

THE WIVES

A Memoir

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PART I

I'd rather live in his world than live without him in mine.

—“Midnight Train to Georgia”

CHAPTER 1

A RAPIDLY DEPLOYABLE COMBAT UNIT

November 2012, Columbus, Georgia

In the photo Andrew had texted, the little brick house looked out of another time. *Just call me June Cleaver*, I'd captioned the shot when I'd sent it to my oldest friend, Reina. In person, though, the 1940s home looked more like it had been forgotten entirely, the front lawn patchy, no shrubs or flowers bordering the foundation, not even a small porch to sit on. I hadn't realized that I'd hoped for these things, but I'd lost an apartment next to a reliable subway line in the only city I had ever loved. A porch swing would have softened the blow.

"Maybe we should have gone with base housing?" I asked Andrew, who was standing next to me on our new driveway in the dusk. I didn't have a driver's license, had never had a need for one in New York City, so he'd driven all one thousand miles here. Over the course of two days, we'd had six hours of sleep and lukewarm showers at a Motel 6 in southern Virginia, but he looked untouched by exhaustion, his dark hair combed perfectly into place.

"Trust me, at my rank, it would've been worse," he said, rolling up the back door of our U-Haul. "Plus, this place is \$700 a month. We get

to pocket a little bit of that BAH.” He looked at me with a mischievous grin, the evening light catching the flecks of gold in his green eyes, and I felt a surge of excitement. We were going to live in a *house*. We had never lived in a house before.

The Army issued you a “basic allowance for housing” to cover rent and utilities, calculating the amount allotted by looking at the cost of living in your area, your rank, and whether you had any dependents. Ours was \$1,100 a month. After utilities, we probably wouldn’t be pocketing much. Still, I could not get over this number. \$700. That had been my rent for a basement bedroom in Brooklyn when I was twenty-one. My view had been a brick wall.

“I wish we could leave this stuff out here for the night, but I don’t think it’s a great idea,” Andrew said, looking around. Getting off the freeway, the roads we’d driven had been lined with used car lots and fast-food restaurants. Then, when we got close to our street, a neighborhood park had appeared like an oasis, shaded by tall oaks, maples, and southern pines. The old homes bordering it were in good shape, even stately, but they had become smaller and more run-down as we’d driven up the hill toward ours. We were just two houses in from an intersection, after which the neighborhood dissolved into a wasteland of empty lots and old warehouses. Among them was a small clapboard church with an old marquee in front, one of its letters gone—SIN ERS ARE WELCOME.

“Oh, look,” I said to Andrew, pointing. “They knew the New York heretics were coming.”

He laughed as he picked up a box. I grabbed it from him and turned away from the truck.

There was a woman standing at the end of our driveway.

She looked about my age, late twenties, thin and freckled, her face red as though she’d been out all day in the wind. She wasn’t wearing

a speck of makeup. Her long chestnut hair looked dry at the ends, like it needed a cut.

“Let me get that!” she said, rushing toward me and grabbing the box from my arms. “I’m Rachel, it’s so nice to meet you, can we help you unpack?” The words trailed after her, rushed and breathy, as she walked up to our front door and placed the box on the stoop. It was like she had been waiting for us.

“Maybe we should let them get settled in, babe,” said a guy standing at the curb. Rachel was so excessively friendly, so overwhelmingly *there*, I hadn’t even registered him until now.

I looked over at Andrew. A smile was spreading across his face.

This had to be Boyd.

Or Daniel, as Rachel introduced him now, rejoining him at the end of the driveway, her hand curled around his forearm in a way that was both tender and possessive. Wisps of blond hair peeked out from under his Mets cap.

“Dan,” he gently corrected, and shook my hand. There was something old-fashioned about Dan or Daniel or Boyd, with his ruddy complexion and white sneakers and big, toothy smile. Andrew had met him at Fort Benning, the Army base ten miles from our new house, at a selection process for an elite, rapidly deployable combat unit that was part of the Army’s Special Operations. After they’d made it in, both of them had gotten stationed here, and when Dan found the nearly identical brick house across the street from ours, he told Andrew about our place. The landlord, a plumber named Frank, had bought both for cheap during the height of the Recession. Theirs was nicer, I noted with some jealousy. It had a covered porch, some well-kept bushes, a feeling of having been recently loved.

That was where June Cleaver actually lived.

“Well, if you need anything, anything at all, we’re right here,”

Rachel said, pointing at their house as Dan practically dragged her off our driveway. Even their walkway was lined with petunias. I had never before wanted petunias, but suddenly I was painfully envious of Rachel and her tidy flowers.

“Apparently, the last tenants trashed the place, but it’s been renovated, sort of,” Andrew said as he fished the keys out of his pocket, unlocking the front door as we reached the stoop. He turned on the overhead light, illuminating a small, box-shaped living room with shiny wooden floors. The smell of fresh lacquer hung in the air.

