



A
Dinah Harris
MYSTERY

THE Dark
Heart

Julie Cave



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Acknowledgments

For my own daughters, Jasmine and Sienna, who are more precious to me than words can adequately say.
For Terry: And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

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JANUARY, 1996

A bank of low, dark clouds hid the moon and threatened rain. When Jordan stepped out into the brisk air, he took a deep breath and wondered if he was going to get wet. It had been windy and dry for weeks, and thus, he'd been too busy to even eat lunch most days. The Santa Ana winds were bothering asthmatics, wreaking havoc on emphysema sufferers, and creating recurring attacks of pneumonia. He was one of only a few respiratory therapists on staff at the private hospital, and he went home after each shift exhausted. And his day wasn't done yet: the staff parking lot was a long way from the hospital; a three-block walk.

Jordan walked down the street, one eye on the belligerent clouds, his backpack slung casually over his shoulder. He'd made the walk many

times, and he daydreamed about the big supper his mama had waiting for him at home. His stomach rumbled in anticipation.

One block over from the hospital, Jordan came across a car with its hood up, and he wondered what it was doing in this neighborhood. It was a commercial district, deserted at night and apart from hospital staff scurrying to and from work, there was little reason for anyone else to be around. Then he saw the two girls bent over it, the dim glow of a flashlight revealing confused faces. When they heard Jordan approach, they both straightened up and he could see them a little better. One was tall with red hair, and one was small and petite, built like a bird. The taller one called out: "Excuse me?"

Jordan slowed down. "Are you okay?"

"Could you please help us?" she asked. "Our car has broken down and we don't know what to do."

The smaller woman shivered. "I'm scared."

Jordan smiled. "Sure. What are you doing around here anyway?"

"We're lost," said the smaller woman.

"Well, let's see what we can do for you," Jordan said. He put down his backpack and walked around to the front of the car. There were no obvious signs that something was wrong; no steam billowing from the radiator. *Perhaps they've run out of gas*, he thought.

"Hmmm . . ." he mused, mostly to himself. He bent over farther. "Let's have a look at. . ."

He didn't get to finish his sentence. A blow to the back of his head sent bright, hot flashes of lightning off in front of his eyes. Pain unfurled in his skull like a sail caught by the Santa Ana wind. *What was that?* His panicked brain shouted, although he only seemed to hear his thoughts dimly. *Did the hood fall on my head?*

A panting breath in his ear explained the situation. Someone had attacked him from behind: *a coward's move*, his brain noted, coldly. Some instinct within him urged him to flee, but his legs had turned to limp spaghetti. He could only collapse onto the blacktop below. He became aware that he was being dragged away from the car and into the darkness. With great effort, he realized that the two women were watching, but they weren't calling for help or screaming.

It had been a trap.

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He ducked away from a fist aimed at his nose. He caught the flow on his chin and lower lip, which split like an overripe melon. Warm blood flowed onto his shirt. *My work shirt*, he thought. *Mama's going to kill me.*

He tried to fight, although he knew that he didn't stand a chance. There were two attackers, he thought, and both were big and strong. He tried to scramble to his feet, though his head felt heavy and disconnected from anything his legs were trying to do. In desperation, he tried to work out what they wanted from him.

"Money!" he cried. "Money. In my wallet."

It was a mugging, Jordan thought. Perhaps they thought he was a rich young doctor.

The snarling response was pure hatred.

Oh, thought Jordan. A boot crashed into his side, and he felt sure he heard the snap of his rib. *They hate me because my skin is a different shade from theirs.*

He almost wished it was a mugging, because the truth was so incomprehensible. It was such a waste of time and energy, to hate somebody for no reason other than their skin color or facial features. The urgent need for quick cash made more sense.

His attempt to defend himself quickly waned. He simply could not fight off two attackers. While adrenaline flooded his veins, numbing the pain, he remembered the stories he'd heard at his grandmother's knee. He remembered how in times past, his family wasn't allowed in the same bathrooms as other people. He knew that some of his ancestors had been slaves. The echoes of those times were still heard today: sometimes a patient shrank back when he came into the treatment room. Sometimes he was assumed to be the orderly, not the therapist. Yet for some reason, he still dreamed of medical school. His mama had taught him that nothing was beyond his reach.

Yet, this attack reminded him that nothing had really changed. Racism was still here; hatred still lived in the hearts of men and women; and violence could erupt in its ugly fury. Jordan came to understand in that moment that his picture would appear in the evening news tomorrow night, right next to his weeping mother, and his name would be added to the roll call of those who'd died because of how they looked.

Jordan could feel his consciousness slipping; his eyes swam and his ears roared like the sea. As though he was in someone else's dream, he

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wondered: *Can't they see my blood is red? Can't they see that we are all the same underneath?*

Jordan struggled to keep his eyes open. It was nearly over, he realized. He fought to stay conscious for as long as he could, and he found himself looking at the faces of the two women who'd led him into the trap.

The taller one looked toward him grimly, her face a mask of stone, but she couldn't look directly at him.

The smaller one stared right back at him, and Jordan was astonished to see tears falling down her face, glistening in the dim light thrown by the street light. She stood straight and rigidly still, arms by her side, not trying to hide the evidence of her tears.

Jordan was mystified for a moment, but another bright explosion of pain erupted at the back of his head, and everything went dark.

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Malia Shaw felt rising panic grip her in its intimate and painful embrace.

She raised herself on one elbow and squinted at the blinds: they were partially closed but still allowed a few long sheaths of light through, long and lean as fingers, to spill on the filthy floor. *It is morning then*, she thought. She'd survived another night. Her addiction to heroin was so great that a distant part of her knew that any time she shot up could be her last. To be truthful, each time she awoke from heavy sleep she was surprised that she was still alive. *Despite my best efforts.*

She sat up with a groan, the long tendrils of a cold ache wrapping around the deep of her joints. The room was dim and musty and smelled like sour milk. The floor was almost unrecognizable as such, littered with old takeout fast food boxes, discarded clothing, and empty water and soda bottles. Malia had ceased to notice it anymore. There was only one thing she thought about when she awoke in the morning, one thing that got her through the miserable, lonely day, and one thing that helped her escape vivid nightmares during the cold night. As she reached for her cell phone, she saw that her hands were shaking. A wave of nausea crashed over her with the chill of the Atlantic winter.

She needed more smack, and she needed it now.

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Malia texted her dealer and then stood up. Despite the pain, she knew she had to find some cash for him. She began to search through pockets of clothes and handbags, looking for spare cash.

She found some in the pocket of a pair of jeans and waited near the door, hopping from one foot to the other. Her nerves were starting to blaze with agony when the doorbell rang.

Simon stood outside, wearing a huge coat. A biting wind tore past him into the tiny apartment, almost knocking Malia over. He looked at Malia, dressed in a thin shirt and shook his head. "Your apartment is freezing," he said. "Don't you have heat?"

She hugged herself. Being cold was nothing compared to withdrawals from heroin. "I think the heat got cut off," she said. "Have you got some stuff for me?"

Simon handed her a paper bag. She peered in, saw what she was looking for, and gave him the cash.

