

Prologue:

Her Next of Kin

25 October 1994 started as the kind of day that made me feel lucky to be a navy pilot.

I climbed into the cockpit of an S-3 Viking at the naval air station at North Island in San Diego, started the plane's two jet engines, and prepared to fly airplane and three other crew members to the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier that soon would become our home was waiting about fifty miles offshore. This was a warmup for the ship's air wing, a chance for aviators to practice landing and taking off from the moving deck of the aircraft carrier in the open sea. In six months our squadron was scheduled to fly aboard the *Lincoln* and steam across the Pacific Ocean, through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean and into the Persian Gulf. There we would enforce the "no-fly zone" over Iraq and monitor the volatile military situation in the Middle East.

Our cruise would make history, too. The *Lincoln* was about to become the first West Coast aircraft carrier to go to sea with female crew members. I was among seventeen female aviators, and the only woman piloting S-3 Vikings--twin-engine jets that hunt submarines, drop bombs, and refuel other planes in flight.

The morning was cool and clear with steady trade winds and streaks of high stratus clouds that looked like huge white brush strokes on a deep blue canvas. I took off from the west-facing runway at North Island, turned south over San Diego harbor to avoid overflying residential areas of Point Loma, then joined up with another S-3 headed toward the *Lincoln*. We climbed together to fifteen thousand feet and circled in loose formation about thirty miles south of the aircraft carrier.

Given its role as the first Pacific Fleet aircraft carrier to carry female pilots, people throughout the navy jokingly referred to the *Lincoln* as the *Babe-raham Lincoln*. The genesis of the nickname was the movie *Wayne's World* ("She's such a babe that if she was president, she'd be Babe-raham *Lincoln*"). I got a chuckle out of the moniker and even used it in letters to my parents.

The air was smooth at our altitude, and that made it easy to keep abreast of the other S-3 as we made lazy circles in the sky. Our Vikings, pejoratively known as "Hoovers" for the vacuumlike sucking sound their twin turbo-fan engines make, are hardly the glamour planes of the fleet. Compared with the supersonic single-seat F/A-18 Hornets I had flown in a previous assignment, or the sleek afterburning F-14 Tomcats made famous by the movie *Top Gun*, Vikings are slow and ponderous. But in the air, with the landing gear tucked neatly into the wheel wells and the flaps retracted, even plodding Vikings look graceful.

Through my plane's large canopy I had an excellent view of the lead aircraft. Like most carrier-based jets, it was painted a dull gray. The drab color did a good job of obscuring the many fuel leaks that always seemed to streak along the undersides of the wings and line the fuselages of our aging planes. The navy had been flying Vikings since the mid-1970s, and some of the planes at North Island had been in service since I was in elementary school.

I kept my head turned to the left and studied the lead S-3. Like all the planes in our squadron, VS-29, it had the silhouette of an ancient Viking ship painted in black on the tail. Most of the tall-masted ship with the billowing sail covered the vertical stabilizer, and the rear of the boat stretched onto the rudder. But to me the emblem resembled a cartoon rubber ducky, and the side-to-side movements of the plane's rudder sometimes made it look as though the little duck was waddling through the sky. Even though I was becoming more tense as we approached the ship, the comical rubber ducky made me smile.

She's Just Another Navy Pilot

I had finished my final carrier landing qualifications in an S-3 a month before, and this was going to be my first time aboard the *Lincoln* as a full-fledged member of the Pacific Fleet. After four college years in the Reserve Officer Training Corps, three years of navy flight training, and two years in a land-based composite squadron, I was finally about to start doing the job my country had prepared me to do: I was going to sea with a fleet squadron. We were part of a five-thousand-member team aboard a technologically advanced aircraft carrier. And that ship was at the heart of a floating arsenal, one of the most powerful naval battle groups ever assembled. Our ship alone had more firepower than the entire U.S. Navy had delivered in all of World War II.

