

When Cam searches for a girl with eyes that sparkle and a woman who disappeared, she uncovers a cosmetics company power struggle, links to a drug smuggling operation, and several deaths, almost including her own.

Lament for a Broken Girl: A Cameron Locke Mystery

By Sylvia Nickels

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LAMENT FOR A BROKEN GIRL



SYLVIA NICKELS

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3. Female Private Investigator - Tennessee – Fiction. 4. Female CEO – Fiction 5. Female military - Fiction

A Different Drummer Publishing

Chapter One

Half an hour after leaving the airport I drove into my driveway as usual. I pulled in at an angle and as soon as I slammed the gearshift into park, I lunged for the glove compartment. Keeping my head below the back of the passenger seat, I grabbed my Glock. One time being ambushed in my own driveway was more than enough.

I'd noticed the gray Ford behind me as I left Airport Parkway for the county road. After making the several turns to reach my house the Ford was still tailing me. Maybe it would have been wiser to turn toward town and the police station. I hadn't done that.

I scooted my butt down to the passenger side floorboard, raised my head just high enough at the outside edge of the seat back to see through the rear window. I pushed the door handle down just enough to release the catch. The Ford turned into my driveway, and I waited until it had moved far enough that the driver couldn't see both sides of my car. I opened the door just enough to slide to the ground, clutching my weapon two handed. I might make a fool of myself. But my heart as well as my head still hurt when I remembered someone I considered a friend had almost killed me right here.

I heard the other car's door slam and footsteps crunched the gravel as someone walked toward me. I stood up and leveled my weapon center mass.

The best-looking man I'd ever seen, bar none, stopped so suddenly the gravel under his ankle boots slid and he lurched slightly to regain his balance. He

threw his hands in the air as shock and a little fear flashed across his face. The fear quickly vanished and he smiled, a mouth full of even white teeth lighting a face tanned to perfection. Whether a result of tanning bulbs or tropical sun, he'd gotten his money's worth.

"I give up. What did I do?" He waited for my answer without fidgeting.

"Nothing yet. Who are you and why did you follow me from the airport?"

His smile widened. "Guess my tip was on the money. You are good."

I kept the Glock trained on him. "I haven't heard a name and your business."

"Oh. Sorry. I'm not used to a pretty woman pointing a gun at me. Eric Winters is the name. I have ID if I can toss it to you."

"I don't think so." I moved ten feet from my car. "Take your wallet out and put it on the trunk of my car, then go back to yours."

"Okay." He reached behind his back slowly and I tensed. But when his hand reappeared, it held his wallet. He walked forward and put it on my car trunk. As he backed up to the Ford, he said, "I'm a potential client, if it matters. That is, if you're Cameron Locke."

Shit. My luck. But Don Mears had been good-looking, too. And a little flirtatious, even though many in the department assumed I was the girlfriend of his partner, Shac Lane. Keeping the Glock trained on Winters, I plucked his driver's license from his wallet. A quick glance showed it was a military license, with the wings decal of a pilot. Lieutenant in the U. S. Navy, and the face matched, thirty-one years old, address in Biloxi, Mississippi. I glanced at it again, back at him

and frowned. The block for race said he was African-American. But his features were pure Caucasian.

A trace of amusement touched his eyes. "It's true."

I ignored the amusement, though it only added to his good looks. "No civilian PI's in Biloxi, Lieutenant Winters?"

"I thought a local PI might be more able to help me." His well-shaped lips drooped a little. "May I lower my arms? They're a tad uncomfortable."

I nodded, slipped his license back in his wallet, and tossed it to him. "Who recommended me?"

He restored the wallet to the back pocket of his perfectly creased dark gray pants, and then crossed his arms across his chest, lounged back against his car.

"Had an unexpected delay when my plane developed a false alarm with the landing gear. Landed briefly in Knoxville because of it so I called your police department while I was on the ground. A woman gave me a couple of names, but said you might be the best. So I found your website and office address."

I'd have to thank Grace. She claimed to be envious of my "exciting PI career". Maybe she was. She'd had a pretty exciting career herself while she wore the patrol uniform. Until a shot by a drunken bastard, who was aiming for his wife, hit her in the hip when she pushed the woman aside. A shattered hip and femur put her behind a desk.

