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opening extract from

Tamar

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Prologue: London, 1979

In the end, it was her grandfather, William Hyde, who gave the unborn child her name. He was serious about names; he'd had several himself.

Cautiously, when he and Jan were alone in the neglected little garden, William said, "Son, about this name. If the hospital is right and the child is a girl."

Jan was watching a tiny silver speck cut a white furrow in the blue sky. "Oh Gawd. Forget about it," he said wearily. "We'll sort it out eventually. There's still seven weeks before the baby's due." Then he looked across at his father, perhaps sensing the old man's gaze on his face. "Why? You got a suggestion?"

"Yes."

Jan's eyebrows went up. "Really? What is it?"

"Tamar."

"How do you spell that?"

William spelled it out and Jan said, "Is that an actual name? Is it Dutch, or something?"

"No, it's the name of a river. It separates Devon from Cornwall. Rivers are fine things to be named after, but that's not what matters. As a word, as a name, what do you think of it?"

Jan thought about it, the shape and the sound of it. "Yeah, it's rather nice, actually. Now tell me why. Why *Tamar*?"

His father took a while to answer. It was his way; Jan was used to it. He waited. From the open French windows, a scrap of his mother's voice, then Sonia's laughter.

"It has to do with the war," he said.

This was interesting. Jan knew that his parents had been with the Dutch resistance during the Second World War. When he was a child, fussy about his food, Marijke had told him stories of rationing and hunger and people who would kill each other for a chicken. His father, though, had said almost nothing about those years. Not voluntarily. And now this.

"You know that I was an SOE agent."

"That's about all I do know. You've never told me much about it."

"I've never wanted to. Psychologists tell us that keeping things buried inside is bad for us, makes us sick. Maybe it does. But I happen to think there are certain things that are best left buried, that we should take to our graves with us. Terrible things that we have witnessed. I'm sure you disagree. You belong to a liberated generation; you believe in freedom of information. But I am sure that one day you will change your mind."

Jan didn't know what to say. This was startling stuff, coming from his old man.

"SOE agents were trained in groups," William Hyde said. "Each agent had a code name; these were chosen by the British, not us, and they were quite eccentric. Early in the war there was a group named after vegetables, if you can believe that. Several men and women went to their deaths having to call themselves things like Parsnip and Cabbage. So I was relieved when the code names chosen for my group were the names of rivers in the west of England: Severn, Torridge, Avon."

"Ah," Jan said. "And Tamar, of course."

"Yes. And Tamar."

"So," Jan said, after another pause. "What you want, what you're asking, is... I'm not sure how to put it. You'd like your grandchild to, what, *commemorate* you. Is that right? You'd like this code name to continue after you've..."

"I would consider it an honour."

Jan almost laughed at this stiff and formal phrase.

"But only if you are sure you like it," William said.

"I like it. But aren't you forgetting something?"

"No. Sonia needs to agree, of course. But you'll discuss it with her?"

"Sure. Don't get your hopes up too high, though. If I say I like it, she'll probably hate it. That's the way it is."

His father considered this. "In that case," he said, "it might be best if you didn't tell her why I suggested it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she might not like the idea of a name which is connected with ... well, with war. With that period of time. She might think it is..."

"What? Sinister, or something?"

"Something like that, perhaps."

"I don't see why. You were fighting on the right side, after all."

His father nodded. "True."

Jan studied his father's face for a second or two. It was so damned hard to know what the old man was feeling. He was like one of those office blocks with tinted windows; you could only see in if you happened to look from a certain angle when the light was right.

"It's not a problem for me, Dad," he said. "Anyway, it's the name of a river, as you say. Come on, let's go inside."

* * *

The following day, Sonia and Jan went to his parents' house for lunch. It was a monthly ritual that Sonia, in her present condition, found challenging. Marijke's Sunday lunches were no-holds-barred affairs.

While they ate the first course, William Hyde kept darting glances at his son and daughter-in-law. They seemed a good deal happier than they had the day before, but that meant nothing in itself. It was not until Marijke was serving the roast beef that Sonia reached out and put a hand on her husband's arm.