Her dealer looked around again, askance at what he saw. "Seriously, put more clothes on," he said. "You'll catch your death of cold."

But Malia held in her hand something that would warm her up quicker than any sweater or coat. She spent a few minutes looking for a vein that hadn't collapsed, and then injected the heroin. Simon stood awkwardly, silhouetted by pale morning light, watching her.

Moments later, liquid fire surged through her body. It took away the pain, made her limbs feel pleasantly heavy, and it lifted her mind to a happy, safe place. She waved a farewell to Simon, who closed the door gently behind him.

She relaxed into the couch, enjoying the sensation of being taken away. The dull, thumping ache of regret that beat in synchronicity to her heart stopped. The memory of the wet thunk made by shattering bones beneath heavy boots retreated into a deep corner of her mind. The relentless fear, which disturbed her sleep and bit at her with tiny vicious teeth, finally left her alone.

Her eyes closed, and she drifted into sleep.

Sometime later, she heard the front door close, and she wondered if Simon had come back to take pity on her. When a figure appeared, profiled in the doorframe, she tried to sit up. Confused and disoriented, she realized that she was lying in her bed. She couldn't remember how she had moved from the couch to the bed. As the planes of light changed on his face, she recognized him.

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She wasn't expecting the person who stood, silently looking at her. There was something not right with him, but her slowed mind couldn't figure out why. Perhaps it was the stiff, tense way he stood, his fists white-knuckled at his side. Perhaps it was that his usual smile was absent. Perhaps it was the expression on his face. Lots of people looked at her like that — their gazes full of scorn and pity, disgust and fear. They crossed the street to get away from her. She was a worthless addict, a junkie in every sense of the word. *Human junk*. But *he* had never looked at her like that. He'd always been warm and compassionate.

Suddenly, he was inside the bedroom, closing the door behind him. For the first time, through her haze, Malia felt a sharp stab of fear. "What's wrong?" she asked, scooting backwards from him until her bare shoulder blades rested against the headboard of the bed.

He took off his jacket and slung it casually across the end of the bed. "How long did you think you could keep running?" he asked. "Did you think I'd never catch up with you?"

She gaped at him. "But I thought — I *trusted* you —"

He smiled broadly. "Of course you did." From his pocket, he pulled out a curled photograph. Smoothing it, he showed it to her.

Malia gasped.

"Recognize it, do you?" he said. "I guess the smack hasn't erased *all* of your memory. This is your past and you can't outrun it."

"Listen," said Malia, her voice brittle with desperation. She knew all about desperation, didn't she? Her life had been one frantic act of survival, one after the other, for as long as she could remember. How well she knew she would never flee her past; it was locked in her memory and it assaulted her viciously daily.

"You don't get to opt out," he continued. "You don't get to decide to walk away. What you did, though, was worse than walking away. What you did was unforgivable."

"I didn't. . . . I wasn't, I . . . *please*," stammered Malia. The realization of why the man was here suddenly assailed her. The heroin haze lifted as adrenaline dumped into her system. She looked around hopelessly for a weapon, but what good would a cushion do? There was a lamp just out of arms' reach, but it was cheap and light, and against the bulk of the man was likely to do little. She searched for an escape route, but the door to the bathroom was a dead end, and a man she'd thought was her friend blocked the only other exit.

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"Listen," she said, again. "I'm sorry. Please, you must know how sorry I am. I know I hurt you terribly."

His laugh was harsh, guttural. "You think you know how much I hurt?"

"I know I turned a blind eye to your suffering," continued Malia, her throat tight. "But you have to know that I was scared and hurt. I didn't know what to do except what they told me to do."

Something seemed to snap inside him and he snarled: "Shut up! Just shut up!"

"I'm sorry I was so weak. Please. I hate myself more than you could possibly ever hate me." Malia begged, tears dripping down her face.

He was upon her in only a few seconds. He had brought no weapons with him but his hands, and with astonishing strength, he seized Malia around the neck.

Instinct kicked in, and Malia's hands flew to her throat, trying to peel away the man's grip. Desperate, choking whimpers were all the noise she could make as she tried to kick out, but it was no use. She thrashed around, in the hands of a much stronger person, much like a fish caught on a hook, fighting until the inevitable end.

Despite her best efforts, the past had caught up with her, and it was intent on extracting revenge.

Starbursts of purple light flashed in front of her eyes as her oxygen-starved brain began to shut down. As the light began to die, she tried to cry out.

The brilliant flares of light in front of her eyes contained within them images from her life: herself as a small girl on a dirt floor, abandoned, frightened, hungry, and dirty, morphing to an angry and hurting teenager, an easy victim for a predator.

Then she was falling backward into darkness that engulfed her, while the light slowly faded into tiny points. She fell and fell, forever, it seemed, and she was not scared.

Then, it was over.

Darkness had always been her friend.

She had never been afraid of it, nor scared of being alone in it. The air, which seemed somehow lighter once the sun had gone down,

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was refreshing to breathe and made her feel clean. Night air felt so much more easygoing than the heavy air of daytime, with all of its loaded expectations and responsibilities. Night air was clarity, freedom, renewal.

It was why Dinah Harris was out jogging through the small town of Ten Mile Hollow, Virginia, at midnight. It was late fall and bitterly cold, but Dinah didn't mind. Ten Mile Hollow was a picturesque town, especially now that it was dressed in all its fall finery of deep red, copper, and gold. At midnight it was silent, and all Dinah could hear was the slapping of her sneakers on the road. The sound reminded her of the years of grief following the deaths of her husband and son, when the only time she could face leaving the house was late at night. Although the streets were arguably more dangerous in Washington D.C. than the rural hamlet of Ten Mile Hollow, she had walked its streets night after night — the only time she felt free of the heavy cloak of shame and judgment.

Thankfully, that cloak had loosened its hold on her in recent times, though it wasn't above a sneaky attack out of the blue, when the feeling of rising anxiety was literally a noose around her neck.

Jogging helped. Jogging at night particularly helped. It gave her time to think, reflect, process, and pray — to rid herself of the day's difficulties. She always returned from a night jog feeling less burdened and more content.

There was also the fact that she no longer slept very well; an insomniac of some years. Instead of frustrated fighting with the bedsheets because her brain refused to wind down, a jog helped to calm her.

The beautiful, cold silence of the night was shattered by the sound of her cell phone ringing. Dinah stopped running and glanced at the time before she answered the phone. It was 20 minutes past midnight.

"Hello?"

"Dinah? Where are you?" It was her friend and host, Elise Jones. Dinah and Elise had been friends years ago, when they went through FBI training at Quantico. They'd lost touch in the intervening years, but Elise had found Dinah through social media. They'd rebuilt their friendship as they exchanged their history — Dinah as a former star of the FBI, her spectacular fall from grace, and her new life as a private investigator, consulting mostly to other law enforcement. Elise had also left the FBI, although in less scandalous circumstances, and was now

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the detective in the Ten Mile Hollow Sherriff's Department. As the only detective, she handled everything from breaking and entering to murder.

Elise had invited Dinah to stay with her for a few days. In between cases, Dinah had agreed, remembering how much she enjoyed Elise's company. This was her first night, having spent the evening getting to know Elise's husband, Lewis, and 15-year-old daughter, Chloe.

