



TAMARI BANKS  
HER STORY

# EYES WIDE

A NOVELLA

DAVID T LADUKE

Prequel to the Terroristic Thriller Series

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The Tamari Banks Backstory

Prequel to the Tamari Banks Terroristic Thriller Series

A Novella



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Eyes Wide

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### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My wife, for her loving support

My family, for always believing

My readers: Mike, Josiah, Judy, Tanya and others

Joel V for The Killer Fuzz Author of the Year Award

My Lord Jesus, for life

## FOREWORD

With every engaging story comes an interest in the characters that weave their way through it. *Eyes Wide*, prequel to *The Tamari Banks Series*, was written to feed the reader's connection with the hero on her journey. Who is she? Where did she come from? Why does she do what she does?

Each chapter represents a "snapshot" of Tamari's life. Spanning in small segments from childhood to the present day of this series, *Eyes Wide* adds a depth of focus on the main player that informs each subsequent book. Of all the thoughts conveyed, one of the greatest is that Tamari was not a character "born in blood." That is to say she did not become an agent, pursuing those who would do harm to the innocent, because she herself suffered some great tragedy in her life. Rather, it is because it is her nature to be a "sheep dog" protecting the flock from the "wolves."

In addition, it was also the intention to present a strong, female protagonist, that did not convey some idyllic form of perfection, but rather a very real human being, with all her flaws and quirks, who plunges headlong into an incredibly dark world. A woman of faith, determination, and strength, she perseveres and rises to protect and serve.

May you enjoy this prequel, as well as all the books in the *Tamari Banks Terroristic Thriller Series*.

David T LaDuke, Author

Pennsylvania, 2018

## Chapter 1

Silvery-brass and smoking, the hot shell beat with rapid swallow wings out of the thrusting chamber. Forward the propellant gushed mushrooming vapors, translucent plumes whirling skirts in an explosive dance of death. The bullet launched, piercing through minute rivulets of flaring gasses, hurtled a thousand feet per second by an intense wave of pressure. It hit the target two inches from dead center. The next hit three. The next one.

The Glock 19 Gen 4 fit well in her hand. She liked its feel, the beaver tail backstrap, and squared design. It seemed strong, substantial. When she tested out handguns, searching for the one that would be *her* brand, and *her* model, not only was size, ammo, grip, safety, trigger, kick, and accuracy her considerations, but also whether she could haul off and club someone with it. Yep – this one got the love. Its subcompact frame molded well with her matte black gloves and long fingers, looking like an extension of her compression shirt, accented by shapely bands of smooth, cocoa skin. Her stance was perfect, practiced, flexed and balanced. She looked like a picture from a training manual.

Four, five, six, seven - the cartridges spit out their projectiles with sweet rapidity. Each report was attenuated from its one hundred-sixty decibel ear split by matte black muffs. Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve – her grouping was tight, precise. She was good. She worked to be the best. Hard. Too hard.

All her life she had a certain drive. A pressure wave of her own compelled success. She hatred meeting requirements. They were meant to be exceeded. “Stars weren’t meant to twinkle,” a teacher once told her, “they were meant to blaze.”

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen – the action popped. Dropping the magazine she shuttled in another and lined up a beautiful eye on the tritium night sights.

One-two-three, shells spun and fluttered.

Her thoughts drifted. Long, misty corridors glowed with nightlights of emotional connection. Tamari remembered. She saw faces, heard voices. The rhythm of shots lulled her into other spaces. Traces of childhood, military service, and current cases she was working blended together with fragments of past training. It was like looking through a series of snapshots. Some were in order, some random. Baby pictures, gymnastic meets, and pics in cap and gown were all thrown into one, big, nostalgic folder.

Four-five-six, she began to reflect. Life...her life was unfolding, a flower opening in the soft, dim moonlight. Through the hazy shades and silhouettes she watched the threads of all her experiences weave together, making her the fabric that she was.

For a moment she pulled the muzzle up. She waited. Breathing out long and slow she focused. All that Tamari Banks was, all she was created to be had coalesced into this moment. A

woman of integrity, strength, and beauty – a good woman. And, as one instructor had told her, “oh, so *bad*.”

She aimed the Glock again. One day it would stop evil. It would take down a criminal. This tool would save lives, but only in just hands...and skilled ones.

Seven-Eight-Nine, she got lost in memory.



## Chapter 2

He laughed. He always did when they talked. His wife had a special, a unique place in his heart. Bobby, his son, swelled him with a certain masculine joy and pride. There was no questioning love for his boy. But her, this little one, his precocious six year old - something about her turned his heart into mush.

He laughed again.

“Daddy,” two golden lamps looked up at him. The color must have skipped a generation. His aunt had it. He didn’t.

“Tiger eyes,” he held her close, tenderly kissing the smooth forehead. “What’s that?”

“It’s my doll.” She held up the blonde figure. It was dressed in fatigues a size too big, with black scars marked in permanent ink on her face. Marcus chuckled.

“My girl,” shaking his head. “Why don’t you have her play with the other girls?” He pointed to the deluxe playhouse with the party pool upgrade. It looked like a crime scene. Half the figures were face down in the water, the others lay amongst the wreckage of overturned tables and upended chairs.

“Uhhh,” reconsidering his advice.

“She has to figure out who did that,” nodding her head towards the toy set.

“Right. She’s on the case.” He smiled crookedly and wondered if he should be more concerned about her...about this. Sighing, he shrugged. Tamari was his girl, eccentricities and all. He’d never quite met anyone like her, at least not a kid her age. And he’d never quite known this kind of love.

“Daddy, I want you to play with me.”

“Ok.”

They colored, fished people out of the water, set up dominoes, knocked them down, then caught a bad guy. Tamari wanted to flush him down the toilet. She called for instant justice. Marcus didn’t feel like unclogging it later, justice or not.

“Let’s put him in jail, kid.” They took an empty coffee can, pulled off the lid, and sealed him in.

She stood up and hugged him. Her little head snuggled down into his neck. The braids and beads pressed up against his skin. He loved her so much it hurt. They talked and shared tender moments, knitting in her heart memories that would never fade. He was her hero, her first love, her everything. His voice, his life, the pictures of his younger days inspired her – how much, she would only later come to realize.

“I love you, Daddy.” A large yawn escaped her. It was getting late.

“I love you too, Tiger. Never forget that. No matter what happens, always remember that. Okay?”

“Okay.” She kissed his cheek.

“Come on, baby girl. Time for bed.”

Tucking her in they said a prayer and he gave a final kiss. Heavy eyelids shuttered the twin lights for the night. Her breathing became regular and deep. Standing in the doorway he watched her for a moment. A warm sense of thankfulness swelled in him. He thought of the journey ahead, raising her, and learning how to parent his quirky kid.

Escaping his mouth, a small chuckle bounced around the room. What kind of person would she grow up to be? What kind of job would she have in this world? And the joy of the journey – softball, tea parties, basketball games, prom, it all sounded like a fun, yet challenging ride.

Shutting off the lamp he stood and walked into the hallway shadows.

### Chapter 3

Shrill and loud the whistle blew. Floating at the top of its ascent the ball began to fall. Meg hit it. Tall, strong, blonde, unusually athletic build for seventh grade, Meg was the point guard, the fastest on the team, *and* Tamari's greatest competition.

She crushed the ball to Darcy, the small, quick forward. Light on her feet, a good handler the little spitfire charged at the defense, pressing to the left side of the hoop. Across the court Tamari flailed her arms, standing just outside the arc of the three point line.

"Darcy," she yelled. Her long, spindly limbs fanned about, hungry for a chance. Tamari was tall – taller than every girl but one in her class, taller than most boys her age. Out of the green, Centerpointe Shamrock jersey her dark legs looked like stilts precariously balanced on white, tennis shoes. But all her long bones and wiry muscles shivered with the spark of competition. She would get the ball. She would score the point. She would *be* number one.

Before Meg could grab her eye, Darcy saw an opening through the opposing team. The orange-brown sphere shot up and over into Tamari's hands. Grasping it she fell into a balanced triple threat: up on her toes, everything cocked, her springy stance set, ready to pass, shoot, or drive. The blue clad power forward rushed Tamari too aggressively and ran a little past her. Faking to the left she darted like a green javelin to the right. Then came the set-up, the aim, and a long, graceful shot.

It was third quarter. The Shamrock's were down by ten. They *needed* this score – not just for the three points, but to boost their sagging morale.. It felt good when it left her hands. Tamari could taste the victory.

The ball looked perfect, the kind that couldn't miss. It hit the inside of the rim, swirled around and flew back out. Charging in, heedless of her teammates or opponents she saw only the ball. She had to get it, had to rebound. The squeak of shoes, the shouts of fans, sweat, drive, and desperation all surrounded her. Lunging for it her shin struck Meg's thigh. Down she went, tumbling in a heap of gangly legs and arms, flailing like a baby giraffe. Her face planted in the floorboards. She lay there stunned, unmoving.

Nikki, her best friend, came up off the bench calling her name.

A few of the blues laughed. Meg came over and crouched down beside her.

"Tam...you okay?"

You'd have thought a fire erupted under the flattened girl. She shot to her feet.

"This was your fault!" hurling at Meg. Tamari's golden eyes, already a stand out against her dark, smooth skin, widened to white, frantic orbs. "You screwed me up!" She pushed Meg back. The point guard held up her hands.

"Tam, it was just an accident. I-"

"I'm gonna punch you in the mouth!" Before she could keep her promise a strong, firm hand gripped her upper arm. Her bunched fist shook but could not fly forward.

"Tamari!" It was her Dad. She froze. Suddenly, it all crashed in on her. She had not only blown the shot, crashed to the floor in front of *everyone*, and then threatened her team mate, but her Dad had to reel in her famous temper. She unclenched her fingers and started to cry. Burying her face in his chest she heard his kind, gentle laugh.

"Alright, girl, let's go sit down."

He wouldn't take her home, but made her sit with her team. No matter how she felt, he would make her stay the course. Loyalty and endurance were his demands. There was no getting around Daddy.

The coach benched her the rest of the game. Afterwards she had to apologize to Meg, go home, get a shower, and miserably pretend to eat dinner.

