

# CHAPTER 1

*May 4th*  
*Paris, France*

HE THOUGHT THERE might be a problem when they didn't hear from Six.

It was a routine status check, each of the spotters responding as requested:

"Zeta One, clear."

"Zeta Two, clear."

"Zeta Three, clear."

"Zeta Four, clear."

"Zeta Five, clear."

Then radio silence.

A full seven seconds of it.

McElroy's gut clenched as he keyed his mic. "Zeta Six, report."

More silence.

"Zeta Six?"

Three more seconds of nothing, then a sharp *pop*, followed by, "This is Six. Sorry. Was repositioning. I think I have him."

McElroy exhaled, telling himself that these things happened, that Six was a good man and should be given a bit of slack. But that feeling of possible difficulties had not abated, and he wondered for a moment if they should abort the entire operation.

No.

He was simply letting paranoia get to him and he couldn't give in to it. Not when they were this close.

He tapped Duncan's shoulder. "Put Six on center screen."

With just a few keystrokes, Duncan switched the image in the main surveillance monitor to the feed coming from Zeta Six's camera—a shot from the top of a building on the west side of Rue Danton, showing the small plaza in front of the Saint-Michel metro station near the entrance of the Latin Quarter. It was six p.m. on a Friday evening, and the

area was packed with the usual swarm—tourists out enjoying the city and locals trying to find their way home.

Not the optimum situation, but then McElroy hadn't set the schedule.

"Zeta Six, identify subject," he said.

"Comin' atcha."

A translucent gray grid appeared over the feed, then a red dot zipped across the screen and planted itself on the back of a man walking across Boulevard Saint-Michel, away from the camera.

"You sure that's him?" McElroy asked.

"I think so. Got a quick shot of him coming out of the metro station. Sending you that now."

A moment passed, then Duncan's computer terminal dinged softly.

"Play it," McElroy told him.

A smaller, unused monitor flickered to life with Six's shot of the metro entrance. The man he had tagged was in the middle of a pack of exiting commuters.

Duncan paused the image and pushed in. Stonewell's surveillance gear was cutting edge, compact, and ultra high-def, so little quality was lost as the image was enlarged.

The man on the screen was solidly built and had a rugged, timeworn face that McElroy had committed to memory years ago.

His pulse kicked up a notch.

"That's him," he said, then keyed his mic. "Raven spotted. All teams, Raven spotted. Entering on Rue de la Huchette. Six has him tagged. Zeta Five, stay alert."

Using the digital tag, the spotters synced their systems to pick the target out of the crowd.

"Got him," Five said. "On Huchette now."

Duncan switched Zeta Five's feed onto the main screen.

"Grab team, stand by," McElroy said.

His orders from Stonewell were to snatch Raven *and* the man he was meeting. Both were wanted by the US government, and their captures would reflect well on the organization, not to mention earn it a generous bonus on top of its usual service fee.

There was only one small problem. The Latin Quarter was a warren of narrow

pedestrian streets that weaved around centuries-old, multistory buildings like crooked trails through a dense forest. All were already filling up with hungry tourists. Because of the twists and turns, sight lines were a bitch, with dozens of nooks and recesses where their targets could hide from view if they even remotely suspected they were being followed.

Raven had chosen his meeting place wisely.

There was also the not insignificant fact that Stonewell's entire operation was off the grid. The French government was kept in the dark, a decision made by Stonewell's executive committee and passed on to McElroy.

It was one that he fully supported, however. No way the French would've allowed them to move forward, especially given the short time frame involved.

The radio crackled. "Zeta One to base. Hawk sighted. Exiting taxi on Rue Saint-Jacques."

McElroy shifted his focus to Zeta One's monitor in time to see a blond, powerfully built man walking away from a taxi at the curb. He had bleached his hair, but it was Hawk all right. Stonewell had obtained only one halfway decent picture of him, but McElroy recognized the intense eyes and that jagged pink scar on the right side of his neck.

In some circles within the US intelligence community, Hawk was considered the bigger catch. He would undoubtedly possess information about terrorist organizations throughout Europe and the Middle East that would be paying off for years.

But the real prize was Raven. It wasn't so much because of what the man might know, but because of what he represented. His capture would be satisfying to Stonewell's clients.