"I'm . . . um, I'm running," said Dinah, realizing it probably sounded weird.

"Oh. Are you in town somewhere?"

Dinah looked around, trying to get a sense of where she was in a town she didn't know. "Let's see . . . I'm outside a little strip of shops, there's a little place called Wheeler Diner?"

"Oh yeah, I know where you are. I'm going to come pick you up."

Dinah frowned. "I'm okay. You don't need to worry about me. I do this all the time in D.C."

Elise gave a brief, dry chuckle. "I have no doubt of that, Dinah. I only ask because the dispatcher just called me to let me know a 911 call was received regarding a dead body. I thought you might be interested in coming along."

"Sure," said Dinah, feeling a familiar thrill. "A murder?"

"I don't know. The caller didn't say much."

"Okay. I'll wait here for you." Dinah hung up and looked around the cold, clear night. Above, a tapestry of stars shone gently in the velvet sky, the faintest whisper of a breeze caressing her cheek. It was at moments like this that she was simply glad to be alive. In spite of past sadness and struggle, she was still here, picking up the pieces of a shattered life and thriving.

By the grace of God.

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her windbreaker and waited, watching her breath bloom in front of her face like a flower made of mist.

A few minutes later, a white Ford appeared. It careened toward Dinah and stopped suddenly, tires squealing. Elise waved at her from the driver's seat.

Yikes.

As she drove, and Dinah hung onto the sides of her bucket seat for dear life, Elise explained that the body would probably turn out to be a

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suicide or an accident. In the small town of Ten Mile Hollow, Virginia, murders were rare, save for the odd drunken fight. Periodically, she pushed a hand into her hair, trying to keep the tight, springy ringlets the color of honey out of her eyes. It meant she only had one hand on the steering wheel, and with the careless regard she had for speed limits, life, and limb, Dinah felt sure they would not actually arrive at their destination in one piece.

I am destined to be scraped up off the road by the fire department.

When Elise had finished speaking, to distract herself from her impending doom, Dinah asked, “Do they call you by the nickname you had at Quantico?”

Elise had pulled on a puffer jacket to protect against the chill settling into the fall air, and although it did make her look slightly bulkier, it didn’t hide the fact that she was short and thin as spaghetti. At Quantico, she’d been known as Bonesy Jonesy, often shortened to just Bonesy.

Elise snorted. “It follows me wherever I go. Could be worse I suppose.”

They passed through Main Street, where tranquility ruled in the sparkling fountain outside the courthouse, in the small, green park next to the medical center, and in the striped awning of Esther’s Eat Inn (*get it? — so small town clever*). They crossed to the western side of town, now literally the wrong side of the tracks according to Elise. Apartment buildings that had once been starter homes for young couples had fallen into disrepair and become havens for drug addicts and petty criminals. Elise knew that gang activity was beginning to crop up in the town, a consequence of failing families and poor employment prospects.

The apartment they’d been called to was a crumbling, red brick, two-story walk up. The street was quiet and deserted, except for the wail of a baby somewhere inside the apartment building. In the darkness, a light was switched on in a window. Elise parked, Dinah said a prayer of thanksgiving for her survival, and they walked up the stairs. Elise knocked on the door, and a shower of peeling paint flakes fell at their feet.

There was no answer. They waited as Elise knocked again. When there was only silence from within, she tried the doorknob. It was locked, but the deadbolts weren’t.

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Elise raised her eyebrows at Dinah and bent down to peer through the keyhole. A moment later, she motioned for Dinah to do the same. Dinah pressed her eye to the keyhole and saw what could easily have passed for a waste facility. It was trashed.

“We need to get through the door,” Elise said. “Lend me your shoulder?”

“Sure.”

Dinah and Elise hit the door three times with their combined bulk. It was a cheap door and a flimsy lock, and it was eventually defeated. Dinah stood on the threshold of the apartment, her eyes scanning the scene. Though the apartment was dark and cold, it didn’t take long to see the body of a woman and the pale, waxy hue of her skin, lying on the couch. She was definitely dead.

Elise turned to Dinah. She spoke in the careful, calm voice of a person used to dealing with crisis. “I’m going to take a look at her and then call for backup.”

Dinah nodded. “I’m right behind you.”

As she navigated the room behind Elise, Dinah took careful note of the surroundings. The apartment was in disarray, filthy and messy. She saw at least one used needle on the coffee table.

Perhaps Elise is right. This is probably just an overdose.

Dinah knelt down by the body and looked at the dead woman while Elise checked for a pulse. The victim was not a young woman, but heroin often aged someone considerably. Recent and faded track marks scored both arms. She was very thin. She had long, dark hair that was fanned around her face.

Dinah couldn’t see an immediate cause of death — there was no pool of blood.

Elise suddenly motioned with one hand. “Look,” she hissed.

Dinah leaned closer, and then she saw the long, purplish bruises around the woman’s throat. *Definitely not a suicide or overdose. This is murder.*

Carefully, she raised the eyelid on one of the woman’s half-closed eyes and saw red, broken blood vessels — the telltale signs of death by asphyxiation.

Elise looked at her, and understanding passed between them without a word having to be spoken. Elise rocked back on her heels and pulled out her cell phone.

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Dinah stood up and took a careful step back from the body. She listened as Elise called in backup, forensic technicians, and the medical examiner.

Dinah began to look carefully around the room, taking out her cell phone to record her observations. Her immediate impression was one of neglect and filth. It would appear that the dead woman lived alone in squalor, which wasn't unusual for hard-line heroin addicts.

The kitchenette contained a hotplate and refrigerator that both looked unused. Judging by the number of empty takeout bags and containers around the room, the dead woman had lived almost entirely on Chinese food.

The living room contained only a couch, coffee table, and a small TV. Dinah picked her way gingerly across the room, mindful both of needles that were likely strewn around and not disturbing the crime scene. There was nothing that stood out immediately to her as being out of place, but it was so hard to know given the state of the room. On a crate serving as a coffee table, Dinah found a small purse. Inside, she found a social security card and an ATM card in the name of Malia Shaw.

She gave the purse to Elise, who dropped it into a plastic evidence bag, and headed for the bedroom.

The queen-sized box-spring mattress took up most of the bedroom, with sheets spread haphazardly across it. The small, attached bathroom was grimy and virtually empty, save for a bar of soap. The dead woman apparently hadn't bothered with the niceties of makeup or perfume.

Dinah returned to where Elise was standing, just inside the door. She couldn't shake a feeling of disquiet. The dead woman had lived a solitary, sad life, she thought.

"Well, what do you think?" Elise asked. Two deputy cars had parked below them; Elise waved at them to come up.

"She was a hard-core heroin addict," said Dinah, "so it could be a drug deal gone bad. Or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"There's nothing to take, except a stash of drugs, perhaps," observed Elise.

"Do you know who she was?"

Elise sucked in a lip for a moment and said, "Not offhand. I'm willing to bet that if we plug her name into the computer, there'll be a record. She had to be supporting her habit somehow."

