

## CHAPTER TWO



THE NEXT DAY, Chance trudged toward the resident office. He flitted his gaze around the wooded parking lot. Stacey's car wasn't nearby. He grabbed his phone but returned the device to his pocket. *Never get too friendly with female colleagues.* Inside the building, he glimpsed his coworker's work area. Where was George? What had he wanted to talk about yesterday?

Agent Rutledge approached his desk, his jet-black hair askew, as if he'd overslept. The guy yawned. "The SAC called a meeting."

"Now?" Chance asked.

"Yep."

Chance followed Rutledge to the conference room and settled into a chair.

Jordan Stanley, the special agent in charge, stood on the other side of the room and smoothed what little hair remained on his head. "I called this meeting because the Agency has had budget cuts. We must reduce the number of agents, and maintenance of multiple buildings is costly. So, we're moving all our staff from our Middleburg Heights office to Norwood, Ohio."

Norwood office? Near Cincinnati. Chance spit out his coffee. *Probably should have known since I grew up there. Had my mind on more important things then.* His stomach tightened. Afterward, he went back to his desk and wiped his face with a napkin.

Grabbing change from his drawer, he headed for the vending machine, but paused before inserting a coin. Did he want to binge on junk again? His ex was seeing someone almost five years younger than him. After plunking several coins in the machine, Chance chose a candy bar and a bag of chips.

Returning to his desk, he studied the green folder laying on top.

Someone cleared their throat, and Chance looked up.

Stacey Sanderson thrust a round plastic, transparent storage container filled with food in his direction. "Hoosier sugar cream pie." She set the dessert on his desk. "I just wanted to say thank you," she whispered, "To my hero." She chuckled.

His ears burned. "You didn't have to, but thanks. I better get back to work."

"Yeah, me too." She glanced at his desk calendar and the blue logo on the side. "You volunteer at the youth center that recently opened downtown?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "How are you doing? I was concerned when I didn't see your car in the parking lot."

"Oh, I was running late." Stacey's phone rang, and she trotted to her desk.

After she walked away, Chance opened the pie keeper. At least he'd have something to wash down dinner with while he watched the basketball game tonight.

He gazed toward Stacey's desk. Maybe she'd forgotten to put out the fire in the fireplace. A simple explanation. But Brad suspected otherwise.

His phone chimed. Mom texted, asking about Easter. *Ugh.* He hadn't told her Fiona wasn't coming. He forced his attention back to the green folder.

Soon, he'd be moving to Norwood. Maybe everyone had forgotten what happened long ago. *Yeah, right.*

His gaze shifted to Stacey, and she caught him staring at her. His stomach flitted. She was kind and orderly. Good for someone else. Not him.

Jordan approached his desk. "George has applied to ATF. Did he tell you?"

Maybe that's what the phone call was about. Chance straightened. "So if I get paired up with someone for a case, will I be working with Scott or Bob?" Though the office gossip, Scott was at least similar in age and interests. Bob was okay, but he had transferred to EPA CID after retiring from the Secret Service and would often go on and on about his time there.

Crossing his arms, Jordan said, "Neither. I want you working with Stacey."

"Sanderson? Sir ..."

"She's an excellent agent."

Chance folded his hands. "It's not that."

Jordan glared. "You refuse to work with a woman?"

"No, sir."

"Good, then."

Definitely complicated.

"Uh, sir, have you seen George?"

"He's on vacation. Wanted to use his time up before he transferred." Jordan walked away.

His life was turning upside down. How could he go back to Norwood? He shuddered.

He hung his head. What other choice did he have?

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*One Week Later, Norwood, Ohio*

Chance hit the snooze button again and rubbed the sleep

crusties from his eyes. He reread the text message his boss had sent him late last night.

I need you and Stacey to go undercover  
as painters and take a certification exam.  
The company you will be visiting has  
been changing answers and scores on  
exams.

He opened the next message, which contained the company name and address, and then he rolled out of bed and stumbled into the shower.

Afterward, he trekked to his closet. What to wear? Chance donned jeans and an old T-shirt he'd worn to help his parents paint. The item sported a tiny white paint spot on the left shoulder. He'd kept it to wear when performing odd jobs around the house. Why ruin his good clothes? He styled his hair then hurried outside and off to work.

Stacey showed up wearing a T-shirt and ripped jeans.

He studied the office. No one watched him as he strolled toward Stacey. She sat at her computer, reading a document. As he neared, she closed the browser.

She blinked. He couldn't be sure, but from this angle, what looked like a hint of a tear leaked from her right eye. Stacey grabbed her purse and headed for the exit.

He walked alongside her. "What were you reading?"

