

AGAINST ALL ENEMIES 1

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**Voice in the
WILDERNESS**

Prologue - The Journal of KC Banning

I'm KC and I'll be nine in a few days. This is the first time I ever wrote in a journal. Brock says it's like a blog post, but you just write it for yourself. So today I'm writing about this summer, the best one I ever had at Crooked River Ranch. Mostly because I made a best friend, Brock Daniels. He just turned twelve. That sounds funny. I mean, like what twelve-year-old boy is gonna play with me instead of somebody their own age?

The first day we got here, I was hanging out at the basketball court, trying to find somebody to play with. That's where a big bully started calling me names. When he called me a red-headed, freckled-faced brat, and some other words I won't say, Brock told him to stop. But the boy was bigger than Brock, so the bully just shoved me. Brock punched him in the nose so hard it knocked the boy down flat. It took him a while to get up and, when he did, that bully ran home with blood pouring from his nose and crying for his mama.

It makes a girl feel funny inside to see a boy fighting for her honor. Nobody else ever did that for me. Usually, I had to do my own fighting.

Brock didn't know what to call me, but he kept looking at my red hair. I was afraid he might call me carrot top, then I would have to punch him. So I told him I was KC. You know, two letters, K-C. He told me his name, then he went and asked what KC stood for. I don't tell nobody that. But he promised not to tell, so I told him my full name, Katheryn Celeste Banning.

Well, after the fight, nobody would play with either of us. So I told Brock, if he would hang out with me, I could show him how to play tricks on golfers. We hung out for four weeks, running all over Crooked River Ranch, chasing Marmots, hiding and moving duffers' golf balls—nice golfers got better lies but, if they cussed, you'd never guess all the things we thought

of to do with their golf balls. Some days we swam in the big pool. Brock can stay under water for three whole minutes. Sometimes I was afraid he was gonna drown.

With Brock I could talk about anything. I even told him about my dad. I don't think Dad likes me much. Maybe it's my freckles. I tried to scrub them off with bleach. It burned like fire, so I was sure some freckles got bleached off. I'll never try that again. When I told Brock about it, he said it don't work. He said you gotta live in the skin God gives you, so learn to like it.

That made me mad at God. Brock said he understood, but that it don't do no good to get mad at Him. Then he got excited telling me about Jesus. I didn't tell Brock I already knew all about Jesus. But he figured that out after a while.

Brock is a good writer. He writes in his journal every day, and he said maybe I should do that too. So I'm writing about the whole summer, all at once, my most favorite summer ever. But it makes me sad that it's ending. We're going home in the morning.

Brock's family left yesterday. I ran away after he said goodbye, because I never let people see me cry. Well, except when I'm so dang mad that I'm getting ready to light into them. Brock told me my temper was because of my red hair. And that I need to control it. If I don't, he said I'd better learn to box like he does, because I was gonna have a lot of fights.

Well, I think I wrote enough for this summer, except for one thing. Brock said he was coming back next year, because his parents like to play in the summer golf tournaments, just like mine. I'm glad. But eleven months is a long time to wait to see your best friend.

Yours truly,

KC Banning

Chapter 1

5 years later, June 29, Crooked River Ranch, Oregon

"Katheryn Celeste Banning, where are you?" Seventeen-year-old Brock Daniels pulled his cupped hands from his mouth and scanned the sparse Juniper forest around him. KC hated her full name. If she was hiding behind one of the trees, he should get a rise out of her.

No answer.

Brock stepped from the dusty trail onto the outdoor basketball court at the Crooked River Ranch RV Park. The intense heat from the Central Oregon sunshine radiated from the blacktop, almost singeing his bare legs between his tan cargo shorts and the top of his running shoes. From the far side of the Crooked River Canyon, a mammoth promontory dwarfed him, a seemingly unscalable rock cliff reaching upward another 800 feet until it intersected the powder blue of a summer sky.

Unscalable? Some day he might climb it. Maybe with KC. He wouldn't have to talk that girl into it—maybe *out* of it, if it turned out to be too dangerous.

Where was she? Her family usually arrived before his did each summer so her dad could play a few rounds of golf before the Fourth of July tournament began.

Brock stepped off the court into the shade of the largest nearby tree, inhaled the pungent odor of the big Juniper, and waited beside a small boulder. What if she didn't show this year? That would ruin this trip. No. It would ruin his whole summer.

