



# *From a Distance*

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*Are you a pawn or are you a knight?  
Do you move forward, or do you move right?  
Some say it's a game, but it may be your life;  
You can't walk forever on the edge of a knife.  
You best be aware of all that's around;  
Death can sneak up without making a sound.  
Can you trust a shadow, that is not your own?  
Who has your back if you are standing alone?  
The truth that you find may not set you free.  
From a distance, the future is not what you see.*

## Chapter 1

Kenzie's weathered soul was as worn as the stones of the pathway leading to the south entrance of Paris's Luxembourg Park. The City of Love was all around her, but she was not there as a tourist, she was there to do a job. Trained eyes looked over the lay of the land, taking in locations, distances, exits, and any patterns in the daily activities of the Luxembourg Palace security. The observations were not necessary, as the famous palace and park constructed in 1615 for Marie de Medici were already etched into her mind. She knew every inch of it before arriving in France, having pored over maps and pictures upon receiving the assignment. Once she had landed, she explored the park grounds until she had decided upon the best spot to wait for her target, based on its location as well as providing her most feasible method of escape.

This morning she strolled along the pathway with her canvas bag slung lazily over her shoulder. Already, a few people gathered on the benches and chairs that lined the walkways of the park. Not one of them gave her a second glance. One of the tools of her trade was to blend in with those around her, and she was good at what she did. She was of average height and stature, looking common, almost ordinary, with the exception of her exotic gold-colored eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. What made Kenzie special were her skills as a hunter. She stalked her targets with unwavering determination, never showing emotion, or care or concern for anything around her. She was silent, and lethally dangerous.

Unseen, she slipped into the thick foliage, opened her bag, and quickly assembled her rifle with practiced precision. With the weapon in its deadly form, she climbed into one of the trees,

searching for the right spot. Years of training and experience enabled her to make herself comfortable and invisible. When her shot was finally, perfectly aligned, she closed her eyes and relaxed. Opening them again, she confirmed her natural point of aim was still on the empty chair next to a chess table.

Rechecking her rifle, she was confident it would do the job. Though the gun was not the caliber she trained with, it shot straight and true, nothing special, nothing unique, nothing traceable. Satisfied that everything was ready, she waited with determined patience for her target to appear.

There was no change in her demeanor changed when she saw him coming down the sidewalk toward his chair. He sat down and, she primed her body for what she was about to do. Breathing in and out rhythmically, she took one last deep, cleansing breath and released it slowly, silencing her mind. There was a large clock tower in the center of the park, and at one minute to nine, she squeezed the slack out of the trigger, everything in her focused on her target. She sensed more than heard the heavy iron hand move into place over the XII. There was a churn and a click as the gears aligned noisily. The ancient tower erupted with a bong of the first bell, signaling the hour. There would be nine, and she counted. One, two, three... fire. She didn't wait; she didn't need to. The job was done. She was out of the tree and on the ground before the clock tower chimed its final bell.

She left the park and headed for the Charles de Gaulle airport. She patted her plane ticket, secure in the inside pocket of her jacket as she travelled through the narrow streets of Paris on an old, used motorcycle. Several times she turned back to make sure no one was behind her. Once she was certain she was alone, she turned down a back alley, and then slowed the bike to a stop next to the River Seine. Quickly, she descended the stone steps to the wide walkway next to the river. Without a second thought, she separated the scope from the rifle and dropped them both into the obligingly murky waters, then scampered back up the steps and sped away. Her assignment finished, she could disappear back into the darkness, her only respite from what she had become.

The plane was only half filled to capacity, but she still felt slightly claustrophobic as she leaned back into her seat and settled in for her long flight home.

*Home. What a concept.* She sighed deeply as she closed her eyes. Home was just a place to wait for her next job.

Her given name was Katherine, but nobody called her that. She had never known a real home, not even as a child, nor had she had a real family or friends, just different places with different faces. Her mother, of Egyptian descent, had died when Katherine was young, bequeathing her daughter dim memories and the looks of an exotic princess. Her father had gone to fight in Vietnam and when he did not return, Katherine went to live with her elderly grandmother, Helen, who called her by a shortened version of her middle name, Mackenzie. Well intentioned, Grandmother Helen had no idea how to deal with a rambunctious, rebellious teenager. The total lack of parenting only added to Kenzie's moral decline and frequent troubles. She trusted no one and respected no one.

With no adult guidance, her sharp mind and bad attitude landed her in Juvenile Hall many times. Just when she was about to fall through the cracks of the system, she found herself in front of Judge Benjamin Woodward, a hard-nosed man with little tolerance for disrespectful, out of

control teenagers. A widower for more than twenty years, he had learned to hide his emotions. However, occasionally, behind his mask of stone, he found himself wanting to reach out to those that needed a little extra help. Tough but fair, Judge Woodward commanded respect from those who respected few.

He watched with interest as the latest rebellious young woman stood in front of him, surveying her surroundings in cocky arrogance. With her full lips, dark skin, and almond shaped golden eyes, her looks were as intriguing as her body language. It was easy to tell that she thought her present predicament was a waste of her time and she wanted everyone around her to know that. The opposing counsel shuffled papers and the defendant split her attention between the clock on the wall and the hole in her jean jacket. She impatiently ran her fingers through her long, curly dark hair and sighed loudly.

