

# BOUNTY

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This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

For KD

Your loyalty and support make me feel like a superhero.

## Chapter 1

A storm was brewing.

The Inner Harbor, usually the most peaceful spot in all of Charm City, was in turmoil. Waves violently splashed against the pier, angry winds tearing through the sails of the boats latched to the dock. Seagulls cawed in protest, every attempt to fly thwarted by the gusts. White caps thrashed onto dry land, staining the pier. Tourists and locals alike had made themselves scarce; even the seafood cathedral Phillips, one of Baltimore's most popular spots, was relatively barren. Clouds roiled and built in the sky, turning the already-dark hue a particularly gnarly mix of black and purple.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The air was thick with the smell of pending rain. To the trained nose, something else was in the air. Something dank. On the rare occasion the wind dissipated, the stench was unmistakable. A young detective was on his knees, hunched over the edge of the pier, that night's dinner spilling out of his mouth and into the bay. Everyone else already on-scene ignored the man's retching as uniformed officers canvassed the area, roping it off and shooing away the occasional passersby. A crane whirred to life, scaring off three seagulls as it lifted something out of the water.

Jill Andersen approached the man still hunched over the edge of the pier, placing a hand on his shoulder as he continued to cough and hack. Her green eyes studied the crane, narrowing upon catching sight of a dead body in the machine's clutches, mangled and twisted, dried blood mixing with the salt water. She then caught her first whiff of the stench, silently glad for the fact that she'd already put in three years on the force. If nothing else, it had allowed Jill to build a tolerance to the gore. Her partner wasn't that lucky yet.

"You okay, Ramon?"

The young man named Gutierrez looked up, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his tan overcoat. "Yeah." He cringed and stood upright, still looking a bit pale. "Still takes some getting used to."

"You will." Jill gave Ramon's shoulder a squeeze before crossing to the other end of the pier, ducking under the yellow crime scene tape and flashing the gold badge on her belt. Letting the uniformed officer see her badge number, Jill stopped to push a strand of brown hair out of her face. She put her hair back into a ponytail to avoid having it blown in her face like this, but the winds were so strong that anything short of shaving herself bald would prove futile.

It was like this every time she got to a crime scene. Everyone going about their jobs, as if this was just another day at the office – because for them, it was. But Jill always made sure to take a moment, no more than a few seconds, to remind herself that the victim was *someone*. At the end of the day, whoever's

mangled corpse was in that crane was a person. Someone's family, someone's loved one. More than anything, that was what mattered. Those left behind didn't care about procedure or protocol; they wanted answers, and more importantly, they deserved justice. Too many times in this profession, victims were viewed in the abstract; it was easy to forget they were people with loved ones and dreams. Jill swore the day she made Detective that she would never lose sight of that.

"I swear to God, Sorenson, if you make a fishing joke, I'm throwing you overboard."

The lanky officer's smile was humorless. "Vic's name is Trent Roberts. 49 years old."

Jill frowned, hands stuffed in the pockets of her black leather jacket. She couldn't tear her eyes from the body being lowered onto a white sheet splayed out on the concrete. The stench was far more pronounced now, and the sheet immediately turned red from the blood still oozing from Trent's neck. Her eyes focused on his face, eyes wide and mouth agape. It looked as if the attack had taken him by surprise.

She tried her best to keep the dread off of her face, silently thankful for the acting elective she took that one semester her senior year of high school. She knew the victim. More than that, the victim was largely responsible for who she had become. Not that she could mention that, lest the captain remove her from this case. But if Jill was being honest with herself, stealing a glance at the raging waters, she knew it was only a matter of time. Trent Roberts winding up dead in her city wasn't a coincidence.

"How do we already have ID?" Jill asked.

A black man joined Jill and Sorenson, red tie loose around his neck. The bags under his eyes nearly matched his mustache. "Uniforms found his briefcase in his yacht. ID was in it."

Turning on the balls of her feet, Jill again brushed strands of hair out of her face. *Crap...* "Captain." She cocked her head to the side. "What're you--?"

