been so much as a minute late to anything. "It's going to be nice to get an evening to ourselves for a change."

"How was your day?" called Harm from the closet, as he searched for that blue silk tie she liked so much.

"Weird, actually. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Clayton Webb came to see me this afternoon."

Instantly, the tie was forgotten as he rapidly stepped out of the closet. "Say what? Webb? What does he want now?"

"A temp spy who speaks Farsi, apparently." She relayed what the intelligence official had told her, and watched his features darken with every word. By the end, he was shaking his head.

"I can't believe he had the nerve to try and drag you into this. I know we've always caved in and bailed him out before, but this one really tops the list."

"Harm, I didn't say no," she began uncertainly, causing him to spin around and face her.

"What do you mean, you didn't say no??"

"I didn't say yes, either," she maintained. "But there's a lot at stake here. Maybe I should at least give it a shot."

"Are you kidding? Sarah, you're talking about going undercover with people that have no problem with killing anyone who gets in their way. It would be a substantial risk even for a trained operative. For you, it's beyond risky."

"Keep your voice down," she pleaded, but Noelle had already picked up on the growing intensity of the conversation. From her playpen in the adjoining room, she began babbling insistently, and Harm went to retrieve her. He returned with the little girl in one arm and his briefcase in the other. Deftly opening the case one-handed, he tossed a file on the bed. She opened it, and drew a sharp breath at the photograph inside.

"This came in yesterday from Diego Garcia. A Red Cross worker in Kandahar was stoned to death by the local police because they found a letter from her brother on the Eisenhower. They killed her simply because her brother was an American serviceman. These are the guys you want to get chatty with?"

"You're over-generalizing things. And I didn't say I wanted to. I said maybe I should." A surge of frustration flushed her cheeks as she searched for a way to explain. "Clay's right. If we don't find a way to stop these targeted assassinations, no one will be safe. This is the part of the war that you can't fight with bombers and infantry units. The Agency needs - "

"The Agency needs to find its own damn guinea pigs!" Instantly, his tone softened as Noelle began to cry, upset by her parents' shouting. "Oh, God, sweetheart, I'm sorry," he soothed, stroking her dark hair tenderly. "I'm just trying to tell your mom that I don't want her to leave us lonely."

"That isn't fair," Mac said quietly, watching the two of them together. "I'm still a Marine, and I can't use Ellie as an excuse to shirk my responsibilities."

"You can when they're not your responsibilities to begin with. This is not your job, and you don't have any obligation to Webb or anyone else."

"I have a responsibility to myself! I have to be able to look at myself in the mirror and not feel like I've let people down by stepping back. Damn it, I didn't take an oath that said 'to protect and defend and do housework'!"

As soon as she'd said it, she wished she could pluck the words right out of the air and bury them forever. She wished she could look anywhere but into her husband's wounded eyes. "Harm, I didn't mean that. I - "

"I think you did," he said softly, setting Noelle down on the bed. "And I think that means we both have some things to think about."

He left the room without another word, and she heard his footsteps on the stairs before the door opened and shut. She sank onto the bed and gathered the still-whimpering baby into her arms, determined to hold back her own tears. She knew better than to go after him right away. Maybe in a little while, after they'd both had time to organize their thoughts. After five years of partnership and three years of marriage, they'd both come to realize that they were too strong-willed to coexist without the occasional argument. But this was their first real fight since Noelle's birth, and it was hitting her hard.

"What do I do now, Ellie?" she asked her daughter, clutching her against her chest. "Do I

stay here with you and Daddy, where I'm safe, or do I do something hard and try to make it safe for someone else?"

"Ma," Noelle replied tearfully, her clumsy fingers reaching for her mother's necklace. Mac lifted the chain and looked at the Marine Corps ring that hung from it.

"That's what I thought," she whispered.

After a few minutes, the sound of the front door opening alerted her, and she went downstairs to begin her apology. But it wasn't Harm who'd entered. Kara dropped her purse on the couch and tilted her head toward the door. She didn't comment on the clearly-tense situation. "He's outside," she said simply.

Mac nodded and bit her lip. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all. That's why I'm here. Come on, Ellie-bean." Kara took the baby into the living room, while Mac squared her shoulders and pushed the door open.

He was sitting on the porch railing, staring off into the fading sunlight. The pain she'd unintentionally caused was plainly visible, and she hated herself for it. He didn't lift his gaze at her approach.

"You know, I never thought I'd be here," he mused, watching the neighbor boys chase each other around the yard across the street. "I thought I had to choose between my career and my life, and despite all my ridiculous efforts to the contrary, my life kept coming in second. Then you eventually beat the idea into my head that I could have both. I don't know why I ever thought you'd be happy with anything less for yourself."

"Harm, I'm sorry," she said tentatively, sitting down beside him. "What I said was cruel. I'm not unhappy with my life. I do miss working sometimes, but I know that what I'm doing is the right decision for all of us right now. I love my life. I love it so much that it drives me crazy to think that some people want to take this way of life away from us. If I can do something to keep that from happening..."

"I know." He wrapped his arms around her and rested his head against hers. "It's just that I can't stop thinking about my dad. He knew that he didn't owe it to anyone to stay in the service. He knew he had a family that needed him. But he went anyway, because he believed in what he was doing. And that was the idea that was supposed to comfort my mother and me when he didn't come home. But it wasn't good enough, Sarah. If I had to look Noelle in the eye and tell her that her mother was..." He held her tighter as his voice came dangerously close to breaking. "She needs you, Sarah. I need you."

"I know," she whispered. "I'll be careful. You know I'll do everything I can to stay out of trouble. Someday that little girl of ours is going to have the same kind of pride in us that you have in your father, and I'd like to be around to see it."

They stayed there for a few minutes, just holding on to each other. They'd learned long ago that there were few hardships in this world from which they could not find solace in each other's arms. At last, Harm spoke again, his breath warm against her cheek. "Let me go with you?"

"Harm - "

"Just hear me out. To pull this off, you're going to need a new name, new history, even a new home, but I could still be your husband. I could do some of the background investigating, and I'd be close by if you needed me."

He wondered briefly if she might get angry with him for suggesting that she needed backup. But their faith in each other was too strong for such trivial concerns. "We've never left Ellie like that before."

"It should only be a couple of days, right? What if we asked Kara to stay with her?"

"That's a lot to ask of her, with her course load. But I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have. Bud and Harriet have their hands full as it is, and besides, we'll have to keep it quiet around JAG."

"So we can ask her, and then call Webb." He flashed a rueful grin. "We've already missed our reservations, anyway."

"Never a dull moment around here, is there?"

Inside, Kara was stretched out on the living room floor, amused by Noelle's enthusiastic banging on a brightly-colored xylophone toy. She didn't hear the click of the back door or the soft footfalls through the kitchen. When a shadow flickered across the entryway, however, reflex kicked in. She rolled swiftly to her feet, placing herself between the baby and the door, and then realized she had no idea what to do next. "Who the hell are you?"

"Clayton Webb," he replied, mildly impressed. Apparently everyone was trying to protect little Noelle from him these days. "I'm going to assume that you're Kara Donnell?"

Kara opened her mouth to demand an explanation for that assumption. Belatedly, though, she remembered that she was wearing her Pax River Rec Football sweatshirt, and relaxed slightly. But she'd heard way too many tales of the exploits of Clayton Webb to let her guard down. "Good guess. My turn. I'm going to assume that you have a good reason for barging in here, and that you're probably the reason my friends are having a fight."

"Fairly likely," he admitted. "You have good instincts. Want to come work for me?"

"No freaking way. I'm an engineer, not a spook." She folded her arms and stared him down until Harm and Mac reentered the house.

"It's been a while since you made house calls, Clay," Harm commented. "I see you two have met."

"Something like that," Kara replied warily, taking a seat on the couch. "What's going on, guys?"

"We've got a favor to ask," Mac explained. "We need to do some reconnaissance, and we

need someone to watch Ellie for a couple of days while we do it.”

“Wait, time out,” Webb broke in. “How much are you planning on telling her?” Three exasperated stares fixed on him, and he held up his hands in surrender. “Look, no offense, Ms. Donnell, but this is classified a lot higher than your airplanes.”

“Well, gosh, Director,” Kara drawled with mock innocence. “If Scout’s honor isn’t good enough for you folks, I could always cover my ears when you get to the super-secret part.”

“Give him a break, Kar. It’s his job.” Harm sat down on the arm of the couch, and Noelle promptly attached herself to his leg. “We’ll keep it general, Webb, but she deserves to have at least a clue.”