The wife stuck by the bastard during his trial for attempted murder, for which he got a ten year sentence. She even took him back after he got early release. Two days later he thanked her by giving her a fatal skull fracture with a fireplace poker. He was now serving life at Riverbend near Nashville.

Unseasonable heat from the late June sun brought my thoughts back to the present. It probably didn't bother my visitor from Mississippi, but I could feel perspiration sliding down between my shoulder blades. I lowered the Glock, and he gave an exaggerated sigh of relief.

I retrieved my tote bag and keys from my car and secured the gun in the holster attached to the inside of the tote bag. I walked to my office door, punched in the combination, and pushed it open, assuming he would follow.

"I've sweet iced tea or can make coffee, if you'd like."

Winters followed me inside as the motion-activated lights in my office brightened. His gaze predictably fell on the fifty-gallon tropical fish tank which took up nearly one whole wall, and he went over to it. I usually didn't go into explanations of why no fish swam in the tank unless someone asked. He didn't.

I wasn't really too lazy to flip a light switch. Dan Traynor had loved technology, especially as it related to security. The office and home he'd left me were crammed with it. Even the fifty-gallon aquarium in which no fish swam had a role in his security precautions. I have to admit last spring's close call had spurred me to add even more features. They included dusk to dawn floodlights outside and security cameras extending throughout my living quarters. Though the latter were not readily detected by guests in my home.

"Tea would be nice, thanks." He dropped into the client chair as I took ice and the pitcher of tea from my compact fridge. I dropped ice in two glasses and poured tea over it.

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I knew pilots were trained to notice things and wondered if the Lieutenant had noticed that the display on one of my three desk monitors was not a normal screen saver. The pictures rotating across that screen showed outside views covering all sides of the house. As well as one covering the front door in my living room from the inside.

He took the glass I handed him and turned it up for a long drink. "Good. Not as strong or sweet as our Mississippi tea, but good."

I leaned back against my desk, reached for my notebook. "So what brings you to Wexler Bend, Lieutenant Winters?"

He didn't answer for a moment so I glanced up. His gaze was fixed as he stared toward my desk. As I followed his line of sight, my gaze landed on the monitor next to the one with rotating images. And I realized the adjacent screen was showing the last document I'd worked on, my bank statement. How in God's name did I forget to close it before leaving for the post office? Lieutenant Winters's look was so intense the thought that my gut instinct when he arrived had been spot on flickered through my mind. But I really needed a client at the moment. If he could see clearly the abysmal balance of my account he might be having second thoughts about hiring me for whatever he needed a private detective to look into.

Chapter Two

Two hours before I drew down on the handsome pilot from Mississippi I'd been seated at the desk trying to reconcile my bank statement when a call from my best friend interrupted me.

"That can't be right," I grumbled, reaching for the phone to call the bank and verify my balance. Either the bank had made an error or I had, again, forgotten to enter the amount of a debit card transaction.

The phone rang just as my fingers touched the handset. I glanced at the caller ID. Zoey. We were supposed to meet for lunch soon. I looked forward to catching up with her and hoped she wasn't calling to cancel.

"Hey, Zoey. What's up?"

"Have you heard, Cam? I can't believe she's finally coming back to Wexler Bend."

She sounded almost breathless with excitement. The thought flashed across my mind that she must be talking about one of her favorite rock stars coming for a concert at Clare View Hotel and Conference Center. Zoey had been head of security there since we both got our walking papers from Eastern Fabricators a couple of years back.

"Who's coming to Wexler Bend? To your shop? Tobi the Metal Tiger?"

"I told you, she's touring Europe. It's Sahara! Shac didn't tell you?"

"Your old friend who's an officer in the Army? When will she be here? Did she call you?"

She answered my questions in reverse order. "No. This afternoon. She's flying in from Mississippi, but I don't think that's where she's stationed. My nephew's a new recruit for the police department. He heard some of the older guys talking. He didn't want to ask them who they were talking about so he called me."

"He knew she was one of your best friends back in the day?"

"Only that I know the family. Even though his Mom's my oldest sister, she waited almost too late to start her family. He was still in diapers when I ran around with Sahara and Rozlinda."

"A little young to keep up with his flashy Aunt Zoey and her friends. Does Rozlinda know Sahara's coming home?"