Backing away from the crime scene, Daniel Richards -- captain of Baltimore's Seventh Precinct -- motioned for Jill to follow him out of Sorenson's earshot. "High-profile victim." He nodded in the direction of the body once they had cleared the crime scene tape. "Only a matter of time before the *Sun* and the TV trucks show up, and you can't exactly solve a murder if you're busy swatting at gnats."

Loathe as Jill was to admit it, the press had good reason to be interested in this case. Trent Roberts had been a high-profile scientist, renowned for his work on human prosthetics. He was also considered a pioneer in the study of cybernetics, using his extensive knowledge in that field to pioneer revolutionary improvements in said prosthetics -- many a war veteran had Dr. Roberts to thank for the fact that their lives had returned to normal, even after losing a limb in combat. Trent had worked closely with the United States government and with governments throughout Europe, hoping to push forward and perfect technology that would allow the world's soldiers -- the ones fighting on the front lines -- to be stronger, faster, more resilient. He had once called it proactive prosthesis: outfitting soldiers with enhancements and upgrades in the hopes that they would avoid catastrophic injury and return home as

intact as they were when they had left.

The Pentagon never admitted it had consulted with Dr. Roberts, and his life's work -- called Project Fusion -- was little more than urban legend, but Jill knew better. She'd seen all of this firsthand during her time with the Army. Not only did she serve two tours in Iraq before her four years were up, but she had also seen things that, officially, never existed.

Giving Richards a knowing glance, Jill again ducked under the tape and approached the body. Juanita Gutierrez, Baltimore's chief medical examiner, was crouched to examine Dr. Roberts, the sky blue of her latex gloves contrasting with the drab surroundings. Juanita wore a black ball cap to keep her matching hair out of the way, but the occasional gust of wind threatened to toss the hat into the Chesapeake Bay.

Ramon stood behind Juanita, covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief. His blue eyes still had that sick look about them. "Guessing we found cause of death."

"I'd say," Juanita said and gave her little brother a sympathetic smile. "Slashed across the throat. You name it, it's been severed. Guessing he got tossed into the water to try and mitigate the mess."

Jill crouched across from Juanita, her eyes scanning Dr. Roberts' remains. His face was bloated; were it not for his wire-rim glasses and the unmistakable hint of yellow in his eyes, she might not have recognized him. Her forehead scrunched in concentration as she put on her own pair of latex gloves. Her heart nearly skipped a beat when she finally laid eyes on Roberts' chest, which had been sliced open, sternum snapped in two, and several ribs broken. Strong as her constitution was, Jill nearly doubled over when she saw Dr. Roberts' heart was missing.

"Ugh..." She got back to her feet, stumbling back before gathering her bearings and clear her head. "We sure it wasn't the gaping hole in his chest?"

Juanita shook her head. "Postmortem." She stood and took a step back, using her pen to point at the body. "Just like the slash on his left arm."

There it was again: that pang of familiarity, along with its dear friend, the chill of dread. Jill struggled to keep her expression as neutral as possible, so as not to raise the suspicion of anyone else on-scene. She paced around Dr. Roberts' body before glancing up at her partner; Ramon was still holding the handkerchief over his face, and she could tell by the look in his eyes that he desperately wanted to be elsewhere. Under better circumstances, she would tease him over his weak stomach, but given the condition of the body, and the reality of the case that had fallen into their collective laps, she couldn't blame him.

"This doesn't makes any sense." Jill scratched an imaginary itch on her right temple, shaking her head. "Who would slash his throat, slice open his chest, steal his heart, slash the side of his arm, then toss him into the water?"

Juanita arched a brow. "Especially since there's not much spatter on the yacht."

"Hey, Ramon," Jill decided to give her partner an out, "go canvass the yacht, see if there's anything uniforms missed."

Jill allowed herself an amused smile and a knowing glance at Juanita as Ramon hurriedly made his way to the yacht. He tried to play it cool, but it was obvious how glad he was for the reprieve. Between his constitution and the fact that he insisted on wearing those overcoats at crime scenes, sometimes teasing him was too easy.