For Judge Woodward, it was not hard to see why Kenzie had been in trouble with the law several times. She stood defiantly in front of him, reached into her pocket and fished out a cigarette and lighter. Placing the cigarette between her lips, she glanced down at the lighter in her hand. With an ease born of practice, she flipped open its lid to light the cigarette when her eyes caught the stony face of the judge.

“Don’t...you...dare,” he said slowly and clearly, leaving no doubt in Kenzie’s mind he was in charge of this courtroom. Judge Woodward watched and waited, and finally the Zippo clinked shut without its flame ever touching the end of the teenager’s cigarette.

Judge Woodward looked over her lengthy juvenile record, then sat back to study the young woman in front of him. He watched with interest, pondering his judgement. Then a thought crossed his mind. Something different, something that could change this delinquent’s troubled life. Checking her birthdate, he confirmed, she was indeed almost an adult, almost — but not quite. He studied her strong features and her obstinate attitude, then leaned back in his chair and pulled off his glasses.

“What do you have to say for yourself, young lady?”

Kenzie stared back at him. “Is this going to take long? I’ve a previous engagement.”

“I think you’re going to miss it.” He put his glasses on and read from her file. “Would you care to explain yourself?”

She crossed her arms and looked suspiciously at the judge, “In regards to?”

“Why don’t we start with the stolen car?” he prompted.

The teen shrugged her shoulders. “I needed a ride.”

“Twice?”

“I got to where I wanted to go, and then I had to find a way back.”

“And the assault?”

“The second guy wouldn’t give me his car. I wanted, I needed ... I took it.”

“Why?”

“I told you, I needed a ride.”

The judge sat quietly studying her as she ran her fingers through her unmanageable hair. Years later, he would look back at this moment, trying to figure out what made him do what he did. Kenzie appeared no different from the thousands of other young offenders that were marched before him, but something told him she was.

Judge Woodward adjourned the court for lunch and went back to his chambers to see if he could pull a few strings with an old Army buddy. The colonel and he had remained friends long after the judge had exchanged his uniform for a black robe, and he was quite willing to listen to the judge’s idea.

After lunch, Judge Woodward called the teenager and her public defender into his chambers. He waited for them to take a seat across from his desk. Once they had settled, he started. "You, Miss LeGault, are almost an adult and you have been in and out of the system like it's a revolving door. Well, the revolutions are about to stop. Tell me young lady, have you had any thoughts about your future?"

Kenzie crossed her arms and remained silent.

The judge flipped through some papers on his desk. "You are no longer a juvenile, young lady. It is time you started to take some responsibility for yourself as an adult. Two counts of grand theft auto, one count of aggravated assault. You have two options: two years at Washington Correctional Center for Women or—"

Shocked at the judge's proposal, Kenzie's public defender slid forward in her seat. "Your Honor, WCCW is—"

The judge cut her off. "Let me finish, counselor."

"Your Honor, with all due respect, that's a women's prison... for adults. You can't send her—"

"It is within my power to do so, and believe me, I can and I will. She is old enough to do the crime, so she's old enough to do the time. It is time for her to make some of her own decisions." He leaned over his desk and stared straight into Kenzie's eyes. "Your choice?"

Her steady gaze never faltered. "What's my other option?"

"Four years serving Uncle Sam." This little maneuver was going to cost him a couple of bottles of forty-year-old Scotch, but something told him the young woman in front of him was worth the effort he had made.

Kenzie sat impassively as her court appointed lawyer pleaded with the judge. "Your Honor, this is highly irregular. You can't force her—"

"Counselor, I would advise you to sit back and shut up. No one is forcing anyone to do anything. I am simply giving her options. She is old enough to understand the law, and to know the consequences of breaking it. What I am doing is offering her a choice. Turn her life around, or continue on the road she is currently on."

Judge Woodward stared at Kenzie. She gave no outward indication of where her mind was going, but he had his suspicions. "If you are thinking of going AWOL once you are in training, the two years at WCCW will be on the table until you have served your entire obligation to the military."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Kenzie raised one eyebrow, "A few years playing soldier, not a problem. Where do I sign?"

Forty-eight hours later, Katherine Mackenzie LeGault stepped off a bus at Fort Lewis and into the care of Sergeant "I eat recruits for breakfast" Carter. He knew who she was and why she was there, and he wanted to make damn certain she knew, there was no "playing soldier" under his command.

Kenzie thrived in the military. It taught her discipline and responsibility, two things her life had been seriously lacking. She got three meals a day, a place to hang her hat, and a chance to make something more of her life. Academically it was challenging at first, since she had never applied herself at school. However, she was top of her class in all the physical training, even though she was smaller than most of her fellow recruits. Soon everyone knew her name, and the direction her military career was heading.

Halfway through Kenzie's training, two monumental things happened. First, her Grandmother Helen passed away, leaving her with no family and making her feel quite guilty for

all of the trouble she had caused her. Second, she sent a letter of thanks to the man who had changed her life. A few weeks later, she was surprised to receive her first piece of civilian mail. The return address surprised her even more: Judge B. W. Woodward, Seattle, Washington.

The letters between them started out short, but soon their length grew, as did their friendship. Kenzie liked having someone in her life, and Judge Woodward liked the spirited fire he had seen beneath the young woman's anger. Since she excelled in all levels of her training, he was not surprised Kenzie graduated top of her class.

