

A
Dinah Harris
MYSTERY



Pieces
OF LIGHT

Julie Cave

First printing: May 2011

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Master Books®, P.O. Box 726, Green Forest, AR 72638
Master Books® is a division of the New Leaf Publishing Group, Inc.

ISBN: 978-0-89051-608-9

Library of Congress Number: 2011928273

Cover by Left Coast Design

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Georgia Purdom, who once again provided generously of her time to read the manuscript, make suggestions and ensure accuracy. Her dedication and attention to detail is more appreciated than words can say. I have grown to rely on and trust her instincts when it comes to creating the best possible manuscript.

I must also thank my husband, Terry, for the sacrifices he makes to ensure that I have the time and space needed to write. Thank you for the many times you have given up a weekend or an evening so that I can immerse myself in the world of Dinah Harris. Thank you for sharing a passion to reach out to others with the good news of Jesus Christ, and for being a Godly husband and father.

For my children, Jasmine, and the precious baby who is due to be born in August: I love you both so dearly. I pray that you will grow to love God and serve Him with joy your whole lives.

This book is dedicated to you – the fans who keep buying my books, the people who read these books and blog about them, who follow me on Facebook, who talk to their friends and family about them, who leave me supportive and encouraging comments, who allow me to speak to at their churches or events, and who generously give up their time and energy to support the vision of my books. You will never know how much you all mean to me, and how grateful I am for you. To say thank you seems woefully inadequate. In any case, I say thank you from the bottom of my heart.

All glory, honor and praise goes to God.

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Sussex 1 State Prison

Waverly, Virginia

Prisoner Number: 10734

Death Row

I am on death row and they say I deserve to be here. I suppose I agree. I don't really know. I don't have any feelings about it. I know I killed some people, and that's why I'm here.

I live in a cell that feels like the size of a postage stamp, but at least I'm by myself. I have my books, a television, and some paper on which to write. I have my thoughts, which are strangely muted as though they have jumped into someone else's head and I'm eavesdropping. They've been that way ever since they arrested me. Before that, my thoughts were all mine and I could hear them just fine.

Apparently, this didn't help me during the trial. The prosecutor called me a "cunning, cold killer who took great pleasure in planning the details of his innocent victims' deaths." The judge told me that my unemotional response to the guilty verdict read out by the jury foreman "chilled him to the bone." Even the newspaper, brought by my family when they visited the

first time, had a picture of my blank face with the headline: “No Remorse Shown by Bomber.” Why didn’t you show any remorse? my family asked me. Why not at least apologize?

Because I don’t feel remorse. I don’t feel guilt. I don’t feel sorry. I feel nothing. Somebody has hit the mute button on me and I no longer can communicate the way I used to.

I’ve heard the rumors about me — that I’m a sociopath, that I’m angry and hatred-fueled, that I’m mentally impaired because I have no conscience.

I have felt anger, hatred, frustration, guilt, and even love before all this happened. I used to be a fully functioning, reasonably normal human being. I think that pieces of me are dying slowly, so that by the time my execution date rolls around, I’ll be almost dead anyway . There are pieces of light inside of me, slowly extinguishing themselves, one by one.

I don’t blame this prison, or the police, or the jury or the judge. It is my fault — the dying process started the day I set the first bomb. When it exploded, something inside me let go and seems to be irreplaceable. It was then that the numbness began to creep over me the way the deadly cold slowly claims the life of those lost in the snow or at sea. The more bombs I set off, the worse it got. Perhaps, then, I’m a suicide bomber, only by slow degrees rather than all at once.

But I was caught, and sent here to death row. My lawyer told me he’d appeal until there were no appeals left. I’ve probably got 15 years of life in a lonely cell ahead of me. I have to live here 23 hours a day. The 24th hour I go outside to a special yard for death row inmates and stare at the sky, wishing that my spirit could be free. My family visits me every 90 days, as per the warden’s regulations, but they are not allowed to touch me. They can only speak to me through glass. I eat when they push a tray into my cell and I sleep when they dim the lights. At least I get to choose the method of my execution — lethal injection or the electric chair. Another death row inmate told me I should make up my mind now: by the time they get around to executing me, it’s likely I’ll have lost the mental capacity to make that decision.

