

TRUST FALL

JESSICA DEVLIN – US MARSHAL ACTION

Alex Ander

Chapter 1

Not Forgotten

25 APRIL—12:21 P.M.

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

“...Gone,” in full uniform, standing before a flag-draped casket, the Alexandria Police Department’s Chief of Police folded hands in front of his body and bowed his head, “but not forgotten.”

Seventy-five feet away, a firing party of seven uniformed officers—lined up from shortest to tallest—stood on the side of a slight incline.

Firing Commander: “Ready...Aim...Fire!”

Seven M14 rifles discharged.

Facing the Police Chief from across the width of the coffin, wearing a black dress, black nylons, and black high heels—her father holding an umbrella over her head—Jessica Devlin felt relief from the spindly arms gripping her right leg. She glanced down.

With both hands pressed against her ears, Cassandra looked up at her mother. “It hurts.”

Devlin scooped up the four-year-old. Hugging her child, stroking the little girl’s hair, “It’s okay, babe,” she gazed beyond the far end of the casket, at a white marble headstone flanked by two, neatly trimmed evergreen shrubs. She squinted at the inscription: *In Loving memory of Jonathon J. Devlin. A devoted husband and loving father, he gave everything for his God, his family, and his country.*

Commander: “Ready...”

With a light mist tapping at the protective covering above her head, Devlin brought Cassandra’s face to her chest. “It’ll be over soon, Cassie.”

“Aim...”

Struggling to tamp down the emotional mass in her throat, Devlin clutched her girl and put her lips to the top of Cassandra’s soft, wispy hair.

“Fire!”

The girl flinched.

Devlin squeezed her offspring.

Cassandra's tiny fingers crumpled her mother's dress, as she drew closer to her remaining parent. "Mommy, are you going away?"

"Ready..."

Pressure built behind Devlin's eyes, as she recalled what she had said on that day. *Daddy had to go away for a little while. But you'll see him again.* The death of her husband had shaken her to the core. A devout Catholic, never missing Sunday Mass, Devlin had lost her faith—her trust—in a benevolent god. She had spoken those words to her daughter to bring comfort, but her mind had questioned their value, their validity. She remembered thinking to herself: *How could a loving god take such a good man from me?*

Devlin cradled Cassandra. "I promise you, Cassie. I'm not going anywhere. I will always come home to you. It may—"

"Aim..."

She shut her eyes, held firm to the one in her care, and braced for the final volley.

"Fire!"

Seven reports broke through the light rain.

"It may not be when you want me to, but I will *always* come home to you." She kissed her child's head. "I love you."

Standing next to the firing party, an officer raised a bugle to his mouth and played the long, first note of "Taps."

Devlin's face twisted. Her breaths became erratic. Her shoulders rocked.

On her left, her father gave her a one-armed hug.

Unable to maintain the strong facade any longer, she cried into Cassandra's hair, her mind showing her images of her late husband. *Why? Why did you leave me? What am I going to do without you?* She felt Cassandra squirm. *And what about Cassie? She's going to need a father. She's going to need you, Jon.*

The bugler held the final note before letting the instrument go silent.

The rain grew in intensity, pelting the black umbrella protecting Devlin and her daughter.

The widow sniffed. *Damn it, Jon. How could you do this to us?* She envisioned her husband lying in a hospital bed—I.V. tubes taped to the backs of his bruised hands, machines beeping, oxygen coursing through the large tube attached to the mask covering his face. He was fighting for

his life as bravely as he had fought the criminal who had shot him. Devlin knew her feelings were irrational, even cruel. To believe this was somehow Jonathon's fault was insane; however, the sudden cutting short of a young life would be enough to drive anyone to the edge of insanity.

Devlin glimpsed the flowers on the casket, the hanging flag, and the grave marker. Her eyes settled on the vessel that held her husband's body and where his face would be inside. *I love you, Jon. Cassie and I will never forget you.*

Their rotors thumping, three helicopters approached the ceremony, flying in a 'V' formation.

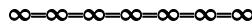
Breaking into her thoughts, the sudden, rhythmic droning grew to a crescendo before fading away. Devlin swallowed, and the simple act seized her throat. Seeing the world around her through a blurry haze, she took a half step backward. The back of her knee touched cold metal. Collapsing, more than sitting, she landed on a folding chair while clinging to her little one.

Moments later, the other mourners claimed their seats.