As an added bonus, I was going to be part of navy history: the first group of female aviators on the West Coast to deploy at sea as fully qualified combat pilots. Women in the military--and especially in military aviation--had overcome tremendous obstacles to get to this point. My bookshelves at home were stocked with accounts of their heroism. Many military women had given up hope that this day would ever come. But thanks to their sacrifices and dedication during more than fifty years of military flying, fifteen of us were about to fulfill their dream. We were going to be allowed to go as far as our ability and imagination would take us. The artificial gender barrier was gone, and we would be allowed to succeed or fail on our own merits.

As usual, when our S-3s arrived at the holding pattern about twenty miles from the ship, air-traffic controllers instructed us to stay at a high altitude. Vikings are relatively fuel-efficient, and we could wait in a holding pattern while the gas-guzzling F-14 Tomcat fighters, which had to get on the deck quickly, were guided in. Next came the F/A-18 Hornet fighter/bombers, then the two-seat A-6 Intruder bombers and four-seat EA-6B radar-jamming planes.

Finally it was our turn to begin our approach, and my adrenaline surged as the *Lincoln's* air-traffic controllers told us to drop down to a lower altitude. Even though I had already performed dozens of carrier landings, each one was an exciting challenge. The goal was to fly a perfect approach at exactly the right airspeed, then hit a spot on the deck while holding the plane at precisely the right attitude. There are hundreds of variables, so no two landings are exactly alike. Each approach and landing is graded, and the results are posted in every squadron's "ready room" for all to see.

Carrier landings differentiate navy and marine aviators from their counterparts in the other services, and we measure ourselves by how well we perform this critical task. No matter how good we are at bombing, dogfighting, hunting submarines, or refueling other aircraft, all of that is meaningless unless we can be counted on to bring our airplanes back to the ship at any time of day and in any kind of weather.

During my previous trips to "the boat," there had been several delays that kept planes in the holding pattern longer than expected. The deck crews were new to their jobs, and so were many of the pilots. It wasn't uncommon for operations to lag a few minutes behind schedule. But on this day, as we kept circling in seemingly endless lefthand patterns, the situation was becoming absurd. Our planes had plenty of fuel, so we were capable of staying aloft for hours; time wasn't a problem. But why had the ship's air-traffic controllers brought us down to a lower altitude if the deck wasn't clear to come aboard? It didn't make any sense. We orbited so long that my neck was getting sore from constantly looking left toward the lead airplane.

Then, at last, we were told to approach the ship for landing. There was a thin layer of clouds over the ship, and I followed the lead airplane through the wispy white cloud. We came out of the clouds about two thousand feet above the blue ocean surface.

My mouth went dry, and my heart was beating so hard that I could hear it thumping through the earphones inside my helmet. I tried to calm myself down by concentrating on the procedures as

I entered the pattern for my first fleet carrier landing, or "trap." My limbs felt as though they had electricity running through them, and my stomach tightened. It was like a bad case of stage fright. This was going to be my first time aboard the *Lincoln*, and I wanted to make a good impression.

I brought my S-3 into tight formation with the lead aircraft, and together we streaked toward the ship at about 400 miles an hour, just eight hundred feet above the ocean. Whitecaps from the wind-blown ocean passed by us in a blur, and the choppy air near the water's surface made it feel as though we were racing cars down a rutted country road. As soon as the *Lincoln* disappeared beneath us, the lead plane banked hard left and began slowing down in preparation for landing.

I continued straight ahead about one mile, then swung my aircraft onto its side in a tight left turn, yanked the two throttle levers back to idle, and extended the speed brakes. The g-forces of the hard turn pressed us all down into our ejection seats at three times our normal weight, and I glanced at the airspeed indicator as it unwound. At 186 knots, my left hand found the round landing gear lever on the instrument panel and pulled it sharply downward. A series of mechanical groans and clanks followed as the hydraulic system pushed the wheels into the slipstream and locked them into place.

My goal was to touch down exactly forty-five seconds after the plane in front of me. That's the minimum amount of time the deck crew needed to move one plane out of the landing area and prepare for the next arrival. By evenly spacing our arrivals at the shortest possible intervals, aviators can reduce the amount of time the ship is required to steam into the wind--a predictable situation that makes the ship and its crew especially vulnerable to enemy attack.

