

MY
SISTER'S
GRAVE

ROBERT
DUGONI

**MY
SISTER'S
GRAVE**

ALSO BY ROBERT DUGONI

The David Sloane series

The Jury Master

Wrongful Death

Bodily Harm

Murder One

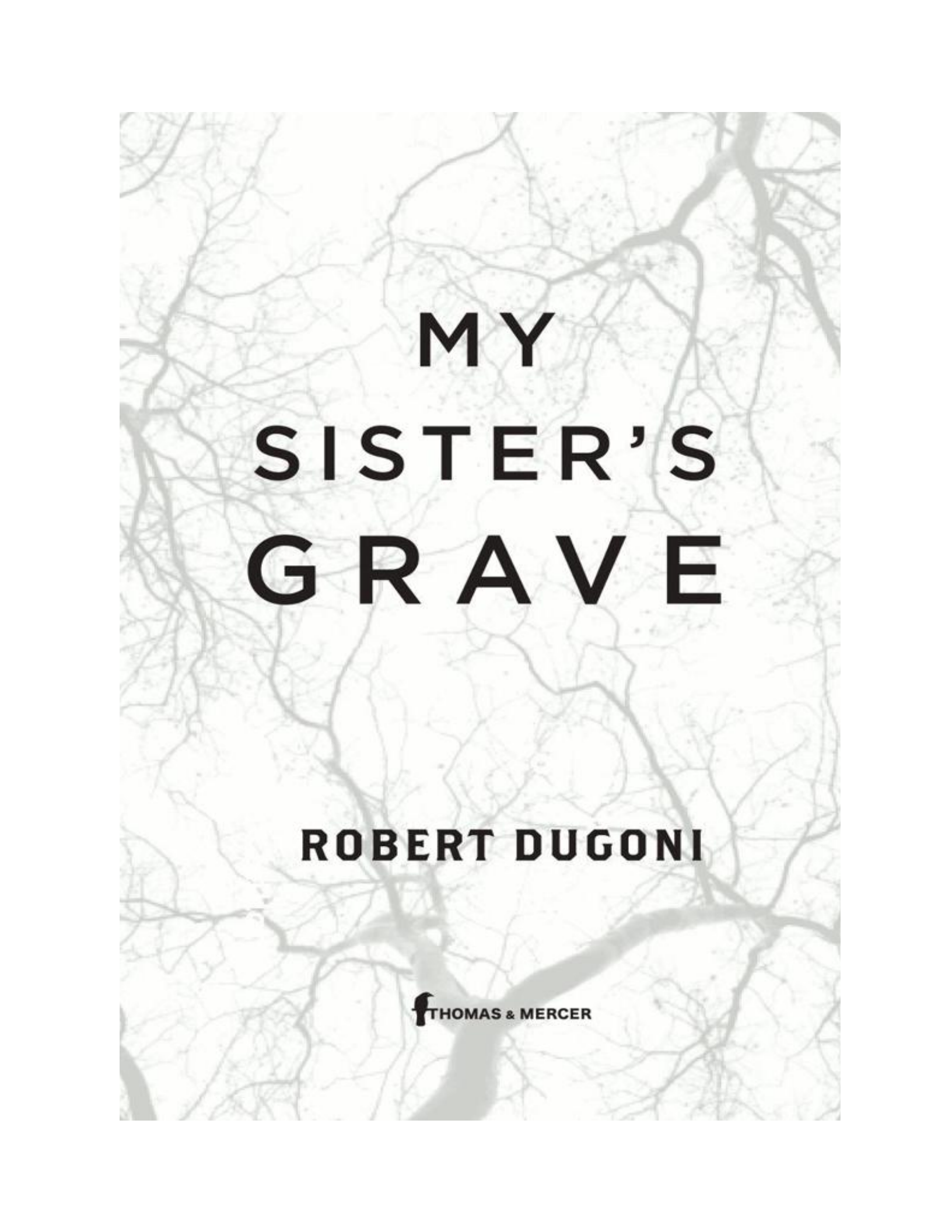
The Conviction

Stand-alone novel

Damage Control

Nonfiction with Joseph Hilldorfer

The Cyanide Canary



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ROBERT DUGONI

f THOMAS & MERCER

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To my brother-in-law, Robert A. Kapela: May you find in God's embrace the peace, love, and comfort that eluded you in the final years of your life.

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PART I

Better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer.

