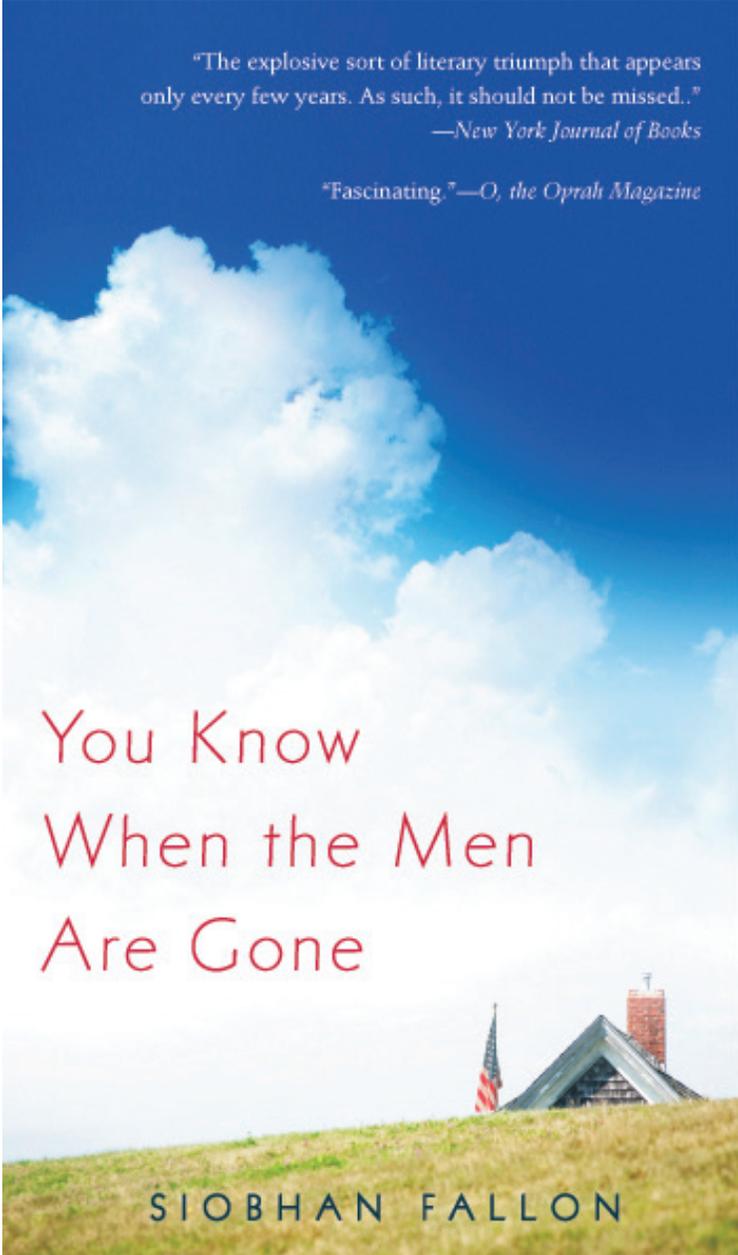


"The explosive sort of literary triumph that appears only every few years. As such, it should not be missed.."

—*New York Journal of Books*

"Fascinating."—*O, the Oprah Magazine*



You Know  
When the Men  
Are Gone

SIOBHAN FALLON

"POIGNANT AND BEAUTIFUL." —Dani Shapiro

## AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

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### Siobhan Fallon interviewed by Kathleen Harrington

Siobhan Fallon's debut story collection, *You Know When The Men Are Gone*, invites us to understand fully the toll of deployments on military members and their families. Fallon's stories take us behind the lines to the lives of Army wives whose husbands are deployed. For civilian audiences, Fallon's work decodes the nuances of a military culture, a culture stressed by frequent deployments; for military members and their families, it teaches them what it is like to be left behind when what most of them know is to deploy. Yet, Fallon's work is far more than a creative handbook or a primer. What permeates the stories is this unmanageable sense of disruption to everyday living. *You Know When the Men are Gone* courageously brings to the forefront of readers' thinking "...the realization of how easy it [is] to move from the ordinary to the unthinkable."

Not surprisingly, Fallon takes on cheating as the most feared and disruptive element to these spouses' daily routines and marriages. However, the range of how Fallon portrays cheating might surprise readers. From "Inside the Break," where Manny's wife finds a condemning message in her husband's email account suggestive of an affair, to "Leave," where the military soldier literally hides in his own basement, eventually confirming his wife's affair, notions of marital bliss fray quickly irrespective of gender. Even the yet-to-be-married, such as David Mogeson in "Camp Liberty," experience degrees of underlying sexual tension. As David's interest in and respect for his Iraqi interpreter, Raneen, grows, he questions his connection to his hometown girlfriend, Marissa. In fact, "He was glad when the

static became thick enough for him to hang up with having to say, I love you.” So we learn that even in today’s highly-technical world of email and Skype, there’s little to bridge the moments families can’t make up for, moments they simply can’t get back. As a result, fear and suspicion fester, grow, and complicate already highly-strained relationships.

In the two stories which conclude her collection, Fallon drives home the difficulties of post-traumatic stress, whether you are a returning soldier or the surviving spouse. In “You Survived the War, Now Survive the Homecoming,” Carla Wolenski confronts the dramatic mood swings of her husband, a Captain and the Company Commander of a Mechanized Infantry Unit, who has returned from Iraq just three weeks earlier. Captain Wolenski asks Carla for “five friggin’ minutes of peace” in what has already seemed like a lifetime of disruption for this new mom. Fallon juxtaposes Carla’s desperation to connect to her officer-husband with Leslie’s, a physically-abused wife of an enlisted troop. Similarly, in “Gold Star,” Josie, “disfigured” by grief, struggles to reconnect with society in her widow status. Yet in both stories, Fallon returns to the small moments, such as Captain Wolenski feeding his baby girl and Josie sitting unexpectedly and quietly in the lap of her husband’s friend, as healing ones.

Perhaps more difficult for readers to understand are those characters who simply stop. These characters reach a threshold of inexplicable pain, guilt, and loneliness that can’t be overcome. For example, in Fallon’s title story, Natalya abandons her twins the day before her husband returns home. Why? After having negotiated life on a military base and the odd culture which unites wives of those deployed, why give up? The answer might come from Helena in “The Last Stand,” who ends up leaving her husband Kit on the day he returns home: “I love you but I don’t think I can do this anymore. I want to be home. I like my college classes and I need to be near my family.” It’s paradoxically as simple and as complicated as that.

Fallon exposes the less talked about stress of those who can’t or don’t deploy because of an illness at home. In “Remission,” we hear the perspective of Ellen Roddy, who has breast cancer. Fallon captures the power of what it means for Ellen’s husband, John, not to deploy. Why is it that “John being home” makes Ellen “different from everyone else in a way that even the cancer did not”? Ellen asks these questions too as she examines and prioritizes her roles of mother, wife, resident of base housing... and the underlying expectations that come with those roles at the same time she is “barely holding on.”

A military spouse herself, Fallon consented to an interview by way of email from the US Embassy in Amman, Jordan, where her husband is currently assigned. Her comments offer a new depth and dimension not only to her collection but, again, to our thinking about the extended costs of war.