Deeply satisfying.

And to McElroy himself.

"Both targets on site," he told everyone. "Grab team in position."

One of the small monitor feeds was focused on the front of the restaurant where the two men were reportedly scheduled to meet. It was down a side street, deeper into the Quarter, and flanked by two other restaurants.

Within moments, the members of the grab team joined the steady stream of tourists

on the cobbled walkway. Two of them, a man and a woman, approached the restaurant and paused outside the door as if they were trying to decide whether this was where they wanted to eat. They were the backup, just in case either Raven or Hawk got that far.

McElroy glanced at the monitor tracking Raven. The man's progress had slowed because of the crowd, and he was still at least a couple minutes away from the restaurant.

Hawk's path, on the other hand, was clearer, and it looked as if he would reach the meeting location first—if he were allowed.

"Hawk approaching from the south," McElroy reported. "Turning your way...now."

Hawk disappeared from Zeta Two's monitor and reappeared on Zeta Three's. The road went straight for about twenty-five feet, bent to the left, then sharply back to the right before passing by the restaurant.

Hawk entered the bend, and slowed as he reached the tight turn.

"Now!" McElroy commanded.

Just as Hawk made the turn, four members of the grab team closed in around him, and before he even realized what was going on, one of them stuck a needle in his arm, pumping enough Beta-Somnol into him to knock him out for hours.

The others caught him before he could fall, propped him up between two of them, and dragged him back out of the Quarter, five happy friends who had started drinking a little early.

McElroy allowed himself a smile at how seamlessly it had all gone.

But the celebration didn't last long.

"I don't see Raven," one of the spotters said. McElroy wasn't sure which.

He whipped his gaze back to the main monitor, and noted that the red dot that had been marking Raven's position was gone.

*Fuck.*

"Who had him last?" he asked Zeta team. They were the spotters, while Omega team was on the ground for the grab.

"I did. Zeta Five."

"What happened?"

"Don't know. I had him on Huchette. He turned off and Zeta Four should have picked him up."

“Never saw him,” Zeta Four reported.

That didn’t make sense. Once Raven had been tagged, Zeta Four’s camera should have automatically been able to pick him up.

“Everyone, eyes open! Find Raven.” McElroy grabbed Duncan’s shoulder, gripping it harder than he realized. “Replay the feeds for Zetas Five and Four. He’s got to be there somewhere.”

Duncan started with Five’s view first, picking it up fifteen seconds before Raven would make his turn. The target was walking at the same pace as before, moving around those who had stopped in the road, and getting out of the way of those moving faster than him. Then, just before he reached the intersection—

“Play that back,” McElroy said.

Duncan did as ordered and McElroy studied the screen.

“Look there,” Duncan said. “He hesitated.”

Indeed, Raven had. It had been only for a second, but it was a definite hesitation.

*Why would he...*

McElroy’s breath caught in his throat as a possibility occurred to him.

*It can’t be*, he thought. To Duncan, he said, “What time did he pause?”

Duncan checked his computer screen. “6:06:17.”

“And when did Hawk get taken down?”

Another check. “6:06:15.”

*Shit.*

“What happens when he gets to the corner?”

Duncan started the video again. Right before Raven arrived at the corner, he reached up, grabbed the top of his jacket, and started to pull.

“What’s he doing?” McElroy asked, more to himself than anyone.

Duncan replied by switching over to the recorded footage from Zeta Four. The area that Four had been tasked to cover ranged from the corner to where the road angled slightly right about fifty feet before the restaurant. This, unfortunately, meant there was a section of dead space, about three or four feet in length, right at the corner—if one kept tucked to the wall.

Apparently Raven had.

He should have appeared immediately on screen, but there was no one there.

“Where the hell is he?” McElroy said.

Duncan seemed flustered. “I don’t know... he should be—”

Before Duncan could complete his sentence, someone appeared down near the end of the street for a fraction of a second before heading back onto the other road. Duncan stopped the video, rewound several frames, and zoomed in.

Raven.

“He must’ve taken his jacket off when we grabbed Hawk,” Duncan said, surprised.

“But how could he know?”

The digital tag had keyed in on Raven’s jacket—its material, color, size—and that’s what each of the other surveillance rigs would pick up on. Without it, the spotters would have to make their own visual identification until a new tag was created.