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I haven't yet lost the ability to dream.

I dream of silence. Here, it is never quiet. When awake, death row inmates yell at each other, scream at the guards, make demands of God, and vent their frustrations. When asleep, they weep, cry out, howl, or whimper, depending on which nightmare they're having.

I dream that I have a normal life — loving parents, perhaps a wife and kids. Not the dysfunctional mess of a family I currently have to deal with. I dream that I have the freedom of a bird, to fly where my heart desires, unfettered by the judgments of men.

I dream of being stuck in traffic, waiting on a delayed flight in an airport, being unable to find a parking space, and a thousand other little grievances because it would mean that I was free.

I know there aren't many who would feel sympathy for me. What about the lives of the victims? They didn't get to choose the circumstances of their death. I, a convicted killer, have more rights in that regard than they ever did.

That's true. I don't have a reply to that.

So why on earth did I do it? I hear this frequently from my mother, who considers herself an abject failure in the parenting department because her son grew up to be a convicted murderer and death row inmate.

I have no reply to that either. I don't know. I just don't know.

Someone is coming who might be able to help me understand why. Her name is Dinah Harris. She used to be an FBI agent and she wants to write a book about people like me. She helped to track me down and arrest me but I'm not angry with her. I don't feel anything.

Actually, I'm looking forward to it. She has black hair and pale skin and eyes that are haunted. I can see that she has pain in her past, like I do. I can tell that she is a complex woman, with deeds she wishes were left undone and words left unsaid.

When she visited me the first time, to ask me whether I'd be willing to participate in her book, I told her that I would. She smiled and suddenly I saw that my initial impression had been a little wrong. Yes, she'd been haunted and hurt and regretful. But when she smiled, all of that was stripped away and I saw compassion, peace, and understanding.

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So I guess the truth is that I've agreed to do these interviews with an ulterior motive. I want to question her as much as she wants to question me. I want what she's got — compassion, peace, and understanding so powerful that they have somehow defeated despair, bitterness, and judgment.

How did she do it?

ONE YEAR EARLIER

The funeral service had finally moved to the graveside, following the traditional church ceremony. It had been a moving service, at least for the mourners who didn't make up part of his immediate family. The eulogy was heartfelt and tear-jerking. It was a direct reflection of his life: flashy and impressive, soulful and well-loved. Yet it left an empty feeling in the deepest parts of the hearts of his children and a dark scar on the heart of his wife.

The mourners were now few — his wife, Rosa, his adult children, Isabelle and Michael, several long-standing family friends, church friends, and some old work colleagues. The small group stood around the casket, staring down at the incongruously glorious spring flowers that adorned it, avoiding eye contact with each other.

The day was still and hot, an Indian summer's day with a venomous thick humidity that settled on the shoulders of the mourners. The officiating priest's forehead was slick and shiny with sweat, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable in his black attire. Isabelle thought that everybody attending this funeral looked desperate to be elsewhere, though not because of the weather.

Isabelle had been asked to give a eulogy and had refused. What would she have said about her father? *He ruled us with an iron fist. He didn't come to any of my piano recitals. He pushed my mother against the wall when his shirts weren't ironed. He broke my wrist. What a guy. Is it irreverent to remark in his eulogy that I am glad he's dead?*

Isabelle tried to gather her unruly thoughts, reminding herself that she had only one more day to pretend her family was fine. She

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glanced at her mother, a tiny woman with veiled eyes. Surprisingly, Rosa's grief seemed genuine. Isabelle then darted a glance at Michael, wondering what he was truly feeling behind the freezing blank glare trained at the ground. Beside her, her husband, Scott, fidgeted impatiently, his irritation at having to be here oozing from every pore.

Isabelle wondered what the other mourners were thinking. Had they really known Reginald McMahon? There had been the public persona: charming, witty, kind, thoughtful. He had been the first to volunteer to help another family, to paint the church, to give money where it was needed. Those outside his family had not known of the explosive temper, the controlling behavior, the acidic tongue. Yet it was clear from the small number of mourners that he'd never really had a close friend.

Finally, the priest finished his brief remarks and invited those present to say a few words before the casket was lowered into the grave. In awkward silence, the attendees shuffled and desperately avoided looking at the priest or at each other. After a few moments, the priest began the last rites, throwing handfuls of dirt over the casket. He encouraged everyone to follow suit.