—SIR WILLIAM BLACKSTONE, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*

CHAPTER 1

Her tactical instructor at the police academy had liked taunting them during early morning drills. “Sleep is overrated,” he’d say. “You will learn to do without.”

He’d lied.

Sleep was like sex. The less you had, the more you craved it, and Tracy Crosswhite hadn’t had much of either lately.

She stretched her shoulders and neck. With no time for a morning run, her body felt stiff and half-asleep, though she didn’t remember sleeping much, if at all. Too much fast food and too much caffeine, her doctor said. Good advice, but eating well and exercising took time Tracy didn’t have when investigating a homicide, and giving up caffeine would be like cutting off gasoline from a car engine. She’d die without it.

“Hey, the Professor’s in early. Who died?”

Vic Fazzio leaned his considerable girth against Tracy’s cubicle wall. It was an old Homicide joke, but never stale when punctuated by Faz’s hoarse voice and New Jersey accent. With a salt-and-pepper pompadour and fleshy features, the Homicide section’s self-proclaimed “Italian Gumba” could have served as one of those silent bodyguards in mafia movies. Faz held the *New York Times* crossword puzzle and a library book, which meant the coffee had kicked in. God help anyone if they had to use the men’s room while Faz was there. He was known to stew for half an hour over his answers or when reading a particularly compelling chapter.

Tracy handed him one of the crime scene photos she’d printed out that morning. “Dancer over on Aurora.”

“Heard about it. Kinky shit, huh?”

“I saw worse working sex crimes,” she said.

“I forgot. You gave up sex for death,” he said.

“Death is easier,” she said, stealing another of Faz’s punch lines.

The dancer, Nicole Hansen, had been found hog-tied in a cheap motel room on Aurora Avenue in North Seattle. A noose was fastened around her neck and the rope threaded down her spine, binding her wrists and ankles—an elaborate setup. Tracy handed Faz the medical examiner’s report. “Her muscles cramped and eventually seized. When they did, she straightened her legs to relieve the pain. She ended up strangling herself. Nice, huh?”

Faz considered the photograph. “Wouldn’t you think they’d have used a slipknot or something to get out of it?”

“That would be logical, wouldn’t it?”

“So, what’s your theory? Some guy sat there getting his jollies watching her die?”

“Or they screwed up, and he panicked and fled. Either way, she didn’t tie herself.”

“Maybe she did. Maybe she’s like Houdini.”

“Houdini untied himself, Faz. That was the trick.” Tracy took back the report and photograph and set them on her desk. “So here I sit at this ungodly hour, just you, me, and the crickets.”

“Me and the crickets’ve been here since five, Professor. You know what they say. Early bird catches the worm.”

“Yeah, well, this early bird’s so tired she wouldn’t know a worm if it crawled out of the ground and bit her on the butt.”

“So where’s Kins? How come you’re having all the fun?”

She checked her watch. “He’d better be buying me a cup of coffee, but at this rate I could have brewed it myself.” She nodded at the book. “*To Kill a Mockingbird*. I’m impressed.”

“I’m trying to better myself.”

“Your wife picked it out for you, didn’t she?”

“You bet.” Faz pushed away from the wall. “Okay, time for my smart time. The *Mockingbird*’s singing, and I’m percolating.”

“TMI, Faz.”

He started from the bull pen, then turned back, pencil in hand. “Hey, Professor, help me out. I need a nine-letter word for ‘makes natural gas safe.’”

Tracy had been a high school chemistry teacher before making a career change and attending the academy. She received her nickname there. “Mercaptan,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Mercaptan. They add it to natural gas so you can smell it if you have a leak in the house.”

“No kidding. What’s it smell like?”

“Sulfur. You know, rotten eggs.” She spelled it.

Fazio licked the tip of his pencil and wrote in the letters. “Thanks.”

As Faz departed, Kinsington Rowe walked into the A Team’s bull pen and handed Tracy one of two tall cups. “Sorry,” he said.

“I was about to call search and rescue.”

The A Team was one of the Violent Crime Section’s four homicide teams, each consisting of four detectives. Tracy, Kins, Faz, and Delmo Castigliano, the other half of the Italian Dynamic Duo, made up the A Team. They sat with their desks in the four corners of one large cubicle, their backs to each other, which is how Tracy preferred it. Homicide was a fishbowl, and privacy was already at a premium. In the center of their square, they shelved Homicide binders below a work-space table. They each kept the felony assault files they were working at their respective desks.