She didn't answer for several seconds. "I haven't seen her for months. She didn't look too good the last time I ran into her at church."

"You think she's back into—" I hated to ask. Her friend's prescription drug dependence saddened Zoey. The fact we suspected Rozlinda's husband, a doctor, got her hooked made it worse. "Maybe Sahara can help get her back on track."

Zoey snorted. "You think? More likely make the situation worse. Hold on a sec."

I'd heard someone call her name. She put me on hold for a minute or so, and a few bars of the Convention center canned music sounded. I had time to wonder why might Sahara's return to Wexler Bend make her twin's situation worse? Then Zoey was back on the line.

"I gotta go. And, Cam, we'll have to meet for lunch later this week. I'm taking mine later today to go to the airport. Bye." She hung up.

I cradled the phone and leaned back. I hadn't known Zoey back when she, Sahara, and Rozlinda were the three reigning African-American teenaged beauties in Wexler Bend. I was fighting my mental battle to get free of an abusive husband. When I transferred from a clerical job to Security at Eastern, I won that freedom and went on to become Security Chief. When a former wrestler who'd landed on his head once too often decided he didn't want a female boss and left, I hired Zoey to replace him.

Zoey had regaled me with the exploits of the three girls. They might have landed in real trouble if the grandfather of the twins hadn't kept a stern but loving eye on them. Captain Lawrence DeWitt Tawson kept the high-spirited trio more or less on the straight and narrow during those years. He'd been a Detective, then Lieutenant, now Chief of Detectives, and Shac's boss, on the Wexler Bend Police Department.

Detective Lieutenant Shackelford 'Shac' Lane was my good friend, "significant other", maybe lover, opinions varied among our friends. A team of wild horses could not have dragged an admission from me of any relationship between us except friends.

Now I remembered something Zoey had said about the doctor, an older man, Rozlinda had married. He'd been engaged to Sahara, who decided she wanted to see more of the world than Wexler Bend. She'd jilted the guy and joined the Army. But that was years ago and the good doctor had become the subject of a different kind of gossip since then. Did Zoey think Rozlinda might believe Sahara was returning with designs on her husband?

Which reminded me. Why hadn't Shac told me of this development last evening? The last few months

he'd made a habit of dropping by with a bag of Buddy Burgers and fries one or two nights a week. He'd mentioned that Jake Hunter and Taylor Glass, members of a multi-state task force, might be in town for a few days soon. He didn't say whether they were on a case the task force was working. Since he was a part of it, too, he often was stingy with information about their cases. Zoey hadn't said how soon Sahara would be arriving. Did Shac even know about her imminent return? Or was he just reluctant to gossip about his boss or his family?

I scooted my chair back to go into my living quarters and get my tote bag. I usually brought it into my home office when I started my work day, but I'd been mulling over the few invoices I needed to send out. My PI clients had dwindled this month. I needed to do something. Like get a real job. As in work for somebody else and draw a regular paycheck. Horrors. Else I might have to dip into the healthy savings account Dan also left me. I wanted to keep it in reserve for possible big ticket house expenses.

Just before I reached the door I heard the local television station music intro to a breaking news story. I backtracked to my desk and picked up the remote to turn up the volume. You never knew. It was possible the story could produce a lead to a job. Not likely, but possible.

Sharing the screen with the anchor was what appeared to be a publicity photo of an unsmiling woman in formal Army dress uniform. A background of red, white, and blue stripes faded into each other on the banner caption below the picture, Major Sahara Tawson. The visor of a stiff military cover, rather than the red Airborne beret she was qualified to wear, sat

squarely atop a smooth tan face with high cheek bones. It shaded her somber, long-lashed dark eyes. No doubt many a young man's heart had been broken by the owner of that face. I tuned back in to the news anchor's voice.

"...Tawson will arrive on a one o'clock flight this afternoon to a hero's welcome. Major Tawson is the granddaughter of Captain of Detectives DeWitt Tawson, of the Wexler Bend Police Department. When her plane lands she will be welcomed home by Wexler Bend Mayor Cal Lenovo, her grandfather, and members of the City Council as well as grateful friends and citizens. Mayor Lenovo tells us a reception is planned at City Hall in two days."

