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November

Minneapolis, MN

Twenty-five years ago

Ted Duffy loved to swing the axe. He loved the motion—pulling back, stretching his body taut like a crossbow, then releasing the power in his muscles. He probably put more into it than was necessary to get the job done. He didn't care. This was his workout, his therapy, his outlet for the toxic emotions that built up inside him all week.

Swing, crack! Swing, crack!

There was a rhythm to it he found soothing, and a violence he found satisfying.

Day in and day out he dealt with people he would sooner have sent to hell: the dregs of society, sickos and perverts. The things he'd seen would have made the average citizen vomit and given them nightmares. He lived in a horror story, fighting a losing battle with no end in sight.

He'd been working Sex Crimes for seven years now. His initial efforts to remain detached from the grime of it had gradually worn him out. His plan to do a brief turn in the unit and then use it as a springboard to a more prestigious position in another department had eventually crumbled and collapsed in on itself.

Turned out he was damned good at the job that sucked him into the filthy gutter of human depravity. And the longer he did it, the better he became. And the better he became, the harder it was to escape. The harder it was to escape, the bigger the stain on the very fabric of his soul. The deeper the stain soaked in, the greater his understanding of the minds of the predators he hunted. The greater his understanding, the more his idealistic self was chipped away, the more the filth soaked into him until the only thing he recognized of his original self was the face in the mirror every morning—and even that was eroding.

He had always been a good-looking guy, with chiseled features and smooth skin and a thick head of jet-black hair. The face that stared back at him these days as he shaved had aged twice as fast in half as much time as his twin brother's. Every day, the lines seemed deeper, the eyes emptier, the hair thinner and grayer. He was becoming something he didn't want to recognize, inside and out.

So he chopped wood on the stump of an elm tree out behind his house.

Swing, crack! Swing, crack!

He lived in an older neighborhood of square two-story clapboard houses with front porches that had mostly been closed in against the brutal Minnesota winters, and yards separated by tall, weathered privacy fences. His property backed onto a large, rambling park that surrounded one of the city's many lakes. The park let him have the illusion of living in the woods.

Mr. Lumberjack, living in the woods, swinging his axe.

Swing, crack! Swing, crack!

Despite the cold, wet weather, he was sweating inside the layers of clothing he wore: thermal underwear, a flannel shirt, a down-filled vest. He hated this time of year. Every day was shorter than the last. Night began to fall in late afternoon. Winter could arrive on any given day and stay until April. They had had an ice storm on Halloween and a blizzard on Veterans Day, followed by three

days of rain that had caused flash flooding in low-lying areas. The odd day of stunning, electric blue skies and a paltry few lingering fall colors couldn't make up for the stretches of bleak gray or the damp cold that knifed to the bone. It buried its blade between his shoulders as he wiped the moisture from his face on the sleeve of his shirt and hoisted the axe again.

Swing, crack!

The temperature was dropping quickly. The intermittent spitting rain that had been falling off and on all afternoon was giving way to a pelting snow that cut like tiny shards of glass, stinging his ruddy cheeks.

Every winter he bitched about the Minnesota weather and vowed to move to Florida the day he retired from the police department. But if he moved to Florida, he wouldn't have any reason to split wood. What would he do for his sanity then?

Like he stood any chance of getting away from here anyway, he thought, looking up at the house, where lights had come on in the kitchen and in one bedroom upstairs. His family all lived in Bloomington. Barbie the Ball Buster's family was entrenched in the southern suburbs. The kids had all their cousins and friends here.

Maybe he should go alone. Maybe everyone would be happier if he did.

He sighed and picked up another chunk of wood, set it on its end on the stump, stepped back, and swung the axe.

Mr. Lumberjack. Mr. Sex Crimes Detective of the Year. Featured speaker at conferences all over the Midwest. Expert on the subject of human degradation.

Swing, crack! Swing, crack!

He tried to concentrate on the silence between the small explosions of the axe striking the wood. He sucked cold air into his smoke-blackened lungs. His heart pounded too hard from the effort. The muscles in his shoulders cramped. He felt like he might have a heart attack at any moment.

Barbie would revive him and kill him again with her bare hands, furious to be left with the kids and the mortgage and the Catholic school tuitions.

Theirs was a marriage in the way of many couples: a partnership of paychecks that didn't stretch far enough, intimacy a thing of memory, the future a projected image at the far end of a treadmill that ran too fast.

More and more all he wanted was off.

They resented each other more days than not. His wife had ceased to think of him as a man. He was a paycheck, a roommate, a pain in the ass. He had sought validation and comfort elsewhere. It wasn't hard to get. Consequently, it didn't mean anything. And the spiral of his life went down and down. He didn't like what his marriage had become. He didn't like what *he* had become.