“There’s even a mudroom,” Andrew said, opening a windowed door just off the living room. I peeked in. On one of the walls were appliance hookups. “We’ll need to get a washer and dryer,” he said, pointing.

“We won’t have to go to the laundromat,” I countered before walking back through the living room to the dining area and turning on the light, bringing to life a chandelier that hung from the ceiling. It was plastic, but it shimmered beautifully. At the back of the house I found three bedrooms. *1,300 square feet*. Just being inside it made me feel like someone had opened a window in my mind and let in the breeze.

Once we’d brought in every last item from the truck, Andrew and I lay down on the living room floor. My body ached. The last week had been a conveyor belt of boxes to pack and goodbyes to say and a thousand loose ends to tie up at my office in the Flatiron District, where I’d worked as an editor for the digital division of a publishing company. By the time we’d finished loading the U-Haul, we’d probably walked a half-marathon up and down the four floors of our Harlem building.

Reina had helped us move out of our one-bedroom. I’d known her since I was twelve. She was like my sister. I didn’t know when I’d see her again, when I’d even next be in New York. Would I ever get another chance at an editing job like the one I’d just given up? It seemed

unlikely. I'd only had it for a year and a half, still couldn't believe I'd even landed it.

And now, here I was, twenty-eight years old, an *Army wife*.

Andrew found my hand and fingered my wedding ring, a tiny diamond that had belonged to his grandmother. We had married nine days before he left for almost eleven months of training. During his ten weeks of boot camp, he'd been allowed just three five-minute phone calls, so I had survived on his letters. In them, he had sounded happy, like something that had been jostling around inside him his entire life had clicked into place. It was strange, the way time had both expanded and compressed while Andrew was gone. I had been living with this ring on my finger for close to a year now, but my husband was still getting to know my hand with it on. My *husband*. The word, as comforting as a hearth, sent a warmth through my body every time I said it.

A knock came at the door. Andrew and I looked at each other.

"That's odd," I said, and got up.

It was Rachel. She had pulled her hair back into a bun. There was blush on her cheeks and color on her lips. She was holding a plate full of chocolate chip cookies covered in Saran wrap. "I just thought you guys might like some cookies. I baked a bunch earlier. I like to bake—a little too much." She laughed nervously.

I didn't know if she was doing this because we were new neighbors or the only people she'd met in the Unit, but no one had ever, in all the apartments I'd lived in during my decade in New York, brought over cookies when I'd moved in.

I took the plate from her. Even through the Saran wrap, I could smell the warm butter and chocolate. "Wow, thank you," I said, smiling stiffly, standing there for a moment before remembering that I should invite her in. I inched back from the door and opened it farther so she could enter, realizing, as I did this, that there was nowhere for her to sit.

But she was already backing away, looking toward her house, as though she could hear her husband from across the street: *Leave them be, babe.*

"I'll let you guys unpack!" she said. "But please, please let me know if I can help."

"Of course," I said. "Thank you so much." I smiled again, relieved that the expression felt more natural this time, and closed the door. When I turned around, Andrew was standing behind me.

"She seems really nice," he said. "You should be friends."

"I've never been friends with someone just because they're nice," I said.

"Maybe you have some things in common," he said. "I mean, other than your husbands."

Our husbands were exactly why I doubted we'd have much in common. Because I had nothing in common with the Army. Even the language of this world—*rapidly deployable combat unit*—was so foreign to my ear, we might as well have just unloaded a spaceship on the moon. The South, too, was new territory for me. Before today, Virginia was the farthest I'd gone beneath the Mason-Dixon line. *Columbus, Ohio?* New York friends had asked when I'd told them where I was moving. No, not that Columbus. The one in Georgia. The one no one had heard of. It was a city of nearly 200,000 people, but when I'd called the *New York Times*' customer service to transfer my subscription, the woman on the line had told me they didn't offer delivery here. There just wasn't the demand.

"Give her a chance," Andrew said. His voice sounded hopeful, but his eyes were pleading. He was leaving for Afghanistan in two weeks.

I had a high tolerance for loneliness. Andrew and I had just spent almost a year apart. But I'd had a life in New York—a career, friends, more than a decade of history.

I looked across the street. Through the Boyds' window, I could see

Rachel gliding across her kitchen. She looked so at home in the space already. There had been an urgency in her voice, though, when she'd dropped off the cookies, like she needed something she didn't know how to ask for.

—

"Sometimes I think about joining the military."

That was what Andrew said to me one evening in the winter of 2007, when he was twenty-four and I was twenty-three. We'd just moved in together and were out walking in Annapolis, the colonial Maryland capital where Andrew was studying the classics at a small liberal arts college.

"I would leave you," I said, without thinking. The air was cold enough that I could see my breath.

Andrew's face went still.