The *Lincoln* was about a mile off my left wing and the lead plane was making its final approach to the steel deck when I grabbed the square flap handle with my left hand and pulled it all the way back to the landing position. My plane was traveling at 156 knots when I tugged on the lever, and it decelerated as though I had tossed out an anchor. In four seconds the flaps reached their full travel of 65 degrees.

I pushed the nose of the airplane down to maintain airspeed, and I tried to anticipate the altitudes at certain key points in the arrival pattern. As soon as we were abeam the ship's arresting wires, I banked the plane 25 degrees to the left and began a descending turn. I focused intently on the instrument panel. With 90 degrees of turn to go, my S-3 was 450 feet above the water. As I rolled into the "groove" on final approach, the ship's frothy white wake was 325 feet below. So far so good.

The naval flight officer, or "NFO," in the right seat made the "ball call" as the "meatball," an automated lighting device that showed the plane's position relative to the deck, came clearly into view.

"Seven-oh-five, Viking, ball," he said in a calm, clear voice. "Four point-oh," he added, letting air-traffic controllers know that we had a little under two tons of fuel remaining.

Everything looked right. The lights on the meatball were centered, just as they should have been, and I was properly aligned with the white painted center stripe on the black deck. My eyes quickly shifted between the gauges on the instrument panel and the rapidly changing view outside. Airspeed was 110 knots, fine. The rate of descent was roughly 600 feet a minute, good. I glanced at the numbers and, by force of habit, reviewed my procedures out loud: "Meatball, lineup, angle of attack."

Under my breath, I admonished myself not to screw up.

From this point on there was no reason to look at the instrument panel. The final portion of any carrier landing is purely visual, and I kept my eyes on the panoramic picture in front of me. The ball started to sink, indicating that I was getting too low, so I added a touch of power. But that

changed the aircraft's pitch, so I pushed the nose down to compensate. Then the airspeed increased along with the rate of descent. I was flying like a rookie--reacting to the ball instead of using the airplane to actively place it where I wanted it to be.

Suddenly we slammed against the steel deck with a loud screech, and the forged metal hook dangling beneath our plane's tail caught the third of four arresting cables. Maybe it was beginner's luck, but I had caught the target wire. We came to an abrupt stop with the nose wheel only a few yards from the edge of the deck. I could feel the rolling motion of waves crashing against the ship's hull directly beneath us.

There was no time to savor the successful trap, however. We knew that the next plane was rolling into the groove just forty-five seconds behind us, and we had to raise the tailhook and clear the landing area quickly. The flight officer in the right seat pulled the lever that unlocked and folded the wings, and in my side mirror I could see them folding into a giant X above us. I added power and steered through a narrow gap between several parked airplanes as we rolled to catapult number one at the bow of the ship. Everything was hurried, but nothing could be overlooked. We unfolded the wings, then extended the launch bar on the front landing gear after I taxied the airplane to the catapult.

As soon as I got the hand signal from the launch director, I brought both engines up to full power. The jet engines whined, and the airplane rocked and shook against its restraints, then squatted down as the catapult went into tension. A pair of deck hands scurried in front of the plane, then ducked down to check the nose wheel and make sure the aircraft was properly attached to the catapult. Moments later, they scrambled away to safety.

I clicked the launch bar switch to "retract" so that it would raise up automatically and not interfere with the landing gear at the end of the catapult stroke. Next I moved the joystick all the way left and right, forward and aft, then around in a circle to make sure that the movement was free and unobstructed. I pushed the rudder pedals firmly back and forth with my feet. Everything felt normal. Then I scanned the gauges a final time to make sure that the jet engines were up to speed and none of the warning or caution lights was on. A few seconds later, the checklist was complete.

I saluted the yellow-shirted catapult officer and watched him slowly turn his head to look up and down the four-hundred-foot length of the catapult, making sure that nothing was in our way. Then I took a deep breath and prepared for the sudden acceleration of a catapult shot. As soon as the catapult officer was satisfied that all was clear, he bent down and gently touched the deck with his left hand, his long-sleeved jersey rippling in the stiff wind. At that moment, the "shooter" behind him hit the button that sent us on our way like a rock from a slingshot. In three breathtaking seconds, we lunged forward from zero to 130 miles an hour. The bow of the ship passed underneath us in a blur.