The detective knelt beside the body again. Juanita, after making a note on her clipboard, regarded Jill and cocked her head. "What?"

"Nothing," Jill lied. "Just...I think I met this guy when I was in the service."

Clearing her throat, Jill stood upright again, deciding it was best to change the subject before Juanita had the chance to pry any further. Logically, Jill figured the truth was going to come out eventually, but she didn't feel like taking a trip down Memory Lane while Dr. Roberts' body was staring up into the sky -- and definitely not with dozens of cops swarming around him. Maybe Jill would get lucky, though; maybe Dr. Roberts' death was unrelated to his ties or his work.

*Come on...when have I ever been that lucky?*

"We need to find the heart."

Even as she said it, Jill knew how unlikely that was. If the killer went through the effort of cutting Dr. Roberts open, of snapping his sternum in half and making a mess of his ribs, then that meant whoever it was wanted the heart for something. Which meant the heart wouldn't be at the crime scene. Familiarity tugged at the detective again -- not just because of who the victim was, but even the manner in which he died felt familiar.

Jill made a mental inventory of every case she'd worked since Captain Richards handed her the badge, but nothing sprung to mind. Baltimore had seen some gruesome homicides in her time on the force, but nothing like this. Even the occasional mob hit had nothing on this; as gruesome as the Lincoln riddled with bullet holes had been two months back, with blood staining the windows and a mob enforcer's brain splattered all over the back seat, even that paled in comparison to this.

Jill glanced over her shoulder, making sure none of the other officers were looking in her direction. Content in that knowledge, she reached up to her left temple before grabbing and peeling off a skin graft to reveal a metal eyeplate that spanned from her hairline to her cheek.

With a blink and a tap of her finger against her temple, Jill activated the infrared sensor embedded in her left eye, scanning the crime scene -- careful to make sure she was in a dimly-lit area in case any officers or detectives looked her way. The last thing Jill wanted was for a street light to glimmer off her eyeplate.

Jill took her time looking over the area. The pavement was clear of anything the naked eye wouldn't pick up, and her infrared vision didn't do much for the water. Jill needed to examine the yacht, but Ramon and three uniformed officers were still on the vessel.

With a sigh, Jill turned her back to the crime scene and placed the skin graft back over the eyeplate. Without a mirror handy, she took a few extra seconds to make sure everything was in order; she couldn't eyeball this one. She eventually returned to the scene, stopping once Richards approached again. "Don't look now..." Jill saw news vans approaching over Richards' shoulder. "But here come the vultures."

Jill shrugged. "Just as well. I've got some phone calls to make back at the precinct."

Jill tried not to laugh; the thunderstorm began just as the media arrived. Juanita and two uniformed officers scrambled to cover Roberts' body so the rain wouldn't compromise any potential evidence, and the TV crews struggled to get the rain gear on their equipment -- which was all the opening Jill needed to avoid dealing with them. Talking to the press was not her job; the department had a spokesperson to handle that.

Pushing her way past Richards, and ignoring the portly reporter cursing under his breath at how the rain had already ruined his notepad, Jill dialed a number into her smartphone before pressing it to her ear. Crossing Pratt Street, she ducked into an alley to get away from the commotion and the heavy raindrops dotting the pavement. She pulled the band off her hair, undoing her ponytail and straightening out the locks. She cursed under her breath when the phone rang for the fifth time, and she was ready to hang up when the sixth ring cut off and a male voice answered.

"*Freeman.*"

"We have a problem." Jill's voice was steady, and her fingers again removed the skin graft. "Meet me at our usual spot."

## Chapter 2

*Four years ago...*

"The procedure is complete, Doctor. She should be awake by morning."

Trent Roberts couldn't hide the smile on his face even if he tried. Project Fusion had spanned almost three decades of his life, and this was the moment of triumph. All those sleepless nights of theorizing. The countless computer simulations. The speculation. The arguments with military brass. Taking the project specs from country to country, looking for one with the proverbial stones to put their money behind the project. It had all led to this moment, and Trent wasn't the least bit surprised when the Americans wound up being the ones to saddle themselves up with the project.

