

QUEEN CITY HEROES | BOOK 1

**GAZING
INTO
DARKNESS**

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*I dedicate this book to my little ones, who are not so little anymore.
You are the most important work. I look forward to teaching you
this year and beyond. I love you. May you follow God in all you do.*

“... I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12 (ESV)

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ALS—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis
ASAC—Assistant Special Agent in Charge
ATF—Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
AWBERC—Andrew W. Breidenbach Environmental
Research Center
CID—Criminal Investigation Division
DEP—Department of Environmental Protection
EPA—Environmental Protection Agency
FBI—Federal Bureau of Investigation
GPS—Global Positioning System
MCHM—Methylcyclohexanemethanol
NEIC—National Enforcement Investigations Center
SAC—Special Agent in Charge
SWAT—Special Weapons and Tactics

CHAPTER ONE



THE VIRUS INVADING Stacey Sanderson's body was a pain, but not like the sickness was going to kill her. She trudged into her kitchen and took an antibiotic. A glass of water helped her wash down the large pill. Afterward, she grabbed the second bottle from the doctor, a cough medicine with a sleep aid. She'd never take the prescription on the job, but maybe tonight, to get some rest. And since her roommate had moved out, Stacey would have a peaceful, relaxing time by herself. All alone. No one else to bother her.

She'd unpack later. Traveling took a lot out of someone. Plus, getting sick.

Her time spent at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center to become an EPA Criminal Investigation Division agent had ended. And the cold weather delayed her flight from Georgia to Ohio by several hours.

As she traveled through her kitchen, she passed the court notice on the counter. The phone rang, and she picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, Sis. How was training?" Patrick sounded perky for this hour. Way too perky.

She rubbed her eye. "Training was good. But long. I'm glad to be home."

"Yeah. Home alone in that big house of yours. You locked all your doors, right? Did you get an alarm yet?"

She sighed. "No, but—"

His tone grew more forceful. "A stalking protective order is good, but I don't think a piece of paper will deter this guy, Sis."

She picked up the court notice. "I haven't seen Michael since I took out the order against him."

"Perhaps also because you changed your phone number, so he'd stop calling you. And you changed up your morning work commute to avoid him. But what happens when he finds your new number or starts following you again?"

She huffed and returned the paper to the counter, then walked over to the window and closed the drapes. "I'm fine, Pat. I can handle myself."

"At least think about getting an alarm."

How had she forgotten to close all the drapes before she'd left for Georgia? "Okay, I'll do that. Thanks for calling. G'night." She moved toward the next window.

"Good night. Oh, and you should get a fire ladder too. Because you sleep upstairs. Don't forget."

She sighed again. "Bye." He meant well.

Stacey closed the right drape, but hesitated before shifting the left. She forced her gaze outside. See? Nothing there. All this talk with Patrick, combined with the cough medicine, played tricks on her mind. Yes, she was alone. But she was safe.

She continued through the kitchen. Empty food bowls sat on the tile floor, near the space normally occupied by a certain male gray tabby. The kennel remained closed for the evening. Stacey would pick up Mr. Fluffles tomorrow.

After trudging upstairs, Stacey entered the bathroom and glanced in the mirror. She fingered the ends of her long brown hair. Maybe time to get a trim.

She continued getting ready, then nestled into bed to start

the latest romantic suspense her book club had chosen. The brakes on the heroine's car went out, and an officer dashed to her rescue. *Meh*. For once, she'd like the heroine to handle the situation herself.

Walking over to her fireplace, she put out the fire and settled back into bed, drifting to sleep.

Later, a noise awoke her. A neighbor's dog barking. *Huh?* Her vision clouded, and she blinked.

Smoke enveloped her room. Everyone knew what to do in a fire until there was one. *Need oxygen. Okay, have to get down low*. She crawled off the bed and onto the floor. Then she scrambled near the door but jerked her hand away. *Feel near the knob first before touching*. She reached out twice but pulled back her hand before she worked up the nerve to get close enough to feel the temperature. *Yeowch, that's hot!* She backed away toward the front window.