With no family left to invite to her graduation, she sent an invitation to Judge Woodward. She could not hide her smile when she saw him sitting in the second row.

The U.S. Army was where she belonged and somehow Judge Woodward had known that. He was there when she received her first promotion, clapping proudly, shoulder to shoulder with the others who were there to see their family members promoted. On her twenty-first birthday, the judge was there to watch her open an envelope that had come from the legal firm of Broughton, Greene, and Hanson. Unbeknownst to Kenzie, her grandmother had set up a trust fund for her. It had not been a lot of money, but it was enough for Kenzie to purchase her first off-base residence — a twenty-eight-foot, Catalina Mark II sailboat. No one knew about it but the judge. It was the first thing she had really owned, and it was a home without roots, just like her. In honor of her grandmother, she named it *Helen's Gate*.

The judge was there for Kenzie, cooking her dinner before she left to begin training at Fort Bragg. Soon after, her duties were taking her all over the globe, opening her eyes to many of the misfortunes that the rest of the world endured. Kenzie wrote the judge often, but she wrote less and less about what she was doing and where she was doing it.

The first time he saw her after she returned from Europe, Judge Woodward was surprised at the maturity in Kenzie's features. He saw her in a new light. The short-cropped dark hair he was accustomed to was starting to lengthen, showing off her natural wild curls. She had always been a beautiful, intelligent woman, but now there was a different side to her, an inner awareness of who she was and a new attentiveness that told him some of what she had seen. It was also the first time he saw how quickly she could change her outward appearance, slipping into another language, almost changing her personality. Judge Woodward knew then the Army was grooming her to be something more than just a grunt in fatigues. The next time he saw her, he was not surprised to see Kenzie sporting a new set of stripes on her uniform.

It was over a year before he saw her again. Her hair was a little longer, her demeanor a little quieter. He noticed more ribbons of action decorating her uniform, and her eyes bore the darkness of someone who had seen death — close up.

Only those in the highest ranks of the chain of command knew Kenzie had been training as a sniper, one of the few female snipers in the world. She loved it, even though it was long hours of lonely work. Friends had never been a part of her life, and she did not miss what she had never had. Boyfriends do not exist, girlfriends on the other hand, did. Though they were a rarity and those there were, were discreet and disposable. It was the military after all — don't ask, don't tell.

However, someone in her life finally did know, a young man from South Dakota, Corporal John Mifflin, the other half of her sniper team. Miff, as she called him, was her spotter and her first real friend besides the judge. Only a few years younger than her, Miff's job was to overlook

the area, assess the wind speed, and clarify the distance to the target while she lined up the kill shot. His eyes were her eyes when she took aim through the scope. They were a great team, and with time had learned to work as an efficient unit; two people who worked together toward one goal — bringing down the enemy target. They took pride in what they did. It called for a special kind of person to crawl around in some of the worst conditions the world had to offer, to lie in wait for hours, sometimes days, for that one clear shot. Nerves of steel, attention to detail, and the patience of a saint were some of the primary attributes of a sniper.

In those long hours of waiting, hidden within the shadows, camouflaged from life, they spoke to each other in veiled whispers. Things she had never even said aloud to herself, she had told to him. They shared their dreams and aspirations, and spoke of the women who had come in and out of their lives. Miff never judged her. She always knew he had her back, and her trust.

In no time, LeGault and Mifflin were the top two names in their field. If the military wanted a target out of the picture, they were high on the list to get the job done. That was until something went wrong during an assignment, something very, very wrong. They were waiting in the mud in the driving rain in South America, watching for their target. They did not move and they did not speak, communicating only with hand signals. Without warning, two shots rang out under the canopy of the jungle, echoing deep into the night. Corporal J. Mifflin died instantly. A high caliber bullet hit him in the eye, splattering his brain matter all over his partner. Kenzie survived with a near miss, the bullet slamming into her shoulder, inches away from a kill shot. Badly wounded and devastated by her partner's death, Kenzie barely made it out of the jungle with her life. Regrettably, all she could bring back for his family was his dog tags.

There had been a cursory investigation, but so much of the incident was confidential the only answer the government gave was that Mifflin died in the line of duty. His family received a medal for his bravery and a crisply folded flag. Kenzie had a hard time after his death and took a leave of absence, during which she had many long phone conversations with the judge. However, due to the sensitive issue of security, she could not speak about what was really bothering her. He tried to console her, but survivor guilt was a hard thing to get over. Having served in Vietnam, he understood that.

When Kenzie was finally able to see Judge Woodward, he knew by the look in her eyes how painful it had been. He could not help her, but that did not keep him from wanting to try. When her leave of absence was over, she returned to the only life she knew.

One afternoon she received a message to report to a Colonel Manuck, off base. This was unusual, however, in the military she had learned not to question, but to follow orders. She had heard of him — a man of color, who wore his rank proudly on his uniform. She knew he was a man who required the utmost respect and that had nothing to do with his rank. He had a reputation of being a good soldier, a quiet man, who let his actions do most of his talking. However, she also recalled some disturbing stories she had heard about Colonel Manuck, rumors about covert operations and a very high mortality rate among the soldiers under his command. The mortality rate did not scare her, and the thought of covert operations sounded like an intriguing challenge.