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Dinah nodded, distracted by the feeling that she had missed something. *What is it?*

She went back inside the apartment and knelt beside the dead woman again. Without touching her, she looked over the body more closely, wondering if there was anything there she had overlooked.

"Found anything I should know about?" a cheerful voice sounded above her. It belonged to a tall man in his late forties, with a thick thatch of silvery hair with a matching beard and a beaming smile.

"This is the medical examiner, Dr. Theo Walker," explained Elise. "Doc, this is my FBI buddy, Dinah Harris. She's a private consultant now."

Dr. Walker smiled as he snapped on his gloves. "Nice to meet you. What did you do for the Bureau?"

"Gangs mostly, but I also did some profiling for serial homicide." *Ah, glory days. All gone. Nothing lasts forever.*

"Excellent. Well, what do you think of our body here?"

"So far, only that she's a murder victim," said Dinah. She pointed out the bruising on the woman's neck.

Walker knelt down next to her and nodded.

"I saw it when I tried to find a pulse," explained Elise.

Silence fell in the tiny, suffocating room as the county medical examiner carefully looked over the dead woman's body. From time to time, he shook his head, as if noting the sadness of the woman's wasted life.

"My immediate impression is that she was strangled manually," said Dr. Walker finally, as he examined the neck carefully. "These bruises look like finger marks, as opposed to rope or cord."

He began a second careful examination of the body, this time speaking into his iPhone as he made notes. Dinah watched as the man gathered evidence slowly and methodically.

"Any thoughts?" she asked, at length.

Walker rocked back on his heels. "Off the record, I think she was probably killed at least a couple of days ago, though the cold temperatures in here would have sped up the cooling process. Rigor mortis has passed. No sign of insect activity, but that is due more to the temperature than anything else. There are no other obvious signs of trauma. I'd be surprised if the killer inflicted any violence on her other than that by which she died."

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Dinah nodded. “He probably wouldn’t have needed to — she’s so small.” She stood up and walked to the door of the apartment to breathe in some fresh air, which suddenly felt cold and sweet compared to the odor of death.

“The crime scene tech is on her way,” Elise noted, after looking at her phone. “She’s coming from another job over in Norfolk.”

Dinah knew that Ten Mile Hollow was too small to employ a full-time crime scene technician, so they used the county resources. The tech worked from the same office as Dr. Walker in Norfolk.

From her perch by the door, Dinah looked around the street: still dark and quiet with not a soul in sight. If this murder had occurred in the middle-class districts, neighbors would have crowded around the scene, curiosity getting the better of them. Here, most of the neighbors had something to hide and stayed behind firmly shut doors.

Across the street, an apartment above a pawnshop had tried to cheer up the bleak façade of the building with flower boxes. For some reason, this attempt at homeyness made Dinah feel unspeakably sad. Somehow, the loneliness of this street struck a chord with her own isolation, and it echoed in her heart like a beautiful song left unsung.

The eastern horizon was blushing with the pink promise of a new day. In the hour before dawn the temperature plummeted even further, and dressed only in her jogging gear, Dinah began to shiver.

Wearily, Dinah and Elise stood in the threshold of the dead woman’s apartment as the crime scene technician finished up. Black fingerprint powder was dusted over every surface, but it was virtually unnoticeable amid the original grime. The crime scene technician nodded somberly at them as she left, the medical examiner had already removed the body, and the remaining apartment and its contents were Elise’s to process. Although she had notified him, the sheriff had no interest in combing through the dead woman’s belongings, and had made an excuse not to be there.

“He’d be here in a flash if it were an important member of society,” grumbled Elise. “Apparently lonely heroin addicts don’t make the cut.”

Dinah knew this only too well. It seemed that humanity was collectively keen to assign value to human beings based on a list of subjective criteria.

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The apartment had been sealed all night with a sheriff's deputy guarding the door. *No doubt his presence severely dampened the usual trade of the drug dealers during the night*, Dinah thought with a smile.

Though the dawn had teased them with feminine shades, the day failed to deliver. Clouds rolled in, turning the sky low and gray. Dinah felt as though she was now completely frozen. Her extremities were numb. Her nose could drop right off her face and she wouldn't even notice.

"All right," said Elise. "Let's do this."

She gave Dinah gloves. They decided to start in opposite ends of the apartment, go through each room carefully and compare notes at the end. Dinah was to start in the kitchen.

After only a few minutes, she decided the autopsy would have to show signs of significant malnutrition. There was literally no food in the apartment, the spoiled remains of a milk carton notwithstanding. The small refrigerator was bare, and there was no evidence of a pantry at all. Underneath the sink languished a solitary bottle of disinfectant. Another cupboard yielded a few mismatched cups and plates. The countertops and sink were covered with the detritus of fast food. Dinah sifted through all of it, looking for anything odd. She opened a large trash bag and dropped each piece of rubbish in after a thorough inspection.

She found nothing there.

She moved into the threadbare living room. First, she looked through the rubbish that littered the couch and coffee table, and put it carefully into the trash bag, mindful of needle stick injury. Once the floor and the couch were clear, she stood back to look. The furniture was cheap, the couch cushions ripped in places and sagging in others. The floor was covered with thin, worn carpet, the original color of which was anyone's guess. Now it was a sickly gray-brown. *At the age of 39, this woman should have had a significant other, some kids, a warm and cheerful home*. Dinah sighed. In this, she and the dead woman were alike.

There were few places to hide anything of note. There was no murder weapon to look for, no ballistics. She hoped that the crime scene tech had found some hair or fingerprints.

Dinah decided the only thing to do was to pull the couch apart. Gingerly, afraid of used needles flying out at her, she pulled up the

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cushions, leaving the frame bare.

It paid off. A thin black cell phone had been hidden or had fallen underneath one of the cushions. Dinah opened it and began to look through the contacts. There weren't many, and she felt encouraged by this. She dropped the phone into a plastic evidence bag.

She walked into the bedroom with its tiny attached bathroom. The sheets on the bed were dirty and covered in tiny flecks of blood — perhaps from needle wounds. Dinah carefully bagged it up as evidence. Perhaps, as a stroke of luck, the killer had left his own speck of blood. Clothes littered the floor of the bedroom, but in total, Malia Shaw had owned little in the way of clothing. Dinah found a pair of jeans, several T-shirts, a couple of sweatshirts and an old coat, a pair of boots, and a pair of sneakers. She bagged each item, carefully wrote the record book, and was left with the mattress.

With a sigh, she rocked back on her heels, wondering why she suddenly felt so warm and claustrophobic. Dinah had always thought that a person's home shared a soul with its owner, and therefore had a personality of its own. In her own house, visitors would instantly see that she loved cooking. She owned every cookbook ever published, and displayed them in her kitchen. Much of the color was provided by a potted chili plant in one corner, and a collection of potted herbs in the courtyard. A throw blanket was always carelessly draped across the couch for use on cold nights. A beautiful and rare painting by an indigenous Australian artist adorned one wall, the earthy ochre, burnt gold, deep brown, and dark red reminding her of an exotic and faraway land. It was a home that was lived in.