Feeling his gut clench again, McElroy keyed his mic. “Raven is on the loose, heading east on Rue de la Huchette. All teams move in to intercept!”

The feeds from the spotters’ cameras began bouncing up and down, as the men hustled to reposition themselves so they could try to get eyes once more on Raven and assist the grab team.

McElroy barely maintained composure as he waited for someone to spot the target.

Finally, Zeta Three called in. “I’m on Huchette, east to Rue Saint-Jacques. I don’t see him anywhere.”

“He must have made it out already,” McElroy said. “Everyone fan out. Check taxis, buses, pedestrians. He’s got to be out there. We can’t let him slip through.”

But after five minutes of no further sightings, McElroy feared his instincts had been correct.

After ten, he knew it.

Raven was gone.

## CHAPTER 2

*August 26th*  
*Calverton, Maryland*

EVEN IN THE tensest situations, the sound of Deuce's voice was reassuring. At that very moment, he was shouting breathlessly in Alexandra Poe's wireless earpiece.

"Look alive," he said. "He's coming your way!"

"Good," Alex whispered.

Barely a second later, she heard Charlie Wright's footsteps pounding toward her down the alleyway. He was repeating something under his breath like a mantra, his tone panicked, but she couldn't make out the words.

Then a second set of footsteps entered the far end of the alley—Deuce, his ragged breaths still in her ear as he followed Wright, cutting off any potential retreat. Wright must have heard him, too, because the mutterings became louder and more frantic. "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God."

It wasn't the most original plea Alex had ever heard, but people like Wright weren't exactly known for their creativity.

She waited until he'd closed the distance between them to a couple dozen feet, then she stepped out from behind the Dumpster and pointed her Taser at him.

"Hold it right there, Charlie."

"Holy shit!" Wright cried.

He was big man who wouldn't have looked out of place on the front line of a football team, so stopping wasn't exactly a simple thing. He tried to skid to a halt, but stumbled over his own feet and fell onto the cracked asphalt.

Alex shoved her Taser into its holster as she rushed over, and then jumped onto his back, straddling him before he even had the chance to roll over. Grabbing his arms, she pulled them toward her so she could cuff his wrists with a plastic zip tie, but he suddenly shoved upward and tried to stand.

Out of sheer instinct, Alex threw an arm around his neck so she wouldn't fall off. He

clawed at it, gasping for air, and twisted around in a circle until he was able to knock her to the ground.

With a thick splash, she landed half in, half out of a muddy, water-filled pothole, groaning in pain as her left butt cheek hit the jagged edge of the pavement.

“Jesus!”

As Wright started to run again, she pushed herself back to her feet, and grabbed for her Taser, only to find that her holster was empty. The weapon must have fallen out during the rodeo ride on Wright’s back.

She scanned the ground, looking for the familiar shape.

“Dude,” Deuce yelled, “for chrissakes, stop! You are *not* doing yourself any favors!” He slowed as he came abreast of Alex. “You all right?”

“Fine,” she said, waving him on. “Just go get him!”

Deuce nodded and took off after Wright.

As Alex whipped around, still looking for her Taser, her gaze settled on the pothole she’d fallen into.

“No,” she said, hoping her instinct was wrong.

Crouching next to it, she plopped her already muddied hand into the water. A moment later, she closed her eyes and scrunched her face. “Son of a...”

She pulled the waterlogged Taser out of the puddle, and angrily shoved the now useless weapon into its holster, this time snapping the restraining strap into place. Then she lit out after Deuce and Wright.

Both men were out of sight, but she could hear Deuce still breathing heavily in her earpiece.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“Turn left...at the end of the alley.”

“You still on him?”

“Ten-four.”

Maps. Directions. Layout. These were things Alex had a particular talent for. Study a map for a few moments and it would be committed to memory. So she knew it would only be a couple more minutes before Wright reached Norris Boulevard, the main drag in this little Maryland burg.



Not exactly the most discreet place for a takedown, but what choice did they have?

When she reached the end of the alley and turned left, she could see both Wright and Deuce ahead. A part of her had hoped Wright would be kneeling on the ground, out of breath, but the big man was still running, albeit at a much slower pace. Deuce, leaner and in better shape, had closed to within fifty feet of him and had his Taser out.