**Was there a story that became the catalyst for the others and how did you settle on which story would become the title of your collection?**

The title story of the collection was the first one I started to write (originally titled “Waiting”). It’s about two women who are neighbors in an on-post apartment building, and Army housing is notorious for being thin-walled. Both of their husbands are deployed and one of the spouses begins to eavesdrop on the other, which spins out of control into fantasies about the glamorous life she believes her neighbor to be living. This story definitely started the flow of all the other stories.

Base life is a lot like life in a very small town (and I was born and raised in a VERY small town). The Army instills a collective feeling of taking care of each other, for both soldiers and spouses (for example, Army soldiers keep an eye out for their ‘battle buddies.’ When our soldiers deploy, spouses who are close friends call each other ‘battle buddies’ too—those are the friends you turn to and know are always there, no matter the crisis). This blurring between civilian and military, friendship and responsibility, can make it difficult to draw the line between being solicitous and helpful toward your neighbor, and being downright nosy.

I was also fascinated with the idea of eavesdropping, how eavesdroppers, at best, will only get bits and pieces of the life that they are trying to listen in on. There will be countless inaccuracies and since eavesdroppers will have to imagine information to paste together the fragmented things they overhear, they can’t help but unconsciously supply what they want, or don’t want, to hear. It seemed like an allegory of loved ones separated by deployments. With such a chasm of distance and time, a spouse can never get the whole story of what her mate is going through. No matter how much a couple tries to communicate, moments and memories will be lost. You can’t fill in all the details of twelve or fifteen months apart with dropped calls or sporadic email or Skype sessions. And with this nebulous unknown growing between two people, each person can’t help but imagine what is happening to the person he/she loves. Sometimes these imaginings will be right, sometimes they will be wildly wrong.

**How did writing these stories function for you as not only a professional writer but as someone who was herself “waiting”? Did you find the writing therapeutic, or a way to reveal the horrors military families face in war time, or any other possibility?**

We have all heard of the quote “Write what you know,” which I was definitely doing as I wrote these stories. But I was also writing what I wanted to know. What I needed to know. I was the acting Family Readiness Group Leader when my husband was last deployed to Iraq, which means that I was the main contact for the parents and spouses of my husband’s one hundred and sixty soldiers, making sure everyone knew how to get information about their soldier or Army services. Basically a family member could call or email me and ask me anything, from how to get enrolled in the Army medical insurance or, Tricare, at Fort Hood, to asking me if I had heard about a recent reported sniper attack on US soldiers in Maysan Province. So I was dealing with a lot of anxious family members on a daily basis. Sometimes I would get frustrated at the behavior of a few of my fellow spouses, the wife who seemed to always run out of money before her soldier’s next paycheck or the spouse who was rumored to be having an affair. On the surface it seemed so obvious to me that these women ought to simply behave better. Be responsible with your money. Don’t cheat. Take care of your kids. Never gossip. But writing the stories made me delve deeper into the lives of fictional characters, made me think about day-to-day life for people who did not have the strong support systems that I had, made me empathize in a way I hadn’t been capable of before. I also realized that if it took my being an FRG leader, as well as having a husband on his third deployment, for me to finally see the hardships so many of these military families were facing, then how could I expect non-military folk to understand how difficult deployments can be? So that motivated me to keep writing as well, to share a glimpse of my world with others.

**Given your husband has deployed three times and your experience as a Family Readiness Group Leader, what advice would you give to spouses now? What do spouses need to hear beyond the expectations of behaving well?**

I think spouses need to educate themselves as much as possible about the avenues open to them during their soldiers’ deployments, everything from education opportunities at the local colleges to how to get an Army Emergency Relief Loan in a time of crisis.

When my husband last deployed to Iraq from Fort Hood, I was trying to write this book, trying to keep it together as an FRG Leader, and trying to be a good mother to my six-month old daughter. I found out that the Chaffee Childhood Development Center on Fort Hood gave free daycare hours to the families of deployed soldiers and, trust me, I used my quota of free daycare each month. It was extraordinary to have that time for myself to write, extraordinary that the Army was acknowledging that parents need some time without their children. The Army continues to create programs that support families and spouses as much as possible; it is in the Army's best interest that military families continue to thrive and succeed. And spouses should do their part to seek those opportunities out and use them.

**Did you aim your stories at a particular audience, such as women whose men have deployed, women whose men might deploy, or the non-military public? If any of the above is true, would your purpose be to show solidarity with the women? prepare women? inform the general public?**

I wasn't actually aware of aiming my stories at anyone when I started writing them. I had been writing short stories for awhile, sending them off to literary magazines, occasionally having a story win a contest. But I wasn't publishing enough of my work to have "audience" on my mind in the beginning. After I had written a few stories and started to see that there were similarities among them, then I thought to myself "I might have a collection here." That's when I started to go back into the stories and view them as a non-military reader might. With that in mind, I fleshed out the details about life on a base that had surprised me when I first became an Army spouse, like showing ID in order to get through a front gate, or what sort of services an Army base provided (commissaries, libraries, gyms, hospital, etc), things that military members might know but non-military might not.

**I have a colleague who is deployed to Afghanistan for a year, and I've debated whether or not to give a copy of your book to his wife. Do you think your stories would help her more now while he is away or after her husband returns? In other words, in addition to informing non-military people what life is like for the deployed and their families, do you think your stories would be most therapeutic before, during, or after a deployment?**

I've gotten conflicting reader-responses from the spouses of deployed soldiers. Some have said that they started to read my book but then had to put it down

because it verbalized too many of their own fears, and they would wait until their soldier returned to finish reading. But I have also been told that reading the collection during a deployment has helped some spouses realize that they aren't the only ones having a hard time handling the stress of a deployment.

That was actually one of the things I wished spouses talked about more during a deployment—that it is OK to feel miserable at times. We all want to be supportive of our husbands, of the military, of our country, we want to seem strong for our children, but missing a spouse for the duration just sucks no matter how you cut it. And sometimes I felt, as an Army spouse, as a Company Commander's wife, as an FRG Leader, that I had to set an example, that I had to grin and bear it and always claim to be doing perfectly fine. Perhaps my fellow spouses would have preferred if I had occasionally stopped smiling, if rather than chiming in with one of my platitudes about how 'time will fly' or 'this deployment is going so much more quickly than the last one,' I had said, "Spouses, prepare yourself because this is going to be a really rough year. Things will go wrong when you least expect it, cars will break down, kids will need to go to the ER, money will be tight, and every time you hear about a bombing in Iraq you will be scared to death for your soldier. But if you keep busy, if you utilize every ounce of information and support that the Army gives you, if you concentrate on getting out of bed each morning, taking care of your kids, and communicating with your soldier as much as possible, then you and your family will make it, and it will have been worth it." Sometimes it's OK to eat the whole jar of Nutella standing at the sink with a spoon; sometimes you need to know that other spouses are having a tough time too, no matter how well they seem to be holding up.

