

# Proud Military Wife

by Hannibal Tabu

Tanisha tucked one of her dark brown braids over her ear and looked out the window at the playset in the yard, freshly constructed and still looking new, months after it had been pulled from the box. David spent all of twenty minutes putting it together, and would have been done even sooner if he hadn't stopped to come inside for lemonade and then cookies. David was always so good with his hands, Tanisha thought to herself with a smile. She knew, one day, he'd be able to fix anything for the kids she knew they'd have. One day.

Her cognac-colored arms dipped in warm, soapy water up just past her wrists, Tanisha thought about David -- his big shoulders, the easy and playful smile on his chiseled golden face, his perfectly managed "fade" haircut, which he took a pass at every single morning. Sometimes that was the first sign that he was gone -- she'd wake up and look in the medicine cabinet over the wide bathroom sink and see his battery powered trimmer gone. Even when he was on the job, he liked to look his best.

"What does your husband do, again?" Tanisha shook her head and returned to washing the scant dishes, wondering how many times she'd been asked that, ignoring the stray strand of straightened auburn hair that swung in front of her eyes. She mouthed her reply as she scrubbed marinara sauce off of the platinum-framed plates. "David works for the Air Force, in a special capacity that lets him spend a lot of time at home," she said to herself, remembering the intonations and balance of the words she used when she told other people. "He's really good at fixing things, and he works on really big computers for the Air Force."

For all Tanisha knew, that might even be true. David might be at

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some corporate office somewhere, a Defense Department partner, or even on some military base, trying to help machines on the ground talk to machines in the sky. He had three laptops, two of which could connect to satellites and talk to the world. He was a very smart man. It was completely possible.

Tanisha drained the sink and tried to let the things she'd decided to forget follow the soapy water down. The night David quietly got out of bed, and it sounded like he fought somebody in the back yard before making some phone calls and sitting up in the bed while lights flashed in the back yard. Tanisha remembered laying quietly, trying to breathe evenly as her heart raced, waiting for something, anything to happen. The lights flashed a few times and then were gone, and ten minutes later David laid down, put his big arm around her and went back to sleep like nothing had happened.

Or the strange slip of papers Tanisha sometimes found in his sweatpants when she was doing the laundry. A seemingly unintelligible group of letters and numbers, with what seemed like random breaks where they should form words. Never longer than, say, a sentence, but always on the exact same kind of slippery white paper, about four inches long by one inch across. Only in his sweat pants, which he wore when he went to run every morning. Tanisha normally quickly walked into his office, when she found them, and laid them on top of the closed laptop in the center of that really nice desk blotter her father had given David for his thirtieth birthday. Once she took one and put it in her pocket, determined to ask David about it or even look it up on the internet, but when she went to look for it later, her pocket held nothing but a strange kind of dust.

Grabbing a bottle of Dasani water from the fridge, Tanisha walked out into the atrium. Their house was large, nestled into the Oregon coastline maybe twenty minutes from Tillamook, and its famous air museum. She remembered being worried about moving out here, the only Black people for miles and miles around. But when she laid

eyes on the house, its light gray siding almost seamlessly melting into the cloudy sky, the huge yard going on for what seemed like ever ... how could she say no? The house was all tasteful wood panels and dark auburn highlights inside, and Tanisha had gotten some of the finest furniture for the house on many of the trips she'd take with David, to bigger cities and even other countries. She could always count on one really nice trip a year, but she remembered during 2002, when airports were just impossible, they made six trips. Tanisha smiled about the week in Germany, even though she was on her own most of it, with the incredibly flaky pastries and the friendly people. The United Arab Emirates was less fun -- after touring Abu Dhabi and Dubai, taking the Dhow cruise and tromping along with the "desert safari," she was stuck trying to decipher the satellite TV in the hotel room. Still, it had been a lot of fun to just get out and go. The world was so big and Tanisha understood so little of it, but David never seemed uncomfortable anywhere ...