Tracy cradled the cup. “Come to me you bittersweet nectar of the gods.” She took a sip and licked foam from her upper lip. “So what took you?”

Kins grimaced as he sat. A running back for four years at the U and one year in the NFL, Kins retired when doctors misdiagnosed an injury that had left him with a degenerative hip. He’d eventually need it replaced but said he was holding out so he only had to have it done once. In the interim, he dealt with the pain by chewing on Advil.

“Your hip that bad?” she asked.

“Used to just be when it got cold.”

“So get it fixed already. What are you waiting for? I hear it’s routine now.”

“Nothing’s routine when the doctor has to slip that mask over your face and tell you nighty-night.”

He looked off, still grimacing, an indication that something more than his hip was bothering him. After six years working side by side, Tracy knew Kins’s tells. She knew his moods and his facial expressions. She knew first thing in the morning whether he’d had a bad night or gotten laid. Kins was her third Homicide partner. The first assigned to work with her, Floyd Hattie, had announced that he’d rather retire than work with a woman, then did so. Her second partner lasted six months, until *his* wife had met Tracy at

a barbecue and couldn't deal with her husband sharing close quarters with a single then-thirty-six-year-old five-foot-ten blonde.

When Kins had volunteered to work with Tracy, she might have been just a tad sensitive.

Fine, but what about your wife? she'd asked. *Is she going to have a fucking problem?*

I hope not, Kins had said. *With three kids under the age of eight, that's about the last fun thing we do together.*

She knew immediately he was someone she could work with. They'd struck a deal—total honesty. No hard feelings. It'd worked for six years.

“Something else bothering you, Kins?”

Kins blew out a breath and met her gaze. “Billy stopped me in the lobby,” he said, referring to the A Team's sergeant.

“I hope he had a good reason to keep me from my coffee. I've killed for less.”

Kins didn't smile. The chatter of the morning news from the television hanging over the B Team's bull pen filtered through the room. A phone rang unanswered on someone's desk.

“Something to do with Hansen? The brass busting his chops over this one?”

He shook his head. “Billy got a call from the medical examiner's office, Tracy.” He made eye contact. “Two hunters found the remains of a body in the hills above Cedar Grove.”

CHAPTER 2

Tracy's fingers twitched with anticipation. The light breeze that had periodically kicked up throughout the day gusted, blowing open the back flap of her weathered duster. She waited for the wind to calm. After two days of competition, one shooting stage remained to determine the 1993 Washington State Single Action Shooting Champion. At twenty-two, Tracy was already a three-time winner, but she'd lost that title last year to Sarah, four years her junior. This year, the two sisters entered the final stage virtually tied.

The range master held the timer close to Tracy's ear. "Your call, Crossdraw," he whispered. Her cowboy name was a play on their last name, as well as the type of holster she and Sarah favored.

Tracy dipped the brim of her Stetson, took a deep breath, and gave deference to the best Western movie ever made. "Fill your hands, you son of a bitch!"

The timer beeped.

Her right hand drew the Colt from her left holster, cocked the hammer, and fired. Gun already drawn and cocked in her left hand, she took down the second target. Finding her rhythm and gaining speed, she shot so fast that she could barely hear the ting of lead over the discharge of the guns.

Right hand. Cock. Fire.

Left hand. Cock. Fire.

Right hand. Cock. Fire.

She took aim at the bottom row of targets.

Right, fire.

Left, fire.

Three final shots rang out in rapid succession. Bam. Bam. Bam. Tracy twirled her guns and slapped them down on the wood table.

“Time!”

A few spectators applauded, but their clapping quieted as more began to realize what Tracy already knew.

Ten shots. But only nine tings.

The fifth target in the bottom row remained upright.

Tracy had missed.

The three spotters standing nearby each holding up one finger to confirm it. The miss would be costly, a five-second penalty added to her time. Tracy eyed the target, disbelieving, but staring at it wasn't going to make it fall. Reluctantly, she collected her revolvers, slapped them in their holsters, and stepped aside.

All eyes turned to Sarah, “The Kid.”



Their rugged carts, handmade by their father to hold their guns and ammunition, rattled and shook as Tracy and Sarah pulled them across the dirt-and-gravel parking lot. Overhead, the sky had rapidly blackened. The thunderstorm would arrive sooner than the weatherman had predicted.

Tracy unlocked her blue Ford truck's camper shell, lowered the tailgate, and wheeled on Sarah. “What the hell was that?” She did a poor job keeping her voice low.