**In your first story, Meg is shopping in Warrior Way Commissary and fixates on "the cold, bloody meat." She then fantasizes about the meat being human flesh, specifically war-torn flesh. What would you have us take from the dramatic shift in her consciousness?**

I think that a deployed mother, father, son or daughter, husband or wife, is always on the mind of his or her family at home. Perhaps not in the forefront of all thoughts, but as soon as something triggers a memory, you can't help but be flooded with worry. That stress weighs down on military families. They still have to exist in the world, they have to work and feed the kids and get the oil changed, but somewhere in the back of their mind they can't help being aware of the fact that their soldier might be in danger. I actually had that thought one day while

shopping at the Hood Warrior Way Commissary when my husband was deployed. One moment I was pushing my baby along in a cart, shoving Goldfish crackers in her mouth, and the next I was staring at the wrapped steaks, something I often bought in the past to cook for my husband. I remember pressing my fingertip into the cellophane and watching the pressure on the meat, the blood pooling in the folds of plastic, and suddenly I was wondering if this was what human carnage looked like. So I know that these thoughts sneak up on a person, unbidden and disturbing.

**As a writer, when those “unbidden and disturbing” thoughts sneak up on you, is it more difficult for you to capture the visual horror (war-torn flesh) or the emotional one with your characters?**

Emotion is a difficult thing to write about. I try to “show” rather than “tell” in my writing, but how to do you “show” something as internal as feelings? So painting the visual horrors, like the bombing of the market in “Camp Liberty,” and not letting the soldiers help the wounded civilians, demonstrates how frustrated those soldiers are as they are ordered to drive away by their Battalion Commander (who has heard that a second improvised explosive device is rigged to go off). In the short story “Leave,” Chief Warrant Officer Nick Cage hides in his basement to better stalk his wife. I thought that this setting would more effectively let the reader know that Nick’s sanity was teetering more than saying something like, “Nick felt like he was losing his marbles.” In another of my stories, “Inside the Break,” I want to let the reader know how much Kailani misses Hawaii, how she longs for her family and their way of life in comparison to her feeling alienated at the sprawling Fort Hood. But Kailani is stubborn, she loves her soldier husband, she is desperately trying to be happy in his world. So I have her moving a sickly potted hibiscus plant around her small apartment, catching the moving rays of sunlight, willing it to grow.

**There are many examples where the language or behavior of the women at home mirrors what deployed soldiers in battle conditions would say or do. However, unlike the battlefield where the soldier would put himself in harm’s way to protect his comrade, the women in your stories appear united in supportive actions, but divided in the hope their husband isn’t killed. Can you comment on this odd tension (an underlying “please don’t let it be my**

**husband” sentiment) in an otherwise extraordinarily tight community of wives of deployed soldiers?**

Well, you see the headline, “Two US soldiers killed at checkpoint” and your first thought is “Dear God, don’t let it be my soldier.” Which of course means that you are hoping it is someone else’s soldier, which is a horrible thought. But also it is a very human one. I think we feel a collective guilt afterwards, when we go to the funeral or see the widow, we are guilty because we felt relief at their grief, relief to be spared that grief.

**Are there other occasions besides death where military spouses might feel the tension between unity and division? The “collective guilt” you refer to?**

Sure. There are times right now when I feel a little guilty for living in Amman, Jordan, where my husband is working at the US Embassy and training with the Jordanian Army, while friends of ours are getting prepared to send their soldiers back to Iraq and Afghanistan. I know my husband feels it too, even after all of his past deployments and the fact that he will probably deploy again in the future. As I mentioned earlier, there is a feeling in the military, especially in the often deployed Army Infantry, that we are all in this fight together. Spouses feel this unity as well to some degree. So on the occasions when someone isn’t literally on the front lines, whether they are chosen for Rear-Detachment or get sent to what is seen as a cushier post, while being incredibly grateful, there is an intrinsic guilt too, knowing your closest friends may have been handed a harsher and more dangerous fate.

**Do you feel that your stories show whether women married to enlisted men face different problems from those married to officers? In one of your stories, Carla’s telephone conversation with Leslie would suggest the marital strains can be similar; yet, my own experience as an officer suggests that there can be differences in how officer and enlisted communities process the same events. Did you intend your stories to reflect any differences?**

I think I was trying to reflect more of an age divide rather than a difference in how officers and enlisted handle problems. In my experience, the marriages that were the most troubled by deployment issues were usually those of the younger soldiers, and many of the youngest soldiers are enlisted. They generally hadn’t had a few years in college to do all the reckless things young people do best at a safer

place like a college campus (like learn their limits with alcohol or test their skills at the dating pool). It seemed like younger soldiers and their girlfriends have a tendency, when a deployment looms in the near future, to rush into a marriage in an attempt to create something permanent and stable in an otherwise uncertain situation. Many of these soldiers are barely old enough to legally drink alcohol, yet we expect so much of them, expect them to defend our country, to handle a gun, to live an entire year away from their friends and families in crisis mode, all the while assessing dangerous situations in a strange culture with people speaking a different language. Add a new spouse or a baby to that mix and almost any twenty-something-year-old would have a tricky time balancing it all. The other half of that equation is the young wife at home, who has been moved to a new state, who is trying to figure out military life when her husband is away, and no wonder there are challenges. Marriages take a lot of work and dedicated communication no matter what your rank, and I have seen failed marriages at just about every strata. And of course there are enlisted couples that make it, that don't just survive the deployment but excel, who inspire their peers, who rise through the ranks, who raise their children beautifully.

**Your stories imagine a condition of gender relations more traditional than what is true today in many parts of America. That is to say, a condition in which men work and women stay home raising children. If the military were actually free from gendered stereotypes, would your stories have less of a bite?**

Stylistically, the way the Infantry works in the Army and at Fort Hood, made the writing of these stories simpler. With so little black and white about the themes of love and war, an all male infantry allowed me to generalize in my stories: soldiers are men, spouses are women. And yes, I agree with your assessment of the Fort Hood in my stories feeling like a more traditional place than your average American town. But that is how it felt for me. When you are moving around so much in the Army, heading to a new base every two or three years (and Army bases are not usually near your most dynamic American cities), it is hard for the spouse to maintain a high powered career. So that sort of upheaval has a tendency to make spouses choose jobs they can travel with, teaching and nursing, or home-based employment like Pampered Chef or Tastefully Simple, which tends to conform to gender stereotypes.

Would my stories have less bite if the military was no longer gender-biased? I don't know. The prevalent theme of my collection is how relationships handle the

stress of a deployment. I think that a male spouse waiting at home for his female soldier to return from Iraq would present many of the same issues. I really hope someone writes that story—I'd love to read it.

**At times, your stories vacillate between sympathy for the women in them and criticism of them for being rather unready to accept either how their husbands have changed or how they have changed. How do you feel about such a claim?**

I'd hate to think I am inviting the reader to be critical of my characters. If anything, one of my motivations was to try to show how people can be driven to do things they would never imagine themselves doing. I feel sympathy for the characters who commit adultery or abandon their spouses—the separation has driven them to do things they themselves consider unforgiveable. When creating Helena, Kit Murphy's wife, it was important for me to show the reader that she is a good person even if she is able to abandon her wounded soldier husband when he needs her the most. All of my characters are trying to survive the best way that they can. If survival for Manny means he has to seek distraction in the arms of a female soldier, well, I want the reader to understand that, and to also understand why his wife might still be willing to take him back. Even Nick Cash, the basement stalker, I wanted to create a situation that, in his unstable frame of mind, seems like his only option. We are all so flawed; we all do things we wish we could undo. I want readers to be able to see a bit of themselves in all of my characters.