As our Viking began climbing into the salty air, the furious noises and strange sensations of the catapult faded away. We were flying again. The smooth comforting sounds of the two jet engines and the wind passing over the wings filled the cockpit. The plane was under my control, and the horizon before us was wide and expansive.

I couldn't wait to do it again.

I made four traps and four "cat shots," as the catapult launches are known, before being told to fly home to nearby North Island. The short trip back to the coast gave me a chance to calm down, and landing on the eight-thousand-foot runway that runs parallel to the beach on Coronado Island seemed like child's play compared with setting the plane down on the ship. By the time our S-3 rolled to a stop in front of the hangar at our base and we shut the engines down, I was relaxed and happy with my day's work. My passes hadn't been perfect, but each of them had brought us

aboard the ship safely. The day's events had increased my confidence that I could perform the demanding tasks required of navy pilots, and that with experience I would become a valued team member.

I bounded upstairs to our squadron ready room with the rest of the crew. The four of us were still talking and laughing when someone asked if we had heard about an F-14 crash. Crash rumors circulate through navy squadrons with amazing speed, and they are seldom unfounded.

A chill ran through me. There were three female officers in VF-213, the F-14 squadron assigned to the *Lincoln*. Two--Lt. Kara Hultgreen and Lt. Carey Lohrenz--were pilots, and a third, Lt. Christina Taylor, was a radar intercept officer, or "RIO." I had worked with Christina in a previous assignment at another squadron, and I prayed that she wasn't involved. But no one had much solid information. All anyone knew for sure was that an F-14 Tomcat had gone down a few minutes before we had arrived at the ship. That explained our long delay in the arrival pattern before landing.

The next morning the *San Diego Union-Tribune* printed a little blurb about the accident on the front page. The article said that an F-14 Tomcat had crashed while attempting to land on the *Lincoln*. The RIO in the back seat of the two-person fighter had been plucked from the 63-degree water and treated for mild hypothermia. But the pilot was gone--lost at sea. The paper said the pilot's name was being withheld pending notification of "his" next of kin. I was slightly relieved by the pronoun, because the only people I knew in that squadron were women; if it had been one of them, I assumed, the paper would have written "her" next of kin. I went to the VS-29 ready room and prepared to fly back out to the *Lincoln* for several more days at sea.

Naval aviation is a hazardous enterprise, and accidents happen. Several people I had met since starting navy flight training had been killed in aerial mishaps. All the losses were tragic, but there was little time to mourn; the missions had to go on. The navy had trained me to compartmentalize, and I hardly thought about the crash at all as I prepared for my next flight to the *Lincoln*.

It was another gorgeous fall day, and I landed on the ship that morning without any problem. After stepping out of the jet, I met Lt. Jana Raymond, a female NFO in my squadron, and we lugged my bags to the stateroom we had been assigned to share during the upcoming deployment. Jana had already been on the ship for a couple of days, and she knew her way around the catacombs better than I. We dropped my bags in our stateroom, and I followed her down a ladder to the second deck.

Jana and I had known each other for several years and had roomed together at the naval air station in Lemoore, California, during a previous assignment. She has brown hair and eyes and a smooth tan complexion. In appearance she reminds me of the actress Holly Hunter; they both have the same slight Southern twang, Jana having been raised in Kentucky. As we got down to the second deck, though, Jana turned and with her usual bluntness asked a question that cut right through me.

"So, did you hear about Kara?" she asked, a concerned look on her face.

Jana's words staggered me. From the tone and the terse wording of the question, I instantly knew that Kara Hultgreen was the F-14 pilot who had been killed in the previous day's accident. The pilot in the newspaper was really a she, not a he. My knees almost buckled, and I had to sit on the ladder and catch my breath.

"No," I answered. "Please tell me you're not talking about the crash."