How could she face anyone at school on Monday morning? It killed her. It all killed her. Tamari hated losing. Hated it! She couldn't wait to grow up. Everyone knew this stuff never happens when you got older. Never! Dreams of graduating high school and being an adult convinced her that life would never be this bad – there were no "Megs" in that world.

Pulling the covers over her head she slowly cried herself to sleep. All she wanted to do was forget this day. It was the longest night of her life.

## Chapter 4

It had never looked so white. The bright, arched ceiling stretched up towards the bell tower over the stage. A large set of windows near the peak washed light from the brilliant October morning into the sanctuary. Her mother, Ruth, leaned against her in the pew.

“It’s a beautiful day.” She squeezed Tamari’s shoulder reflexively. Small tears gathered at the corners of her eyes.

“Mama,” leaning back towards the pretty, middle-aged woman, kissing her on the cheek, Tamari put an arm around her mother’s neck. “You don’t have to cry. I’ll be okay.”

“Oh, baby, I *am* sorry. You’re just my only daughter, and my youngest child, and my best friend. *Why* would I cry?” Ruth laughed underneath her sarcasm. Her sense of humor carried the family through many a hard, bitter point in life.

Tamari choked a sob.

Ruth began to tear up again. Small, weeping sounds escaped her lips. The old pew creaked underneath them as they embraced and rocked.

Bobby huffed and crossed his arms.

Ruth let go of her daughter and daubed at her eyes with a frilly handkerchief. Tamari wiped away tears with her hands.

This was an exciting time for her. It was a sad time for them all – *even* her brother Bobby, though he’d be hit by a truck before he admitted it. They were a close, simple, happy family. And being all plain spoken and strongly opinionated there was little guessing where each one stood with the other. This, of course, caused abrupt friction and sparks at times, but nothing was ever left to simmer, to brood in the bitterness of sullen, unspoken family relations. Everything in the Banks household was on the table, including an unwavering commitment to each other. “Fight if you must, but fight fair. And when the fighting is done, don’t forget to love and forgive.” It was her mother’s adage. It was spoken often enough to be remembered.

Marcus sat on the other side of Bobby. He told them how it was important that Tam and Mama had some time together. In truth, he didn’t want to start blubbing in public. He knew everyone at church, and frankly, no one would have cared. They knew from the time his girl was born that he was gone on her. How he would show her off, wrapped tightly in her baby blanket, adorned with a frilly headband and a silk flower. One would have thought he carried the Princess of Earth in his arms, and he, her knighted servant.

The choir stood. Earl Grisby, the worship pastor rose, welcomed the congregation and began leading the music. The beautiful, aged sanctuary rolled with sweet, powerful strains, testifying to the goodness of God, to His faithfulness. As the voices died, and the organ scaled down to a low murmur, James Robins, the Senior Pastor stood.

“Today, before we have testimonies and announcements, I want to call for special prayer. Tamari Banks, we all know her and her family, will be leaving us to serve in the United States Army.” His breath could be heard in the microphone. “Now, you know me. You know I’m not partial to all that’s going on with that, and that’s all I’ll say about it. But you know how I love this family.” Nodding towards the Banks family, carefully straightening his tie.

“Brothers and sisters, I married Marcus and Ruth right here in this spot.” Pastor Robins pointed to an area on the floor, his voice tightening a bit. “I dedicated their babies, Bobby and Tam right here – in the *same* spot,” shaking his finger at the carpeting. “We watched her grow up through grade school, middle school, and high school. I have to admit,” he looked down and paused, “I was very proud of how well she did at University.” He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face. “Okay, and now you caught me carryin’ on.” Light, warm laughs filtered through the congregation. “And now I’d like to call this precious family up to stand here,” motioning again, “before Tamari leaves us to pursue her future.”

“First, if you are a veteran, please stand up.” Thirteen men and women got up. Marcus stood and made it fourteen. He looked over to his girl, his golden-eyed treasure. There were so many things he would say right now to her, so many memories drifting through his mind. Now was not the time. Still, he wanted to shout some things out loud to her. Marcus felt ready to burst.

“I’d like you to come forward,” the pastor instructed, “the Banks here, the vets to follow. After that, anyone in the congregation who feels led can come up.”

Ruth and her family filed out into the aisle and moved to the front. They stopped in front of the elderly minister. With her arm interlaced in Tamari’s she stood strong and straight. A gentle woman, beautiful and dark, her bearing held the faith and confidence of endurance tested by many storms. She loved her family. She knew her God.

Marcus came to the other side of his daughter, slipping an arm around her. Bobby stood next to his father, strong, built like the bull-shaped, former university football player he was. The veterans joined them. Others came.

“Let us pray...” the pastor bowed his head. A dozen hands reached out to touch this family of four, encouraging them, supporting them. They prayed for strength, for Tamari’s safety, for an unwavering commitment to faith in Christ. Many tears around the room began to flow. It was a season of change, of new beginnings, and for many a time of loss.

They loved this pretty, fiery girl. In their minds she was the sweet, precocious Banks child, running like a tornado through the fellowship hall in neat, pressed skirts. For not a few boys, now grown men, she was the first crush of their lives. Her passion and laugh were infectious. Intelligent, sociable, and articulate, she was charming, kind, and generally friendly to all. She would be missed.

Some were also afraid for her life, knowing the slow burning of America’s elongated wars could claim anyone overseas through bullet, IED, or terrorist. A number disagreed with her choices, but purposed to keep a silent watch over her soul.

“In Jesus’ name,” the pastor finished.

After many hugs, tears, and well-wishes the group broke up and returned to their seats. Announcements, prayer requests, and testimonies done, Pastor Robins preached his sermon, inviting the choir to end with a hymn. The Banks family slowly made its way out to the parking lot.

As they approached their car a voice called out.

“Yo, swizzle stick.”

Tam instantly giggled and stopped walking.

“I’ll meet you at the car,” she said to her family. Bobby looked back grumbling then checked himself. The unspoken love of his life stood thirty yards away from his sister. He hurried to the vehicle and got in.

Tamari turned slowly and moved towards the shorter girl.

“Hey, baby carriage,” Tamari shot back, a smart-mouth grin on her face. She looked up and down at her best friend, Nicole Johnson. To every inch of height and lean, sinewy muscle on Tamari’s gymnast build, Nikki grew out womanly curves and child-bearing hips.

“Don’t you give me the elevator eyes, sister,” Nikki scolded. “You know I’m naturally built for comfort, not speed. Ain’t no sense gettin’ all jealous about it.”

“So, how many kids *are* you plannin’ on having?” Tam crossed her arms and tilted her head.

Nikki snorted. “If they’re shaped like your skinny hind I could stack a dozen of ‘em in bunk beds.”

The two eyed each other. They were both gorgeous in their own right. Nicole’s face was dark and pleasantly rounded, with dimples, perfect teeth, and dark brown eyes. At five four, with turns like a country road she was just the kind of woman a big man like Bobby adored.

Tamari was beautiful and tall, but she had never been boy crazy like Nikki. Sure, she was sweet on this one or that one, but she always held them at arm’s length. Well, Kevin Spade at half an arm’s length, anyhow. But Nicole loved to twist boys into emotional knots and leave them dying at cafeteria tables and high school dance floors. She was good at it.

They both stared at each other, hands on hips.

Nikki’s smile broke. Tears jumped off her eyelids and tumbled down her face. “Come here, baby.” She walked forward and took Tamari in her ample arms. They both began to bawl unashamedly.

“I hate you for leaving,” Tamari’s friend said between gasps. “You’re my sissy, my girl. What am I going to do without you?”

“Let a man catch you and add to the population,” Tamari answered.

Nicole pulled her teary face back. “Now, don’t think I’m namin’ my first girl after you.”

“Naw, just after your Aunt Lottie.” Tamari referenced Nikki’s large, heavy, great aunt from Downtown.

“ ‘Big Lots’?” Nikki flicked her hand at Tam. “Girl, you’re outta your mind. But then again...” she leaned over and looked at Bobby. The poor man practically had his nose pressed up against the window. “Now *that* big boy? Oooh, honey, all he can think about is making line backers. I’m gonna marry me some rich, little Indian doctor and have some accountants and attorneys.”

Tamari covered her mouth and snorted a laugh into it. Nikki was always audacious. She wasn’t mean. She just never had a filter.

“Now, don’t you tease Bobby,” Tam lovingly chided her friend. “Girl, he’s been gone on you since eighth grade. You two would make the cutest babies. And may I remind you, sis, that he’s an engineer at Ford. The man’s got brawn *and* brains.”

“Ahhh,” Nikki looked towards the car like a chef at a farmer’s market, eyeing suspect vegetables. “I guess he’d do,” she sighed. “Well, we’d really be sisters then.”

“No more than we are now,” Tamari said, wiping her face.

They stopped and looked at each other again.

“I guess this is goodbye, then.” Nikki let out a long, unhappy breath.

Tamari nodded. “I guess. I’ll-”

“You won’t do nothin’,” Nikki cut off her friend, holding up the palm of her hand. “You won’t call – cause that Army won’t let you. You won’t write, ‘cause you’ll be too busy. You’ll come home for the holidays, but you’ll be too tired to have fun. You an old, busy lady now. So get going being busy. And don’t hug me again, woman. I don’t want you slobberin’ all over my Sunday dress. Go on...go!” She pointed at the car, folded her arms and began a fresh round of tears. Tamari blew her a kiss, turned on her heel and headed for the car.

As they pulled out, Bobby looked back.

Nicole glanced at him sideways. “Boy, I’m gonna give your large, man-self a call,” she quietly said.



## Chapter 5

At church, Marcus was glad he hadn't broken down and made an emotional fool of himself. They came home, ate dinner, took in some sports, and watched the clock begin to drop toward evening. He knew it was coming. Bobby would head back to his place, Ruth would wisely head upstairs a little earlier than usual, and he and Tam would have that final farewell. This was the end of her childhood. The end of little, white beads in her hair, sports jerseys, father-daughter dances, of high school and college graduations.

Marcus shut off the TV and left the family room. His den was safe territory for him. He dug this room. It was small and smelled of books. Both counted in its favor. And he was really into the fact that it faced west. The exceptionally large, triple pane window took in a wide, horizontal swatch of sky. An old professor lived here. The real estate agent had told him that when he showed this particular room to him. Apparently, the red, hazy wash of the westering sun was the desired effect for scholars, poets, and sages alike. Marcus didn't count himself among them, but he loved his man cave. And, he *loved* sunsets.

