

A
Dinah Harris
MYSTERY

Deadly

DISCLOSURES



Julie Cave

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Thomas Whitfield climbed out of the Lincoln Towncar and stood in the snappy, early morning fall air, breathing deeply. The temperature had fallen a few more degrees overnight, signaling that winter was truly on its way.

Thomas glanced up and down the wide street. There was nobody around at this early hour, and he took a moment to drink in the sights of his beloved city. The graceful willows, their branches arching over the street, were turning gold and red and, in the gentle yellow morning light, threw off highlights like burnished copper. This street was like many others in the center of DC — wide and tree-lined, with magnificent government buildings standing one after the other. That was another thing that Thomas found so delicious about this city — so much of it hinted at the enormous wealth and prosperity of the country, and yet only a few streets behind these world-famous landmarks,

the seedier side of American poverty flourished. It was a city of contradictions, Thomas thought.

His gaze fell finally to the building right in front of him — the main complex of the Smithsonian Institution. Enormous stone pillars flanked the entryway into a marble lobby, and behind that were laid out the evidence of mankind's brilliance. Everything about the institution was testament to the scientific and anthropological advances of man over the pages of history — the inventions, the discoveries, the deductions, the sheer radiance of a human being's intelligence at its finest.

Thomas Whitfield had always been immensely proud of this place, and everything it showcased. He had boasted about it, defended it, nourished it, and protected it, the way a proud father would his prodigious child.

He was the secretary of the Smithsonian, after all, and he felt a strange kind of paternal relationship with the buildings and their contents.

He stood for a moment longer, a slender whippet of a man dressed immaculately, with highly polished shoes gleaming, thinning dark hair cut short, and a gray cashmere scarf to ward off the cold. Then he purposefully strode down the path and into the main building, scarf fluttering behind him.

To the malevolent eyes watching him through high-powered binoculars down the street in a non-descript Chevy, he presented a painfully easy target.

Thomas settled in his large office with the door shut, turned on the computer, and shut his eyes briefly as he contemplated what he would do next. The course of events he had planned for this day would change everything, and the impact would be felt right up to the president himself. *Courage, Thomas*, he told himself silently. *What you are about to do is the right thing to do.*

He began to type, slowly and decisively, feeling within himself a great sense of conviction and purpose. He was so lost in concentration that he was startled by the door suddenly swinging open.

“What are . . . ?” he exclaimed, almost jumping off his seat. Then he recognized his visitor and he glanced at his watch.

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“What are you doing here?” Thomas asked. “It’s a little early for you, isn’t it?”

“I wanted to be sure I caught you,” his visitor replied, moving closer to the desk. “Without any interruptions.”

“I see. What can I do for you then?” Thomas asked, trying to hide his irritation. He hadn’t wanted to be interrupted during this most important task.

“What are you working on?” the unannounced guest asked, ignoring him and moving around the side of the desk and trying to look at Thomas’s computer screen.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Thomas answered with a falsely airy tone. “It’s just a family project. Nothing to do with work. Is there something I can help you with?”

Thomas was suddenly aware that his visitor was standing close by him. He felt uncomfortable, and tried to roll his chair away to maintain some space.

“You see,” his visitor said in a quiet voice, “there are people out there who don’t agree with you. They think the project you are working on could be very dangerous. In fact, I believe they have already tried to warn you about continuing with this project.”

Thomas now felt distinctly uncomfortable and a little afraid. He decided to assert his authority. “Listen here,” he said, in a voice that betrayed his anxiety. “What I am working on is none of your business. The subject is certainly not up for discussion with somebody like you. I suggest you leave my office immediately.”

The visitor managed to fuse sorrow and menace into his words as he said, “I’m afraid I can’t do that. You will have to come with me.”

Thomas retorted, “I’m not going anywhere with you. In fact, I . . .” He broke off abruptly as he saw the small handgun in the visitor’s hand, pointing directly at him. There was no sorrow or pity on his face — only menace.

“Do I need to force you to come with me?” the visitor wondered, his tone like flint.