Two officers removed the flag from the coffin. After folding the American symbol of freedom in half—twice, lengthwise—the men made thirteen folds, creating the shape of a triangle. Only the flag's blue field and white stars were visible. One officer handed the standard to the Police Chief.

The Chief approached Devlin, went to one knee, and held the patriotic emblem in front of her. "On behalf of the..."

Gaping at the small stars, hearing nothing after the man's first four words, her eyes shedding tears, she accepted the gesture of gratitude.



Chapter 2

Mom Vibe

TWO YEARS LATER...

1 MAY—8:49 P.M.

COLONIAL HEIGHTS, VIRGINIA

Normally busy during the day, this intersection in Colonial Heights became desolate at night. A couple of low-rent, high-rise housing structures—across the street from each other—took up two corners while an all-night liquor store and a check-cashing establishment sat on the remaining two.

The traffic signal faithfully did its job, cycling from green to yellow to red, even though very few cars passed beneath. People who knew the area and valued their lives found alternate routes to get to their destination.

Those who were forced to call this area home, due to poverty, low-paying jobs, a single income, or some other factor, stayed inside behind door locks, door chains, deadbolts, bars on the windows, and whatever other security devices they could afford to employ.

The young, the strong, the fearless made this stretch of Virginia their playground, many of them major contributors to the criminal activities—illegal drugs, prostitution, gambling—plaguing the community. Drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, men loitered, waiting to pounce on anyone who foolishly entered this district. In short skirts, high heels, and revealing tops, their hair done up, women patrolled the sidewalks looking for their next twenty-dollar ‘John.’

Its muffler rumbling, an older model, rusted out, four-door Chevy stopped at the curb near one of the housing units. The driver leaned over the console and rolled down the passenger window. An overhead streetlight lit up his gaunt cheeks, dark goatee, and bushy eyebrows.

A woman wearing a black leather jacket, blue-and-white-striped miniskirt, black knee boots, and black fishnet stockings sauntered up to the car.

Eyeing her attire and athletic figure, he smiled, “Hey there,” and gunned the engine a couple times, partly to impress her, but mostly to keep the car from stalling.

The five-ten woman, easily six foot tall in her high-heeled boots, bent over and leaned on the Chevy's passenger door. "What can I do for you?" She quickly scanned both ends of the street.

"Well, that depends." The man stroked his goatee while admiring her looks—straight, medium-length raven black hair; dark brown eyes; petite, slim nose; full lips; slender lines along her jaw.

"What's the going rate?"

"Fifty. Anything out of the ordinary will cost you extra."

"Kind of high, isn't it?"

"I'm new here...and *fresher* than the competition." Looking away, the woman lifted a shoulder. "Take it or leave it."

Goatee gave her another once-over. "But you're also older..."

She flicked her eyes his way.

"...you've," he twirled a finger at her, "got this whole...*mom vibe* going on."

The woman pivoted her head toward him.

"But," he slowly nodded at the cleavage protruding from between her jacket's lapels, "I like it."

A sleek, red Cadillac convertible—top down, music blasting into the open air—rolled by and parked two spaces ahead of the rusted Chevy. Four Latino men in jeans and muscle shirts hopped out and swaggered toward the apartment building. Each man exchanged hand slaps and chest bumps with others he knew.

The woman turned her attention toward the scene.

Afraid of losing her, Goatee dug out a fifty-dollar bill and dropped the note onto the passenger seat. "There's your fifty." He added a 'Jackson' along with demands for additional sex acts.

Squinting at the four Latinos, she watched them walk through the front door of the structure.

"So what do you say? That's seventy bucks."

"Yeah," fishing around inside her jacket, "you're not getting any of those things from me," she faced him and held out a bi-fold.

He glimpsed her badge—a five-pointed, silver star inside a silver circle—before shutting his eyes and letting out a low groan.

"United States Deputy Marshal." She stowed the credentials. "Since I don't have time to bust you, you should consider this your lucky day." She smacked the door twice and jerked her thumb. "Beat it, scumbag."

Not giving the federal agent the chance to change her mind, the man spun the steering wheel and stepped on the gas pedal. Its muffler spewing noise pollution, the Chevy peeled away from the curb.

The woman made her way toward the apartment building's front door. "This is Devlin. I have a visual on Mendoza. All tac teams have a 'go.' I repeat...all teams move in!"