His grandmother had always warned him about purgatory. Hell's waiting room, she used to call it. Purgatory had become his life.

Sometimes he wondered if death could be so much worse.

Swing, crack! Swing, crack!

Crack! Crack!

The final two sounds seemed to come from far away, like an echo.

Ted Duffy was dead before he could wonder why.

The first bullet hit him between the shoulder blades as he held the axe high over his head. It shattered bone and deflated a lung, and tore through a major artery. The second bullet struck him in the head, entering above the right ear, exiting below the left eye.

He dropped face-first to the ground at the base of the tree stump, his eyes open but seeing nothing, blood pooling beneath his cheek and seeping into the new-fallen snow.

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November

Minneapolis, MN

Present Day

“Duffy was a great guy.”

“That’s not one of the criteria for picking a cold case,” Nikki Liska argued.

Gene Grider narrowed his eyes. He had a face like a bulldog, and breath to match. “What the hell is wrong with you? Do you need a Midol or something?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “What decade did you crawl up out of, Grider? Smells like 1955.”

Grider had worked Homicide before her time, but not *that* long before her time. He had put in thirty years, doing stints in Homicide, Robbery, and Sex Crimes. His last few years on the job had been spent working special community initiatives—jobs Nikki would have thought required a lot more charm than Grider could scrape together on his best day.

“It’s twenty-five years since Duff was gunned down,” he said, slamming his hand down on the table. “Twenty-five years this month! It’s a disgrace that this case has never been solved. This is what I’m coming out of retirement for. We’re finally getting a dedicated cold case unit. This case should be front and center!”

“It’s not like nobody’s worked the case,” Liska said. “People have worked the case all along.”

“On the side, with no money,” Grider complained.

Which was exactly how the majority of cold cases were worked all over the country—piecemeal, if at all. Cold case units were far more common on television than in reality. In the real world, police departments operated on taxpayer dollars, funding that was continually being cut to the bone. Homicide detectives all had their old unsolved cases that they continued to chip away at when they could, and passed them on to other detectives when they transferred or retired. It was a wonder any of the cases got solved, considering.

“The same as all these cases,” Nikki pointed out.

She had spent the last two months going half blind reviewing cold cases dating back to the mid-seventies. Of the two hundred cases she had evaluated, she had pulled sixty-seven for the final round of reviews. Grider had looked through another two hundred and pulled fifty-nine. They had whittled the list down to a hundred, and now had to prioritize. They would be lucky if the federal grant money being used to set up the unit got them through half the cases on their short list.

“This isn’t the same thing,” Grider snapped. “Duff was one of us. Where the hell is your loyalty?”

“This isn’t about loyalty,” Nikki said. “It can’t matter that Duffy was a cop—”

“Nice to know what you think of your peers,” Grider said, sneering.

“Oh, get off your high horse,” she snapped. “It’s about solvability. We’ve got a limited budget. We have to go after the cases we have a hope in hell of closing. You couldn’t close Duffy’s case in twenty-five years for a reason: There’s jack shit to go on. He was shot from a distance. There were no witnesses, no fingerprints, no DNA, no trace evidence of any value,” she said, ticking the points off on her fingers.

“We’re supposed to spend money and man hours going back over a case not likely to ever be solved?” she asked. “What case

doesn't make the cut because we're giving priority to an unsolvable crime? The serial rapes from 1997? The child murder from 1985? The hit-and-run death of a father of six? Which one do we leave out? All those cases have forensic evidence that can be retested with better technology than before. All of them are potentially solvable."

The new Homicide lieutenant, Joan Mascherino, looked from Liska to Grider and back like an impassive tennis umpire.

She was a neat and proper woman with auburn hair cut in a neat and proper style. Perfectly polished in her conservative gray suit and pearl earrings, she was Liska's height—short. Kindred spirits in the world of the vertically challenged—or so Nikki hoped.

Nikki had learned long ago to take any advantage she could get in this profession still dominated by men. She certainly wasn't above playing the girls-gotta-stick-together card when she could do it subtly. But Joan Mascherino hadn't gotten where she was by being a pushover. Now in her mid-fifties, she had come on the job when discrimination against women was a way of life, and had still worked her way up the ranks to lieutenant. Running Homicide was just another feather in her cap on her way to bigger things. Rumor had it she would be going upstairs to rub elbows with the deputy chiefs in the not-too-distant future.

Homicide's last boss, Kasselmann, had used the closing of the Doc Holiday murders as a springboard to being named deputy chief of the Investigations Bureau—as if he'd had anything to do with solving the serial killer's crimes. He had just happened to be sitting in the office at the time.

Mascherino had come over from Internal Affairs just in time to be handed the plum task of putting together the Cold Case unit, which would, initially at least, be high profile and put her in the media spotlight.