"Oh, come on," she coaxed. "Don't keep your poor old dad in suspense. Tell him."

"Aha," Marijke said, sliding a thick slice of red-centred meat onto Sonia's plate. "What's this? Some good news?"

Jan put his hands palms down on the table and leaned back, grinning. "It's a miracle," he said. "Sonia and I actually agree on a girl's name. Thanks, Dad. Well done."

Marijke was pouring gravy onto Sonia's plate. She looked up, puzzled. "Name? What name is this?"

Sonia said, "Tamar. It's perfect. I love it."

Marijke dropped the jug. It fell onto Sonia's plate, snapping a chunk off the rim. Gravy ran across the table and, before anyone could react, spilled onto Sonia's distended belly.

England, 1944

The air shook; you could feel it. And the noise was unbelievable. It is probable that humans had never heard anything like it, since it was perhaps the sound of the planet giving birth to its mountains, of raw young continents grating together. In the fields of southern England, animals panicked and continued to panic because the noise would not stop. At a stables in Buckinghamshire, every horse kicked out the door of its stall and bolted. Near Mildenhall, in Suffolk, a line of military vehicles came to a halt and men tumbled out of the trucks to stare at the sky. A doctor, driving with his head out of the window to look upwards, ran into the back of the convoy and was killed instantly.

It was Sunday 17th September, the middle of the morning. People were in church. The pulsing downward beat of the noise overwhelmed their hymns. Choirs gave up. In Westminster Abbey the vast sound of the organ was drowned by it. Men, women and children went into the streets and gazed up, speechless, at the vast migration of mechanical birds that filled the sky. You could not see where it began, nor where it ended.

An army had given up the earth and taken to the air. It was flying to Holland to end the war. The aircraft –

bombers, paratroop transports, gliders swaying at the end of three hundred foot cables, fighter escorts – set out for Europe in enormous columns ten miles across and a hundred miles long. One of the pilots who survived said later that the air was so packed with planes it looked like you could climb out onto the wings and walk all the way to the Dutch coast.

On a crescent-shaped lawn, part of the grounds of a large country house just north of London, about sixty people watched the vast airborne armada pass. They were a mixed bunch, men and women, some young, some not. Some wore uniforms; others were in civilian clothes. Few were known by their real names. Towards the middle of the lawn, close to a tarnished bronze statue of Eros, two young men lay on their backs watching the spectacle. The Special Operations Executive had given them the code names Dart and Tamar. Although both men were fluent in English, they spoke in their native Dutch.

Dart said, "I think we are witnessing the beginning of the end of the war."

Tamar saw a heavy glider swing into the path of another and then somehow correct itself. In Holland, flights of German fighters would be taking off. They couldn't miss so huge a target. He was watching men being flown – being dragged – to their deaths. My God.

"We'll not go in now," Dart said. "They've been wasting our time. The codes, the parachute jumps, the wireless stuff, all that shit. It was just a damn cover. They were planning this all the time."

Tamar turned onto his right side. "Listen – even if those poor bastards up there drive the Germans out of our country, that won't be the end of it. The Nazis have broken everything. There is no organization. There is no trust any more. Some of our people are collaborators; some are heroes.

I'm almost as afraid of liberation as I am of anything else. So don't imagine there is nothing for us to do, that we have been wasting our time."

He rolled onto his back and watched the infinite planes cross the sky. "One way or another," he said, "we'll be in Holland soon. I'd bet my life on it."

Dart was arrested in the early hours of the morning. He was awakened by a Luger pistol pressed against his temple and a torch blazed into his face. There were two men, a sergeant and a private in Waffen-SS uniforms. He received some rough assistance getting to his feet and then a bag or hood was pulled over his head. The Germans half marched, half dragged him along a corridor, the pistol barrel at the base of his skull. They went through three sets of doors and made four turns. Dart tried to retain his sense of direction, but lost it. He half fell down a long flight of stairs and at the bottom found himself standing on cold stone. A door closed behind him and he was forced onto a hard wooden chair. His arms were wrenched behind his back and his wrists cuffed. The hood was removed.