Jana informed me that the navy had just called off the search for Kara's body. The rescue helicopters were back on deck, and spotter planes had returned to their land bases. I hoped

desperately that Kara might be out there bobbing around on a raft, working on her tan and wondering why it was taking those helicopter drivers so long to find her. But in my heart I knew right then that she was gone.

Kara had been assigned to share a two-person stateroom during the upcoming cruise with Christina Taylor. Now Christina had been told to move in with Carey Lohrenz, the other female F-14 pilot in her squadron. Jana and I were moved into Christina's old room--the one she and Kara had been going to share. Some of Kara's belongings were still in the cramped quarters when we got there; it was hard to believe she was really dead. We put Kara's T-shirts and personal things into a bag and gave it to Christina to take back to Kara's family in Texas.

I hadn't known Kara well, but I had been impressed by her confidence and sense of humor from the moment we met. At twenty-nine, Kara was a few years older than most of the other female aviators. She had a tall, athletic frame, and she was outgoing and vivacious. She had been a vocal proponent of allowing women to fly combat planes, and she had testified before Congress several years earlier seeking to change the old laws. She seemed absolutely positive of who she was and what she wanted to accomplish. I'm sure that many of her fellow F-14 pilots saw in Kara a female version of themselves. She had the same fighter-pilot swagger and self-assurance. Her radio call sign was "Revlon," a nickname she picked up for wearing makeup in a TV interview. Others called her "The Incredible Hulk" or "Hulkster" in reference to her imposing size.

Some female aviators who, like Kara, began their navy careers when women were excluded from combat assignments had mixed feelings about serving on the front lines. They never considered the possibility that they might be shot down, become prisoners of war, or have to endure the strain and loneliness of being at sea for months at a time. Kara had thought about all of those things, though, and had been a forceful advocate for female aviators. To me she had always been a symbol of our competence and eagerness to serve our country.

I spent the rest of that afternoon in a daze. I couldn't eat or concentrate on my trivial tasks of unpacking. That night in my stateroom, when I finally went to sleep, I had the odd sensation of floating somewhere. There was nothing to look at, only blackness, and I was deeply afraid; I didn't know what was going on. Then there was a faint glimmer of light and shadows. I knew immediately that it was Kara, and she was telling me without words that everything was going to be all right. I felt her presence and her peace, and wherever she was I had a sense that she was OK. I don't know why I should have had a dream like that, especially about a person I didn't know very well. The memory of that dream is still vivid, and it calms me whenever I think about Kara and her sudden and violent death.

That Friday the air wing held a memorial service for Kara aboard the *Lincoln*, and the turnout was impressive. Officers from Kara's squadron, VF-213, stood shoulder to shoulder in their khaki uniforms in the forecastle, or fo'c'sle, at the extreme forward end of the ship. Many of them had been opposed to the idea of women flying with them, but their proud, pained faces showed that they regretted Kara's loss profoundly. The rest of us sat in folding chairs among the ship's heavy anchor chains. The ceremony was short, simple, and emotionally overpowering. I had difficulty getting through it, especially when the lone bugler sounded taps. We were acknowledging the loss of a fellow aviator, someone who had known the dangers of her profession but had pursued flying with passion and determination anyway.

The ceremony hadn't even ended when, back in San Diego and around the country, anonymous faxes began arriving at news organizations claiming that Kara had been "pushed" through flight training because she was a woman. These nameless messages insinuated that she hadn't really been qualified to fly F-14s. The malice and cowardice of these writers made me

furious. How could people make such serious charges anonymously? How could they gang up on Kara when she wasn't around to defend herself? How could they pour salt in her family's wounds during their time of sorrow?

More than 60 percent of military plane crashes are caused by pilot error, but I had never heard of anyone questioning the qualifications of other pilots who died in mishaps. The furor over Kara's qualifications seemed incredibly unfair. Fortunately Kara's mother asked the navy to make her daughter's flight training grades public. That should have put a quick stop to any questions about Kara's qualifications. She had had some difficulty mastering the art of landing an F-14 on an aircraft carrier, but that's nothing new; it's a huge airplane, and bringing a Tomcat aboard a ship is one of the most demanding feats in aviation. Her grades throughout training had been above average, and she had finished third in her training class of seven. Kara had a degree in aeronautical engineering from the University of Texas and had hoped to become an astronaut. She was a gifted flier who had proven herself in the navy and truly earned her place in a fighter cockpit. She didn't deserve to die so soon--or to become the target of such vicious slander.