Gene Grider, retired for eighteen months, had come back to work this unit, offering himself at part-time pay, which made him very attractive to the number crunchers trying to squeeze every

penny out of the grant money. But it also augmented Grider's pension, and allowed him to bring his own agenda along with him.

His agenda was Ted Duffy.

So went the law enforcement food chain.

Nikki had her own agenda, too. She had leveraged her role in closing the Doc Holiday cases to get Kasselmann to recommend her to this unit. When she caught a case in Homicide, it wasn't unusual to be on for twenty-four hours or more, straight. In Cold Case, there was no urgency. There were regular hours, giving her more time with her boys.

She had spent the better part of a decade in Homicide. The unit was her home away from home, her family away from family. She loved the job, was very good at the job. But R.J. and Kyle, at fourteen and sixteen, were growing into young men, struggling around the pitfalls of adolescence as they made the transition from boyhood to independence and maturity. They needed an adult available, and she was it. God knew their father didn't qualify for the job.

It had been during the height of the Doc Holiday hunt that Nikki realized she didn't know enough about what was going on in the life of her oldest son, Kyle. The lives of teenagers were so much more complicated now than when she was a kid. Her sons could be lost so easily while she was looking away—lost literally and figuratively. No matter how much she loved her job, she loved her boys a million times more.

News of the grant money coming in for a cold case unit had started circulating at the perfect time. She would still be investigating homicides, but the urgency and long hours of a fresh case would be removed. The challenges would be different, but she would still be fighting for a victim.

Except that, at the moment, she was fighting *against* a victim. Another detective, no less.

"If Ted Duffy's murder isn't on this agenda, I'm out of here," Grider threatened.

Like he was some kind of supercop. Like he was Derek Jeter coming out of retirement to save the Yankees or something.

“And every cop in Minneapolis is going to be up in arms about it,” Grider continued, cutting a hard look at Liska. “Except this one,” he muttered, and then put his attention back on the people he wanted to sway. “Duffy’s is the only unsolved homicide on the books involving a police officer. It’s a black eye on the department. And I would think now—especially now—that would mean something.”

Liska sat up straighter, incredulous. “Is that a threat? Is that what you’re trying to so cleverly slip into that rant? You’ll set a fire amongst the rank and file if you don’t get your way?”

Grider shrugged. “I’m just saying people are already on edge.”

“You’re a fucking bully.”

Lieutenant Mascherino cut Nikki a disapproving look. “We can do without the language, Sergeant.”

Nikki bit her tongue. Great. She had a mouth like a sailor on holiday, and a schoolmarm for a lieutenant.

They sat at a round white melamine table in a war room commandeered from Homicide. Round tables were supposed to foster feelings of equality and cooperation, according to the industrial and organizational psychology expert the department had wasted taxpayer dollars on during the last remodeling of the offices. The same expert had recommended painting the office walls mauve, and had told them they needed to remove the U bolts from the walls and floors in the interview rooms, so they had nowhere to cuff violent offenders if the need arose, because the threat of physical restraint might be deemed “intimidating.”

Nikki could still see the look on her partner Kovac’s face as they listened to the presentation. Nobody had a better “Are you fucking kidding me?” face than Kovac.

Weeks later a suspect had yanked a useless decorative shelf off the wall of an interview room and cracked Kovac in the head with

it. He still had a little scar. Nikki had kneecapped the suspect with her tactical baton before he could do worse. Thank God Kovac had a head like granite.

Mascherino exchanged a look with Chris Logan, the chief assistant county attorney. Logan was a big, handsome man in an expensive suit, tall and athletic with a thick shock of Black Irish hair streaked with gray. Fiftyish. Brash. Aggressive. Intimidating in the courtroom or in a conversation.

Logan's role in this meeting was to give his blessing to cases he thought might have the potential to be prosecuted successfully. The Duffy case offered nothing for him to sink his teeth into as a prosecutor. He would want witnesses, evidence, forensics—at the very least, a viable suspect at this stage of the game. Yet, he didn't jump in to dismiss Grider's sales pitch.

Logan was certainly aware of the contract tensions between the city and the police union, recently made worse by the mayor's threats of deep budget cuts and layoffs. But if any of that concerned him, he wasn't going to show it. He had to be a hell of a poker player.

He rubbed a hand along his jaw as he weighed the pros and cons.

"We owe Duff one more try," Grider pressed. "All we need is for one person to talk. That's all it takes to crack a case like this."

"After twenty-five years, why would anyone talk?" Nikki asked.

"Maybe they got a conscience," Grider said, "or found Jesus, or now hate the person they were protecting back then."

But none of that seemed likely, and even if someone talked, there was still no physical evidence to speak of. They couldn't go to trial with nothing but hearsay or uncorroborated accomplice testimony. Nikki sighed.

