

# CHAPTER 1

Devin Buckner's left shoulder slammed against the side of the van as it skidded along the pavement. The tires squealed in protest and the vehicle threatened to topple onto its side, but once the rubber collided with the pavement again, the van righted itself and lurched forward. By the time Devin gathered his bearings, the van swerved to the right, causing him to stumble forward until his face smashed into the rusted partition between himself and the driver's compartment. A horn bellowed a motorist's discontent before the van swerved again, and as Devin reached for something to grab onto, warm blood pouring from his nostrils, it accelerated and the motor gave as mighty a roar as it could muster.

A large sign on the partition taunted Devin: *Please buckle up - it's the law!* Only there was no buckle, and no seat on which Devin could plant himself. Even as he got back to his knees, nursing a broken nose and a shoulder that throbbed, his eyes took in his dark surroundings. What metal wasn't rusted was a faded gray, with small dark splotches littered throughout. As the first taste of blood crept over Devin's lips, he wondered if those spots were dried blood from victims past. He had heard the rumors; he knew he was likely not the first to find himself in this situation.

Another violent swerve sent Devin's 17-year-old frame flying into the side of the van again, and he bellowed in pain when his left knee slammed full-on against the metal. He had torn the ACL in that knee a year and a half earlier in a high school basketball game. The blinding physical pain aside, he had likely lost his shot at getting a full ride to a big-time school -- the University of Maryland had been on his short list, even dating back to his middle school years.

His dreams of playing for the Terrapins were likely over, but the work Devin had put in over the last several months had opened up other doors for him. Now the only door he wanted to open was the one leading out of the back of the van. But it was latched shut.

The van accelerated at such a rate that the motor began to vibrate, and Devin prayed under his breath that the engine would give out. *Force these bastards to pull off to the side of the road... if they're gonna kill me, let them do it to my face.*

The months since his injury had not been without their issues, but Devin was about to graduate from high school, and he had already been accepted to college. In fact, the whole reason he had been in downtown Baltimore in the first place was to meet up with a friend about possibly living on campus together. The friend never showed, and before Devin could turn around to catch a bus back home on the north side of the city, a plain white van had slammed to a stop in front of him and four figures wearing all black had grabbed him and tossed him into the back.

He had heard the stories. About what had happened to others in this city. He knew all about what some of the locals called *rough rides*, and even though the van was without any identifying

markers, Devin's gut told him he was at the mercy of police officers. Whether they were rogue or exacting a bastardized brand of justice that higher-ups would tacitly endorse, he couldn't tell. But the stories he had heard on the streets were apparently true, and as the van continued teetering back and forth, Devin settled on the knowledge that his name would soon be added to the list.

Now the van was pushing ninety, maybe even a hundred miles an hour. It switched lanes so suddenly that Devin's stomach churned. He cupped a hand over his mouth, trying desperately not to be sick, but the pain in his surgically-repaired knee and his shoulder was becoming unbearable. Tears clouded the boy's vision, and he was launched into the opposite side of the van when the vehicle skidded along four lanes of traffic and took an exit.

At the start of the ride, Devin had tried to keep a mind on which way the van was moving, but being thrown around like a proverbial ragdoll had caused him to lose his bearings. Whoever was driving didn't bother slowing before cutting a hard left, practically at a full ninety-degree angle, before again swerving in and out of traffic. Blaring horns created a symphony of chaos as Devin lost his footing and slammed back-first into the double doors leading out the back of the van. He felt the doors give under the force of the impact, but the rusted chains holding them together never gave.

Devin crumpled onto the floor, almost curling into the fetal position. Blood dripped from his nose into a small puddle on the rusted metal, and the pain in his shoulder flared again when the teenager tried to push himself at least onto his good knee. By the time Devin got his bearings again, he noticed the van had cut a hard right. Almost immediately, it made yet another right, swerving hard to the left to avoid another motorist who laid onto the horn with such volume and duration that it was clear how angry they were.