"Join the Army? You would never want to do that," I continued uneasily. The Global War on Terror had been going on for six years already. We were in the midst of the Iraq surge, the deadliest year for US forces since 2004. I had moved to New York for college just two weeks before the Twin Towers fell. By the time I graduated four years later, it was hard to imagine not being at war. But it wasn't *my* war. Everyone I knew was against the invasion of Iraq, which seemed, in every sense, like a costly conflict with no clear rationale, and I had marched with friends in protest of it. Afterward, we'd gotten drinks at an East Village bar. That had been the extent of my involvement. It wasn't like my generation was being drafted. US soldiers fighting this, I thought, must either be true believers, from military families, or out of options. Andrew was none of those things.

He always had an answer or an argument. This time, though, he'd said nothing.

Two years passed. Andrew finished his degree, working as a bartender while I waitressed at an Irish pub and freelanced for the local weekly paper. He dropped the Army idea, or so I thought. As he finished up school at age twenty-six, he considered his options. He was fascinated by geopolitics. Maybe the State Department could be a fit? Then he discovered how much paper-pushing the job entailed. The Peace Corps was an exciting post-college idea, but he needed a decent income to repay his mountain of student loans. He also felt like he didn't have time to dally.

When most of his peers had gone off to college, Andrew had chosen to dedicate himself to Wushu, a modern martial art China was bringing to the 2008 Olympics. He'd started practicing traditional Chinese martial arts when he was four, becoming so invested in it that, by the time he was a teenager, he was waking at 6 a.m. to instruct classes alongside his teacher. In late high school, he began working with a coach who trained members of the US team for Wushu. He didn't love it the way he'd loved Shao-Lin, a practice based in Buddhist philosophy that had been much more than a sport to him—it had been his purpose, his cosmology, his spiritual center. But the Olympics was an athletic goal he couldn't pass up. He trained seriously for three years in the Bay Area before leaving, at age twenty, to spend six months practicing Wushu full time in Beijing. When he returned to California, he was so burned out on the sport that he quit martial arts entirely and became a bartender, renting a studio above a taqueria on Market Street in downtown San Francisco, where he spent his mornings diving into books by Western philosophers and twentieth-century American novelists and questioning the limits of the narrow world he'd grown up in. By the time he entered college at twenty-two, he had already worked hard for and given up on a lifelong dream.

The spring Andrew graduated, I noticed an Army recruitment pamphlet on our nightstand. I intended to ask him about it but forgot

in the tumult of moving. We were heading to do forestry work in the Ontario outback for a summer, where we would live without electricity or running water, a last adventure before we moved back to New York so that I could attend Columbia's graduate school for journalism. Life was so busy, and the Army seemed such a far-fetched idea to me, it was easy not to think about it. Maybe because I didn't want to.

Then, sometime in the fall of 2011, when I was knee-deep in school, I found an extremely detailed workout regimen scrawled on a pad of paper on our coffee table. Andrew was so devoted to the gym that he often went at 3 a.m. after work, but there was something about the specificity of the goals, and the goals themselves—X number of push-ups, two-mile-run in X time—that made me pause.

"Are you planning on running away and joining the Army?" I asked that night. It was Wednesday, the only weekday evening he had off. We were at our neighborhood park. It was June and steamy out. Shirtless men were grunting and sweating, doing pull-ups on rusty equipment. Bill Withers wafted from someone's giant boom box.

"Not running away," he said, smirking. "But yes."

"You haven't stopped thinking about this," I said.

"I haven't," he said. "It's what I want to do."

And suddenly, I understood what I hadn't wanted to understand two years prior: This was real, whatever this was. A desire—a calling, even? For the next month, I came at him with the same question over and over: *Why?* I asked, riding back with him to our apartment on the subway at night, drinking whiskey at a neighborhood bar, sipping coffee out of paper cups on our stoop. Why did *he* have to get his hands dirty with these wars?

Andrew's grandfather had fought in World War II, like mine. Otherwise, his background was about as far afield as you could get from the military. He had been raised in California by children of the '60s. His

mother was a modern-dancer-turned-marriage-and-family-therapist. His father, who died when Andrew was eighteen, had been a charismatic ecumenical spiritualist. He had run a commune where Andrew spent the first six years of his childhood. But Andrew had also grown up on a steady diet of *Rambo* and *Predator* and *Saving Private Ryan*, and felt drawn, as a kid, to the Vietnam vets who came through his life, like his father's friend, a helicopter gunner who loved to show Andrew his war wound, the gunshot to his stomach; and a boyfriend of his mother's, a limo driver who lived with a bullet lodged next to his spine that had traveled there after he'd been shot during a firefight. In Annapolis, he lived on the same block as the Naval Academy, bartended with Iraq vets, and watched college friends commission as officers in the Marines. His vision broadened, and he became increasingly curious about the war, inhaling books like Robert Kaplan's *Imperial Grunts*, about American Special Forces soldiers, and *Where Men Win Glory*, John Krakauer's biography of Pat Tillman, the football player who left his sports career after 9/11 to become an Army Ranger.

