

## 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 extensively until she found the best spot to wait for her target. The vantage point she chose provided her the easiest and quickest 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. With her shot lined up, she closed her eyes and relaxed. She opened them again, confirming that her natural point of aim was still on the empty chair next to a chess table.

She rechecked her rifle and 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 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. She breathed in and out rhythmically, then took one last deep 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. Two, three...fire. She didn't wait; she didn't need to. The job was done. She was out of the tree 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 northeast through the narrow streets of Paris on an old, used motorcycle. Several times she turned 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, 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 who 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. She placed the cigarette between her lips and glanced down at the lighter in her hand. With an ease born of practice, she flipped open its lid to light her 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 who 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 glanced at her. He saw something more than just defiance in Kenzie's eyes. Checking her birthdate, he realized she was 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?"

Kenzie shrugged her shoulders. "I needed a ride."

"Twice?"

"There and back."

"And the assault?"

"The 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 who 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've 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're no longer a juvenile, young lady. It's 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 there—"

"It is within my power to do so, and believe me, I can and I will. She's old enough to do the crime, so she's old enough to do the time. It's 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'm simply giving her options. She's old enough to understand the law, and to know the consequences of breaking it. What I'm doing is offering her a choice. Turn her life around, or continue on the road she's currently on."

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

Kenzie, her arms still crossed over her chest, 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 was not 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'd 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 took 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 that the Army were grooming her to be something more than an average soldier. 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 entailed long hours of lonely work. Friends had never been a part of her life, and she didn't miss what she'd never had. Girlfriends were a rarity and those there were, were discreet and disposable. It was the military after all — don't ask, don't tell.

But someone in her life 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 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. Until something went wrong during an assignment, very, very wrong. They were waiting in the mud in the driving rain in South America, watching for their target. They didn't move or 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 alive. Regrettably, all she could bring back for his family were his dog tags.

There was 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 couldn't 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 couldn't help her, but that didn't 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, which 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'd heard about Colonel Manuck, rumors about covert operations and a very high mortality rate among the soldiers under his command. The mortality rate didn't scare her, and the thought of covert operations sounded like an intriguing challenge.

Kenzie found the address that she was looking for belonged to an old, rundown office building. She double checked the piece of paper in her hand and confirmed the location was indeed correct. She paused outside the door, 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 two men there.

"I'm looking for Colonel Manuck?" she said, 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 after a quick observation of his crisp dark suit and tie, athletic build, and military haircut, 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. At first, the colonel explained a military career change; however, as she listened longer, it became plain that it was more than just a career change. Many times over the following years, she would wonder what would have happened that day if she'd declined their offer.

FBI, CIA, SSA — the initials didn't 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 security clearance at the highest level. 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.

Manuck 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, not sure what to ask, but somehow she knew there would be nothing more forthcoming.

That afternoon Judge Woodward received a call from Kenzie, asking if she could meet him for dinner. It had been a while since he'd seen her, and when she walked through his door, he couldn't 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, was killed in the line of duty. She leaves behind no immediate family.*

A feeling of unbearable sorrow tore at his chest. He laid the paper down in utter disbelief as tears filled his eyes, blurring his vision. It couldn't 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, he 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. He was hesitant about opening it without a postmark, 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 report to someone higher up, but she didn't 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 vulnerable without her dogtags 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 mechanic who looked after her bike. Nobody knew her real name, where she lived, or what she did. She was living her life as a ghost. There was no one to notice that, even though Kenzie had quit smoking years earlier, she still purchased Zippo lighters on a regular basis.