The sound was drowned out, though, by Devin's scream when the top of his head slammed into the partition. One more hard turn and he rolled to the right, his other shoulder slamming into the metal. His shoulder popped out of joint, and Devin's scream echoed in his dim, cramped surroundings. When he finally settled, Devin did become sick, retching that morning's breakfast all over himself. He could hear a chorus of laughter through the partition, and he howled in pain when he tried to lift his left arm so he could wipe his mouth over his sleeve.

When the van made one more violent, ninety-degree turn to the right, Devin rolled with the momentum again, and this time when his back slammed against the side, an audible crack mixed in with his grunt of pain. By this point, exhaustion and agony kept Devin from moving. He lay in a heap several feet from the fresh pile of vomit, gritting his teeth and sucking in labored breaths. All the work he had done over the past year and a half to get his life back together was playing on a loop in his mind, and Devin knew that he was never going to get to see all those plans unfold.

Even as he felt consciousness slipping from his grasp, Devin gave one more silent prayer, asking for peace for his mother and justice for what was to come.

The van skidded to a stop, the force of rapid deceleration banging the back of Devin's head against the side. The blow knocked him unconscious, so he didn't hear when the front doors to

the van were thrown shut and heavy footsteps approached the back. The chain came undone before the double doors were pried open, and a burly figure clad in all black, including a full mask and gloves, climbed aboard and grabbed Devin by the back of his maroon hoodie. With a grunt, the man dragged the teenager's body from the back of the van and tossed him onto the pavement.

The corner of Madison and Tyson was dead at this time of day, with no onlookers in the vicinity. The parking lot at the First & Franklin Presbyterian Church was empty. The burly man stood over Devin's unconscious body and folded his arms across his chest while three others -- all wearing identical gear, joined him. The lone female in the group cocked her head and cracked her knuckles, flexing her shoulders in the process.

"Is he dead yet?" she asked, her voice muffled by the mask.

"Naw, shithead's still alive," the burly man replied. "Barely."

"We fucked him up good, though," the taller, thinner man added. "Busted-up nose, probably broke quite a few bones in the process... I say that's some of the best driving you've ever done, Freddie."

"Don't matter how many times we do this," Freddie bragged, "still fun as hell."

The only man yet to speak pulled a handgun from the holster on his back, cocking it and pointing the weapon at the side of Devin's head. "I say it's time we put this dog down once and for all."

The burly man placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hold on a sec," he ordered, turning to glance over his shoulder. Once he saw there was no one around, that the only other car on the street was a block away and driving in the opposite direction, he let go of the man's shoulder and nodded once. "Go ahead."

The gunshot rang out into the morning air, scattering a group of pigeons huddled nearby, and Devin Buckner's brains splattered all over the pavement.

## CHAPTER 2

"Is it just me," Officer Greg Sorenson asked as he lifted the yellow crime scene tape so the two plain-clothed detectives could duck underneath, "or are the murders in this town getting more and more gruesome?"

"What's the matter?" Ramon Gutierrez quipped as he slapped baby blue latex gloves over his hands. "You gonna be sick?"

Jill Andersen couldn't help but laugh at her partner's joke, seeing as how until a few months ago, retching at crime scenes was *his* thing. Ramon was the greenest detective Jill had worked with in her almost four years in Homicide, and for the first year or so, he vomited almost every time they found a body. Sometimes, he threw up as soon as he got out of the car. Other times, he would be fine until he saw the body or caught a whiff of the remains. But he appeared to have broken that particular habit, and Jill was proud of him for it. Not that she'd ever say so.

But as they approached the body, Jill felt that familiar rumble in her gut. Not just because of the gaping hole in the victim's head, bits of skull and brain matter spattered on the concrete, but because their victim appeared to be a child. Lead medical examiner Juanita Gutierrez was hunched over the body, making her preliminary assessment, and the look on her face told Jill this wasn't going to be a good one.