The cold case she had pulled as her number one candidate was the 2001 rape and murder of a young mother. There were two solid suspects. They needed only a couple of puzzle pieces and a little luck to make the case. The victim's mother had already been in touch with her to lobby on her daughter's behalf.

“Have you read the entire Duffy murder book?” Logan asked her.

“Enough to know there isn’t—”

“That’s a no,” he said. “Maybe you need to take a closer look.”

“I’ve personally read through sixty-seven other cases that are more promising.”

Logan didn’t blink.

“Re-interviewing friends, family, co-workers. Going through the file with a fresh eye,” he said. “That’s not a huge investment of time. A few days. A week at the most. If nothing turns up, at least we gave it a shot.”

“It’s a good case for the media,” Grider said, sweetening the deal. “The twenty-fifth anniversary of the murder of one of the city’s finest. The news coverage might shake something loose.”

And there was nothing a politically ambitious prosecutor liked more than a free media spotlight. It was no secret the current county attorney was considering running for the U.S. Senate. Everyone assumed Logan was next in line to take over as top dog for Hennepin County. If he decided to champion the Duffy case, he could get that initial news exposure that would come at the launch of the new unit, and curry favor with the police union at the same time. Two birds, one stone. To the cops, he would look like a hero for reopening the case, and if, after the media had moved on to other news, the case didn’t get solved, that would be the fault of the investigators. No downside for Logan.

Nikki sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. She wouldn’t admit defeat, but she would have to accept it. Fine. Let Grider have his one case. It would keep him out of her hair while she devoted herself to her dead young mother.

Unlike Homicide, where the detectives worked together, and had multiple cases going at the same time, in Cold Case each of them would be working one case at a time, until it was either solved or all hope had been exhausted, and then they would move on to the next one.

Logan drummed his fingers on the tabletop and gave a decisive nod. "Let's do it. That's our headliner."

Mascherino stood up and went to the long whiteboard on the wall behind her. "All right, then. We start with the murder of Ted Duffy."

She chose a marker and wrote Duffy's name at the top of the board in neat cursive. Grider looked at Nikki and smiled like a shark. She rolled her eyes away from him and toward the third member of their team, Candra Seley, who shrugged and spread her hands, mouthing her opinion: *He's such an asshole!*

Seley, on loan from the Business and Technology unit, would primarily be reviewing evidence, processing and reprocessing test results, performing witness and suspect background checks, compiling witness lists, and constructing time lines. Liska and Grider would be the feet on the ground.

Grider got up from his chair, smoothing his tie over his protruding belly. "I'll get right on it."

"No," Mascherino said calmly. "The Duffy case goes to Liska."

"What?!" Liska and Grider blurted out simultaneously.

"That's my case!" Grider argued, his face turning red.

"It's time for a fresh pair of eyes," the lieutenant said firmly. "That's the whole point of a cold case unit—getting a fresh take on an old crime. I'm sure Sergeant Liska will appreciate your input when she asks for it, but this is her case now."

"But I know this case inside and out! I *know* these people!"

"That's just my point. I want someone who doesn't know any of the people involved. Someone who has no preconceived ideas going in. That's the only way a case this stale has any chance of being solved."

Grider paced behind the table. Nikki could hear him breathing in and out like he'd run a hundred yards.

"She doesn't even think the case deserves to be investigated!" he shouted, pointing at Nikki as if he were fingering her for a witch.

“I don’t think it deserves to be a priority,” Nikki corrected him, pushing her chair back and standing. He was still half a foot taller than she was.

“You said it was unsolvable.”

“Well, in twenty-five years you certainly haven’t proven me wrong.”

“So it’ll be just fine with you if you don’t solve it, either,” Grider said sarcastically. “You’ve already got your excuse ready.”

Nikki felt like the top of her head might blow off. Furious, she walked up on him, her hands jammed at her waist. “Are you implying that I won’t do the job? You think I’m a bad cop? Fuck you, Grider! I didn’t ride in here on a powder puff. I’ve worked my ass off to get where I am. I’ll put my record in Homicide up against yours any day of the week. I don’t have any moldy age-old unsolved murders with my name on them.”

Grider looked at the lieutenant. “How am I supposed to work with her?”

“You’re not,” Mascherino said. “You’ve got your own case to work. Take your number two and run with it. Nikki, you’ve got priority for Candra’s time, however you need her.”

Logan unfolded himself from his chair, looking at Nikki. “Press conference at five in the government center.”

“Today?” She glanced at her watch. It was nearly four.

“Plenty of time to go powder your nose and put on some lipstick,” Logan quipped.

“Speak for yourself,” Nikki snapped, gathering her notes from the table. “I’ve got a case to review.”