Thomas leapt to his feet, his eyes darting about wildly. He needed to get out of here, to try to get away from this situation that had so rapidly gotten out of hand. A hand shot out and grabbed Thomas by the collar with surprising strength. Thomas was shocked as he strained to get away from the man, who was intently staring at the computer screen.

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“You traitor!” Thomas spat. “I should’ve known you were nothing more than a trained monkey!”

The visitor chuckled heartily. “That’s ironic, Thomas.”

The visitor, much younger and stronger than Thomas, began to drag him out of the room. Thomas was determined not to go down without a fight, and drove his heel backward into the visitor’s shin. There was a yelp of pain, but the unrelenting grip did not lessen around Thomas’s arm. Instead, a thick arm curled around Thomas’s throat and squeezed, applying pressure to the carotid artery. It took only a few seconds for Thomas to fall limply into the arms of his abductor as the blood supply to his brain was cut off.

That was the last anyone saw of the secretary of the Smithsonian Institute.

* * * *

Dinah Harris woke with a scream dying in her throat, the sheets twisted hopelessly around her legs. Her nightgown was damp with panicked sweat, her heart galloping like a runaway horse. She stared, blinking, at the pale dawn light streaming through the window, while the shadowy vestiges of her nightmare slithered from her memory.

As she lay in bed, joining the waking world from sleep, the familiar blanket of depression settled over her, dark and heavy as the Atlantic winter. The dread she felt at facing another day was almost palpable in the small bedroom. Dinah glanced across at her alarm clock, where the flashing numbers showed 6 a.m.

She threw aside the sheets and stumbled into the tiny bathroom, where she purposefully avoided looking at herself in the mirror. She was only in her mid-thirties and had once been relatively attractive. Certainly not beautiful, but with what her first boyfriend had once told her — a pleasant face and athletic body. Now her eyes were always underscored by dark bags, her skin pale and paper-thin, and the weight fell off her in slow degrees without ceasing. She dressed in her trademark dark pants suit, pulled her black hair from her face in a severe ponytail, and washed her face.

She made strong coffee and sat in the kitchen as she drank the bitter liquid. The dining alcove was still stacked with moving cartons, filled with books and music that she couldn’t face opening. The gray

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light of morning lent no color to the apartment, which suited Dinah just fine. Her world didn't contain color anymore.

Though traffic often seemed at a standstill in the mornings, Dinah always arrived early to the J. Edgar Hoover building. She turned directly to the teaching wing, avoiding the eye contact and morning greetings of many she knew in the building. She knew what they whispered about during after-work drinks and at the water cooler. Her fall from grace would go down as one of the most spectacular in FBI history.

So she kept up the ice-cool veneer until she arrived at her desk, checking her e-mails and teaching schedule for the week.

She didn't look up as an imposing shadow fell across her desk.

"Special Agent Harris, how are you?" boomed the voice of her former colleague, David Ferguson. He was a big man, six-four and two hundred pounds, with a loud, booming voice and a penchant for pork rinds. He stood above her, his hand resting easily on the holstered gun at his hip; the twin of a gun Dinah no longer wore but kept underneath her pillow.

"Ferguson," she replied. "Fine, how are you?"

"Feel like a coffee?" he asked.

"Don't you have a killer to catch?" Dinah asked, dryly.

He waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, they can wait. Come on."

He took her to a tiny Italian café a block away from the FBI headquarters. While they ordered, Dinah wondered at his ulterior motive for bringing her here. *It certainly isn't for my sparkling wit and charm*, she thought. Rumor had it that the freshman criminology classes were afraid of her.

"So I'm just wondering if I could get your opinion on something," Ferguson began, tentatively testing the water.

She scowled at him. "You know I don't get involved in cases."

He held up his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, calm down, Harris. I just want your opinion. I know you've given up your real talents to teach some snotty freshmen."

His comment stung her, but she narrowed her eyes at him and pretended she hadn't even noticed. "So get on with it already."

"I don't remember you always being this prickly," complained Ferguson, draining his macchiato. "Anyway. What would you say if I told you the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution had gone missing?"