To this point the sweep of Tamari's orbit had stayed somewhere close to Detroit. He knew she was there. She would stop by on weekends. Hot, hazy summers still saw her living at home. But now she was leaving the State, and soon the country. Would he see her again? Would war claim her as it had so many others? He knew that in all the history of mankind there were countless fathers that stood and watched this immortal sun, thinking these kinds of thoughts, pondering the fate of their children. This would be a big change for him...for them all. The eternal truth danced in his head, "*to everything there is a season.*"

He heard a faint sound at the door.

"Baby girl."

"Daddy," Tamari's voice said softly.

Marcus couldn't answer. He stood at the window and stared into the sky. A small flock of Canada Geese made their way across the burnt butter edges of the mellow, crimson light, embodying change in their south-bound journey.

Tamari's eyes filled. Her father should answer. She knew he had a lot to say. That he didn't, couldn't, made her tears pour even more. This was goodbye. Not the Summer camp goodbye, or the "off to school, see you in a few weeks" kind of good bye – no, *this* was goodbye.

She saw it in the shadow of the man she loved most in the world, in the sharp, dark outlines of his frame against the fading light: time was slipping, change was here. The moments left were few.

"Daddy...I'll only be gone for six weeks or so--"

Marcus turned. Tamari's voice choked mid-stream. She reached down and picked up a small, stuffed animal sitting on the end table. Taking a seat on the edge of a cushion, she composed herself and tried again.

"Daddy, I..."

The strong, forty-eight year old man sat silently beside his daughter on the small, comfortable couch. They both faced into the fading light.

"Now, girl, you know there's nothing you can say. It is what it is. You've come of age, and there it is. Bobby's gone, but he's close by. I don't think he'll ever leave Detroit, Mama, *or* her cooking." Marcus laughed and wiped his left eye. "You, when you leave..." The proud man looked to his left, gazing at the tall bookcase filled with words and memories. He spotted a few little books he used to read her, the kind about baby ducks and puppies. There was a dam in him, straining at its concrete wall.

"I left high school in '86, married your mama right away and joined the Army that Fall. I was proud to serve. I was infantry – a grunt. Eight years." He shook his head, remembering. "You were an Army brat for a little while." Patting her leg, he folded his arms and pushed deeper into the cushions.

"It was a big world out there, a big pool and I wanted to swim to the other side. Ha!" laughing a little. "Yessir, I wanted to swim in the deep end. Worried my parents so. My mom and dad were good, God-fearing people. I loved my Mama. She taught me how to love and forgive. And my Dad found a way to dig deep into who I was as a person, a young boy."

"Papa was the best," Tamari said in a whisper.

Marcus nodded. "Yes, sir – he'd belt my backside and kiss my forehead all in the same day. Those two things taught me the most of what I learned about being a parent. Well, that and being in church a lot." His mouth bent up into a crooked smile. "But see, I never went to college like you. I was too restless, too much of a wild streak in me. I wanted adventure, purpose, a calling, you see?"

"I get it, Daddy. I really do."

"Well, I found the military, or should I say it found me – the real me, the me that had to be molded, squeezed, kicked into shape, I guess. See, I was in the Gulf. I did what I had to do, what I was ordered to do. And, I *believed* in what we were doing. Do you?"

"I do," she nodded. "There's a lot of people that want to hurt this country. I think of the friends and family that I love – of you, and Mom, and Bobby. I see what they do around the world, how violent and abusive they can be, and all in the name of religion and power and money." She breathed out a sigh, squeezing the old toy in her hand.

Leaving it all behind was harder than she thought. Being so driven and so busy kept her from really thinking about this moment. In the morning she would take the small bag she called her own and walk three blocks to the bus depot. From there to Georgia, to Fort Benning, basic training and the start of a new life. She knew six weeks was just the beginning. Fourteen grueling

weeks of Officer Candidate school lie ahead, then off to Fort Rucker in Alabama for fifteen to eighteen months of aviation training. Next will be the duty assignments, and the tour overseas – she was in for long periods of demanding responsibilities. Other than the occasional break, there would be no coming home.

“Daddy,” she said in a sudden rush, leaning towards Marcus. Their arms fell around each other.

Slowly the silent man rocked his baby, back and forth, back and forth. He told her of bloodshed and boots on the ground, of friends gained, and others lost. The taste of victory and of sand in the mouth both came into his speech. Birthday parties, swing sets, flying kites, and first days of school intermingled with wise warnings of bullets, billets, and protecting herself from abuse and sexual harassment.

“The world is a mean place,” his voice strained. “You are gonna be ticking off some nasty people in time - people who hate your country, what you stand for, your faith, even your gender. You won’t get out of this line of work, baby girl, without scars and nightmares. Yeah,” he lovingly patted her back, “you’ll have your share. But I want you to go out knowin’ what you’re getting in to. It won’t be easy. You’re a woman. They won’t let you forget it. But, you’re a Banks *and* a fighter – don’t you let any of them forget it, either. Take your lumps, dish ‘em out. Keep your head up and look around. I just want you to go out prepared, with your eyes wide.”

They hugged each other tighter again. Her soft, slick cheek brushed against the stubble on his. She knew she must go. But she hated to all the same. Leaning back into the seat she gave a long, sad sigh.

They talked for four hours in front of the small, whispering fireplace, laughing, crying, praying. At last she stood and yawned. It was time for bed. She would leave early in the morning, even before Marcus was up. It was her way of avoiding another painful goodbye. Leaning down she kissed him on the cheek and left the room. The little, ragged kitten sat on the cushion where she had been. Listening patiently to the slight creak of stairs, he reached out and picked up the silly toy. It’s pink fur was faded and worn. He had gotten it for her when she was six.

“Six,” he said to himself, remembering the brilliance of her golden eyes when she first held it. Putting it to his face he inhaled. It used to smell like strawberries. Now it smelled like her. Burying himself in it he began to softly weep.

## Chapter 6

It was late morning. Whirring overhead, the frantic pulse of the rotary wings shot the bird forward.

“Confirming location,” Tamari spoke over the helmet com to her co-pilot. The man beside her nodded. “ETA thirty minutes.” She checked in with command, trimmed a few settings and pressed on.

Two squads of U.S. soldiers had slowly pressed into a scrubby grove of trees an hour before. Intel revealed that a crucial player in the Al-Qaeda network was hiding in the small, dusty village. Lining the southern edge of the hamlet was an ancient, thick wall of clay-mortared stone, three feet wide and twelve feet high. That was going to be a problem. There was no cover to the north so approach from that direction was impossible. It might as well have been a shooting gallery. This side didn’t hold much promise either.

The men moved with silence and discipline. Coming to a short, boundary wall they picked their spots and waited for the next move. Fifty yards across from their location was an arched entrance. Through it threaded a narrow, dirt track that intersected the main street. In and out of the low houses and walled courtyards the inhabitants moved – women with baskets, children in tow, men, old, young, some armed. Too many civilians.

Swearing, Captain Teal looked through his binoculars. His rugged face with its long, aquiline nose and dark yellow mustache wouldn’t melt any girl’s heart, but they generally found him charming company. That’s how he won his wife over. With his men he was usually in a happy-go-lucky mood, even in the heat and the dust. Today, he wasn’t feeling it so much.

“LT!”

“Yes, sir.” The fresh-faced second lieutenant hustled up next to Teal’s position. He was thin framed, with short, wiry hair, and an easy smile. The captain glanced at him. He always thought his helmet was too big. It made the young man look like they were playing in the backyard with toy guns and pots on their head.

“Take a look, Martin.” The older officer handed the lenses to him. Martin scanned the wall, passed the arch, and rested on a small, ground level window to the right.

“No great options, sir.”

“Nope.” Teal spit at the ground and adjusted his chin strap. “It didn’t even look so good on paper. ‘But orders is orders,’ ” mimicking a gruff staff sergeant back at the combat outpost.

Martin laughed. The impersonation was good. He liked Captain Teal, and trusted him. They had seen a lot of action together. Both had lost their share of men under command. Whether the brass picked a crummy assignment for him or not he would do his duty.

Teal raised a gloved hand to his forehead, dragging the thumb across. Nothing really itched, it was just what he did before taking the plunge. “Okay,” he sighed, turning to the junior

officer, “take a squad up around to the east and follow that wall towards the archway. Nunes has his men at the western side of the compound. They’ll start a party and draw those guns towards them.”

Martin scanned the wall, searching the empty scrub of small, stunted trees.

“I know, buddy. I’m asking the same things. ‘Why don’t they call Special Ops, or do this at night, or just turn this place into a parking lot?’ They probably thought up this secret squirrel last night over bourbon.”

“Gin, sir,” Martin grinned like a country boy.

“That’s right – Colonel Weebly likes his G&T.” Teal laughed a little and swore softly.

“We’ve been chasing ‘Sheik Yerbouti’ all over this cat litter box of a country, and yet somehow he manages to slip away...every time.” The Captain cursed and spit on the wall. The thick, brown stain oozed down the dry, mud-caked rock. “We were closest, so we got picked. He’s in there, and now we gotta flush him out.”

“Sir, to the north, and the east-”

“Don’t worry, Martin – we’ve got welcoming parties for him all around. We’re not going to level this place. Remember, we either catch him in the village outright, or we’re supposed to make enough heat for that camel spider to crawl out of his hole and run. You wait close to that window. When you hear things crank up, move your men in.”

“Yes, sir.” Martin hustled off, hunched down under the cover of the serried wall. He selected sixteen men and headed east.

Teal watched them follow the covering stack of stones, kicking up angry whorls of dust as they ran. “What will be the cost today?” he wondered quietly to himself. They were trained for this – trained to follow orders, to execute, to get things done. Still he wondered as he watched the young soldiers, “who wouldn’t be going home alive?” How many of their lives, their interaction with him would be reduced to a report, a bundle of belongings, and a letter to an aching family back in the States? How many...

He keyed his com and gave the order.

First Lieutenant Nunes wound them up. The thunder of three M110 snipers opened. The same number of Talibani dropped simultaneously, still clutching their rifles. Automatic weapons, chattering in bursts of twos and threes began to spray the west-facing wall. Hearts were pounding, tension escalated, the action increased.