Tanisha flopped down on the plush chenille sofa in front of the sixty inch plasma television and remembered how far that used to be from the truth. She thought back and remembered meeting David her junior year at Washington State University, when he was a sharply dressed ROTC student who was better known for being clumsy than being anything else. She never understood what his General Studies major meant, but given that she only picked biology because it seemed to make her parents happy, she supposed it didn't really matter. Still, David was so sweet and so simple, that she fell for him almost instantly. How could she do anything but wait for him when, a year later, he told her that the Air Force wanted to send him away for a year of special training, and that he wanted to marry her? She remembered the twenty thousand dollar ceremony, the big honeymoon in Niagara Falls (just like in the movies!) and the cute house they moved into outside of Alexandria, Virginia, right before he was gone. Letters and emails were few and far between that year, as he said they kept moving him around, but when he came back he was so romantic and so interested in everything she had to say that

all the absence was swept away in a rush of his kisses. When his job transfer to Oregon came in, Tanisha realized she'd made precious few friends in Virginia and had little to tie her to anywhere, outside of David.

She thought of her mother -- another pretty, thin, dark-skinned woman sitting alone in a big house back in Scottsdale. Daddy had built the western market for his mortuary supply company over twenty hard years, and even as a part-time CEO, he still spent a lot of time on the road. Growing up, Tanisha and her mother were just like best friends (still running up massive long distance costs, before they got that special unlimited deal from AT&T), and it always made Tanisha a little shy around new people. Daddy loved David, thought he was "the best thing since sliced bread," and Mommy encouraged her to dive into making their home the most wonderful place in the world, so when David was out in the world, he'd always be thinking of coming back to it. "Works for me and your father," her mother said. It seemed to be working for Tanisha and David.

Still ... there were a lot of things that Tanisha could never get out of her mind. The day she found a bullet in the couch cushions. The tool shed in the back yard where David worked almost as much as Tanisha worked in the kitchen, a place that could have been Fort Knox for all she knew. The fact that David almost never talked about his work or his travel. Back when they were younger, David was always gushing about every little thing in his head, and his openness appealed to her as much as his muscular frame did. But after that year they spent apart, he was always ... smiling. Smiling and vague.

About two years into their marriage, Tanisha remembered asking why she couldn't come along on more of his trips. He smiled before he spoke, something he always did now and never did before. "When I can take you," he said slowly, "we fly on nice planes with nice soft seats and stuff like that. When I can't take you is when they put me in the back of a Galaxy transport plane with goggles and earphones,

like I'm flying in a warehouse. You deserve the best, which is why I work so hard to give it to you." Tanisha had a hard time finding any fault in that logic.

But when she asked him about the bullet, which she found six months later, he again smiled and paused. Like his brain was a computer, and it was searching the hard drive for the right answer. "Some of the guys I knew from basic training came by, when you were at the store," he finally said. "Must have come from one of them. I'm sorry, baby ... hey, wanna go out for dinner at that new Italian place tonight?" Hours later, as she enjoyed some really good pasta primavera, she remembered that he hadn't really answered the question, but the wine and rich food made it easy to decide it wasn't such a big deal after all.

Tanisha looked at the clock -- four ten in the afternoon, on a perfectly normal Tuesday. David had been gone two days. He'd had to leave suddenly, and despite the missing clippers, it was the voice mail message that had given her all the real information she had. "I'm sorry to go so suddenly," his voice said smoothly in the message, "but they need me in California, and it's kind of a emergency thing. Probably those Navy guys broke something again. Anyway, I'll be back Thursday, and I'll take you into Portland, so we can go to that seafood place you like, okay? I love you, honey. Bye."

Tanisha sat on the couch, considering it. The first time she'd gotten one of these messages, now four years past, she was furious. She'd stomped around the house in a mist of rage, finally finding herself outside of his tool shed. She fiddled with the latch and let herself in, her eyes adjusting to the dust and the dimness. There didn't seem to be a light switch, even though she remembered when David installed a generator out here, somewhere. She looked along the rows of perfectly arranged tools, each hanging meticulously in place, and was stricken by a sense that she shouldn't be there. She walked for a moment on the wooden floor, and almost believed she

could see something like lights through the dim cracks ...

Tanisha never went in the tool shed again. A few weeks later, David commented that he thought some teenagers had broken in and gotten drunk out there, and he installed a really good digital lock on the tool shed "as a deterrent."

The clock now dutifully reported that it was four twenty two, and Tanisha sighed into the silence. She thought about calling Karen or Cindy, the other two wives within driving distance, but decided against it. This time of day would find Karen tending her five kids, some headed to after school activities and some finishing up. Cindy, on the other hand, would either be locked in her bedroom with her husband Jeff or locked in her bathroom with something mechanical. Cindy liked sex a lot, Tanisha remarked to herself, and sometimes she wondered if Jeff hadn't moved them here from Seattle just to keep her out of trouble. Jeff worked nights as a security guard, and would probably just be waking up to her advances (the day's soap operas always got her ready, she said conspiratorically over coffee one day).