**Your closing story talks of the “mental realignment” that needs to happen when returning from a deployment. Yet, other than the two children who are abandoned in the opening story, and Delia, whose father isn't deployed, there is no discussion of the impact on children. Would you subscribe to the notion that children are remarkably resilient, or is there more to be said about their journey to be whole again?**

My daughter was very young when I wrote the stories so she wasn't quite aware of what was going on, at least not in a way she was capable of communicating. But I had friends with children who were school age, and they talked about the unvoiced anger their children felt about having a parent deployed, how the kids just couldn't understand why their dads had to miss their birthdays and holidays and couldn't help out with their homework.

I do think that that is one of the biggest tragedies for the units that are gone for a year, come back for a year, and then are gone again. I don't think you can ever make up for the time you have missed. The school plays and the soccer games and teeth under pillows. These are the small events and stages that make up a young life. Just last night my husband and I had a friend over for dinner. At one point my husband was holding our friend's daughter, a beautiful, chubby ten month old baby. My daughter, who is three now, asked him why he was holding this child and my husband replied, "I didn't get to see you when you were this age and I want to see what it feels like to hold a little girl like you." It's a loss for both parent and child.

**In the concluding story of your collection, "Gold Star," we meet Josie Schaeffer, whose husband Eddie has been killed in Iraq. She is visited by Specialist Kit Murphy, who served with Eddie and believes Eddie saved his life. I'm interested in the way Josie's discussion with Kit unfolds unexpectedly. What are we to make of her challenging Kit regarding whether or not her husband really "saved" Kit's life?**

I wanted Josie to have a different reaction than the reader expects. When you read an interviews with family members who have lost a soldier, they usually say something about how their soldier's death served a greater purpose, and how that is a consolation. But Josie does not want any consolation. It is easier for her to think her husband's death is an accident, that he was unconscious and died quickly, rather than that he consciously chose to save Kit (and in choosing to save Kit, Josie thinks he must have chosen to leave her/die). She had tried to convince her husband to get out of the military and, in her grieving way, she feels like the Army has 'won'—has managed to triumph over her by keeping her husband's memory forever. She is angry, furious, and resents that the Army is turning her husband into a hero, which feels false to her. To her, the man she loved is dead. Just that, dead and gone, and no eulogy or title or medal is going to bring him back or make her feel better about his absence.

**Do popular television shows such as "Army Wives" or "Coming Home" serve as an extension to your stories or are these shows in opposition to what you are trying to convey in your work?**

I don't watch that much TV—I saw the first episode of Army Wives and never managed to catch Coming Home, though I read Tanya Biank's book that Army

Wives was based on, and I loved HBO's series *Generation Kill*. However I think anything that gets the dialogue going about what soldiers and their families are going through is beneficial to everyone. The military make up such a small minority of American society, and yet they bear the burden of this very long, hard war, so I think it is important for non-military to have a way to view our lives, as well as for the military to see that topics that affect them are being taken seriously. So I applaud and am grateful to programs that focus on the military world.

**Is there anything you would like to add?**

Yes. To all the military folk out there, tell your stories. Write your experiences into articles, poetry, short stories, comic books, novels. I've been amazed by the reaction of non-military readers, how readily they have responded to my work, how many questions they've had about my 'real' life as an Army spouse, how often they ask me to recommend similarly themed books. I get so many emails from civilians thanking me for showing them what day-to-day military life is like, and I also get emails from people asking where they can send packages to troops or what military-focused charities I would recommend. Americans are eager to hear what we have to say, we just need to find a way to tell them.



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SIOBHAN FALLON

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## Leave

Three a.m. and breaking into the house on Cheyenne Trail was even easier than Chief Warrant Officer Nick Cash thought it would be. There were no sounds from above, no lights throwing shadows, no floorboards whining, no water running or the snicker of late-night TV laugh tracks. The basement window, his point of entry, was open. The screws were rusted, but Nick had come prepared with his Gerber knife and WD-40; got the screws and the window out in five minutes flat. He stretched onto his stomach in the dew-wet grass and inched his legs through the opening, then pushed his torso backward until his toes grazed the cardboard boxes in the basement below, full of old shoes and college textbooks, which held his weight.

He had planned this mission the way the army would expect him to, the way only a soldier or a hunter or a neurotic could, considering every detail that ordinary people didn't even think about. He mapped out the route, calculating the minutes it would take for each task, considering the placement of streetlamps, the kind of vegetation in front, and how to avoid walking past houses with dogs. He figured out whether the moon would be new or full and what time the sprinkler system went off. He staged this as carefully as any other surveillance mission he had created and briefed to soldiers before.

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Except this time the target was his own home.

He should have been relieved that he was inside, unseen, that all was going according to plan. But as he screwed the window back into place, he could feel his lungs clench with rage instead of adrenaline.

How many times had he warned his wife to lock the window? It didn't matter how often he told her about Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker, who had gained access to his victims through open basement windows. Trish argued that the open window helped air out the basement. A theory that would have been sound if she actually closed the window every once in a while. Instead she left it open until a rare and thundering storm would remind her, then she'd jump up from the couch, run down the steps, and slam it shut after it had let in more water than a month of searing-weather-openwindow-days could possibly dry.

Before he left for Iraq, Nick had wanted to install an alarm system but his wife said no.

"Christ, Trish," he had replied. "You can leave the windows and all the doors open while I am home to protect you. But what about when I'm gone?"

She glanced up at him from chopping tomatoes, narrowed her eyes in a way he hadn't seen before, and said flatly, "We've already survived two deployments. I think we can take care of ourselves."

*Take care of this*, Nick thought now, twisting the screw so violently that the knife slipped and almost split open his palm, the scrape of metal on metal squealing like an assaulted chalkboard. He hesitated, waiting for the neighbor's dog to start barking or a porch light to go on. Again nothing. Nick could be any lunatic loose in the night, close to his unprotected daughter in her room with the safari animals on her wall, close to his wife in their marital bed.

Trish should have listened to him.

This particular reconnaissance mission had started with a seemingly harmless e-mail. Six months ago, Nick had been deployed to an outlying suburb of Baghdad, in what his battalion commander jovially referred to as "a shitty little base in a shitty little town in a shitty little country." One of his buddies back in Killeen had offered to check on Trish every month or so, to make sure she didn't need anything hammered or lifted or drilled while Nick was away.

His friend wrote:

*Stopped by to see Trish. Mark Rodell was there. Just thought you should know.*

That was it. That hint, that whisper.

Mark Rodell.

Nick didn't know who the hell that was, but his friend seemed to think he should.

So he called Trish, standing in line at the FOB for an hour and a half for one of the three working pay phones that served over two hundred soldiers.

"Who's this Mark Rodell guy?" he asked as soon as Trish answered the phone.

There was a pause, then her voice, too calm and easy. Too ready. "He's the new gym teacher at Mountain Lion. I told you I wanted a willow tree, for the backyard? Well, he brought it over in his truck."

Nick could hear himself breathing out of his nose. "Is he married?"

"No. Nick, don't blow this out of proportion. He's just a pal. He helps all the teachers who have husbands away."

