

## CHAPTER THREE



NOT LONG AFTER the simulation training exercise, hanger, as Chance called the sensation, had overtaken him—a combination of anger and hunger. The rumble from his stomach, along with slight irritation toward Stacey for not stopping for food beforehand, confirmed the feeling. Not hearing from the FBI recruiter yet hadn't helped things.

"This is the place." Chance pulled his work-assigned vehicle into the parking lot of Ranger Chemical Company on the west side of Cincinnati. Taller than wide, the gray structure sat next to a small pond, maybe even where owner Chris Preston had illegally dumped chemicals. "I can't explain why, but I have this feeling our caseload is about to heat up." He huffed. Then again, he once had a hunch he and Fiona might get married.

Normally, in a twelve-month period, they'd process around fifty cases. So far, they'd worked on forty, and the year wasn't over yet. Still several months for things to liven up in case the FBI thing didn't pan out.

Plus, their boss had warned them Preston might be the kind to flee prosecution. "Parking lot is empty. Guess Ranger Chemical isn't open for business." Still, he and Stacey needed to check the site before driving to Preston's apartment.

Chance sighed as he exited the automobile and removed his standard-issue weapon from its holster. Stacey did the same and trailed him to the entrance.

It was still odd to see her wearing the same blue shirt with yellow lettering indicating she, too, was a federal agent.

Chance motioned for her to move to the right of the door. Once she stood in position, her pistol pointed down against her legs discreetly like him, he reached out and tried opening the door. No luck. He pounded on the front entry. "Federal EPA CID agents. Open up."

Nothing.

A gate clanged in the rear. He muttered a curse. Preston must have heard them coming.

Stacey holstered her weapon, then sprinted to the corner of the structure and paused.

Chance stuffed his pistol back into place. No telling if Preston might be armed. Stacey could have waited for him to go first. He fumed. After jogging behind her, he turned the corner, stopping and resting his hands on his thighs once he caught up to her. He willed himself not to gasp for air. The yearly mile and a half recertification run was coming up. If Chance didn't pass the tests this year, he was out.

On the alternative side of the chain-link fence surrounding the perimeter, Chris Preston scurried along the outside of the building toward a black SUV in the distance.

Stacey stowed her pistol in her holster, grabbed onto the chain links, and climbed.

Chance groaned. "What are you doing?"

She ascended. "I'm gonna chase him."

While she climbed, he peered at the locked gate and dumpster nearby and weighed the probability of hoisting himself over the fence.

Somehow, he'd have to scale it. He shuddered. Heights. The only thing he feared more than exercise and health food. A close second to his fear of fire.

After lifting himself up and over the gate, he lowered himself onto the ground. He fixed his gaze on Stacey. She'd already landed on the opposite side of the fence. Chance glimpsed her looking back at him before she sped after Preston, now about two feet from an SUV.

Preston flashed a glance back at Stacey and tripped on a rough patch of concrete, stumbling as he ran into the back end of the vehicle. *Thank goodness for potholes.*

While the man struggled to stand, Stacey sprinted to his side and pushed him back onto his stomach. "Don't even think of resisting. Now show me your hands." She yanked the man's palms behind his back, then cuffed him.

Chance joined her, huffing as he helped her pull the man off the pavement and drag him inside his office. Stacey stepped aside as Chance sat the man in a brown leather rolling chair.

"I think this whole thing is a misunderstanding," Preston said. "Maybe I should call my attorney. Are you sure you're at the right location?"

"Yep, pretty sure." Chance removed a paper from his pocket and waved the document in front of Preston. "Got a criminal warrant right here with your name on it." He leaned forward and glowered at the man they'd apprehended for unlawful disposal of chemicals.

"I don't appreciate the EPA sticking its nose where it doesn't belong. Soon, there will be so many environmental regulations there won't be any industries left." Preston frowned and slumped in his chair, shifting sideways, to avoid sitting on his cuffed hands. "Ranger Chemical has been a landmark in Delhi Township. I bought the place from the Simpson family, who operated it for years and years."

Chance raised his voice. "Save it for the trial, Preston. Soon, you'll get your day in court before a judge. But for now, you get to sit and wait to catch a ride with Cincy PD."