“Stop!” Deuce called out. “Right now!”

Ignoring the pain in her gluteus maximus, Alex sprinted down the road in a burst of speed faster than even her partner could achieve, but she was still a half block back when Wright suddenly turned and lunged toward Deuce.

Caught off guard, Deuce fired his Taser, but Alex could see that only one of the needles hit its mark. A spasm shot through the left side of Wright’s massive rib cage, but it didn’t stop him. He yanked out the needle, and made a grab for Deuce’s hand. Deuce jerked away just in time, and landed a blow to Wright’s gut with his other fist.

Wright staggered back a few feet, and then leaned forward breathing deeply, his hands on his thighs.

“On the ground!” Deuce shouted.

Wright didn’t move.

Deuce took a step closer. “I said, on the ground!”

Wright reached out and swatted at the air, in what was probably meant as a warning. Unfortunately for Deuce, Wright’s arm was as long as he was large, and the back of the big man’s palm glanced off Deuce’s chin.

Deuce stumbled back a few steps, the blow momentarily stunning him.

Wright took a tentative step forward, as if he were going to take advantage of the situation and run again.

But Alex shouted, “Not another move!”

Wright jerked in surprise and looked back. She was ten feet behind him, her inoperable Taser once more in her hand.

“On the ground,” she said.

He hesitated for a moment, then, with a sigh, lowered himself onto his knees.

As Alex moved behind him and secured his wrists, she glanced at Deuce. “You all right?”

He turned his chin toward her. “You think it’s gonna bruise?”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Cool.”

Deuce wasn’t like other people.

But then neither was Alex.

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*Baltimore, Maryland*

THE RIDE HOME was uneventful. By the time they got to the station, it was nearly nine p.m.

Artie Cashman, aka Max Cash of Max Cash Bail Bond, was waiting in the lobby when Alex and Deuce escorted Wright inside.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “The giant takes a fall. What did I tell you about trying something stupid?”

Wright, not meeting his eyes, shrugged.

“Come on, Charlie, what did I *tell* you?”

Alex nudged her prisoner. “You’d better speak up.”

The big man frowned, and mumbled, “That you’d always find me.”

“That’s right.” Max beamed. “And guess what? I did.”

Alex could have argued the point, since the only thing Max had provided was an address that turned out to be bogus, but in the grand scheme he was close enough. Charlie had gone rabbit and gotten his tail clipped. And Max was just lucky that Alex and Deuce had been available to do the clipping.

“Let’s get you checked in,” Alex said.

Max seemed to notice her for the first time. “I see he put up a fight, huh?”

Alex glanced down at her muddied shirt and pants. “No, I always dress this way. Helps me blend in with the losers.”

“I think it’s working,” Max said.

He had already briefed the police before Alex and Deuce arrived, so the transfer of the prisoner went smooth as silk.

Once Wright was off their hands, Max told them, “Come by the office tomorrow and

I'll write you a check."

Deuce chuckled, but Alex narrowed her eyes.

"Don't even try," she said.

Max spread his hands. "What? You can come first thing in the morning." He looked at his watch. "That's less than twelve hours from now."

"Max."

"Come on, Alex. You think I carry my checkbook everywhere I go?"

"You *know* the rule."

It was simple: payment on delivery. No exceptions.

He huffed as he pushed a hand into his pocket. "Fine, here." He pulled out a check, and handed it to her. "Buy yourself a garden hose, spray off some of that crud."

She wasn't surprised to see it was already filled out. Max was a notorious skinflint, and more times than not Alex had to play this little game with him.

She nodded at Deuce, and they turned to leave.

"Hey," Max said, "I still want you to come by tomorrow. There's a hearing in the morning and I have a feeling my guy isn't gonna show. If that happens, I want to jump on it right—"

"We're busy tomorrow." A lie, but Alex wasn't in the mood to pick up Max's trash twice in a row. "Come on, Deuce."

Deuce clapped Max on the back. "See ya, dude."

"I'm serious," Max said as they walked away. "Tomorrow, okay?"

Without looking back, she said, "Not gonna happen."

"Come on, Alex, is that any way to treat one of your best—"

"Alexandra Poe?"

She had reached the door and started to push it open, but that stopped her. She turned toward the voice.