"Please tell me this isn't what I think it is," Jill said as she crouched next to her friend.

"Fraid so," Juanita said with a sigh, handing Jill the driver's license she had found on his body. "Devin Buckner, 17 years old."

Jill studied the card with a frown. "North Baltimore. What was he doing downtown?"

"Other than getting his brains blown out," Earl Stevens said as he approached the small cadre of police officers, hitching up his pants and making sure his cowboy boots didn't step in any of the viscera, "we're not sure. So far we got no eyewitnesses."

Jill frowned in disbelief. "How are there no witnesses?"

Juanita pointed at the entry wound with the tip of her pen. "Preliminary time of death is about nine or 10 this morning."

Watson folded his arms over his chest. "Traffic's light here at that hour."

Jill pushed herself back to her feet, readjusting her ponytail and turning to stare down Madison. The traffic was fuller at this hour, bottlenecking as motorists tried to sneak a peek at the crime scene, but it was nothing compared to what Pratt Street near the Inner Harbor saw most of the day. The traffic lights worked a pattern that Jill knew by heart. Baltimore was her hometown; aside from the four years she spent fighting for Uncle Sam, stationed in both Virginia and Iraq, Jill had never known any place other than Baltimore. She was proud to protect this city to the best

of her ability, and she hoped she was doing a better job than her father had.

At one time, Paul Andersen had been the best and brightest the Baltimore Police Department had ever seen. But along the way, he had been corrupted -- like so many others in this city -- and he found himself on Death Row after committing a trio of murders. Two months ago, the state of Maryland had him executed for it -- a personal tragedy that was nothing but the latest in a long line of tragedies for the Andersen family.

"So... simple GSW to the head," Stevens theorized, crouching beside Juanita, close enough that their shoulders brushed together.

Juanita glanced up at him and did her best to suppress a smile, even though her eyes still lit up. "I'm not so sure. I dunno what happened to this kid before he took one to the temple, but his nose is broken, he's got a dislocated shoulder, and there's dried vomit on his shirt. And that's just me eyeballin' him."

"Jesus," Stevens muttered under his breath.

With her back now turned to the others at the crime scene, Jill wandered down closer to the junction between Madison and Tyson. A gentle breeze fluttered around her, and she could hear seagulls soaring through the sky, undoubtedly on their way to the Inner Harbor in hopes of scrounging up breakfast from the myriad of restaurants locals and tourists alike frequented every day. But this section of Baltimore, while still downtown, was not the attraction that the Inner Harbor and the Power Plant were, and the lack of foot traffic mirrored that.

Stealing a glance over her shoulder, and confident no one was paying attention to her, Jill reached up to her left temple and peeled off her skin graft to reveal a silver eyeplate that ran from the bottom of her cheek up to her hairline. The plate surrounded an infrared eye, which connected to a microscopic supercomputer embedded in her brain. Tapping her temple again, Jill activated her infrared sight so she could scan the road.

During her time in the Army, Jill had volunteered for a secret experiment called Project Fusion. Dr. Trent Roberts had seemingly perfected the advancement of human cybernetics to the point where he boasted that he could create the perfect super soldier -- how with one procedure, he could make those fighting on the front lines stronger, smarter, more resilient, and faster to heal. Most countries balked at first, but with the United States in the midst of two wars, the Pentagon -- secretly -- agreed to let the enlisted volunteer if they so chose.

Jill chose.

Now her entire skeleton was coated in titanium. She boasted super strength and accelerated healing, and her athleticism surpassed that of even the most in-shape tactical cop. Her physical scores from the Academy were still records to this day, and the general consensus was that no one would ever top them. But Jill's enhancements gave her a new purpose; on top of her life as a homicide detective, Jill also doubled as the costumed vigilante Bounty. Black leather and mesh armor fueling rumors and innuendo throughout the city, to say nothing of the few who actually knew her secret.