All of these influences stirred in him a possibility that had maybe always been there. Still, he struggled with the ethics of this impulse. He'd been raised to do harm only as a means of self-defense. If he didn't have to hurt or kill people, he reasoned, then wasn't remaining a civilian the moral choice? He knew there were no clear-cut answers, but he mulled this conundrum for years as though it were a hard but not-impossible-to-solve math equation. Eventually, he came to this: Soldiers were as necessary to a society as shelter was to an individual. If he had both the aptitude and proclivity to be one, then maybe enlisting *was* the moral choice. And a soldier, he decided, was no more responsible for a country's war than a tax-paying civilian. He also felt it was his duty as a citizen to vote and be informed, but it wasn't a soldier's job to weigh in on political decisions. Once he'd clarified this thinking, he spent

months looking at photos of seriously wounded vets, soldiers who'd lost both their legs or all of their limbs, fates that scared him more than the prospect of death. He thought that in doing this, he might burn out his desire. But it remained. He was willing, he decided, to take the risk.

There was the matter of the particular conflict, though. Like me, he had been against the war in Iraq. But after thinking and reading about our involvement in Afghanistan, he came to feel that responding to 9/11 in the way we had was important, even imperative. And he understood our need for a presence in a country that shared borders with strategic competitors like Iran and China.

"Countries are in a constant power play with one another," he told me when I asked what he meant by "strategic competitors." I was romantic and naïve. Countries, to me, were beautiful patches on a quilt, mountains to ride trains through and beaches to sleep on, not chess pieces vying for dominance on the board of geopolitics. "Countries need armies, and armies need soldiers," he explained, though he admitted it wasn't quite *that* simple. But he believed in owing your country rather than it owing you. He believed it was meaningful to be a soldier. He wanted to be part of history, to be, as he told me once when he was feeling lofty, "at the beating heart of the world." He longed to be of service, to get high on purpose. And, despite his unerring decency, he wasn't soft. He had an edge, a restlessness, an outsized energy that filled any room.

"Andrew? The Army?" people would say when they discovered that he was enlisting. Usually, they'd pause, then nod to themselves. "He's intense," they'd admit. "It does make a weird kind of sense." His mother was the most worried but least shocked of any of us. Once, when he was in the first grade, she found a piece of paper on which he'd scrawled the words *I love WWII*.

When it came down to it, for Andrew, the Army was like anything else we can't talk people out of: He wanted it.

And I wanted him.

We fought hard about his desire to join, winding up in a therapist's office together in downtown Manhattan, not far from where the World Trade Center had once stood. He had proposed just weeks before. In therapy, I found out that in his past two years of silence, he had been fighting with himself. He worried that maybe he wouldn't make it out whole and alive, but mostly, he worried that I would leave him, just as I'd threatened.

"If I have to choose between you and the Army, it's the Army," he said during one of our sessions. The words hit me with the force of a physical blow. We had been together for four years by then. He had wanted to marry me from our very first date.

"I'd give up my writing for you," I said without thinking. What had I even meant by that? I didn't have to sign away my civil rights to be a writer. I didn't even have to take a shower. But I meant it, at least in the way that people mean things when they feel desperate and terrified. *Don't leave. I'll do anything.*

"Well, you shouldn't," Andrew said, frustration contorting his face.

"What if we just don't get married at all?" I asked after the session as we walked back to the subway, pushing against the autumn wind. I had never been sure about marriage anyway, had been a skeptic of the entire enterprise since watching my parents tear theirs apart. Even the most ordinary marriage seemed designed to fail, and this would be no ordinary marriage.

"What do I do with all my stuff? Just stick it in storage?" he asked.

"No, leave it! We'll still be together," I said.

Andrew stopped suddenly, just a block from the subway entrance. Leaves skittered across the sidewalk. "We need to get married, Simone. Girlfriends don't count for shit in the Army. If something happens to me, no one's gonna be calling you, no one's gonna take care of

you. And we've been together four years. It's time to shit or get off the pot."

I looked at him. His face was calm, no longer twisted with emotion, and I felt every impulse I'd ever felt toward him. I wanted to slap his cold, rough cheek and touch it, softly, just to warm him.

"How romantic," I said, looking down at the feet rushing past us.

"You could stay here, keep your job," he said.

"So, what? We break up?"

"No, I could just do one contract, then get out."

One contract? That was more than three years. "A long-distance marriage?"

"People do it," Andrew said.

"People are idiots," I said. "It would crumble. We would crumble. Can you imagine? With how much you'll be deployed and training? It would be like saying goodbye for the next three years. And then what?"

"We're strong," he said.