For several weeks after Kara's accident, every time I flew toward the ship in preparation for another trap I would think of her. No one was better qualified to lead the female aviators on our ship than she. She was fearless and funny, charismatic and confidence-inspiring. She had appreciated the historical significance of our mission, and she had been dedicated to completing it. Now, suddenly, she was gone--and our chances for success seemed diminished.

Prove Them Wrong--Or Right

After Kara's accident, I felt more pressure than ever to fly well. Yet the harder I tried, the worse I actually did.

A week after Kara's memorial service, I was scheduled to fly a night refueling mission from the *Lincoln* off the California coast. I started the engines and began taxiing our S-3 toward a catapult on the bow when one of our plane's two generators quit. I was momentarily tempted to ground the plane for a mechanical inspection and skip the entire flight. But my crew and I were able to restart the faulty generator without too much difficulty, so we decided to proceed.

The night sky was murky and ominous as we approached the catapult, and I had a deep sense of foreboding. The ocean surface was rough and windswept, and low clouds blocked out the moon and stars. As we taxied forward to the catapult, I silently pondered a few of the unanswerable questions that had surely passed through the minds of all the naval aviators who went before me: What invisible forces conspired to bring me to this frightful place? What fate awaits me in that darkness ahead? What the hell am I doing here?

I concentrated on my tasks inside the cockpit and tried to vanquish these troubling doubts.

With my gloved left hand I pushed the S-3's two throttle levers forward as far as they would go. I listened to the engines whine and felt the airframe buffet and shake as I double-checked the gauges and tested the controls. The cockpit was bathed in a faint red light designed to enhance night vision. Finally I flicked on the external lights and held my breath as the catapult hurled us forward into the night. The launch felt normal, and the airspeed indicator on the instrument panel showed that we were accelerating at the proper rate. I wanted the plane to leap off the deck and vault upward, away from the blackness and the cold, churning water beneath us. But as soon as I pulled back on the joystick to initiate our ascent, all the lights in the cockpit went out; our plane had lost electrical power, and suddenly it was as dark inside the cockpit as out. I could hear the engines

humming, so I knew that we wouldn't have to eject as long as I could keep the airplane under control.

My eyes found the dim standby gyroscopic gauge near the bottom of the instrument panel, and I used it to hold the wings level and begin climbing. I remembered from training that the gauge would run for nine minutes on battery power alone, so I had time to try to get to a higher, safer altitude as the others tried to sort out the problem. I called to the NFO in the right seat and told him that I had control of the aircraft. He knew he didn't have to pull the ejection lever that would blast all of us from the plane, and he began restarting the generator.

A long minute later, the electrical power returned. The red lights inside the cockpit came on again, and we all tried to calm down. We continued flying away from the ship and performed our tanking mission without any more complications. By the end of the ninety-minute flight I thought that I had put the fright of losing power behind me, and I prepared to bring our airplane back to the ship. The weather had deteriorated during the time we were away, however, and what had begun as a scattered overcast was now virtually solid. As we skimmed through the clouds, the blinking external lights exacerbated the dizzying vertigo I already felt. I had to concentrate on the flight instruments to keep the airplane right side up, but the sudden loss of electrical power had rattled my faith in the equipment. Beneath us, the ocean swirled like an infinite well of black ink.

Our S-3 was scheduled to be the last plane to land on the *Lincoln* that night, so in the back of my mind I knew that all the aviators would be watching our arrival on the ship's internal television system. Every squadron's ready room was equipped with a TV monitor that showed the ship's landing area and broadcast radio transmissions between pilots and the landing signal officers (LSOs) guiding them to the arresting wires. On nights like this, aviators throughout the ship would sit around the ready rooms eating popcorn and watching "terror-vision."