But for right now, her enhancements were being used in a more mundane capacity. Ramon would call what Jill was doing right now cheating, but Jill didn't care. She would use every tool at her disposal to get to the truth, and if that meant her two worlds had to occasionally collide, then so be it. This also gave her a chance to undergo her ritual, to grieve for the departed in solitude. She didn't know Devin Buckner, but by the end of this case, she would know him as well as his family -- if not better. Other cops would see the victim as just another case, a series of facts and figures to piece together to lead to an eventual arrest.

For Jill, though, every case was a matter of who the victim was. The teenager lying on the pavement wasn't just another case. He was someone's son, someone's friend. Maybe he had been someone's brother or someone's boyfriend. He was someone who had plans and a future, and someone made sure he wouldn't get to have either of those things. Whereas other cops, competent though they were, would see Devin Buckner as a case, Jill would make sure to never lose sight of him as a person.

She studied the tire tracks on the road, cognizant of the fact that hundreds, if not thousands, of vehicles used this intersection every day. To the naked eye, tire tracks were simply tire tracks. But this was also a low-speed intersection -- at almost ninety degrees, most cars wouldn't lay down that much rubber when making the turn. Which was why the series of deep black tire tracks, so dark the rubber was deeply embedded into the asphalt, seemed so out of place. Jill frowned to herself, replacing the skin graft and taking a few extra seconds to make sure it was in place. Tapping her temple to turn off the infrared sight -- mostly because she knew the looks the other cops would give her if they saw it -- she turned back to Ramon and Stevens.

"We got traffic cams in this area?" she asked.

"Yeah, just installed last month," Ramon answered. "Why?"

"We've got some major tire tracks on that intersection," she explained, pointing over her shoulder. "Far blacker and far deeper than a normal vehicle. Someone took that turn at a high rate of speed..." Jill was now looking down as she talked, studying the road until she got to Devin's body. "...and stopped right here."

"Sonofabitch," Stevens muttered, scratching the back of his head.

Ramon picked up on his partner's train of thought. "Devin's killer dropped him off here."

"Before killing him," Juanita added.

"We need that footage," Jill said, turning around to see Stevens already digging out his phone and pressing the device to his ear. "I want a visual on the vehicle. Maybe if we're lucky, we'll even get a visual on the sick fuck who did this."

Jill stared at the teenager's body while listening to Detective Stevens place the call asking for traffic cam footage for the intersection in question and a three-block radius surrounding it. She cocked her head to the side, forcing herself to stare at the hole in Devin's head even though she could feel the burn of acid creeping up her esophagus. She would let herself be disgusted later; right now, she had to piece together this boy's final moments.

"Hey, J... is the bullet still in his head or did it embed itself into the sidewalk?"

"Won't know until we get him moved," Juanita said with a shake of her head.

Jill frowned at that -- not because she was mad at her friend, but because that was one more puzzle piece they didn't have. The more pieces they had to find, the more time they had to spend waiting and digging. The minutia of the case was something that frustrated Jill more often than not, and she appreciated cases that were largely open-and-shut. Either because the evidence was that abundant or because someone confessed, she had learned to truly appreciate the "easy" ones.

This was apparently not going to be an "easy" one.

"So someone screams through the light like a bat out of hell," Ramon theorized, "skids to a stop, tosses Devin to the sidewalk like he's nothing and pops him in the head." He shook his head and folded his arms over his chest, squinting at his partner. "Is it just me, or does that not make a whole lotta sense?"

"Not just you," Jill agreed. "Let's hope traffic cams paint a clearer picture for us."

## CHAPTER 3

It was another hour before traffic cam footage became available; in the interim, Jill had informed Captain Daniel Richards, leader of the Seventh Precinct, about the preliminaries of the case. Richards' face had fallen upon learning the victim was a 17-year-old black boy, and Jill couldn't help but wonder if that was a case of racial solidarity or if it was because the case triggered less-than-pleasant memories. Knowing Baltimore the way she did, Jill guessed it was probably a bit of both. Downtown had already called him several times wanting an update, which Jill found odd. They almost never called that often so soon after a body dropped -- not even in the case of famous victims.