Rosa lingered over the grave and wiped away tears. Isabelle marveled at the depth of her mother's delusion, even on the very day she became free from her husband's tyrannical rule. Michael sauntered over and tossed in a handful of dirt carelessly, the contempt curling his upper lip the only indication of the emotion he was feeling. Isabelle was quick, glad that the whole sorry day was almost at a close.

The small crowd dispersed, leaving the family to watch the burial in silence. In the still air, the rhythmic thud of the shovels of dirt being tossed into the grave was hypnotic. Isabelle wondered whether her family could now begin to heal, now that he was dead.

"What am I doing to do?" Rosa finally spoke, her voice a low keener. "What am I doing to do without him?"

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“How about throw a party celebrating the fact that he ’s dead?” suggested Michael, his voice hard and tight. “Then we could burn his clothes and try to pretend he never existed at all.”

Rosa gasped, turning to Isabelle to defend her.

“Michael . . .” started Isabelle.

Michael waved his hand dismissively. “Yeah, I know. Now is not the time or place. Whatever. It’s *never* the time or place.”

“Well,” interjected Scott, with perfect timing, as usual. He looked meaningfully at his watch. “I’ve wasted too much time here already. I’ve got to get back to the office. ” He looked at Isabelle, eyebrows raised, as if daring her to challenge him.

Isabelle didn’t want any confrontation, particularly in front of her mother. She smiled. “Of course, I’ll see you at home,” she replied and watched Scott stalk away. For a moment, she wondered at her ability to deeply care about how everyone else was feeling when they so often didn’t seem to return the favor. She hoped fervently that Scott would return home that evening in a much better mood.

She turned to Michael. “We can discuss it anytime you want,” she said. “I just don’t think the funeral is the most appropriate venue.”

“Don’t speak ill of the dead, ” added Rosa, which didn’t help the inflammatory situation at all.

“Mom,” said Isabelle with a touch of frustration.

“Okay, okay,” her mother relented. “We’re all upset, I understand.”

We are, but for different reasons than you think.

“Let’s have dinner tomorrow night at home, ” Rosa continued. “Will you both come home?”

Michael glanced at Isabelle, who knew that if she didn’t accept the invitation, then he wouldn’t either. “Sure, sounds great, Mom,” she said, with a long look at her brother.

“Sure,” he agreed. He didn’t raise his eyes from the ground, where he was scuffing the toe of his sneaker in the dirt.

They began the walk to the parking lot in silence, Isabelle wondering when this agonizing day would finally be over.

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* * * *

He had been told that he looked like Billy Idol, the eighties rock icon, and he'd been pleased with that. So now, when he was in combat mode, he thought of himself as Billy Idol. As he worked, he hummed some of Idol's songs and changed the words to suit himself. Instead of singing, *It's a nice day for a white wedding*, he sang: *It's a nice day for some blood shedding*.

As he sang, he built the bomb.

He'd spent yesterday preparing for his target. There were a number of prerequisites: an older building was preferable, plenty of space at the front or side of the building, and the possibility of little collateral damage. It was important to him that surrounding buildings, like family homes, were not impacted by the blast. That's why he was tailoring the bomb not to ensure maximum payload but simply to damage the target building. He absolutely didn't want a child sleeping in her bedroom to wake to shrapnel peppering her curtains.

It was important that people knew that he wasn't a monster. He wasn't interested in causing maximum harm. He just wanted to make his point.

After about two hours, he'd found one that fit his criteria and then had begun looking for a vehicle to steal. There, too, were prerequisites for the vehicle. It had to be tough, big, unremarkable, and disposable. Therefore, he'd discounted a van with baby seats in it, a van filled with gardening equipment, and one he'd observed belching blue smoke as its driver pulled up to the curb.

He didn't really know why he was applying moral values to the mission he was trying to complete. To an outsider, it would have seemed ridiculous. But how could he in good conscience build a bomb in a car with baby seats?

Humming under his breath, he carefully inserted dynamite in the industrial plastic bag and checked that it was surrounded equally by

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the slurry mixture of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. Then he meticulously attached the fuse, which he intended to set on a time delay.