The young woman listened as they went over the idea, her expression carefully neutral. Finally, she nodded curtly. “If you need me, I’m here. My spring break’s coming up, anyway.”

“You’re not too thrilled with this concept, are you?” Mac asked.

“Since you asked, no, I’m not,” Kara replied bluntly. “I’d much rather be watching Ellie while you two take a weekend in Key West or something. This sounds like a rough gig. Really rough. I know you’re good at what you do, but long term, I’m a pretty poor substitute for Ellie’s parents.”

“We’re careful,” Harm promised, lifting his daughter easily. “I know it looks dangerous, but you know we’re careful.”

“Yes, you are.” She met his gaze squarely. “And despite all your caution, less than two days after I met you, something unexpected happened and you almost died. It’s not you two I worry about. It’s the bad guys.”

“I’ll make sure they’re well covered,” Webb assured, but the couple was clearly a little unnerved. “If there’s even a blip on the radar, we’ll make absolutely sure that they’ll be able to walk away. Everything will be taken care of.”

Kara nodded coolly. “Sounds like you all have some work to do. When should I show up here?”

“Sunday afternoon ought to be fine. We’ll have everything you’ll need ready.”

“Then if you don’t need me tonight, I’ll get going. Structural dynamics homework due tomorrow.” She rose from the couch and leaned over to kiss the baby goodbye. Mac exchanged a glance with her husband and called after her.

“Kara - thank you. I know it’s not ideal, but it’s important. Big picture, and all that.”

“I know. Otherwise you’d have had a harder time convincing me. Night, everyone.”

Intrigued, Webb followed her out into the driveway. “You’re not easily impressed, are

things at NTSB?”

“This is turning into a 24-7 job,” he grouched, and she imagined she could hear him rolling his eyes sky-high. “Actually, you’ll never guess where I’m headed tonight.”

“Outer Mongolia? The moon? Hell in a handbasket?”

“Cute. They’re sending me down to Pax, believe it or not. Apparently some unlucky lieutenant had a flameout on final and came in hard with a planeload of bigwigs from the House Subcommittee on military R & D. Everyone’s all right, but he snapped the damn landing gear on the port side.”

“Bet that spilled their coffee.” She smiled, but hesitated. “You don’t sound too thrilled about going down there. But it’s been a long time since your last adventure at NavAir. Really.”

She’d done her best to say it casually, but she knew the same thought was churning in his mind as well. From her first day on the job at NavAir Flight Systems, over five years ago, the two of them had been inseparable. But the infamous Phoenix incident had severed every link he’d had to that organization: and although she had eventually accepted and forgiven his mistakes, they both knew the Navy didn’t forget.

“I don’t know, Kar,” he sighed. “I told Richards that they probably wouldn’t be too happy to see me, but he swore he’d smooth it over with them. I know how long it’s been, but still...”

“It’ll be fine,” she said resolutely. “All the mil-types have rotated out since then, and a lot of the civilians have shuffled around just as much. If anyone left has a problem with your rep as a kick-ass investigator, screw ‘em. It’s time to move forward.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Was that supposed to be a hint?”

She blinked, caught off-guard. *Shit*. This wasn’t where she’d intended to take this conversation. “A hint?” she echoed lamely.

“Come on, Kara. You’re lousy at playing dumb. ‘Moving forward’? Honestly, I really don’t want to get into this again. Not right now.”

Despite her initial instinct to back off, his comment sparked something, and she felt almost compelled to respond. “Again? Did we ever get into it before?”

“You know what I mean. This whole thing with us, future-wise - I’m just not at a point in my life where I can make that kind of leap. I’m not secure enough with where I am - ”

“Scott, I’m not asking you to run off to Vegas with me. I’d just like to know if someday ... if you see us in the long term.”

There was another, longer silence on the line, long enough that she had to fight back a flush of panic. “Do you really think it could work?” he asked finally, uncertainly. “You’re the girl wonder of the Systems division. You’re one of their rising stars, and I’m their

problem child. I'd bring you down if they knew about us."

"What are we, Romeo and Juliet?" Kara countered, exasperated. "I am not ashamed of being with you, and my career is a totally separate issue. No one is going to throw what happened back in your face. It was three years ago. The only one who's still hung up on it is you."

"So what am I supposed to do? Forget about the fact that I basically betrayed everyone and everything I care about, all because I was afraid? What kind of person would I be if I just 'got over' something like that?"

She stopped for a moment to let herself cool down. It was true that Scott Fairfield had made a grave error in judgment - not once, but twice. His remorse was well earned, and she had no right to trivialize it.

"I didn't say you should forget about it," she replied quietly. "But you can put it in perspective. Who got hurt? Harm? He's fine now, and you can't blame yourself for what happened to him. The program? It was dealt with inside of a week. It could have been a disaster, but it wasn't, and it's history. You have to at least give yourself a fighting chance at being happy."

"And what makes you so sure that 2.5 kids and a house in the suburbs is the answer to that? Come to think of it, when did you turn into the settling-down type? Do Noelle and the perfect Rabb home have you that spellbound?"

The sharp comment cut deeply, worse than she'd thought him capable of. For the first time, she began to question whether the two of them were going in the same direction. Two options presented themselves: get upset or get angry. For better or worse, in Kara's mind, it wasn't even a contest.

"For Christ's sake, Scott! Now you want to blame this on peer pressure? You think there's some secret sisterhood that's brainwashing me into wanting to conform to the stereotypical American dream? I thought you knew me well enough to recognize that my ambitions in life extend a little further than being barefoot and pregnant in the God-damn kitchen!" She took a deep breath and continued more rationally before Noelle could hear too much. "I've spent most of the last year trying to convince you that you do in fact deserve the second chance you got. But it's starting to sound like you don't really even want it. I just don't want us to be in this exact same place ten years from now, wondering why we're not satisfied with the way things are. Why doesn't that make sense?"

"It does, all right? I get it! But that doesn't mean I have any answers for you. Jesus, I've got enough to deal with at work without getting the commitment inquisition from my neurotic girlfriend!"

The accusation rang like a physical slap. After a few seconds, Scott stammered, "Damn, Kar, that just kinda slipped out. I didn't mean it - "

"Whatever," she cut him off, her voice clipped. "You figure it out on your own time. Just give me a call when you're ready to join the adult world."

"Kar - "

"And say hi to Pax River for me." She hit 'end' and flung the phone across the room. Watching it bounce harmlessly off the couch cushions did little to dissipate her frustration. It wasn't that they didn't love each other. She knew that. It wasn't even that they didn't understand each other - at least, in every way except this one. But this constant tug-of-war was becoming exhausting.

"Boys are stupid, Ellie," she commented dejectedly, flopping onto the floor next to the little girl. Noelle seemed to comprehend her mood, and leaned over to place a sloppy kiss on her hand. Kara shook her head and smiled. "Thanks, sweetie. I needed that."

Most of an hour passed before the doorbell rang, startling her slightly. *Who the hell ...* Scott should have been halfway to Lexington Park by now. He wouldn't blow off his meeting - would he? "Scott, if that's you, your boss is going to kick your ass even harder than I am," she muttered as she got up to answer it.

The man on the doorstep was decidedly not Scott. About her age, with Arabic features and coloring, he smiled at her politely. "Excuse me, ma'am. I'm looking for Mrs. Rabb?"

"Sorry, I'm just the babysitter," Kara replied uneasily. No one who actually knew Mac called her 'Mrs. Rabb'. "She's out this evening. Can I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I believe you can."

And that's when she caught sight of the gun.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

"I hope you're having more luck than I am with this," Harm murmured in his wife's ear as he handed her a glass of punch. "Small talk is definitely not working. I've run through all the major sports, and nobody says a damn thing. I'm going to be reduced to talking about the weather pretty soon."

"You don't have a lot in common with these folks, do you?" Mac smiled wryly. Her students were far more likely to discuss the foreign policies of East Asia than the latest baseball scores, and bringing up current events would be a minefield. This little social gathering, however, had the 'Marrons' on edge for good reason. Over the past two days, she'd caught enough whispered conversations and sentence fragments to confirm the fact that all was not well on the campus of American U. Webb's outside people had picked up vague references to an event that would take place during the next week. Two or three students had even gone so far as to speak of something called "a great fight" in her presence. They'd said it in Farsi, of course, presuming that she wouldn't catch the significance. It could prove a dangerous assumption.

"I just wish we could narrow this down a little," she said quietly. "We think they're planning something, but we don't have enough to take to the Agency or the Bureau ... we don't know where, when or, how ... we don't know even know which people are involved."