He was in a windowless room that smelled of mould and something else – paraffin, perhaps. A shelf ran along the wall to his right and one of the things on it was a large toolbox, the kind a carpenter or electrician might use. It was open and Dart could see the implements it held. The hard light from three unshaded bulbs made the room seem colder than it was. Dart felt his skin contract.

The two SS men went to stand against the wall behind the thin bespectacled man who sat at a table studying Dart's false identity papers. He wore the black uniform of a major of the Gestapo. When he looked up, his expression suggested that he disapproved of Dart coming to this interview in his underwear.

"Good morning," he said.

Unnerved, Dart said, "Good morning," and by the slight downward shift of the Gestapo officer's mouth realized he'd already made his first mistake.

The major switched to Dutch. "Who recruited you into the British secret services? Was it Colonel Nicholson? Neave? Perhaps the persuasive Mr Clements?"

Dart kept his face blank. "I don't know any of those names. I am a doctor."

The major, without taking his eyes from Dart's, tapped the identity papers. "Not exactly. Not according to these. You are not fully qualified, it seems."

"True," Dart admitted. "The war interrupted my studies."

"In other words, you are merely pretending to be a doctor."

"I have a licence to practise under the emergency regulations. It is attached to my identification, as you see."

The major pushed Dart's papers away with his fingertips as if they were a particularly grubby work of pornography. "When did you arrive in Holland?"

"I do not understand the question."

"Yes, you do. You understand the question, and, as a matter of fact, I know the answer."

Dart was silent. The major shrugged, a dismissive gesture. "I am slightly interested in finding out which resistance organization you are attached to, even though they are all useless. What are you: a royalist, socialist, communist, or some other kind of *ist*?"

Dart said, "I am a doctor. I have no interest in politics."

The major leaned back in his chair. "Let me tell you something, my friend. The British are, as they themselves might say, taking the piss. You know that expression?"

Dart said nothing.

"Of course you do. The British send us rubbish like you to waste our time. They persuade you that you are doing

something important. That you have real secrets which you must go to your death before revealing. Their idea is that people like me, who have useful things to do, will waste our time in conversations like these." He rose and went to stand behind Dart, who, despite himself, twitched.

"Let me tell you something else, Mr so-called Lubbers. We know your real name. In fact, we know a great deal about you. One of your colleagues gave us this information just before he died. There is nothing for you to protect, except yourself. It would save us both a great deal of time, and it would prevent me getting very, very irritated, if you were to cooperate. Do you understand?"

After an hour, the Gestapo major yawned and looked at his watch. He turned to the SS sergeant behind him and said in English, "Williams? You still awake? Get the cuffs off our friend here and offer the poor sod a cigarette. Give him a blanket too, before he freezes to death."

Grinning, the sergeant released Dart. "You did all right, boy," he said. His accent was liltingly Welsh.

Dart said unhappily, "I was lousy."

The Gestapo major, rubbing his hands together for warmth, said, "Well, not too bad, Dart. Six out of ten, I'd say. Maybe seven. An extra mark for bladder control."

His real name was Franklin, and for SOE purposes he held the rank of captain. "We'll talk it through at ten o'clock. I'll tell canteen to hold a breakfast for you. I expect you might fancy a bit of a lie-in."

"Thank you, sir," Dart said. He was dog-tired.

Dart was mopping the grease from his plate with a slice of greyish bread when Tamar came in and sat down opposite.

"I hear you got the early call. How'd it go?"

"I was crap. The first thing he said to me was 'Good

morning' in bloody English, and I said 'Good morning' back to him in bloody English. Christ."

Tamar grinned. "Franklin. What do you think he was, before the war?"

Dart thought about it. "A solicitor," he said. "A solicitor with a passion for amateur theatricals."

Tamar threw himself back in his chair dramatically. "Hey," he said admiringly. "That is sinister! That is exactly what he was. You are a dangerously good judge of character, my friend. You should work here."

"God forbid."

"Amen to that," Tamar said. He took a folded newspaper from his jacket pocket. "What time's your debriefing?"

"Ten."

Tamar looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes. Do you fancy trying to crack the code of the incredibly insane *Times* crossword? I reckon two down is an anagram of *early bat*, don't you?"