Kenzie found the address she was looking for belonged to an old, rundown office building. She double-checked the piece of paper in her hand, confirming the location was indeed correct. Pausing outside the door, she took a breath and straightened her uniform before she knocked.

The door opened immediately and Kenzie entered the nearly empty room. She was surprised to see not one but two men there.

“I’m looking for Colonel Manuck?” she inquired, looking at each man.

“I’m Manuck,” the man with the large barrel chest said.

“Colonel.” Kenzie started to salute.

Manuck waved off the pomp and circumstance. “Not needed. You know who I am?” the colonel asked as he offered her one of the three chairs in the room.

“Yes, sir,” she said as she sat down on the cold metal chair.

The other man wasn’t introduced, but a quick observation of his crisp dark suit and tie, athletic build and military haircut, and Kenzie guessed he was a Fed. He was a Kevin Costner look-alike, and she decided to call him Kevin, since no name was offered.

Kevin sat down, his eyes never leaving Kenzie’s as Colonel Manuck quietly laid out the reason as to why she was there. Manuck did most of the talking. Now and then Kevin would supply a few details. A military career change, the colonel explained at first, however, as she listened longer, it became plain that it was more than just a career change. Many times over the years to follow, she would find herself wondering what would have happened that day, if she had declined their offer.

FBI, CIA, SSA — the initials did not matter to her. She would be performing the same function, but the proposition came with strings attached. She weighed the offer very carefully. More responsibility, less military operations, and it all came with a fat pay raise and a much higher security clearance. Kenzie was ready to jump at it until Kevin made one final statement. He cleared his throat dramatically and then informed her that any perceived benefits would come at a very high cost.

“Your life in the civilian world will come to an end.”

“Meaning?” She looked to Manuck for clarification.

The colonel hesitated for a moment, weighing his words as he studied her face. “Any and all contact with persons not within the unit will cease.”

“Your existence will be terminated — permanently,” Kevin added coldly.

Kenzie glanced from one man to the other, was not sure what to ask, but somehow she knew there would be nothing more forthcoming.

That afternoon the judge received a call from Kenzie, asking if she could meet him for dinner. It had been a while since he had seen her, and when she walked through his door, he could not help but notice the concern creased into her brow. He was surprised when Kenzie brought up the subject of her financial estate. Money was not something she typically discussed. He listened carefully to her words and wishes, and though she had not mentioned anything specific, he suddenly had his suspicions. The mood became happy and light as they made and ate dinner together, and then enjoyed one of their highly competitive games of chess. When Kenzie pulled on her black leather jacket to leave, the dark foreboding feel from earlier in the evening returned. They hugged tightly to one another at the front door and again in the driveway. It was hard for her to leave, but she tried not to show emotion as she climbed onto her motorbike.

With a simple nod, she was gone and the elderly judge stood and watched as Kenzie rode out of sight. Somehow, he knew this good-bye was different.

When Kenzie reported to Colonel Manuck the next morning, she handed him all her signed papers, her dog tags and identification. He gave her a new security clearance ID card — with no name and no picture, just a laser scan of her thumbprint. Just like that, Katherine Mackenzie LeGault ceased to exist.

Two days later, Judge Woodward was reading his morning paper when a small article caught his eye.

*United States Army Press release — Fort Lewis, Washington. Officials at the Fort announced the death of a local soldier. Sergeant-Major Katherine Mackenzie LeGault, a highly decorated member of Special Forces, died in a training accident off base. She leaves behind no immediate family.*

A feeling of unbearable sorrow tore at his chest. In utter disbelief, he laid the paper down as tears filled his eyes, blurring his vision. It could not be true. Surely, if she were dead, someone would have called him. The tears fell as he closed his eyes and recalled their dinner just the other night. His breath caught as he remembered her strange demeanor that evening. Reaching for the paper, the judge read the death notice again, wondering whether his sudden insight was the truth or just what he wanted the truth to be.

Weeks after the judge read the obituary, a package arrived for him at the courthouse. Without a postmark, he was hesitant about opening it but curiosity got the better of him. Inside he found a small jewelry box, and when he lifted the lid, a smile instantly spread across his face. Inside was a Zippo lighter embossed with a black and white yin-yang, the same as the lighter his Katherine had flippantly attempted to use in his courtroom so many years before. He smiled broadly. Katherine was alive. It was all he needed to know.

Months later, another package arrived, another Zippo lighter — no note or return address, but he knew it was from her. It was her way of telling him she was okay.

Kenzie quickly became one of Colonel Manuck's favorites. She spoke less than he did, but was far more accurate with a rifle at five hundred meters. When he met with her, their meetings were short and to the point. Kenzie knew he had to answer to someone higher up, but she did not ask who it was. It was irrelevant to her job. He gave her orders and she followed them. Killing became easy. It was her job. It was what she did.

In her new posting, Kenzie only met Colonel Manuck in nondescript buildings or underground parking lots. At times, she found the whole cloak and dagger thing almost amusing, but there was little humor in what she was doing. She followed her orders to the letter. The first few jobs were a lot harder than she had expected. In some way, she felt very vulnerable without her dog tags and military backup, although the job itself was not much different from what it had been before. If anything, her situation was better, because she had more freedom to move under the radar, and she answered only to Colonel Manuck. She liked the fact that sometimes she would spend months in one location just gathering information. Kenzie considered herself a specialist in her field of global security. When a problem arose and all other avenues of solution had failed, they would bring her in to handle it, by whatever means necessary. She followed all protocols, as per her orders. It was a different life and she was learning to enjoy it, although she soon realized that the cost of her anonymity was a world of solitude.

