

THE
Shadowed
Mind

A
Dinah Harris
MYSTERY

Julie Cave

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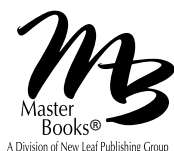
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The glory belongs to God.

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He looked utterly ordinary. Cruising the streets of Washington DC, he looked like he belonged there. He was wearing a charcoal pinstriped suit, a red and blue silk tie, and shiny Italian leather shoes. He carried a calfskin briefcase. His cell phone was tucked in his pocket — one of his most useful props. Who would look twice at a man in a suit with a briefcase and cell phone, in the heart of DC?

Yet his reasons for being in the city were far from ordinary. He had come to find and stalk his prey.

It was early evening in the first week of a promising summer. The streets were busy and the restaurants and cafes packed with patrons, enjoying the arrival of longer, warmer days. A new, wild optimism seemed to charge the atmosphere when summer arrived — the shackles

of winter thrown off, thoughts turned now to vacations, beaches, and the possibility of a tan. Business lunches seemed less high-powered, with talk revolving around yachts and summer houses rather than the economy and falling commodity prices.

He should know — he existed in that world during the day and partook in those very lunches and conversations. But at night, when the mood overcame him, a new creature emerged.

His prey wouldn't be found on Pennsylvania Avenue or Constitution Avenue. He would have to traverse the shadowy alleyways and the darkest corners of the city to find what he was looking for. He wasn't afraid. He was the one who struck fear into the hearts of others.

He headed northeast of the city, where crack cocaine was sold on the streets only blocks away from Capitol Hill. He was entering neighborhoods where the shade of his skin could put him in danger, but he strode confidently. As he walked, his eyes constantly roamed, taking in the people around him. Though he received several catcalls and jeers, those who got sufficiently close enough to see his eyes soon backed away.

He realized that in this part of town, potential victims were plentiful. Human life was cheap and could be bought by the highest bidder. But he wanted more than a chance to buy five minutes in an alleyway.

It took some time, but finally he found someone who had real potential. She stood on a street corner, arms crossed over her skinny ribcage, and shoulders hunched defensively. Her dirty blonde hair hung forward over her face, but he could see that she was still attractive despite the weariness evident in her face. Track marks dotted both arms. Boldly, he approached.

“Want to get a cup of coffee?” he asked, offering what he hoped was an engaging smile.

She stared at him in confusion. “What?”

He held up his hands placatingly. “I don't want anything from you except a cup of coffee. I swear.”

She glanced around, probably for a friend who watched from the shadows. “I'm waitin' for some stuff, y'know what I'm sayin'?”

“I'll pay you five hundred,” he said, “for nothing except coffee and food, if you want it.”

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“You a cop?” she asked warily.

“No, I’m not. I’m definitely not a cop.” The thought almost made him laugh.

“I can’t be away too long,” she said, with a frown.

“It’s completely up to you,” he agreed.

Still not believing her luck, she walked with him down the street, to where a crumbling cafe did its trade. The lights were blindingly bright and the bright yellow Formica counters were chipped and cracked. The cook, a large woman with a permanent scowl on her face, watched them suspiciously from the kitchen.

He ordered two cups of coffee and a cheeseburger for her. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Lakeisha,” she said, pouring six sugars into her coffee. Her nails were short and badly chewed. She didn’t look at him.

“How long have you been out there?” he asked, gesturing out at the street.

She shrugged. “Year, maybe?”

She’d survived a year. She was either pretty tough or very fortunate.

“What did you do before that?”

She offered another indifferent shrug. “Went to school, some.”

He frowned. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

The cheeseburger arrived and she wolfed it down, barely stopping to chew.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Yeah, he takes care of me.” She stole a fleeting glance toward the street.

The boyfriend was probably part of her small gang, made up of runaways just like her, he thought. He was probably addicted to the same drugs and he kept her in her drug of choice in exchange for a measure of protection.

“Does he treat you well?” She almost smiled, and it was haunting. The answer was probably no. Girls like her were rarely treated well.

He nodded toward the scars and marks on her arms. “Is it smack?”

Lakeisha folded her arms and stared down at the Formica table.

He ordered some apple pie for her and they sat in silence for a while. He was starting to feel warmly positive about her — he was almost sure she was the one.

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“Where are your parents?” he asked.

The pie was inhaled almost as quickly as the cheeseburger. “Don’t know my pops. Don’t care what Mom is doing.”

“Why is that?”

She paused, her young face hardening. “She chose her boyfriend over me. Why would I care about her?”

“Does she try to contact you?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Don’t know. Don’t care.”

Perfect, he thought happily.

“She had a lot of boyfriends when you were growing up?”

Lakeisha looked disgusted. “Yup. Kicked me out o’ the house every time they came over.”

He could have hugged her.

