

CHAPTER 1

Fourteen years ago...

Black-tie functions were not Paul Andersen's idea of a good time. He would just as soon spend an evening on his back porch with family and friends, knocking back beers and telling jokes. Seats at Camden Yards and a heaping plate of food from Boog's Barbecue were his idea of a pleasant social outing. But this particular charity ball was for the Baltimore Police Department's benefit -- specifically to establish a fund to help families of fallen officers -- and Paul was told it would behoove him to attend.

It was a noble cause, one that native-born billionaire mogul David Gregor had cooked up three months prior. With his fortieth-story penthouse serving as the venue, Baltimore's skyline the backdrop, some of the city's best and brightest came for a night of champagne, elbow-rubbing, and meals that were certainly not going to hold Paul over for the rest of the night.

Part of Paul wished he and his partner, Daniel Richards, had a case to work, if for no other reason than to have an excuse not to be here. Paul was uncomfortable in his tuxedo, but not as uncomfortable as he felt brown-nosing and making small talk with the downtown big wigs.

Those people saw police work in raw numbers: this many cases open, that many cases solved. Murder rates going down, drug arrests going up. It was a black-and-white interpretation of a job that was often anything but, and Paul found himself biting his tongue far too many times throughout the evening.

Setting his empty champagne flute on a black tray, Paul shook his head and leaned in to whisper something to his wife. Janice had attended the gala with him, wearing an elegant floor-length strapless dress, her brown hair done up in a sleek bun. She was as gorgeous as ever, and if nothing else went right for Paul on this admittedly awkward night, he at least got to see his wife in that stunning dress.

"I'm gonna hit the head," he whispered, palming Janice's backside and kissing her left temple.

"Don't be gone too long," Janice called out to his retreating form. "Otherwise, I might drink your next glass for you."

With a chuckle, Paul weaved his way through a lot of the other party-goers. At least Janice was enjoying herself. His odd shifts and late hours often left them without much of a social life, and it had been so long since they had a date that she jumped at the chance to go when the invite came in the mail. Paul was initially hesitant, but seeing Janice in that candy apple red dress made up his mind.

People who were probably dressing up for the first time in years, if not their entire lives, surrounded him. Paul eyed most of them as he went by, noting just how many of these people he

didn't know. Many of them were no doubt part of David Gregor's inner circle and not in any way affiliated with the BPD.

Captain Franklin was in the corner, nursing what was at least his fifth glass of champagne while rubbing elbows with the mayor. Paul smirked; his boss was probably going to come in late the next day nursing one hell of a hangover.

"Excuse me?"

Paul cursed and stopped before putting on his best fake smile and turning on the balls of his feet. He saw another man approaching, wearing the same tuxedo as seemingly every other man, holding a glass of something that definitely wasn't champagne in his left hand and holding out his right.

"Detective Andersen, is it?"

"Yes." Paul shook the man's hand with a frown. "I'm sorry, I don't think..."

"David Gregor," the other man introduced before slipping his free arm around Paul's shoulders. "I'm glad you could make it tonight. Good to know the city's most decorated detective can be so generous with his time."

"Would you think less of me if I said I'm only here cause I was ordered to show?" That wasn't the only reason -- even now, Paul couldn't keep his eyes off of Janice -- but it was close enough to the truth.

Gregor laughed, a genuine, throaty outburst as he slapped Paul on the back. "I guarantee you that's true for half the people here."

Paul shared in the laugh, though his wasn't as boisterous. "I still think it's great what you're doing. This is a fantastic cause."

"Listen, there's something I'd like to discuss with you," Gregor replied, the polite smile on his face disappearing. "A business opportunity, so to speak."

Paul frowned. He had heard the rumors over the years, hushed whispers that Gregor was paying some of the BPD under the table in exchange for having certain investigations steered away from his business and other operations. The detective never had any reason to pay the rumors any mind because he worked Homicide and, near as Paul could tell, such indiscretions had never seeped into his work.

"What do you want me for?" Paul asked. "I'm just a homicide cop."

"That's just it," Gregor smiled. "I think you can be so much more. There are so many other ways for you to make a difference in this city." Seeing the skepticism on Paul's face, Gregor smirked and clasped his hand over the detective's shoulder. "Tell me something, Detective. You catch bad guys, and that's great, but... doesn't it bother you that by the time you arrest them, the damage is already done?"

Paul shook his head. "Not sure I follow."

"You bring down scum after they've already killed," Gregor explained. "I mean, it's great that they're off the streets, but the victims are still dead. Their families are still grieving. What if I

showed you a way to take down bad guys before they have a chance to inflict any harm on anyone else?"