That was what was bothering her. There was absolutely no indication in this apartment that Malia Shaw had cared one little bit about herself. The apartment was bereft of love, cold and shuttered. There was nothing sentimental, nothing personal. There were no photos or mementos or souvenirs. There were no books or music — not even a computer. No indication that a human being, with a soul, with a personality, with preferences and desires and fears, had lived here. *Is this what a life reduced to a heroin addiction looks like?*

A spreading sadness trickled through every vein. *How could you call this a life? Was there anyone who loved you?*

Dinah took apart the box spring, searching for any cuts or frays in the fabric in which something could be hidden. She didn't find anything.

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The final room to search was the bathroom, which consisted of a shower stall, a toilet, and a sink, all of which were moldy and dirty. Dinah found nothing in the stall or toilet tank, and turned her attention to the small cupboard underneath the sink.

It was bare — a bottle of shampoo, a body moisturizer, and several new bars of soap. For lack of anything else to look at, Dinah picked up the bars of soap and threw them back into the cupboard in frustration. The soap hit the back wall of the cupboard with a hollow *thunk* and Dinah frowned.

The back wall of the cupboard sounded loose and spongy. She reached in to test it and the particleboard shuddered at her touch.

Dinah retrieved her flashlight from her bag in the living room and looked around the cupboard before realizing that the particleboard was bent *toward* her, in a concave fashion.

Shuffling on her knees, she pressed herself up against the bathroom wall and shone the flashlight in the small crack between the wall and the back of the bathroom cupboard. She could see something there, a dark mass that had bent the particleboard inward.

In the process of pulling the dark mass out, Dinah scraped her glove-clad knuckles and bent her elbow at impossible angles. With great concentration, she managed to inch the mass out from behind the particleboard slowly.

It was a large, sealed plastic bag, and at first Dinah thought it would be a stash of drugs, kept safe from anyone who might steal it. But the feel was wrong; it was too stiff and thick to be drugs. When she pulled the contents from the bag out, she stared for several moments in total confusion. Two U.S. passports and three social security cards emerged from the bag, all bearing Malia Shaw's photo. However, the documents contained three aliases: one passport and social security card read Theresa Scott, the other passport and another social security card named her as Lexi Hollingsworth, and the final lone social security card pegged her as Amanda Wallace.

The documents all had varying addresses, all within Virginia; but all had the same birth date. Dinah examined the documents carefully. They were professionally made; indiscernible fakes. She slumped back against the bathroom wall, her heart galloping like a thoroughbred, thundering in her ears.

Who was Malia Shaw?

Angus Whitehall arrived home as the last golden filament of dusk disappeared, absorbed by the cold blackness of night. He felt a usual rush of warmth as he made the juxtaposition from dark to the cheerful light of his home. As he walked from the driveway to the porch, he could feel the burden of responsibility of his work as the pastor of Ten Mile Hollow First Baptist Church begin to lift. The responsibility of being the leader, the motivator, and the example to an entire town was, at times, exhausting — particularly since he was pretending to be a fine, upstanding citizen when he knew very well that he was not anything of the sort.

His wife, Louise, was both fixing dinner and supervising the homework of their children, 15-year-old Grace and 10-year-old Marcus. He shrugged off his coat, kissed Louise, and poured himself a glass of water.

“How was your day?” he asked.

"Oh, you know. It was fine," said Louise. She was distracted, stirring broth into a simmering pan and answering Marcus's questions about fifth-grade math. "How was your day?"

Angus shrugged. "It was okay. I finished my sermon for Sunday, so that's a big relief."

"Uh-huh, that sounds great," said Louise. She flitted from one saucepan to the next. "I'm sorry, honey. Can we talk later?"

"Of course. Can I help with dinner?"

"Oh, it's all under control. Do you know anything at all about math? I really don't." She smiled at him.

"I may remember something." He stood up and took another swallow of water. "Hey, Marcus. Need a hand?"

For 15 minutes, he helped Marcus wrestle fractions into submission and checked on Grace, who was in her room. While he waited for dinner, he decided to relax for a few minutes.

In the living room, he sat down on a couch and turned on the television. He mindlessly watched without really digesting the latest political news from Washington, tales of economic woe from Europe, and a scandal surrounding a famous football player.

"In local news," the newscaster said, "the body of a woman was discovered this morning in the small town of Ten Mile Hollow, just outside Norfolk, and police report that her death is a suspected homicide. Ten Mile Hollow Sheriff Wilder says that the woman was strangled about two days ago in an apartment on the west side of town. She has been identified as Malia Shaw, and she was 39 years old."

The glass slipped from Angus's hand and shattered on the hardwood floor.

The latest photo of Malia Shaw appeared on the screen, and he saw gaunt cheekbones, dull skin, and weary eyes. The photo was lifted directly from her driver's license, and her hair was disheveled. *She looks almost dead*, Angus thought and then shuddered with horror at the thought. *Now she really is dead.*

Suddenly the television screen was too large, too sharp, too clear. Did they really have to blow up her face to such dimensions? Did they want the general public to see death already residing in her eyes?

"Angus?"

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He snapped back to reality and saw Louise standing next to him, looking at the broken glass in confusion.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Angus wanted to laugh, hysteria bubbling up in him. *A ghost, indeed. A ghost from the past, who represented memories he'd almost succeeded in repressing.*

"Uh," he said. "I'm fine. Just an accident."

Louise looked at the television screen. "You were watching footage of the woman who was murdered?"

"Yes." He looked down at the broken glass and thought he should start cleaning it up. Yet, he couldn't will his limbs to move.

"It was a shock, wasn't it?" Louise said. "A murder, in our little town."

Angus felt relief wash over him. "Yes," he agreed. "Terrible. You wouldn't think it could happen here."

Finally, he managed to drop to a knee and begin cleaning up the glass. Louise came in with a small broom and took over, directing him to the dinner table. Over dinner, he tried to behave normally, but he caught Louise throwing him a few odd glances, as if there were something slightly off-kilter about him. Was he talking too fast, laughing too loudly? Did the smile on his face reach his eyes?

He kissed the kids goodnight and sat brooding on the couch. *What is going to happen? Will the police link Malia to me? What if people find out? What if my family finds out?* The thought made him go cold all over, his stomach flipping like a fish on a hook. He wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh, cry, or vomit. All options felt entirely possible.

Louise had curled up on the couch next to him with a cup of tea, watching him carefully. "Is everything okay?" she asked him, when he smiled briefly at her.

"Of course," he lied.

"Did you know the murdered woman?"

"No!" he replied, a bit too quickly. He waited a moment. "No. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," she said. "I just thought you might have come across her during your ministry work on the west side. She looked like she lived a hard life."

A hard life doesn't even begin to explain what she — what we — did. But his wife had unknowingly thrown him a lifeline. *Ministry on the west side.*

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"I didn't know her," he said. "I guess she might have been a recipient of our ministry services, but if so, I didn't recognize her."

He had lied to many people, including Louise, throughout the course of his life. It was only because the truth was too hard to bear for anyone except him, and he'd resigned himself to carry the burden alone. But this lie sat heavily on his shoulders like an ill-fitting coat, because of the possible consequences of discovery.

The last time I saw her she was alive, talking. She had the same eyes though: death lived there.

