



## ***Pursuit of Justice***

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### **CHAPTER 1**

The moment Bella accepted the reassignment to the FBI's field office in Houston, she realized the past had stalked her to the present. And she was ready, or at least she told herself so. Her training and experience had sharpened her skills and provided tools to solve crimes the average American deemed unspeakable.

Fear and memories had climbed into her luggage for the relocation to Houston, but she resisted their hold. Bella had made the decision to work hard to build her credentials and help curtail the endless barrage of crime, especially in the country's fourth largest city. Her Blackberry interrupted her thoughts and her drive to work with its musical rendition of "That'll be the Day." A quick glance showed the caller was Frank.

No way, super agent. I don't have a thing to tell you. She answered on the third ring.

"Morning, Frank. What can I do for you?"

"Lunch?"

She laughed. "You heard I have an appointment with Swartzler, and curiosity is killing you."

“Me? I wanted to talk about spending the weekend in Galveston.”

“Right. Frank, it’s been nine months since we dated.”

“Nine months, huh? As in giving birth to a new relationship?”

She envisioned a slight smile spreading over his face—a good looking one, but not for her. “No thanks. Remember, we tried and it didn’t work. I don’t want to put my heart in that place again. See you later.”

“But—”

“Bye, Frank.”

Bella tossed the phone into her purse. Regret over the failed relationship with Frank settled like a day harboring poor air quality. She’d known from the start a relationship with him wouldn’t work. He wanted a wife who’d stay home and raise kids. She refused to give up the agency, no matter how much she cared for him. The only thing she’d ever formed a lasting attachment to was the FBI, and mistakes in the name of love were not in her playbook.

A promotion had been in her path for the past few months, and she desperately wanted it. Ambition always ruled over her logic, but she didn’t view her objectives as selfish. The meeting this morning with her supervisor might be a jump in her career. A coveted opportunity to prove her mettle sounded almost too good to be true, and like a kid at Christmas on this early June morning, she drove toward the field office to see if she had a gift marked “promotion.”

Bella moved into the right lane of 290 to take the feeder road off the Interstate. For certain, battling traffic at seven a.m. had hardened her for criminal activity—or destroyed any trace of patience. Her mind raced with the anticipation over her meeting with Swartzter. This meeting could be about a number of ongoing investigations or possibly a new one. No matter, she’d take the assignment and keep climbing the ladder.

She swung into the parking lot of the eight-story, glass and steel building and stopped in front of the guard shack. After displaying her creds, she eased into the covered parking area and hurried inside. Her heart pounded against her chest, and she sensed the familiar excitement of something new to challenge her. She scanned her badge and keyed in her security code through every door and made her way to the second floor housing the violent crimes task force team and the office of Larry Swartzter, her supervisor. While his secretary informed him of her arrival, Bella took several deep breaths in an effort to settle her nerves and will away the anxiousness making her feel like a kid sent to the principal’s office.

Swartzter opened the door. “Mornin’, Bella. Come on in.”

Her heavy shoulder bag shifted and slipped from her arm to the floor. Thank goodness it was zipped. She cringed at the idea of her Glock, handcuffs, and all of her other equipment, including her make-up bag and wallet, dropping at her feet.

“Little nervous are we?” He chuckled, and her confidence fell to somewhere between diffused and lack-of.

She laughed and hoisted her bag. “Add curiosity to the mix.”

He ushered her into his office, and she took a seat across from his desk. The wall behind him intimidated her with its framed certificates and honors earned over his twenty year career. Most likely his wife refused to have them all displayed at home. Bella attempted to read his face, but Swartzler prided himself in being unreadable, and this morning was no exception. Although short and stocky, her supervisor had the neck and shoulders of a man who must bench nearly two hundred and seventy five pounds. He removed his signature black-framed glasses and turned to retrieve a couple of files from atop his credenza. She hadn't seen him without his glasses. Swartzler's military haircut and polyester pants still made him look nerdish, but then super intelligent people usually were.

Where did that leave her? Shoving aside the bazillion thoughts darting in and out of her mind like mosquitoes over a stagnant pond, she realigned her focus and gave the impression of professional calmness.

“I have an assignment for you.” He tapped the file and eased back in the chair that was made for a much taller man, at least physically.

“What kind?”

“Murder. Three bodies were found Monday afternoon on a ranch in West Texas.” His calculated gaze met hers. “Sixty miles southwest of Abilene.”

He had her attention, and he knew it. “Runnels County?”

“Ballinger area.”

She nodded and forced aside the implications of what the location meant to her. “Why the FBI?”

“It's linked to a man on our fugitive list.”

Suspicion flared, and she opened the file, complete with photos of the victims. She pressed her fingertips into her palms. “Who?” But she already knew the answer. “Brandt Richardson.”

“Murder for hire.” She stated the fact while memories in apocalypse proportions

slammed against her mind. “Also obsessed with finding the so-called Spider Rock treasure.”

“The victims were hunting for this treasure and believed their clues led them to the High Butte Ranch, owned by Carr Sullivan. They sought permission to dig, and he refused. Ran them off. One of the victims wrote ‘Spider Rock’ in the dirt before he died.”

“Runnels County doesn’t fall within the triangle of where the gold was supposedly hidden.”

“You know more about it than I do.”

“What were the victims’ names?”

“Forrest Miller, a history professor at The University of Texas. Daniel Kegley, a geologist from Austin, and Walt Higgins, a retired oil man from Waco.”

She didn’t recognize any of them. “Family?”

“Miller has a wife and three teenaged girls. Kegley was engaged, and Higgins has been divorced for over thirty years—no ties there. The families have all been interviewed. Professor Miller’s wife said a fourth man was in the mix, but that’s all she knew. Nothing else at this point.” Swartzler slipped on his glasses and steepled his fingers. “You know why I want you on the assignment. Or would you rather I brief Frank Nielson?”

Not on her life. Both of them were up for the same promotion.

“I’ll take it.”

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