
Chapter 1

Another kill. Everyone would miss him: the kind man with a quick smile. Everyone would miss him until they checked in the basement of his house and found the evidence—evidence dating back decades and exposing his fixation on small children, a rich seam of toys and skeletons the authorities could mine for decades to come.

Agent Darby set down her newspaper as she sat at the Starbucks and watched her mark. People in the parking lot of the toy store began screaming and running to the body, sprawled next to his sedan with pink Barbie dolls and Matchbox cars spread like a funeral bouquet from one of his limp hands. Public executions were just, well, her *style*. She pulled her phone up and clicked a few times, taking a few pictures for proof of death, sipped her coffee once more, and then left for the airport. St. Louis was nice, but she needed to get back to Texas.

Justice is served. *Was* served? *Had been* served? No.

Hashtag: Justified.

“Darby!”

She pulled her cell phone away from her ear as she crossed McKinney and entered the tinted glass lobby of the gray Frost Bank building. People rushed by without even noticing her. Her preference, in her line of work.

“Oh, I’m, I’m sorry, sir, you’re breaking up,” she mumbled, swiping at the black phone and stuffing it into her pocket. She would be in the office shortly. Her boss could yell at her then. Brushing past the people in line for the elevators, she held her thumb on the express elevator button, let it scan her print as people blindly barked into their cell phones and banged on their screens, then entered the dark elevator alone. She swiped a card, looked up at the camera, and waited.

Bob Seger’s ‘Night Moves’ softly played on a speaker above her head as the security system in the elevator scanned her body for unauthorized weapons.

The doors opened on the top floor and a man in a suit stood behind three inches of glass with a key. He used to raise an eyebrow at her, kind of in a snarky way. After a while he just got used to the little redheaded munchkin marching into the office every day.

“Agent Elle Darby,” she clearly said into the black speaker that was mounted mockingly far above her head. The suited man checked the voice recognition on a screen, and then turned his key to allow her entrance.

A door slid open and she strolled down the black tiled hallway towards her small office. She dumped her black Coach satchel on a chair and had just sat down when her intercom roared.

“Darby!”

“Yes?” she asked, acting dumb as she pressed the speaker button on her desk phone. She knew it was her boss and she knew he was pissed off. He was always pissed off, though. And it was *always* her fault.

“You have one second to get your ass in here!”

Yes, he was clearly upset. Was it even nine yet?

“Coming!” she answered, falling out of her chair, running down the hallway in her four-inch Jimmy Choos, yanking on the jacket of her black suit over her dark green shell. She paused to brush her strawberry blond hair behind her ears and raised her hand to knock when his secretary spoke behind her.

“He’s waiting,” she said over her glasses, big Dallas hair perfectly sprayed into its puffy place.

Nodding, she slowly opened the door and didn’t take one step inside before he began yelling.

“Agent Darby, so glad to see you’re in the office today.”

“I-I was in St. Louis.”

“So I see!” he shouted, throwing a newspaper on his desk. He breathed heavily and stood ominously in his dark suit as he waited for her reaction.

She inched over and stood in front of the large oak desk, turning her head slightly so that she could read the headline.

“Local Philanthropist Dies at 50,” she said, shaking her head.

“Don’t play dumb with me. I know this is your work. The chemical adhesive planted under the car door handle? Causes myocardial infarction?”

She shrugged as he pointed his finger at her. It had gotten the job done, hadn’t it?

“What I want to know, first of all, is how this man went from our watch list to our hit list.”

“He...”

“And how, Agent Darby, you got promoted overnight. You are *not* authorized to design and direct assignments on your own. And this is becoming a pattern. The murderess in Reno, the pedophile in Seattle, the fucking mascot at that high school in that small town! Are you getting me here?”

“Yes sir,” she quietly responded, holding back everything she wanted to say.

“And don’t think I’ve forgotten about the time when you slit that rodeo clown’s throat on the Ferris wheel!”

Now that guy had deserved it, but she still remained silent as she stood before his large desk in the large, modern office.

He finally fell back in his large leather chair and ran his fingers through his thinning brown hair.

“Director Dunner is going to fucking kill me.”

The director? Was he going to tattle on her?

“But, sir?”