I tried to put the electrical failure behind me and concentrate on making a smooth approach and accurate landing. I scanned the instruments as we descended through the clouds, then spotted the ship about two miles straight ahead. The deck was rising and falling as the ship plowed through heavy seas, and the rough air near the surface was equally turbulent. Our plane had plenty of fuel, and we were near enough to the coast that we could have diverted to land bases at Miramar or North Island if necessary. But I was determined to show that a female pilot--even a new arrival to the fleet like me--could handle these tough conditions.

On my first approach, the deck seemed to rush up toward our plane as the ship rose on a large swell. I instinctively added power, but it was too much, and our S-3 sailed a few feet over the top of the arresting cables on deck. This was a missed approach, or "bolter." I slammed the throttles full forward and took off again, promising not to let myself make the same mistake a second time.

Then, to my horror, on my second approach I missed the wires again.

"The third time's the charm," one of my crew members offered, trying to boost my confidence. But the third landing attempt wasn't lucky for me, either. Another bolter. Finally, on my fourth approach, I trapped successfully.

I parked the airplane, and the deck crew immediately chained the aircraft to the pitching deck to keep it from rolling. I climbed out, exhausted, wet with sweat, legs rubbery and weak. I was totally humiliated by my three failed landing attempts. It had been a terrible night, made worse by the knowledge that everyone in the air wing had had a front-row seat to my gaffes. After Kara's death, I wanted to build my shipmates' faith in female pilots. Now, because I had allowed myself to become too preoccupied, my poor performance was accomplishing just the opposite.

"Thanks for the extra flight time," one of my crew members joked, trying to lift my spirits.

"At least you were too high," someone else said. "You should've seen the F-14 that almost hit the ramp tonight." That was no consolation, either.

Back in our squadron ready room, Joe "Flojo" Keith, a senior S-3 pilot and LSO, punched me in the shoulder sympathetically and told me he thought he knew what I had been doing wrong. Instead of telling me about it right then, however, he wisely suggested that I get some sleep; we could discuss it in the morning.

I trudged downstairs, took a shower, and went to my stateroom. On my desk there was a package from my parents. Evidently Jana had found the box in the ready room and had thoughtfully brought it back for me to open. I tore at the brown packaging material and hoped to find something inside that would take my mind off my current difficulties. There was a can full of treats as well as letters from Mom and Dad.

My dad had served as a marine officer, and both my parents knew how important mail and care packages from home could be to morale. Even though the room was dim, I began reading the letters right away:

Dear Loree,

I've wanted to write to you for a few days now. That package Mom is sending you seems an appropriate vehicle--food for thought along with real food. Mom and I attended the memorial yesterday for Kara (I've enclosed the clipping from today's paper). It was moving in every respect. We introduced ourselves to Kara's mother, and Mom had already written to her. I hope we'll spend some time together later.

When I administered your oath of commissioning, I spoke of my pride in seeing you and your classmates join the officer ranks and of my delight as an active-duty officer that talent like yours would be with us. But as a father I knew--more than most other fathers present--that this is a dangerous profession. We are managers of violence, and sometimes accidents happen. I wish I had not been so prophetic, but I had to be honest.

As far as I know, Kara is the first of your comrades to be lost. If there are others, this is probably the closest to you. If it would help, let me share a few thoughts with you about losing comrades.

At your age, and in your calling, death seems distant and not relevant. You and your team have so much to do and to live for. Few think of or dwell on the possibility of death while you do so well that which you've been trained so well to do.

Then, like the thief in the night, death strikes and you must react. Then you come to grips with your own mortality. Often the first reaction to the death of a comrade is relief that it wasn't you. That is followed by guilt for feeling that way. Both are very normal reactions to the shock of losing someone close.

There follow feelings of anger--at the lost friend for being gone, at the system that allowed the loss, at others who don't seem to feel the loss the way you do. (I must add, regretfully, that the chorus has already begun about qualifications of women pilots. You and the other women will have tough, bitter days ahead of you. I wish I could help you, but you will do just fine. Maintain your poise and dignity--you'll find both in short supply in others.)