Were we? I had always thought we were. I knew, somehow, from the beginning, that our relationship wouldn't be one to just run its course. This fact had intimidated me at first, but once I'd summoned the courage to commit, being with Andrew had been like building a home from cedar and cement. Time wouldn't tear it down. You'd need heavy equipment, a fire fed with kerosene. You'd need violence. That's how I'd felt about our relationship. And then Andrew's single-minded ambition about the Army came blowing into our house, threatening to knock it down. It was a force of nature I hadn't foreseen, a decision he was making that required me to make my own tough decisions: Could I marry a soldier? Could I support him in a war with a purpose that seemed more gray than black and white? Could I reconcile that man with the man I loved? And was it worth it to leave behind a life I'd made for the life he'd chosen, simply because I loved him?

CHAPTER 2

QUIET PROFESSIONALS

December 2012, two weeks later

Andrew stood over the moat of gear surrounding our Christmas tree, ticking off items from a packing list—a sub-zero winter jacket, wool glove liners, things he was required to pack but unlikely to actually need for winter in Afghanistan. It was early December, and this was our version of Christmas morning. In eight hours, Andrew was leaving. So was Dan, though he would be heading to a different forward operating base. Rachel and I were not allowed to know where in the country they were going. She would be giving us a ride for the drop-off.

“Can I help you?” I asked Andrew from our love seat, though I wasn’t sure how I could.

He glanced at the stack of papers sitting on his dad’s old trunk: the living will, the power of attorney, and the pink book, which was still blank, asking for information I didn’t have to give, like an emergency contact or the name of my local doctor.

“Why don’t you fill out the pink book?” he suggested.

Every time I’d try to sit down with the booklet, I’d found something more pressing to do, like clipping my toenails. If anything happened

to Andrew and I was too out of my mind with grief to deal with life's mundane details, someone could go to it to fill in the gaps. But who?

"Why pink?" I'd asked Andrew when he'd brought it home from work.

"Because you're women?"

"Shut up."

"I'm serious. Our book of regulations is blue. Not because we're boys or anything. The Continental Army's first training manual was blue."

"So, we're pink, like babies in a nursery? What happens if women are eventually allowed into the Unit?"

"I guess they'll have to change the colors."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's all that will need changing," I'd said.

Andrew handed me the pink book and I opened it, flipping through the pages until I reached the item that had stumped me most of all. *Emergency contact, if I am notified that my husband has been injured or killed.* This would be the person notification officers would call to come to my side after they knocked at my door. My stomach was suddenly uneasy. All morning had been like this: I'd feel fine, and then, reality would hit with a blunt force that made me sick. I closed the book.

"Do you think they'll let you go on missions, since you're new?" I asked. I was hopeful that maybe they'd keep the dumb private back at the forward operating base, but he nodded.

"I think so. I need the experience," he said.

I had only a vague idea of what happened on these missions. I had asked about them only once, the morning after Andrew enlisted. We'd been eating greasy take-out plates of eggs and bacon from the short-order diner beneath our apartment in Harlem. It was July, and President Obama's surge in Afghanistan was just coming to an end. There was such a backlog of enlistees that Andrew would have to wait until the end of January to leave for boot camp.

“So, you were able to get a Special Operations contract?” I asked.

“I was,” he said. The contract ensured that he would have a chance at the Unit, though it was no guarantee. He had to pass a rigorous selection process. It was not necessarily his first choice, but it felt to him like the best choice. He’d originally thought of joining Special Forces, also known as the Green Berets, but he was already twenty-seven. The pipeline felt too long. A friend he’d gone to college with had joined the Green Berets two years prior, and he was still in preliminary training. What if the war was over by the time Andrew made it onto a team? The unit Andrew chose required a shorter selection process than Special Forces. It was also one of the most extensively used combat units in the military. And he wanted, more than anything else, to be in the fight.

“What do these missions entail, exactly?” I’d asked, trying to keep my tone light. For months, I had avoided this question, but now that the deed was done, I found that I had to know. I was trying to frame it as just one more logistical query. *When do you think you’ll leave for boot camp? What day should we schedule our courthouse wedding? Will you be killing anyone this time next year?*

“Well, I don’t actually know. But, I watched this documentary about special operations leading manhunt missions. Kill or capture. That kind of thing, I guess,” he’d said, trying to sound casual too, as he averted his eyes to 116th Street outside our windows. The word *kill* curdled my stomach instantly. It was state-sanctioned killing, but that didn’t make it any more palatable to me. I didn’t like *manhunt*, either. It made me think of that disturbing Hemingway quote: “There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter.” Why did he want to put himself in a position where he might have to kill another person? Did he *want* to kill another person?

“*Why* would you want to do that?” I asked. He’d enlisted; I had stayed. I was trying to stop interrogating him about his motivations. But this had been my main question all along, one I was brave enough to ask only after there was no way out.

Andrew slowly put down his toast, considered my face for a moment. “You look ashamed,” he said sadly.