Still, that was a problem Richards had to deal with, not Jill. So she strode from his fishbowl of an office to her desk, where a blank white dry-erase board stood. Plopping herself into her chair, Jill queued up the traffic cam footage just as Ramon joined her with matching mugs of freshly-made coffee. Only "fresh" was a misnomer for the coffee in their break room. Sludge was likely a more appropriate term.

"You ready?" she asked.

"To see a kid get his brains blown out?" Ramon asked with a shake of his head. "Not especially."

With a click of her mouse, Jill pressed *play*. The grainy black-and-white footage began to roll, though for the first several minutes there was no activity of which to speak. Only one car had crossed the intersection, and the silent rhythm of the traffic lights was almost enough to lull Jill to sleep. But just as her eyelids grew heavy, a large white van with no markings screeched through the intersection, nearly teetering onto its side before skidding to a stop. Four black-clad figures burst out of the front doors before the biggest among them yanked open the rear of the van and pulled Devin out. When they saw him toss the teenager onto the sidewalk, it was clear he wasn't conscious.

Ramon frowned in disgust. "The fuck did they do to him?"

When the man pulled the gun and shot Devin in the head, they both flinched.

"I could go the rest of my life without seeing that ever again," Ramon muttered under his breath.

"So we're dealing with four assailants," Jill explained, jotting notes to herself in a yellow legal pad, "all wearing masks and gloves. Unmarked white van. So... how did Devin wind up in the van in the first place, and what happened to him while he was in there?"

"Judging by the way the van took that light?" Ramon shook his head. "He probably went for one hell of a ride."

The word *ride* triggered something in Jill's brain and she sprung out of her chair before grabbing the red dry-erase marker and approaching the whiteboard. In block capital letters, she wrote out the words *Rough Ride* before stepping back, capping the marker, and giving Ramon a knowing look.

Ramon read the words before staring at the frozen feed. "You sure?"

Jill shrugged and returned to her seat. "It fits."

Rough rides were a bit of legend in the Baltimore Police Department, and not in a flattering way. Over the last three years -- longer, if some lifelong citizens were to be believed -- certain Baltimore police officers had been accused of snatching people up off the street and throwing them into the back of vans that were less than safe. The people allegedly taken on these rides were almost always black, and these rides always resulted in at least life-altering injuries. The route was always different, and previous cases had seldom resulted in anything other than lawsuits settled out of court, but the stories were well-known.

"Jill," Ramon began as he approached the board, "think about this. Think about what you're saying here."

"Oh, I'm well aware." Jill folded her arms and stared at the board, twirling the marker in her hand. "My father is the poster child for cop gone bad."

"But this is different. First of all, we have no way of knowing if those are cops. At least not until we ID the van or ballistics come back on the bullet. And even that might not prove anything." Ramon sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Secondly... I mean... if you're right? If *that's* what happened here... we just got our next Mike Brown."

The implication was clear. And Jill suddenly understood why Richards was fielding all those phone calls.

## CHAPTER 4

*Fifteen years ago...*

The first thing Paul Andersen did upon waking up every morning was fix himself a cup of coffee. The coffee maker in the kitchen had already whirred to life by the time he shuffled into the kitchen, bleary-eyed and wearing a loose-fitting robe. He blinked sleep out of his eyes -- what little sleep he had managed the night before -- reaching up to grab a mug from the cabinet before noticing his wife sitting at the table reading the newspaper. Her own mug steamed in front of her, and the smell of bacon cooking on the stove began to pull him out of his daze.

Pouring himself his first mug of the day, Paul scrubbed a hand over his face before taking the empty chair to Janice's left. She immediately grabbed for his hand, much like she had every day they had been married, and he gave her a lazy smile when his fingers laced with hers.

"You tossed and turned all night," she said, finally tearing her eyes from the paper. "Rough case?"