When the broadcast returned to the stupid show that passed itself off as reality, I started to switch off the set. But my thumb hovered over the remote as an ad flashed on the screen. One I usually muted or snapped off, one of those with a short-haired strident-voiced guy hawking some product with over-the-top enthusiasm. I jabbed the button to turn the set off before it ended. But an idea fluttered through my mind. How much would a short television ad cost? Would I need to do it? Or get somebody else more talented? Who? Probably more than I could afford. But I needed to do something to increase my bottom line.

I shook my head and thought again about Zoey's friend. Zoey surely knew the time of Major Tawson's flight. I'd go and see her there instead of lunch. Besides, I liked to take any opportunity to support our military.

Zoey, Sahara, and Rozlinda were inseparable in high school, according to Zoey. Maybe Sahara's twin would be at the airport. Sahara's return could spur her into

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getting clean for good. Stranger things have happened. And what about her husband, Sahara's ex? Did he still hold a grudge for being jilted? What might he do? Airport security's problem, not mine. I'd have to leave my weapon in my car, with regret. But Homeland Security took a dim view of armed civilians anywhere near their bailiwick. One could easily understand why.

Chapter Three

I left my office by way of the door to my living quarters, making sure it locked behind me, grabbed my tote bag, stuffed the invoice envelopes in it and left my house. I cruised by the postal drop box at City Hall, near the police department wing and decided to see if Shac was at his desk in the detective squad room. I pulled into a visitor space, stashed my Glock in the glove compartment, and locked it.

Police departments also failed to appreciate even legally armed visitors toting weapons in their house. I splashed through smaller puddles, evaporating rapidly in the midday heat, and around wider ones that last night's spring storm had left in the uneven pavement between the buildings.

I paused at the security checkpoint just inside the double glass doors and exchanged a few words with the cops working it.

"Hello, Clip. Morris, how are the triplets?"

Morris grinned from ear to ear. "They're always hungry. Grandma helps out when her migraines allow. My daughter and son-in-law don't get much sleep, of course."

"I can imagine. But I'm sure they're thriving. Take care." Morris was eagerly looking forward to his retirement the end of this year. He said the three grandsons would be big enough that he wouldn't be afraid to play with them by then. Mostly street cops nearing the end of their careers requested and got checkpoint duty. I deposited my tote bag on the short

x-ray conveyor belt and stepped on through the metal detector.

When I picked the bag up I waved to Grace behind her bullet-proof glass. I mouthed, "Is he in?" She nodded and buzzed me through the door off the lobby that led into the police department proper.

I walked past the uniformed squad room and on to the smaller detective department. Shac leaned far back in his chair, feet crossed on his desk, staring at the ceiling, phone sandwiched between his ear and left shoulder.

Shac's new partner, Wes Thornton, headed toward their desks bearing two cups of coffee. He saw me and held one up, nodding back toward the break room. I shook my head and walked over to stand in Shac's line of sight. He brought his gaze from the ceiling and his feet to the floor. He waved to the chair beside his desk and held up a finger for me to wait.

I sat and put my tote on the floor. Glancing around, I nodded to a couple of other detectives either talking on their own phones, or working on their computers. Wes reached us and sat down across their shared desk from Shac, He greeted me. "How you doing, Cam? Heard there was some flooding out your way last night."

"A little. People will fill in sink holes on their property, and then wonder why the water can't run off."

He laughed. "I know. Had to help animal control rescue a goat kid stuck in a pretty deep temporary pond this morning. Little sucker was so scared he butted two of us into the mud with him. I just now got cleaned up."

"Exciting times. Glad it wasn't a human kid, though."

Shac clicked off his phone and chimed in. He'd apparently escaped the mud bath. Or had cleaned up first. Which I doubted, he was thoughtful of his co-workers.

"Shoulda seen him. His wife wouldn't have let him in the house. Good thing he could shower and change here."

Wes nodded with a rueful expression. His phone rang and he picked it up.

Shac looked at me. "What brought you down here, Locke? Trolling for clients?"

He didn't know how close to the truth he'd come. And I wasn't about to tell him. I didn't want his pity. Not likely to be offered anyway, because he knew I could get by for a good while without a client. Thanks to my friend and benefactor, Dan Traynor, whose generosity to me and others I probably could never hope to match. Repaying him was not possible since he gave his life to save mine.