"I bet." His voice veered too loud so he coughed into his camouflaged shoulder to contain it, then continued in a hoarse whisper, "I bet he is a huge help to all you poor, neglected, stranded wives."

"He is. I don't like the tone of your voice."

Nick shut off the tone, shut his mouth and said nothing, waiting for more of an explanation, for anything, but his wife followed suit and said nothing as well. He could have told her that she was all he thought about during the long patrols or the even longer days at the base, that he had pictures of Trish and Ellie all around his cot so they were the first thing he saw every morning when he woke up and the last thing he saw at night when he shut off his light. He even had a sweat-stained photo of them tucked into his helmet that he would take out and show his interpreters, the local town council, or random Iraqis on the street, just to have an excuse to talk about his wife and child. But instead he said nothing until his time was nearly up, just listened to Trish breathe, knowing that she was winding and unwinding the old phone cord around her narrow fingers and getting angrier with each passing minute.

"How's Ellie?" he finally asked, his voice softening, deciding to salvage a minute or two.

"Damn it—I'm late. I have to get her from Texas Tumblers." And Trish hung up.

Nick pulled the phone away from his ear as if it had bitten him. He stared at it until the sergeant in charge of enforcing the fifteen-minute call limit walked over to him and pointedly glanced at his watch.

From then on, Nick could think of nothing but Mark Rodell. In the chow hall waiting for a serving of barbecue and bleached-looking green beans, in the Tactical Operations Center, or TOC, where he read reams of intelligence reports, in his weekly review of the latest surveillance video from the Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, otherwise known as “predator porn.”

He thought back over the last months of his deployment, to the days Trish forgot to send him one of her quirky e-mails or the nights when a babysitter answered Nick’s call, and all of the strained phone conversations in between. She had told him she occasionally went for drinks with her fellow schoolteachers or to the monthly game nights hosted by other military spouses whose husbands were deployed. It had filled him with relief to think of Trish clinking martini glasses with bookish friends or, even better, playing Bunco! with wives wearing their husbands’ unit T-shirts. But now he imagined his wife swishing her dark hair in a dimly lit bar, lip-glossed and bare-shouldered, meeting the eyes of a stranger.

Three weeks later, Nick started planning his return.

He woke at dawn, wide awake but disoriented, as if startled by a mortar attack. He had wedged himself behind a wall of old and crumbling cardboard boxes just in case Trish decided to come down and look for something. It seemed like a great idea at almost three in the morning, but now, with a hint of blue light touching the corners of the basement, he realized that his head and feet were sticking out on either end. The odd noise repeated itself above his head, and he pulled himself into a fetal position, holding his breath. It continued long enough for him to realize that it couldn’t be human, and he gingerly got up on his hands and knees, careful not to topple the boxes, and rose to his feet.

He held his Gerber knife ready, expecting a rat, but instead found a cat, an ugly little thing, flecks of brown and orange smudged through its gray fur. It looked up at him, then turned back to its scratching and finally squatted and shat in the corner of a box full of Trish’s old college history papers. Nick bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from barking out a laugh, and reached in to pet its head. He could read its collar: “Anne Lisbeth.” It tolerated his touch, then leaped out of the box and wove its way through the detritus of the basement and headed toward the stairs. Nick dropped back down, knocking his head against the cement wall.

Ellie had been asking for a pet for a year now, begging every time they spoke, flip-flopping between cat, dog, chimpanzee. Of course Trish had decided on a cat, not a dog that could watch over them, that could bark or rip out an intruder’s jugular. A cat named after Hans Christian Andersen’s “Anne Lisbeth”: the tale of a mother

who abandons her infant in order to become a wet nurse for a count. Her own neglected baby dies and the mother goes mad in the end, haunted by the unloved ghost of her son.

It was just like Ellie to name a cat something so freakishly morbid. She'd become fascinated with fairy tales during Nick's last deployment. And not the Disney fairy tales, oh no, not those wide-eyed, fat-lipped princesses mincing around and breaking out into song. Ellie had gone to spend a couple of weeks with her grandma in Boston two summers ago and came home with a collection of Hans Christian Andersen and illustrated Grimm's Fairy Tales. Nick would read them to her every night when he was home. They were full of strange cruelties he wanted to hide from his child: the way Cinderella's stepsisters cut off their own toes in order to fit into her glass slipper; the huntsman giving the queen the still-beating heart of a stag instead of Snow White's; the orphan girl so beguiled by her red shoes that she is cursed to dance in them until her legs are chopped off with an ax. Whenever he tried to skip or edit any of the ghoulish bits, Ellie corrected him, staring at him with her mother's huge and serious eyes, disappointed with his omission.

Then Nick heard the faraway tinkle of his wife's alarm playing the Bizet CD it always did. He hid behind his boxes, listening as she waited for two tracks, probably doing her morning yoga stretches, and then rose from the bed, the springs gasping. He felt his gut loosen a little when he realized that she was alone; no voices, muted laughter, or heavy steps followed his wife's tread into the kitchen. Her slippers scraped along the hardwood floors and headed directly to the coffeemaker. He could see her clearly: her hair held up in a messy ponytail on the top of her head so it didn't get in her eyes when she slept. One of her mother's old robes draped across her narrow shoulders. Sweatpants loose on her hips. A Brown University T-shirt tight across her breasts, which still looked damn good for a woman who breast-fed Ellie until she was two.

He suddenly wanted to walk up those basement stairs as easily as the cat. This was his home, she was his wife, his baby girl was still asleep in her pink-comfortered bed. He was a fool. Then he heard Trish back in the bedroom, probably rooting around for her sneakers, putting on her running shorts and a tank top that showed off her nicely sculpted shoulders, getting her body firm for Mark Rodell.

The coffee machine buzzed above and Nick reached for a warm Gatorade. No, he wasn't ready to go upstairs yet. He couldn't let himself break. He needed to listen, to find out, to know.

Nick quickly unpacked while Trish was out running. He had fourteen MREs jammed into his assault pack—one for every day. There were also a few shelves

of dusty canned goods in the basement laundry room that he could eat: peaches, pineapple rings, kidney beans, tuna fish. He had a two-quart CamelBak of water and three large Gatorade bottles that he would drink and then use as a urinal when his wife was home, and that he could dump when she wasn't. He also had his sleeping bag liner, not too soft but at least it was something, a set of civilian clothes in case he needed to go out into the world like a normal person, and a backup set of black clothing in case he didn't.

It seemed like every little bit of training for the past seven years had led him to this moment, to hiding in his own basement, his intestines tight with fear in a way they had never been in Iraq. Every minute he had spent in Baghdad, sifting through lies, brought him back to this, to his home, his wife, the entirety of his life. While he organized his possessions against the basement's damp wall, he thought about the TOC, all those intelligence reports, how difficult it was to discern truth from exaggeration and ambiguity. He interviewed informers and interrogated suspects, watched the blinking eyes, twitching hands, the sweat on their foreheads, knowing that every word was suspect, each sentence could be loaded with mistruths, familial vengeance, jihadism, fear, self-preservation, and maybe, just maybe, innocence. It was difficult to determine if someone was one-hundred-percent guilty, but nearly impossible to find someone one-hundred-percent innocent.