When his back started aching from bending over, he stood up and nearly smacked the top of his head on the roof of the van. It was far easier to build the bomb in the van in which he intended to detonate it, but it made for cramped quarters. The fumes were also getting a little too pungent, which was the biggest problem with building a bomb in a small space. And it was hotter than a commercial oven inside the vehicle. He checked that both windows were open and wiped his sweaty forehead.

There was suddenly a pounding at the door of the van and his heart dropped to his feet. "What?" he yelled, fear hammering in his throat.

"You okay in there, man?" a familiar voice yelled back.

The bomb maker ground his teeth in frustration. It was his neighbor Randy, who was simple and harmless, if a little too curious for his own good. He flung open the door and quickly exited the van, almost stepping on Randy as he did so.

"Just bought some fertilizer," he explained. "For my garden."

Randy glanced around the weed-choked yard, but if he was surprised by this revelation he didn't show it. "Cool, man," he said with a shrug. "You were just in there a while."

There was an awkward silence. "So did you want something?" the bomb maker asked finally.

"Oh, right," said Randy. "Just wanted to see if you wanted to hang out."

"Uh," said the bomb maker, throwing a glance back at his tools. He thought quickly. He'd timed the tasks he needed to do today to perfection, and he couldn't afford a break. But he didn't want Randy to become suspicious. He'd always been pretty happy to hang with Randy in the past, mostly because his neighbor never noticed whether the company was bad. The bomb maker wanted to scream with indecision.

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"I'm sorry, Randy," he said finally. "I sort of committed today to getting this chore done."

"Oh," said Randy, nodding. But he didn't move. The silence stretched out.

"Randy?"

"You want some help?" offered Randy. "Man, it *really* stinks in there!"

The bomb maker wanted to start pounding the side of the van with his fists. Instead he laughed, a brittle noise that sounded forced even to his ears.

"I'm good," he said. "Thanks though. No point both of us passing out from the smell."

Finally, it seemed to sink into Randy's thick skull that he wasn't wanted. He languidly waved goodbye and sauntered away.

The bomb maker glanced at his watch and thought about all of the things he still needed to get done before his self-imposed deadline.

Feeling his stress levels rise, he began humming to calm himself down. An anxious bomb maker often made for a dead bomb maker. He *had* to have steady hands and a clear brain.

He thought of a Billy Idol song, in an effort to settle his mind. Instead of humming *In the midnight hour, she cried more, more, more*, he changed the words to *In the midnight hour, the bomb roared, roared, roared*.

Feeling calmer, he got back to work, attaching the time delay to the fuse. By design, he was working with explosives that were reasonably stable. He didn't have to worry about heat, bumps, fumes, or anything else that would set the bomb off prematurely. The payoff was that the bomb would lack the power of its more unstable cousins. The bomb maker's intent was not to take as many lives as possible, or even to cause the maximum damage. There would be collateral damage, of course. Lives probably would be lost; destruction would certainly be wrought.

But in the end, he simply wanted to send his message.

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* * * *

Dinah Harris glared at the oscillating fan as though one of the hottest summer days on record was solely the fan's fault. She lifted hair damp with sweat from her neck and twisted it up on top of her head. She was perusing notes for her book idea and had spent last night writing down every random thought that came into her head about it. Now she was sorting through them all and wondering at some of the nonsense she'd clearly thought sounded lucid last night.

She'd gotten the idea from a friend at home group during the week. There were two funny things about that statement, she suddenly thought with a grin. One, that she had a friend, given her profound instinct never to let anyone get too close; and two, that she was going to a church home group. The idea of it had been awful, but the reality had been a lot better.

Dinah had been telling the women in her group about her current job as a freelance crime consultant, and her previous job as an FBI agent. They had all been so interested that one of them suggested she should write a book about her experiences.

It got Dinah thinking, but down a different line. She wanted to write about the *people* she'd encountered along the way. There were many stories worth telling — gang members with the courage to walk away, everyday heroes, and even the backgrounds of violent criminals.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the shrilling of her cell phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, Harris, it's your old partner in crime," said a familiar voice.