"You know, you enviro cops think you're so tough. Better watch your back, especially you, lady." Preston stared at Stacey.

Chance leaned closer. “Are you threatening a federal agent?”

“All I’m saying is the EPA isn’t exactly popular in this area ever since you moved here from Cleveland.”

Chance narrowed his gaze.

“My cousin lives up there. He warned me.”

Who was Preston’s cousin, and would he have a reason to set fire to Stacey’s former rental home?

Chance helped the man up, led him outside, and stuffed him in the rear of his work vehicle. Then he mimicked Preston talking, using his left hand. “Blah, blah, blah.” He faced Stacey and raised both hands. “I don’t even need to know why. He did it. That’s all that matters. End of story.”

Despite the little workout, today wasn’t a bad day. Maybe later he’d visit the onsite gym with Stacey and be in prime shape, plus keep the boss off his back.

An audible rumble sounded from his stomach. Just thinking about exercise made him hungry.

A siren sounded, just not the one he wanted. A car alarm blared in the distance.

“I hope Cincy PD gets here soon so we can get some lunch. You called the police and gave ‘em a heads up, right?”

Stacey pressed a fist to her mouth. “Yes. I spoke to Officer Sheridan.” With a narrowing gaze, she gave him a once over.

Someone had been touchy lately. Sure, he had his quirks, but he wasn’t the only one.

Chance glanced down. She must have eyed the small red smudge just to the right of his dark blue tie. He tried to wipe off the ketchup.

She pointed at him. “Didn’t you eat a breakfast burrito earlier?” The third degree from the woman who’d once brought him pie? Guess Jordan’s speech about him needing to get in shape had seriously clouded her judgment.

“And I’m hungry again.” He cleared his throat. End of that little chat.

He climbed inside the car, and Stacey followed suit.

Twenty minutes passed. Chance peeked at his watch, then tapped his foot. He'd give the police a few more minutes before placing another call. Better yet, let Miss Secretarial handle it. She lived for the details.

"They're here," Stacey said.

"Finally." He opened his door and stepped outside, and Stacey did the same. The Cincinnati Police Department would haul Preston away and hold him until the U.S. Marshal's Service took him into custody.

Stacey discussed the details of the case with Officer Sloane while Chance and Officer Sheridan led Preston into the back of the district patrol car.

Chance shifted his focus to Officer Sloane—tall, thin, and brunette, like a younger version of his friend Adam, minus the slight southern accent. Tray Sloane praised Stacey for her apprehension of the suspect and made goo-goo eyes at her. Totally flirting. Chance clenched his jaw. He knew that look.

Officer Sheridan nudged him in the arm, interrupting Chance's train of thought. "Looks like the rookie is trying to put the moves on your partner."

Chance shrugged at his friend and walked away. "So?" Jealous? No way, not him. He had powerful feelings because Tray should treat Stacey with respect, not like an object. Still, he could sympathize. Despite the former Indiana Cornstalk Queen's attempts to dress like a tomboy, there was no hiding the fact she was attractive.

That gleaming, pearly white smile, those piercing brown eyes ... Her long brown wavy hair unfurled in the breeze. His stomach fluttered, but not from hunger. Another reason this was a bad work arrangement.

Chance strolled toward their car and paused near the driver's side door of the black sedan, rubbing his chin.

Stacey tapped him on the shoulder. "Jordan called. He says

he wants us to fill out closing paperwork on Preston by the end of the day.”

He'd bet his last chili dog she was the only CID agent who enjoyed writing reports. Chance climbed into the car. “Okay, we'll get to the paperwork after lunch.”

Stacey entered the other side of the vehicle and glared. “I told him we'd sign off on the report now.”

Would it kill her to loosen up? He turned toward Stacey. “Seriously?”

She returned the look, like a canine staring down another member of its pack. “When have you known me not to be serious?”

Good point. “Tell Jordan to pop a mint. We're on our way.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Leave him alone. They helped him stop smoking. You got something against that?”

Chance rolled his eyes. At this rate, next she'd try to convince him to eat mints instead of chili dogs.