"My job isn't just about arresting bad guys," Paul argued. "No, I can't bring the victims back, but I can give their families closure. I can give a victim's loved ones the peace of mind in knowing that justice has been served. You and everyone else will focus on the killers, Mr. Gregor. I focus on those left behind."

"An admirable trait." Gregor smiled and produced a business card from the inside of his tuxedo jacket. "The offer stands, Detective. Feel free to call me if you have a change of heart."

As Gregor walked off, Janice was at her husband's side again, her hand on the small of his back as she cocked her head to the side. "What was that all about?"

With a shrug, Paul slipped the business card into his pocket and shook his head. "Not really sure," he admitted, leaning in to kiss his wife. "You wanna get outta here? Think I've had my fill of champagne for the night."

Janice smiled and nodded, her arm slipping into Paul's as they made their way to the door leading into Gregor's penthouse. "Maybe you can help Jill with her homework before going to bed."

Paul blanched at that and shook his head; to be honest, he was far more occupied with the thought of helping Janice out of her dress. "Nuh-uh. Have you *seen* what they teach in math nowadays?"

CHAPTER 2

Jill Andersen was nervous, to the point where she was reconsidering her dinner with Brian. Not because she didn't want to spend time with him; despite the chill between them in recent years, they were still family. If the next week was to unfold as Jill feared it would, her younger brother would soon be the only family she had left. Despite her nerves, Jill was glad to get a little dressed up for the occasion. There were only so many t-shirts and jeans she could wear to maintain comfort at crime scenes before the whole wardrobe became redundant.

Still, her salary being what it was -- the pitfalls of being a public employee during a fragile economic recovery -- Jill couldn't get too fancy, so she figured her cleanest solid red button-down and a new pair of jeans would suffice. Her mother's garnet earrings hung from her earlobes, and Jill couldn't help but glance at the watch her father bought her after she earned straight A's as a freshman in high school.

They had decided upon the seafood mecca Phillips -- largely because of its location on the Inner Harbor, but also because it was one of Jill's favorite spots and it was a place both she and Brian could afford on their salaries. The fact that they both worked within reasonable proximity to downtown Baltimore made the location even more convenient.

The waiter stopped by to hand Jill a glass of ice water as her phone buzzed. Cursing under her breath, just knowing it would be a new case, Jill swiped her thumb over the touchscreen. She sighed in relief upon realizing it wasn't work; instead, Brian had texted her saying he was stuck on Pratt Street and would be there as soon as he could.

Jill used that time to queue up the camera built into her smartphone, taking in her digital reflection to check not just her hairline, but to make sure the skin graft she applied to the left side of her face was properly attached. The last thing Jill wanted was for her brother to see her metal eyeplate and the infrared eye that came with it.

Prior to joining the Baltimore Police Department, Jill served in the Army and fought in Iraq. She also took part in a secretive government experiment called Project Fusion, which -- among other things -- fused her entire skeleton with titanium. Her speed, strength, stamina, healing, and overall constitution had also been enhanced, but perhaps the most noticeable part of her transformation was the titanium plate on the left side of her face that ran from her hairline to the bottom of her cheek, as well as the infrared eye and the supercomputer embedded in her brain.

Those upgrades meant eventually cheating at crime scenes -- it was no coincidence that Jill sometimes had one of the city's highest Homicide closure rates -- but more than anything, they enabled her double life, her alter ego. The one thing she didn't want her brother, or anyone else, finding out: Jill wasn't just a cop. She was also the costumed vigilante known as Bounty. A dark

avenger in black leather, leaping from rooftop to rooftop while eliminating the scourge of Baltimore that the cops couldn't -- or wouldn't -- touch.

There might come a time and place where Brian learned that particular truth about her... but this dinner would not be it. Not if she had anything to say about it.

About fifteen minutes later, she heard his wheelchair against the hardwood. Brian was still in his suit, but his tie was gone. Jill couldn't help but notice he had actually shaved that morning -- it was as unusual as the smile he gave when he saw her.

Jill wanted to hug Brian as he approached the table, but she wasn't sure how wise that idea was, so as awkward as it felt, she simply waved and matched his smile.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself." Brian flagged down the waiter to ask for a Coke. "I'm actually sort of surprised you came."

Jill frowned. Were they were really about to start things off like this?

"Relax." Brian chuckled and shook his head. "I meant it's a wonder you didn't get tied up at a crime scene or something."

She exhaled in relief and giggled before taking a sip of water, giving her nerves a few moments to untangle themselves. He was trying to be funny, using his underrated sense of humor to break the ice. It wasn't much, but considering so many conversations between them had amounted to little more than shouting matches, the change of pace was welcome. Jill tucked a wisp of hair behind her left ear, an excuse to make sure her skin graft was securely in place.