From various cracks and chinks, murder holes the soldiers called them, AK-47s and 105s began the answering chorus. The game was on.

Lt. Martin signaled the Captain and headed toward the archway. Somewhere inside the thick, ancient stone an old woman screeched, her piercing voice erupting through the window as the third man passed. Martin signed for the men to go well under the window and keep moving forward.

He stopped five feet from the archway. The young officer and two other men had smoke grenades in their hands, ready to chuck them down the short walkway shuttling through the towering wall. In the chaos the covering fog would help them press toward the particular hovel their target was supposed to be hiding out in. Word was the terrorist leader was wounded and not as mobile as in days passed. Martin had to find him. Stepping forward he pulled the pin and got ready to hurl.

A copper wire. It was only a slender, metal thread that stuck up out of the dust and gravel. Only a copper wire...how could he have seen it? His dirt-grey boot brushed the trigger and half the world exploded. The IED rocked the three lead men, raggedly severing Martin's foot, hurling him twenty feet away from the wall. Several men were blown back by the percussive wave. Raining down, a hailstorm of dirt and stones covered everything in a thirty yard radius.

Teal jumped up, belching out curses and orders.

"You men," pointing at a small cluster of soldiers sheltering to his right. "Over that wall and get them out of there!"

The four men shot up and sprinted toward the fallen. Six in total were down. Grainy, yellow dust hung in the air. As the running men approached, a section of the arch collapsed, completely burying a young PFC. A couple of large blocks struck the leg of another soldier, pinning him to the ground.

"Staltz, on me!" Sergeant First Class Mason took charge. "You two, start pulling him out," pointing urgently at the fresh pile of rubble. Mason, ran over to the rest of Martin's men crouching by the wall. He hustled them into action.

"Get the Lieutenant outta here," motioning back towards Teal. "Two more on the man buried – you, and you!" pointing. "The rest of you grab a man and get him out!"

Training and experience took over and the men surged forward.

A shot rang out. One of the Specialists dropped in place. Mason spat a couple of bursts near the shooter who ducked behind the top of the wall. With some effort the sergeant draped the man across his shoulders and began to trot away from the arch.

"Let's move it!" he turned and yelled. "Covering fire!" Three soldiers worried the rocks, momentarily keeping the shooter down.

The space seemed like a mile. Mason was in excellent physical condition, but the terrain, and warm, sticky sensation down his back seemed to make every second both urgent and difficult. Reaching the low wall he rolled the man over to waiting arms and tumbled after him. Three more AK rounds smacked their cover, one of them whining off over their heads.

"Return fire!" Teal belted out. "Keep it hot." He signaled to a radio operator. The young Corporal hustled over, the long whip of antennae in his left hand.

"Sir!" the soldier ducked his head instinctively as a bullet whipped past. "Woah!"

“Close one,” Teal grimaced. “Come here, Quarter.” It was the tongue-in-cheek name the Captain personally gave anyone with a 25C MOS. The officer reached out and took the mic. He keyed in, gave ID, and called for help. “At least two men down-”

Part of the wall above his head exploded into a shower of dust and sand, covering their helmets. Someone was shooting at the long, black wire bobbing off the corporal. The Captain spat, then blew into the grill on the handset.

“Need MEDEVAC now!” Two more shots thudded into the short wall by their heads. The Captain gave the corporal back the mic. “Mop it up, Quarter.”

“Sir!” The corporal moved down the wall into a shallow depression and gave the coordinates, possible landing zones, hostiles, etc.

Tamari had busted her tail to get here. She was proud to be a US Army Aviator, a Knighthawk – Second Battalion, Third Aviation Regiment. This mission would be her thirtieth flown in Afghanistan. She never counted the flights when she was a taxi cab or tour bus. That always made her smile. It was the ones where she felt she helped save a life, or made a difference that she mentally ticked off. Fortunately, *all* the flight hours she logged in mattered for something.

Three months earlier she had earned the rank of Captain. In six more she had to decide whether to re-up, or get out. There was an unopened letter from an old friend at Homeland in Detroit, waiting for her attention. Hopefully, if she wasn’t too exhausted tonight, she would find out what was in it.

A lot went through her head once she got the craft in the air, leveled off and on its way. She loved the droning, lulling sound of the Blackhawk. It was her baby. The nickname “Doc” stuck to the craft, along with the little decal of a dwarf. The UH-60L had been modified for aeromedical evacuation. So had she. Tamari went above and beyond the training requirements of her job. Her crew consisted of four – pilot, co-pilot, crew chief, and a medic. She knew the medic and the chief’s jobs almost as much as they did.

Earlier in the day they had logged in their inspections of the craft, attended a briefing, then got the call. Like well-greased machinery they prepped, loaded, and took to the air with tremendous efficiency. That was another thing - if you worked *for* Captain Banks, you had better *be* like Captain Banks. And they were proud to.

Lifting off with her was another Blackhawk offering support and extra supplies. Stretching out over the rugged, hilly landscape the two dark crafts thundered west towards their destination.

Rutges, her co-pilot, was a Chief Warrant Officer, excellent at his work. He was as experienced as Tamari. Coming up through the High School to Flight School program meant that his first time skids up with a training unit happened at a tender nineteen years old. That was seven years ago. At Banks’ urging, he too learned all he could about the duties of the other crew members. Between the two of them they ran a happy, albeit tight ship.

“Rut,” her familiar name for him, “how are your ducklings?” She referred to the younger Warrant Officers he assisted the senior ranking Chief Warrant Officers with. Just coming up through the ranks these men and women liked and listened to Rutges as he coached and shepherded them in their duties and careers.

“They’re fine, Captain. Only they keep asking me a sticky question.”

“Oh, what’s that?” she asked innocently.

“Whether CW’s can date Commissioned Officers.”

“And you’re answer?”

“I said I’d let them know if I ever get to.”

Tamari laughed. It was a happy, sweet sound, filled with the nervous excitement she had when in flight. The helo thrummed, vibrated like a living bird. She could feel it’s beat, the energy surging, pulsing through her “air child.” Captain Banks never felt more alive than when she was off the ground.

“You’re cute, Rut, but you’re *way* too short.”

“Ouch!” Turning towards her he looked like a big, helmeted bug with a handsome smile and perfect, white teeth. “Hey, it’s my mother’s fault. I mean, she gave me my stunning, Spanish good looks, but,” he cocked his head, grinning crookedly, “she was a *little* woman.”

“Spanish? With a name like Rutges?”

“A none too tall Englishman. Bummer for height.”

They shared that easy humor of two people who work close together and generally get along while doing it. Each knew the other’s boundaries, rank, and buttons – at least which ones *not* to press; like never calling her “Sir,” or dissing the Detroit Lions. And especially never, ever referring to Banks by any of the names the men in the locker room called her: *Black Widow*, *Stick Chick*, *Stick Witch*, or a few other gems of particular insult to a woman.

All crude joking aside, most of the men respected her. There were always those that would object to her for one reason or another, but the majority were at least courteous to her face. And there were quite a few, Rutges included, who would have loved to be more than just a co-worker with the tall, attractive pilot.

Rut read some dials and looked at a map. “There in ten, Captain.”

She nodded.

Crew Chief Mularoni stuck his head in. His thick, block-shaped face always wore a smile. “All good, Captain.” He gave a thumbs up. “How long?”

“Ten,” she answered.

“Roger-Roger,” the Chief doing his best, though not so good, drone voice.



Rut let out an audible groan and shooed him away.

Mac, short for Macaroni, had been in Army Aviation for twenty-two years. When asked why he didn't get out all he would ever say was "she won't let me," pointing at whatever craft he was currently assigned to. If this bird was Tamari's kid, it was certainly Mac's wife. He knew this helicopter down to its inner rivets. Long before he had become a Crew Chief he had worked his way up as a mechanic. Then he helped instruct younger mechanics build, tear down, then rebuild Blackhawks until it was second nature.

For eighteen months he took a career detour and became a door gunner. He went where they needed him. Then he put in for Crew Chief. And that, for Mac, was the happiest day of his life. He was like the old ship master who cared not for land, but was wed to the sea. One would never find Mac so at home as in the air. And on it he would sail until he could sail no more.

The radio operator dog-crawled back to Teal, keeping himself and the antenna whip below the rocks.

"Sir, dustoff inbound, ETA ten minutes."

The captain nodded and informed his men. He knew they had to force out Samir Rahbar, a vicious Islamist, the man they were tasked at capturing. But no way he was sending more men in – too narrow, too many guns. They needed to keep the pressure up. Rahbar had to be flushed out.

Teal looked to his right and behind him. Six men were down. The small cluster of wounded, buddies helping out, and two field medics were safe for the moment in a shallow depression seven or so feet lower than the short wall they hid behind. All along it his men were hurling back a steady stream, keeping the enemy at bay.

Bright colored smoke poured up from a canister a soldier had thrown to mark their location. He could hear the helicopters in the distance. They were taking a long arc around the eastern side of the village, coming in around from the south.

"Pour it on!" Teal ordered his men. The word was passed down the line, but the soldiers knew the drill. Keep things steaming until the wounded got out.

"It looks hot down there, Rut." Tamari spoke while she made some adjustments.

"Affirmative to that, Captain," he responded.

"Chief," she called.

He poked his head around a thin, metal divider. "Yes, M'am?"

"Any nice, quiet, little park-n-rides to set down in?"

Mac's smile grew wider. "Annie may need to do a little sweeping, but I think we can manage." Mac patted the M134 Minigun he kept neatly stowed out of the way. It was a six-barrel, rotary machine gun set to fire just over three thousand rounds per minute. He began

getting it ready. If it was up to Tamari they would have two of those little darlings, an extra door gunner, a full complement of Hellfire Missiles, Hydra Rockets, along with an exploding kitchen sink. But command often reminded her that MEDEVAC was best stocked with medical equipment, litters, and first aid supplies. Still, she wished her hawk had more beak and claws.

The chief found a level place and steered Tamari towards it. The two helicopters arced down from the sky like large, dark dragonflies, their tails swinging around on descent. Three shots plinked on Doc's hull. Two men at the top of the wall were taking aim.

"Mac," she called to the chief, "they hurtin' my baby. Make 'em stop."

"Yes, M'am," Mac grinned.