Smiling at her from a dozen feet away was a well-groomed man in a dark gray Armani suit. Mid to late thirties, possibly forty, but not much more, and in decent shape. She wouldn't have called him attractive, but he was passable.

*A lawyer*, she thought, or something along those lines.

She smirked, then went outside, Deuce trailing behind. She was tired and just wanted

to take a hot shower and crawl into bed.

She heard the door open behind them as they walked toward the parking lot.

“You *are* Alexandra Poe, correct?”

Growing annoyed, she quickened her pace.

“I just need a moment of your time.”

“Set it up with my secretary,” she said as she pulled out her key fob, and aimed it at her Jeep. With a push of a button, the locks popped open.

Deuce circled around to the passenger side, while Alex pulled open the driver’s door and climbed in. When she tried to pull it closed, the man in the Armani suit grabbed hold of it, stopping her.

“You’re about to lose that hand,” she said.

He didn’t budge. “I know it’s probably not a good time.”

“You figured that out on your own? Let go of the fucking door.”

With his free hand, he removed a business card from his pocket, and held it out.

“When you get a moment, I’d appreciate it if you’d give me a call.”

Alex wrenched the door free from his grasp, but just before she could close it, he tossed the card inside. The locks clunked down as she hit the dash button, then she started the engine, punched the gas, and left him standing in the parking lot.

Deuce said, “Looks like the wolves are circling again.”

Alex looked over and saw that he’d somehow gotten hold of the business card. He turned it so she could see it.

Taking up the entire left side of the card was an all-too-familiar logo: STONEWELL ASSOCIATES.

The man’s name, however, was new to her.

Jason McElroy.

She grabbed the card out of Deuce’s hand, crumpled it, and tossed it into the back.

Deuce snickered. “I take it you won’t be calling him?”

“Not without a gun pointed at my head.”

## CHAPTER 3

SHE DIDN'T GET the alarm to stop shrieking until the second try. Clipping a hand against the clock radio, she hit the snooze button, groaned, and rolled onto her back.

She should have turned the thing off last night, when it was clear she couldn't sleep, but she'd been too preoccupied with the thought of that asshole from Stonewell to do anything sensible.

This wasn't the first time Alex had been approached by the organization. Stonewell was a top-tier defense contractor, and for whatever reason, they seemed to think she should be working for them. She suspected it had less to do with her skills than with the way she looked, being half Iranian and all. Her dark hair and mixed-race features would make it easy for her to pass for a number of different nationalities, which could be quite useful to an international operation like Stonewell.

Alex pushed the covers to the side, sat up, and made sure the alarm was off for good.

To hell with them. She was fine with the way things were, thank you. She was her own boss, could pass on assignments she wasn't interested in, could even take off and do nothing for a month or more if she wanted to. Not that she ever did, but knowing she could was all that mattered.

She stood up, still angry, thinking that if Mr. Jason McElroy hadn't grabbed her door like an overaggressive lunatic, she could have brushed it off. That's what had really set her teeth on edge. Her personal space was very important to her.

More than one person had learned that the hard way.

She thought about taking a shower, but what she really needed was to work this crap out of her system, so she pulled some clothes on, grabbed her gym bag, and headed for the door.

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ACKERMAN'S GYM WAS located in a middle-class Baltimore neighborhood that was once good, had gone bad, and was now transitioning back the other way.

Through it all the gym had remained a constant.

The original owner had been an old fighter named Marty “Ace” Ackerman. Marty had never gotten close to a title fight, but had seen plenty of champions either on their way up or their spiral back down—much like the neighborhood, Alex had often thought—and had died at the ripe old age of eighty-six, right there in the gym.

He’d left the place to its longtime manager, Hans Emerick. Emerick himself was getting up there in age, but he still showed up every day, and was more than willing to train Alex whenever she asked.

“Speed bag,” he said the moment she walked in. “Fifteen minutes. Then crunches. Five hundred.”

His German accent was still thick after all these years in the States. He was a refugee of the Cold War, a promising East German weightlifter who’d escaped through one of the tunnels under the Berlin Wall, something he almost never talked about.

“Ancient history,” he’d say, if anyone brought it up.