KC was smart. Really smart. She could practically read his mind and talked with him like a buddy, not like a girl three years younger than him. This would be their sixth summer ... if KC showed. Her large, green eyes were full of life and mischief and her hair turned to red flames when the sun set it on fire. This summer she should turn fourteen and—

"Brock?" A soft, alto voice came over his right shoulder, familiar sounding but also

strange.

He stepped away from the tree into the hot sunshine and turned toward the voice. Brock looked, swallowed, and nearly choked. "KC?"

"Well, yeah. Who did you expect?" She stood, studying his face, dressed in a pair of snug-fitting capers or caprios—whatever women called those knee-high pants, and one of the blouses that tied above her waist.

He was staring. Brock knew it, but he couldn't help it. Because it *was* KC, but it *wasn't* KC. Certainly not the KC from last summer.

At least four inches taller. Hair now a dark auburn, but still blazing in the sun. Eyes a deeper, darker green. She still had the freckles sprinkled across the cheeks and nose of her tanned face, but there were curves in places where she had never had—

"Brock Daniels!" Her eyes turned to glaring green emeralds as her hands went to one of those new curvy spots, her hips. "If you make even one remark, so help me I'll—"

"KC, I'd never do that. You know—"

"I only know what your eyes are telling me, and..." She didn't continue.

He sighed in relief. It wasn't a good thing to tick off KC.

Over the last eleven months, this girl, his buddy, maybe even soul mate, had morphed into a young woman. Brock tried to reply, but was too confused by the contrast between the girl he expected to see and the beautiful young lady standing—

A piercing buzz jolted his nervous system. Every muscle in his body went rigid.

KC drew a sharp breath and froze.

Brock spied the source of the menacing noise. It lay coiled under a bush two feet from her bare leg. "Kace, don't move a muscle."

Head erect now, the three-foot rattler had coiled and given its warning. It wasn't going to wait much longer. If she moved, it wouldn't wait at all.

“Please, Brock, I can't just stand here while—“

“Then close your eyes and think about something else.”

“Something else? You've got to be kidding.” Her voice was barely audible now above the agitated snake's buzzing.

Brock lowered a hand to the ground and curled his fingers around a baseball-sized rock. He could throw hard and he could throw strikes. But could he stop a strike with KC's life on the line?

The snake's roving tongue had sensed the large, warm-blooded threat only twenty-four inches away. Its head began the tell-tale back and forth motion. The rattler wasn't going to stand down. Its mouth opened wide, fangs extended. That little demon would strike even if KC didn't move.

From the stretch, Brock let both a prayer and the rock fly.

The triangular head shot toward KC's leg.

He tried to correct the trajectory as the rock spun off his fingertips.

KC's scream pierced his ears.

But the head of the striking rattler veered off course. A foot behind KC's right leg, the snake now lay writhing in the dirt.

She leaped from beside the bush, nearly knocking Brock off his feet when she collided with him.

He wrapped KC up in his arms to keep her shaking body from falling, but kept his gaze locked on the snake. Its mangled head hung limp from its neck, if a snake really has such a thing

as a neck. The loud buzz dropped off to a feeble rattle, but the snake kept coiling and striking.

KC swiveled in his arms, pressed her back into him, and shivered as she watched the nearly headless snake striking at nothing. “You nailed him, Brock. I thought I was dead, but ...”

“Couldn’t afford to miss, Kace.” Brock’s heart finally caught up with the desperation of the previous few seconds. Now it pounded out his full realization of the danger to KC. Anger at the rattlesnake surged through Brock and flew out his mouth. “No way would I let that darned little s—“

“Don’t say it!” She slammed her open hand over his lips. “No swearing, Brock. That’s what he is alright, but I don’t want you to ... why’s he still striking?” KC looked up into his face with terror in her wide green eyes. “He still wants to kill me, doesn’t he?”

Aware now that this wasn’t a little girl in his arms, Brock loosened his hold on her.

But KC’s gaze again locked on the striking snake.

“No, Kace. He’s not trying to kill you. Snakes are stupid. They don’t have much of a brain, and half of it is distributed along their backbone. That half still thinks he’s in danger. He’s so dumb he doesn’t even know he’s dead yet.” He cupped her chin and pulled until her eyes left the snake and focused on him. “Are you okay?”

“I am now.” She turned, stood on her tiptoes, and softly pecked his cheek. “Now that you saved me.”

That had never happened before. Now what was he supposed to say?

Before he could come up with an appropriate response, KC grabbed one of his hands.