When Nick showed up for an interrogation, his soldiers would say, "Here comes Chief Cash, we're about to hit the jackpot," or "With Chief Cash dealing, we're gonna win us some old-fashioned Texas Hold 'em." Nick ignored them; he wasn't any luckier than anyone else. But he did happen to be paired with an interpreter, Ibrahim, who used to be a Baghdad taxi driver and knew every street and shred of gossip in the city. They were a good team, Nick and Ibrahim, listening, waiting, knowing how to be patient and how to ask the right questions, and occasionally it led to something, like a dozen rocket launchers hidden in a hole under a mayor's refrigerator. But most of the time it led to nothing.

Nick understood the slippery nature of his task. Sources lied. Eyewitnesses missed crucial facts. Even the intel experts stateside regularly screwed up. So when his buddy offered to check on Trish more often, he told him no. Nor did Nick grill his wife about the details of her evenings out when they spoke on the phone, to search for cracks and split them open. Nick knew that his friend wouldn't be able to get at the truth no matter how many times he stopped by the house. And the thousands of miles of static and dropped calls separating Nick from Trish made it impossible for him to find out if she lied. There was only so much that could be gained from talking. He knew from experience that the only way to prove anything

beyond a reasonable doubt was to get inside the suspect's house, to find the sniper rifle under the bed, the Iranian bomb-making electronics in a back shed, the sketches of the nearest U.S. military base in a hollow panel of the wall.

The only thing to do was to find out for himself. To go home in a way that didn't give Trish enough notice to hide the evidence.

To go home and catch her in the act.

Forty-seven minutes after her alarm had gone off, Trish returned from her run, the latch on the front door clicking shut. At the same instant, Nick heard his daughter wake up— heard her jump down off her bed and her bare feet slap along floors, heard the high-pitched screech of her voice, “Anne Lisbeth! Anne Lisbeth!”

Nick winced; that ugly cat did not look like the cuddling kind. Knowing Trish, they had gone to some “no-kill” shelter and deliberately found a cat that no sane person in the world would adopt. He imagined Ellie with scratches on her face and bite marks on her hands and Trish gingerly putting peroxide on the wounds rather than admit she couldn't rehabilitate a fey cat. It felt good to create this jittery resentment against his wife just when the sound of his child's footsteps was starting to make him yearn for her small arms around his neck.

“Mommy, where's Anne Lisbeth?” Ellie's voice screamed from the kitchen, probably a few feet away from Trish, who must be wiping sweat from her lean face, starting in on her second cup of coffee in order to put on a smile for her early morning whirling dervish. Nick was amazed he could hear her voice so clearly; he would have to be careful about every noise he made.

“Maybe she's in the basement,” Trish replied. Nick quickly scanned the dim room and spotted Anne Lisbeth sitting on her haunches a few feet away, staring at him.

The cat lifted a paw and indifferently licked. Nick made as if he was going to kick it and it shot off, a blur of raccoon gray, bursting up the stairs, and he heard his daughter's shout of happiness.

When Nick's mid-tour leave came up at six months, he just didn't tell Trish. He said he wasn't coming home; he said a private's wife was having severe complications in her pregnancy and Nick gave his leave to him.

“There isn't some single soldier who could make the sacrifice instead?” Trish asked. Then, when Nick didn't say anything, “Fine, be the good guy. That's what I'll tell Ellie. You can't see your daddy because he's being the hero again.” She didn't sound angry or even that upset, just giving him shit because lately she always gave him shit about something.

“Anything you want to tell me?” he asked calmly. “Anything at all?” He wasn’t sure what he was getting at, if he was asking for a confession or a fight.

There was a long silence, as if Trish wasn’t sure what he was getting at either, and then the predictable talk of Ellie: A’s in the first grade, her most recent piano recital and the birthday party he had missed, all the milestones and transformations that had passed Nick by.

“She misses you,” Trish said softly, as if she didn’t want their daughter to hear. Nick imagined Ellie paging through her Grimm’s in the living room, arching a thin eyebrow when her mother’s voice dropped low, knowing the way all children do when their parents are talking about them. Nick waited for Trish to say that she missed him, too, but she hadn’t said that in months.

Trish continued, “Last night, during prayers, she asked God to blow up the bad guys before they could blow you up.”

Nick tried to laugh but instead closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the hot metal of the pay phone and felt like all the gravity of the world was pulling on his rib cage.

“Kiss her for me,” he whispered, and two hours later he was boarding a plane for home.

Nick, being Nick, had every step planned out. When he was sure, absolutely sure, that his wife wasn’t cheating on him, he would leave the basement. He would wait until Ellie and Trish went to bed. Then he would jog the four miles to the Travelodge just off Indian Trail and get a room. He would take a really long shower, shave, brush his teeth, make sure there wasn’t any dirt under his nails, eat a hot meal, get a few hours of sleep in a bed. First thing in the morning he would change into the uniform that was carefully folded in his assault pack. Then he’d call Trish, catch her before her run, and tell her he was on his way, that he had gotten leave after all at the last minute and had to jump on a plane, that he hadn’t had a chance to contact her when they stopped over in Kuwait, but he was here at the Killeen Airport, he was home, he was about to get into a cab and he couldn’t wait to see her and Ellie. He would say that he loved them, he was sorry, he was everything and anything he ought to be. Then he’d hang up, tell the cabdriver to stop at a florist, and Nick would buy a huge bouquet and whatever stuffed animals he could get his hands on.

However, he did not know what he would do if he found out that Trish was indeed cheating on him.

The scrape of the car keys, the corralling of Ellie out the door, time for first grade, time for Trish to go to work at that Montessori School in the ritzy neighboring town of Salado, finger painting to Mozart, prints of freaky Frida Kahlo with monkeys in her hair gazing down at the kids. Nick started to go up the stairs and then hesitated, sat down on the dim bottom step and waited. Then the front door opened again and he heard the click of Trish's shoes moving quickly from the hallway to the kitchen. Ellie must have decided she needed something—a juice box or an apple or maybe her favorite Maggie doll. Something forgotten, always something, and then Trish was gone. The old Volvo pulled out of the driveway and Nick tiptoed into the civilian world.

The first thing he did was walk into the kitchen and look out at the backyard.

Sure enough, there was a willow tree sitting right smack in the middle of the lawn. A frail, spindly spider sort of thing. But big enough that it wouldn't have fit in Trish's car. Nick took a deep breath. So at least part of Trish's story was true. That was a good liar's smoothest trick, to plant bits of reality into the subterfuge. It was the untold that Nick watched for. The slipup. The contradiction. The nervous hands touching a cheek, an ear, the smile or frown that seemed forced, the desire to change the subject. Such obvious signs.

The cat stepped in front of Nick, weaving between his legs as if deliberately trying to trip him.

"Shoo!" Nick stamped his foot and the cat hissed and ran.

He opened the fridge and stared at the shelves of plenty: a gallon of organic milk, a block of sharp cheddar cheese, fresh squeezed orange juice, and weirdly hourglass-shaped bottles of pomegranate juice. Nick hadn't seen such vividly colorful food for more than six months. He poured himself a cup of orange juice, careful not to take enough to be noticed. He did the same with the milk and savored it, full fat and fresh. Then a handful of blueberries, cherries, grapes. The garbage bag was new and empty so he put the cherry pits in his pocket. He shaved a few slices off the cheese with his Gerber knife and let it melt in his mouth.