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“Missing?” Dinah raised her eyebrows and slurped her latte. “In what context?”

“As in, turned up for work at six this morning and disappeared off the face of the earth shortly thereafter.”

“How do you know he turned up for work at six?” Dinah asked.

“Security cameras have him arriving in the lobby and heading for his office. After that, who knows?”

“So he’s an adult, maybe he took a trip to get away from work stress or his wife has been giving him grief or his kid is in trouble.” Dinah frowned. “Why are we even involved at this early stage?”

Ferguson paused. “It’s due mostly to his rather prestigious position. It wouldn’t do for the secretary of the Smithsonian to simply disappear. Congress is rather anxious.”

Dinah knew of political influence that ran high in this city but didn’t press the issue. “Is there evidence of homicide?”

“Not really, although I haven’t been to his office yet.” Ferguson made it sound like a confession, and he looked at her sheepishly.

Dinah stared at him. “What do you really want, Ferguson?”

He gathered up his courage. “I need you to work this case with me, Harris.”

Dinah opened her mouth to respond indignantly, but Ferguson held up his hand and continued with a rush. “You know I’m not good with sensitive cases. I . . .”

“Or complex ones,” interjected Dinah, bad-temperedly.

“I’m operating on a hunch that this is a bad case, that it involves people in the White House.” Ferguson must have needed her very badly to allow her comment to go unheeded.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I have a heavy teaching workload,” she said. “So I’ll have to limit my involvement to opinions only.”

Ferguson didn’t say anything but looked even guiltier.

“What have you done?” Dinah demanded.

“I may have cleared your schedule so you could work with me.” Ferguson examined his fingernails with great concentration.

Dinah waited for a beat. “I see. You’ve spoken to my superiors?”

He nodded. “They’ve agreed to lend you to me for as long as the case takes.”

Dinah stood abruptly. “Thanks for the coffee.” She walked angrily from the café.

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Ferguson stared at her as she walked off, then slapped down some crumpled notes and heaved his bulk out of the chair. “Where are you going?” Ferguson asked, struggling to keep up with her.

She wheeled around and glared directly at him. “Who do you think you are? Do you think I’m lesser than you so you can sneak around behind my back?”

“Dinah, we really need you back in the field. You were — *are* — brilliant.” Ferguson spoke softly, hoping to calm her down.

“My field days are behind me, with very good reason,” snapped Dinah. *I can’t see a dead body anymore. I can’t feel desire to catch the person who did it. I just want to lie down beside the body and feel the same endless peace of sleep.*

“Please, I’m begging you. I need you back,” Ferguson said. Then it hit her. Dinah realized that this situation was very serious. Ferguson was the last person on the planet to beg anybody.

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” she said dully. She knew that this case could break her.

Ferguson didn’t reply, and his answer was in his silence.

* * * *

The Smithsonian Institution was bustling with tourists and school kids as if nothing had gone wrong. Dinah and David strode into the main lobby, trying unsuccessfully to look casual. When they flashed their badges discreetly, they were allowed into the inner sanctum, where Thomas Whitfield’s personal assistant was fielding phone calls.

The secretary was young and pretty, with thick, dark hair waving gracefully to her shoulders, startlingly blue eyes, and a creamy olive complexion. Her only downfall was the thick eye makeup, applied to make her eyes stand out but which had the effect of making her look like a scared raccoon. “I’m afraid Mr. Whitfield simply cannot be interrupted at present,” she snapped into the phone. “I’ll have him call you back if you’d leave a message.”

She glanced up and saw the two agents standing at her desk. She gave them a wave to acknowledge their presence, repeated the details of the caller, scribbled furiously, and then hung up.

“Good morning,” she said, jumping to her feet. “If you caught the end of that conversation, you’ll know that Mr. Whitfield is in an extremely important meeting and. . . .”

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“Save it,” interrupted Dinah, showing the secretary her badge. The young woman blushed. “We’re here to investigate the disappearance of Mr. Whitfield. What is your name?”

The secretary sat down hard, looking relieved. “I’m Lara Southall. I’m so worried about Mr. Whitfield.”