"Maybe you were on the right track earlier, with the computer thing," Harm suggested, slipping a casual arm around her waist for the sake of appearances. "Didn't you think

something wasn't quite right about that?"

"I never did figure out what, though. I checked all the web browsers in the computing center again this afternoon, going through the history folders to see what people have been looking at. Mainly I just found newsgroups, university sites, a few weather pages..." She trailed off, realizing what had set her warning signals off. "Wait a minute. I think I know. It was all the ESPN pages that surprised me. I mean, it might have just been somebody checking up on the Wizards trade or something, but - "

"Hold up. Just ten minutes ago I tried to start a conversation by talking about Kwame Brown's defensive skills, and all I got was blank stares. I don't think there's a single student in your little group who could care less about the Washington Wizards. All the pages you found had to do with them?"

"Most of them, at least. There was a story about how they renovated their arena before the season, but mostly it was just some stuff about their upcoming schedule, links to the ticket office, and all that."

Harm leaned closer and kept his voice low. "This might be a long shot, but what if these guys are planning to take a shot at Reynolds at the game on Friday? He's been known to show up in the owners' suite in the past. If they've been looking at the layout of the arena..."

"It's worth a call to Webb," Mac agreed. "Shall we say our goodbyes and go check this out?"

"Definitely."

As they eased toward the door, a young man moved in to meet them. "Professor Marron, you're not leaving us so early, are you?"

Mac smiled back, keeping her poise without much effort. "I'm sorry, Fadi. I've got a pile of grant applications on my desk that's a mile high. I'll see you in class tomorrow, though."

"Please, a moment," Fadi insisted. "There is an ... advising matter on which I would like to ask you opinion. May I impose on you for just a few minutes?"

She and Harm exchanged a glance, deciding at once that this might be necessary to avoid raising suspicions. "Of course," she replied easily, following him into an adjoining room of the house. Harm hovered just inside the doorway, the awkward situation making him more than a little uncomfortable.

Another student entered and shut the door securely. With the click of the latch, the tension in the room leaped. Before Mac could open her mouth to object, both men swiftly produced weapons.

"We have not been properly introduced," Fadi informed them coldly. "Colonel, Captain, have a seat. This may take longer than you expected."

Harm slowly moved to sit next to Mac, his mind racing. There was no point in denying who they were - these people seemed to have little patience for such things. How the

hell had this happened? "What gave us away?" he inquired as calmly as he could manage. It had been a while since he'd last been held at gunpoint.

"Oh, your cover was fine. Nearly airtight, I'd say. Unfortunately, you haven't always kept such a low profile, and some of us have rather long memories." Fadi gestured to his counterpart. "Abhik was once a military guard in Tehran. He recalled a prison break that occurred five years ago, where an American pilot was helped to escape by two fellow officers. You're apparently not an easy face to forget, Colonel Mackenzie."

Of all the incredibly bad luck ... Mac met his gaze unflinchingly and corrected him. "Rabb."

"I'm sorry?"

"My name is Sarah Mackenzie-Rabb."

"Ah, yes. The husband and wife team of attorneys, investigators, and part-time undercover agents. Believe me, Colonel, we've had nearly as much time to study the two of you as you have had to study us. What I do not know, however, is how much you have learned about our organization and our plans, and how much you have passed on to your CIA. That is what we intend to discover tonight."

"Do you expect us to actually tell you anything?" Harm demanded. "You're not likely to let us go, no matter what we say."

"Your lives are not the wager here. You both are patriots, who have risked your lives for this godless country more times than you could count. I have something more powerful in mind." The man checked his watch, then withdrew a cell phone from his pocket and pressed a series of buttons. After speaking a few harsh words in Farsi, he set the phone down. "What did I say, Colonel?"

As a feeling of dread overtook her, Mac answered quietly. "You said, 'It has begun. Wait for my next call.' Is that supposed to mean something?"

"It means everything. Right now, my brother Ahmed is standing in your living room with a gun to your child's head. If he does not hear from me in thirty minutes, he will pull the trigger."

An identical combination of shock and horror struck both parents at once. Mac's eyes immediately filled with tears, and Harm's face had never been so pale. His voice trembled as he spoke. "You soulless bastards ... if you so much as touch my daughter, I swear to God I'll hunt you down - all the way from the gates of hell if I have to."

Fadi only nodded with satisfaction. "Now we are in a position to talk."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

As Kara sat down next to the oblivious Noelle, her eyes never straying from the handgun that was trained on her, there were very few thoughts in her mind that didn't involve any four-letter words. This wasn't exactly what she'd feared when she'd warned her friends

about taking the assignment. This was far beyond anything she'd feared. This was the stuff of nightmares. *Fuck.*

"I want to make the rules clear from the beginning," her visitor said matter-of-factly. "I need the child. I do not need you. I do not necessarily intend to kill you, but if I am given an adequate reason to do so, I will not hesitate. You may wish to remember that."

"Good to know," she answered, a little shakily. Visions of that terrible night three years ago flew before her eyes: the one that had radically altered the lives of Harm, Mac, Scott, and even herself. But this was no desperate madman that stood before her. He had a dispassionate, deliberate attitude that made it clear that he would stop at nothing to carry out his mission. Whatever it was.

Kara hadn't truly prayed in years, since before her brother's death. She hadn't lost her faith - at least not entirely - but it simply hadn't seemed to help much. Now, though, as she looked into Noelle's big blue eyes, it seemed like a good option.

Remember me, God? she said silently. I'm the one who bitched you out all those years ago for what you did, or didn't do, to Jason. I'm sorry for that. I'm also sorry for all that swearing a few minutes ago, and for sleeping with my boyfriend when we're not married, and for all the times an aircraft I helped build was used to hurt someone. I'm nowhere near perfect, and I know it, but if you could just help me get my friends out of this, I'll make sure I earn it.

Feeling slightly more in control, she glanced up at her captor. "So what now?"

"Now we wait for instructions." He crossed the room and took a seat, his weapon still at the ready. "It may be some time. I suggest you get as comfortable as you can."

"Right."

There was a minute of strained silence, and then he spoke again. "Do you have a name, or should I just call you 'babysitter'?"

"Depends. Should I just call you 'terrorist'?"

Instantly she regretted the insolent tone as his eyes flashed. But he kept his temper in check. "This term is too general. It is as if anyone who takes any action against America can now be labeled a terrorist."

"Not everyone. Just the ones who 'take action' on innocent children."

To her surprise, he only raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you have something of a point. My name is Ahmed."

"I'm Kara. This little girl you're so interested in is Noelle."

"I don't wish to hurt her, either. She is only a tool to ensure her parents' honesty." Ahmed looked her over with a piercing stare that made her flinch. "Did you know that there is an Arabic dialect in which 'kara' means 'priestess'?"

"Is that right," she replied quietly. "I didn't think Islam had priestesses."

"It is an ancient dialect. Are you a Christian, Kara?"

"I'm not particularly devout, but yes. Do I deserve to die for that?"

Ahmed shook his head with a hint of a smile. "You're quite fearless, considering your situation. But you don't seem to grasp the larger picture here. What is it you do, when you're not caring for the children of spies?"

She wasn't about to tell him what her real job was: identifying herself with the military might be suicide. "I'm a college student. I study engineering."

He looked amused, most likely in disbelief that a woman could do such a thing. "What kind? What do you hope to do once you've finished?"

"Aeronautics. I want to work on airplanes." She knew she should have left it at that, but the hostility simmering within wouldn't allow it. "Maybe I'll develop a way to prevent them getting commandeered and flown into skyscrapers."

"We are not the same as those people! Our strikes are precise. We have legitimate military and political targets. I do *not* have the blood of thousands on my hands!"

"No, you just use babies to get to those targets," she fired back, ignoring the warning voice of reason. "You're a real knight a shining armor."

Without another word, he grabbed her roughly by her ponytail and yanked her in close. "Listen to me, foolish girl," he hissed dangerously. "You don't know what you're talking about. If you want to see the sun come up tomorrow, you'd best learn some tact."

Kara squeezed her eyes shut, determined not to let him see her fear. After a moment, the shrill ring of her cell phone shattered the silence. He released her and gestured with the gun. "Go ahead. I don't want anyone to get worried and come looking for you. But if you say anything to alert them - "

"Yeah, I get the picture." She reached for the phone and lifted it to her ear, praying it might be Harm or Mac. "Hello?"

"Kar, it's me," Scott's voice replied, tinged with defeat.