With the luxury of money, she had two residences, but neither of them was a home. One was a house in the Pacific Northwest and the other was her sailboat, for which she changed the mooring often. Kenzie's only interaction with the world outside of her true existence was the polite conversations she had with the strangers in her life, the overly happy Asian woman who giggled and bowed every time Kenzie came into her small produce store, and Jack, the skateboarding young mechanic who looked after her bike when she was out of town. Nobody knew her real name, where she lived, or what she did. She was living her life as a ghost. And there was no one to notice that even though Kenzie had quit smoking years earlier, she still purchased Zippo lighters on a regular basis.

## Chapter 2

Kenzie's cell phone warbled a text message. Flipping it open, she read the text — ACTIVATION: PREP MODE/ARMED AND READY FOR TRANSPORT; WHIDBEY ISLAND NAVAL BASE/HANGAR 11. ASAP. She read the message again before punching in her confirmation code. Closing her phone, Kenzie absorbed the information as she grabbed her helmet and backpack.

Arriving at the heavily fortified front gates of the naval base, she flashed them her high level clearance ID and they waved her through without even a salute. No one saw her face beneath her helmet as she cruised her bike toward Hangar 11. Several armed Marines secured the entrance, and they directed Kenzie where to park her bike. Keeping her helmet on, she nodded as one of them indicated the waiting plane. The sound of the powerful engines whined as Kenzie climbed the stairs. The flight crew said nothing as they closed the doors, muffling the sounds outside as she took her seat.

Once her flight leveled off, one of the flight crew came back and handed her an envelope. Not even making eye contact, he returned to the cockpit. Alone, Kenzie turned the envelope around to reveal the words **Omega 3** written boldly on the front.

"Omega 3," she whispered to herself. She had heard of them, but until that moment, she had not known she was one of them.

The Omega Squad was the silent little brother of Delta Force. Their military actions were unrestricted by any legal limitations, military or civil. They were the few, the proud, the non-existent. Delta Force soldiers were hand picked from within the military elite, and from those, Omega soldiers were carefully chosen. Delta Force soldiers were like a band of brothers, while Omega soldiers were more like an only child, working alone in the dark. According to the government, the only real difference between Delta Force and the Omega Squad was that the Omega Squad did not exist.

Her finger traced the words on the envelope. "If I'm three, who the hell are one and two?" she whispered as she ripped open the envelope. Scanning the document quickly, she learned that they were heading for a military base in the Middle East. Further orders would be provided upon her arrival. Then her eyes fell on the bold type at the end of the document, and an eerie feeling settled in the pit of her stomach.

*Upon arrival, rendezvous with additional personnel.*

Kenzie did not like the idea of working with someone again. It was something she was not comfortable with, but she knew there was nothing she could do about it.

When the plane landed, Kenzie was hustled out and taken into what she assumed was the commander's office. There were several people there, and even without introductions, Kenzie knew which ones were other non-named "personnel". One stood about 6'3", with a football player's neck and shoulders. The other was a little shorter and had a slightly thinner build but the same intense stare. That, and the lack of emotion on their faces, told her who they were.

There were no introductions offered between the soldiers, only slight nods of acknowledgment. The commander explained the situation as the three Omega soldiers listened intently.

Kenzie thought it strange that they had been brought in to deal with a military operation the commander's own men could have handled, but she kept her assessment to herself as she studied the map on the wall.

The three listened in silence as the commander finished the details of the mission. "My orders were to get you people down here and let you handle it."

"Yes, sir. That is what we do," the smaller of the two men stated firmly. Apparently, he was in charge.

"Now you understand that this information is highly classifi—"

"Sir, our classification is of the highest level," thick neck fired back.

"The job will be done as directed," the smaller man said impassively. "We will be ready in ten minutes, sir. Please be certain that a helicopter is ready for our insertion and our extraction."

The commander nodded and left, leaving Kenzie and the other operatives alone.

Kenzie mulled over the mission in her mind, feeling a sense of uneasiness growing inside her. The two men, who seemed familiar with each other, didn't seem to be bothered but what they had been told. She looked them over, assuring herself they were as equally trained as her and more than capable of doing what had been ordered, so why was she feeling so uneasy?

The two men changing knew more about the operation than she did and that made her even more uncomfortable. "Does this seem strange to anyone besides me?" she asked. When the men remained silent, Kenzie looked to the second agent, the shorter of the two men, and he appeared to be looking at her. When she arrived, she had caught a glimpse of recognition on his face, but the expression had quickly disappeared.

"Do I know you?" she asked him.

The question caught him off guard but he covered quickly. "No," he answered abruptly and turned his attention to his preparation. The fact that he did know her was not of any importance to their present situation.

She realized she still didn't know their names or what to call them. "Are you going to tell me your names or should I just make some up?"

"I know what to call you — split-tail, so it doesn't really matter," thick neck said snidely.

Kenzie chose to ignore the derogatory slang directed at her.