She stood suddenly and held out her hand for the money. “Gotta get back,” she said.

He paid her five hundred dollars. “Thanks, Lakeisha,” he said, working hard to be charming. “It really has been a pleasure.”

The young lady eyed him mistrustfully. “Whatever.”

He pretended not to watch her walk down the street, but in truth, it hurt not to stare hungrily at her retreating figure.

I’ll see you later.

Dinah Harris sat back in her chair and looked over her desk thoughtfully. She’d spent the morning setting it up — it probably shouldn’t have taken so long, she admitted to herself, but she was a little obsessive about organization. Her laptop sat in the center, flanked by a phone and a document tray. A printer stood next to the tray and a stainless steel pen holder was wedged next to the phone. The blotter was brand new and clear.

Now, all she had to do was hope that the phone would ring and she would actually have a job to do.

It had been six months since her ignominious firing from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the subsequent fall from grace of her immediate supervisor and Special Agent in Charge, George Hanlon, during what she had dubbed the Smithsonian case. Hanlon had been killed in a Virginia prison while awaiting trial for his involvement in the murder of four people. The case had had ramifications throughout

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the FBI, the Smithsonian Institution, and the halls of political power. It had been a case that had pushed Dinah to the edge of oblivion, emotionally and physically.

Dinah hadn't escaped unscathed from the ordeal. She had spent 60 days in a rehab facility, dealing with her alcohol addiction. When she'd returned home, she'd felt as weak as a newborn kitten. She had to relearn how to live in her world without the crutch of wine or vodka. She had ventured forth, feeling as though she'd returned to a completely different city; such was the change in her life.

She was now enrolled in the clinic's outpatient recovery program, which required her to keep in constant contact with a mentor and counselor. It was necessary for her to attend weekly counseling sessions with her mentor, and check in by phone several times a week to ensure that her recovery was on track.

And while sometimes the desire to drink literally made her hands shake, she thanked God that she hadn't relapsed.

Following her release from rehab, Dinah had cast around for something to do. The FBI would not take her back, given her spectacular, fiery exit that had been well documented by the media. Having once been one of the very best profilers the Bureau had, she decided to use her skills on a consultancy basis. Whether this would work or not remained to be seen.

This was what had led to the set up of her new desk and landline.

Dinah stared at the phone and drummed her fingers on the desk.

Suddenly, it rang.

"Hello, Dinah Harris," she said.

"Well, that was very professional," said a familiar voice.

"Ferguson! It's only you. I thought it might be someone important," Dinah replied. David Ferguson had been her partner at the FBI and had literally saved her life during the Smithsonian case. Despite her sarcasm, she was thrilled to hear from him.

"How's civilian life?" Ferguson asked.

"Good so far. I'm just waiting for the phone to start ringing. How's the Bureau?"

"You know, the same but different. I have a new Special Agent in Charge, obviously."

Dinah laughed. She could just imagine the earthquake that had divided the Bureau in the wake of the Smithsonian case. They had

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thought she would be their biggest liability — yet it had been Hanlon who had stolen the headlines.

“Any good cases?” she asked, almost wistfully.

“Not really.” There was an awkward pause. “So how’s . . . you know, everything?”

Dinah didn’t really want to talk about it, but she owed Ferguson so much that he deserved to know. “It hasn’t been fun,” she admitted. “Rehab was hard. Coming back and living here has been harder. I have to pass the liquor store where I bought my supplies all the time. But every passing day means one more day of success. I’ve found a great church to go to, too.”

“You in a church? How many of the congregation have you offended?” Ferguson chuckled. Dinah’s sarcasm was legendary throughout the Bureau. “Seriously, that’s really great. I’m glad to hear that you’re getting everything back together.”

Dinah glanced over at two framed photos on the living room wall, haunting reminders that she would never have everything back together. The loss of her husband, Luke, and little boy, Sammy, in a car accident reminded her daily that her own family would never be back together. She felt the familiar needle of sorrow pierce her heart and old wounds weep tiny tears like a leaking tap. “Yeah,” she said, more brightly than she felt. “I’m getting there. In the meantime, do me a favor and pass my name around town, would you?”

“You got it. Listen, I have to go. Keep in touch, okay, Harris?”

“You bet.” Dinah hung up and checked the wall clock. It was almost six o’clock in the evening, the hardest part of the day for her. In the old days, she would open a bottle of something at six on the dot. At her worst, she would drink from six until she passed out sometime later that evening. Now, the craving for alcohol would be palpable in the room as the clock inched toward six.

Dinah wiped the sweat from her forehead with one hand and opened her Bible, which sat on the desk in front of her.

Please God, give me strength, she prayed. I cannot do this on my own.

She found her bookmark, opened her Bible, and read, “The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

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Thank you, God. With your help, I can overcome this. Dinah continued to read, immersing herself in the Book of Corinthians and refusing to allow her thoughts to dwell on her craving.

