

the internship

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Cassandra took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders and pushing her blonde hair back before pushing through the door again. She'd sat in her car waiting for Chief to return to his office for the last two hours, passing the time by finishing up her English assignment. Who could have guessed she'd enroll in college at the age of twenty-nine?

"Can I help—" Chief cut his words off when he saw her. He rolled his eyes and turned his back on her to stride back into his office.

Resolved to gain his acquiescence this time, she followed him. As usual, his desk was a chaotic mess, at least four stacks of files sat haphazardly around it, and the visitor's chair looked like a make-shift outbox holding a week's worth of correspondence.

Marching forward, she grabbed the stack out of the chair, placed it as neatly as possible on the floor, and sat down. Crossing her fingers, she laid her hands in her lap and looked up at him with as much determination as she could muster.

His glare was intimidating, and she knew he knew it.

"I will not wilt under your stare."

"I'm not hiring."

She flicked her gaze around the room. "You need to."

Repeated visits to ask Chief for an internship had taught her that he was a man of few words, much like her father had been. Whether it was his background in Special Forces or just his personality that kept things to himself, Cassandra could return the curtness for the moment.

Still standing behind his desk, Chief crossed his arms over his chest.

Cassandra waited him out. The last time she'd tried to push hard for this job, she'd talked his ear off. This time she would see if silence helped her cause.

“Why?” he barked.

The brief question caught her off guard in its simplicity. She preferred clarity. “Why what?”

“Why the Fire Marshal’s Office?”

“I’m going for a degree in Emergency Management, but fire safety is a segment of that and it’s all Silver Heights offers.”

“You might break a nail.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Oh, how she wanted to offer more details, talk about her rough-and-tumble nature or all the wrestling matches she’d won with her brothers growing up. But she clamped down and renewed her decision to say as little as possible.

“Why Silver Heights? Why not go to Cumberland or Moore County where the departments are bigger with better funding?”

“Two reasons. One, I live here. Two, I want you to train me.”

One eyebrow rose as his eyes narrowed. She took that as an unspoken question. “I’m sure the men running the offices in the other counties are good men, but I know your background includes a career in the Army dealing with explosives. Add in your extensive fire training and years of serving as Chief of a volunteer fire department, you are the wiser option considering we’re on the border of the largest military installation in the world.”

“Continue.”

His stance didn’t soften, but he did speak. Cassandra took that as encouragement.

“Just over a decade ago, terrorists brought their evil to our country. They don’t give up easily, so we must assume that other plans are in the works. Our proximity to Ft Bragg dictates that the dangers to it must be part of our emergency plan. My guess is that you understand that and will make sure my training includes it.”

That was far more than she intended to say, but she also felt like this was going better than any of the other times she’d come in to ask for a job.

After all, he was still listening to her.

Cassandra watched a muscle in Chief's jaw work. Her brother Steven had the same habit when he was thinking hard to refute something she'd said. It bolstered her confidence as she continued to wait quietly.

Chief sat in his desk chair, spinning slightly away from her to look at a print on his wall. Cassandra turned her head to see what had captured his attention. In the picture, a brick building was engulfed in flames. Black smoke and fire spewed from second story windows and various places across the roof. Judging from the clothing of those she could see, she guessed the fire occurred at least fifty years ago.

"Ever hear of the St. Anthony's Hospital fire?"

Cassandra shook her head.

"No one knows what started it, but the hospital was an open floor plan. When the fire started just before midnight on April 4, 1949, it spread quickly. One hundred sixteen patients and ten staff were in the building at the time. Most got trapped on the second floor. Seventy-four died."

"Sounds like a tragedy that probably instigated a lot of fire safety changes for hospitals."

Chief nodded. "Yes, first in Illinois and then throughout the country as news spread."

He turned and faced her. Cassandra fought the urge to squirm under his intense gaze.

"This is more than a job to me. I was born in that hospital, discharged on the day of the fire. Every newborn that was still in that building when the fire started died."

Cassandra took in and released a slow breath as the weight of his admission sunk deep into her heart. Those precious babies motivated him, drove him. He was so good at what he did because he recognized how narrowly he'd held onto life.

"You need to understand that I will not waste my time with someone who merely wants to climb the county ladder or get in the commissioners good graces. Lives matter in this job. Every day."

Cassandra knew she'd have difficulty speaking with the lump in her throat, so she nodded. Glancing back at the framed print on his wall, she felt

moisture gather in her eyes. The loss of her husband was still too fresh for the thought of eleven families going from the celebration of life to the shock of death not to affect her.

She tried to clear her throat. “If life—” Her voice cracked and she paused, swiping at the one tear that had escaped down her cheek. Refocusing on Chief, she swallowed and tried again. “If life wasn’t important to me, I wouldn’t have chosen emergency management.”

Again, she waited under his scrutiny.

Finally, he nodded. “I’ll clear it with the Sheriff. We fall under his command. Be here eight o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Cassandra wanted to jump up and cheer, but she imagined Chief would not appreciate that. Calling forth a heavy dose of self-restraint, she stood and reached out a hand to shake his.

“Thank you, sir.”

He paused before standing and grasping her hand.

“It’s only a trial.”

A trial basis. He wanted her to prove she meant it, would be an asset to the county. She stood taller. “Of course.”

Another quick nod.

Apparently she was going to have to translate them into his secret language. But that would wait until tomorrow. Tonight, she and her girls were going to celebrate.