A hundred feet off the ground Tamari rotated the Blackhawk around until her side faced the big, haphazard stack of stone that made up the south side of the village. In the compartment behind her Mac slid the gunner's door open and set Annie forward. The minigun spewed out an incredible stream of bullets, slamming them into rocks, shattering and showering the shooters with lead, sand, and gravel. No one came back up.

The soldiers continued to take measured shots.

"All good!" Mac came over Tamari's headset. She brought the helo down.

"Party time!" she called. Mac and Sergeant Darlene Stanzo, the young medic exited the craft. They brought out two litters for the most critically wounded. The field medics joined them in securing Martin and the young Specialist. Four other men, two broken by the collapse, were hustled off to the second Blackhawk, waiting fifty yards behind Doc.

In under seven minutes supplies and ammo were unloaded, the wounded were secured, and the two helicopters were kicking up a dust storm, rising into the blue, arid sky. Tamari looked down from her high seat, smiling.

From an old escape tunnel stretching two hundred yards to the east of the Village, Samir Rahbar emerged in the shadows of rock and bush.

## Chapter 7

She hated this hill. She loved it. Like everything that pulled sweat and pain from her body Tamari had a workable, yet strained relationship. You had to do it. Her new job in Detroit as a field agent with the fuddily-named Office of Internal Security demanded that she hold her own. After an honorable discharge from the Army she was excited to step into this challenging phase of life. And being in top shape for it was a given, no, a demand. “Cops that ate too many donuts,” her boss liked to say, “*looked* like donuts.”

The rigors she put herself through was like hand sanitizer – every weakness, every opening hurt, but then you knew for sure it was doing its job.

“C’mon, girl,” she puffed out in the cold. Pushing hard into the sixth mile her feet pumped in swift beats up the incline. *Harder, stronger, faster*, her mind was relentless: *never quit, never surrender, never cry*. She would not be mastered by the road, nor by gravity.

Cresting the top she raised her hands. Her long, muscular figure floated like a graceful shadow. All in black from head band to shoe, cranking, ebony wireless ear buds and dark, mirrored shades made her look like a sleek, stretch limo, surging powerfully on eight cylinders.

She took a cleansing breath. The long exhale and inhale cycle set her up for the final leg. Spotting her apartment complex Tamari set her eyes on the target and took off like madness. A hunting panther, teeth bared, she poured everything into the chase. Her legs and arms pumped like a biological machine, sucking power up from the very earth itself, spending it on the forward surge. The girl was fast. Olympic fast.

Passing a couple of old men sitting in the early morning sun she blasted by like a midnight train.

One grey head leaned over watching her go past. He whistled low.

“If I coulda run like that the cops ‘d never caught me.”

“If you coulda run like that they never woulda needed to. You’d get a medal or somethin’.”

They both laughed, ruffled their papers and talked of times past.

It took her half a block to slow down. She walked. To the end and back, she paced in front of the Rail Street Apartment Complex. This was how she loved to greet the day. Suffused with endorphins, focused, she checked off several accomplishments in her head, and all before six in the morning. She never liked to seize the day by the coattails and hang on, no, Tamari took it by the collar and dragged it forward.

This was her day.

Like all other soldiers, cops, and first responders there was always the thought, the reality somewhere in the back of the head – *would this day be my last?* One bullet, one fire, one bomb, one criminal too many and your number was called. It was just there. Always. Rather than a chance to back down, to shrink from the danger, Tamari defied it, lived for it. It was part of what hurled her forward. She had purpose and mission. There were wolves, there were sheep, and then there were sheepdogs. Her drive and strength were all in. She would protect. She would serve.

This was *her* day.

## Chapter 8

“The Mid-West branch of the Office of Internal Security is proud to celebrate its eighth year of operation.” The OIS Director raised his coffee mug in salute.

“No celebratory pastries, sir?” Agent Aimes interjected.

“Tight budget – spent too much on bullets,” the Director’s usual, tired joke.

Ten pairs of highly trained field operatives sat around the long, oval table. Many of them were new to the OIS. Tamari had been joined at the professional hip to Aimes for the last three years. The rigors of her training prepared her well, but Orville added a new dimension of street smart to her tactical understanding. None too tall, bald as a baby, and *none* too handsome, the man resembled a stocky, muscular bulldog, scarred from many a bloody fight. Aside from the occasional wisecrack in meetings, he kept quietly to himself. He would, of course, talk Tamari’s ear off when alone, his wispy, British-inflected voice smoothly running commentary on a garden variety of subjects. But generally he looked like a late, middle-aged lifer, riding out his final years at an obscure, little agency. And looks could be entirely deceiving.

“As you know,” the Director began to pace, hands behind back, “our agency is in a sense a mirage...”

“There’s a new one,” Aimes whispered to his partner. The corner of Tamari’s mouth twitched. She kicked him softly under the table.

Carrying on the Director cleared his throat, looking in their direction. “We picked the stuffiest, non-descript name we could think of. And then we, that is the upper brass and I, began the rumor that we dealt with financial oversight at some murky level. ‘I think they work in accounting’ was a line cooked up by yours truly. That thought alone makes most other political and military sectors choose to leave us to ourselves. No one wants a bee’s nest in their records. Really, who wants their books investigated?”

The Director turned and smiled. Though Tamari knew in her head that this man was a decorated war vet, ex-spook, and, in the eighties, a technical genius, yet he looked like a grumpy, but otherwise harmless grandfather. Clean shaven, big, rectangular glasses, and a ring of thin, grey-white hair around the sides of his head, he seemed best suited for bedtime stories and cardigan sweaters. Looks again were wickedly deceptive.

“Our job is to hunt terrorists.” The Director stopped pacing and looked directly at them. “That’s the bottom line. The cover, the camouflage, the mirage, if you please-”

“Oh, I do,” Aimes whispered to Tamari.

She snickered. She kicked, harder.

“ - is intended to keep meddling bureaucrats and finicky politicians from gumming us up with red tape.” He began the slow walk again.

“We are not above the law, but we are free to execute it without having to work everything up fifteen links in a chain of command, then all the way back down again. As you senior agents are well aware, we report directly to a three person panel in the DOD. They, in turn, report directly to the president. Our overall mission comes from them, our funding comes through them. Beyond that they have given this agency a great deal of autonomy, *and* latitude. Typically, only the results are reported, nothing more. They don’t want the gory details of each game, just the final scores. Thankfully, this also cuts down on paperwork.”

He stopped. A mild response of humor and whistles came from the agents.

“Yes, yes,” he nodded his head, “we all appreciate that. In addition, it keeps a tighter circle of trusted people involved in our work. As you all know, various hostile nations love to fund terrorist organizations against The United States. They have also enjoyed turning the loyalty of a few congressmen recently, plying them with large amounts of cash, laced with a touch of extortion. Thank Lady Justice our team helped bring them down.”

Small hoots and fist bumps ran around the table.

Tamari began to rub the edge of her white, non-descript coffee cup. She hadn’t sipped it in ten minutes. During each of these meetings it always happened. At some point her attention began to fade away into the echoes constantly bouncing around her head – the day’s targets, tomorrow’s projects...and the past. How far had she come? Now, in her early thirties she often found herself evaluating who she was then, and who she had become.

What a different woman she had been ten years ago when she first stepped off the bus and into the U.S. Army Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning. Or fourteen years back at eighteen when she had graduated from high school and pursued a degree at Michigan State. Top of her class she earned a bachelors in Criminal Justice in three, and a Masters in Law Enforcement Intelligence and Analysis in one and a half. Every moment she could spare during her college years she was involved with the local Department of Homeland Security and the Michigan Intelligence Operations Center. Her focus was the same then as now – terrorism.

Even the hectic days at OIS were life changing: a little over one year of unbelievable, at times impossibly hard training, and the rest with “Sir Egg Head,” one of her various nicknames for Aimes. She was almost an entirely new person in some ways. Tougher, way stronger, yet somehow more patient and compassionate. Even in her short time in the field she had witnessed the utter brutality that humans could inflict on each other. She also experienced the greatest deeds of courage and love from ordinary people. Her people.

She hadn’t come from wealth, or a famous family. The city she grew up in, a satellite of Detroit, was a bit tired, nothing fancy. It wasn’t the Hamptons or Bel-Air that she called home. But home was the place she learned to be the person she was – the one she would always be at the core. It was where she knew she was loved.

“Are you still with us, Banks?” Aimes annoyingly leaned in to her personal space.

“What?” spilling cold liquid from her cup onto the dark, faux wood table.

Fellow agents stood all around her, worker bees buzzing off to their assigned nectar.

“Oh,” she said absently and rose.

Together they walked out the office door and headed for the field.

## Chapter 9

Whistling, inches from her head she ducked under the arc of the brown, whiskey bottle and moved in. The quick right smacked off the side of his head. Pivoting, Tamari whipped her left leg. Like the thousands of times she hit the bag at training she smashed her brick hard lower shin into his outer thigh. The impact to his lateral femoral nerve was severe. All the motor skills shot out of the leg as the pain broke in. He collapsed to the ground. A loud scream erupted.

They had hunted him for three days. Long and deep were his ties to a vicious, local gang, recruiting young men and women as soldiers, drug runners, and sex slaves. A bomb had detonated in the Detroit area known as Greek Town, shredding a man, his family, and his restaurant for daring to stand up to them. The OIS targeted him. Banks and Aimes tracked him down.

“Police brutality!” the writhing skinhead cried. His bare, bony arms twitched around on the alley pavement making the tats dance.

“Shut up, punk!” Tamari shoved him with her foot, rolling him on to his stomach. “We’re not the cops.” She straddled his waist and pulled out a pair of pink colored zip tie restraints. Deftly looping them she tightly bound his wrists.

Hopping up she spotted her partner.

“Why, Miss Banks, it seems you have netted our game.”

“Somethin’ like that,” her breath slowing.

“Pink? Oh, I daresay his manhood is threatened by your accessorizing. Though he seems more the purple type to me.”

“He’ll be purple, alright – just after black and blue, and well before greenish-yellow.”

“A full palette then.” Aimes breathed a sigh, hands clasped in front. “Come, Ernesto Jones.” The stocky agent lifted the man up like a child. He carefully dusted him off and dragged him to the waiting van, whistling a cheerful tune. Two other agents drove. Tamari and Aimes were seated in the back, a rather distraught Ernesto bouncing along, face down on a mat laid across the vehicle’s bed.