"Hey!" she greeted him, her tone abnormally cheerful. "How's it going down there?"

She could practically hear his confused frown. "Lousy. Aren't you still pissed at me?"

"Sure." But the cheerfulness continued. "What's going on?"

"I spent the whole drive down here trying to find a decent way to apologize. I can't believe some of the stuff I said to you."

"Hon, forget about it," she continued, keeping one eye on her anxious companion.

Please, Scott, don't pick today to be dense. "Focus on the here and now, all right?"

The suspicion in his voice was evident. "Something's going on. You sound like you're on drugs."

"Not even close, but thanks for playing."

"Is someone there with you? Is that why you're doing this crypto thing?"

Thank you, God. Now she just had to figure out how to surreptitiously tip him off. "Better believe it. You know what I was thinking about earlier? That time three years ago, when we got caught fooling around in the hangar. Wasn't that crazy?"

"Kar, we weren't fooling around. We were..." And with that, the light dawned. "Holy shit. Are you a hostage?"

She wanted to collapse onto the couch in relief, but they weren't there yet. "That's what I'm saying."

"Fuck..."

There must be an echo in here, she thought ruefully.

"Should I call the police, or what?"

There was a good question. What should they do now? She searched her memory for a code he might understand. "You know, I just remembered. That concert we were talking about is probably going to sell out pretty soon. You should call those friends of yours with all the connections, and see if they still want to go with us."

There was a brief pause. "You're losing me on that one. Concert ... the Marine Corps band concert on the Mall? Mac? You want me to call her and Harm?"

"Yeah, tell them to hurry and get tickets before it sells out. Wait!" If Harm and Mac were already in trouble themselves ... "Change of plans. Skip over them and call *their* friend directly. Just tell him who you're with, and you should have no problem getting good seats."

"You're talking about the CIA guy, right? Webb? How the hell am I supposed to get that number? I'm in Pax River."

"Just call freaking information, Scott. Tell the front office who you're with. I swear, it'll work."

"Okay, got it." She could hear him draw a shaky breath on the other end. "Kar, I'm sorry -"

"I know," she said softly. "Get going, all right?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Night."

When she ended the call, Ahmed was watching her carefully. "Your boyfriend?"

She nodded, tossing the phone into her backpack and calmly lying through her teeth. "U2's coming to the MCI Center. Scott has a friend of a friend who works for the box office."

A sneer of contempt curled his lips. "Rock concerts. They're the very epitome of excessive, materialistic American society."

During all this, Noelle had been contentedly playing on the floor with her stuffed bear. Finally, the lack of attention began to get to her, and she babbled for a while. When this got her nowhere, she began to wail. With a start, Kara realized she'd been ignoring her charge and went to pick the baby up. "Sorry, Ellie-bean. When you get old enough to start seeing monsters under the bed, I bet they'll look a lot like this guy."

He shook his head. "Do you have a death wish or something?"

"What, you're going to kill me because I piss you off?" she demanded. "Or is it because I'm a woman and I piss you off? You want me to cover my arms and hair, get rid of my driver's license, and stay away from the schoolbooks, right? Believe it or not, I'm okay with that, up to a point. It's fine for anybody who actually wants to live that life - I'm not going to force my choices on anybody. But why should you people get to force *your* beliefs on an entire culture? What makes you the judge and jury on what people can and can't do?"

"I never claimed to be the judge. Only Allah can do that."

"Oh, Allah judges me to be inferior? Allah makes it okay to kill a woman for the crime of showing her skin?"

"Do you now mock my faith?"

"If that is truly your faith, I'm not just mocking it. I'm flat-out condemning it."

She knew this was a bad idea, but it didn't matter. She'd never been good at controlling her temper. But now her captor lunged toward her and struck her hard across the jaw, knocking her and Noelle onto the couch. When her vision cleared, she checked the crying child for injuries and found none. Her own face, however, throbbed painfully. *That'll teach me to keep my damn mouth shut.*

Ahmed stalked to the other side of the room. "Shut her up," he ordered roughly. "You don't want me any angrier than I already am."

"How am I supposed to accomplish that?"

"You're the babysitter. Sing her a lullaby or something."

Her own anger still seething, she was sorely tempted to start with a round of "The Star-Spangled Banner". But rational thought took over, reminding her that he could take any

revenge out on Noelle. So she rocked the little girl in one arm, pressing the other hand to her aching jaw, and quietly sang the first thing that came to mind.

"No one's gonna hurt you, no one's gonna dare
Others can desert you, not to worry - whistle, I'll be there
Demons will charm you with a smile, for a while - but in time
Nothing can harm you ... not while I'm around."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Approximately eighty-five miles away, Scott jumped into his car and slammed the door shut. With trembling hands, he took out his phone and racked his brain for the correct number.

"Base Information, Petty Officer Harris speaking."

"Yes, I need the main number for CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia."

It took nearly ten minutes of both pleading and threatening to get the night operator to transfer him to the counterintelligence director's office, but eventually a new voice filtered through. "This is Webb."

"Director, my name is Scott Fairfield. I'm Kara Donnell's ... boyfriend. This is going to sound nuts, but I just called her, and she's being held hostage at the Rabbs' house. I don't know what you've got Harm and Mac doing tonight, but you'd better send them some backup right the hell now."

As he explained to the best of his knowledge, Scott threw the car into gear and headed for the gate at the highest speed he dared. He wouldn't be able to reach Rosslyn for at least an hour and a half, and he didn't have a clue what he'd do once he got there. But there was no way he was going to sit on his ass in Lexington Park while the most important person in his life stared down a gun.

You're an idiot, his conscience accused. You've screwed up every good thing you've ever had. If you lose her tonight, you'll hate yourself for the rest of your life.

His heart beating wildly, he stomped down even harder on the accelerator.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

For the past few minutes, tears had silently been streaming from Sarah Mackenzie-Rabb's dark eyes. She refused to cry openly - she didn't dare give this animal the satisfaction. But the very idea of her baby in the hands of these people was killing her. Why hadn't they thought of this? Why hadn't someone realized this could happen, that Noelle could be in as much danger as any of them? She was already convinced that she'd never forgive herself for agreeing to this debacle in the first place. For all her training, she was positive she would have collapsed in a sobbing heap if it hadn't been for her husband's hand clasped tightly around hers.

She'd known this man for eight years; had stood with him through some of the darkest periods of both her life and his. Never in all that time had she seen such utter hatred radiating from his expressive blue eyes. Part of her was actually afraid that he might snap and charge at their captors in a moment of blind, kamikaze rage. The rest of her

chastised herself for ever doubting his sense of control. Harmon Rabb was passionate to a fault, but not to the point of madness.

But it was their *daughter* - Jesus, God in heaven...

"So," Fadi stated, breaking into her thoughts. "Where shall we begin?"

"You can start by proving to us that you're not bluffing," Harm replied with deadly calm. "How do we know you really have her?"

The young man shrugged and pulled out his phone again. He spoke into it for a moment, then handed it over. "Your babysitter. I assume her word will suffice."

With a deep breath, Harm took the phone. "How are you doing, Kar?"

"I've been better," Kara answered in the same guarded tone. "Ellie's fine so far, but I seem to have a knack for pushing this guy's buttons."

Nice going, civvie, he thought, keeping his expression neutral. She'd just informed him, without alerting anyone, that there was only one person there with them. Hopefully, at some point, he'd be in a position to use that information. Aloud he said, "You never do manage to stay out of trouble, do you?"

There was a hint of a smile in her voice, recognizing their usual banter. "Well, you know me. Scott called about the concert tickets, and it all went downhill from there."

He frowned a little, trying desperately to place the reference. He'd seen enough of her tricks to know when she was trying to tell him something. "Concert tickets, huh?"

"Yeah, I told him to try getting a hold of a friend of a friend at the box office. The guy has a rep for being able to get things done. You know what I mean?"

"I think I do," he responded, clamping down on the glimmer of relief he felt. If she'd gotten any kind of message through to Scott, maybe there was hope. "You're an awfully good babysitter, Kar."

"I do my best. Hang in there, guys."

"You, too." The phone went dead, and he handed it back to Fadi. "All right, I believe you. But I'm putting another rule on the table. We'll deal only if you leave them alone - Noelle and Kara both. It's not her fault she got caught up in this."

"I don't think you're in a position to make the rules, Captain. But as a gesture of ... good faith, we will consider it." The man leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "Clearly your FBI or CIA had some reason to send you in here like this. What explanation did they give you?"

