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HER DEADLY GAME

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HER

DEADLY

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**HER
DEADLY
GAME**

**ROBERT
DUGONI**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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First edition

*To Jim Fick. Strong mind. Strong will.
Strong body. Looking forward to watching you climb
mountains at ninety.
And to Doug Harvey, mentor and friend.
Gone too young.*

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The truth is rarely pure and never simple.
—Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Part I

Prologue

April 1, 2022
Seattle, Washington

Seattle Violent Crimes Detective Frank Rossi drove over the street curb onto the Pioneer Square plaza pavers, the black Chevy's headlights reflecting the heavy rain, its windshield wipers slapping left and right in a futile effort to clear the glass. Ambulance lights pulsed red and white on the Pioneer Building's first-floor gray sandstone, and the fifty-foot, red cedar Tlingit totem pole overlooking the square. The eyes of a raven, the lowest carving, stared at Rossi, as if to question his early-morning presence.

"Right there with you," Rossi said, turning off the engine.

Being the on-call detective team was like being an on-call doctor. Rossi and his partner, Billy Ford, could be summoned at all hours of the day and night, though unlike a doctor, they never had the chance to save a life.

Rossi's day began when the victims' days ended.

The wind gusted, causing water from the sodden leaves of a maple tree to fall like hail on the car's roof and hood. Rossi noted two additional pool cars in the plaza. That would be his sergeant, Chuck Pan, and Ford. No matter how quickly Rossi responded to a homicide scene, he had never beaten Ford in the two years they had been a Violent Crimes team.

Rossi draped his Gore-Tex jacket over his head, pushed from the car, and hurried up the marbled steps where a uniformed officer stood seeking refuge beneath the arched building entry. Rossi flashed his credentials and stepped inside the foyer. He shook the rain from his jacket while considering the directory of commercial tenants in the glass case mounted on the wall. He found Cliff Larson Accounting on the fourth floor. The name pinged his memory, though at four in the morning, his addled brain couldn't place why.

He looked up at the peaked glass roof. Vines stretched over each landing, a curtain of green hanging in an atrium. The tenant offices were situated on the periphery of the landings, which were accessed by a staircase or a tiny cage elevator—a death trap, in Rossi’s opinion. He climbed the ornate, marbled staircase with the decorative, wrought-iron handrail, passing framed photographs on the wood-paneled walls that documented the building’s 130-year history at First and Yesler. The interior’s musty odor reminded him of the smell inside his grandfather’s closet.

On the fourth floor, Rossi followed the sound of hushed voices to the building’s northeast corner. Two paramedics stood alongside a uniformed officer—presumably the first to respond—and Billy Ford. Red crime scene tape had been strung across the office entrance. Cross it and you were obligated to file a report documenting your purpose at the scene, what you encountered, and with whom you spoke. Most officers avoided it like the plague.

Ford glanced at his wristwatch as Rossi neared. “Beat you by six minutes. You’re getting slower,” he said, his baritone voice as soothing as a deep saxophone.

“I’m beginning to think those rumors about you sleeping at Police Headquarters are true,” Rossi said. “Either that or you’re a superhero.”

Rossi scribbled his name on the log held by the uniformed officer, noting Chuck Pan’s and Ford’s names beneath the signatures of the two first responders. Pan used his middle name, and with good reason. His parents, first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, gave their son an American name, hoping he’d better fit in at school. Not aficionados of children’s literature, they had named him Peter. Everybody at SPD called him “Pan.”

Rossi could empathize. His Italian parents had named him Francesco. He’d endured bullying until he shortened his name. “You been in?” Rossi asked Ford.

“Waiting for you,” Ford said.

“You confirmed the victim is dead?” Rossi asked the paramedics. They looked remarkably young, and shaken, as did the officer holding the clipboard. At thirty-eight, Rossi had reached the pinnacle of investigations, with nowhere left to ascend, unless he had an interest in a desk job. He didn’t. He became a cop to avoid a desk. Homicides were now his job.