Tanisha sighed and rubbed the taut surface of her belly underneath her cashmere sweater. She wanted to have a baby. It was probably the one source of discord in her life with David. They had no lack of attraction for one another -- every homecoming, he barely got in the door before one or the other was pulling clothes off. David surely wanted kids, maybe not as bad as Tanisha, but what man does? He just kept saying, "I just need a little more time, to achieve in my career." He was a lieutenant, and said he just wanted to make captain before they could start a family.

Tanisha considered how much money she'd spent on remodeling and decorating the house alone, and sometimes wondered where all the money came from. From the very little she knew, an Air Force lieutenant made good money, but their house was the envy of

virtually everybody Tanisha had ever met. Two car garage. Two floors. Three and a half bedrooms. Gorgeous mahogany furniture and accents everywhere. A set of glassware that would make the Queen of England pause. All on two square acres of the most glorious green land that God ever made, just walking distance from the beach.

Tanisha once asked David about that, and again he just smiled and made some vague comment about making some good investments when he was younger before surprising her with a really amazing diamond tennis bracelet, which then was followed by some really amazing, bed-rattling sex.

Tanisha reached for the latest Pier 1 catalog, which was lying on the squat, square coffee table, and flipped through it aimlessly. She was shocked when the phone rang and pierced the still afternoon.

Tanisha walked over to the phone and picked it up off the base station. The Caller ID read "unavailable," which normally meant telemarketers, but Tanisha could use some human contact.

"Hello?" she said pleasantly into the phone.

"Is this Mrs. Tanisha Jenkins?" a man's voice said roughly on the other end of the phone. If he was a telemarketer, he wasn't very good at it -- he sounded mean.

"Yes, it is," she replied, still waiting to see where this was all going.

"Is your husband at home, Mrs. Jenkins?" the voice asked.

"Not right now," she replied, and before she could say anything else, the phone went dead. Seconds later, she was faced with a dial tone.

"That's strange," she said aloud before setting the phone back down.

She then remembered that leaving it on the charger was why she was always getting new phones, and took it with her back to the couch.

As she sat down, she heard a knock at the door. Her brows furrowed, as she wasn't expecting anybody and she was normally too remote for door-to-door salesmen or even Jehovah's Witnesses. Clutching the phone to the sweep of her curvy chest, she walked to the door and looked out the peep hole to see a worried looking white man with an even, shaggy beard in a trenchcoat, looking back over his shoulder, away from the house.

"Can I help you?" Tanisha called out, leaning forward a little, as if it would help her timid voice carry.

"Ma'am, my name is Paul Archibald, I'm with the government," he replied, still glancing behind him. Tanisha recognized his voice as the one from the phone, moments before. "Can I come in for just a few moments?"

Tanisha's breath caught and she asked, "Is this about my husband? Is he all right?"

"I would have to assume that your husband David is in tip top shape," Archibald replied wryly, turning to smile rakishly at the peephole, "and yes, this is about him. Please, can I just come inside and talk about this?"

Tanisha didn't think that was such a good idea. She was all by herself out here, and there was a strange white man at the door. Tanisha stood maybe five foot four (on a good day) and weighed all of a hundred and twenty pounds. He wasn't a big man, but Tanisha had never been a gambler.

"I'd really like it if you'd tell me what this is all about," Tanisha said



evenly, trying to sound confident.

Archibald looked down at his shoes and then stared directly at the viewhole, saying, "Have you ever wondered what your husband really does for a living, Mrs. Jenkins?"

"He's in the Air Force in a special capacity," she replied, again reciting the lines. "He's very important."

"Mrs. Jenkins, I know exactly what your husband does for the Air Force," Archibald said, rubbing the bridge of his nose, as if he were fighting a headache. "Probably in a great deal more detail than you do, as I knew him while they trained him for the job. I know where he is right now ... well, at least what city he was last seen in, and I surely know what he's there to do. If you'll let me in, as a lot of people would not like the idea of me being here, trying to tell you all this, I'll share everything I know about David Jenkins."