Normally another agency would have handled this. But Jones was a key to a much larger, more insidious plan that was brewing from the Middle East. It had emerged at other places across the U.S., and was now spilling into the streets of The Motor City. Just what they were specifically up to was uncertain. The OIS was tasked with finding out.

“What are you going to do with me?” the man on the moving floor asked.

“We’re going to open up your head and put an eggbeater in it just for fun.” Tamari was in a dark mood.



“For fun, dear Tamari?” Aimes had a note of disgust. “Think of the splatter. Well, you’re not doing it in my flat, at any rate.” He folded his arms.

Jones looked from one to the other. He saw a pair of eyes looking at him through the gloom of the windowless van. He shuddered. With city cops he would have been defiant. Even with the FBI he knew he could lawyer up and make a scene. These two smelled like black sites and even blacker holes. He didn’t know if it was the sophisticated, weird guy that made him nervous or the giant, mad cat staring at him. She had claws. His leg throbbed.

“Look, I’m a nobody,” he pleaded. “I’m an errand boy. I ain’t no killer.”

“Oh, he does whine incessantly. Can’t you possibly do something?” Aimes smiled wryly.

“Getting...what’s that funny word you like to say?” Tamari’s eyebrows were up.

“Peevish. Yes, I am a bit out of temper. The sooner we dispose of this one, the better.”

“Dispose!? Hey, I can cut a-”

“Pipe down, Adolf!” Tamari crossed her ankles and set them on Jones’s head. “Finally, something he’s useful for. So, talk to me about cutting.” She shook her black boot against his cheek.

“I can give you some drug dealers,” he said through a smooshed face.

“Naw, ain’t my department. Next!”

“I...” his wheels spun frantically, “sex coyotes, a-and lots of Johns - important ones!”

“As much as I would enjoy slowly feeding them feet first to sharks, I’ll pass. What else?” She shook him again.

“No way. I’ve seen them strip the skin off of people hanging from meat hooks. No lie.” Jones said in a high-pitched voice.

“Oh, how vulgar,” Aimes.

“They’ll kill my family first,” the man whined. “You don’t get it.”

“We already have your family. They’re in protective custody.” Tamari’s voice was simple and matter of fact.

The man swore at her. Tamari’s boot ground in.

“You hurt them and I’ll kill you! Blackie will kill all of you!”

“Ah, we have a name.” Aimes happily reported. He pulled out a pocket watch. “And you, my dear, have lost a wager.”

Tamari huffed at him. Turning back to the man underfoot she leaned forward. “Now, how about I find Blackie and slip him a little note with your name on it. Maybe on some stationary from the Detroit PD? What *would* he do about a few squeaks from a mole?”

"I'm not, no," he gasped, "don't do that!" A real panic began to set in. This man wasn't the tough criminal kind, but that didn't make him any less a sleaze ball. They had evidence he was in on the bombing, and the drugs, and selling children.

Tamari pushed her heel down.

"Hey, hey – that hurts!"

"It's supposed to," she stated.

"I'll tell you anything...everything if you'll let me go."

"Not a chance, mole face."

"You b-" he almost got the nasty word out. Her foot cut him off. "Ow! OW!" he shrieked.

Tamari shot up.

"Oh, dear," Aimes, shaking his head.

"It's us or Blackie!" she growled, pressing weight on her boot. "Your family is safe. But you belong to us now. You will tell us all we want to know or we'll tell him to sharpen his knives." All Tamari could see was the innocent girls, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, that were caught on camera being herded into a truck by this filth. She saw the smoking remnants of a family eatery, the youngest grandchild's corpse thrown through the window and across the street by the blast.

What never came into her mind's eye was the tender, hypocritical sensibilities of effete politicians, hiding from this barbaric invasion in their safe, guarded worlds of comfort and security. The academic opinions of professors untouched with the blood and burnt flesh of children never borrowed her mind for a second. This war was real. And it was here. Now. Justice could not be meted with a shaking hand. It needed firm, unwavering resolve.

The Glock 19 came smoothly from the sticky holster at her hip. She pulled the action and released, snapping it back in place. Jones heard it. He strained to look up under her rugged sole.

"I really don't care if you make it to the next stop alive. Honestly, the paperwork would be worth it. Maybe you got violent, or pulled a hidden knife."

"Or broke free of his bonds." Her partner added.

"Or maybe," she bent over him, the dark, polished muzzle poking at his head, "maybe I just wanted to clean some filth from the Earth."

"There are witnesses. You're a cop, or somethin'. You can't do this!" Jones let out a volley of curses.

"Bad buzzer on all three. Aimes and I are on the same page. You're a violent killer. We were attacked. I felt afraid for my life."

“Me too,” her partner, calmly examining his nails.

“And those two,” nodding to the front, “they don’t exist.” The driver reached over and turned up the radio. “So, it’s just you, and me, and Madame la Balle.”

“Who?”

“The gun, stupid!”

“You’re crazy. All of you!” His eyes rolled around while he sweat pints per minute.

“And you’re caught. Choose wisely or the show is over.”

He partially buried his face into the mat. A sticky dryness sucked the moisture from his mouth. The ache in his leg became worse. And, he needed a bathroom. Badly. He gave one last furtive glance at the gun and the vicious thing holding it. There were no good options left.

“Okay, okay,” submissively. “Just promise me that my mom, brother, and niece are out of it.”

“Like I said, already done,” she confirmed.

“I’ll tell you what you want,” Jones said, defeated.

Tamari held the pistol closer, pressing a cold metal ring into his temple. Her lips bunched with tension, her grip tightened. Without a word she sat back down, putting away the weapon. Earlier she had swapped out her loaded magazine for a dummy. As a back-up a .380 Glock 42 was tucked in her waistband, but she doubted ever needing it. This game was as much in the head as in the hands. And today, she had won.

On through traffic the van headed north of the city to a hidden destination.

The faintest of smiles teased her face.

## Chapter 10

“Breathe,” the strong, ripped man coached her, his heavily accented voice booming in the practice area.

She moved towards the heavy bag.

“Keep hands up! Watch your motion.”

Quickly backing out she shuffled to the right, moved in and out again. It was always the first part of the drill – breathing, footwork, holding up your guard. She hadn’t even touched the tall, canvas punching bag. It wasn’t even moving.

“Speed it up,” he barked, “in and out, good stance, shuffle each way ‘round, pivot.”

They had done this drill hundreds of times. But Tamari always stayed sharp. She had increasingly dangerous missions ahead. Her level of preparedness would mean the difference between life and death, not only for herself, and her partner, but for those she was ultimately protecting. These exercises were whetstones, and she wanted a keen edge to her blade.

“You can do better. Better!” he nearly yelled at her. “Now hit it!”

She moved in, fast, light, strong – her long, wiry muscles were like braided steel cable. Many a stupid man had underestimated her. Most times she counted on that.

“Don’t let the bag push you! Quick snaps! Don’t lunge!”

By now those words were drilled into her head. She focused on the target. Visualizing each vulnerable spot on the opponent, her strong thighs shot her forward.

*HIT-HIT*, a jab and a cross. She shuffled left. Hook, uppercut, uppercut – she saw her adversary grunt with broken ribs. Slamming her right elbow at jaw level, her knee followed, shooting up and shuddering the bag. Again and again the thin gloves smacked the canvas, making the hundred fifty pounds of sand and stuffing jump. Each hit was punctuated with a short, forceful breath.

“Back out!” the man yelled.

Retreating she gave another one-two to her opponent. *Strike when you come in and when you go out, when you move to the side, when you pivot.* Constantly coaching herself she ran over the tactics she had heard so many times.

You had to find the sweet spot. Too far away and you had no effect, just cat smacks. Too close and the big, heavy sack pushed you back. Each strike was like a weapon in the arsenal – some could do damage at short distance, some had greater reach. That’s why you practiced, again, and again. “Know thyself,” the old adage spoke. “Know your enemy,” her head voice reminded.

Over and over she struck: long range kicks to imaginary gut, quad, and knee, close range to jaw, throat, and groin. In a few seconds she could do considerable damage.

“Focus on specific area, don’t just stare at bag,” he told her.

She never let her eyes go blurry, or wander. You had to see the face, the windpipe, the head, the abdomen, and the legs. *Aim tight, hit right*, ran through her head, *stay centered on the bag, never turn your back*.

“Empty it out!” he barked.

With fury and fire she poured in every ounce of power she had. Again and again combinations landed. The bag shivered and shook, creaking on its chains. For a full two minutes she hit and kicked and pounded with fierce intensity.

“Enough!”

She stopped and began a short walk around the training area. Her body was absolutely drenched in sweat. It shone like layered gloss on ebony. Heaving in and out her body sucked for air like gills on a dock.

The man stood arms folded and made a face. “It was okay.”

“I’m gonna smack you, Pearl.”

He chuckled.

Pearl. That was his name. Or, rather, it was the only name she ever heard. It wasn’t “Sergeant Pearl” or “Mr. Pearl” or “Sir Pearl” or “Pearl something-or-other.” Just Pearl.

If a boulder suddenly stood up and decided to walk to town and see how the humans were getting on, you might mistake it for Pearl. At just under six feet, the man’s entire body was a block of compact muscle mass, callouses, and various scars. As a young teen he was brutally trained in Muay Thai, fighting in the ring and on the street. At twenty he enlisted in the Royal Thai Army, progressing rapidly in the eyes of his superiors. Two years active duty and he successfully joined the Special Warfare Division, Ranger Battalion. From there he mastered a host of other martial styles and military tactics, becoming an encyclopedia of practical training and knowledge.

At some point the OIS scooped him up. And that was all the facts anyone there had about him. That was all Tamari knew – that, and he was the biggest pain in her neck. *And*, he was the best trainer she ever had.

“That was a good warm-up, agent. But we have much to do today.”

Tamari pulled off a glove and threw it at him. He ducked and watched it fly by.

“Much to do,” was an understatement. Tamari went above and beyond what was required by regulation. She wasn’t content at that. If they wanted her to be skilled, she wanted herself to be outrageous. And Pearl was the man to do it.

The first time they met, the first time he trained her, she didn't know whether to wet herself with fear, or be grateful for such a high bar to rise to. Though new to the agency, she wasn't completely raw to tough, martial instruction. A number of men and women had pushed her beyond what she thought was her limits. Until the day she stepped into *his* world.