"Come on. Race you to the lookout." She flashed him her smile, but it seemed to speak a different language than it used to.

By the time he got his mind in gear, she nearly jerked him off his feet. Then they were

off, running hand-in-hand toward the canyon rim.

So just like that, the snake was history. That was vintage KC. Using fun to conquer or forget her fears. But, in reality, there were people in the world a lot like that snake. People programmed to do evil because they believed evil lies. Someday he wanted to help fight against such people, maybe with his words, his writing. But he hoped he never had to fight *them* to save KC's life. He'd need more than a well-thrown rock for that battle.

Without slowing her pace, KC veered off the trail and pulled him along, dodging sagebrush and rocks as they ran toward the wooden structure hanging out over the six-hundred-foot-deep canyon, their favorite vantage point on the ranch.

This was how the last four summers had begun. Well, all but the rattlesnake part. She was still KC, still a girl who loved adventure, even though she looked like she'd just stepped off the cover of a magazine.

Brock inched ahead of her as they trotted up the steps. He led the way onto the wooden structure lined with four-foot-high protective railing. He didn't stop until they reached the outer edge. After dropping KC's hand, he stuck his head out over the rail and looked down at the ribbon of water below. Crooked River. "Feels like someone punched me in the gut again."

"Brock, you're not afraid of heights. I don't think you're afraid of anything ... well, except, maybe how different I, uh, the changes—"

"Kace ..." He cut off her remark about her appearance. "... It's not that I'm *afraid* of heights, but you have to respect them. And, each year, that first look into the canyon reminds me." He found himself staring at KC again. Their gazes locked.

Her cheeks turned pink and she looked away.

Maybe because that first-ever kiss on the cheek had taken their relationship onto

unexplored turf.

Time for another subject change. "So how was your school year?"

"Awkward." She looked away, shuffling her feet.

"Whaddya mean?"

KC sighed and propped her forearms on the railing, staring into the canyon while the late June sun glistened off the beads of perspiration on her face. "Most of the time I didn't know whether to act like a kid or to try acting like somebody older. Then the harassment started."

"Boys?"

"Yeah. *Little* boys who thought they were acting like *big* boys." She turned her head and looked his way. "I'm glad you're not like that."

"Can't say that I blame them." He smirked at her and gestured from her head down to her feet.

She smiled and blushed again. "Not you too." Then KC's smile faded, completely.

"Things are changing." Twin frown lines formed on her forehead. "They'll never be the same again ... not ever." Tears welled in her eyes.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. You're just growing up. Welcome to the mixed up, schizo, semi-adult world of your teenage years."

The tears overflowed and spilled down her cheeks. "It's more than that." She sniffed, wiped her nose, and met his gaze again. "You probably heard Dad was elected to the Senate."

He nodded. "My parents said he's the man we need to help straighten out the mess in Washington."

Her lower lip quivered. "We're moving, Brock. To DC. This is my last summer here."

"You mean you won't even come back for the golf tourn—"

"No. The truth is ... you and I may not see each other again. And we're leaving after the tournament on Saturday."

Her words pounded him in his solar plexus and brought the same sickening feeling left by a big linebacker dude who speared Brock in the bread basket and knocked the breath out of him. As a quarterback, he was all too familiar with that. But this, losing summers with KC, maybe losing KC completely, was much worse. He doubted the sick feeling would go away anytime soon.

Here he was feeling sorry for himself while tears streaked her tanned face. He brushed the tears from her nearest cheek. "We need to fix this, Kace. We—"

"But we can't." She turned and circled him with her arms. Now the tears turned into a river.

Brock held her while she cried, and he tried to come up with a plan that made the most of the time they had left.

When her crying turned to sniffles, he took her shoulders and pushed her back until he could see her face. "We're gonna do three things."

She didn't seem to hear him.

"Are you listening?"

KC nodded then met his gaze. "Yeah."

"We have two more days here. A couple of years ago your parents said you were too young to hike down into the canyon. Well, you're older now, so we're gonna explore the canyon and the river together for the next two days. I'll pack food and water for us. Tell your mom you won't be home for lunch."

"But you said three things."

"I'm not done yet. We're both going to pick out a weird name—something no one else would think of—names we can Google on the Internet to find each other."

"Can't we just decide to meet on one of the big web sites? Well, whenever my parents let me have my own account we could meet."

"Not good enough. Six years from now, I'll be out of college, your dad's first term in the senate will end, and who knows what will be around on the Internet."

"So what's the other thing?"