Dinah felt a rush of delight at hearing the voice of her old FBI partner, David Ferguson. They'd worked closely together for years, until Dinah's drinking problem had gotten her fired from the Bureau. He had always been her greatest champion, even when at her lowest point she had turned up for work drunk or hung-over. Their relationship was one of bantering rather than deep and meaningful discussions, but they were still as close as a professional partnership could be.

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“What’s up, Ferguson?” she asked. “Why are you bothering me on a Sunday?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Ferguson breezily. “I just thought you’d be pretty thrilled to talk to the new Assistant Special Agent in Charge.”

Dinah grinned. “You? Didn’t they have anyone else? Are things really that bad at the Bureau these days?”

“I really miss that sarcastic sense of humor, Harris,” said Ferguson. “You really know how to build a guy up, don’t you?”

“Seriously, you’re the new Special Agent in Charge?” asked Dinah. “That’s really something. Congratulations.”

“You haven’t asked me what department,” said Ferguson, sounding like the proverbial cat with the cream.

“What department, Ferguson?” Dinah asked impatiently.

“Domestic terrorism!”

It was a prestigious gig. The Bureau appointed agents to high-profile positions only if they had a long, scandal-free history of clean cases and a good solve rate. Her own presence notwithstanding, Ferguson had been a longtime and loyal servant for the Bureau and deserved his promotion.

Dinah couldn’t help but feel an edge of jealousy. She had been one of the Bureau’s brightest stars, brilliant at her job in the Violent Gangs department, extracting high-ranking gang members in exchange for intelligence. She’d enjoyed almost legendary status, at least until she lost her husband and son in a car accident, began drinking heavily to cope, and made a series of spectacular mistakes. Finally, her alcoholism had led to her firing from her beloved Bureau.

“Ferguson, you are totally awesome,” she said sincerely.

“Listen,” said Ferguson, suddenly serious. “The best part about being in charge is that if I need an external consultant, I can hire one.”

Dinah smiled. “You don’t have to keep saving my butt, Ferguson.”

“Yeah, I know. But just so you know . . . if I need you, I’ll call you. I heard you did some good work with the serial killer and the Metropolitan Police.”

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Dinah thought of the last case, a serial killer bent on removing victims he decided were not worthy of life based on his own crazy eugenic agenda. It had been the first case she'd worked in a long time completely sober, and the gratifying thing was that she'd done some good work.

"Thanks, Ferguson. I'll always take your calls," said Dinah.

"Well, stay tuned," said Ferguson. "Listen, is everything going okay with you?"

Dinah knew what he was talking about. He wanted to know if she was still sober and if she was coping. "Ferguson, I've been clean for close to six months," she said proudly, one relapse notwithstanding. "I feel optimistic and hopeful. I have my faith in God and joy in the redemption that He's offered me. I honestly feel the best I have in a long time."

"That's really great, Harris," said Ferguson.

"Listen, could you do me a favor?" Dinah asked.

"Sure thing. What?"

"Do something about this ridiculous heat, will you?" Dinah grinned. "It's killing me here."

Ferguson laughed. "I hear you. You'll have to put a word in to the man upstairs about that, if you know what I mean."

Dinah hung up and made herself a cup of coffee. While she inhaled the bittersweet aroma, she stood by the window, looking down at the street. The heat was intense and it had brought people outside: kids in paddling pools, parents on loungers in the shade, older children enjoying the luxury of a cold ice cream. Dinah smiled at the activity and wondered what her boy Sammy would be doing today had he still been alive.

It had been three years since his death along with his father Dinah's husband, in a car wreck. He would be six now, going to school and the emergency room in equal measure, given his adventurous spirit.

Dinah noticed that the ever-present sadness filled her heart, but at the same time, she was smiling at the fond memories. This was a big

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step, she thought. She'd never been able to attribute any positive emotions to the memory of Luke and Sammy. Perhaps, finally, she was dealing in reality rather than alcohol-numbed delusion.

Still with a smile on her lips, she walked to the kitchen and began to poke around in the refrigerator, searching for something to eat.

For one of the first nights in a long time, she didn't think about alcohol.

* * * *

The sun, a belligerent orange disk, took its time to sink down to the horizon, as if petulant that it could no longer terrify the inhabitants of D.C. during the night. The bomber had hoped for a cover of darkness but eventually conceded that long-shadowed twilight would have to do.