How many times he threw her around like a bear with a kitten. More than once he had nearly broken her. Bruised, beaten, and for Tamari, humiliated, she would crawl back to the little box of her agency appointed room and cry in the tiny shower stall. She could bleed it out there, her tears blending with the thousands of other drops. But *he* would never see her cry. And...she would never surrender.

The next day she would drag herself, aching, limping, bruised to the bone, back to the bags, and the mats, the choke holds, limb locks, strikes, the fighting sticks and practice knives. He particularly liked to hammer certain skills out on what he called the banana bag. Seven foot tall, heavy, leather, and narrow, it felt like it was filled with cement. Again and again he would train her bare feet, shins, and elbows, kicking and striking until she cried out. And each time he would speak with his level voice, never angry, always demanding, and always inflicting one brand of pain or another.

During one session he had her on the mat in a debilitating hold.

"Pain is just weakness leaving-" Pearl started to say.

"Shut up!" she yelled, cutting off his intentionally irritating American Military quote. After a salvo of choice words she sunk her teeth into his arm. Grunting, he rolled her over like a feather, pinning her to the ground. He pulled her arm up and away behind her while kneeling into her back. The pain was unbelievable.

"That is good in fight, but you will not bite me again." His tone was at its most menacing – quiet and promising. "If you do, I make sure you do not forget lesson."

He laughed and pulled her to her feet. She never apologized. He never threatened again. He didn't need to. From that day forward they had a mutual love-hate-respect relationship. He would be a solid, unyielding mountain for her. She would ever strive to scale it.

## Chapter 11

She stepped into a world of ambiance and luxury. Like polished onyx, cut with precision, and buffed to a glossy sheen her arms, neck, and legs flowed from the shimmering, gold, evening gown with long, feminine curves. Every muscle was defined. An artist, a master at sensuous realism had carefully sculpted each contour. Draping the silky fabric, cinching a metallic, braided belt at an impossibly thin waist he stepped aside and let his creation appear amongst the common-framed mortals.

With a flowing, easy grace she moved across the rectangular, upper level of the casino towards the steps descending to the gaming floor. Small, intimate tables, glowing with candlelight lined the outer perimeter. Secret faces hidden in shadows conversed with tones of love, intimacy, and desire. Many could not be recognized – most cared not to be.

Heads turned as she moved. Women, with the acerbic criticism they bear toward other females, looked her up and down, judging and categorizing her figure, clothes, accessories, hair, and shoes. Men saw a dark wonder, wreathed in a brilliant, metallic haze; they saw a shape, and a dream. Some dropped their jaws, some their spoons.

Rounding a final, pillared corner she took the steps. Tamari shifted a small, square clutch to her right hand, her left lightly tracing the heavy, brass rail. The purse was woven from gold colored strands, studded with seven blood red crystal beads a side. She never let it rest in her palm, but held it with her finger tips. Down she came from the top of the broad, curving descent. With impossible grace the *belle femme* seemed not to walk, so much as dance with rhythmic motion, her steps, her movements in harmony with the floor, the Earth around her. The fine metal strands hanging from the blood colored studs of her earrings swayed in time to her smooth, elegant stride.

Some of the figures around the two large, gaming tables dominating the center of the room stopped to look up. They watched a jaguar descending with smooth, cat-like motion – black and gold intermingled, splashed with crimson marks of previous hunts. Tamari was a predator, beautifully dangerous. She rocked.

At the bottom of the staircase the young, OIS Agent surveilled. The curving sweep of her footwear joined together at the top of thin-spiked, two inch heels. Six feet, glowing like the sun at half eclipse it was little wonder she attracted attention. Her expressionless face moved in the manner of a woman of class and money deciding which group of the vulgar she wish to join on the commons. The full, dark lips were held with the slightest of knowing smiles. A sweep of short, black hair sloped down towards the right eye, partially hiding its outer edge. It gave her a curious innocence, a girl-like quality, utterly disarming – particularly to men.

Whistling long and low the young OIS technical operative in a white, pristine shirt focused camera four, hidden in the wood work of the casino. He zoomed in on Tamari. “Hokey smokes! I-”

“Alright, Agent Druck! That’s enough chatter.” The Director’s voice cut in over the system. Even as an older man he couldn’t blame the Agent. Tamari *was* captivating. In his day,

particularly near the end of the Cold War, there had been a few Katia Zatuliveters, and Anna Chapmans of his own he had dealt with. Honey traps were the deadliest kind.

Tamari made as though adjusting the jewelry in her lobe. She touched the ear piece.

“Target?” she said quietly.

“Visual?” the older man’s voice.

“No.” She scanned the crowd clustering around blackjack and roulette. Moving towards the middle of the room her head turned from side to side. A light blush of gold was powdered on her left cheek, sweeping up to the temple. It terminated in a dark red gem, lending her an even more alluring, artful look. This was another piece of advanced OIS tech. Once activated, the microcam only had a fifteen minute battery life. But up close it took surprisingly high resolution pics. The first test shots came in wirelessly to the operations van parked outside the Lafayette – an exclusive, high-end, swank tank, located near the Detroit Opera House where people came to glitter their gems, and lose their gold.

She was hunting a man. And, she would find him. Omid Banai, also known as Papa Boom, was an Iranian arms smuggler, and a central figure in the terrorist movements infiltrating Detroit. She need only pick up his scent and the game was on.

“Found him,” Druck’s voice came over the channel. “East end...to your left. That’s him.”

“Move in and confirm.” The Director was brusque about things. There was no padding in his manner so far as operations were concerned.

Tamari moved down the long room towards the second gaming table. Her movements looked like she was on the runway modeling the latest *haute couture*. She came up to a cluster of women surrounding a man bent over, tossing dice across green felt. He stood up. Touching her temple, the camera cycled four shots, transferring them instantly to the Chief.

“That’s our man. Confirmed,” the leader of the Mid-West OIS said firmly.

Tamari didn’t answer. She simply glided over next to the cluster of cooing and cheering females and found a hole at the table’s edge.

Banai was surrounded by women, tall and drop-dead attractive. At five-five he was not an imposing figure. Plain featured, middle aged, his amber-colored skin was smooth except for laugh lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth. His hair, once a deep black, but now thinner and graying, fell back into a flowing swoop down to the collar. The dark glasses, sideburns, and thick mustache made him look like he stepped straight out of the seventies.

A century ago he would have been a spice merchant in Tehran, dutifully loving his wife and children, attending mosque, and happily stacking his coins. His native instinct for a deal translated into an adeptness with modern weapons and how to move them in and out of countries undetected. When he wasn’t partying he was happily counting the encrypted digits in bank accounts across the globe.



Cheers erupted at a successful roll. The women, in their scant dress and tired eyes clinked glasses. Banai stood in their midst, suffuse with the ether of their beauty, perfume, and adoration. Abstaining from drink and drugs satisfied the small bulb of religious conviction that shone in the dim passage of his conscience. But such feelings never hindered his indulgence in pounds of female flesh, or in blowing enough cash to feed a small village in one night at a gaming table. “Who cares,” he would laughingly tell himself. He knew he made enough in one day to buy a city.

Banai had a little wife at home. It was an arranged marriage from thirty years ago. The deal had pleased his parents, and his in-laws. As a groom he was not overly thrilled, nor was he upset. Sabah was a respectable wife who would mind his house and bear him children. She was of a coarse, sturdy cloth that was serviceable for all practical and domestic concerns. These immoral women were merely his diversion into the world of colorful silk and spices. Provided he firmly took care of responsibilities on the one end, what harm if he let loose on the other? And besides, who would know?

That he travelled for business dealings was not an item to be questioned by his wife. They lived in a beautiful home, one that she was proud of. Their children were well-dressed, orderly, never suffering want or deprivation. Banai was good to his parents, her family, and to their local mosque. In short, they had fine standing in their community. Marrying her was the perfect cover.

Banai reached over to a tray and picked up a tall, crystal glass, bubbling with ginger ale. He saw Tamari. The drink sat frozen in the air halfway to his partially open mouth. Small, sparkling lights glittered up and down the contours of her firm, athletic figure. Mesmerized, he was as connoisseur of fine art who tripped into the Louvre, bumped into Venus, having her topple over and land square on his head. It was altogether absurd, if he thought about it.

No one would ever consider Omid Banai a playboy in the classic sense – he was neither handsome or charming. But, everyone knew he had money. And, to his own thinking, he was a man of taste. He did not consider himself a mere hoarder of adulterous indulgences. No, that was too base, too thuggish. In his mind’s eye he saw himself as a collector of the exquisite, the exemplary female form. Women beyond count had complied with his wishes. That this one should strike him so hard across the face was both thrilling, and enraging. She must be acquired. She must be subdued.

Within his self-defined scope of artistic perception the one thing he cherished above all was the exotic. Here, gold, and black, and sleek, with aching hints of red was this...this *woman*. She was a Bugatti Veyron – a *very* limited edition. Even standing still she looked fearsome and fast, a crouching beast ready to devour the road, and hopefully him.

“Omid, are you okay, baby?” A lustrous blonde gently took the glass from the man’s hand. He pushed her aside, brushing away her grasping, long, white finger nails. Cautiously taking several steps forward, the short man stood next to Tamari like a kid waiting at a candy store counter. She ignored him. Studying his psychological profile armed her. If she made him wait, he would become more earnest. Her lack of attention was the act of blowing on coals.

So Banai waited, anxiously tapping his hands together. Midst the swelling sounds of cheers, chatter, and gaming he found himself lost in the desire of conquest. “What would it take to gain her?” he wondered. “What was her price?” He must have her. He *would* have her.

“Miss?” his voice small, hesitant. Clearing his throat he spoke up. “Beautiful woman.” His accent made it sound like a question. With deliberate slowness, Tamari turned as to a beggar. She stopped the carriage of her inner world to roll up the shade and peer at this pauper. Closing her lids she timed them to open when her face met his.

The man was lost. Hopelessly. High in the weeds of his own passion he stared into the golden eyes. “Lioness...” he whispered to the air. Unconsciously he pulled off the aviators.