"Could say the same for you. I know the Watkins case is a pretty big deal."

"So much so that it's led the eleven o'clock news for each of the last three nights." He chuckled without much humor, the conversation pausing just long enough for the waiter to drop off his drink. "I almost ran over Ted Starnes' feet yesterday leaving the courthouse. I'd say I feel bad about it, but that would be a lie."

Jill laughed with a touch more confidence; one thing she and her brother shared was their disdain for Starnes, a rabid and ghastly defense attorney. Also, the fact that Brian was being glib and saying more than three words at a time was a positive sign. They had a long way to go to heal the rift that had grown between them since his accident and her enlisting in the Army, but Jill was willing to take the victories wherever she could get them.

"Could he get workman's comp for that?"

Brian cringed. "Let's not find out."

They gave the waiter their orders when he approached -- she went with her trusty crab cake dinner, while Brian opted for the lobster tail with cheddar mashed potatoes -- before his expression turned serious. Brian leaned forward with his elbows against the table, lowering his voice. "How's Dad?"

Jill shook her head. "More and more withdrawn every time I see him."

"He's preparing himself for the inevitable, I'd imagine." Seeing the look in Jill's eyes, and

knowing she was likely about to once again proclaim his innocence, Brian reached across the table to cradle her hand into his own. "Look, I know... how can someone who's so clearly innocent just accept being put to death by the state he served? I don't disagree, Jill, but... how many years has it been? How many appeals have his lawyers filed? I'd imagine even Paul Andersen reached a point where he decided enough was enough."

"It's not fair..." Jill's voice was far weaker than intended.

"I know." Brian gave Jill's hand a soft squeeze before withdrawing. "You want so badly to do something, but you can't."

"I keep going over the files." Jill hadn't planned for their dinner conversation to get so heavy, but here they were, and Jill figured that if she was truly going to set things right with her brother, being open and honest was a good way to start.

To an extent, of course. There was one secret she was still adamant about keeping. "Police files, court transcripts, autopsy recaps... I keep waiting for that *a-ha!* moment." She stared at a random spot on the table. "But I'm stuck."

Brian knew he had to tread lightly, chewing on the inside of his lip before speaking. "Don't hate me for what I'm about to say... but is it possible that's because there isn't anything else?"

"No!" Jill cringed at how defensive that came across and her shoulders slumped. "I mean... I don't want to think that."

"Neither do I."

The waiter showed up with their food, and Jill marveled at his impeccable timing. It obviously wasn't on purpose, but she appreciated that he seemed to come by when she needed a break from the moment.

Brian took a few moments to squeeze his lemon wedge over the lobster tail, stirring the butter sauce with his fork without really paying attention to it. He was stalling, pursing his next words lest he ruin whatever tenuous progress they had made.

Fortunately, Jill spoke up for him.

"I mean... I know what the evidence says. It's a slam-dunk case." She shook her head and jabbed her fork into one of the crab cakes. "And I don't want to insinuate that everyone involved with the investigation was inept or corrupt..."

"But it beats the reality that our father's a serial killer?"

Jill deflated as she stabbed a broccoli stalk with her fork. "Yeah..."

The pair ate in silence until their plates were clean. Despite the heaviness of their earlier conversation, it was nice for Jill to again share a meal with her brother. It was even better that he ordered actual seafood, since they were at a seafood restaurant. Brian was just as much a son of Baltimore as Jill was a daughter of the city, and he knew what was what when it came to Charm City's seafood.

They opted out of dessert, choosing instead to bide their time and catch up. Brian's deposition wasn't until eleven the next morning. And if a body didn't drop within the next few hours, Jill

had two days of not being on-call to look forward to. They had time to kill.

“Look, Brian... I’m sorry. For not being there.”

Brian’s expression hardened at the memory, but softened once what Jill said had registered. He sat back in his chair and twiddled his thumbs. “Yeah, uh... I am too.”

“What for?”

“I’ve been unfair to you. Ever since my accident. I know you didn’t bail on me. I know you would’ve called or visited sooner if you could.” Brian polished off the rest of his Coke, shaking his head when the waiter came by to ask if he wanted a refill. “I guess... with everything that’s happened to this family, the accident was my breaking point, you know? I had all of this untapped rage and I had to direct it somewhere.”

Jill nodded. “And I was an easy target, being the only other one left.”

Brian hung his head. “Yeah...”

“I probably would’ve acted the same way.” Jill shrugged. “Hell, I think the only reason I didn’t was because of my time in the Army. Firing a fully automatic rifle into an enemy bunker in the dead of night is surprisingly cathartic.”