“Vic is in the office in back,” the young officer said. “It’s gruesome.”

They almost always are, Rossi thought but did not verbalize. “Did you or your partner touch anything?”

“No,” the officer said.

“Step in or on anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Who found the body?”

“Building superintendent. The victim’s wife called in just after two, said she couldn’t reach her husband.”

“Why’d she wait so long to call?”

“Husband said he’d be working late. She said he’d worked late all month.”

Tax season, Rossi thought.

“The super is in the office down the hall.” The officer pointed over Rossi’s shoulder with his pen. “My partner is taking his statement. You’ll find some vomit in the reception near the desk. That’s the super’s.”

“The super let you in?”

“Door was open. He was waiting out here. Pretty shaken up too.”

The super had likely touched the doorknob. They’d get elimination prints. “You do anything else?” Rossi asked.

The officer shook his head and gave a slight shrug. “Nothing else to do.”

“Pan called CSI and the ME,” Ford said.

“Let us know when they arrive,” Rossi said to the officer.

Ford opened their go bag. Made of black nylon, the bag had multiple exterior pockets, like a tool bag. Inside were notebooks and pens, a small tape recorder and batteries, disposable gloves and booties, a flashlight, a folded pocketknife, a small medical kit, zip ties, duct tape, business cards, a laminated card with a suspect’s Miranda rights, a magnifying glass, and extra ammo for their Glock handguns.

Rossi and Ford slipped the gloves and booties on. Before stepping inside the office, Rossi read the stenciled lettering on the fogged-glass door pane:

CLIFF LARSON, ACCOUNTING

The name still nagged at him. Still didn’t have time to consider why.

The office walls were red brick. Framed photographs hung by picture wire from the wooden molding high up on the wall. Rossi noted a reception desk piled with manila folders and documents, tax forms. *There but for the grace of God*, he thought. His mother was a CPA, as were both his sisters and his older brother. Family business. Rossi had taken all the classes at the UW and passed the CPA exam's five sections in just two tries. But he got cold feet. Couldn't picture himself sitting at a desk surrounded by numbers.

You'll never be out of work, his mother had told her children. *Two things are certain in this life. Death and taxes.*

Three certainties, actually. His mother had left out crime. Sadly, every day, someone, somewhere committed a crime. Law enforcement called to Rossi. A passion, he supposed, though his mother didn't like his choice. "I'll go to bed worrying about you every night."

She called frequently.

Rossi noted the puddle of yellow vomit on the beige rug. Blinds covered the windows of the two offices behind the reception desk. Pan stepped from the office on the left. Their sergeant was built like the brick walls—square and sturdy. Rossi couldn't help but think Pan's build was related to his given name. Kids could be cruel, until they feared for their safety.

Pan, almost never at a loss for words, grimaced. "This one is brutal," he said softly.

"Gunshot?" Rossi asked.

Pan nodded to the office. "Tell me what you think, but from a distance. You'll want to put on a Tyvek suit." Which meant there was a lot of blood and likely bodily fluids.

With growing trepidation, Rossi stepped to the office door. He noticed blood spatter on an exterior window, which was partially open, and the manila files atop the desk. A rainbow-shaped swath of spatter cut across a framed print by Ansel Adams—a lone tree crystallized in winter snow, the beautiful image a stark contrast to the violence Rossi took in. The room held the metallic tinge of iron.

Pant legs protruded from behind a desk. Khakis. Rossi took one careful step to his left. The person, presumably Cliff Larson, lay facedown. His green leather chair had been upturned, and blood, a burgundy red, pooled on the plastic mat beneath his misshapen head. Rossi initially

thought gunshot wound, but a longer look revealed that wasn't the case. He stepped back out into reception, where Pan and Ford waited.

“Someone beat him to death,” Rossi said.

“Thinking the same thing,” Pan said.

“Not sure with what, but to inflict that much damage . . .”