I’d thought then that he was right. But sitting here, watching him move swiftly around our half-empty living room in Georgia, I understood what I’d felt was fear. I was an adventurer, but Andrew was a seeker, the type of person who opened doors not just to peek behind them, like I did, but to step all the way through. His enlistment was a door I never would have considered opening, not even for just a glimpse of what lay waiting on the other side.

Now, we were both about to find out.

I looked past the Christmas tree and through the living room at the Boyds’ house. Since that first evening when Rachel had brought us cookies, I’d only seen her in passing outside, each of us waving awkwardly to the other across the street. I wondered if their place was as comically disappointing as ours. Over the course of the last two weeks, it had become abundantly clear that whoever had renovated it had left in the middle of the job and never returned. When I went to pull up the blinds to let the sun in, they fell clean off the window, clattering to the floor. The first time I plugged in my hair dryer, the outlet shocked me. At every threshold, tacks poked up from beneath the carpet, and a persistent leak dripped beneath the kitchen sink. But it was ours. Or at least, it already felt like ours in a way no apartment ever had.

Andrew turned away from the mess of gear on the living room floor. “I need a break,” he said. “And I have something for you.” He took my hand and guided me down the hallway.

"I see where this is going," I said, but he bypassed our bedroom and opened the door to the spare room next to it.

"Merry Christmas," he said as my eyes fell on a lean black desk beneath the window. It was simple, with just a single drawer in the center. I walked over and ran my hand across its surface.

"I put it together this morning," Andrew said. "It isn't much. It's from Walmart. But you'll need a place to write while I'm gone. I was thinking this could be your office."

For as long as I could remember, I had loved to write—stories in elementary school, poetry in high school, short fiction in college. In Annapolis, looking for a viable way to turn my passion into a profession, I started writing for the weekly paper. I loved interviewing sources and hunting down stories and thought maybe I could be a tough-as-nails reporter. In journalism school, though, I discovered I was too enthralled with the slow burn of creative work, too obsessed with language, more interested in the guy who owned the bodega that was robbed than the news of the robbery itself.

With my graduate degree, I found work as an editor and decided I would carve out time to write on the side. That was when I discovered essays. Writing them gave me a profound sensation most people seemed to take for granted but I'd never quite understood: that of being at home. I stole moments to write before sunrise, or late on Saturday nights at a cramped table in McNally Jackson's café, drinking coffee as people streamed by outside. But the responsibilities at my editing job, where I worked hand-in-hand with the editor to publish three 5,000-to-30,000-word pieces each week, were all-consuming. I was doing everything from sifting through slush to soliciting work from big-name authors to developing pieces with newer writers. I loved this work, could not believe I was even getting paid to do it, but it left almost no room for my own essays, so I decided that writing would likely always

be a side note to my life, a kind of mischief I committed when no one was looking. I'd never truly believed I could be a *real* writer, anyway. Being a writer was something for other people. Luckier people. People who believed in themselves blindly. That wasn't me.

Andrew believed in me, though. He always had. He thought I shouldn't rush to find a traditional job in Columbus, at least for now. Instead, I could build my own freelance editing business and write—still on the side, but there would be no more answering to a boss at any hour or staying up until 2 a.m. responding to emails, no more relegating writing to the farthest edges of my life. Andrew made less in the Army than he had as a bartender, but our expenses here were easily half what they'd been in New York. Still, he was a low-ranking enlisted man. Money would be tight. He couldn't support us both entirely. But he insisted that I didn't need to make a full salary, at least not yet.

"Here's your chance at a writer's life," Andrew had said to me. I had been suspicious of his glass-half-full argument, but now, looking at this little desk, I thought that maybe he was right. This wasn't the airy loft I'd imagined when I'd moved to New York. The window across from me looked out at a diseased tree stump and a rusted clothesline. But nothing was ever what you imagined.

I turned to face Andrew in the doorway. He looked so hopeful. The desk was an offering, I understood—both an apology for leaving me in this place and a hope for what my future might hold here. This desk was Andrew's way of saying, *I believe in you*. It demonstrated, too, just how much he wanted—needed—this new life to work for both of us. *I'm leaving you*, it said. *But I'm giving you something else in return: a room of your own. The precious commodities of solitude and time.*

"It's perfect," I said.

In the afternoon, we sat on the floor in front of the Christmas tree

and opened our stockings. The tree was plain, decorated in uniform bulbs we'd picked up at Walmart. The one exception was an ornament Andrew's mother had sent, a stained-glass yellow ribbon. I hadn't known what it stood for when I first opened the package, but over the last two weeks, I'd seen that yellow ribbon plastered on bumpers around Columbus, hanging from front doors, peeking out from the windows of small businesses. It signaled that someone the ribbon-hanger loved was deployed overseas. The gift felt like a symbol of Andrew's mother's effort to know his new world, which was as foreign to her as it was to me. She had even signed up to be in a support group for local parents. "None of their kids are deploying, though," she'd said to me over the phone, and her voice had cracked.