He and Louise slid into comfortable movie watching, although Angus's mind was elsewhere. He stared blindly at the television screen, seeing people move and speak and do things. He had no idea what was going on.

Instead, he was wondering if he'd covered his tracks well enough. He wondered if he'd left behind anything of himself, though he thought he had been as careful as he could be. He wondered if anyone had seen him, if they could identify him. He wondered if any clues existed on the woman's dead body.

Fear thrummed through him like a high-tension electrical wire. He couldn't afford for any of this to be revealed. It would be devastating if his secret were exposed. He had spent so many years building a careful veneer of respectability, and he couldn't imagine what would happen if it all came crashing down.

He was the pastor of Ten Mile Hollow First Baptist Church, a husband, and a father. Since those terrible times with Malia, he had tried to make amends in every way he knew how. He had spent all his energy giving to others, trying desperately for love to outweigh the hatred. Now he had to acknowledge that, as in many things, his efforts fell short.

Oh God I'm so scared. Please help me. Please show me what to do.

What he couldn't say, couldn't find the courage to articulate or the temerity to ask for was a plea for protection for himself.

Chloe Jones glanced at the front steps of the E. Crenshaw Ten Mile Hollow High School. When she saw who was sitting there, her heart tripped a little and then went icy cold. *If only there was another entrance,* she thought.

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Each morning, before the bell, Jessica Hunter and her minions would station themselves on the steps. What followed was great sport to them — making nasty comments, laughing, teasing, mocking — and dread to those who would fall victim.

Chloe was one of their favorite targets.

She narrowed her eyes and stared at the girl who ruled the tenth grade. She was beautiful and popular and confident. Long, blue-black hair cascaded in effortless waves around a face with flawless olive skin. Her blue eyes were startlingly lovely, and her white teeth were perfect. She was a cheerleader and dated a senior football star. Her clothes displayed long, lean legs and a tiny torso. She was vicious and mean, feared by almost everyone in the tenth grade.

Chloe knew she made an obvious victim. Her hair was blunt and short and spunky. Her figure could best be described as curvy, though Chloe thought of herself as simply fat. She was as pale as the full moon. She wore glasses and favored a chunky frame. She liked to wear clothes that were retro, and therefore not at all cool. She was smarter than Jessica, and beat her in every class.

In return for these slights, Jessica tormented her at every possible moment.

Chloe glanced around, trying to see if a more likely victim was about to make his or her way up the stairs. She waited five minutes, but finally, she knew she had to take a deep breath and enter the building.

As she approached the stairs, the tenth-grade chess club president began to climb the wide, stone staircase and she silently yelled out a thank you. He was sure to attract more taunts than her.

It was going perfectly until she reached the step third from the top. She was so tense, waiting to hear her name called out, that she forgot to concentrate on what her feet were doing and she tripped. She dropped her book bag and fell on her hands — not a large fall, by any means.

But it brought the vultures circling.

A loud burst of laughter erupted from Jessica's group, sounding like a rookery of raucous crows.

"You don't just look like a cow," called Jessica. "You're as clumsy as one, too!"

Blood rushed to Chloe's face as she picked up her book bag. A brief thought flitted through her mind — *that doesn't even make sense* — but she didn't dare retort. *Are cows clumsy? Really?*

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On cue, Jessica's minions began to moo loudly. As Chloe fled into the school building, she heard the *mooing* intensify amid squeals of laughter. Once inside, she realized she was shaking, while humility burned her cheeks. Other students streamed past, most of them probably thankful that they'd avoided the wrath of Jessica on this particular day.

"Hey, you don't look great," a familiar voice said at her side. Chloe turned to see her best friend in the whole world, Grace Whitehall, fall in beside her. Grace could have been one of Jessica's minions; she was pretty enough and had the interest of plenty of boys. Jessica had never thrown any taunts her way.

Instead, Grace had chosen to be Chloe's friend. They'd known each other for only a few years, but had clicked almost instantly. They'd been inseparable ever since.

Chloe looked at the petite, blonde girl and said, "Jessica."

Grace frowned. "Yeah, I heard the last part of it. Are you okay?"

"I guess." At the lockers, Chloe suddenly felt drained. She had invested so much energy into trying to escape Jessica that she actually felt sick.

"She'd be nothing without her minions, you know," Grace said. "A bully is a coward."

"And her stupid football star boyfriend," added Chloe, with a frown.

Grace sighed. "Yeah, it totally bites. I'm sorry."

Chloe patted her friend on the shoulder. "Not your fault! What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, right?"

Just as she was about to feel better, she saw Jessica stalking down the corridor toward her. Her blue eyes were narrow and mean as she searched for her prey. Chloe tried to melt into her locker, sending up a prayer to whoever might be listening. *Please, please, please, please leave me alone.*

Instead, she heard the sweet voice of her friend Grace say, "Hey, Jessica!"

Chloe went mute with horror.

"Hi, Grace. When are you going to cheerleader tryouts?" Jessica asked, her voice suddenly warm as pudding.

"Never," snapped Grace. "And leave Chloe alone!"

Chloe turned around slowly, if only to witness the situation unfolding grotesquely like a train wreck. Except that a train wreck could never be as horrifying as this situation unfolding before her.

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Jessica smirked and flicked a contemptuous look Chloe's way. "I don't know why you're friends with her. She's dragging you down. Aren't you embarrassed to be seen with her?"

Embarrassed? thought Chloe. She felt hot, as though she was standing directly underneath the sun on a hot summer's day.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Grace, sharply.

Jessica stared at the blonde girl for a second, then tossed her hair. "Whatever." Her minions followed her sashaying walk down the corridor.

"You didn't have to do that," Chloe said, almost collapsing against her locker. Every limb felt like a wet noodle. "Seriously. She's going to have it in for you now."

Grace shook her head fiercely. "I don't care. Now, let's forget about her. What's new?"

Chloe smiled in spite of herself. *Thank goodness for Grace.* "Mom's got a lady staying with us at the moment. An old friend from when she was an FBI agent."

"Really? That's so cool. Is the friend still an FBI agent?"

"Don't think so." Chloe frowned, realizing she didn't really know for sure.

"What's her name?"

"Dinah Harris." Together they began to walk to their first class. "She seems nice."

The office was quiet when Dinah and Elise arrived at the police department later that day. Both had returned to Elise's home for a quick nap and now had arrived to continue their investigation. Dinah had only been able to sleep for half an hour. She was preoccupied with the new case, her thoughts all over the place.

Elise looked around the office and snorted. "The sheriff has obviously decided two hours of work today is sufficient."

Dinah smiled. "What would you like me to do?"

Elise laid the bags containing the cell phone and the identification documents on her desk. "My first job is to try and locate some next of kin," she said. "While I do that, could you start with arrest records for Malia Shaw?"

"Sure." Dinah sat at a spare desk and using Elise's log on details, opened up the arrest records database.

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The first and most obvious question was whether the woman's name had actually been Malia Shaw, or whether that was another alias.

She'd been arrested twice, both on minor drugs charges. She'd been identified as Malia Shaw in both those arrests. Dinah typed in the other names she'd found on the bogus identification but found no matches. Therefore, while the dead woman had lived in Ten Mile Hollow, she'd only used one name — with the police, anyway.