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Once they'd finished processing Chris Preston and faxing paperwork to the Cincinnati PD and U.S. Marshal's office to Jordan's liking and Stacey's satisfaction, Chance talked Stacey into grabbing lunch. Good thing the paperwork didn't take as long as he'd expected.

After ordering lunch at the restaurant, Stacey left to locate a table, while Chance stayed behind to get their order. He set the food tray on the table and took a seat across from Stacey, who bowed her head.

The door flung open, and a chime sounded. A tall man walked inside and looked around, like he was searching for something. Or someone. But what? Or who? Chance moved closer to Stacey.

The man darted into the bathroom.

Chance peeked at Stacey's salad and then at his double cheeseburger and onion rings. No wonder she outran him. He needed to clean up his diet. Things had spiraled since Fiona dumped him. Plus, now was the wrong time of year. Any time but now. The call from Julie's dad served as a reminder.

Still, on days like today, when they chased the suspect on foot, he needed to be more up to the task. He studied Stacey. She seemed to have things together, and maybe her diet was part of that. Perhaps that was the missing piece in his life.

Grease stains covered the onion ring container and cheeseburger wrapper. Hmm, maybe he should say a prayer for his food too. Pray the calories would melt away.

"Earth to Chance." Stacey waved her hand in front of his face.

"Huh?"

She leaned closer. "You haven't touched your food. Are you sick? Do you need to take a leave of absence?"

"I'm fine." He gritted his teeth, stuffed the burger in his mouth, and chomped a bite. The least she could do was let him enjoy some comfort food.

A tap on his shoulder garnered his attention. He turned to face the person standing behind him. "Adam? Good to see you." As a detective with the Cincy PD, Adam ran into Chance at work occasionally. They'd been friends since elementary school but had fallen out of touch while Chance lived in Cleveland.

"I know we didn't get time to catch up this morning, but I guess y'all read about my unit's big bust?" Adam thrust his chest forward, grease-stained paper bag dangling from one hand.

Chance scratched his chin.

Stacey's mouth fell open. "Chance, you had to have seen the article. His unit made the front page of the newspaper. Adam, I bet your family was excited to see you on the local news station too."

Chance dipped an onion ring in ketchup. "You know, now

that you mention the bust, I vaguely recall reading something about it.” He forced a smile.

Adam waved. “I’ve got work piled up. See y’all later. Nice to see you again, Stacey. Take care of him. Make sure he’s in shape for the mile and a half recertification.”

“I’ll try.” She finished a bite of her salad and took a sip of water.

Chance played with an onion ring. “This morning was invigorating. Guess I’d like to see more action like that on the job. Nothing serious, you know, but something more than the usual.”

“That’s what this is about? You and Adam? About who has the bigger case?” She shook her head. “Complete machismo.”

“The monotony and lack of recognition doesn’t bother you?”

“I’m here to do my job. And to do the best one I can. Maybe we don’t have the most exciting cases, but we bring many people to justice.”

Justice. The reason he’d joined the Criminal Investigation Division of the Environmental Protection Agency. And yet, no matter how many cases he and Stacey solved, they’d never bring back Julie. He stuffed an onion ring in his mouth. Perhaps he’d diet next month.

“Jordan handed me some paperwork before I left. Suspicions of unlawful disposal on the south side. Does that cheer you up?” Stacey rubbed the back of her neck.

Setting his food aside, Chance counted off on his fingers. “One, I hope the investigation turns up nothing harmful. You know I don’t want people to get hurt. Two, if the claims are legit, you know as well as I do, most owners just pay their fine.”

“For the sake of the residents, other fauna, and flora in the area, I hope you’re right. I hope it is nothing.”

A little boy and girl giggled in their seats, two tables away. An older boy sat next to them and waved.

Pollution affected everyone. Adults and kids. Chance pulled at his collar. Action, he wanted, but not at the expense of

innocent civilians. Something was missing from his life, but he needed to find the answer elsewhere. *I shouldn't have been so unkind to Adam either. I'll apologize later.*

He scanned the restaurant, and his pulse picked up. Where was the man from earlier?