Brian nodded. “Watching a member of your platoon lose his leg in an IED blast... not so much.”

The waiter returned and Brian paid the check before Jill had a chance to protest. She smiled when the waiter left to process payment, running a hand along the back of her neck. “I’m glad we did this.”

Brian’s smile matched his sister’s. “Me too.”

“Maybe one night you can join me for dinner with Dan and Evelyn.” Her smile broadened when Brian cocked his head to the side. “I have dinner with them once a week. I know you weren’t as close to them as me, but I think they’d be glad to have you.”

“I’d like that.”

The sound of Jill’s phone buzzing ruined the moment, and she rolled her eyes because she knew this time, it *would* be a case. She glanced at her watch. It was almost nine at night. With a cringe, she checked the text from her partner giving her the address.

“Work?”

“Yeah.” Jill stood and made a face, pocketing her phone. “I wish murderers worked 9-to-5 like everyone else.”

Brian laughed. “I don’t know *anyone* who works 9-to-5 anymore.”

“True.” She dropped to a knee to give Brian a quick, admittedly awkward hug. Just as she was about to let go, Brian slipped both arms around her shoulders and squeezed. She smiled into his shoulder before forcing herself to pull out of the embrace. She had forgotten how comforting a hug from her brother could be. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Don’t work too hard.”

Brian grinned. “Right back atcha.”

CHAPTER 3

Ramon Gutierrez stood next to a rusted trash can on the corner of Lovegrove and Chase, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his tan overcoat. Crime scene tape blocked off the intersection behind him. Red and blue lights flickered off the buildings and the damp streets. Ramon bounced on the balls of his feet, sucking in his cheeks and staring into the sky. He wasn't going to get sick at the crime scene. Not this time. Nope, Ramon's days of burying his head in a trash can upon seeing a dead body were just about over.

Then again, this was another gruesome one. Even uniforms who had over a decade on the force were having a hard time keeping their composure. Ramon kept his distance while Juanita Gutierrez, his older sister and the Baltimore Police Department's top medical examiner, took her time with the victim.

He checked his phone with a hard swallow, looking for the distraction more than anything. Jill would show up soon. If nothing else, his partner's company would further distract Ramon from the rumbling in his gut.

He kept dinner light most nights, knowing his job had a knack for throwing him into the line of duty in the most inopportune moments. He was bound and determined to break this particular... he didn't know if *habit* was the right word, but it was the best he could come up with.

Uniforms were wrapping up the preliminaries, blocking off more of the area with yellow tape: CRIME SCENE – DO NOT CROSS. The only witness was the woman who had called 9-1-1 upon discovering the body, and Officer Sorenson had already taken her statement. Ramon knew Jill would want to talk to her as well once she arrived, which was why the woman was standing on the corner, nursing a steaming mug of coffee. She mimed sipping, but Ramon could tell she wasn't actually ingesting anything. Based on the condition of the body, he couldn't blame her.

Where *was* Jill, anyway?

Sorenson approached Ramon with one of those shit-eating grins and a shake of his head. "Look at it this way, Gutierrez. Even if you *do* yak tonight, it'll be a new personal record. Used to be, you were retching as soon as you stepped out of the car."

"Trying to tell me I'm making progress, Greg?"

"Hey, if it helps you sleep at night." Sorenson glanced over Ramon's shoulder. "Where's the hero?"

Ramon had to bite back the smirk. Ever since the Roberts case, many in the department had taken to calling Jill a hero. They did so in a teasing manner, the way cops always did, but Ramon appreciated the irony of it because they had no idea just how on the mark they really were. As far as they knew, Jill fought back the murderer after being attacked in her own home; the truth

went much deeper than that.

Ramon checked his watch again with a frown. "Not sure. I gave her the address twenty minutes ago."

As if on cue, Jill's red Malibu pulled up to the crime scene and as she stepped out of the vehicle, he could see that she had already put on a pair of baby blue latex gloves. Knowing Jill, she had a box of them in her glove compartment. She gave Ramon and Sorenson an apologetic smile as she approached. "Sorry, guys. I was having dinner with my brother."

A rush of happiness made Ramon forget his grim surroundings, if only for a moment. If his partner was reconciling with her brother, then that was a much-needed ray of metaphorical sunshine on someone whose life seemed to be perpetually cloudy. Ramon had hoped solving Trent Roberts' murder would end the gloom, but David Gregor was still free and thriving, and with Paul Andersen's execution coming up in a week...

Jill glanced at the trash can with an arched brow, nudging her partner with her elbow. "You alright?"

Ramon nodded. "So far, so good."