“Engage in small talk. Remember to make the subject relaxed.” The Director’s voice sounded like he was reading from a “How To Be A Spy Woman” textbook. Nonchalantly reaching up to her ear she made as though adjusting the stud on her lobe. The earpiece shut off. As her hand traveled back down she brushed the microcam. It took a burst of four more shots. Thirty seconds later it died.

Silently she stepped forward. The right side of her mouth cocked up into a slight smile. Looking down at the entranced figure she lifted her chin. To anyone watching them it was as if Tamari was evaluating whether this man was to remain alive in her presence. Without a word she grabbed the lapel of his suit and began dragging him toward the elevator. Omid felt on the downward curve of a roller coaster. His toes curled, his gut retracted. He was in flames.

“So strong,” he said with astonishment. He felt like a cub gripped between fangs and carried away. This woman wasn’t out to fuss over him, tell him how handsome or smart he was. She wasn’t a cooing little dove to be taken to his room and plucked. This was a powerful, black wonder that made his head spin. For once *he* was the conquest. The thought was intoxicating.

Four of his security guards followed him with their eyes. For Omid, this was the normal end to every evening on the town. The only thing that piqued their curiosity was the tall, sparkling figure that hauled him away. They both laughed at the small man being carted off, *and* envied him.

Nothing passed between Agent Banks and her target. No word, no sound escaped save a few delighted whimpers from Banai. In the elevator she faced him towards the door, one impossibly firm hand on his shoulder. He couldn’t turn around. He didn’t dare.

At the third floor the doors slid open and she marched him like a captive straight ahead to her room. Pushing him against the door she slid her card. The small light on the lock turned green and she ushered him into the spacious area.

Placing him on a spot in the middle of the floor she reached down to the bracelet on her right wrist as though shifting it for comfort. She slid it up over her thumb until it was stretched across her palm. A hidden, inch and a half long spine shot up from the clasp, dripping with a clear liquid. Tamari stepped toward the man, that curious smile on her lips. He was breathing heavily. Perspiration dotted a face filled with wonder and anticipation.

“Th-this is going to hurt, isn’t it?” He said with thrilling delight.

Tamari's left hand shot up to his mouth, stopping the words.

"Can a man scoop coals into his lap and not be burned?" she quoted the proverb.

Banai's eyebrows arched and quivered.

With a swift motion Tamari brought her right hand around to the back of his neck, plunging the barb in next to his spine. Upon impact the stinger shot a high dose of drugs into his system. When her hand pulled away, the needle stayed in his flesh, detaching from the bracelet, leaving a small bulb on his skin. The tiny, carbon nanotube supercapacitor shot two high voltage shocks into his body. Omid jerked twice and fell back on the floor in a heap.

"Yeah, Omid, baby," she purred like a bimbo at the crumpled form, "it's gonna hurt."

Reactivating her earpiece Tamari spoke. "Five by five."

"Good work, Banks." The Director's gruff voice came through. "I'll send them up to get him."

With simple, easy grace she made her way to the lobby, out the door, and into a waiting Uber.

## Chapter 12

Into the embers and flames they stared in the quiet evening. They were both tired. Exhausted. It had been a long day, a long month, really.

“So,” Aimes spoke languidly, “how do you...” He broke into an involuntary yawn. “Excuse me. Now that you’re an experienced agent, how do you like your job?”

“Are we making a difference, Aimes?” Tamari looked over at him.

“How so?” his head tilting.

“A difference?” she repeated.

“Yes, yes, I understood the word.” Aimes nearly yawned again. “What the Devil do you mean by it?”

Tamari thought for a moment. At least once a week she found herself in the comfortable dwelling of Agent Orville Aimes, her partner, and the greatest professional influence of her career. He was also her friend.

“I mean, do we change the world for anyone?” Tamari made a long, tired exhale.

Aimes shifted his glass and gazed at the flames. “The world is what it is, Miss Banks.”

“You know, you can be so annoyingly philosophical. Can anyone ever get a straight answer from you, Orville?”

“Why don’t you start with a straight question,” turning to face her, “like, what on Earth is bothering you.”

“Dude, are we making a dent in the freaking hate machine? How many people have to die, or be tortured, or lose their homes, and...” she searched, “and families until the tank is full? Will it ever end?”

“Miss...” Aimes paused and slid to the edge of his cushion. “Tamari, the answer is yes, in the small circle, but in the larger, the historical, the global – no. There will always be evil in the world. Such wears many faces, a variety of iterations that spring up like a perennial weed. But in our little circle, the little world of Detroit? Yes, my dear, we can – you can, and *are* making a difference. If we had the world in our hand we could be blamed as responsible for all of it. But this little neck of human wood is our stand to tend. So, do not trouble for the larger picture. Only do your work with honesty here...and now.”

The older agent took a sip of his drink and leaned back into his chair.

Tamari’s head fell to her chest. Her body ached. Her mind and emotions were scuffed up. “I think I’m going to hide out at my place tomorrow, eat mint chocolate chip ice cream, and binge watch something online.”

“I could not think of a better Saturday for you. You need to decompress, Tamari. Don’t forget, in the midst of saving others, you cannot lose yourself. You are only human. We tend to wear out if not maintained.”

“Yeah,” she nodded, her eyelids slow and heavy.

They let the silence soak in like healing balm. With only the crackling of the fireplace filling the room it gave them a small, mental space to breathe.

“I’m going to see my folks on Sunday. It’s been six weeks. No one cooks like my Momma.”

“Capital! I believe those dinners do you a world of good. My mother, on the other hand, God rest her soul, was quite dreadful at cooking. A lovely lady, to be sure, but she could barely pull off decent toast and tea.” Aimes looked down into his small glass of sherry.

One didn’t think of Orville as having a mother, let alone being a child. Such innocence and immaturity seemed so foreign to him that it was almost alien. Tamari knew his persona was like a Russian doll, a man within a man, within a man. He seemed such a static entity, yet somehow turbulently existing in the shadow of multiple, previous lives. The person he was, wasn’t who he became. The person he became escaped to become the person he now was. There was a certain brokenness about him. Yet he carried such strength, and such a well of experience that it was hard to pity him.

It wasn’t pity that fueled her concern for him. And it was far more than just a nosey curiosity. She was often worried about him for the tint of grief that seemed to color all his life, all this thoughts. Who was he, really? There was such profound sadness in his eyes, yet such pride and assurance in his bearing. His past, or rather the work he did in it, had garnered him so much capital with the older agents and leaders that they seemed to physically sigh with relief just knowing he was handling something. It was asking a giant to smash a house. Expecting splinters was a foregone conclusion.

“Well, my dear, the hour is late. I feel I must retire.” He finished the last of his glass and stood. Tamari got up. She stretched and yawned. “You must make certain to utterly unplug tomorrow – no phone, no answering the door, with quarts of ice cream and equal parts television combined.”

They had only shaken hands once. It had been the first time they met. Hugging never happened. Goodbye was simply saying so and leaving. There was no fanfare, no promises, no emotional traces. It was just a word, a nod, and an exit.

Tamari stepped into the cool evening. She started her car and drove down the dark streets, wet with rain. The glossy spots of pale lamplight along the short leg of interstate passed by her like fleeting years. From one exit to another there were only so many. They come, and they go. Each gives you a little bit to see, but you had to rely on the light you carried with you.

She looked back on life thus far. Despite all of her questioning, and the doubts that crept up, she knew she had climbed quite high at a young age. She *was* making a difference. She *would* make a difference.

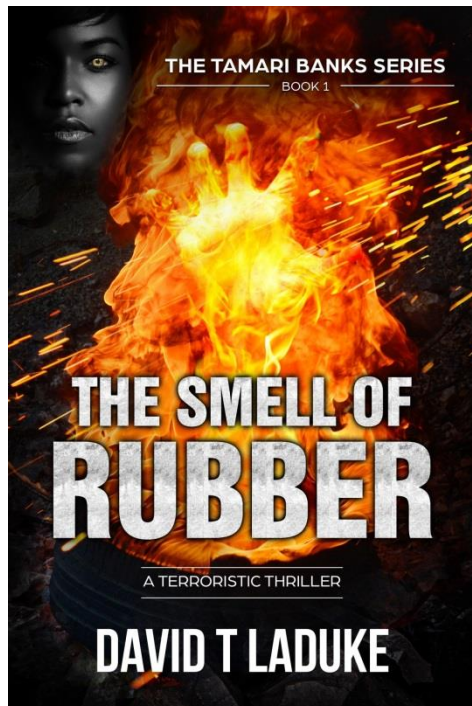
Would she ever move into another career? What about marriage, kids, house with a picket fence? Were these her dreams, or the desires of another, of the culture around her? She laughed at herself. When she got tired, she got melancholy. Once she got this way it was an easy slide into some sad, blue light of wishes and troubled contemplations.

She could worry about that tomorrow - no, not tomorrow, or Sunday. Those were days to get the rest she badly needed. Monday, she could compartmentalize everything 'til Monday. Then she would wind the machine up all over again. At that point Tamari would greet the world, her job, and all the nasty terrorism she could handle. A whispered prayer went up. She asked for wisdom, strength, and Grace to meet that coming day. A day when she hoped her eyes would be wide enough to see it all.

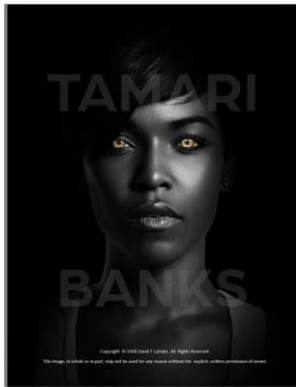
For now, she just had to get home and pass out.

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## About the Author

**Born 1967 in Detroit, Michigan I was raised by loving parents who impressed in the clay of my childhood a belief in God's existence. Around eight years old we moved farther north to a town called Hartland. I graduated from Hartland High School in 1986. In December of 1986 by God's Grace I became a follower of Jesus Christ.**

**After a couple years at University of Michigan - Flint I moved to Pennsylvania and was married to my beautiful wife, Julie in 1989. Five children, multiple grandchildren, and various houses and pets later I now reside in Western Pennsylvania.**

**For most of my adult life I have worked blue collar jobs, operated my own small businesses (recording studio, real estate investment), and volunteered in church ministry (Bible teaching, pastoring, leading worship, etc).**

**In addition to writing, I love guest speaking at churches, performing music, writing lyrics and working at audio production in my studio.**



**David T LaDuke**  
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