


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ROBERT DUGONI

"Extraordinary . . . I would follow  
Robert Dugoni anywhere."

—LISA GARDNER, #1 NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# HER DEADLY GAME

## PRAISE FOR ROBERT DUGONI

“One of the best crime writers in the business.”

—Associated Press

“Dugoni is a superb storyteller . . .”

—*Boston Globe*

“Dugoni is every bit the equal of Lisa Gardner and Harlan Coben when it comes to psychological suspense.”

—*The Providence Journal*

“Dugoni has become one of the best crime novelists in the business.”

—*Romantic Times* (top pick)

“A writer at the top of his game.”

—Authorlink

“An author who seems like he hasn’t met a genre he can’t conquer.”

—Bookreporter

“Dugoni’s writing is compellingly quick, simple, and evocative.”

—Seattle Book Review

## PRAISE FOR *HER DEADLY GAME*

“One of the best puzzle books ever! I raced through the pages, which are packed full of compelling characters and taut gamesmanship, desperate to learn the answer to this extraordinary thriller, which is both whodunit and how-dunit. I would follow Robert Dugoni anywhere.”

—Lisa Gardner, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“I adore Robert Dugoni’s legal thrillers, and *Her Deadly Game* is his best one yet. I loved Keera Duggan’s strength and her heart, which shine through the pages, and I rooted for her every step of the way through this

unputdownable story.”

—Lisa Scottoline, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Absolutely riveting. A juicy tale that will leave readers hungry for more.”

—Victor Methos, bestselling author of *The Secret Witness*

“Robert Dugoni has done it again—created a twisty puzzle-box story with one of the most satisfying, jaw-dropping endings I’ve read in a long time. Part murder mystery, part courtroom drama, and part character study of fascinating chess prodigy turned defense attorney Keera Duggan, *Her Deadly Game* will keep you reading late into the night.”

—Angie Kim, international bestselling author of *Miracle Creek*

## PRAISE FOR THE TRACY CROSSWHITE SERIES

“Tracy Crosswhite is one of the best protagonists in the realm of crime fiction today.”

—Associated Press

“Gripping . . . Fans of police procedurals will hope Tracy has a long career.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Crime writing of the absolute highest order.”

—*The Providence Journal*

“An immensely—almost compulsively—readable tale . . . A crackerjack mystery.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

## PRAISE FOR THE CHARLES JENKINS SERIES

“Dugoni delivers an exceptionally gripping spy thriller that will keep readers on the edge of their seats.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Reviving all that was tense during the Cold War, Dugoni has fashioned a wonderful series around sleeper agents and one American’s duty to protect those involved.”

—*Mystery and Suspense Magazine*

“Espionage writing doesn’t get any better than Dugoni’s shrewd take on the state of US-Russian relations, as he proves to be not just a literary jack of all trades, but a master of all of them.”

—*The Providence Journal*

“*The Eighth Sister* is a great mix of spycraft and classic adventure, with a map of Moscow in hand.”

—Martin Cruz Smith, international bestselling author

**HER  
DEADLY  
GAME**

## **ALSO BY ROBERT DUGONI**

*The Last Line* (a short story)  
*The World Played Chess*  
*The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*  
*The 7th Canon*  
*Damage Control*

### **The Tracy Crosswhite Series**

*My Sister's Grave*  
*Her Final Breath*  
*In the Clearing*  
*The Trapped Girl*  
*Close to Home*  
*A Steep Price*  
*A Cold Trail*  
*In Her Tracks*  
*What She Found*  
*The Academy* (a short story)  
*Third Watch* (a short story)

### **The Charles Jenkins Series**

*The Eighth Sister*  
*The Last Agent*  
*The Silent Sisters*

### **The David Sloane Series**

*The Jury Master*  
*Wrongful Death*  
*Bodily Harm*  
*Murder One*

*The Conviction*

Nonfiction with Joseph Hilldorfer

*The Cyanide Canary*

**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.

Text copyright © 2023 by La Mesa Fiction, LLC  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle  
[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Thomas & Mercer are trademarks of [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781662500190 (hardcover)  
ISBN-13: 9781662500183 (paperback)  
ISBN-13: 9781662500176 (digital)

Cover design by Rex Bonomelli  
Cover image: © Westend61 / Getty Images; © ValterDesign / Shutterstock

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.*

# Contents

[Start Reading](#)

[Part I](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Part II](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Part III](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

*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