Tanisha bit her lip. The idea of more knowledge about David was intriguing. He was a wonderful provider, a committed husband and a passionate lover, but when laid out as bare facts, Tanisha had to admit she didn't know a lot about the man she'd shared her life with for the last nine years. Still, her fear of an unknown person outweighed her curiosity.

"I'm sorry, but I don't just let strange men come into my house," Tanisha said firmly. "You'll have to just tell me what it is you came to say."

Archibald sighed. "Mrs. Jenkins," he said slowly, "... wow, I knew this would be a challenge, but the closed door kind of makes it easier. Mrs. Jenkins, your husband, Lieutenant David Jenkins, is an assassin. He kills people. On purpose. When assigned to do so, of course. He gets his assignments via email, and gets coded confirmation slips on his morning jogs, which provide simple ROT 13

keyphrases that he has memorized. I am here because some of the assignments he has been carrying out have been authorized by people with private agendas, and that's not a good thing."

Tanisha stared at the door, clinging to the phone receiver like it was a life preserver. Archibald's words took root in her mind, and she considered how much this would clear up, how many things would suddenly make sense. The mysteries, the trips, everything.

On the other hand, if it was true, and a white man was at her door telling her this ... she might be in danger. Tanisha clapped a hand over her mouth at the thought that Archibald was here to ... kill her? No, that makes no sense. Kidnap her! Yes, to make David do what they want. Even more logical, if they'd made up this crazy story to scare her, so some foreign power or some evil businessmen could get control of the computers David really does work with.

"Please don't call the cell phone number that your husband gave you, for emergency use only," Archibald said, probably impatient with her silent thought behind the door. "Doing that could get me killed, and I'm pretty attached to the idea of not being killed, if it's all the same to you."

Tanisha cringed, her arms crossed with one hand squeezing her left shoulder and the other grasping the phone. How could Archibald know that David had given her a number she could call, only if there was an emergency? She'd used it once, just to hear his voice, and been greeted with a man at an answering service, asking what was the problem. When she finally did get through to David, after ten minutes on hold, he gently but firmly insisted that she not use the number unless there was a real emergency, as his work was of a delicate nature that couldn't allow interruptions. She apologized, and later that night he called and they talked for an hour, which made Tanisha feel a lot better.

"Look, you can't believe that an Air Force lieutenant can afford all of this," Archibald continued. "Our profiles indicate your husband probably leaves the confirmation slips where you might find them, before the paper self-destructs anyway. Look, I'm sure you have questions, doubts ... I can answer them for you."

Tanisha kept staring silently at the door, saying nothing. "You two met while you were at Washington State," Archibald went on, sighing, "and you lived in Virginia for three and a half years before moving out here. David told you he was going away for a year of 'special training' right after the two of you married, and during that time, the Air Force honed him into one of their finest killing machines. I'm not here to hurt you, and I surely don't want anything to hurt him. I do need to stop him before he follows some orders which are really a bad idea. To do that, I need to go through you, as he's very well insulated from ... well, it's a long story. Look, I feel like I'm sitting in somebody's crosshairs out here, can I please come in?"

Tanisha's lip quivered, but she shook her head and stood adamant, making a decision and saying, "No. No you can't. Even if what you say is true, and David is doing his job ... well, so be it. He's a good husband and a good provider and until today, none of this ever came home. If what you say is a lie, it doesn't matter anyway. I am his wife, and I am on his side, and everything you say has nothing to do with helping him and everything to do with helping yourself. If I needed to know any of this, David would have told me. I'm going to wait three minutes before I call David, so if you'd like to get out of here before he drives up, you should get going now."

"David landed at El Toro Marine Base in California two days ago," Archibald said tiredly, rubbing the bridge of his jagged nose again, "and is more than likely still in southern California. He's slated to return here the day after tomorrow, after debriefing on his assignment to kill the son of an Orange County congressman, and make it look like an accident. David will not come if you call. Some

extremely unpleasant men will show up, however, and that will be extremely bad for me, true enough. But David will not come. It's also why we're still talking and I haven't tried anything rash like breaking in. The house security system would register that and the same angry men would show up to kill me. After that French Special Forces team showed up in the middle of the night to take revenge on your husband whacking one of their colonels in '99, David was very determined that nothing bad happen here. It's all in the file ..."