When Dinah next looked at the wall clock, it was past eight o'clock and the worst of it had passed.

Ella Barnett was in the midst of making dinner and trying not to worry. Her life these days seemed to be one great worry after the next and she was, to be totally frank, exhausted. She thought about the day she had planned for tomorrow, and sighed. What was the use in making plans? In truth, her day consisted of fitting in work where she could, trying to keep the Columbia Heights house as clean as possible, which wasn't easy under the circumstances, and taking care of her father. There was little time to even read a magazine, let alone have her hair done or go to a movie.

Ella wiped her brow and caught sight of herself in the kitchen window. She was only 32 but she looked a decade older. Her long, brown hair had been allowed to do its own thing, rather than be styled, and her only concession was that she cut her bangs herself. Her green eyes looked tired, and her face was pale. Was that a new patchwork of wrinkles in the corners of her eyes? Probably.

The door bell rang and fear struck the heart of Ella Barnett. She suddenly realized that she hadn't checked on her father for some time. She rushed to answer it.

Her neighbor, a kindly, middle-aged woman named Margaret, stood with her arm hooked securely around Ella's father, John Barnett. The old man was wearing an undershirt and had put his underwear on over his long pants. He stared between Margaret and Ella, thoroughly confused.

"I'm sorry, dear," said Margaret. "He was in our garden."

"Oh, I'm sorry," cried Ella. "I thought I'd secured all the windows. I should have checked in on him. I hope he didn't give you a scare."

"Not at all, dear," said Margaret. In burning embarrassment, Ella thought to herself that all her neighbors were probably used to it by now. Margaret nodded toward the kitchen. "I'll take over in there, and you can get your father settled."

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Ella would never have asked for help, but when offered, she gratefully accepted. “Thanks, Margaret, that would be wonderful.”

She took her father by the arm and moved aside so that he could follow Margaret into the house. He looked at her suspiciously. “Who are you?” he demanded. “Where are you taking me?”

“It’s me, Daddy,” said Ella. “Your daughter.”

“Nonsense!” the old man declared. “I don’t have children! I’ve only just married.” He looked more closely at Ella. “Charlotte? What on earth have you done to your hair?”

Ella didn’t reply. More frequently, he thought she was his wife, who’d died ten years earlier. More frequently, Ella didn’t correct him, because it lowered his resistance to her.

“Dinner’s ready,” she said. “Would you like to sit at the table?”

He at least allowed her to lead him to the dining room and he sat down. Margaret emerged from the kitchen with dinner and helped Ella serve the meal.

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” Ella asked. “There is plenty.”

“I’ve got to fix dinner for my family, but thank you anyway,” Margaret said. “Will you be okay here?”

“Yes, thank you, Margaret.”

Margaret nodded and smiled at both of them, then whisper quiet, slipped out the front door.

Ella and John ate in silence. It would have been impossible to carry on a conversation of any meaning. John Barnett was suffering the final stages of Alzheimer’s disease, and he was rarely aware of the present anymore. His memory seemed to be stuck decades earlier, when he’d just married Charlotte, Ella’s mother, and had just landed a job in the bank, of which he eventually became president. As a result, he increasingly didn’t know who Ella was, and could become alarmingly hostile toward her.

Ella glanced over at the once-proud man, hunched over his food. He had been a wonderful father — kind, compassionate, fair, and gentle. His world revolved around his family, and he taught Ella from a young age the things he believed most important: belief in God, pride in country, devotion to family, and to be honest and kind in all things. They had had a close relationship. He taught her to ride a bike and gently patched up her grazed knees when she fell

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off. He took her hiking all through Virginia, pointing out different birds and teaching her how to find her way back if she got lost. In her teens, they'd had a monthly date where, over pancakes, he had taught her how potential suitors should treat her and why she should respect herself.

Now, it wasn't just that he didn't know who she was. He no longer knew where home was, hence the nighttime escapes out of windows and treks through neighbors' gardens; he forgot how to get dressed; he couldn't have fixed a meal for himself. His independence had all but vanished, and Ella knew that the man he once was would have hated that.

She saw he was looking at her, his confusion so great that it was pitiful. Ella felt a lump rise in her throat.

"You're not Charlotte, are you?" John said wretchedly.

"I'm your daughter, Dad," Ella said. "I'll take care of you."

He seemed to mull over her words, and then his eyes flashed. Had he recognized her, deep in the shadows of his mind?

"Am I home?" he asked.

"Yes, Dad. You're home and safe, I promise." Ella reached over and took his hand.

Thankfully, this seemed to satisfy him. When she took him up to his bedroom to get ready to go to sleep, he said to her thoughtfully, "If I did have a daughter, I'd want her to be just like you."