Moments later, two black SUVs squealed around the corner and skidded to a halt, blocking the Cadillac's escape. Eight doors flew open, and eight men rushed toward Devlin; seven were outfitted with tactical gear. The eighth man was dressed in blue jeans and a dark-colored windbreaker, POLICE U.S. MARSHAL emblazoned on the jacket. He carried a bulletproof vest.

Devlin turned away from the assaulters and held her arms straight out behind her.

The man in jeans threaded the vest's two openings up her arms and over her shoulders.

"Thanks, Hawk." She drew a forty-five caliber Colt 1911 handgun from a hip holster under her leather jacket before securing the newly added protective garment.

Blake Hawkins—six foot tall, African-American, closely cropped dark hair, chiseled jaw, and muscular frame—drew his Glock 22. "Fifty bucks, huh?"

The two of them hurried toward the building.

"I thought that was a good price." She shrugged. "I don't know. You think my rates are steep?"

He shook his head, "Not at all," before grabbing the front door's vertical handle. "In fact they might be low for an," pulling open the glass entry point, he hesitated, "*older woman with a mom vibe going on.*"

Hearing him repeat what the 'John' had said to her a moment ago, the twenty-nine-year-old woman pulled up short and confronted Hawkins, her jaw set, one eye half closed.

He smiled. "I know I'll pay for that later, but," he dipped his forehead toward her, "the look on your face right now...is worth the price."

She shed a half grin at her partner, the man she relied on to have her back in these situations. "You *will* pay for that."

Entering the structure, Devlin and Hawkins led the U.S. Marshals Service Special Operations Group (S.O.G.) toward the stairs. Her four-inch heels clicking off the tile flooring, she lifted a balled hand and glimpsed him. "Take one for you."

He gave her a fist bump. "Not if I take one for you first."

Six months ago, Hawkins had stepped in front of a bullet meant for Devlin. His vest had absorbed the projectile. From that moment, the two deputy marshals became close friends and started fist bumping and repeating their mantra before every potentially violent encounter.

Having ascended two flights of stairs and crept down a third-floor hallway, the assault team stacked up outside an apartment door.

Devlin and Hawkins stood on the opposite side of the walkway, across from the door.

The S.O.G. team leader looked at her.

Hearing a noise—a door closing in a hollow room—she faced the direction of the sound and glanced at an ‘EXIT’ sign at the far end of the hall before eyeing Hawkins.

He showed her an upturned thumb.

She nodded at the S.O.G. team leader.

The man pounded on the door.

Devlin raised her voice. “Raphael Mendoza, this is the U.S. Marshals Service. We have a warrant for your arrest. Open the door.” Retreating, she gestured at the agent with a battering ram.

The man swung the instrument, and the door burst inward. Two columns of heavily armed men flooded the dwelling, each man shouting commands:

“U.S. Marshals.”

“Hands.”

“Show me your hands.”

“Get down on your knees.”

Guns up, Devlin and Hawkins were last to enter the living area.

More commands came from the S.O.G. team...

“Get down on the floor.”

“Hands on your head.”

“Don’t move.”

Seconds later, at different intervals, Devlin heard shouts from different men.

“Clear.”

“Bedrooms are clear.”

“Clear.”

The S.O.G. team leader approached Devlin. “All clear, ma’am. Suspects have been secured.”

Devlin went from room to room, identifying each handcuffed man. She faced Hawkins. “He’s not here. Mendoza’s not here.”

Hawkins scowled at her. “What do you mean? You said you saw him.”

“I *did* see him.” She ran fingers through her hair. “He got out of that Caddy right in front of me. Where did he—” she half closed an eye at her partner, her mind recalling the sound of the closing door from seconds earlier. “Someone tipped him off that we were coming.” She bolted out of the apartment and headed for the back stairs.

“Devlin.” Hawkins followed her.

“Bravo Team, report.”

“All clear...no contact—over.”

After bursting through the stairwell door, Hawkins one pace behind her, she leaned over the railing and saw Bravo Team stacked up on the first-floor landing. She tipped her head back and eyed a gray metal door with areas of missing paint that revealed rust blotches. Lifting her tight-fitting skirt, she clambered up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. “Mendoza’s on the roof.”

With their guns at the ready and each deputy marshal spanning his/her one hundred and eighty degree arc of responsibility, Devlin and Hawkins cleared the roof, hurried to the edge, and peered over the side. She scanned the adjacent roof and spotted a door closing the last few inches. Pointing with her chin at the door, “He jumped,” she holstered her 1911 and backed away.