Rossi didn't finish his sentence. He didn't need to. Pan and Ford knew what Rossi had been about to say. The killer had struck Larson repeatedly, hitting him long after Larson's skull had caved in and death had been certain. An act of rage. Rossi now knew why those assembled outside the office could barely talk.

This was a nightmare, one that would linger in their memories every time they closed their eyes to sleep.

Rossi would share their nightmare.

Chapter 1

June 2, 2023

Seattle, Washington

Keera Duggan peered across the King County courtroom to the swinging wooden door and willed her father to walk in. Leaving him to lunch alone had been a mistake.

The bailiff entered from a door behind the elevated bench and commanded the courtroom to rise as Superior Court Judge Ima Patel retook her seat behind her desk, instructed the three people in the gallery to sit, and invited Officer Greg Walsh to retake the witness stand. Walsh pushed through the railing gate and made his way past the jurors. He looked official in his navy-blue uniform and utility belt. His SPD badge glistened. Walsh wore the belt at the request of the young prosecutor standing at the adjacent table. Keera used to give officers the same advice, despite the efforts of many judges to prohibit weapons in their courtrooms.

Patel turned her attention to Keera. “Counsel,” she said. “Will Mr. Duggan be joining us this afternoon?”

Patrick Duggan had sparred with King County prosecutors for four decades, including Ima Patel before she ascended to the bench. “Sparred” was a polite term. Patsy had routinely knocked out prosecutors, earning his nickname, the Irish Brawler, a moniker he wore as a badge of honor. The prosecuting attorney’s office felt differently. Patsy had not been opposed to hitting below the belt, throwing elbows in the clenches, and rabbit-punching out of the break. He defended his clients the way he’d won a Golden Gloves boxing tournament as a young man—any way he could. But alcohol abuse had softened Patsy’s punches and slowed his reflexes, if not yet his razor-sharp mind, and prosecutors and jurists on the King County bench knew well his binge drinking. When she’d been a prosecutor, Keera had heard colleagues in the office say, “If you want a chance to beat the Brawler, save

your best witnesses for the afternoons, and hope Patsy Duggan goes on a bender.”

Clancy Doyle, apparently now Keera’s client, looked at the empty chair at counsel table with genuine concern. With good reason. Keera sat second chair at this DUI trial only at the insistence of her eldest sister, Ella, now the managing partner of Patrick Duggan & Associates. Babysitting duty. Ella had suspected Patsy to be on the brink of a binge. Damned if she hadn’t been right.

Keera knew almost nothing about the details of Doyle’s case.

“Counsel?” Patel asked, sounding impatient.

Keera rose and tugged at the lapels of her black suit. “Mr. Duggan has been detained,” she said, as if her father had a dental appointment that had run long. “I’ll conduct the cross-examination of Officer Walsh.”

Patel’s lips nearly inched into a grin. Keera clearly wasn’t fooling at least one person in the courtroom. “Proceed,” Patel said.

Officer Walsh looked tightly wound as Keera approached. He expected a confrontation. The prosecuting attorney, also young, inched to the edge of her chair, prepared to stand and defend Walsh with objections and interruptions intended to throw Keera off her game.

They wouldn’t.

Keera approached the podium without notes. She smiled. “Good afternoon, Officer Walsh. How was your lunch?”

Walsh hesitated. “Too short.” His response garnered a few smiles from the jurors.

“You’re tired, I assume, from working the Third Watch last night—the graveyard shift.” Keera knew this because of Walsh’s age—twenty-three. He was years from pulling more reasonable watches. She also knew no officer got used to working the graveyard. Officers had told her their bodies adapted, but their internal clocks longed for normalcy.

“I’m eager to get home and sleep.” Walsh glanced at the jury. His boyish good looks and aw-shucks smile played well.

“I’ll bet it can be difficult to concentrate when your internal clock is thrown off.”

“You get used to it,” Walsh said, cautious, as the young prosecutor had certainly prepped him to be. Keera empathized with her. She was about to lose this case, and her supervising attorney would not be happy.