Dinah searched through the records and saw that at both arrests she had not been bailed out nor visited. The charges had been minor, and she hadn't served a great deal of time in jail, due to non-custodial sentences. Dinah got the initial impression of a woman who had lived a very solitary life.

There was nothing in the arrest records that revealed Malia Shaw's next of kin. Wherever she had come from, Ten Mile Hollow clearly was not home to parents, siblings, or even a romantic interest. Dinah recorded the information for Elise, closed the files and turned her attention to the cell phone.

The first thing she checked was the phone contacts. It was a pitifully small list: only three names — Simon, Al, and Lola. There was no entry for Mom or Dad, nor anyone else who seemed like a family member. No aunt or uncle. No Grandma or Grandpa.

Dinah called Simon first. The phone rang out, with no voice mail message. *Interesting.*

Next, she called Al. The phone rang, then a male answered: "Hello?"

"Hello, this is the Ten Mile Hollow Sheriff's Department and—"

Click.

"Hello? Hello?" Dinah listened and heard nothing. Al had hung up on her. *Very interesting.*

Dinah called Lola, the final name in the contacts list. The phone rang out, and like Simon, it did not go to voicemail. She pursed her lips thoughtfully as she wrote out the numbers to follow up with the phone company.

She looked at the text messages next, and saw that almost every single text message was to or from Simon.

Need stuff, wrote Malia Shaw.

30 minutes, Simon replied.

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You be around today? Malia had asked on another occasion.

Yes need something? Simon said.

Yes.

Her drug dealer, Dinah thought. It was no wonder he hadn't answered his phone.

Occasionally, a text message popped up from Al or Lola. The purpose of those messages appeared to be checking in on Malia, asking her whether she was okay.

When Dinah checked the phone log, she found calls to and from Al and Lola on a semi-regular basis. Al seemed to be in contact with Malia several times a week, while Lola appeared once or twice a week. She wondered the significance of their relationship. Although they had been in regular contact, neither Al nor Lola had visited Malia in jail or tried to bail her out.

Dinah had a burning desire to follow up the phone numbers and pay a visit to Simon, Al, and Lola; but first, she had to wait for Elise, who had been on the phone the whole time.

Finally, she hung up and shook her head in frustration. "I got nowhere," Elise said. "This woman did a good job of cutting off her whole family or she was dropped off here by the stork."

Elise drummed her fingers on her desk for a moment. "All right. Let's go talk to the owner of the building in which Malia lived. I figure she had to fill out a rental application and they usually ask for next of kin details."

While Dinah waited, Elise accessed the county records database, which showed that the owner lived on the opposite side of town to his grubby, crumbling apartment block.

It was late afternoon when they stepped outside, and the sun was relinquishing its job in a seemingly hurried fashion. It was very cold, and a series of scudding gray clouds promised rain before nightfall. The approaching dusk had almost completely leached what little light was left as Elise and Dinah pulled up in front of an immaculately kept bungalow.

Owen Karakarides was a short, bald man with a head shaped like an egg and a huge cigar protruding from his mouth, around which was clamped a set of yellow teeth.

He glowered at them. "You the detective?"

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He looked both women up and down like he didn't like what he saw. Dinah raised her eyebrows, silently daring the man to make a rude comment. *Give me a reason, old man.*

When the silence stretched out, Elise said, "Evening. I'm Detective Elise Jones of the Sheriff's Department. This is Dinah Harris, former FBI agent and consultant on this case. I need to talk to you about the tenant of one of your buildings."

"Uh-huh," he said, looking at Elise and then Dinah, through narrowed, suspicious eyes.

Dinah felt her patience sap and her ire rise. "Shall we go inside, or do you want your neighbors knowing your business?"

Grudgingly, he stepped aside, showing a well-furnished living room. "This about that dead lady?"

Dinah glanced around the room and sat down with some reluctance on an overstuffed armchair. "Yes. Her name was Malia Shaw."

He snorted. "I never really knew her name. She, and all the rest of them in that building, they're all the same."

"Same in what way?"

"Junkies," Karakarides sniffed. He puffed on his cigar.

Dinah let out a slow breath, amazed at the man's ability to completely irritate her to the point of violence in only five minutes.

Elise jumped in. "Okay. So do you remember Malia Shaw?"

He waved his hand in a vague gesture. "Sure. Single lady. Obviously a junkie. No job."

"Why on earth would you rent to her if she was so clearly a drug addict and had no job?" Elise asked.

Karakarides thought about that. "As I recall, she paid her rent six months in advance, in cash."

Elise and Dinah exchanged a glance. "Six month's rent in cash? How much would that have been?"

"Well, the monthly was \$300, so you do the math," Karakarides said, with a smirk.

Dinah bit her lip viciously to prevent herself from saying what she thought. She very much wanted to knock the man in his yellow teeth at that moment. To hide her irritation, she wrote the figure in her notebook, thinking about the information the owner had just given her.

Eighteen hundred dollars: not a lot of money by some standards, but to a drug addict, a fortune. Dinah thought about the tiny, sparse

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apartment, furnished cheaply. How had she come up with \$1800 in cash? How had she resisted the temptation to trade it for heroin?

"When was the lease due for renewal?" she asked.

"I think March."

"So did you ask her if she was going to stay in the apartment?"

"Not me, personally," said Karakarides. "But the super — well, he's only a part time super, on account of the place being a dump — he told me that she told him she wanted to stay. And that she had cash."

Curious. Both Dinah and Elise had tossed the apartment and there had been no hidden stash of money. From where would she have gotten the money?

"Do you have the rental application?" she asked.

Karakarides sighed. "Well, I guess it's in my office somewhere." He didn't move.

Dinah almost growled aloud. Even Elise, who seemed more patient, snapped, "Well, I'm gonna need it."

Karakarides made it a big production to get up and shuffle off down the dark hallway to another room.

Dinah thought about the dead woman's finances while Karakarides was away, wondering if Malia Shaw had been dealing drugs on the side or engaged in some other crime to feed her habit. It would open up a world of possibilities when it came to suspects if that were the case. Finally, the owner returned, waving a thin file at them.

Elise took it from him. "Thank you," she said. "I'll return it when I'm done."

"Really? Can't you take a copy?" Karakarides whined.

Elise smiled. "Sorry," she said. She sounded suspiciously like she didn't mean it. Dinah rose and together they saw themselves out of the bungalow, leaving Karakarides standing behind them with his hands on his hips, puffing on his cigar, and filling his home with the acrid smoke.

In the car, with Elise dangerously behind the wheel, Dinah opened the file and read the application quickly. Some of the information would require further clarification, but it was bare where it counted for now.

No next-of-kin was listed — in fact, the page was totally void of writing. Dinah supposed the property owner hadn't cared, since he'd received his rent in advance.

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“Nothing here,” she told Elise, as the car lurched forward, tires squealing. “I suppose since the owner received the rent in advance, he didn’t care too much about the missing spaces on the rental application.”

Elise managed to avoid a tree and pedestrian with only inches to spare. “So our dead victim is still a ghost.”