Hawkins glanced at the narrow alley three stories below. “All teams, the suspect’s jumped to the structure to the immediate east. Cover both exits. Make sure he doesn’t get out of that building.” He turned around and saw his partner removing her vest. “What are you doing?”

“This thing’s too restrictive. It’ll also,” she tossed the garment at him, “weigh me down.”

“I—” approaching her, he caught the clothing, “that’s not what I meant. You,” he shot a look at the other roof and came back to her, “you can’t do this, Jess. It’s too far.”

Hiking up her skirt for more freedom of movement, Devlin filled her lungs and exhaled. “Sure I can. I’ve got,” she bobbed her head downward while lifting one boot, “long legs. And we’re one story higher.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I won’t let you do it. This is crazy.”

“Crazier than letting a child molester get away?” Squinting, she found a landing place and lowered her center of gravity. “Meet me downstairs.” Devlin took off running.

Hawkins lunged for her, “Jessica,” but she was beyond his reach.

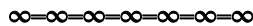
Three strides from the metal lip, she felt her heart beating faster. A dozen years ago, she had competed in the long jump in high school; however, she had done so in tennis shoes and shorts, not high-heeled boots and fishnets. She planted the sole of her left boot on the metal lip. *Tennis shoes, boots... she pushed off, it can't be that much different.*

Flying through the air, Devlin discovered one difference—traction. Her plant foot had slipped upon takeoff. Pumping her arms and legs as if she were still running, she saw her landing spot, further away than she had envisioned. Resisting the urge to look down at the darkened alley, she focused on her target while propelling her arms and legs faster. She brought her feet together and leaned forward.

Her heels touched down two inches from the edge of the building. Throwing out her hands, Devlin scraped her right knee and both palms, and fell onto her right hip before rolling through the landing. She stuck a boot spike into the rubber-coated, flattop roof to slow her momentum. Her knee boot skidded a short ways, and she came to a halt, down on one knee, one hand on the roof. Getting to her feet, while rubbing the smarting knee, she glanced over her shoulder.

One hand on his hip, the other holding the Glock loosely at his side, his lips mashed together, Hawkins slowly shook his head at her.

Drawing her Colt 45, Devlin flashed a smile. “See? I told you...long legs.” She hobbled a few paces, feeling a throbbing in her hip, before her gait returned to normal, and she ran toward the door she had seen closing moments ago.



Chapter 3

Dear God...

After following a short service entrance hallway, Devlin swung open an interior door and darted into a large space. Half-drawn window shades let in moonlight and ambient lighting from neighboring structures and streetlamps. After ducking behind a stack of boxes, she peeked out and saw rows and rows of more stacked boxes. Shelving units against the walls held additional cartons. She gave the loft another quick look. *Must be a storage area.*

With her 1911 in both hands and in front of her chest, the deputy marshal slowly advanced down the aisles while aiming the weapon at emerging dark corners. “All teams,” her voice was a whisper, “report.”

“This is Alpha. Front door of adjacent structure is secure. No movement—over.”

“This is Bravo. Back of the building is covered. No movement—over.”

Devlin rounded a corner and swung her 45 in the same direction. “Copy that.” Sticking two fingers into her left boot, she retrieved a skinny Pelican 1970 flashlight and slipped the tool’s lanyard around her left wrist.

Employing the Harries Technique—backs of hands pressed firmly together, light and gun pointing in the same direction—she briefly thumbed the Pelican’s rubber tail switch and lit up an area. A half second later, she released the on/off button and quickly moved to another position.

Using this method, Devlin cleared the near half of the storage loft and stopped at the edge of an open space. More piled boxes and a door were on the other side of the expanse. Swallowing, she heard the gulp between her temples. She looked left and right, her eyes trying to burrow through the brown cardboard and see possible threats waiting behind.

A moment later, her mind recalled the pledge she had made two years ago: ‘I promise you, Cassie. I will always come home to you.’ Devlin shut her eyes for a split second. *Dear God...* shaking her head, she dismissed the urge to call on the Divine for help. Expanding her lungs, she set her jaw and lowered her chin to her chest. *I can do this. I must do this.* She saw an image of Cassandra in her mind’s eye. *Someone I made a promise to is depending on me.*

Slightly crouched, she crept forward into the open area, whipping the Colt and Pelican in all directions while intermittently thumbing the 1970. Flashing and moving, flashing and moving, she had traversed a third of the exposed stretch when the beam from the flashlight zipped by a

disappearing dark mass to her right. Feeling an overwhelming interior voice telling her to do one thing—*Run*—Devlin took off running. To the sound of gunfire, she sprinted the final two-thirds of the vastness.