Ella held back her tears until she made it to her own bedroom. As she had done many times before, in helpless frustration, she inwardly shouted at the ceiling. *This is so unfair! How could this happen to my father?* As had always been before, she did not receive a reply.

He was back, stalking the decaying streets of northeast DC, but this time he had his eyes firmly fixed on his prey. This time, he wore an oversized, hooded sweatshirt and baggy, low-rise jeans. Other than his pale face, he blended into the neighborhood seamlessly. By now they were used to him. He had visited Lakeisha several times that week, taking her for a coffee and food, and paying her well for it. Her faceless boyfriend and the others in her small gang figured he was either a do-gooder hoping to get her off the street, or that he had a little thing

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for her. Either way, he suspected they all thought he was incapable of hurting a fly.

This time, when Lakeisha saw him, she came trotting over eagerly.

“Hi, Lakeisha, how are you?” he asked.

“Hi,” she said. “Same drill tonight?”

Not quite.

“Yeah — let me guess, coffee, cheeseburger, and apple pie?” he asked, smiling at her. She hadn’t changed her diet and he ordered the same thing for her every time he saw her.

“Onto a good thing, why change?” she shrugged.

At the café, he watched her obscurely, committing every feature and detail to memory. He wanted to remember everything. During their discussions, he’d learned that Lakeisha had to get high to tolerate her life on the street. She hated herself — scrounging for food and worse, and she hated how she lived, but she would do it to obtain more heroin. She was almost apathetic now, having had it drummed into her head from a young age that she would never amount to anything. She had seemed to accept that this would be her lot in life, and that it would never improve.

“How come you never told me your name?” she suddenly asked.

So you could never mention it to anybody.

“Didn’t think you were that interested,” he said. “Aren’t I just another social worker to you?”

She considered. “Nope, you better than that. You don’t expect nothing from me.”

“Well, just call me John,” he said. It wasn’t even close to his real name.

She continued to eat and he continued to think about her history. Her boyfriend did indeed spend most of his life trying to obtain heroin for himself, and he was mean when he didn’t get it. He then gave her heroin when she needed it, and precious little else. If she did something he didn’t like, his favorite punishment was to get rough with her. When she showed some initiative or expressed a desire to get off the street, his favorite punishment was to withhold heroin. Her addiction to it was so great that she would beg and plead and agree to do anything as long as she received a hit. Fearful of having it withdrawn from her again, she would dutifully do as she was told.

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He'd asked her if she was worried the heroin would kill her. She seemed resigned to that fate, too. She told him that if it wasn't the heroin, it would be her boyfriend, and if it wasn't him, it would be the street.

He thought it was pitiful, but it didn't lead to a welling of empathy or rage against the injustice of the world. It just made him more resolved to do what he needed to do.

Surreptitiously, he checked that the card in his pocket was still there. It would be an important part of the staging.

"Well, gotta go," she said with a sigh, finishing her coffee. He stood, too.

"I'll walk you back. It's not safe," he said.

Lakeisha gave him a wry look that conveyed she was perfectly capable of looking after herself.

Not tonight.

The alleyway he picked was only a block away, and it was quiet and ill-frequented. The lighting there was particularly bad. He walked street side, so that she couldn't try to escape in that direction.

At the mouth of the alley, he grabbed her arm with sudden force. She swung around to look at him, bewildered hurt on her face. She hadn't expected violence from *him*.

"I have a gun," he said, very quietly. "It has a silencer. I will use it if I have to."

She quickly grasped the rules and they moved into the dark alley.

"You can take the money," she said desperately. "Whatever you want. Please don't hurt me."

It was funny, he thought, how someone completely accustomed to being hurt still had keen self-preservation instincts.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Truly, I am. But someone has to stop the cycle, you see."

She was momentarily confused, but was clearly concentrating on how to escape. She pulled out a small and deadly knife from the waistband of her skirt and lunged toward him. He dodged her, moved behind her, and seized her arm. Ruthlessly, he twisted it behind her until she cried out, dropping the knife to the ground. Still not giving up, she drove one boot heel into his shin and he let go of her, remarkably bright, glassy pain shooting through his leg. Making the most

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of her freedom, she ran toward the street. White-hot rage erupted through his veins, and he caught up with her — over-sized boots being completely impractical to run in. He had to end this, quickly.

Finally, he subdued her and dragged her back to the original spot he'd picked out. It had to be exactly right.

He was efficient. He was not a torturer. He didn't do it for his own sick pleasure. He did it for the good of society.

That was why he placed her body gently and respectfully sitting — well, slumping — against the wall of the tenement. He wrapped a cord around one of her upper arms. From a distance, she looked like one of many residents of the area, sleeping off a big hit of heroin.

He slipped the card from his pocket and read it again, enjoying its simplistic message. He slid the card down one of her boots and stood back, drinking in the atmosphere.

Then he left, as smoothly and quietly as he had come, his thoughts already turning to his next hunt.