When she turned and looked outside, a shadowy figure darted around the side of her house and down the street, disappearing. Or did they? Hard to tell because of the smoke and darkness. She squinted. Could it have been Michael? She'd seen him outside her house before.

She studied the window frame. The opening was small and on the second story. Now what?

She crawled to her bed and grabbed the comforter. Then she scooted back to the door and stuffed the bedspread near the bottom of the door leading to the hallway.

Ugh. If she survived this, she'd never hear the end of it from her brother. If she survived ...

Hyperventilating, she counted to slow her breathing. *One. Two. God is with me*.

She clasped a hand to her chest. Where was Mr. Fluffles! Wait, he was safe at the kennel.

And her photos? Stacey crawled to the bed and pulled the box from underneath. Many memories she didn't want to lose, and at least one she wouldn't mind burning from her memory.

Her throat itched. Stacey coughed. More smoke in the room. She opened the window and stuck her head outside. *Help me, God!* She hyperventilated again.

Try to climb out first, or call 911? She coughed, and smoke enveloped the room. Where was her phone? Where was anything? Hard to see inside the room now. She stuck her head back out the window. “Help! Help!”

When renting the two-story house, a second floor appealed to her. Now, not so much.

The room got warmer. She coughed again, then leaned farther out the window. Her tone grew desperate. “Help!”

Chance McPherson awoke to his dog circling and growling. “What’s got into you, Bruno?” He stood and trudged to the door.

Bruno’s growl deepened. Chance glanced at his watch. His elderly neighbor might be asleep by now. “Okay, boy, just a short walk.” Maybe it’d get Bruno to settle down. He blew out a breath before taking one last gaze at the overturned photo. One distraction was as good as any other, right?

He grabbed the leash next to the door and hooked up Bruno. They strolled along the sidewalk. Bruno pulled on the leash, not stopping to water lawns along the way. As the chilly wind blew, Chance shivered. *Hurry, dog.*

When they neared older houses in the neighborhood, Bruno barked louder and tugged on his leash. “What’s wrong, boy?”

Probably just a cat. Or a squirrel. That’s what stirred him up last week. Chance pulled on his dog’s leash. “C’mon, time to go home.” Bruno threw on the brakes and broke free from Chance, dragging his leash behind him. He chased after his dog.

Smoke filled the night air. But where were the fumes coming from? And where was his dog? “Bruno? Here, boy? Bruno,”

Chance's voice hitched. His phone rang. An incoming call from his coworker. "Hello, George?"

"I almost got killed tonight when some idiot about rammed into my car. Anyway, I've got some good news."

"Huh?"

Chance sprinted down the sidewalk. Bruno let out a barrage of barks. Chance shifted his gaze upward. "Sorry, I gotta go. I'll call you later."

Smoke billowed and flames danced from an older, two-story house. A faint cry for help carried on the wind.

As he neared the car parked in front of the house, a shiver raced across him from head to toe. He'd seen the same vehicle in the parking lot at the office. A tree logo and Jesus' fish sticker clung to the bumper. The kind lab tech he'd worked with occasionally owned the car.

An upstairs window opened, and a head peeked out.

"Stacey?" he yelled.

More smoke puffed around her. "Chance?"

"Hold on, I'll call the fire department. Let me see if I can get a ladder."

A dude stood near Stacey's house. Maybe a neighbor.

Chance stepped toward him. "Hey, do you live nearby? You got a ladder?"

The man trembled and darted down the street. Was he getting a ladder or running away?

The house to the left appeared vacant and sported a 'For Rent' sign in the yard. Chance sprinted to the house on the right and banged on the door.

The door opened, and an elderly man stepped outside. A few light brown hairs topped his otherwise bald head.

Chance pointed toward Stacey's place. "Your neighbor's house is on fire. You got a ladder I can use?"