Tanisha thought about the trip to Paris in 1999, a second honeymoon which was ... interrupted by a day that David had to go to work. "Consulting the French military on this thing for NATO," he'd said at the time. "Can't really say more."

"You could be right, but it doesn't matter," Tanisha said coldly. "and you have two minutes before I call."

Archibald sighed. "Okay, okay, I'll go. I don't want to die today. But tell your husband, or whoever, that his old Company pal Paul Archibald would love to have coffee with him at Starbucks he likes at the Portland Airport, any day at noon for the next two weeks. If he shows, great, if he's being followed, I hope I'll be able to tell. Have a good afternoon, Mrs. Jenkins."

She watched Archibald walk back to what looked like a rented Dodge Stratus and roar away. She looked over at the house's security system, and the display still looked as quiet and unperturbed as it always did, the word "OPTIMAL" in friendly green letters across its LCD surface.

She went to the kitchen and got the phone number off the bulletin board, dialing it with her hands shaking.

"David Jenkins' answering service," a young woman's voice said perkily. "How can I help you?"

"I'm Tanisha Jenkins," Tanisha said nervously, the words spilling out in a flood. "A man named Paul Archibald just came to my door and said that David is a killer for the government, and that he wanted to talk to him, and that David was following bad orders."

The phone was quiet for a moment, as if the woman were considering this. "All right," the woman said, her voice suddenly colder and more business-like. "Mrs. Jenkins, if you'll hold for just a moment, I'm going to connect you directly with your husband. Will you hold for just a moment?"

"Okay," Tanisha agreed. She moved over to one of the white wooden stools near the counter (David had painted them with her, so the kitchen could be happy and bright, it took her forever to get the paint out of her hair from when they playfully started fighting with the brushes) and sat down.

In less than a minute, David was on the line. "Tanisha, are you all right?" he asked excitedly.

"I'm okay, baby," she said. "I know you told me to only call if it was an emergency, and I know nobody's really hurt but ..."

"Shhhh, shhhh," he said quietly. "It's okay. Tell me everything."

"A white man came to the door," Tanisha started. "He called first, to see if you were home. Said his name was Paul Archibald, that he knew you. He said he needed to talk to you. He knew all about us, about where we went to school, about this number, about us living in Virginia, and when we moved here. he said it was all in a file ..."

"Uh huh ..." David said, listening intently.

"I told him to go away, that I didn't wanna let him in. He really

wanted to come in, said he was scared to be standing out there, and that if I called this people would come kill him. That you weren't a computer person at all, but that you kill people, and you were getting bad orders, that you were going to kill some congressman's son ..."

"Baby ..." David started, "listen ..."

"It doesn't matter, David," Tanisha said, starting to cry. "I don't care if you killed a French colonel when we went to Paris, and I don't care if you're in California to kill some politician's son ... I don't care about any of that. Just tell me that you love me and that you're coming home to me and that you're not going to ever leave me alone. None of that other shit matters, David. You're my husband and I love you, no matter what. But you have to tell me that you're with me, too, I have to know that ..." Tanisha sobbed gently into the receiver.

"I will never leave you alone, Tanisha," David said softly. "I love you and I always will. I'm coming home ... I'll be home tomorrow, maybe tonight."

"Never bring your work home, David," Tanisha said, still sniffing. "You come home, that's okay with me. Just you. Nothing else."

David took a pause to consider that and replied in an even tone, "I understand. I'll be home tonight. It'll be late."

"Then just come home tomorrow," she said. "Finish your work. I'll make those strawberry pancakes you like for breakfast."

David chuckled a little and said, his voice cracking a bit, "That'd be just about the best thing in the whole wide world, babe. I'll be home ... uh, about nine thirty tomorrow morning, then."

"Okay," Tanisha said quietly.

"Baby?" David asked. "How about we start looking at remodeling the spare bedroom into a nursery? How does that sound?"

"You're not a captain yet," Tanisha replied. She was done sobbing now, and tear tracks still stuck to her face like errant rock climbers.

"Maybe I'm close enough," David said gently. "I love you, Tanisha Jenkins."

"I love you too, David Jenkins," she said quietly.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow. Bye, babe."

"Bye."

The line went dead and Tanisha hung up the phone. She walked back over to the kitchen window, brushed strands of hair away from her face and looked out at the playset, imagining laughing children scooting down its shiny metal slide.