Dinah had to agree. Malia Shaw was turning out to be a shadow, a wraith, a ghost, a woman with no past, no family and no future.

How did she end up here in Ten Mile Hollow, and why?

Darkness had stolen across the sky on the silent feet of a thief by the time Elise turned the car into her driveway. Dinah muttered a brief prayer of thanks that somehow they hadn’t both been killed. Elise had a careless disregard for yellow traffic lights.

Elise lived in a pretty, two-story A-frame house. Flower boxes adorned every window and the front door and shutters were all painted a cheery yellow. Light spilled from the windows into the cold dark, promising warmth, hearth, and home.

Elise’s husband, Lewis, was a firefighter and paramedic with the Ten Mile Hollow Fire Department, and worked shift hours. His car was not in the driveway tonight, and Dinah surmised that he was on shift down at the fire station.

Once inside the house, Dinah sat at the kitchen table to await further instructions regarding dinner, while Elise flipped through her mail.

“Hello?” Elise called up the stairs. “Chloe? Are you up there?”

“Hi, Mom!” Chloe shouted back. “I’m doing my homework.”

“Okay. Dinner in about half an hour, okay?”

“Sure!”

Elise returned to the kitchen and began to rummage through the refrigerator for something for dinner. She pulled out some lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, and a carrot and popped them in front of Dinah. “Would you mind slicing these up for a salad?” she asked.

“Sure,” said Dinah, selecting a knife from the block.

She began to chop while Elise prepared to grill some chicken to add to the salad. Using garlic, lemon juice, and continental parsley as a dressing, she also took out of the refrigerator a bottle of white wine.

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Dinah watched with some trepidation as Elise put a wine glass in front of her.

“Would you like a drink?” Elise opened the bottle and waited.

“Uh . . . no thanks.” Dinah took a deep breath. “I don’t drink.”

“Oh, okay. Do you mind if I have a glass?”

“Not at all.” Dinah concentrated on chopping. There was a momentary silence.

“So you’ve given up drinking altogether?” Elise asked, putting the chicken on the grill.

Dinah nodded. “Yes. I can’t drink at all.” She debated whether to tell her friend the truth — it was always hard to talk about. But honesty seemed to lead to conversations about the deeper issues of life. “I had some problems with alcohol after Luke and Sammy died.”

Elise turned to look at her, her expression one of sympathy. “I’m sorry. I can’t say I blame you, but it must have been a terribly difficult time.”

The tiny, deadly claws of shame were always looking for an opportunity to sink themselves into Dinah’s brain. Now they pounced, sending twin rivers of electrical pain through her head and right down into her stomach. “I didn’t handle it very well,” she admitted to Elise. “I made some terrible mistakes.” *And death followed me and took my family and very nearly took me, too.*

“You seem to be doing much better now,” said Elise, turning the chicken on the grill.

“Well, thank you. I think so.” Dinah stared hard at the wine bottle. It would always be a struggle to resist the temptation of alcohol, and she had to admit that she thought of it often — especially when shame and guilt took hold of her.

“How did you overcome it?”

“Two things. I became a Christian and I went to rehab,” explained Dinah. “But in reality, I owe my life to becoming a Christian.”

Elise nodded. “I’ve heard faith in a higher power can help with addiction.”

“Well, it’s more than that to me. It’s not just simple belief in something out there, or blind faith in something I can’t explain. It’s personal. It’s a relationship with God, who made Himself real to me.”

Elise looked at her quizzically, but there was no more time to talk. Dinner was ready and Chloe was clattering down the stairs with the

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earnest enthusiasm of youth. Dinah tossed the salad into a bowl and then buttered bread rolls while Elise chopped up the sizzling chicken. When it was ready, they sat down at the kitchen table.

Elise asked her daughter: “How was your day?”

Chloe glanced up. “Okay. How was your day?”

“Long.”

Dinah suddenly realized she, too, was exhausted. A night of no sleep followed by only a short nap was not enough.

“Is Dad at work tonight?” Chloe asked.

“Yes. How’s your homework?”

“It’s fine.” Chloe waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “Can I be excused?”

Elise frowned. Chloe had already finished dinner and was looking impatiently at her cell phone. “No. Where are your manners? How about you talk to our guest?”

Dinah hid a smile while Chloe tried to hide a long-suffering eye roll. “How are you enjoying Ten Mile Hollow, Ms. Harris?”

“Please call me Dinah. I like it very much. It’s a beautiful town.”

Chloe snorted. It was an identical snort to the one Elise often gave and it made Dinah smile. “It’s pretty boring. I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Where would you like to go?”

“Well, college. I want to go to college someplace fun.”

“What would you like to do at college?” Dinah asked.

“I dunno.” Chloe cocked her head to one side. “I like science. I like computers. I’m pretty good at both. Maybe something to do with that.”

“Sounds great. I’m sure you’ll do well no matter what you choose.”

Chloe gave a faint smile. “Thanks. Can I be excused now?” she asked of her mother, now that the chore of talking to the dinner guest was over.

“Sure.” This time it was Elise giving an exaggerated eye roll to Dinah.

Chloe disappeared in a flash, and Dinah stared after her for a few moments. She would forever miss out on Sammy’s teenage years — she would never see the attempts to find his independence and identity, nor the awkward, gangly teenage limbs, nor the awkwardness of a first date.

A Dinah Harris Mystery

After cleaning up the kitchen and watching a sitcom with unseeing eyes, both she and Elise decided to turn into bed early. Dinah was relieved, in all honesty. The comfort and familiarity of home for Elise, Lewis, and Chloe brought pangs of sadness for Dinah.

In the guest bedroom, she turned off the lights and slipped between the sheets. Despite her tiredness, her mind was racing.

Thoughts of her own solitude inevitably led her to think of Malia Shaw, who had been far more isolated than she: the cold, blank apartment; communication with no one other than the supplier of her drugs; nothing of sentimental value around her at all.

Where are her parents, who once must have loved her? Had she ever loved somebody more than she'd loved drugs? Had everyone who'd known her forsaken her?

Dinah wrestled her mind back to the case. For one thing, the death of a drug addict seemed that it would be more complex than it first appeared. Why did Malia Shaw have fake passports and social security cards with aliases? How could she have afforded to pay six months' rent in advance, with cash? By all indications, she was getting ready to do the same when her lease expired in only two months' time. Where would she have gotten her hands on a further \$1800? It was wildly implausible that a hard-core drug addict like Malia Shaw could possibly avoid the temptation to turn the cash into heroin.

Finally, she had suffered a lonely, violent death at the hands of another. It was such an enormous waste of precious human life. In the harsh light of day, Dinah could be tough, unemotional, jaded. But in the soft darkness of this foreign guest room, she allowed herself to feel the pain of humanity whose mistakes gave her employment.

Perhaps, she also realized, that she and Malia Shaw were not so different.

She rolled over. *God*, she cried out silently. *Tonight it hurts. Please send me some of Your great comfort and strength. Thank You that even in the midst of pain, You are name above all names, the great Creator of the universe, the One worthy of all our praise.*

As she slipped away into sleep finally, she was conscious of one last thought that she knew to be irretrievably true: *Always remember that you are forgiven, daughter.*