Roughly ten hours from now, Project Fusion's first success story would be a reality. Jill Andersen was capable in her own right: intelligent, driven, focused, a stubborn streak a mile long. But she had decided she wanted to do more. Simply exchanging gunfire with terrorists and insurgents in the remote desert of the Middle East wasn't good enough for her. Neither was a future in which she put murderers behind bars. No, she wanted to truly make a difference. She didn't want to spend her life reacting to the evils of the world. She wanted to stamp them out before they had a chance to materialize.

The Pentagon balked once they realized one of their own would volunteer for the procedure. They tried to get Andersen to withdraw her consideration -- which was when they realized just how headstrong she truly was. By all reports, the procedure -- all twelve hours of it -- had been a success, but they wouldn't know for sure until Andersen regained consciousness.

Examining the reports his assistant handed to him, Dr. Roberts loosened his yellow tie. His mind drifted to a 30-year-old bottle of scotch stored away in his office. So many nights over the years, Dr. Roberts had thought of digging out the bottle and having himself a stiff drink, but he refrained because he wanted that first sip to be in celebration. If Andersen awoke and everything was in working order, this was cause to crack open that bottle.

A knock on his door broke Trent's concentration.

"Yes, Felicia?"

A young woman with olive skin hesitated, her brows scrunched together. She looked like she'd seen something horrific, her eyes wide and fingers shaking. Dr. Roberts took off his glasses and rose from his chair, concern etching onto his wrinkled features as he grabbed a white lab coat from the hanger and slipped it over his broad shoulders.

"Felicia, what is it?"

She swallowed hard, eyes darting around the office before settling on her boss. "It..." She



swallowed again. "It's Andersen. She's awake."

Confusion and dread were a potent mix. Dr. Roberts was momentarily frozen with uncertainty. This wasn't supposed to happen. Andersen wasn't supposed to regain consciousness until at least the following morning. He mentally poured over the procedure again; everything had appeared to be normal. Every step of the process had gone off without a hitch. Her vitals were strong once the procedure was over. Everything pointed to a normal, if not necessarily speedy, recovery. He shuddered to think how much pain she might be in, being awake so soon after the procedure.

"Felicia," Dr. Roberts' voice was ragged. "Morphine. Lots of it."

She bolted from Dr. Roberts' office while Trent made a beeline for the observation room. His heart pounded in his chest, to the point where he had to stop and lean against the wall. He'd had a heart attack two years ago, and he had to keep reminding himself to slow down from time to time, take deep breaths, and not get so stressed out. He gulped in two big gasps of air, closing his eyes. His heart rate dipped, but not appreciably so; truth was, given the startling news he'd just received, Dr. Roberts was only going to be but so calm until he figured out what was happening.

Still, this was not the time for another coronary.

Methodically pacing along the bland corridor, Dr. Roberts turned off his phone. News of Andersen's awakening would probably spread quickly, and the last thing Dr. Roberts wanted was to be hounded by his superiors before he had any answers. That was a surefire way to get fired -- if not worse.

As Dr. Roberts approached the observation room, he heard what sounded like the room being trashed. Something crashed against the wall, startling him to the point where he wasn't sure if he wanted to walk into the room anymore. This was one of those rare moments when Trent wished he was packing. A muffled thud interrupted Dr. Roberts' thought process, at which point adrenaline took over and he pushed his way through the door.

Dr. Roberts nearly tripped over an overturned table when he crossed into the examination room -- which was when he noticed needles and all manner of surgical equipment strewn about the floor. His eyes scanned the room, but there was no sign of Andersen. He carefully stepped over the table, making sure his feet avoided the sharp instruments. He wasn't barefoot, but the soles of his shoes were thin, and some of the instruments would surely puncture his skin. Once he cleared the table, Dr. Roberts heard ragged breathing to his left. He stopped in his tracks, swallowing hard to fight off the impending dread.