Sorenson lifted the tape for Jill as she ducked under it and checked to make sure her gloves were secure. "So what do we have?" she asked.

"Another doozy, Detective."

By the time Jill and Officer Sorenson turned the corner into the alley, she stopped in her tracks. Juanita was hunched over the corpse, her brow scrunched in a mixture of focus and frustration. Jill's eyes took in the body, lying prone on the soggy concrete. Though to call it a body was a stretch: between flesh that was charred beyond recognition and the fact that both legs had been severed at the knee, it was easy to see why Juanita was so vexed.

Jill had to swallow back a bit of bile -- not necessarily because of how gruesome the crime scene was, but because she felt the same tug of familiarity she felt when they had fished Dr. Roberts' body out of the Inner Harbor six months earlier. Gruesome bodies came with the territory, and Jill's days of getting sick at crime scenes were long over. But something bugged her about this one, and she hated the way that feeling settled in her gut. Jill knelt by the corpse, hoping her poker face held.

"Don't even bother asking for ID." The ME shook her head. "At this point, I'll be lucky if there are any teeth left."

Jill scrunched her nose at the smell of burnt flesh. "The legs... postmortem?"

"The lack of blood spatter tells me yes." Juanita rubbed her temples. "But I can't think of any reason why someone would burn a person like this and then slice off the knees."

Jill stood and gave Juanita's shoulder a squeeze, unable to tear her eyes off the corpse. "S'okay, that's more my department anyway."

Jill was so absorbed in the body that she hadn't noticed Ramon join her and Juanita. He knelt and cocked his head, reaching into his overcoat to grab a pen. Stealing a glance at his sister,

Ramon sucked in a deep breath and pointed at the corpse's right thigh. "I could be wrong, but... isn't there something shiny there? Where the femur should be?"

Both Jill and Juanita leaned in for a closer look before Juanita's face broke out into a proud smile. She lightly tapped her fist against Ramon's shoulder. "Good eye, *hermano*. It looks like a metal rod of some sort. If I can get a serial number, I may get an ID sooner than I thought."

Jill turned her back on the corpse. "Thank goodness for small favors."

Spotting the woman nursing a cup of coffee, Jill pulled her badge from its perch on her belt. Her steps slowed as she approached; judging by the look on the young woman's face, she was ragged and sensitive. Her eyes were dull and appeared to stare at nothing in particular.

Jill needed to tread lightly.

"I'm Detective Andersen," she introduced in a sympathetic tone before putting her badge back on her hip. "Are you the one who called it in?"

With a whimper and a quivering lip, the woman nodded. The hand holding the cup shook, to the point where Jill was worried the scalding liquid would spill onto her wrist.

"I was heading home from work," the woman explained in a near-whisper. "I got to the alley and... I could smell smoke. Like something was burning. I turned the corner, and..."

A hitched breath cut the woman off and she cupped her free hand over her mouth again. The cup of coffee fell to the ground, splashing all over the pavement. The woman's cheeks puffed out as she doubled over, a uniformed officer springing to her side before she dropped to her knees and retched.

"Have the paramedics look her over," Jill told the officer. "Just in case."

Jill had more questions she wanted to ask the woman -- who to this point was the only person other than the police and the killer to see the body -- but her physical and emotional state were more important right now. Content to let the paramedics look the woman over, Jill brushed a hand through her hair and turned around.

Ramon frowned as he watched Jill walk away from the alley before following her. They pulled their gloves off in unison, tossing them into the trash can Ramon had been hovering over just minutes before. Jill let go of a ragged sigh and her lower lip quivered. Her eyes met Ramon's, and she could tell by the look on his face that he saw the trepidation.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked.

Jill shook her head, grabbing the ends of the trash can and hunching over it. She squeezed her eyes shut, and as if someone had snapped their fingers in her subconscious, a wave of memories flooded into the detective's brain.

Crime scene photographs, detailed autopsy reports, all the signs pointing to three murders committed while Jill was in high school. Her intuition had screamed at her ever since she laid eyes on the corpse, and now there was no denying it; whether Jill wanted to face reality or not, the body in that alley was but another harbinger from her past.

The weight of that reality caught up with Jill and with a lurch, she buried her face in the trash

can to vomit. Ramon cringed and grabbed Jill's ponytail to keep it out of the way, trying to avert his gaze. She coughed and hacked until the dinner she had just enjoyed was little more than a steaming pile, wiping her mouth with a disgusted grunt and standing upright again.

"Okay." Ramon arched a brow. "That's new."

"Ramon..." The fear in Jill's green eyes made her partner freeze. "Those people they say my dad killed? They were killed the exact same way as our victim."