"Sure," the man said. He led Chance inside his house and to the garage, then opened the garage door.

Chance grabbed the ladder and barked back at the man. "Call nine-one-one, please."

Racing back to Stacey's house, Chance propped the metal contraption against the wall. Why'd it have to be a fire? He gripped the ladder and headed upward. Climbing the rungs, embers and smoke greeted him. Chance moved his coat sleeve in front of his face and kept going.

Stacey coughed.

Chance forced his gaze downward. *Oh, why'd I do that?*

Several neighbors gathered in a circle and stood in front of Stacey's house.

"Secure the ladder," he yelled.

Two men ran over and stabilized the metal rungs below.

Steadying his grip, Chance reached for Stacey. "Gimme your hand."

She grabbed his fingers and clutched a box under her other arm. Forcing his gaze away from the grass below, Chance helped her climb out the window and onto the ladder.

Carefully, he aided her descent and fought back the urge to kiss the ground once they reached the last rung.

She hugged him. "Thank you." She mumbled, "I guess I need a hero after all."

He raised a brow.

She touched her hand to her mouth. "I mean. I was just reading a book. Before bed. I-I, uh, thank you. So, tonight, you were my hero."

His face grew impossibly hot.

She smiled, then looked away.

The ambulance and fire department arrived, and a firefighter ran over. "Anyone else inside?"

Stacey coughed, then shook her head.

Thankfully, her cat wasn't there. Puffy or Muffy or something. She'd mentioned the feline once before at work.

"You better let them check you out," Chance said to Stacey, then traveled with her to the ambulance. She walked

away from him and stowed her box next to her neighbor's garage.

After Stacey received a clean bill of health, Chance rested with her off to the side, near a wooded area of the sidewalk. Several neighbors stood on the other side of the driveway, watching the firefighters. Always looky-loos.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah." Her hands shook. "Thank you. I'm never taking this cold medicine again. Makes me so drowsy. I put out the fire in the fireplace. At least I thought I did."

He narrowed his gaze. "The important thing is you're okay."

She coughed. "You're right."

"Haven't seen you for a while. Where you been?" He'd avoided her and her God talk at work for a while.

"I just got back from Glyngo, Georgia. Decided to become an EPA CID special agent too."

"That's great." He forced a smile.

Of all the things Stacey Sanderson was—kind, beautiful, and intelligent, she was also religious. Not that her beliefs would stop her from being a great agent. Just not a good one to be matched with him. They'd worked together before, but never that closely. Thankfully, they handled most of their own cases, and when he happened to be paired with someone else, his boss chose George.

Bruno's scar-tipped brown nose moved toward Stacey at a rapid pace, sniffing as he went along, inspecting her.

"He's harmless, unless you're a mail carrier."

"Good thing I'm not." She bent and scratched the dog under the chin.

Bruno unleashed his long pink tongue and licked Stacey on the hand. Would she scowl and recoil like his ex had?

Instead, Stacey chuckled, and their eyes met. A cool breeze whirled around them, and she rubbed her arms.

Chance took off his coat and wrapped the garment around her shoulders.

"Sorry, I wasn't expecting to be outside."

“I get it.”

“Are you sure? Won’t you be cold?”

He shrugged. “I’m fine.” Chance willed his teeth not to chatter. At least he’d layered up before going outside. Could always be worse. No way he’d let her freeze.

After putting on the coat, Stacey shoved her hands in the pockets. A bracelet fell out. She bent to pick the jewelry up, then handed the shiny chain to him. “Here.”

“Oh. Thanks.” He snatched it. “Was for ... Fiona. My girlfriend. Uh, ex-girlfriend. I was going to give it to her earlier this evening. Apparently, she was seeing someone else on the side.” Randy, the pre-med interning at the hospital where she worked, a suitor apparently more her dad’s style.