"A report about how lead paint health risks are higher for kids from lower- and middle-income families."

Like the kids at the youth center where he'd volunteered. Where was God in that? Didn't He care about justice? Chance huffed and glanced at his partner then smiled. Her attitude was admirable, even if her faith was misplaced.

Stacey's gait appeared different from normal.

"New shoes?" he asked.

She nodded. "I went shopping with a friend last night after Jordan called. I saw these, and she talked me into buying them

for work. I convinced myself I needed ‘undercover shoes.’ I guess I wanted a reason for buying them.” She smirked.

Maybe not the best footwear for work. Oh well.

Chance drove them to their destination in short order, hitting green lights the whole way to the asbestos and lead abatement certification training facility.

As he and Stacey got out, he walked over to her. “So, here’s the thing. We’ve ditched the first two days of class so we can test the owner. We go today, and then we take the test. You can do what you want. But I suggest skipping some questions.”

“What are you going to do?” She quirked a brow.

He chuckled. “I’m going to answer a few questions incorrectly.”

Her eyes widened. “On purpose?”

He nodded. “Let’s see what happens. We’ve had more than one report this place is sort of hinky.”

As they walked to the front of the facility, Stacey tripped, and Chance caught her. She blinked, blushed, and then looked away. “Thanks.”

“Yeah. Uh, no problem.” He cleared his throat and kept on walking. Shouldn’t have worn those shoes. And yet, he didn’t mind helping her. And that was the problem.

They entered the facility, and a receptionist, with worry etched on her face, led them to a small exam room, where one other person sat under the tutelage of a training instructor. Rather loudly, Chance plopped into a metal chair to the right of the other student, while Stacey settled in on the other side of Chance.

The instructor paused for a moment, then kept lecturing about lead abatement. Chance yawned a few times during the workshop. To Stacey’s credit, she played with her hair and examined her nails. Nice touch at appearing disinterested.

When the group took a break for lunch, Chance darted outside to the parking lot, which adjoined other businesses.

A wolf whistle carried on the wind.

Chance shifted positions. Stacey trailed him by several feet. A guy approached and gave her a once over.

Clenching his left fist, Chance shouted, “Hey, buddy, leave my girlfriend alone, will ya?”

While the guy turned toward him, Chance moved to close the distance between them, towering over the dude by several inches.

The man raised his hands. “I-I, I uh, didn’t know she was your girl. Sorry, dude.” He hurried away and out of sight.

Stacey met Chance’s gaze, then looked away.

“I know you could have handled that,” he said.

“Totally. But thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I just, uh, you know, didn’t want to break our covers.” He followed her gaze to his fist, which remained clenched. He shoved his hand behind his back.

This time, he followed her to their car. They stopped to get tacos at a drive-thru, before returning for the rest of the workshop. No signs of the catcaller in the parking lot.

They took their time, arriving late to class. Hours later, the instructor passed out the exams. Stacey finished her test in ten minutes, turned in her papers, and left the room. Chance took his time, leaving some questions blank and incorrectly answering others. He bit back a smirk as he turned in his exam and walked outside. Stacey waited for him inside their vehicle.

They took a break and returned to the classroom an hour later. The instructor sweated, perhaps nervous because he was guilty, and handed back their exams. “Congrats, you all passed.”

Stacey awkwardly glanced at Chance, who examined his paper. The instructor had changed answers or corrected them.

Next, he gave them each a Certificate of Completion.

Chance gritted his teeth. The guy knew they hadn’t attended the entire course, and yet he’d changed Chance’s answers to help him pass.

Chance waited until the other students filed outside. He approached the instructor. “I wasn’t here for the whole course.

Neither was she.” He nodded toward Stacey. “I chose *A* for all my answers. You changed some. Why?”

“Look, I helped you. So what? You passed, why do you care? Do you wanna fail?”

“No.” He pointed a finger at the man. “So what’s in it for you?”

“I help you, and my testing center has a better passing rate. We both benefit.”

Chance stepped closer. “Not anymore. You’re under arrest for making a false statement to the federal government.”

While he cuffed the guy, Stacey approached, arms crossed. She scowled, and they led the man outside.

After the instructor had been handed over to the proper local authorities, Chance and Stacey returned to work, building their case for the DOJ to prosecute. They spent the rest of the day documenting their experience.

Chance completed his work and stopped by Stacey’s desk. “If you’re finished with that, I can take it to Jordan.”

“Thank you.” She placed her report in a folder and handed it to him.

After work, on their way out of the office building, Stacey jetted toward her car near the front of the tree-edged lot. Chance followed her from a distance.

When he’d moved to Cleveland, he didn’t know anyone. Sure, Stacey knew her coworkers, but she was new to Cincy. Probably didn’t have any other friends here. And she was moving from the lab to the field.