Hissing at the first sip, because Paul insisted on taking his coffee black and as strong as possible, he cradled the mug in his free hand. "You could say that."

Quiet mornings like this were a godsend; with Jill and Brian having spent the night at a friend's house, Paul and Janice had a night to themselves for the first time in months. Janice had plans for the previous night, but the look on Paul's face when he got home told her those plans weren't going to happen. But she understood the reality of the job, the fact that working Homicide sometimes drained her husband physically and emotionally, so she had simply cooked dinner for them and convinced Paul things would be better with a solid night's sleep. Only he didn't sleep well. She didn't need to see the look on his face to see that.

"Is this the case?" she asked, showing Paul the front page of that morning's *Sun*.

Paul's heart skipped a beat when he saw the school photo of a smiling teenage boy on the front page, the light in young Carlos Grainger's eyes a far cry from his cold, lifeless body lying on a metal slab in the medical examiner's lair. He knew it would only be a matter of time before the press caught wind of this case; Paul was angry it wasn't in the immediate aftermath of detectives finding the body just north of Camden Yards. No, there had been nary a peep about the murdered 16-year-old boy when they made ID and notified his next-of-kin.

But now that they had a pool of suspects -- high-powered suspects, at that -- the jackals were all too happy to come out of hiding.

This wasn't journalism; this was a circus.

"Sources have told the *Sun* that Carlos Grainger's murder is likely a case of police brutality," Paul read, pausing to take another swig of coffee. "Officially, the Baltimore Police Department has no

*comment, with the case on-going, but those talking to the Sun and requesting anonymity have insinuated that the 16-year-old Grainger fell victim at the hands of two police officers who had stopped him on the corner of Pratt and Greene. The officers in question have not been identified, and no one from the Department has been willing to go on-record.*

*“Requests for comment from the detectives working the case have not been returned.”*

Setting the paper back on the table with a sigh, Paul pinched the bridge of his nose before downing half of what was still in his mug. Not only had the media caught wind of the case, Baltimore's flagship paper had taken to painting the issue as a matter of police misconduct. Incompetence at best, maleficence at worst. The last sentence in particular angered Paul, making it sound as if he and his partner, Daniel Richards, were derelict in their duty.

Never mind all the hurdles that had been placed in their way.

“Yeah,” he muttered with a sigh. “That's the one.”

“So is it true?” Janice squeezed Paul's hand. “Did cops kill that boy?”

As a rule, Paul didn't normally discuss his cases at home. At least, not in great detail. Most of them were too gruesome for polite conversation, and he tried his damndest to not bring his job home with him. A work-life balance was of paramount importance to Paul, and even when he used to tell Jill about his daily crusades, he kept things vague. Not to protect her -- his daughter was always so insistent on knowing the details -- but because when he walked through that front door, he was no longer Detective Andersen. He was just Paul.

“Babe,” Janice said, “talk to me.”

“When they gave me my badge,” he began, “I took an oath. Protect and serve, do everything in my power to make sure justice is served.” He stared into his coffee mug, the thumb of his free hand trailing along the rim. “That's been my... when all else failed in this job, that was my guide. Follow the truth, get the answers. But now... road blocks everywhere. And they're being put up by people who took the same oath I did.”

“But why?”

With a shrug and a sneer, Paul finished off his mug. He had a theory, but he wasn't exactly in the mood to vocalize it just yet. “That's what I wanna know.”

## CHAPTER 5

*Present day...*

"So what do we know about our victim?"

Jill's question was posed to a mostly empty bullpen, though her team -- Detectives Gutierrez, Stevens, Watson, and Blankenship -- was huddled around the white dry-erase board by her desk. Though Ramon was her assigned partner, the other three were all capable investigators and incredible people in their own right. Detective Stevens was abrasive in his own way, but his attention to detail was second-to-none. His physique -- still burly even if it had trimmed slightly -- and background in college football led some to believe he was a step behind the others mentally. It was an assumption he often used to his advantage.