He huffed. Enviro cops didn’t exactly get a lot of respect. *If I can just get more recognition on the job, maybe people will forget what happened years ago.*

“That’s awful. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. What happened to me isn’t your fault.”

“No, but betrayals by those close to you are especially hurtful,” her voice trailed off.

“Sounds like you know from experience.” He turned toward her, but the shadows of the trees along the sidewalk covered their faces.

“A little.” She stood, then stepped forward and slid on an icy patch on the sidewalk.

Chance grabbed her arm.

Stacey spun around, their faces close. “Thanks. Looks like you really have this heroic thing down.”

He studied her dark brown eyes, making strong eye contact. Like he was seeing her for the first time. In a different light. Not the geeky lab tech. But as a beautiful woman.

Stacey tugged free from his hold, then started forward and slipped again, her legs splayed against the ice.

“Here.” Chance thrust out his arm.

Stacey stared, then reached and grasped his bicep, her fingers a bit cold to the touch.

And yet, electricity sizzled through him. Fiona had just dumped him. These were rebound feelings. Not a genuine connection.

He stood with Stacey until the firefighters put out the fire. “You got a place to stay?”

The elderly neighbor who’d lent him the ladder approached them with a blanket. “Stacey, Ellen wanted you to know you can stay with us tonight.” He handed her the blanket.

“Thank you. I’ll be over in a minute.”

“Sure.” The man walked back to his house.

“Thanks, Chance.” She handed him his coat and wrapped the blanket around herself.

“You’re welcome. Here, let me at least walk you over there so you don’t trip again.”

Her arm hooked around his, he led her to the neighbor’s house. “Thanks again. See you tomorrow, hero.” She winked.

Lightheaded, he sauntered away with Bruno in tow and put his coat on. A bit of smoke remained. And a bit of warmth from the person who’d been wearing the garment. For now, at least until he was in a better place emotionally, best to avoid Stacey Sanderson.

He walked over to the firefighters grouped by the sidewalk. The tallest one, Brad, went to his gym. “What’s up?” he greeted his friend.

Brad shifted to face him. “What are you doing here?”

“Long story.” He shrugged. “Any idea what caused the fire?”

“There’ll be an investigation, but I’m fairly certain the cause of the fire was arson.”

“Are you sure?” Stacey reappeared, her hand squeezing his arm.

Chance did a double take. “What are you doing out here again? I thought you were at your neighbor’s.”

“Same thing you’re doing. I didn’t want to say anything at

first, but I thought I saw someone running from my yard. I chalked my vision up to the cold medicine.”

“I saw a guy,” Chance said. “Thought maybe he was a neighbor. I asked for a ladder. Barked at him, really. Wondered if that’s why he ran off. Or maybe he was going to get a ladder. But he never returned.”

Stacey stared at him. “What did he look like?”

“Medium height and build, light hair.”

“Curly?”

“Hard to tell from a distance. You know, he had a blue jacket. With a red martial arts logo.”

She nodded. “Michael used to attend my dojo.”

She did martial arts?

“He was a bit, um, over-friendly. After he followed me home and showed up outside my house a few times, trespassing on my property, I got a stalking protective order.”

“We need to call the police. He may have started the fire.”

“I would agree with you, but that’s the thing. The guy had a ton of phobias. Part of the reason I hesitated getting a protective order. Yeah, he’s weird, but he’s harmless. Plus, we had a group campfire at the sensei’s house once, and Michael had to leave. He was afraid of the fire.”

“Yeah, well, I saw him standing there. So he didn’t seem too afraid to me. People lie, you know.”

People like his ex.

“Anyone else with a beef against you?”

Her eyes didn’t meet his gaze. “No.”

If he didn’t know better, he’d say she wasn’t being completely forthcoming, but it was Stacey.

“Well, if Stalker Boy didn’t do it, maybe he saw who did.”

They didn’t work together daily, but one thing he knew—Stacey Sanderson was a saint, or close to it.

Why would someone want to hurt her? And not just harm her—kill her.