“Wait up,” Chance called out. “Some other agents and I are meeting at the pizzeria up the street. Care to join us?”

She appeared deep in thought. “I’m kind of tired of salad. Do they have veggie pizza?”

He chuckled. “I know the owner. For you, I’m sure he could scrounge up some veggies.”

“Thank you.”

The waiter approached. “Same as usual, Chance?”

“Yeah, and can you make a small veggie pizza for my coworker?”

“Sure thing.” The man grinned and walked away.

Chance nodded toward the foosball table in the corner. “You wanna play while we wait for our pizza?”

“Why not.” She followed him, then moved to the side with the black players.

His ex got mad when he’d win. He’d go easy on Stacey, at least for now. “Ladies first.”

She leaned closer and squinted. “Ready?”

“You bet.”

Moving the rod, she kicked off from the midfield.

Whoa. Chance rotated his rod but failed to block the ball. “Nice work.”

Five minutes later and two goals behind Stacey, Chance stopped when the waiter called his name. “McPherson, your pizza is ready.”

He walked around the foosball table and shook Stacey’s hand. “Good game.”

“Thanks.”

Heading back to the dining table, Stacey followed him.

The others were already eating, and Chance waited for Stacey to sit before he bit into his pizza. Mmm. The perfect combination of sauce, cheese, and meat.

Stacey bowed her head for a moment before eating. It’d been years since he’d prayed.

She took a few bites of pizza, and he asked, “Is it good?”

“Yes, thank you—for inviting me and for asking about the veggie pizza.”

After dinner, Stacey gathered her things and stood.

Chance glanced outside the restaurant. Pretty dark out there. He followed Stacey to the door of the establishment.

Stacey looked back at him as she headed outside. “What are you doing?”

He shrugged. “It’s late.”

"I'm fine. You don't need to walk me out."

"Might I remind you, someone set fire to your house. Brad said it was arson."

"True. But we don't know they were after me. Your friend said there had been other arsons in that neighborhood."

They walked down the sidewalk toward her vehicle. "I appreciate it. But I'm fi—"

*Uh-oh.* Stacey tripped. Falling forward, she placed her hands outward but managed to tumble. Her left forearm connected with the ground first.

Chance knelt and extended his hand. Her delicate, warm fingers gripped his, and he pulled her toward him as they stood, facing each other, only inches apart.

He smiled, then pointed to her footwear. "Nice-looking shoes. Maybe don't wear those again."

She paused, and her face grew serious. Was she angry?

Stacey burst out laughing and took off the shoes, holding them in her hand. "They were cute in the store, but they hurt so bad." She wiggled her toes. "Much better." She chuckled, then looked toward her vehicle and screamed. He followed her gaze.

A man in all black—a dark hoodie and sable jeans—stood next to her vehicle and was attempting to break inside.

"Hey!" Chance shouted.

The man glanced up then darted away.

Chance sprinted toward the car, Stacey on his heels. With long strides, his feet pounded the pavement as he rounded the corner. The laughter of a couple across the street caught his attention, but no sign of the thief. Probably long gone.

As he walked back to her vehicle, Chance shifted his gaze along the street. Stacey's car was older. Why pick hers? Too many coincidences had taken place. A fiery arson enveloping her home. Someone breaking into her car. Cleveland and Cincy had their share of crime, but this felt different.

Chance stepped closer to Stacey, who slipped her shoes back

on, then opened the driver's side door. "I'll report it to the police."

Chance nodded. "At least you're okay."

He made the mistake of glancing at the playground catty-cornered from their location. His throat constricted, and his lips trembled.

"Good night, Chance," she yelled.

He jumped, then after composing himself, called out, "G'night, Stacey."

She waved then shut her door.

After she'd driven halfway up the street, he walked back to the pizzeria, but not without a glance back at the playground. The one where Julie died. Coming back home was a bad idea.

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To think, a week ago, they'd enjoyed pizza together. And now this.

Though blindfolded, Chance replayed today's training exercise. While on the job, suspects had overtaken him and Stacey. Sweat beaded on his brow.

Chance's captors removed his blindfold, and he opened his eyes. He couldn't locate his assailants.

Heavy breathing behind him followed by footsteps and a door slamming.

Hard to see with only the dim natural light coming in from the abandoned building's small broken windows.

The scent of fresh spray paint mixed with a musty odor assaulted his nostrils. General filth, trash, dirt, cigarette butts, and dust bunnies of yesteryear surrounded him. Overturned barrels and boxes littered the ground.