“You still have your officer’s report?”

“I do.” Walsh held up the multipage document.

“You testified on direct examination that your report was complete, accurate, and honest.”

“Truthful,” Walsh said.

Keera had deliberately misquoted Walsh. “Complete, accurate, and *truthful*,” she repeated, for the jury’s benefit. Each question was strategic. Keera thought several questions ahead, choosing the next one depending on Walsh’s answer. Walsh had found Doyle asleep behind the wheel of his car on a county road. Doyle had blown a .08 on the Breathalyzer and been charged with drunk driving, his second offense in two years. He faced a \$5,000 fine and thirty to 364 days in jail. Patsy had the Breathalyzer test thrown out since Doyle hadn’t been operating the vehicle at the time Walsh confronted him, but the PA chose to move forward with evidence Doyle also failed the field-sobriety test.

“Let’s get to it, then,” Keera said. “At the academy and at roll call before each watch, you are taught that officer safety is priority number one; aren’t you?”

Walsh looked surprised by the question. “Yes.”

“And in keeping with rule number one being *your* safety, you are taught how to interact with people in all kinds of situations, including a possible DUI stop; correct?”

“That’s correct.”

“Remind me. Your police training at the academy is about seven hundred hours; isn’t it?”

“Seven hundred and twenty.” He smiled.

“Of those seven hundred *and* twenty hours, how many hours are devoted to pulling someone over for a possible DUI?” Keera knew the answer from a class she took while at the PA’s office, but the answer was better coming from Walsh.

“I don’t know,” Walsh said.

Keera gently pounced. “The class didn’t make much of an impression, then,” she said.

Walsh stumbled to correct his mistake. “It did. I just don’t remember how many hours it was.”

“The DUI class I took at the police academy was two hours. Does that sound about right?”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he agreed, his smile becoming tentative.

“At the academy you’re also taught that approaching a vehicle can be dangerous; correct?”

“It can be, yes.”

“Even more dangerous when you come upon a car at night, on a county road, in pitch-black darkness; correct?”

“I have a lamp I shine through the back windshield,” Walsh said.

“You’re alert, then, maybe even nervous?”

“I’m not nervous. You get used to it,” he said. He thought he had figured out Keera’s next move.

“Really? With all the negative publicity police officers have recently received, you’re not nervous when you approach a car parked along the side of the road, alone, late at night?”

“There are always some nerves, but you deal with them.” Walsh glanced at the prosecutor, who gave him a subtle nod of approval.

“Okay. You’re also taught the person inside the car might be nervous, correct?”

“Correct.”

“A specific protocol exists on how to proceed with a night stop; doesn’t it? You call in the stop and provide your location to police headquarters.”

“Dispatch. Right.”

“You don’t jump out of your car with your gun drawn, do you?”

Walsh chuckled. “No. I check the license plate to determine if the driver has any warrants.”

“Did Clancy Doyle have any warrants?”

“No.”

“Then you jump out?”

“No. You position your vehicle at an angle in case the patrol car were to be rear-ended, it would not strike the parked car. Then you light up the person or persons inside the vehicle to determine if they’re trying to hide or grab anything. Any suspicious activity.”

“You didn’t observe Mr. Doyle doing anything suspicious, did you?”

Another pause. “No.”

“And when you approached Mr. Doyle’s driver’s window and questioned him, he didn’t argue with you, did he?”

“I don’t think he did.”

“If he had argued with you, you would have written it in your complete, accurate, and truthful report, wouldn’t you?”

“He didn’t argue with me,” Walsh said.

“He was cordial. Polite. Reasonable.”

“I guess so.” Walsh shrugged this off as inconsequential.

“You asked him to exit his vehicle, and he did that with no problem, correct?”

“I don’t recall any problem.”

“You didn’t note any problems in your complete, accurate, and truthful report, did you?”

“No.”