Mac swiped at her eyes and spoke up. Regardless of how this night ended, some of this information would end up on ZNN anyway. "There are members of your group that have connections to an Iranian fundamentalist faction. Our people discovered the link through a series of Internet postings, so they didn't know who exactly was involved. Based on the

fact that there are only four of us in this room, I'd say the majority of the students in IPPA don't have any idea what you're up to."

"You would be correct. We have a couple more people outside in the party, making sure no one disturbs us, but most of the students will leave here tonight without ever having known what is taking place right now. What we do does not require large numbers." Fadi looked at her intently. "Do you understand what it is we do, Colonel?"

"You target high-ranking politicians and officers who advocate a strict American foreign policy in the Middle East - "

"Do you really believe that it is that simple?" he interrupted, the unflappable façade beginning to wear thin. "Let's be honest. Have your 'nation-building' efforts really made Afghanistan a better place in your eyes? Or did a lot of people die just so that your government would not appear weak? America values its precious freedoms so much, yet it forces its own desired outcomes on battles that are far from its responsibility. How is it all right to place your troops in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and to provide weapons to the whole of Israel, but wrong to allow another such country the same choices?"

"Now wait a minute," Harm countered. "No one's forcing the Saudis to host our troops, and as for providing weapons, I didn't hear your countrymen complaining when we supported the Shah a couple of decades ago. Or is that a little too far back for your attention span to grasp?"

"Watch yourself, Captain," Fadi warned, but Harm wasn't finished.

"I don't think I will. It's one thing to try and get information out of us, but if I have to sit here and listen to your skewed propaganda, I'm damn well going to respond. You try being a superpower in the twenty-first century, all right? There's no such thing as an easy way out when it comes to world politics. Helping one person almost inevitably leads to pissing another person off, because no matter how hard we try - and trust me, we *have* tried - we're never going to get everyone to agree. Maybe we've made some decisions that have singed your eyebrows, but they're decisions that were based on the best information available, and I don't apologize for a single one of them. You're allowed to rant and rave about it, because unlike some other countries, we accept dissent here. But when dissent turns into killing innocent people, that's the end of the line."

"Colonel, talk some sense into your husband," Fadi hissed, leveling his gun on the naval officer. "He's on extremely dangerous ground."

"Harm, please," Mac pleaded softly. "Don't make this any worse."

After an interminable moment, in which Harm's burning stare never wavered, Fadi stepped back and lowered his weapon ever so slightly. "And why do you have reason to believe we will be 'killing innocent people', if there is such a thing? Surely you don't suspect another hijacking."

The two prisoners exchanged a glance, uncertain as to how to answer. If they confessed their actual suspicions, what would result? What if they were wrong? Better yet, could they get him to confirm the plot?

"Any time you attempt an assassination in a location with thousands of people, you have

to expect some collateral damage,” Mac stated, with just enough vagueness to throw him off.

“We are not in the business of killing indiscriminately. That accomplishes nothing.”

“But you’re willing to get rid of the kids selling souvenirs or the family in the next row if they get in the way, aren’t you? How does that make you any less of a terrorist?”

“That is not going to happen! We know exactly what we need to do to succeed. If all goes as planned, the only people who could possibly get in the way will be those who have earned this death.”

Harm narrowed his eyes. The man hadn’t even blinked at the wording of Mac’s accusation. He was now willing to bet that targeting Admiral Reynolds at the basketball game was precisely their objective. “There’s your problem,” he stated calmly, with far more bravado than he felt. “Things never go exactly ‘as planned’. It’s called the fog of war.”

For a split-second, there was a flicker of uncertainty in the gunman’s eyes. Immediately, it vanished, but both officers had seen and understood its significance. This wasn’t a highly-trained, well-equipped force. This was a group of educated but angry individuals desperate to change their surroundings. At that moment, however, they were every bit as dangerous as any terrorist could be.

“As fascinating as your opinions are, Captain, I’m getting tired of listening to them. Let’s move on. You know something of our plans, obviously. Who have you passed that information on to? CIA? FBI? Your own people at the Pentagon?”

“What if we said all of the above?” Mac lied. “What difference does it make? Your plan’s toast anyway. Reynolds will just skip the game, and you’ll have to come up with another place to take your shot.”

There was a trace of a sinister smile in Fadi’s gaze. “If those were my intentions, I wouldn’t need to keep you alive right now, would I? There’s another way to play this out. You’ll go back to your contacts, whoever they are, and tell them that you know our plans. Tell them you’ve gathered enough information to trap us at the arena, and encourage the admiral to attend as bait. Make sure he sits in the owners’ box, the one that’s supposedly so ultra-secure. We already know how to bypass the increased security measures. How much farther can they step it up?”

“And we would agree to this why?” Harm demanded, already afraid of the answer.

“Because if you don’t, you’ll spend the rest of your lives looking over your shoulders. You’ll never be able to let little Noelle out of your sight without wondering her school bus driver or soccer coach is one of us. You’ll get personal insight into our way of life.”

With that threat, both parents came to a terrible realization. For the first time in either of their lives, the oath they’d sworn was about to come in a distant second. If those were truly their only options, if the choice came down to their duty or their daughter’s life, they knew which one they would unquestionably choose.

For the sake of their country, then, there *had* to be another option.

“Do you really think you can pull this off?” Harm asked, allowing contempt to show through in his voice. “This is the nation’s capital. I don’t care how big that arena is - our government can put more policemen, agents and officers in and around it than you could ever dream of. With five or six men, you expect to still find a way to hit your target?”

The number was a complete bluff: he had no idea how many people were involved in this plot. But again, Fadi didn’t dispute the statement, leading him once again to believe that he was closer than he thought. “We have a simple, solid plan,” the other man insisted, confidence wavering ever so slightly. “We have our strength of conviction, and we have our God to see us through - ”

“You have nothing,” Harm spat out, seizing the opportunity to keep him off-balance. He rose from his seat, not flinching when the men’s guns followed him. “If you had any faith in the righteousness of your cause, you wouldn’t hide behind children. You’d be able to come out and confront me, not my daughter. I’m the one who represents everything you hate. I’m the one who puts on the uniform and fights alongside the people who oppress you. Me, not her. Or can’t you bring yourself to start a fight you might not win?”

“Harm, stop it!” Mac begged, but neither one heard.

“Is that a challenge?”

“You’re damn right it is!”

A sound outside the door snapped everyone’s attention and gave Harm precisely the chance he needed. He swung at Fadi, knocking his weapon aside, and drove the younger man against the wall with the fury of a man possessed. From the couch, Mac instinctively lashed out at Abhik, kicking his gun to the floor. Suddenly, a group of black-clad agents burst into the room, adding to the chaos. When the dust settled, though, the agents hadn’t done a thing. The attractive, well-dressed couple who had previously been held hostage had done the hard work for them.

“Special Agent Hunter,” the leader introduced himself, as two other men took custody of the criminals. “Director Webb notified us of the situation. Sorry we didn’t get here sooner.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Harm tossed back, accepting the handshake. “Is Webb here?”

“Just outside. We had to take care of all the guests at this little gathering before we could get to you. He’s organizing the interviews, trying to figure out who’s part of this gang.”

“There aren’t that many of them. They thought they could accomplish more if there were fewer people involved.” Mac grabbed her husband’s arm. “Come on. We’ve got to get home.”

Webb met them outside, among a throng of officers and the flashing lights of a dozen emergency vehicles. Without a word he led them to a black Suburban and climbed in behind them. “I’ve got two teams setting up around your house - ”

changing the world to suit our purposes.”

He didn't answer, checking his watch for the third time in five minutes. Something was happening, she guessed, and whatever it was, it wasn't going strictly by the book. Maybe it was time to step up her efforts.

Let's see where this gets me. Casually, she reached up and tugged the elastic band out of her hair, allowing the light brown waves to fall to her shoulders. Ahmed watched her without comment, but she imagined she could see a tiny flare of interest before he looked away. *Bingo.* This guy might be a slave to his beliefs, but he was still a young, red-blooded male, and the concept of forbidden fruit still held some power over him.

A minute or two later, without even a glance in his direction, she took off her sweatshirt and tossed it next to her backpack on the floor. This time, he raised an eyebrow and gestured toward her close-fitting T-shirt. “This would get you arrested in my country.”

“Hey, if I'm going to sit here all night with you, I'm at least going to be comfortable,” she retorted, keeping the air of defiance intact. If her guess was right, being headstrong might be just as effective a turn-on as her attire. “Besides, if showing skin is such a no-no, why do you get to do it?”