As far as the locals were concerned, Ashgrove House was a convalescent home for Allied officers injured in action. It was odd that no civilians were allowed in, that all deliveries had to be left with the armed guards at the lodge, that the patients were never seen walking the lanes or footpaths. The accepted explanation was that these poor chaps were so badly damaged that it would be bad for civilian morale if they were seen in public. Stories went about of horribly disfigured characters glimpsed in the grounds, and the Special Operations Executive was happy to let these rumours circulate.

Officially, Ashgrove House was known as ST73. Agents, and the officers who sent them there, knew it as "the finishing school". It was the last place of safety. From here, on a moonlit night, SOE agents would be taken to an airfield in East Anglia, put into the belly of an RAF bomber and flown

across the North Sea to parachute into Nazi-occupied Europe. With any luck, the reception committees that awaited them would not be German.

During the months before their stay at Ashgrove, Tamar, Dart and the other members of the Rivers group had been put through a training programme that was like a tour of the stately homes of England organized by dangerous psychopaths. At a succession of very grand houses – great echoing places commandeered for the war effort – they had practised concealment, stealth and sabotage. In splendid drawing rooms they had been taught to lie and to believe absolutely the lies they told. In deer parks and landscaped gardens they had practised killing: silently, with knife and wire garrotte; and noisily, with both British and German firearms.

They'd gone to Manchester for parachute training, dropping – if all went well – into the elegant grounds of Tatton Park. Dart found them exhilarating, those steppings-out into the empty air, and was interested to discover that Tamar was afraid, even though he was already an experienced parachutist. He'd never detected a trace of fear in the man until then.

Back in London, in an anonymous office building just off Baker Street, the group spent arduous days practising codes and cryptography. Their instructor was a cocky, brilliant and very young man who usually had an enormous cigar sticking out of his face. He introduced himself as DCY/M. They never discovered his name. He instructed them in the use of one-time pads. These were squares of silk, about three times the size of a handkerchief, printed with pre-set codes. He pulled them out of his briefcase and displayed them to the class like a salesman showing off a new line in underwear. He spoke of the strength of these silks and the ease with which they could be concealed. As a last resort they could be folded until they were no bigger than a square of chocolate

and swallowed. Tamar put his hand up and asked, straight-faced, whether they might emerge intact "at the other end". Equally straight-faced, DCY/M assured the class that the inks were designed to dissolve in digestive juices.

During a lunch break Tamar said, "You know, the best thing about these one-time pads is something our boy with the cigar hasn't mentioned."

Dart looked up from his minced beef and mash. "Which is?"

"They make torture less likely. For you wireless operators, anyway."

Dart placed his knife and fork on the table, keeping his hands steady. *Torture* was a word that threw a shadow across his brain, one that he did not like to look at.

"Do they?"

"Sure," Tamar said. "Because you use a different line of code for each transmission, right, then you cut that line off the silk and burn it, or eat it, or whatever. You don't memorize anything. So there's no point in the Gestapo torturing you."

"Unless they just happen to enjoy it," Dart said.

"Yes, there's always that." Tamar looked at his watch. "Come on. Just time for a smoke before the boy wonder starts messing up our brains again."

Later the group divided. The WOs, the wireless operators, were sent to yet another stately home for an intensive ten-week course. Tamar and Dart didn't see each other again until the group reunited at Ashgrove House, six days before the sky filled with aircraft heading for Holland.

The agents became aware that something was wrong a couple of days before they found out what it was. There was a shift in the atmosphere at Ashgrove, like a change in the

weather. Officers who were usually good at smiling seemed to have forgotten how to do it. The busy female clerks flirted less.

At the breakfast table, Torridge said, "You know what I think? I think something extremely bad has happened at home and they don't want us to know. There's been a major cock-up and they are embarrassed to tell us."

"They'll have to tell us," Tamar said, "but they'll wait until they've worked out how. You know what the British are like: 'It's not what you say, it's the way that you say it.' But you're right. Something has happened, definitely."

He pushed his crossword aside and tossed the pencil on top of it. "Shit."