"If all else fails. We'll try to meet here. Like we do now, on June 29th. And, in case we can't be here at the same time, I'm going to bury a pencil and some paper in a jar under that boulder by the tallest juniper tree. You know, the one at the corner of the basketball court. One of us can leave a note with information so the other one can find them. Dad says the way the country's going we may have Internet censorship by our own government in a few years."

"I hope my dad can help stop that." Her voice grew soft. "I wish my dad would do some other things too."

"Like what?"

"A lot of bad stuff happens where we live. More than ever before." KC looked down at her feet on the platform. "It would be nice to have someone to protect me." Her gaze rose to meet his. "Someone who really cares about me."

Brock was being cut out of that opportunity, one he would have gladly taken. "How about your dad?"

Her gaze dropped to her feet again. "He only wants me to support his campaign. To be a model daughter. Show up and smile."

"I care. But, most of all, God cares, KC."

“Well, yeah. But it doesn’t always seem that way. I want to *know* someone cares, and I want to feel safe. Someday, I’m going to help keep people in our country safe. But for now ...”

“I care, but I won’t be there where you’re going. Maybe someday ...”

“I know you care. But, Brock ...” Her eyes pled with him. “Can we do something else too?”

He might as well say yes. No way could he refuse that look in her eyes. "Sure."

KC took his hand and led him down the steps and off the lookout. She stopped and scanned the ground around them for several seconds.

"What are you looking for, Kace? Maybe I can help."

"This." She stooped, picked up a flat rock, and put it on the palm of his opened hand.

"You've got your pocket knife don't you?"

"You know I don't go anywhere without it. Well, except maybe to the airport."

"Good. Then scratch our initials on this rock and throw it into the river."

"You mean throw it in tomorrow when we go down into the canyon?"

"No, Brock. You just threw a fastball that smashed the head of a rattler. Throw it into the river from the lookout."

"KC... I know it looks almost straight down from up here, but it's about 250 yards out to the river. Nobody can throw that far. Not even when they're throwing down into a canyon."

"Then just throw it as hard as you can."

She was really serious about this. Like there was some sort of magic in it. He hesitated.

She closed his fingers around the rock. “Please? For me?”

“Okay.” But his throw wouldn’t live up to her expectations. Brock pulled out his knife and etched their initials into the stone.

When he finished, she pulled him up the steps and onto the lookout. The afternoon sun was still high enough to light the water 600 feet below them.

Brock looked at the flat rock in his hand, about three inches in diameter. Maybe it would sail a little and, since it was flat, the rock would slice through the air. But...

"Throw it, Brock." Her intense green eyes urged him on.

At seeing that look in her eyes, his heart revved like a race car's engine. The adrenaline rush hit like an explosion. Brock stepped into his throw, cracked his arm like a whip, then spun the rock off his index finger. He had thrown so hard his forward momentum sent him crashing into the railing.

KC grabbed him, steadied him, and looked toward the rock as it sailed outward above the canyon.

Brock's sharp vision picked up the rock's trajectory. It sailed flat, like the wing of an airplane, far out over the canyon for three or four seconds. The rock then turned on its side and dove downward.

"No way, Kace. It's not gonna—"

Her hand clamped on his arm when a small, white splash appeared on the water near the far side of the river. "I knew you could do it."

"Well, I'm glad *you* knew it. I've never seen any rock go that far, especially one I threw."

KC beamed at him, her sadness temporarily gone. "Now ... no matter what, we'll always be together here at Crooked River."

"Yeah," was all he could manage. Their initials might be together at the bottom of the river, but not them.

For the next two days, best buddies, perhaps soul mates, explored the river at the bottom

of the canyon. They roamed for miles in both directions. As their time together grew shorter, KC walked closer to him. And her hand kept finding his.

Early in the morning of the second day, KC watched as he buried the jar with writing materials under the rock by the big Juniper.

At the close of the second day, after they climbed up the old Hollywood movie road to the canyon rim, KC kissed Brock. This time it wasn't on the cheek.

It left him surprised, speechless, and tasting her salty tears as his best friend turned and ran away toward her parents' motor home, which was ready to roll. It also left Brock with that breath-knocked-out-of-you sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Would it ever go away? Probably not. And it only got worse after he walked back to his family's RV and read the letter from KC's father.