Ferguson flashed his partner a frown and took charge. “I’m Special Agent David Ferguson and this is Special Agent Dinah Harris. You’ll have to excuse her; she’s been out of the field for some time and has forgotten how to relate to people.”

Dinah opened her mouth to reply with outrage, but Ferguson continued, “Can you tell us about this morning?”

Lara Southall regarded Dinah with a mixture of amusement and fear, which Dinah filed away for future reference. “I got to work at eight o’clock as usual,” she replied. “Mr. Whitfield always arrives before me. I usually turn on my computer, get settled, and then get us both a coffee. When I opened his office door to give him the coffee, the room was empty.” As the girl spoke, she tapped perfectly manicured fingernails together absently. Dinah hated manicured fingernails: they reminded her of her distinctly unattractive, chewed-to-the-quick fingertips.

“Mr. Whitfield was due to give a presentation at eleven o’clock,” Lara continued. “So I didn’t really start worrying until about ten-thirty. He hates to be late, and he had to come back to get his presentation and make it uptown in less than half an hour. At eleven, I started to make some calls.”

“Has he ever been absent from the office before?” Ferguson asked.

“Sure, he often has meetings or goes out into the museum to talk to visitors. The thing is, I always know what he’s doing. That’s part of my job. He never goes anywhere during the day without letting me know.”

“So you started making calls at eleven. Who did you call?” Dinah asked impatiently.

Lara ticked off her fingers as she remembered. “I called his cell phone, and I called the other museums. I thought maybe he’d just forgotten to tell me he had a meeting. Nobody had seen him and his cell just rang out. So I called his home. His wife told me he’d left for work at about five-thirty and she hadn’t seen him since. Then I called some of the senior executives. I thought they might’ve had an emergency. But nobody had seen him.”

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“Did the people you called — his wife, the executives — seem concerned about his whereabouts?” Ferguson asked.

“Yes, they did. It’s so unusual for Mr. Whitfield to act this way that everyone I spoke to was concerned. I think his wife is actually here somewhere at the moment.”

“So then you called the police?” Dinah said.

“No, one of the directors came over to look at the security tapes. She specifically told me not to call anyone until she’d viewed the footage. I thought that Mr. Whitfield might’ve had an accident on the way to work. Mrs. Whitfield was calling the hospitals when Ms. Biscelli — the director — came back from security.”

“What did the tapes show?” Dinah asked.

“They showed him arriving at six-thirty or so. That’s all I know.”

“Did any of the tapes show him leaving?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“Right. So what then?”

“I called the police.”

Ferguson nodded. “What did they tell you?”

“Basically they won’t do anything until he’s been missing 24 hours.” Lara stopped clicking her nails together and started twisting her hair with one finger. “So I told Ms. Biscelli, and she wasn’t happy with that. I think she must’ve pulled some strings, because here you are.”

Dinah and Ferguson both raised their eyebrows at her in confusion.

“The FBI,” explained Lara. “You guys wouldn’t normally get involved, would you?” She may have been a very pretty secretary, but Lara Southall was an intelligent girl. She’d asked the very question Dinah had been mulling over all morning.

“We’re going to look in his office,” Ferguson said, ignoring the question. He handed her his card. “Please call me if you think of anything else that might be helpful.”

She nodded and picked up the ringing phone. “No,” she said, sounding very weary. “Mr. Whitfield is in a meeting at the moment and can’t be disturbed.”

Ferguson opened the door to the office while Dinah waited to get the log-on details for Thomas Whitfield’s computer. Dinah stood in

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the doorway, looking into the impressive room, and felt the thrill of the chase wash over her like a wave. It had been a long time since she had felt anything.

The office was furnished with heavy cedar furniture that consisted of a large desk, a leather-bound chair, a couch, and two armchairs grouped around a glass-topped coffee table and one entire wall of built-in bookcases. The floor was covered with thick burgundy carpet, and the drapes at the picture window were also burgundy. The walls contained portraits of several great scientists and inventors — Dinah recognized Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, and the Wright Brothers — as well as photos of the secretary with the president, the queen of England, and other dignitaries. The room itself was clean and uncluttered, likely symbolic of the man himself, Dinah thought.