Andrew talked about the war as two wars. He had joined the second, which was, in a sense, Obama's war. Under Obama, the war's primary combat strategy changed from daytime foot patrols to night raids. For the previous few years, we'd been slowly handing over control of territory we'd seized from the Taliban to the Afghan National Army. We continued to support and train them, but had shifted the focus of combat operations to killing or capturing leaders of terrorist units that the Taliban had given safe harbor to, like Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network. This kind of work was the purview of Special Operations. They owned the war now, which meant Special Ops families were feeling the burden of continual combat deployments in a way that the families of conventional soldiers no longer were.

Andrew found the silver St. Michael's medal I'd put in his stocking, and I kneeled behind him to fasten it around his neck. He'd worn a St. Christopher's medal when we'd first started dating. Times had changed. He needed a saint with a sword and shield, not just a walking stick. Neither of us was religious, but I was superstitious, and I had decided that the patron saint of soldiers would keep him safe. I would keep him safe.

“This is harder than I thought it was going to be,” he said.

Andrew lived in the present, facing down obstacles only as they approached. And now that this one was finally arriving, I could hear in his voice that he was fully realizing, maybe for the first time, where he was going, and that I wouldn’t be there.

“This is exactly as hard as I’d imagined,” I said, forcing a laugh.

Andrew looked at his watch. “Shit, we have forty-five minutes before we’ve got to be at the Boyds.”

The sex was rushed and sweet, lips brushing against collarbones, hands grasping at each other’s necks. We kept avoiding each other’s eyes, like we were afraid of getting too close. After, when we were lying side by side, I was surprised to reach down and feel a wetness on my chest. Somehow, I knew it was Andrew’s tears, not sweat, though I had only seen him cry on a few occasions.

“We still need to talk,” he said.

I’d known this conversation was coming. He’d filled out the paperwork, answered questions like, *What music do you want played at your funeral procession?* (The opening aria of the Goldberg Variations, the frequent soundtrack to his paper-writing in college.) But there were things he hadn’t written down.

“This is just another thing to check off the list,” he said.

And so, minutes before leaving, he began to tell me the things he wanted, if anything were to happen to him: his best friend to officiate at the funeral, a burial, no talk of God or the military.

“It is important to me that you and my mom receive a flag, though,” he said.

My chest tightened. I had seen those flags in videos and photographs, folded meticulously, placed carefully in the hands of spouses.

“And I want you to live a full life, get married again, all of that.” He said this slowly and deliberately, as though he wanted me to remember it.

He turned to me and put a hand to my cheek, and, even though our bodies had just been pressed against each other, his touch was almost unbearable. I rolled away from him, wrapping myself into the fetal position and closing my eyes. If I could disappear, maybe this entire moment could disappear too. There would be no goodbye, no deployment, no returning to an empty house and plugging in the Christmas tree lights to ward off the darkness.

“Simone.” Andrew’s voice was soft. I opened my eyes. My nightstand was just inches from my face.

“Simone.” His voice was more insistent, but nowhere near forceful enough to drive out the sick feeling in my stomach. Maybe this was just how life would feel now.

“It’s time,” he said.

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On the way to headquarters, Dan fiddled anxiously with the radio until Rachel asked him to please turn it off. Then, there was silence, Andrew and I holding hands across the backseat as we each looked out our respective windows at Victory Drive, the state road that led to base. It was worn out and colorless, bordered by bail bondsmen, tattoo parlors, and motels. Eventually, we turned onto a wooded road, and the seediness fell away as we drove toward the gate.

Before we’d arrived in Georgia, I’d expected the base to feel like part of the greater city that surrounded it, a neighborhood among neighborhoods. But when we’d come to get my ID, I’d been struck by how stark the transition from city to base had felt. Fort Benning was an orderly 182,000 acres, with a brick post office and hospital and four elementary schools, even its own zip code. It was the home of the infantry, which meant it was a base dominated by men. Women were stationed here, but they weren’t allowed in combat arms or Special

Operations, so it was men I'd seen marching down the side of the road, their M4s clutched to their chests; men with high and tights standing at attention in parade fields; men buying tins of Copenhagen at the gas station where I'd stopped for a soda water.

When it was first established, Fort Benning's primary purpose was to provide basic training for soldiers in World War I. By World War II, Benning had become the primary infantry and airborne training center for the Army. All of those details had led me to believe that the base would have a real center-of-the-universe vibe, but, at least as it stood today, it felt so utilitarian, with its enormous motor pools of strikers and Humvees and beige buildings lining the roads, that driving through it had the mind-numbing quality of traversing an endless cross-country route. The jump towers at Airborne School reminded me of oil towers, and the massive complex of barracks looked, from the road, like the world's most nondescript outlet mall. Even the commissary, the base's grocery store, had the feeling of a brutalist 1970s DMV.