“It is different for a man.” He stepped closer to her, a conflict raging in his dark eyes. “It is a privilege to look on a woman that way. No one should be worthy of it except her husband.”

“Well, I don't belong to anyone. So I think I'll choose what I want to wear, and everyone else can choose how they want to look at me.” Taking a substantial risk, Kara took another step forward and placed her hands on her hips, indicating that it was his move. But she hadn't really expected the ploy to go this far. He reached out with his gun and traced the curve of her breast with the barrel. She stiffened slightly, but didn't back away. *It's for Harm and Mac, and for Ellie,* she repeated to herself. *You can handle whatever this asshole throws at you.*

Abruptly, he jerked away, angry with himself for being tempted. “Cover yourself!” he ordered harshly, checking his watch again.

“Why? Because you don't think you can control yourself? That's your problem, not mine.”

“Damn you!” He reached down to retrieve her sweatshirt and flung it at her. In the process, he caught the strap of her purse, spilling the contents across the floor. Her wallet fell open, and he picked it up - and the expression that contorted his features drove an icy spike of terror into her heart. In an instant, she knew he'd spotted her NavAir ID.

“You little whore,” he seethed, hurling the wallet back to the floor. “You lied from the beginning. You're one of them.”

“I never said I wasn't,” she returned, mind racing. He was nearing the breaking point: that much was clear. Had she made a colossal mistake by messing with his head?

The gun came back up, and for the first time in over an hour, he was actually aiming it.

Kara followed his gaze to Noelle, and immediately dove for her, snatching the baby up and jostling her awake. "Don't touch her! Look, maybe I'm not as blameless as you thought, but damn it, she is! There's got to be something better than this!"

The combination of the rough wake-up call and the voices shouting started Noelle crying again. It only added to the cacophony that resonated through the house. From just underneath the side window, outside in the bushes, Harm cursed and started around toward the door. Webb seized his arm. "Don't do something you're going to regret," he warned seriously.

"Listen to what's going on, Webb. We have to put a stop to this before - "

"Don't say it," Mac cut him off, readying the sidearm she'd borrowed from another agent. Harm clicked the safety off of his own weapon, and they moved toward the door. Once there, she crouched low and leaned close. "Let me talk, all right?"

He hesitated, but nodded. Reciting a prayer in her head, Mac steeled her nerves and raised her voice. "Ahmed, this is Sarah Mackenzie-Rabb. My husband and I are here, and we're alone. May we come in?"

Ahmed shot a suspicious look at Kara, who raised her free hand in a shrug. "What are you doing back here?" he demanded.

"Your brother Fadi sent us home. He says they're going to use their backup plan, and we've agreed to it. We just want to see that Noelle and Kara are safe, all right?"

"No!" he shouted. "He would have called me himself - we had an arrangement..."

"The best-laid plans of mice and men," Kara murmured under her breath, rocking the still-crying Noelle.

His gun hand shook, but he lifted it toward them. "You're wrong," he maintained, beginning to lose control. "You're so sure you're right - you think you're always right ... But you don't get to win tonight."

With a growing sense of panic, she realized that he didn't intend to kill her. He wanted to hurt her - hurt them all - and he knew just how to do it.

"For the love of God, don't!" she screamed. "She's a baby!"

With those words, something broke in Harm's mind. *This could not happen.* He threw the door open and brought his gun to bear on the other man - and everything seemed to slow down.

Gunfire echoed from both sides as Kara whirled, shielding the child's body with her own. Ahmed stumbled and fell, a bright scarlet stain spreading across his chest. At once, Harm and Mac dropped their weapons and flew into the room, terrified of what they'd find.

Kara stared up at them with a look of disbelief, unable to speak. The left sleeve of her shirt was darkening with blood, and she wordlessly held the hysterical Noelle out to them

with her other arm.

"Oh, God, oh, God," Mac repeated over and over, gathering her daughter into her arms with tears flowing freely. Harm immediately reached for Kara as she staggered, lowering her to the floor and pressing his hands to the entrance and exit wounds on either side of her shoulder.

"Is she okay?" Kara gasped, her face taut with pain and fear. "Please, tell me she's okay..."

"She's fine," Mac whispered, sinking to her knees and cradling Noelle with all her strength. "Webb! Get some paramedics in here!"

"She's fine because of you," Harm clarified, swallowing his own emotions. His baby girl had almost been taken from him, and somehow this amazing young woman had been able to stop it. "Jesus Christ, Kara, why'd you do that?"

"Had to," she managed to say, squeezing her eyes shut against tears of agony. "God, Harm, it hurts so much..."

"It's okay, honey," he soothed, tightening his hold on her. "You're going to be okay. The bullet went right through. I swear on my wings, I'm going to find a way to give you a medal for this one. You just stay with me, all right?"

A small army of agents and EMTs entered, sizing up the situation and splitting up to deal with both of the injured. Kara cried out as a pair of medical personnel eased her out of Harm's embrace. "Don't leave," she begged, her voice more distressed than he'd ever heard it. Apparently there were a few things in this world that could actually get to the ever-confident Kara Donnell. "Harm, please ... I need you..."

We both know I'm not the one you need, he thought as he squeezed her hand reassuringly. "You don't need anyone, Kar. You're Wonder Woman. But I promise you I'll be right here when all this over. Just relax."

She seemed to accept that, offering a hint of a grateful smile as her eyes slid closed. The paramedics calmly strapped her onto a stretcher and headed for the ambulances waiting outside. Webb watched from the doorway, taking it all in with as much professional detachment as he could muster. Finally, he addressed a question to his friends, still sitting on the floor in a kind of shock. "So which one of you got him?"

Harm and Mac looked at each other blankly for a moment. "I don't know," Mac admitted quietly. "I only got one shot off."

"Same here," Harm replied. "Does it matter?"

"I guess not." The intelligence official paused, searching for a phrase that would accurately cover the depth of his regrets. "You can't possibly know how sorry I am that it turned out like this."

"Not any more sorry than we are," Mac stated numbly. "But it could have been much worse. I think that's the best we can do for now."

hers. Before she could wonder whose it was, the pain took over and forced all other thoughts aside.

"Oww," she moaned, a deep, throaty sound that didn't sound like her own voice at all. Forcing her eyes open, she managed to focus on the weary yet comforting features of her friend. "Hi, Harm," she croaked out.

"Hi, civvie," he replied with a smile. "Just take it easy. You just got your shoulder stitched back together, so don't try to move around. You want some water?"

Given the difficulty previously encountered with speaking, she chose to respond with a weak nod. Harm lifted a paper cup to her lips and gently supported her while she took a few cautious sips. After a moment, she nodded her thanks and attempted to speak again. "Everything over?"

"Apparently. Scott got through to Webb, and he sent the cavalry in after us. They think they've rounded up everyone involved, but it'll be hard to tell for a while."

"What about Ahmed?"

He shook his head. "DOA. I'm glad I wasn't around when they broke the news to his brother, handcuffs or not."

"His brother?"

"The mastermind, if you can call it that. They'll probably call him a martyr for it, but it's nothing more a waste of a young life in my book."

"They saw it as their duty," she murmured. "How, I don't know, but that's how they saw it."

Harm watched her struggle for a moment, and helped her raise the head of the bed. "Kar, why'd you do it?" he asked quietly.

Through the dull ache in her own mind, she could see the pain glistening behind his eyes, and she didn't have to ask what he meant. A few hours ago, she'd been faced with a choice, and she'd chosen to put herself between a child and a bullet without so much as a moment to consider the consequences. Still, she didn't have to think very hard about her answer. "Harm, in this city, there are men and women whose primary responsibility is to do exactly what I did. The only difference is that they do it for the President. I don't begrudge him that in the slightest, but in my opinion, the death of a child is infinitely more tragic than that of any sixty-year-old man. Even the most powerful man in the country."

"What if you'd died?" he whispered. "Were you going to make me try and tell your parents why my child was more important than theirs?"

"I know. Believe me, I know. After Jason ... The thing is, I can't live my whole life in fear of hurting them. It's because of Jase that I think they'll understand this. I mean, God knows I'd do just about anything to keep them from going through that again, but that doesn't mean I can compromise what I feel is right. I'm twenty-six, and obviously I'm not done living my life, but I've had a better shot at it than some people have. And I don't

regret anything I've done. Ellie hasn't had any of that yet, and she deserves that chance. That's all there is to it."

Harm shook his head, a wry grin twisting his lips. "Your unfailing sense of logic is truly frightening."