Then he noticed the two bottles of white wine, both opened. His wife always drank red. Did that count as proof or had his wife just started drinking something new? Maybe she had a girlfriend over one night who had brought the wine, maybe they watched movies, painted their nails, told themselves how good their hair looked, or did whatever women did when their men were away.

He carefully washed and dried his glass, made sure everything was put back perfectly in the fridge, and left the kitchen.

He went directly to the master bedroom and stood in the doorway. He had picked out this furniture set of dark mahogany, choosing it because the headboard had a pillow of leather pegged into the wood with medieval-looking brass nails. Trish said it looked like the Inquisition but that was what Nick liked—the bed seemed like it was made for history, that it would be fixed in their lives forever.

The room was immaculate. No strange baseball caps or sneakers, no boxers or tightie-whities in the laundry basket, no new lingerie in Trish's top drawer. His relief hit him hard enough that he had to sit down on the mattress. It felt like it always did, the bed, the room, the house; it felt like it was his.

On his way back to the basement, he walked through the living room and, like the bedroom, it was the same, the family photos spaced nicely around the flat-screen TV, an abstract oil painting over the fireplace, a few charcoal sketches perfectly accenting the black leather sofa. He ran his hands along the cushions as if he could channel who had sat on the leather from its soft touch. They had fought over it. Trish had whined and whined, wanted an ugly stuffed corduroy couch with clawed feet like an old bathtub, but Nick had won. Now the leather leered at him, so soft, so sexy. He had wanted it because he imagined making love to Trish on the supple length and then somehow they never had, she was a bedroom-only kind of girl, but now he wondered if, like the white wine, she had developed new tastes.

There was a day at the forward operating base, a day like any other, the guys coming in from their latest mission emptyhanded, unsure if not finding a cache of guns at the local imam's house was a good or bad thing. They were exhausted, hungry, the Humvee's AC busted again, and they knew they had missed DFAC's one hot meal of the day. They exited the Humvee, snapped off their forty pounds of Kevlar, took off their dusty Oakley sunglasses, and wiped the sweat from their eyes.

A private was sitting on a folding chair cleaning his rifle and drinking Wild Tiger, an Iraqi energy drink reputed to be laced with nicotine, the radio at his feet blasting Stephen Stills's "Love the One You're With." He was singing along, intent on the greasy insides of his gun.

Nick stood listening and thought of Trish's hips sashaying to the refrain, *When you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with*. She grooved on all those long-haired seventies sounds, Bee Gees, Rod Stewart, Eagles, whipping out her old high school cassette tapes when feeling frisky.

Then Nick heard a hissed "Motherfucker." He glanced up in time to see Staff Sergeant Torres, one of the most laid-back guys he knew, walk straight over to the private and stomp the radio to smithereens.

The private leaned back in his chair to get away from flying bits of plastic. Nick and two other soldiers moved in close, ready to pull the men apart if Staff Sergeant Torres planned on smashing the private's face as well.

Instead Torres looked down at the shards under his boots. "I'll pay for that," he said, then turned and walked back to his tent.

None of the men looked at each other, as if refusing to acknowledge what they had witnessed. They knew there was only one thing that would make a guy snap like that, make him want to crush those words out of existence, and it didn't have a damn thing to do with life in Iraq.

By the time Trish and Ellie returned from school, Nick was firmly ensconced and almost comfortable with his setup. He had shoved some of Ellie's discarded stuffed animals into an old pillowcase and propped it against the wall as a cushion for his back. He had dug through the boxes he could reach and found a few of his books. Maybe not his favorites, his *How to Eat Soup with a Knife*, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, and *Crime and Punishment* were still in his office upstairs, but here were the books he had liked before he joined the army, his Grisham and Clancy and *Black Hawk Down*.

A couple of Ellie's fairy tales were here, too, a yard sale version of Hans Christian Andersen and a lesser known collection of Grimm. He picked the Grimm up gingerly, as if he were touching his daughter's hand. He wondered if she was finally over her obsession, if she was listening to ordinary stories now with happy endings, stories that other children liked, the fluff that made Disney worth millions. He opened it and started reading a story titled "Child in the Grave," whose first sentence stated: *It was a very sad day, and every heart in the house felt the deepest grief; for the youngest child, a boy of four years old, the joy and hope of his parents, was dead.* He closed the book and shut his eyes.

That was life. The motherless Hansel and Gretel, starving and lost in the forest, arriving at the cannibal witch's gingerbread cottage. The little mermaid rescuing her prince from the stormy sea, then giving up her voice and her fin for painful legs only to watch him fall in love with the woman he mistakenly thinks saved him from drowning. The young army corporal, a mere three days from going home to his wife and newborn, gets hit by a sniper. Such vicious twists dealt to the undeserving.

And those were the stories people knew about. The ones that stayed silent could be almost just as bad: the everyday horrors of lonely and quietly disappointed wives, of husbands deployed to the desert for years and years, missing their children's first steps, spelling bees, scraped knees.

Nick stretched; his neck and back ached from sleeping contorted on the hard cement. It was day three and he was starting to smell; as soon as his girls left for school he would risk a shower. And he desperately needed to dump the latest bottles of urine; even the cat shit above couldn't mask the acid and meaty stench of his slightly dehydrated, over-proteined piss. Trish hadn't been grocery shopping so he couldn't eat much of the dwindled-down fresh food but he could eat a can or two of tuna. She wouldn't miss a couple of tablespoons of mayo or slices of bread. Nick might even turn on the TV for an hour or two to see what was happening in the world.

So far there had been no sign of this Mark Rodell—maybe Trish had told him the truth, Nick thought, letting himself feel hopeful. Maybe he really was just a pal.

Or maybe he planted the willow in the backyard and then planted something else. Nick took a deep breath and told himself he could live with that. He could forgive. He could handle it as long as Trish's feelings hadn't changed toward Nick, as long as she still loved him, and this . . . this aberration faded with time until it was nothing but a memory overshadowed by anniversaries and vacations and Ellie's high school graduation. He could do it, he could, if it meant keeping the life they had, the beautiful life of Trish next to him, her hip pressed against his in the night, her hands tracing the bones of his spine, her body pulling him toward her, against and inside her, to a place he knew and longed for, safe with her and home.

But what if, what if, damn it, the what-ifs burned his brain and he pushed his filthy hands against his eye sockets. What if it had happened in his bed, on his couch, in the newly redone tub of the master bathroom? Relax, he told himself, relax, don't kick the wall or kill the cat. Then he thought of the sergeant busting the radio to bits, how good it must have felt, that release and revenge, in crushing that sound into nothing.

That night Nick kept rearranging his pillowcase of Ellie's animals. It was after midnight and he couldn't sleep. His body missed his morning five-mile runs, missed the exhaustion of a long day of constant movement and thought, fueled by endorphins, adrenaline, caffeine. There was always another informer waiting with a story, the rumor of small arms crossing borders, or the sighting of a high-value target visiting a second cousin. There was always something for Nick to chase.