"Funny, I thought you'd be taller," the man continued.

"How tall do you have to be to pull a trigger, Einstein?"

"You don't have to be tall, but you have to be a...a guy." He glared at her in frustration. "It's a man's job, not a job for a woman, and my name's not Einstein, either."

She raised an eyebrow in surprise and then looked at his partner, "It would appear not." Her sassy sarcasm got a small smile from the shorter one. Kenzie slipped into the shoulder harness that held her twin 9mms.

“Where are your .45s?” thick neck asked. “Or is that too big a gun for a little girl?”

“The 9s work for me,” she said as she leaned over to pull a small backpack from her bag.

“Will this work for you, too.” Thick neck gazed lewdly at her figure while grabbing his crotch. “Nice ass, by the way.”

Kenzie looked over at thick neck and sneered. “I guess that would make you asshole number one.”

Thick neck stood up after fastening his backpack, his eyes lingering on her on his way to a mirror on the wall. “Actually, number two, code name Cobra.” He began to darken his face in front of the mirror. “The quiet one over there is Viper. He’s number one.”

“I’m working with a couple of snakes — nice.” She reached down and retrieved her black balaclava from her bag. “Kind of a cocky, aren’t ya, Cobra?”

When she straightened up, she was not surprised to see he had turned around to face her. A foot and a half apart, they stood eyeing each other.

“Nice tits,” Cobra said softly. Suddenly his right hand shot out, reaching for one of Kenzie’s breasts, but before his fingers could touch even the wool of her shirt, she turned to her left, striking out with her right hand, driving her fingers up into his armpit. Stepping out with her right foot, she lifted him over her hip and Cobra landed soundly on his back.

“Try that again, asshole, and I’ll break your fuckin’ arm.”

“Hey...hey, knock it off, you two.” Viper rushed to break them up, but it was already over.

Kenzie stepped over Cobra and brushed past Viper to stand in front of the mirror. With her black smudge in her hand, she glanced over to see Viper offer Cobra a hand up.

“I’m not here to be you boys’ secretary.”

“And we’re not here as your enemy,” Viper said as he brushed off Cobra’s shirt.

“I don’t call anyone friend.” Kenzie plucked her balaclava off the floor where it had fallen during the scuffle, and pulled it over her head. “So we can forget having a beer when this is all done.” In stilted silence, the three boarded the waiting helicopter. A short but dangerous flight took them over a border they should not have been crossing. Moments later, three black figures rappelled silently to the ground.

## Chapter 3

A phone rang, interrupting the thoughts of the lone occupant of the large office. The man sitting at the desk reached for the handset. It was too early for the call to be good news. “Yes?”

“We have a problem and it needs to be dealt with immediately.”

“Explain.” His voice was void of emotion. The voice on the other end of the phone spoke in a gravelly whisper. He did not like what he was hearing. Glancing down at the paperwork on his desk, he asked, “Is she a threat to Maquinar?” The voice did not reply immediately, and he could almost see the frustration on the caller’s face.

“I’m not sure.”

“That, to me, sounds like we have a problem.”

“I just think—”

“No! I’m not willing to put my ass on the line...” His voice trailed off as his finger traced the Federal Government seal embossed on the letterhead of the letter he was holding. “That other little problem we talked about before...” He ran his hand over the stubble on his chin while his mind spun off in a different direction. “Eliminate one to eliminate the other, and both problems cease to exist. Get it done, clean and fast. Can you do that?”

“Consider it done,” the caller responded and the line went dead.

After what seemed like a lifetime since she had left, Kenzie landed back at Whidbey Island. The silence on the plane ride home was almost unbearable. There was no one there to talk to, and for the first time in her life, she realized there never really had been. She was alone — no partner, no companionship, no one to share her life’s ups and downs with — except for the man she called “Judge”. Looking out at the lights of Seattle, she fingered the fresh sutures on her cheek. Even in the distorted reflection of the plane’s window, she could see the swelling and the discolorations on her chin and cheek. She wished it hurt more. The physical pain would keep her mind occupied.

She was alone and it was more than her conscience could bear as she tried to forget the images burning in her mind. She needed someone to tell her that she had done what needed to be done. What she did not need was to face the man who had put her into that position. Flagrantly flouting policy and procedures, Kenzie deplaned and left the base.

She sped through the empty streets on her bike, running from the memories and the shadows in her mind. She had no idea where she was going — she just needed to drive, to get away — but she could not run from herself and from what she had done. Hours later, she pulled up in front of a convenience store just as the bundle of newspapers arrived. She waited impatiently for the elderly man to pull one from the pile. Walking back to her bike, she flipped madly through the pages until a small article caught her eye.

After reading it a second time, she folded the newspaper in half and tucked it inside her leather jacket. Sitting on her bike, she struggled to decide between following her principles or her training. A moment later, she fired up her bike and roared down the deserted roadway.

Kenzie parked her bike and walked a short distance through the quiet, urban neighborhood. Silently, she slipped into the shadows and made her way along the side of a house. Within seconds, she disappeared through a ground level window and into the basement. Making her way up the basement stairs and through the house, she was as soundless as they had trained her to be. Without a noise, she moved down the hall, pausing only for a moment at a picture hanging on the wall. It was obviously taken many years earlier, a young Judge Woodward sitting with a child on his knee. He had never discussed with her what had happened to his wife and child, but she had heard the story about a car crash. Moving on, she took a chair in the kitchen and waited.