We went through the gate, driving for a few minutes down a two-lane road before reaching the "white elephants," the most elegant and oldest neighborhood on base. These white stucco homes with Spanish tile roofs were the one aspect of Fort Benning that matched the cinema of my imagination. Porch lights glowed in every entryway and weeping willows shaded yards that looked so soft I wanted to lie down on them. The homes were, reportedly, prone to mold and badly in need of repair, but I had fallen in love with them immediately.

"Why don't we to move to one of these houses?" I'd said to Andrew that afternoon we'd come for my ID. He had driven, then, a mile or so farther on to an enclave of apartments. Their exterior paint was peeling, and through one unit's open door, I could see that the places were small and dark, the floors throughout a yellowish linoleum. Out-

side, a few residents sat on their stoops smoking. Others were getting in and out of cars parked in assigned spaces. Every single one of them looked depressed as hell about the life choices and circumstances that had landed them there.

“This is where we would live,” he’d said. “At least until I move up in rank.”

We’d reached the parking lot behind Andrew’s and Dan’s companies. Since most of the guys had already been overseas for six weeks, there were just a few other couples saying goodbye to each other. I’d expected deployment farewells to happen at airfields, with crowds of well-dressed women holding the tiny hands of their children. But we weren’t allowed anywhere near the airfield, and the women I saw dropping off their husbands now were a mess—red noses, smudged eyeliner, sweatpants, and unwashed hair. They didn’t look brave or scared. They looked like they’d been through this too many times, their expressions tired and resigned as they gave their husbands a hug and a kiss goodbye before retreating to the safety of their cars.

Other than Rachel, the only spouse I’d had any contact with so far was Andrew’s company commander’s wife, Charlotte Adams, the leader of A-company’s Family Readiness Group, a collection of volunteer spouses that existed entirely to support the families of soldiers in Andrew’s unit. I’d received a few cheery mass emails from her. *Leave no trace behind!* Charlotte reminded us at the end of each one. Of what? Were we collectively committing a crime of some kind? Cleaning up after ourselves at a campsite?

“She means on social media,” Andrew had told me. “When we’re leaving, coming home, that kind of thing. It’s a big problem.”

“So, you’re telling me I should take down that photo I posted on Facebook of the flight schedule?” I’d joked. Of course I had no flight schedule. There was very little I could put on Facebook if I wanted to.

This was all I knew: Both Andrew and Dan would be joining their companies somewhere in Afghanistan. Andrew would be gone for roughly two and a half months. The guys in Andrew's unit called themselves "quiet professionals," and they expected the families they left behind to be equally discreet. The Unit told us just enough, but nothing more, leaving us almost as clueless about the war as the rest of the American public, but with a whole lot more at stake.

When we were about fifty yards from Andrew's company, his name hit the air with a smack. I looked around. There was a moment of silence, and then, there it was again, louder and more urgent. I felt Andrew stiffen against me like a dog responding to a whistle.

"Where is that coming from?" I asked.

"One of the Rear D sergeants is calling me from inside."

I looked toward the open door and saw only darkness. "How can you tell?"

"Oh, I can tell," he said, and then he turned to me in a swift motion and brought me to his chest. He smelled elemental, like sweat and dirt and the fresh air breathed in after a long run.

"I love you," he said, pulling away just as someone shouted his name again. He hitched up his pack and ran toward the open door. And then, he was gone from sight, and I found that I couldn't move. Maybe I could just wait out the next couple of months right here in this parking lot. I had gotten quite good at waiting this past year.

"I hope you have patience, because you'll need it where he's going," Andrew's drill sergeant had said to me at boot camp graduation. In his letters, Andrew had spent whole passages talking about Drill Sergeant Brown, who was always chewing tobacco and clicking his black military knife open and closed, saying things like "you look like hammered dog shit" and "sense is common, but common sense ain't." In one letter, Andrew wrote about the "twenty-one comrades" Brown had lost on

his three deployments to Iraq. Thousands of soldiers had been killed in these wars. But twenty-one. That number seemed fathomless.

A breeze moved through the air, and I felt myself go tense as a skinny arm laced itself through mine.

“Let’s get in the car.”

It was Rachel. Her face was streaked with mascara, and she wasn’t even trying to wipe it away.

“I’m not sure I can move my legs,” I said. She smelled sweet, like sugar and butter.

Rachel laughed. “I know just what you mean.”

When we got to her Corolla, she stopped with me at the passenger side. “You know, when Dan asked if we could give you a ride, I thought it might be weird,” she said. “I told him I wanted to cry alone, damn it.” She was still crying, I saw, as she unlocked the doors. She was also laughing. “But crying together is better, isn’t it?” She handed me a crumpled Kleenex. I touched my cheek and realized that I was crying, too.

Was it better? I rarely cried, and almost never in front of anyone other than Andrew. And yet, oddly, I wasn’t mortified.

“But fuck, I definitely will need to cry alone when I get home,” she said.