Keera picked up Officer Walsh’s report. “On direct examination you said the first thing you did after ordering Mr. Doyle from his car was put a pen in front of his eyes and ask him to visually track it. Did I read that correctly?”

“You did. And he didn’t.” Another smile for the jurors.

“You didn’t consider the fact that Mr. Doyle had bright lights shining in his eyes on a pitch-black road just seconds before you administered that test, though, did you?”

“Well . . .”

“It’s not in your complete, accurate, and truthful report.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s talk about what else is not in your report . . . and feel free to refer to it. I don’t want to mislead you.” She noticed several jurors suppressing grins. “Mr. Doyle did not have red, bloodshot eyes.”

“No.”

“He did not have glassy eyes.”

“No.”

“His skin was not flushed.”

“I couldn’t really see.”

“It’s not in your report.”

“It’s not.”

“He did not slur his speech.”

“No.”

“He did not stumble, fall over, or lose balance when he exited his car.”

“No.”

“He didn’t throw up or look sick.”

“No.”

“You testified that you considered ‘each piece of evidence’ to conclude my client was drunk. I assume you considered this evidence that indicated Mr. Doyle was not drunk; didn’t you?”

“When I gave him the field sobriety test, he did not step straight.”

“You’re saying Mr. Doyle, who admitted to being nervous, and after you had shone a bright light in his eyes, didn’t step perfectly straight while trying to follow your instructions that he walk heel to toe, with his hands at his side, along an imaginary straight line, on an uneven dirt-and-gravel shoulder?”

Officer Walsh sighed. “He stumbled.”

“But he did follow your instructions correctly, and he did count nine steps, turn, and count exactly nine steps back; didn’t he?” Keera demonstrated the walk.

“He followed the instructions I gave him, but he wove.”

“You considered his accurately following your instructions as evidence he was not drunk; didn’t you?”

“I considered the things he did wrong.”

Keera frowned, as if sorry for what she was about to do. “Then you *didn’t* consider each piece of evidence, as your report states. You *didn’t* consider all the evidence that indicated Mr. Doyle was not drunk; did you?”

“I considered everything, but I was *focused* on the things he did wrong,” Walsh said again, becoming recalcitrant.

Another mistake. “Then leaving out all the evidence you observed indicating Mr. Doyle was not intoxicated was inadvertent and not a deliberate attempt to mislead this court and its jurors?”

“Objection,” the prosecutor said, standing. “Argumentative.”

Patel sighed. “Overruled.”

“I’ll withdraw the question,” Keera said. She didn’t need the answer. “You also wrote in your report the car smelled of alcohol?”

“That’s correct,” Walsh said.

“You didn’t write Mr. Doyle smelled like alcohol.”

“What? I—”

“Was the car drunk?”

“Objection, Your Honor.”

“What’s the objection, Counselor?” Patel asked.

“Sarcasm?”

“Overruled.”

“He was the only one in the car,” Walsh said, his tone combative.

“You were taught at the academy, during that two-hour class on DUIs, that alcohol has no smell, weren’t you?”

“I don’t follow.”

“You were taught alcohol has no smell.” It was technically true. If the officer smelled an odor on the driver’s breath, it was the flavoring added to the beverage.

“I know what beer smells like, and he smelled . . . hoppy . . . Like hops.”

“Did the car smell like peanuts?”

Walsh paused. “I don’t recall.”

“My client had a bag of peanuts in the car, didn’t he? It’s in your report.”

“He did.”

“So you smelled peanuts, or maybe hops, but not alcohol, because you were taught at the academy that alcohol has no smell.”

The prosecuting attorney stood. “Objection, Your Honor. The witness said the defendant smelled like beer.”

“I don’t believe he did, Your Honor. Officer Walsh said the witness smelled ‘hoppy.’”

“Overruled,” Patel said.

Keera made a face like Officer Walsh’s answers pained her, but she’d have pity and not embarrass him further. She turned to Judge Patel. The jurist no longer looked as though she was holding back a smile.

Though several jurors did.