A long, patient wait later, she heard a familiar creak coming from the carpeted stairs leading to the second floor. The swinging door opened into the kitchen and a hand reached for the light switch.

“Leave them off, Judge.”

He froze at the sound of her voice and flattened himself against the opposite wall. “What? Who’s there?”

His startled voice tugged at her and she realized just how long it had been since they had spoken in person. “A ghost,” she answered solemnly.

The judge hesitated, though even in the dark, he knew who it was. “Katherine?”

No one but the judge ever used her first name, and it sounded strange. She had almost forgotten it was hers. “Yeah.”

The judge noted that she sounded tired. “My God, girl, what are you doing here?” he said, reaching again for the light switch. “It’s been so long. Let me take a look at you?”

“Leave ’em off.” She regretted the demanding tone in her voice. “Please.”

Judge Woodward left the lights off and crossed the dimly lit room, taking the chair opposite her. “Katherine, you’re sounding awful good for a dead person.” Squinting in the low light, he did not like what he saw in the shadows. “Rough work you’re in?” He nodded toward her bruised cheek and the row of stitches. He watched in painful interest as her eyes went down to a scratch on the table she was picking at with her nail.

“Yeah, well, you should see the other guy,” she said.

The judge waited, hoping she would say more. When she did not, he could wait no longer. “Katherine, what’s wrong?”

She took a deep breath, but said nothing as she glanced out the back window. There was a long moment of profound silence before her low whispered words crept from the shadows. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Well, you are here and you can’t change that now.” He watched her with knowing eyes, waiting, probing. “Something happened that was bad enough for you to risk coming out in the open.” She turned back and looked at him, and he understood. “I have a military background, my dear. I have a pretty good idea what you are doing.”

“I wish I did.” There was an awkward moment of silence and it penetrated deep into her subconscious. Never before had she felt uneasy around the judge.

“Katherine?”

The concern was evident in his voice, but she did not know what to say or how to say it. He watched her in the shadows, waiting long enough to know she was not going to answer him.

“I know you can’t tell me what has happened, but maybe I could help if you give me something to go on.”

Her eyes darted around the room, telling him just how uncomfortable she was, but he wondered if her nerves came from whatever had happened or from who she had become. He waited and finally she spoke.

“Who am I?”

The judge leaned closer, knowing there was more to the question than the obvious. “I’m not sure how to answer that. Who do you think you are?”

There was a long silence, a palpable pause to have come from such a simple question. “I don’t think I know anymore... I don’t think I ever really did. I’ve just followed orders.” She stopped and the only sound in the room was the steady tick of the kitchen clock. “Because that is what a good soldier does...but at some point I stopped thinking for myself... I stopped caring.” It was the most she had spoken all at once in a long time.

“That is your job.”

“What?” she said with asperity as she stood up quickly from the table. “Not to care?”

“No.” He wanted to reach out to her, but he had no idea how. “Katherine, your job is to follow orders, because if you don’t follow those orders, people will die.”

Kenzie slowly unzipped her jacket. “People are dying whether I follow orders or not.” She tossed the folded newspaper onto the table.

Picking it up, he moved to the light over the sink. Judge Woodward quickly scanned the paper, knowing it was her way of communicating without giving him information. The moment he spotted the military press release, he knew he had found what he was looking for.

“That was no accident.”

He read the article quickly. “Are you sure?”

Kenzie nodded and waited for him to finish. When he was done, he returned to the table, put the paper down, and sat across from her.

“I was there.”

“At the base?”

Kenzie stared into nothing, recalling the sights and sounds where she had just been — the flames, the heat, and the sound of gunfire, the stench of death as it rose into the night sky. Her conflict then was almost as bad as the conflict she was experiencing now. Kenzie looked at the judge as she fingered the injury to her face. “Those men did not die on any base.” She reached for the paper and zipped it back into her jacket.

“Katherine?”

Kenzie had noticed the growing gray of twilight and she knew her time was up. “I gotta go.”

“But you just got here. Stay for a bit, let’s talk.”

“I can’t.” She rose from the table, uncertain of what she was going to do. She did know that she should not have come. Her being there put her only friend at risk. “I, ah, I’m sorry...but I gotta go.”

“Where are you going?” the judge asked.

She walked over to the door at the edge of the hallway, which would take her back to the basement. “I don’t know. I have to deal with this myself.”

“It was good to see you, Katherine. I’ve missed you — and our chess games.”

She tried to smile but could not muster one. She did not know whether it was because of the wound on her cheek, or the confusion in her conscience.

“Can you come back?”

“It might be better for us if I didn’t.”

“I’m here if you need me. Be careful.”

“Always.”

He watched as the basement door closed silently, and just like that, she was gone. Standing alone in his kitchen, Judge Woodward made his own decision and reached for the phone. Dialing a number, he listened to the ringing until a sleepy voice answered.

Kenzie had no idea what had possessed her to go and see the judge, knowing she should not have. Regardless, it had made her feel a little bit better. She kept her mind busy on the long drive back, and when she pulled into her driveway, she was certain she had made a decision.