He turned to his left to find Andersen on the floor, huddled up against the wall. Her hair hung over her face, hiding the metal plate over her left eye. Her fingers trembled as she stared at them, a long scar decorating her left arm. The off-white medical gown hung loosely off her shoulders, contrasting with her dark locks. Dr. Roberts wondered if Andersen even knew he was in the room, but once she lifted her gaze, her eyes bore right into him. A chill ran down Dr. Roberts' spine. His brain told his legs to move,

but they refused to cooperate.

"Andersen."

She remained still, her eyes still glued to Dr. Roberts.

"Jill?"

The brunette slowly climbed to her feet, her palm pressed flat against the wall to keep herself steady. Her knees nearly gave out at one point, but Jill caught herself and regained her composure. Once she was fully upright, Jill regarded Dr. Roberts once more.

"Who are you?"

This was not the voice of someone who had just regained consciousness after a massively invasive procedure. It was steady, confident. Yet her question betrayed that sense of confidence. Then again, Dr. Roberts had warned Jill temporary memory loss was a possibility. Trent made sure to keep his distance, because if this procedure had been a success, he realized just how much danger he'd be in if she turned violent.

"I'm Dr. Trent Roberts." He tried to keep his voice even, faltering on the last syllable.

Jill's right eye -- which was still her natural green -- twitched, darting from one side of the room to the other. She pressed her left hand against the wall, cringing when the movement of her left arm tugged on the healing scar. She shot Dr. Roberts a menacing glare, one that immediately melted into a neutral expression. Jill took a tentative step forward, then another, then yet another, and with each of her steps, Dr. Roberts took one to distance himself further.

"You're afraid of me."

Dr. Roberts winced as the truth smacked him in the face. He didn't like to admit that a product of his experiment, something he'd worked over half his life for, scared him -- especially knowing Jill had volunteered for this procedure. But considering this was the first time a test subject for Project Fusion had survived the experience, it was safe to say that Trent was in uncharted waters.

"No." Trent hoped his fake smile was convincing. "We just didn't expect you to be awake so soon."

"I was asleep." Her eye darted back and forth again. "Did you put me to sleep?"

Dr. Roberts forced himself to stay still as Jill approached again. She got to within a few feet of him before Trent flinched and immediately relaxed his shoulders. She was uncertain, taking in her spartan surroundings. The medical gown threatened to slip off her right shoulder. With her left arm, she brushed strands of unkempt hair out of her face, and Dr. Roberts briefly caught his own reflection in her eyepate. The skin surrounding the plate was scarred, jagged and red.

"You..." He swallowed. Words were suddenly hard to come by. "You volunteered for a procedure. We finished it a couple hours ago."

Jill flinched. Her eyes darted to her left arm, taking in the long scar. The red patches of healing skin were turning pink almost before her eyes. She then looked down, seeing the top of another scar that started at her collarbone, her finger trailing over her gown until the raised skin stopped just shy of her navel. Her eyes widened, the realization of what occurred finally dawning on her. The brunette brought a shaky hand to the side of her face, gasping when her fingers touched cold metal. She opened her mouth to speak, but all she managed at first was a tiny gasp of air.

"What," she finally whispered, "what did I agree to?"

"Project Fusion." Trent took a step forward, excitement beginning to override any concerns over personal safety at this point. "We...you..." Dr. Roberts sighed in frustration. This was so much easier to explain when the person he was talking to wasn't suffering from memory loss. He took a deep breath, gathering his bearings before pressing. "Cybernetics, is I guess the best way to put it."

Jill scrunched her brow. "I'm a cyborg?"

"That's..." Dr. Roberts took a step back, almost tripping over his own feet. "...an oversimplification, I'd say."

She closed the distance between them quicker than he expected, and he could barely react before her hand wrapped around his neck. Dr. Roberts yelped in fear, trying to keep as still as possible, lest she decided to squeeze.

"Then *explain* it."