Chapter 2

7 years later

2 AM, near the DUCC (Deep Underground Command Center), far below the West Wing

Modulated light pulses, speeding along strands of fiber, carried packets of encrypted, Top-Secret data, information meant for the eyes of warfighter commanders. But when pernicious packets hit a fiber-optic router, KC Banning's monitor flashed "Code Red" in the only color suitable for such a menacing message. Her heart accelerated toward its red line when the dreaded question came. Was this a cyber Pearl Harbor?

As her gaze swung from the flashing screen to the 30-something Army sergeant with his fingers flying over his keyboard, she prayed that it wasn't.

If it was an all-out cyber-attack, no one knew how much the US would be impacted, how long the recovery might take, or *if* we could recover.

"Code red, Blackford!" KC called out as she opened her emergency response checklist, clicked each hypertext link displayed on the screen, then traced the packet's origin.

"What have we got, Banning?" Blackford stood and scurried toward her workstation.

This was just great. Only her second month as a network monitor and this had to happen. Was it a drill or the real thing? "Something just came through the portal and reached a router on the—"

"Did you trap it?" Sergeant Blackford stepped beside her.

"Yeah. I think it had a strange encryption scheme that tripped the alarm. It's isolated now and I've notified everyone."

"Any idea where it came from?"

KC drew a sharp breath when she recognized the subnet. "Yeah. But it's not possible."

“What?” The look in Blackford’s eyes morphed from concern to confusion.

She pointed to a network diagram that looked like spaghetti to the uninitiated.

"But that subnet's got—"

"I know, sergeant. The president's private study and his personal computer. That machine's internet connected, so it has no access to our classified networks.” Something was dreadfully wrong here. KC locked her workstation and stood, looking at the door leading to the hallway and the elevators beyond.

“Banning, what are you doing?”

“Someone's got to check out that device. Find out how it connected and—"

"Seriously? POTUS's personal—"

"Seriously." She shot him a glaring glance.

Blackford's raised eyebrows said to deal him out of this one.

As the only woman in the new West Wing Network Security group of DISA (Defense Information Systems Agency), KC had developed a reputation as a hot headed mischief-maker, a girl who would cut corners, risk her job and more, if needed, to keep networks and computers secure.

She gave Blackford a grin minus any mirth. "If you can't take the heat, stay out of—"

"The Oval Office isn't the kitchen. KC, bad things happen late at night to pretty girls who go into the—"

“I'm not KC to you.” The heat under her collar ignited a flame. She turned it loose on the sergeant. "And I can take care of myself. Got that, Blackford?"

If she wasn't careful her temper was going to put another black mark on her reputation, like the one she got after punching one young Secret Service agent for the unwanted move he

tried to make on her. He had apologized for his forwardness. There were witnesses, so nothing went into official records, but the rumors about her still spread.

Blackford stepped out of reach. "Sorry. I didn't mean you would actually—"

"Bad analogy, Blackford. But apology accepted. Bad things happening in the Oval Office was before my time. Now, who's on duty on the first floor tonight?"

"Before your time? But—"

"I'm younger than I look." Something swept the cobwebs from her memory, and her words echoed in KC's mind. Brock's words.

You're younger than you look, Kace.

Brock was the only man she had ever allowed to call her KC. She shook off the reminder and tried to concentrate on the dicey task ahead.

Blackford's voice trailed off.

"Huh?" What had he said?

His hands went to his hips. "I said it's Agent Belino."

She needed to focus. Stop her mind from wandering to places it shouldn't go. "Would you please contact Belino? Tell him I'm on my way up. I've notified everybody. But I need to see what's happening with the president's machine. I want to be physically looking at it while I'm examining it, not using remote access."

"I'll call Belino. It's your job and your funeral." He turned toward his desk.

She stepped to the door and scanned herself out. "I'm not worried. Worst case, they'll just call it a rookie mistake. But if someone *has* sabotaged his computer, I'll get one of POTUS's patented pats on the back."

"You're really into alliteration aren't you?" He grinned.

She gave him a smirk. "Just seems like that to illiterate sergeants from West Virginia."

Blackford shook his head. "Illiterate? Wrong word, Banning. But your career's facing obliteration if you're not careful poking around the president's personal—"

"Enough, wise guy. Call Belino. I'm out of here."

Three minutes later KC followed Belino into the president's study outside the Oval Office. "I'm going to log in to the admin account and give this machine a thorough physical exam. You need to stay here and witness what I'm doing."

"Sergeant Blackford said you were bossy, but I think—"

"Witness, Agent Belino, not talk. I need to concentrate."