With confident strides, she made her way up the stairs and stopped to unlock the back door, but it was already unlocked. Someone was in her house! Startled and apprehensive, she reached for her weapon. Crouching down, she pushed the door open from the bottom as a large figure filled the doorway in her kitchen.

“Where the hell have you been, LeGault?” Colonel Manuck said. “Have you got any goddamn idea what goes on when someone like you doesn’t show up for a debriefing? Especially after a mission that was almost a disaster.”

“Almost a disaster? It was a disaster!” She fought to calm her rising anger.

“We do what we have to do. We do what we’re asked. People live and people die, for God, for country—”

Kenzie glared at her commander. “They didn’t die for their country. They were murdered!”

“Sit down and shut up, LeGault. You do what you’re told to do, and that is the end of it. You are not here to think, you are here to do, because we have trained you to do it — period!”

“I didn’t sign up for this.”

“No one ever does, but someone has to do the dirty work and that is what we do.”

Kenzie could not help looking down at her hands, knowing just how dirty they had become. She picked at her bitten fingernails, digging at the rough skin around the edges. “Did you know what we were being sent there to do?”

“You do what you are told to do — period! What we do here is highly sensitive and classified. We cannot afford the actions of one person to destroy the delicate balance of our nation’s safety and security.”

Kenzie crossed the room and looked out the window, her eyes scanning the busy streets below. She crossed her arms, but it felt uncomfortable and unnatural. “So what happens now?”

“That depends on you.” Manuck sat down at her desk, ignoring the thin layer of dust covering the unused work area. Pulling herself from the view out her window, she turned to watch him. He felt her stare. Wiping his hands off, he turned his attention back to her. “I need to know — are you an asset or a liability?”

“Meaning what?”

Manuck picked up a briefcase and placed it on the table. Keeping his attention on Kenzie, he opened it and looked down at the two large envelopes with her name on them. He hesitated a moment, looking from one to the other, before selecting one and offered it to her. “Your next assignment.” He never took his eyes off her.

As she studied the lines in his face, Kenzie knew it was a test. “What if I don’t take it?” There was no answer as his dark eyes returned her questioning stare. “What if that was my last assignment, and I wanted to...let’s say, take an extended leave, without a return date?”

“Extended leave? You mean quit?”

“Whatever you want to call it — leave, quit, holiday... What if I want to resign! What if I’ve had enough? What if I want out? What happens?”

Manuck studied the grain on her dusty table and was silent for too long a time before answering. “There are proper procedures, steps to be taken, but it isn’t going to happen overnight. We would have to establish an identity for you, and that takes time. We have spent a lot of time and money on training you. We can’t just let you leave.”

“But I can get out?”

“If that is what you want, but in the meantime there are jobs that need to be done.” He reached back into his briefcase, exchanged one envelope for the other. He held it out to her, waiting to see if she was going to accept it. When she did not, he laid it on the table and pushed it toward her. “We need confirmation within forty-eight hours.”

Reaching for the envelope, her hand stopped and she pulled it back as if she had been burned. “Forty-eight hours?”

“We need to — eliminate the problem — quickly.” Manuck’s eyes bored into hers. “And we need the best.”

Kenzie finally picked up the envelope and broke the seal. The colonel watched her with interest as he clicked shut his briefcase. Kenzie pulled out the documents, perusing them quickly. “It’s a woman,” she stated flatly, looking at the picture of a young woman sitting on what appeared to be a park bench. The photo had obviously been taken with a telephoto lens, and Kenzie could clearly see the features of the young woman’s face.

“Is it a problem?” Manuck asked. “I need to know.”

Flipping through the pages, Kenzie was absorbing information without even knowing it. Though the thought of killing a woman weighed heavily on her mind, she reminded herself that she was a soldier.

“Can I count on you?”

“Where?”

“Guadalajara, Mexico. There is a plane standing by.”

Kenzie did not answer him. Walking over to her bags, she looked around her bare living room. There was nothing personal in the room, nothing she really cared about. How could she? She did not exist. Aside from the judge, she had no one in her life and she never had. This was not a home, it was just a place where she waited for her next assignment.

“I need an answer, LeGault,” he said impatiently. “Can I count on you to eliminate this problem?”

Walking over to the fireplace mantle, she picked up the only photograph in the room. Staring into Judge Woodward’s face, she spoke in a distant voice. “Have you ever heard the fable about the frog and the scorpion?” She did not wait for an answer. “You see, this scorpion, wants to cross this river but he can’t ‘cause he’d drown. He sees a frog out swimming in the river, so he asks the frog for a ride on his back. The frog says, ‘No — if I let you on my back, you will sting me.’ The scorpion replies, ‘Why would I do that — we would both drown.’ The frog thinks it over and then decides it seems safe enough, so he lets the scorpion on his back. Halfway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog and as the frog starts to sink to his death, he says to the scorpion, ‘Why did you do that? Now we are both going to die.’ The scorpion says, ‘I couldn’t help it — it’s what I do.’”

Kenzie replaced the photo, picked up her bag, and walked over to the colonel. “Of course I will eliminate your problem. It’s what I do.”

Manuck stood on the tarmac and watched Kenzie’s plane ascend to the skies before he climbed into his black Suburban. With one eye on the blinking taillights, he picked up his cell phone and dialed a number. “It’s Manuck. She accepted the envelope, so I would consider the problem solved. Yes...the best man for the job.”