"I'm an engineer, remember?" She smiled, but it quickly faded. "Harm, I'm serious. Don't try to make this into some superhuman effort. I reacted, we're all still here, it's over. But you do owe me, so listen up. This spy business is not for you anymore. You two are great at doing what needs to be done, no matter what, and we're all in your debt for it. But you have a family now, and that changes the rules. You both know what it's like to lose a parent, so don't risk doing that to Ellie. And the risk of losing her ... I know you don't even want to think about it, but I've seen it up close. To this day, I'm sure my mother still has moments of wondering what she could have done differently, and she knows damn well that there wasn't a thing. If tonight had really gone bad, you would have been haunted for the rest of your lives. Consider that my solemn word of honor."

"Kar, you're preaching to the choir," he answered, but she only rolled her eyes.

"Evidently not, or we wouldn't be here." Even now, pale and hurting, she was determined to make this right. "Humor me, will you? I want to see you go back to the courtroom and do what you do best, and when the time comes, I want to see you take over JAG and be the amazing leader I know you are. And the next time Director Webb or anyone else comes calling, I want you to tell him where he can put his cover stories. Is that so much to ask?"

"Not at all." He met her gaze squarely. "I hear you, Kara. After tonight, you don't have to convince us of any of this. We're done with this kind of thing. I promise."

"Good," she said firmly, wincing a little. "This is going to hurt for a long time, isn't it?"

"Probably. But you'll have a cool scar."

The sound of hurried footsteps in the hallway drew their attention, and both looked up in time to see a distraught Scott Fairfield barreling through the doorway. "Thank God," he blurted out, his sentences coming in short, jumbled spurts. "I was doing at least ninety-five on the freeway - I can't believe I didn't get arrested - and then when I got to the house, it was like a damn crime scene - nobody would tell me what the hell was going on, and ..." At last, he took a few deep breaths and regained control. "Hi, Kar," he offered breathlessly.

"Hi," she echoed quietly, feeling tears well up in her eyes. At that moment, feeling as terrible as she did, there was nothing more wonderful than the sight of him standing there.

"I'm out of here," Harm remarked with a knowing smile, sliding toward the door. "You two behave yourselves."

As soon as he was gone, Scott flew across the room and enveloped her in the most powerful embrace he dared, burying his face in her uninjured shoulder. "I'm sorry," he mumbled haltingly. "I'm so sorry, Kara ... I was an idiot. A complete and total ass. An

insensitive moron of monumental proportions - ”

“Scott, for Christ’s sake,” she interrupted gently, still clinging to him as best she could. “Let up on yourself a little. I’m okay. In part because of you, remember?”

He pulled back slightly to look at her, and the trauma of the past few hours reflected in both gazes. “I was so scared,” he confessed. “I felt so damn helpless, and I spent the whole trip back here kicking myself for everything I’d said earlier. Every time I thought about the possibility that it could have been our last real conversation, I almost ran the car off the road.”

“It wasn’t like that,” she reassured him, lifting her hand to his cheek. “The last thing you said was ‘I love you’. That’s the important thing.”

He covered her fingers with his own, drawing strength from the connection. “You believe that, don’t you?” he asked earnestly. “That I do love you?”

“Of course I do,” she said softly.

“Then let me fix this mess I put us in. Right now.” With an unsteady but certain grip, he took her hand in both of his and looked up at her. “Marry me.”

For a moment, Kara wasn’t entirely sure she was still breathing. “What?” she whispered.

“You were right. About giving myself a chance to be happy, about what’s really important, about everything. We almost lost each other once before, and it took some strange twist of fate to find each other again. Somehow I took that for granted, and I almost lost you again tonight. I’m not going to let it happen again, because I don’t know how many more chances we have left.”

It sounded so right, and it made perfect sense. And yet, in some inexplicable way ... it didn’t. “Scott, we’ve barely even touched this subject,” she managed to say, trying to sort out the conflicting emotions that battled in her mind. “All of a sudden, you’re ready for this?”

“I just think I have a better perspective on it now. Things don’t look as complicated. I love you, Kar. What else is there to know?”

And all it took was a hostage situation to bring him around, she thought ruefully, tears springing to her eyes once more. As much as she wanted to just say yes and sort the rest out later, the ultra-rational part of her recognized what was really going on. “I don’t think any of us are really thinking straight right now,” she began quietly, bracing herself for the confusion and hurt she knew was to come.

He searched her face for an explanation. “Isn’t this what you want?” he asked tentatively, crestfallen and honestly perplexed.

“Not like this,” she whispered, willing her voice not to break. “Not if you’ve only been thinking about it since Pax River tonight, and not because you’re scared of losing me if you don’t make a commitment. That’s not the way it’s supposed to work.”

"And how is it supposed to work?" he asked in a dull voice.

"I don't know, but..." As he started to withdraw, she seized his hand. "Ask me again. When all this is over, and we know we're seeing things for what they are ... ask me again."

"Okay," he acquiesced reluctantly, unable to fully mask the wounded look in his eyes. "I'll be back later, all right?"

He kissed her fingers and hurried out, leaving her to wonder if she'd just made the biggest mistake of her life.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

In the hallway, Harm and Mac glanced up as Scott rushed past them, looking defeated. With a brief glance into Kara's room, the situation was evident. Husband and wife exchanged a 'not again' look. Sometimes these two were just impossible.

"Which one do you want this time?" Mac asked.

"I'll take Scott. You take Kara."

"All right. Good luck."

"You too."

Mac opened the door quietly, Noelle fast asleep on her shoulder. Kara raised her head to look at them, and it seemed as if the tears were literally pouring down her cheeks. "I said no," she said helplessly. "He actually asked, and I said no ... What the hell's wrong with me?"

"Oh, sweetie," Mac sighed, taking the chair. "Just because I got married practically on a whim doesn't mean it works for everyone."

That comment slowed the sobs ever so slightly, and Kara looked up at her friend with a disbelieving stare. "You did *not* get married on a whim. You had a very unique set of circumstances."

"And you don't?"

"All right, you win." Before long, the younger woman had brought herself back under control, but the reddened eyes betrayed her anguish. "I pushed him away, Mac. He's so fragile to begin with - I worked so hard to make him see that he wasn't a failure, and then what do I do? Drop-kick his heart through the window."

"I think he's a lot stronger than you give him credit for," Mac stated reasonably. "After the problems he's had, he could have just given up and spent the rest of his life working at McDonald's, but he didn't. He knew he could still do what he loved if he was willing to work for it. You can trust me on this, Kar - it takes a lot to get past mistakes like that."

"I know. I admire him for it - I really do. I'm just not sure he knows that."

"Then I guess you're just going to have to tell him."

... Scott was sitting on a bench outside the side entrance when Harm tracked him down. The younger man was hunched over, his elbows resting on his knees, staring into nothing. After watching him for a moment, the captain walked over to the bench and spoke quietly. "So what happened?"

He didn't look up. "Same thing that always happens. I screwed up big time."

Harm took a seat on the adjoining bench. "Care to elaborate on that a little?"

"I don't know what's going on anymore. I thought she wanted to get married. She's been asking me where we stand ever since she moved up here for school. But I've been too chickenshit to make a decision, because - oh, what the hell does it matter why? The point is, all this happened, and I got a wake-up call, but..."

"She said no?" There was a heavy dose of skepticism in his voice.

"Pretty much."

"What do you mean, 'pretty much'?" Scott responded with a listless shrug, but Harm wasn't about to give up so easily. "You'd better be clear on what precisely she said, because the amount of room for misinterpretation in this kind of thing is staggering. Trust me."

"She said 'Not like this.' Is that clear enough for you?"

Harm sighed. "Scott, Sarah and I wasted more than a year of our lives because we saw different meanings in the phrase 'Not yet.' It took a disastrous investigation and the court-martial from hell for us to finally figure out what we wanted, and even then, we didn't run out and get married that very day."

"No, you gave it a good twenty-four hours," Scott retorted with a trace of humor.

"Okay, I'm a bad example. But Kara's been through a lot today. What if she just wants to step back from all this madness for a while and apply some logic before making a life-changing decision? It wouldn't exactly be out of character for her."

"I know. She did say to ask her again after all this had settled. But God..." He shook his head, searching for a way to explain. "I know I wasn't ready to make this jump before, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought about how I'd do it. I wanted to see her eyes light up as she said yes, and I wanted to hold onto her, knowing that any time I had to let go would only be temporary. When that didn't happen, it just hurt so much ... even if we get the 'happily ever after' later on, how am I supposed to forget what that feels like?"