"Your skeleton," Dr. Roberts pointed at the scar on her left arm, "we grafted it in titanium. Practically indestructible." He pointed at her eyeplate. "Infrared vision. Great once you have your badge and you can examine crime scenes unlike anyone else." He felt her fingers flex against his neck, eyes widening in momentary panic before they relaxed again. Offering a silent prayer to a deity he didn't believe in, Dr. Roberts tried his damndest to meet her gaze, no matter how terrifying it was. "You're stronger, faster, more durable. We cut you open several hours ago, and already I can see the scars healing."

Reluctantly, Jill released her grip on the doctor's neck. She glanced down at the scars littering different parts of her body, squinting. "I asked for this?"

"We have your signed waiver on file, if you'd like proof."

Dr. Roberts watched as Jill roamed around the room. Her human eye was distant, fluttering about her surroundings. He could see the wheels spinning inside her head. Trent remembered her saying she wanted to be a cop after she got out of the Army. Homicide, like her father. He could already see the cop in her, the person who had to have all the answers, trying to piece everything together.

"The memory loss is temporary." Trent was secretly relieved when she didn't turn her attention to him. "I'd say another twenty-four hours, and you'll likely remember everything again."

"And if I don't?"

Dr. Roberts blinked, taken aback. He hadn't actually considered that possibility. Trent secretly chastised himself for that, because any scientist worth a damn would have. Jill turned to face him and he flinched. Unable to think of a suitable answer, Dr. Roberts opted for changing the subject.

"Are you in any pain?"

Jill's eyes flickered again and she glanced at the scar on her arm. To be entirely truthful, she didn't feel much of anything at the moment. Her legs were a little weak, if anything, and she could feel her knees threatening to give out. Whether that was a matter of being physically weak after the procedure or the overwhelming reality of what just happened, she couldn't say. She tore her eyes from the scar and regarded the doctor once more, a flash entering her mind and leaving in almost the same instant.

She stumbled a bit, taken aback by the flash. It hit her again, knocking her back against the wall. Her mind was a blur, but the fog eventually lifted, and she could see a searing hot blade slicing into her arm. She recoiled at the image with a gasp, dropping to her knees and curling up against herself next to the wall. She could feel the blade cutting through her skin all over again, screaming as she scratched at the scar.

A faceless figure clasped something over her nose and mouth. Everything went foggy again, then drifted into black. Her shoulders hunched, a shiver tore through her body. A dull ache grew in Jill's chest, slowly morphing into an unbearable burning sensation. Her teeth gritted and gnashed, her arms cradling her stomach as she doubled over in pain.

Against his better judgment, Dr. Roberts approached her. His steps were cautious and methodical. If he had to guess, he figured some of the memories were returning, and with them, the realization of the physical trauma her body had just endured. She volunteered for this procedure, that much was true, but she had been given ample warning about the immediate physical effects once she regained consciousness.

Trent dropped to a knee, placing a tentative hand on her shoulder. "Andersen..."

Before Dr. Roberts could react, Jill lashed out at him, pushing him to the floor before her hands grabbed the lapel of his lab coat. She slammed the back of his head against the floor with a growl before her left fist collided with his nose. Even as he felt his nose break, Dr. Roberts noticed what sounded like the collision of metal on metal when she punched him. Dr. Roberts recoiled, his hands covering his nose, the warmth of his blood soaking onto his fingers.

She raised her fist again, but the sound of guards approaching stopped her mid-swing. Panic set in before she released her grip on Dr. Roberts and bolted. His nose throbbing, Dr. Roberts could barely see as she leapt into a vent on the ceiling, her body disappearing just as the guards burst into the room. Two of them ran to opposite ends of the room, their boots clomping loudly on the floor as one tended to Trent.

"What happened, sir?"

"Andersen's awake." He cringed as he sat up, wiping at his nose with his shirt sleeve.

"And...gone."

"Should we pursue?"

"No!" He grabbed the guard's shoulder, a fit of panic briefly overwhelming him. "No. Let her go. She'll be fine."