Ferguson was moving around the room, muttering to himself, as was his habit. Dinah had forgotten how intensely annoying she found this habit. She preferred silence so that she could concentrate.

Having received the log-on details from Lara, Dinah strode to the desk and pulled on her latex gloves. The top of the desk was shiny and would be a great medium to obtain fingerprints. She was careful not to allow herself to touch the desktop while she turned on the laptop.

“By the way, Harris,” Ferguson said from the wall of bookcases, “I forgot to mention that if something has happened to Mr. Whitfield, the media scrutiny is likely to be intense.”

Dinah scowled at the screen of the laptop. She hated the media, and it was a long-term grudge she held from the last case she’d been involved in. “You can handle it,” she said. “I want nothing to do with those vultures.”

Ferguson glanced over at her. “Of course I’ll handle it. But I can’t guarantee that they’ll leave you alone.”

Dinah tapped her foot against the leg of the desk impatiently as the laptop struggled to come to life. “Sticks and stones, Ferguson,” she said tightly. “Words can never hurt me.”

She could see that Ferguson didn’t buy the lie, but he’d decided to let it go. He at least knew not to push too far.

“This whole office is giving me a weird vibe,” he said after a moment. “It’s too . . . organized.”

Dinah logged onto the laptop. “I’m listening.”

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“Look at the desk,” Ferguson mused. “No files or paperwork. Not even a pen or a Post-It note. No diary.”

“Maybe he’s just really neat,” Dinah said, opening Outlook on the laptop.

Ferguson went back to his muttering as he continued drifting around the room. Dinah frowned as she clicked through the folders in Outlook. Then she opened the other programs on the computer and looked through the folders there.

“That’s odd,” she commented at last. Ferguson looked up and came over to her.

She clicked through the inbox, sent items, and calendar of the e-mail program. There were no entries in any of them. “They’re completely clean,” she said. “The calendar is the strangest. You’d think the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution would have at least a couple of meetings a week.”

“Maybe he uses a paper diary,” suggested Ferguson.

“Certainly a possibility,” agreed Dinah. “But couple the empty calendar with the fact that he’s neither received nor sent an e-mail from this computer and something isn’t right.”

Ferguson opened the desk drawers and started looking through them.

“Also,” added Dinah, “there is not one single saved document in any other program — no letters, articles, presentations, anything. The entire computer is as if it’s never been used.”

Ferguson sat back on his heels. “You think someone has wiped his computer?”

“Well, the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is: did Thomas Whitfield wipe his own computer before disappearing or did someone else wipe his computer before abducting him?” Dinah began to shut down the programs. “After all, there is no evidence to suggest that he has been abducted. There’s no sign of a struggle in here or blood stains, is there?”

Ferguson shook his head. “No, there isn’t. But there is something off about this office. Nobody, least of all a man in his position, can get through a working day without sending an e-mail or doing paperwork of some kind.” He gestured at the desk drawers. “There’s absolutely nothing in them.”

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“I agree,” Dinah said. She closed the laptop and picked it up. “I’m going to have the lab look at the hard drive. What else?”

“I’ll call in crime scene to lift some fingerprints and check for blood.” Ferguson paused, thinking. “I’d like to talk to Ms. Biscelli, and I’d like to talk to his wife.”

Dinah nodded. “If Mr. Whitfield has been abducted, what do you suppose is the motive?”

Ferguson considered. “I don’t know. Money? Fame? Half the time I think these loonies go around killing people just so they can get their name in the news.”

Dinah stared at him. “Do you think Thomas Whitfield is dead?”

He shrugged. “Right now, Harris, I know nine-tenths of absolutely nothing. Let’s talk to Ms. Biscelli. Maybe she’ll know what happened and we can solve this case before dinner time and I’ll get a decent night’s sleep.”

Flippancy, Dinah remembered, was just Ferguson’s way of dealing with the intensity of this job and the horror they’d witnessed over the years.