Once you've gone through the various emotions and trials of being one of the first, you'll have to come to grips with how you go on from here. Tough as it is, you must continue to do your job. Without notice or publicity you must just fly your missions and take care of your troops. Grieve in private. Be the officer and pilot you are capable of being. The greatest tribute you can give Kara

is by being the best you can be. Many will expect less of you and are ready to excuse you and the other women from really performing now. Only you can prove them wrong--or right.

When you became one of the first, you took on a lot more than you probably expected. You are up to it. These difficult times will make you better. Get through them like a professional. When I was your age, I had lost many marines--some because of my decisions, my mistakes. It doesn't get any easier with time. It just makes you more determined to avoid the same errors and to continue to set the example.

*I think of you constantly and pray for you each night. God bless all of you. I am so proud!
Love,
Dad*

Dear Loree,

Happy Halloween! Enclosed in the box is my treat (peanut butter cookies and a tin of special nuts--bet you can't eat just one of these nuts). Couldn't think of a trick, although Dad suggested an exploding can of phony snakes--I put the zap on that fast.

I had such a strange birthday this year. (Your card was absolutely wonderful--I read each word of it, and it made me feel so loved by you--many thanks, my darling!) Kara's memorial service was at 5 p.m. on my birthday. It was held outside of the San Antonio Country Club on its terrace, shaded by large oak trees with lovely golf-green lawns sloping away to the golf course. The navy had an Honor Guard, and the Marine Corps provided the firing squad.

Prior to the service, the Navy Band played several patriotic selections ending with "I'm Proud to Be an American" and "Eternal Father." Short but very emotional eulogies were then given by Admiral Yakely (who said he knew you), Kara's best friend Mo, her two sisters, her dad, and finally her mother. The ceremony (attended by about two hundred people) concluded with the firing squad's three volleys, taps, and an F-14 flyover in the missing-man formation. [At aviators' funerals it is traditional for the flyer's squadron to fly a missing-man formation. A four-plane division approaches the site of the memorial service, then one of the aircraft, symbolizing the missing aviator, breaks off by pulling up toward "the heavens." The rest of the formation continues flying without him/her, with a space left in the formation.]

This death really hit me hard even though I had never known Kara. Her great sense of humor, the French braiding of her hair when on flight status, her witty intelligence, and the love she had for flying couldn't help but remind me of you. You are so very dear to me, my only daughter, my direct line to the future and the source of my sweetest memories of the past. My pride in what you do is never exceeded by my fear of its risks, but I do pray daily for your safety.

I guess I found the total lack of any mention of God or an afterlife at Kara's memorial very sad. Such a beautiful soul should have been alluded to. Kara's spirit, so vital and strong, surely whispers in God's ear each day now to protect and help her aviator buddies as they continue doing the work she so enjoyed. Many of the women I talked to were particularly upset at the manner of Kara's death. I prefer to believe she was too busy trying to solve her problem to fully realize the grave danger in her last seconds of life.

I see in my mind's eye, directly beneath the water's surface, an enormous archangel, one of the many who guard all our pilots, and his face shines with such love for her as she lays her head upon his chest. With mammoth wings furled protectively around her, Kara met God and now knows how to really fly. We poor souls still plodding along from day to day on this earth are left with the anger, the sadness, and the lost potential of Kara's passing. My comfort is that I think of death as

She's Just Another Navy Pilot

being very much like childbirth--great pain and tears producing great joy in a new life. Kara has been reborn into Heaven.

Dearest daughter, I treasure every bit of you. Stay safe, and if you ever chance to hear a rustle of wings as you near your S-3, those are just Mom's guys arriving on duty.

*Love always,
Mom*

My parents' pride and faith in my abilities were sincere, and I'm sure they meant for their thoughtful words to elevate my spirits. Yet on this night their positive, hopeful expressions only deepened my despair. Dad said the way to honor Kara's memory was to excel. By flying so poorly--and so conspicuously poorly--I had dishonored my fallen shipmate.

Even though I seldom cry, alone in my room that night I put my face in my hands and wept until exhaustion overcame me.