Alex was the only exception. In her he seemed to see some sort of kindred spirit, and had given her a glimpse of what his life had once been and how terrified he was the night he snuck into the West.

“You have not known fear,” he told her, “until you’ve been alone in the dark and either freedom or death is only a few footsteps away.”

Alex had never argued the point.

Just hearing about it was frightening enough.

Changing into her workout clothes, she wrapped her hands in tape, and headed out to the bag. Within the first few seconds, she could feel her tension begin to drain away. This was exactly what she needed, something to get her blood moving again. Push out the toxins and soak in the fresh oxygen.

Right. Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. The rhythm slow at first, then speeding up to her normal pace. Sweat beaded along her hairline and down her jaw as the knot in her stomach started to loosen.

This was good. Really good.

Emerick let her know when the fifteen minutes were up by clapping his hands twice and saying, “Crunches.”

She hit the bag one last time, then moved over to the floor and began torturing her abdomen. She had counted to two hundred twenty-one, grunting with each crunch, when the buzzer at the far end of the room went off.

Someone had entered the lobby.

Emerick, who had been sweeping the area around the boxing ring as Alex worked, leaned his broom against the ropes and went to see who it was.

Alex passed crunch number three sixteen when Emerick came back inside, accompanied by two other men. She assumed they were clients, and didn't pay them any attention.

*Three thirty-five. Three thirty-six. Three thirty-seven. Three thirty-eight.*

"Alex?"

*Three thirty-nine.*

She slowed slightly on three forty, and looked over.

"Someone here to see you," Emerick said.

She shifted her gaze to the man standing next to him.

Jason McElroy.

*Son of a bitch.*

The suit was dark blue today and he was carrying a briefcase, but he wasn't wearing a tie, maybe in deference to his surroundings. He took a few steps toward her, his buddy remaining back by the door to the lobby.

"Good morning, Ms. Poe."

Ignoring him, Alex picked up her pace again. *Three forty-one. Three forty-two. Three forty-three.*

She kept going, right through four hundred and all the way up to five, before she finally stopped. Lying back on the mat, she allowed herself to catch her breath, then hopped to her feet.

"Okay, what next?" she asked Emerick.

He thought for a moment. "Medicine ball."

With a nod, she moved over to where they kept the heavy, oversized ball, picked it up, and acknowledged McElroy's presence for the first time. "You catch."

He blinked at her. "What?"

“I throw. You catch.”

“Uh, okay.”

As McElroy turned to set his briefcase down, Alex tossed the ball. Sensing the movement, he swung his arms around and up just in time to catch it before it slammed into his hip.

Alex motioned with her fingers. “Come on. Throw it back.”

McElroy tested the heft of the ball, and heaved it in her direction. In a single, continuous motion, Alex caught it and sent it back.

“I was hoping we might have that chat now,” he said.

She nodded at the ball. “Keep it going.”

As he threw it back, he said, “I realize you’ve been contacted by others from my organization in the past.”

Alex made another smooth catch and return. Catching it again, McElroy grunted under his breath. “I know that whatever it was they were asking of you, you turned it down.”

“The ball.”

“Can’t we just talk first?”

She stared at him for a second, then looked at Emerick. “Next?”

Before Emerick could reply, the man who’d been standing by the door said, “I’ll toss with you.”

Alex had ignored him earlier, assuming he was simply there to make McElroy look more important. But as he walked toward them, she realized he was more than that.

She knew him.

At one time, she had known him well.

*Shane Cooper.*

“How you doing, Alex?”

She shot a look at McElroy. “Are you kidding me? Is bringing him along supposed to give you an edge? Is that what you think?”

“I tried to tell him it wouldn’t work,” Cooper said as he picked up the ball. “But you know suits. They never listen.”

He threw it at Alex with more force than McElroy had even come close to achieving.



She caught it and returned it equally hard. They continued the back and forth, neither holding the ball for more than a few seconds before sending it off again.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Cooper said.

“What question was that?”

“How you’re doing?”

“I’m fine.”

“Me, too.”

“I didn’t ask.”

He smiled. “I know.” He tossed the ball back to her. “You’re looking pretty good. Maybe a little angrier than before.”

“My mood depends on the company.”

“Ouch.”

They silently tossed for a couple of minutes.

Cooper finally said, “It *is* good to see you.”