“Darby, not another word!” he yelled, as his large plasma screen beeped on his wall. “Oh for God’s sake, he’s already heard-”

Director Dunner appeared on the screen in a frenzied tirade that made both Agent Darby and her boss lean backwards. The junior agent froze, the director of the black ops sector swallowed hard, and the Department of National Defense director proceeded as if already in the middle of his chastisement.

“Masters, I hope you have a good explanation for this because I’ll tell you what. I am tired of cleaning up after you and your sloppy agents! I created this covert agency ten years ago and put you in charge and I’ll be damned if I let you run it into the ground. Now one of your agents was exposed last week and we had to book it double time just to get him back into the country! *Now* I’ve got calls flooding my inbox from St. Louis? What *is* it this time?”

Agent Darby choked on her own spit a few times before she could speak to the head of the Department of National Defense. In the chain of command, he was pretty much in the top ten people directly underneath the President of the United States.

“Uh, Director Dunner, I...”

“Who the hell are you? The high definition of the screen showed a pulsating vein in his forehead and every single enlarged pore on his nose. He looked like he was not to be fucked with.

“W-well, I’m Elle Darby.”

“Are you responsible for this?”

“Yes sir, but you have to understand—”

“Understand me. We are covert. We are black ops. We can operate *because* we are invisible. You are going to get my foot up your ass if the National Security Organization is exposed because you killed fucking Santa Claus!”

“But that’s just it, damn it!” she yelled, stepping towards the screen and holding out her arms. *Whoa, did she just say that? Quit yelling.* “He wasn’t this wonderful pillar of the community like everyone thinks! The guy was a monster!”

Stop yelling!

“Is she yelling at me?” Director Dunner turned his glare towards Director Masters. His reputation for intolerance of insubordination was becoming clearer at every pulse of the vein in his head.

“Oh, no sir, our speaker and mic are all discombobulated,” Masters replied, eying her and popping a Tums.

She rolled her eyes.

“Turn your television to a twenty-four-hour news cycle,” she ordered, folding her arms across her chest.

“What?”

Rolling her eyes again, she huffed and grabbed the remote off of Director Masters’ desk, turning to the news on a screen on the opposite wall. A guy was reporting away until a news alert interrupted him.

“This just in from Missouri: Stanley Sinton, a generous philanthropist, died yesterday from what emergency medical staff say was a heart attack.”

Darby held her breath.

“Remains of what appear to be children have been uncovered in his basement and identified, several other skeletal remains are also being examined in his back yard. It looks like several missing persons cases are going to be solved, some dating back twenty-two years...”

Darby turned it off and smirked at the other two. She reminded herself not to act smug. But, seriously, Hashtag: Justified.

“Look. I picked up on some FBI chatter that someone on his block was being investigated. Not charged, just investigated. He was getting ready to do it again,” she sighed. “I researched him for at least a month. He was casing the kindergarten down the street. I was thorough.”

“All right, Darby, you’re off the hook this time,” Director Dunner pronounced, straightening his tie and leaning back. “But consider yourself warned. Any more missteps and you’ll be terminated.”

“Yes, sir.” The screen clicked off and she turned towards her boss. The termination process for people in their black ops agency was unpleasant, to say the least. She swallowed hard.

Director Masters breathed heavily, rubbing his chin while he frowned at her. Then he walked around his desk and sat on the edge, pushing her back with a weathered hand into an oversized chair.

“Ellie, I’m not sure what to do with you, here.”

Do with her? She’d done the world a favor, damn it.

“I just...”

“Still talking.”

“Sorry.”

“You are a junior agent. Junior means you need supervision. You, however, seem to think that you are a senior agent. Are you seeing the distinction?”

“Yes sir,” she quickly replied. “But...”

“I’m glad that you have this confidence and ambition that we like to see in our agents. But if you aren’t careful, you are going to get yourself in a world of trouble. We are covert. We exist beyond the law. Director Dunner created us for that reason. But because of that, we have protocols, do you hear me? You can’t

just decide to end someone's life without going through me. Are you hearing me?"

"Yes, sir." She felt thoroughly cut down to size.

"Good," he grinned, patting her back with a little more than a friendly swat.

"When am I going to become a senior agent?" she asked, as he tried to push her out of the office. Her persistence would get her everywhere and nowhere. She knew it.

"When you have more experience," he said, slamming the door.