Bullets punctured the boxes to her left, sending pieces of cardboard into the air behind the fleeing deputy marshal.

Dropping to her right hip—the same one that had taken the brunt of the rooftop landing—Devlin grunted and slid along the floor. She did a counter-clockwise quarter-turn and went to her back. Twelve inches later, her right shoulder and hip slammed into a concrete wall.

The boxes above her head blew apart. Bits of packing peanuts floated down, coating her black hair and black jacket in a white dust.

The right side of her body on fire, the government agent lowered her head to the floor. Beneath closed eyelids, her eyeballs rolled backward. She pitched onto her left shoulder and inched closer to her cover, cutting the shooter's angle.

Devlin went to her belly, exposed her right eye and the Colt, and got off four shots. The reports from the forty-five caliber handgun eclipsed those from the nine-millimeter. Getting her feet under her, she put her left knee on the floor.

More incoming rounds shredded the box in front of her nose.

Ducking, putting her free hand on her head, she made herself small.

The noise stopped.

She leaned right, emptied her gun, and swayed back behind cover. Letting go of the Pelican, she fished out a spare magazine from inside her jacket and rammed the thin, metal rectangle home. "The building's surrounded." With the 1970 dangling from her wrist, "Drop your gun and," she gripped and ripped the 45 ACP's slide, chambering a cartridge, "come out with your hands up."

The loft was silent.

Devlin heard radio chatter in her ear. Alpha and Bravo Teams were preparing to breach the front and rear doors. "There's no escape. Surrender now before this gets out of hand."

More silence.

She squeezed her pistol, bracing for another blast of gunfire.

Something heavy skidded across the floor before a voice said, "Don't shoot. I'm unarmed."

Making a compact circular motion with her left forearm, Devlin caught the Pelican and tapped the button at the end of the flashlight. The device's beam centered on a gun in the middle of the open space. She swung the Colt and the 1970 to the left.

Hands held high, a Latino man came out from behind a stack of boxes and stood in the circle of light, his eyes blinking rapidly.

She squinted at him, *Mendoza*, before rising, and sidestepping to the right. "Turn around and interlock your fingers behind your head."

Mendoza complied.

"Walk backwards, toward the sound of my voice."

He backpedaled.

"Keep coming...keep coming...keep coming." Devlin kicked the empty firearm further away. "This way. Keep coming...*stop*."

Mendoza stopped.

"Get on your knees."

He kneeled.

"On your belly."

He went to his stomach.

After retrieving a pair of handcuffs from a pouch on her skirt, she drove a knee into his back, slapped one cuff onto his left wrist, and brought the same arm behind his back. She holstered her Colt and reached for his other wrist.

Hearing metal scrape across plastic, like the bottom wrestler in the 'Referee's Position' hearing the starting whistle, Mendoza jerked his body and twisted away from her grasp.

Devlin dropped to both knees and grappled with the wanted man before delivering three elbow strikes to his head and neck.

Mendoza flopped over and swung an arm back and forth.

Devlin heard the blade rip her jacket sleeve on the first pass. She rolled away to avoid the knife's second swipe. Leaping to her feet, she threw back the right half of her jacket.

The criminal charged and thrust out the switchblade, slicing at the deputy marshal.

Retreating, while arching her back and lifting her arms, she dodged the attacks.

Mendoza lunged and brought his cocked left arm forward.

Reversing course, Devlin got inside the arc, grabbed the offending wrist with both hands, pivoted clockwise, and wrenched her left arm backward. Her elbow caught the side of his nose.

Mendoza staggered away holding his face. Red liquid oozed from between his fingers.

Devlin drew her Colt and leveled the 45 ACP at his chest. “Drop the weapon! Drop it now!”

Lowering his hand, revealing a crooked and bloodied nose, he glimpsed his stained palm and glared at her.

She cocked her head at him. “Don’t be stupid. You’re outgunned...and federal agents will be here any second now.”

Standing taller and wrinkling his twisted nose, Mendoza toyed with the knife, tossing the switchblade from one hand to the other.

Devlin barely shook her head. “This ends with you in handcuffs or a body bag. Make the smart choice.”

He snorted a red glob out of his nose before spewing a vulgarity, a word unique to the female anatomy.

Her eyebrows bounced once. *Sticks and stones...*

Raising the weapon above his head, “You’re dead,” he rushed her.