Harm was silent for a moment, remembering. "I don't think you can," he said honestly. "When the admiral suggested that we could fix almost everything by getting married, I was ready to do it. It shocked the hell out of me, but I was. The thing is, Sarah wasn't. She'd had some bad experiences before, and she knew that we hadn't had a chance to

done.”

“But now you two want out,” Webb finished easily, surprising the other man slightly. “It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, Harm. You’ve both redefined the term ‘above and beyond the call of duty’. That little girl is your priority now, and you don’t owe anyone an explanation for that. If I’d been thinking about anything besides my assignment, I never would have come to you in the first place.”

“Well. That conversation was easier than I thought it would be.” Harm smiled at his associate and sometime friend. “I have to admit, though, the idea of slowing down in my old age is a little depressing.”

“Yeah, right. In my experience, naval aviators don’t slow down. They catch the wire at full throttle.” Webb rose and extended his hand across the desk. “You’re not getting rid of me entirely, you understand. But I know you’ve got something important coming up, so I’ll get out of your office. Take care, Harm.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that this isn’t my office?” Harm protested, but Webb just shook his head with a smirk. Almost before the other man was out the door, the officer was checking his daily planner. What the hell was Webb talking about, ‘something important coming up’? The most pressing thing on the schedule today was an operational readiness exercise, and fire drills didn’t qualify as ‘important’ in his book. “Webb! Do you know something I don’t?”

There was a faint snicker from the doorway. “Always, Rabb, always...”

Harm rolled his eyes and turned back to the computer. Before long, the phone buzzed again. “Sir, the admiral’s back, and he’s calling a quick meeting in the bullpen.”

The yeoman’s voice sounded vaguely odd, as if he wasn’t sure how much to say. Harm narrowed his eyes and stood up. Mondays were getting weird around here.

When he stepped out into the bullpen, Admiral Chegwidden was talking to Mac and grinning rather uncharacteristically at baby Noelle. Kara was with them, having been released from the hospital the previous evening. Before Harm could comment that the women were awfully early for lunch, he stopped and glanced around. Most of the staff had gathered, and Webb was skulking in the back, observing from the double doors. The light began to dawn, and Harm fought back a flush of adrenaline. If this was what he thought it was...

“Okay, we’re all here. Attention to orders!”

Everyone came to attention; even Mac, despite still holding their daughter. Harm stared straight ahead as the admiral continued. “Giving an officer orders to his new post doesn’t typically require a whole lot of fanfare, but since I’m still in charge around here for a few weeks, I get to do this however I choose. You all know how much this office has meant to me, and you’ll hear it all in vivid detail at the official change of command ceremony, so I won’t take much time here. I just want to reassure you that I’m leaving you in capable hands. Assuming he doesn’t intend to use those hands to fire any more weapons in the courtroom, I have every confidence in his leadership, and I know that he will serve you as faithfully as you will serve him. Ladies and gentlemen, your new commanding officer,

Captain Harmon Rabb.”

The bullpen broke into applause as Admiral Chegwidden stepped forward and shook his hand. “I’ll do you proud, sir,” Harm promised quietly.

“I know you will, son.” The admiral looked over to the elated family that stood beside him. “So who gets to do the honors this time?”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s any question about that.” Mac passed Noelle over, and the baby dutifully placed a smacking kiss on her father’s cheek. “Congratulations, flyboy.”

“You’re devious,” Harm accused his wife good-naturedly. “Obviously you’ve known about this a little longer than I have.”

“Only by a couple of hours. How could I miss out on the look on your face when you figured it out?” Mac leaned in to deliver her own kiss. “The admiral was kind enough to give me a heads-up, since we now have something of a personnel issue on our hands.”

“Jeez, I totally forgot. Reservist or not, I can’t exactly be your C.O., can I?”

“Already taken care of,” Admiral Chegwidden replied smoothly. “That is, as long as the colonel doesn’t mind staying under my command. I’m fairly sure I could use her over at the Pentagon.”

“I’d welcome the opportunity to continue working with you, sir,” Mac beamed.

As Harm accepted congratulations from the rest of the staff, Kara eased back from the crowd, the smile on her face feeling plastic and insincere. She was thrilled for her friend, of course, but she’d been hoping to talk to Scott after leaving the hospital, and so far she hadn’t received so much as a message from him. Their only contact since that first night had been a brief phone conversation Saturday night, when she’d tried once again to explain herself, and he’d claimed to have understood her reasons. She wanted to believe that he meant it, but every day that passed made her question herself even more.

Her cell phone rang, and she fumbled around for it in her purse. This one-handed thing was already driving her up a wall. “Hello?”

“Hi, Kar,” replied the voice she’d been so desperate to hear.

“Hi,” she echoed softly. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“I’m sorry. I had to work some things out. But that’s all out of the way, I promise. Is Harm going to be the new JAG, or what?”

“How’d you know about that? It just happened five minutes ago.”

“Doesn’t matter. Look out the window by the stairwell.”

Hopelessly confused, she obeyed. Scott was standing outside in the courtyard, his own cell phone in hand. He waved up to her, and she could see a kind of confidence in his stance that hadn’t been there in some time. “And how’d you know I’d be here?” she

demanded.

"I have my sources. Get down here already, would you?"

She took the stairs two at a time and pushed through the double doors with her sling, knowing she'd probably regret it later. At last, they stood just a few yards apart, uncertain how to proceed. "How's the shoulder?" he asked, concerned.

"It's not good for much at the moment," she admitted. "Have you been thinking about ... you know, everything?"

"Haven't thought about much else. You?"

"The same." Kara sighed. "Look, whatever your decision is, I'll deal with it. I want you to do what you think is right, not what you think I want or need. I just don't want to lose what we already have. You're one of the best things in my life, Scott. Don't you understand that? This past year has been everything to me. You're the one who's there when I want to burn every textbook I own, and when I can't stop crying because that song Jason always sang is on the radio..." She scrubbed away a stray tear with her good hand and met his gaze with clear eyes. "What I'm trying to say is, I'll be here no matter what. I promise."

"I'm glad you said that," he answered honestly. "It means a lot. But I already know what I think is right."

And with that, he took a small velvet box out of his pocket and opened it in front of her. Before she could even form a response, he crossed the distance between them and kissed her gently. "We're right," he said quietly. "Us, together. No one in my life has ever understood me the way you do, and there's no one who could ever make me as happy as I am when I'm with you. The rest is just logistics. I want to marry you, Kara. I'll do anything in the world if you'll just say yes."

This time, there wasn't a whisper of doubt in her mind. "Yes," she said simply.

The pure joy that radiated from his eyes was overpowering. He fumbled with the ring for a moment, struggling to put it on the hand that was partially immobilized by the sling. She laughed delightedly, not caring that it would most likely hurt like hell later on, and kissed him again, more decisively. Despite the confusion and pain of the past few days, nothing could have made this moment more perfect.

Upstairs, Mac watched from the window and smiled. "Hon, come take a look."

Harm joined her and looked down at the touching scene below. "Don't tell me you had a hand in that as well." His wife only offered a smug look, and he shook his head. "Good lord, Sarah. When did you get so sneaky?"

"Hey, all I did was give Scott a heads-up as to where we'd be today. Besides, can I help it if I want everyone else to be as happy as I am?" She studied his face for a second as he gazed out the window. "Harm? Where'd you go just now?"

"Hmm? Nothing. I mean, nowhere." Under her unwavering gaze, he surrendered.

"You're going to think it's stupid."

"I doubt it. Come on. What's on your mind?"

He looked vaguely guilty as he shifted Noelle in his arms. "I was just thinking that someday, some guy's going to come along and do something like that for Ellie, and she'll come to me and make me give her away, and ... I told you it was stupid."

"It's not. I can't say I'm looking forward to that day, either. But you might want to let her learn to walk and talk before you worry about it." Mac leaned in and stroked their daughter's petal-soft cheek, and Harm drew them both into a warm embrace. Unseen by any of them, Admiral Chegwidden and Clayton Webb watched with a small amount of satisfaction.

"Four years ago, if you'd come to me and said things were going to work out like this, I would have told you to get your head examined," Webb commented.

"I would've been right there with you," the admiral agreed. "God, I'm going to miss this place."

"I'm sure this place will miss you, too. But you know what they say. The only thing constant is change."

"You've got that right." He looked at baby Noelle, contentedly resting her head on her father's shoulder, and smiled. "But it seems that lately, things around here mainly change for the better."

"Amen to that."

*** THE END ***