Hitori Watson was a bright mind and a capable investigator, and his partner, Whitney Blankenship, was known in the bullpen as the Numbers Guru. She could take bank statements or anything else that would make other detectives' eyes glaze over and make sense of them within an hour -- sometimes sooner. But right now, Blankenship's eyes were red and puffy; she had taken the news of Devin Buckner's death harder than anyone else, and for good reason.

"He, uh," Blankenship began, staring at her hands cradled together in her lap, "he was really bright. Didn't always apply himself in school, but..."

Watson squeezed Blankenship's shoulder and gave her a nod of solidarity. "Juanita found a surgical scar on his left knee."

Blankenship nodded. "He tore his ACL playing basketball almost two years ago. He had finally gotten full range of motion back in his leg."

Jill capped the red marker that had written what they knew on the board to this point. It wasn't much, and there was still too much empty space for her liking. "Whitney, I'm sorry for the loss of your nephew, really. But... you're gonna have to step away from this case."

"I know," Blankenship said with a snuffle. "I just... you need to know who Devin was."

"Next to who did it," Stevens said, arms folded over his chest, "that's the most important question to ask."

"We know how he died," Jill added, giving everyone a moment to further digest the disturbing traffic cam footage they had all seen by now. Even with the resolution on the video as low as it was, the image of that teenage boy's head exploding when the bullet tore through his temple was one none of them would forget any time soon. Even the thought of it in hindsight made Jill squeamish. "Maybe if we know how he lived, we might have a better idea of why he was targeted."

"He hit a rough patch," Blankenship explained, "after the injury. His grades slipped, he

started getting into trouble.”

Stevens cocked his head to the side. “What kinda trouble?”

“Drugs. Weed, mostly. He was down on himself and a couple classmates decided to pray on that.” Blankenship shook her head. “He's got a juvy file.”

Jill nodded. “Ramon, submit a request to have that file unsealed.” She turned to Watson. “Anything on the assailants?”

“Not yet,” the detective known affectionately as Hi said. “All we've got right now is body types, and that's not much to go on.”

“Which means the van might be our best bet,” Jill added.

“Or the bullet,” Stevens interjected. “I'll check with J to see if she's made any headway on that.”

Ramon cocked a sideways grin. “Yeah, I bet you will.”

The laughter was welcome, even if it was light and a little forced. Ramon had teased Stevens about his affinity for Juanita in recent months. On the surface, Stevens and Juanita made a strange pairing, but it worked, and Jill was glad that her partner wasn't playing the part of the stereotypical overprotective sibling. He knew what kind of man Earl Stevens was, and if he was good enough for Ramon's older sister, then he was good enough for him.

“Alright,” Jill said, “we all know what we have to do. Let's go do it.”

As the small group broke, detectives returning to their stations to bury themselves in the minutia, Blankenship stuck around for a few moments. Jill set down her marker and pulled her colleague into a light hug. Blankenship's arms lingered around her shoulders for a long while, and when they finally broke the hug, Blankenship grabbed Jill by the shoulders and sniffled.

“Devin was a good kid. Even with the trouble he got in, Devin would never hurt a soul,” she whispered. “There's no one else I'd rather have on this case.”

Blankenship's meaning was clear; this wasn't just a case of Jill's reputation within the department or the fact that her closure rate was among the highest in the city. What was left unsaid was clear as day: even if Jill the cop couldn't find justice for Devin Buckner, perhaps her leather-clad alter ego could.

At a loss for what to say -- partly because she couldn't say anything out loud with regards to her double life -- Jill could only nod before watching Blankenship return to her desk to gather her things. The black woman gave Watson a quick one-armed hug before leaving the bullpen, and Jill found herself releasing a breath she didn't realize she had been holding. Jill was about to return to her desk when she heard the door to Richards' office open.

“Andersen,” he called, poking his head out from his fishbowl of an office. “A word?”