Belino backed away from KC. "Blackford was right."

She shot him a fiery glance.

He shoved his two palms at her in surrender, snapped his mouth closed, then smirked.

Marines. A bunch of smart alecks. But we wouldn't survive without them.

KC turned back to the computer. The men in this place really annoyed her. She wasn't interested in any of them and had made that clear enough. But several of them couldn't accept that.

Time to focus or she could be putting her job on the line.

After logging in, KC brought up a command window, tried to ping to her workstation, and waited for the reply.

It came back quickly with no errors. Someone had connected this machine to the most highly classified and protected network in the nation. It was also connected to the Internet. And it was the president's personal machine, located in his private study.

Two questions arose. How? And Why?

Had the perpetrator used something like a SNAP account to make this computer part of a VPN that had been given access to the networks below? Not likely. You don't just splice an insecure machine into a highly classified network.

KC followed the network cable to an Ethernet jack near the floor. It looked newly installed compared to the scratched plate around the jack three feet above it. She unplugged the network cable, plugged it into the jack higher on the wall, and waited for the machine to connect.

Within thirty seconds the computer was on the network. She checked the router. It belonged to a subnet on the unclassified, White House network, a subnet where this machine belonged.

She understood part of the how. The mysterious part was how someone managed to run a cable several hundred feet down into the DUCC and splice into the classified network without anyone knowing. It was a huge security violation, but this president seemed to do nearly anything he wanted, including violating laws and trampling on the constitution, and nobody held him accountable.

But why this? POTUS could ask for any information from down below and get it, so it had to be some other reason.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. They grew louder.

Belino stepped to the doorway and stared down the hallway toward the Oval Office corridor. "Banning, it's your boss."

Belino stepped aside and Major Grieve strode into the room with his authoritative face painted over his usual smile. "Ms. Banning, you can stop now. This was an exercise and we passed."

The heat rose under her collar for the second time. "*We*. Sir, don't you mean *I* passed?"

Major Grieve sighed. "Okay. *You* passed. But you also have gone outside your area of responsibility, the classified networks."

"But, Sir, I found—"

"I know what you found." He waved Belino into the hallway, then closed the door. The major lowered his voice. "You found the method used to introduce the malware for this exercise. It originated and was approved by the president. You do not need to be concerned."

But she was concerned. KC turned and faced the major, hands on her hips.

Major Grieve's gaze bored into hers. "Back out of whatever you're doing on that computer, Ms. Banning. The WHCA staff will take good care of this machine in the morning. But *you* will go downstairs. Now."

KC started a reboot of the president's machine and turned to leave.

"And, Ms. Banning..." He waited for her to meet his gaze, "... consider everything related to this exercise as classified, Top-Secret SCI. I'm sure you understand what that means."

She nodded. "Yes, Sir. No sharing information with anyone not properly cleared and without a need to know."

"No sharing this with anyone under any circumstances. Is that understood?"

KC nodded. But, even after Major Grieve's explanation, the security violations and other possibilities niggled, as did the major's out-of-character actions and his cease and desist order. Was there something he didn't want her to find?

The major opened the study door and KC followed her boss out into the hallway where Belino waited.

"Time for you to get back to work, downstairs." Major Grieve turned toward the Secret Service agent. "I'd like a word with you, Agent Belino."

KC headed for the elevators.

What did her boss want to tell Belino that he couldn't share with her? Would this strange security incident have any repercussions for her? For her job? In light of her discovery in the president's study, what did it all mean? Too many questions and no answers.

Before her father's death, he had become a close friend of Senator Richards, the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, where KC's father had served as a junior member. Senator Richards had tried to fill in for her father after the plane crash, giving her advice when she needed it, watching out for her in the often hostile world inside the Beltway. That was more than her dead father had ever done.

If she could get a few minutes of his time, Senator Richards could probably answer some of her questions, if security regs didn't interfere. If there was something going on behind the scenes, he would likely know about it.

But as much as she tried to bury it, the "why" question wouldn't stay dead. Why would a man with access to any information he deemed necessary to do his job want direct access to warfighters? The only answer that came to mind sent a chill that shook KC to the core. She had to be wrong. But only one answer made sense.

The president must be sending information, not simply listening. He could issue direct orders to any part of the military, breaking the chain of command. In that position, he could order troops to do things they might not otherwise do, enabling him to act like a dictator, like an Assad or a Hussein. But that wouldn't be just trampling on the constitution, depending upon the man's goal, it could be the end of it.