This time when she caught the ball, she dropped it to the ground and looked at Emerick. “Next.”

“I have an idea,” Cooper said.

As she started to scowl, he glanced at the boxing ring then back at her. “How about it?”

She stared at him, then shrugged as a short, disdainful laugh escaped her lips. “Your funeral.”

While Alex was more than willing to get into the ring with only gloves on, Emerick insisted they both wear headgear and mouth guards. He also loaned Cooper some shorts, shoes, and a T-shirt.

“This is a waste of time,” McElroy said as Alex and Cooper climbed into the ring.

“No one said you needed to stay,” Cooper told him.

Alex stifled a smile. She couldn’t help liking the fact that Cooper had talked back to McElroy. His willingness to speak his mind even in front of superiors was one of the traits she’d always appreciated. It was good to see he hadn’t lost that.

“Four rounds. One minute each,” Emerick said.

“Two minutes,” Alex told him.

Emerick frowned. "Ninety seconds. Remember, liebchen, this is my gym."

Alex pounded her gloved fists together and nodded. Ninety seconds it was.

They went through the ritual of a quick glove tap in the center of the ring, then separated. Once they were ready, Emerick rang the bell.

Typically, the first several seconds would be spent circling and jabbing, testing each other's defenses. But Alex wasn't in the mood for that. She moved to the middle, making it look like she was going to do the expected, then as soon as Cooper was in range, she let loose a surprise left hook.

He saw it at the last second, and pivoted his right arm to block it, but he was too late. Her blow landed solidly against the head pad that lay across his cheek.

As he staggered sideways, she knew she should move in for the kill, but she held back, not wanting to end it so quickly.

He laughed. "So that's how you want it, huh?" He raised his gloves again. "All right. Let's go."

Through the rest of the first round and all of the second, neither was able to land anything more than glancing blows.

In the third, however, Cooper snuck in a shot to her ribs that nearly knocked the air out of her. But Alex refused to show any weakness, and came at him with a flurry of punches that forced him back against the ropes. If the bell hadn't rung, she was sure she would have had him.

Both fighters were breathing deeply as the final round started. Clothes drenched in sweat, they met in the middle again, their fists held at the ready.

Jabs one way, and the other, all harmlessly knocked away.

As Alex searched for an opening that would allow her to make solid contact, she could sense the seconds ticking off the clock. She didn't want the fight to end this way, not dancing around like this.

She feinted a punch to his stomach, then pulled back, ready to swing at his head, but he'd anticipated the move and left no clear shot. She tried it again, and had the same results.

On her third attempt, she didn't fake a stomach punch, but instead jabbed straight at Cooper's face with her right, and swung another left hook at the side of his head.

Right before her blow landed, he shot a fist up at her now unprotected torso. She hit him a split second before he hit her. Cooper's blow sent Alex backpedaling several feet, while hers knocked him to the mat.

She winced in pain, her ribs undoubtedly bruised, and looked over at Cooper.

"Get up."

He slowly pushed himself up. "That felt good, didn't it?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, ignoring the pain radiating from her ribs.

"You still pack a pretty good punch. I was worried maybe you'd dropped off a bit."

"Nope."

"This is the part where you compliment my skills."

A smirk. "I know."

"Still Alex, I see." He took a breath. "Again? Or are we done?"

"If you're worn out, we can be done."

"Oh, I'm not worn out at all."

But as they raised their gloves, the bell rang.

"You're done," Emerick said. "Both of you."

Cooper held the ropes open so Alex could climb out first. She contemplated letting herself out on another side, but decided to accept the offer. Cooper wasn't a bad guy. There were just some things that were hard to forget.

With Emerick's help, she removed her gloves and pulled off her headgear as McElroy stepped toward her. "So, can we talk now?"

"Don't need to," she said. "Whatever you're asking, my answer's no."

"Ms. Poe, I have some information I'm pretty sure you'll want to hear."

"And I'm pretty sure I don't. But thanks for bringing Cooper by. Haven't had a workout like that in a while."

She started for the women's locker room.

"It's about your father."

She stopped, and slowly turned back. "Don't you dare screw with me, asshole, or I will put you in the ground."

"We have news about him."

"*What* news?"

McElroy smiled. "We know where he is."