I pulled my thoughts back to the present and gave him a hard look. "You failed to tell me something yesterday when you brought the burgers. Thanks again, by the way."

He waved the thanks away. "Good thing I brought you dinner. Your cupboard was bare, I noticed. As usual."

I ignored the insult and pounced. "I saw the news story about Sahara Tawson just before I left the house. Did you know she was returning?"

"Not until I dropped by for a beer at Sydney's on my way home. One of the guys had heard it from a clerk in Admin."

"First time she's been back since she left, isn't it? How long is her leave?"

"Don't know. I don't think anybody's talked to Tawson about it." Shac picked up his phone and tapped keys. He still kept a spiral notebook in his pocket, but was trying to get used to keeping notes on the smart phone. I could tell he didn't really want to talk about his boss's granddaughter and her long-delayed return to Wexler Bend.

"She's stationed at a base somewhere in the South, I think?" I ended on a questioning note. He didn't answer.

He suddenly raised his head and stared at me. "Zoey called you, didn't she? She and Sahara were buddies when they were growing up, right?"

"She did. And yes, she was buddies with both sisters. She was surprised I didn't know about Sahara's arrival."

"Guess everybody will, after that news report. So much for a quiet visit home."

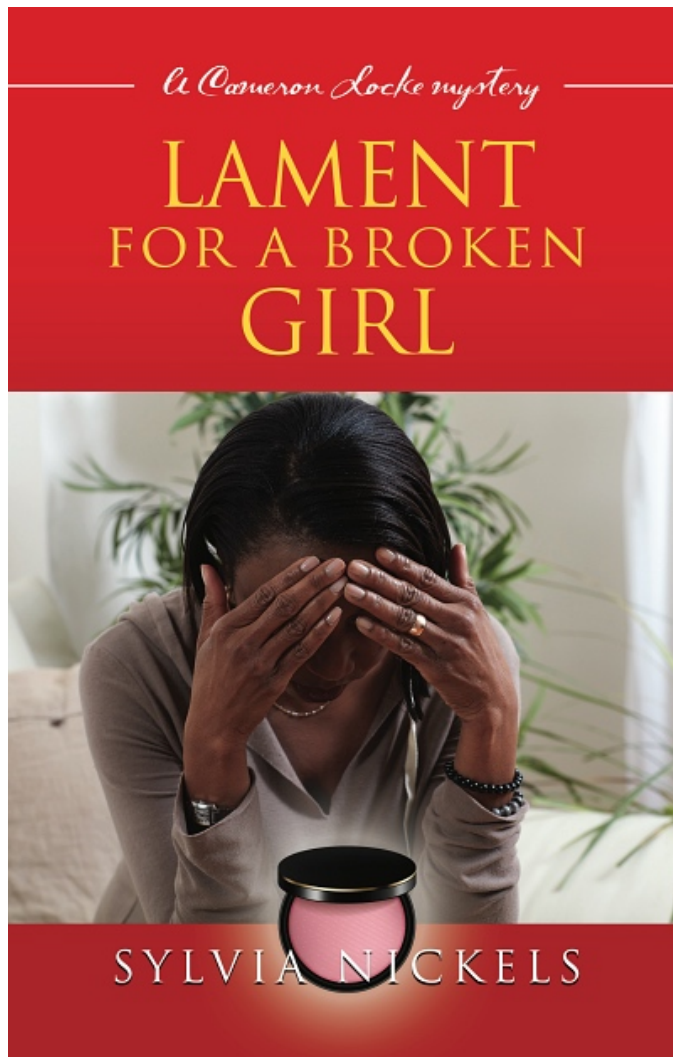
"Well, the town's proud of her, after she managed to survive in the Middle East."

"Yeah. And rightly proud. But sometimes soldiers need some quiet time."

"I'm sure. Can't blame them." I checked the time and stood to leave. "Maybe she can have a couple of quiet days after this airport welcome. I think I'll go to show support and gratitude."

"Mine, too. Later, Cam." Shac frowned down at his phone and touched another button, muttering. "Damn spell check."

Before I left the City Hall parking lot, I tried to call Zoey. Voice mail. She must already be on her way to the airport. I'd catch her there.



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