But now the only thing he could do was wait. He told himself that he needed a couple more days. He just had to get through the weekend and then he would be

satisfied. If Trish lived blamelessly through a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, then all was well.

He imagined her asleep above him, her brown hair fanned out across the pillows, her long legs kicking free of the sheets and twitching the way they did when she dreamed. Her bedside table set with the glass of water she filled each night but never drank, her wedding ring and pearl earrings in one of her grandmother's china teacups, the framed photo of Nick in uniform holding a confiscated AK, smiling as if he owned the whole damn world. He had seen that photo when he went into the bedroom, and what woman would bring a lover to bed if there was a picture of her husband with a gun staring down at them?

He rubbed his hand over his face. Trish had been right. It was so damp down here that Nick felt like his skin was covered in a film of mold. Keeping the window open had actually made a huge difference. He reached out and touched the rough wall to his right. It was slightly concave and uneven, looked like something that had been crafted with a pickax. When they were first stationed at Hood four years ago, Nick had wanted to live on post, wanted Trish to be surrounded by other army wives and families. But she refused. She didn't like the exposed carports, chain-link fences, or the flat roofs of the houses on Wainwright, and at the time Nick was only a Warrant 1 and didn't have the rank to get assigned anything nicer. So they started looking off-post in Killeen and Harker Heights, looking at the housing developments that seemed to spring up overnight like mushrooms after a heavy rain.

Trish had chosen this particular house on Cheyenne Trail because of the basement; she said that it reminded her of her childhood and she couldn't imagine buying a home that didn't have roots deep underground. Nick had laughed at her, hoping she was kidding. They were in Texas, for goodness' sake, and basements were unheard of. But the original owner had also been the architect, builder, and contractor of the entire housing development, and he hailed from upstate New York and, East Coaster like Trish, he, too, had decided that he needed a basement. It must have cost him a fortune digging through that unyielding soil of rock and clay. A fortune for a whim. Which was also what Nick thought about the house. Sure, it was fairly spacious, three bedrooms with an office, wood floors, and ceiling fans. But they could have gotten a new house, un-lived in, untouched, for less. But he loved Trish like that, loved her enough to do something crazy, loved her enough to buy her one of the only houses in Texas with a basement.

When he made it back from Iraq for good, he was going to rip out this moldering carpet and finally get rid of these damn boxes. Hell, they would redo the whole thing, make it a playroom for Ellie and her friends. Trish would paint huge murals

on the walls and Nick would put up new shelving so that Ellie's toys didn't have to rest on the floor. Why hadn't he ever thought of that before? Trish in an old T-shirt with paint on her forehead, re-creating all those fairy tales in their gruesome wonder, and Nick would walk over and hold his bottle of beer to her lips. She would drink deeply, her eyes on his, and Nick would know there was no one else in her life, never was and never would be, and he'd find a way to never leave her alone again.

There were still no visitors by late Friday afternoon, day four of his precious leave, just his wife and daughter. Each day had been almost identical in its simplicity. His wife running every morning, his daughter rising and yelling for that hell cat, off to work and school, and then Nick would creep up the steps like some troll, elf, garden sprite, to steal food, wash his hands and face, peer at the photos of his family together and normal. He would retreat to his cave and his girls would come home, do schoolwork, eat dinner, get Ellie ready for bed, then Trish would watch TV and turn in early.

Tonight he could hear Trish singing softly while she made dinner, the fridge door opening and then sucking closed, the oven timer dinging, and Ellie singing along, not sure of the words but mimicking her mother. Nick fidgeted behind his wall of cardboard, desperate for Sunday to come. He cracked his knuckles gently, finally took out his flashlight, allotting himself an hour of its light to read a bit of the Grimm.

Then a sparkle of white gleamed briefly along the low basement ceiling—a car had pulled up in the driveway. Nick clicked off the flashlight, letting the book fall to the floor with a muted thud, his heart lifting in his chest like it wanted to crawl up and out his dry throat.

The doorbell didn't sound but Nick heard the unlocked door open and a man's voice push itself into the rhythms of his wife and child's song.

Nick fingered his Gerber knife and stood, ready to protect his family. But Trish's voice called back, comfortable and welcoming, and footsteps creaked toward the kitchen along the floor above.

Nick held on to his knife all through dinner, listening to another man tease his daughter, listening to another man chew and eat his wife's food, his weight shifting in the chair that Nick ought to be sitting in, opening beer bottles and quenching his thirst with all that Nick loved. He held the knife when Trish took Ellie to bed and he heard the interloper pace, heard him put some dishes away clumsily in the dishwasher, as if wanting Trish to hear him clean up, finally turning on the

television set. Nick thought how easy it would be to walk up those steps and slit this stranger's throat and be out of the house and gone before his wife had finished telling Ellie a bedtime story. But he waited, waited because having a man over for dinner looked bad but it still wasn't proof.

Then Trish came down and her voice was low and she laughed a lot, softly though, as if shy to show her teeth, and Nick knew from the way the door of the fridge kept opening and closing and glasses were clinking that they were drinking those bottles of white wine. Then a stretch of silence that could only be a kiss, and Nick pushed the knife into his thumb until he bled, just enough to keep him angry instead of wanting to put it to his own neck.

Nick was still holding his knife two hours later when he crept up the cellar stairs, utilizing every ounce of stealth he had ever learned. He had his assault bag, all evidence of his arrival packed up and wiped clean from the basement, and could be on his way to Iraq by dawn. He kept thinking of the Little Mermaid. Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, not the singing movie desecration. How, brokenhearted, she went to the prince's room on his wedding night and looked down on his sleeping face, his arm thrown possessively across his new bride. If she killed the prince and his wife, she would be set free, back to the sea and the waves that could crash over her until all of this human awfulness had faded away and she was a soulless water creature again.

The moon was near full and filtered through the blinds of the windows, filling the house with a thick, underwater blue. Nick went into Ellie's bedroom and stood at the edge of her bed, close enough to touch her, close enough to see the rise and fall of her chest. She was curled around her Maggie doll, her hands cupped together by her chin, her lips turned in a faint grin. She slept like her mother—deeply, innocently, unafraid, dreaming things he would never know.

Anne Lisbeth followed him as he crossed the hallway, moving soundlessly from Ellie's room into the master bedroom, her eyes knowing and reflective green like a witch's familiar. Nick stopped at the threshold. There was his wife and there was a stranger sleeping next to her. Trish's face was tilted toward the door, a bare arm trailing off the bed, the toes of one pale foot poking out from the sheet, just as Nick had imagined her night after night. The man was turned away, his back a wall, his head half hidden by a pillow, anonymous. But Nick could see the ridges of his fragrant spine and knew that he and his Gerber could take him. Easily.

Nick moved the knife from his right hand to his left and then back to his right again and took a step closer to the bed.

He had done it. Here it was, finally, after all his searching, after all the lies and lies and lies, the shifty informants with their misinformation and subtleties lost in translation. Here, in his own home, was a single and undeniable truth. Nick felt a wave of sweat seep through him and his bowels twist, but he felt a sense of relief, too, that finally, for once, there was no doubt.

The knife continued to move from hand to hand, the blade catching the moonlight, a pendulum swinging from one side to the next, a judge's gavel raised, and Nick waited to see where it would land.