He drove the van carefully. Although it wasn't unstable, the cargo in the back was heavy and he didn't want the bags to topple over. He also drove carefully to ensure a passing cop wouldn't pay him any attention.

He wore high-visibility work clothes so that wherever he stopped, he looked like he had work to do. He'd even brought some tools and temporary fencing with him. If questioned, he planned to say that he worked for the city and had received an urgent call-out.

Finally he arrived at the chosen target. Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, on Fourth St. NW, had been built in the late 19th century of red brick and stained glass windows. It was not large and occupied a grassy corner block. At the moment, a steady stream of people arrived at the church for evening mass.

The bomber parked his van up on the curb illegally and immediately pulled out his temporary fencing and placed it around the fire hydrant. It would look to passersby like he was conducting emergency repairs of the hydrant, and in any case, he didn't plan to be here long. He busily inspected the hydrant, tapping it and casually producing tools as if he

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knew exactly what he was doing. He bent down and stared hard at a bolt, as if it were offensive in some way. He stood up, scratching his head. The final scene in this grand charade involved pretending to receive a cell phone call, glancing at his watch, and walking rapidly away.

With his heart making a staccato rhythm in his throat, he waited for someone to yell at him or stop him. At the end of the street, still pretending to have a conversation on his cell, he turned around and scoped out the street. All the visible pedestrians were too busy to take notice of the van and hurried by without a backward glance.

The bomber then looked at the buildings around the church, where somebody looking out of a window might have seen him and wondered what he was doing. The bomber had taken precautions: he had a stolen van, he wore unremarkable, working-man's clothing, and the broad-brimmed high-visibility hat he wore low so that his face was partially obscured.

Everything had gone according to plan.

Now the bomber made his way to a nearby shopping mall, where he would buy a drink and sit at a table facing the street. From here, he couldn't see the church, but he'd be able to see the detonation.

At 5:30 precisely, evening mass began at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church. The usual Saturday evening attendees were there.

At 5:42 the bomber, seated at a bench overlooking the street, pretended to take another cell phone call. Except this time, he pressed the "receive" button.

The explosion could be seen before the loud rumble reached his ears, and the seat beneath him shook a little. A smoky orange ball rose above the rooftops and the bomber had to suppress a smile at its beauty.

Loud exclamations erupted around him. Instinctively, people began to leave the mall quickly, fearing being trapped among tons of steel and concrete in the event of a second blast. The bomber, a look of blank panic upon his face, did the same, except he made for the men's

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room rather than the exit. There, he ditched the high-visibility work clothing, underneath which he was wearing casual chinos and a T-shirt. He wandered out onto the street, where bewildered people were milling as sirens grew louder in the dusky air.

“What happened?” he asked a young lady standing nearby. “Do you know what happened?”

“Something’s been blown up,” she said, her voice high-pitched. “People are saying a church has been blown up!”

“What?” he said, faking incredulity. “Who would do such a thing?”

“Terrorists,” she said gravely.

He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe his ears.

As he’d known it would, his bomb shut down the city. Trains stopped running immediately and buses and cars stalled in a severe traffic jam. Police were in the process of setting up roadblocks near the bomb site to check vehicles.

The bomber walked the 15 blocks home. It was hot and tiring, but he was keyed up anyway and needed to exercise off the adrenaline. By the time he reached his little bungalow, the bomb had made it to the major news stations. Like a pyromaniac watching his own fire with glee, the bomber watched the newscasts late into the night, eventually falling asleep on the reclining armchair.

By morning, the news would be able to paint a clearer picture. Two people were dead, 35 were injured. The church looked like a listing, stricken warship, one entire wall missing and the roof leaning precariously to one side. A burning, acidic odor wafted pungently over the bombsite.

It was immediately apparent how the church had been attacked: only ten feet away from the collapsed wall sat the smoking remains of a vehicle.

The bomber couldn’t have been happier. His reign of terror had begun, and it filled a gaping, desolate part of him with an elation and arrogance he’d never felt before.

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Everyone in the city whispered to themselves and each other: *Am I in danger as I kneel to pray? Will I be blown up as I raise my voice in praise during morning prayers?*

Mostly, they wondered, *Who did this and why?*