A chill passed over him as he sat on the concrete floor. He moved his hands, but his captors had bound them around a pole behind him, with zip ties cutting into his wrists. He sat, with his legs extended out in front. As he studied the area, four graffiti-

covered block walls stared back. Looked like he was being held captive inside an abandoned warehouse.

Chance wriggled his hands and tugged on the zip ties. Hopefully, the cheap variety found at a hardware store. Not the tougher kind law enforcement used.

Thrusting his hands backward, then forward again, he tried to bang the ties against the pole. *Ouch*. Chance twisted his fists. Still bound. Bang.

He hit the pole again and again.

He huffed. The awkward position with the pole presented a challenge. His shoulders slumped.

He clenched his teeth and forced his thoughts elsewhere. Was there anything he could use as a weapon? Chance slid his arms down the pole and searched the ground, using his hands.

A door creaked open. Faint breaths intensified.

His stomach churned.

With all his might, Chance bent his knees and pressed down on his heels and struggled to shift his weight around the pole, but he slid back down on the ground.

Footsteps came from behind. Before he could turn any farther, a hard object touched the back of his head, presumably a pistol. "Time's up, McPherson," a familiar female voice said, "you're dead."

*Already?* Chance wriggled his hands and cleared his throat. "Can you get me outta these?" He lifted his gaze to Stacey who'd moved in front of him and held a stapler. "Nice weapon."

She shrugged.

Swallowing hard, he pinched his lips shut. "Do we have to do the drill again? Why can't we do something fun, like with helicopters?"

A scowl spread across Stacey's face. Kneeling, she cut his feet free.

Chance's wrists ached as Stacey freed his hands.

He turned his head partway around the pole. "Can you take it easy?"

“Huh? Sorry. One of the creepy simulation actors tried to get my number.”

He bit back a grin. “The one who looked like me? You know, the ruggedly handsome one?”

Stacey chuckled. “No, the blond.”

She stepped aside, brushing against him slightly, and Chance stood.

Jordan strutted over, the scent of mint following him, and nodded toward the wall. “Chance, can we have a word?”

He stepped closer to his boss but maintained enough distance to avoid being overcome by the peppermint odor.

After raking his fingers through his remaining hair, Jordan looked up to meet Chance’s gaze. “Two years ago, you would’ve outrun those guys in this simulation. By now, you would’ve freed yourself and found Stacey. Fitness tests are coming up. I don’t care if you do yoga, tai chi, hypnosis, whatever. You’ve gotta get in better shape.”

Chance suppressed the urge to mouth off until Jordan was out of sight. “It’s just a simulation, a drill.” He grunted and studied his gut. “Better shape.” As if he and Stacey would ever get captured or kidnapped. While that sort of thing made for exciting TV crime shows or novels, his world involved mounds of boring paperwork that would never make it to prime time. Which made simulations like this even more of a waste.

Maybe soon he’d hear from the FBI. Scott said George transferred to ATF because he didn’t care for Chance’s constant wisecracks. Had that driven Fiona away too?

Stacey joined him and spoke in a bubbly tone. “My church has an exercise group. You’re welcome to come.”

Chance rubbed the nape of his neck. “Hmm. That would be a sight. A federal agent sweating to oldies music in a church basement with a bunch of grannies. Thanks, I’ll pass.”

She touched his arm as they walked away from the warehouse used for the simulation. “After work, join me at the gym.”

He sighed. Houses of worship and fitness centers—two places he'd rather not visit. *Ugh*. A few days prior, he'd worked out with Miss Lean Mean Fitness Machine at their office and been sore for days. "Let's head to the onsite fitness center, then. I'd rather get the torture over with now."

"Can't. We've got to bring in Chris Preston." Stacey strode toward their car.

Chance ignored his new partner. She was friendly enough, but the nerdy type. Geeks he could deal with. The gender difference bothered him. Nothing against the ladies. But how could he keep his mind on the job, given his history? He'd failed Julie.

What if something happened to Stacey too?

Chance massaged his forehead. His phone chimed rhythmically and repeatedly. He let the call go to voicemail, then swiped his fingers against the cool screen to check messages. A missed call from Frank, Julie's dad.

Julie Barber. The girl he wanted to marry the first time he laid eyes on her. Did everyone have just one soul mate in life? He blinked. Unfortunately, six feet of earth now separated him from his.

Much like his love life, his job was going nowhere. He gazed into the distance. Maybe he could find another job in Cleveland. Maybe that was the ticket. Get away from the EPA and go somewhere new. Forget about the past.

The nagging voice mail message icon again caught his attention. Nothing like a reminder of his shameful past right after he'd received a warning from his boss. Like icing on the cake. Must have been the fat-free kind, which explained why it left a bad taste in his mouth.