Sarah tossed her hat into the truck bed, blonde hair falling past her shoulders. “What?”

Tracy held up the Championship silver belt buckle. “You haven't missed two plates in years. Do you think I'm stupid?”

“The wind kicked up.”

“You're a terrible liar, you know that?”

“You're a terrible winner.”

“Because I didn't win; you let me win.” Tracy waited for two spectators to hurry past, the first drops of rain starting to fall. “You're lucky Dad wasn't here,” she said. August 21 was their parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and James “Doc” Crosswhite hadn't been about to tell his wife she'd have to forsake Hawaii to celebrate at a dusty shooting range in the state's capital. Tracy softened, though she remained agitated. “We've talked about this. I've told you, we both have to try our best or people are going to think the whole thing is rigged.”

Before Sarah could further respond, tires crunched gravel. Tracy diverted her attention as Ben swung his white pickup around her Ford, smiling down at them from inside the cab. Though he and Tracy had been dating for more than a year, Ben still smiled every time he saw her.

“We’ll talk about this more when I get home tomorrow,” Tracy said to Sarah and stepped away to greet Ben as he dropped from the cab and slipped on the leather car coat Tracy had bought him last Christmas. They kissed. “Sorry I’m late. Whoever outlawed drinking and driving never drove through Tacoma traffic. I could use a beer.” When Tracy straightened the collar of his jacket, Ben glanced at the belt buckle in her hand. “Hey, you won.”

“Yeah, I won.” Her gaze shifted to Sarah.

“Hey, Sarah,” Ben said, looking and sounding confused.

“Hey, Ben.”

“You ready?” he asked Tracy.

“Give me a minute.”

Tracy shed her duster and red bandanna, tossing both into the truck bed. Then she sat on the edge of the tailgate and held up a leg for Sarah to pull off her boot. The sky had turned completely black. “I don’t like the idea of you driving alone in weather like this.”

Sarah tossed the boot into the bed and Tracy raised her other leg. Sarah grabbed the heel. “I’m eighteen. I think I can drive myself home; it’s not like it never rains here.”

Tracy looked to Ben. “Maybe she should just come with us.”

“She doesn’t want to do that. Sarah, you don’t want to do that.”

“No, I definitely don’t want to do that,” Sarah said.

Tracy slipped on flats. “There’s supposed to be thunderstorms.”

“Tracy, come on. You act like I’m ten years old.”

“Because you act like you’re ten years old.”

“Because you treat me like I’m still ten years old.”

Ben checked his watch. “I hate to break up this intelligent discourse, ladies, but Tracy, we really have to go if we’re going to keep that reservation.”

Tracy handed her overnight bag to Ben and he took it to the cab as Tracy addressed Sarah. “Stay on the highway,” she said. “Don’t take the county road. It’ll be dark and the rain will make it harder to see.”

“The county road is faster.”

“Don’t argue with me. Stay on the highway and double back off the exit.” Sarah held out her hand for the truck keys.

“Promise me,” Tracy said, not relinquishing them without Sarah’s commitment.

“Fine, I promise.” Sarah crossed her heart.

Tracy pressed the keys into Sarah’s hand and curled her fingers over them. “Next time, just knock down the damn targets.” She turned to leave.

“Your hat,” Sarah said.

Tracy removed her black Stetson and popped it on Sarah’s head. When she did Sarah stuck out her tongue. Tracy wanted to be angry, but Sarah was impossible to stay mad at. Tracy felt a grin inch across her own face. “You’re such a brat.”

Sarah gave her an exaggerated smile. “Yes, but that’s why you love me.”

“Yeah, that’s why I love you all right.”

“And I love you too,” Ben said. He’d pushed open the passenger door and was leaning across the cab. “But I’ll love you more if we make that reservation.”

“I’m coming,” Tracy said.

She hopped in and shut the door. Ben gave Sarah a wave and made a quick U-turn, heading for the line of cars forming at the exit, the falling rain now looking like flecks of molten gold in the truck’s headlights. Tracy shifted to look out the cab window. Sarah remained standing in the rain, watching them leave, and Tracy felt a sudden urge to go back, as if she’d forgotten something.

“Everything okay?” Ben asked.

“Fine,” she said, though the urge persisted. She watched as Sarah opened her hand, realized what Tracy had done, and looked quickly again at the cab.

Tracy had pressed the silver belt buckle into Sarah’s palm along with the truck keys.

She would not see either again for twenty years.