ELEVEN DAYS

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ALFRED A. KNOPF
NEW YORK
2013

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

www.aaknopf.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Carpenter, Lea.
Eleven days : a novel / by Lea Carpenter. — First edition.
pages cm
"This is a Borzoi book."
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-307-96070-2
1. Mothers and sons—Fiction. 2. Soldiers—Family relationships—Fiction. 3. United States. Navy. SEALs—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3603.A7698E44 2013 813'.6—dc23 2012051104

Jacket design by Peter Mendelsund

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

For
the one who said,
“only tactical competence, and humility, impresses me.”

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

—W. H. Auden,
"The Shield of Achilles"

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Tarawa

The United States Navy SEALs came out of the Teams that served in Vietnam; they in turn came out of the Navy Seabees, the Scouts and Raiders, and the Underwater Demolition Teams used during World War II. The UDTs evolved out of something else: loss of lives. Their unit was born in the wake of the Battle of Tarawa. At Tarawa, for the first time, the Japanese mounted a sophisticated defense against an enemy amphibious landing. In one day, six thousand Americans died or were injured. It was 1943.

Most lives were lost before the Marines reached the beach that day. They drowned. They didn't know how deep the water was; they didn't know where the reefs lay. The moon had skewed the tides. Men stepped from their boats into chest-high waters, and when their gear sank, it took them with it. The coral was sharp, and so close to the surface in places that you could see it catch the sun.

A new force was required where men were as comfortable in water as on land, and the navy's underwater demolition trainees possessed part of the necessary skill set. These were combat swimmers, reconnaissance experts, with a kit of suits, knives, life preservers, and a facemask. On D-day they secured the French beaches.

In 1962 President Kennedy announced a new defense initiative: a focus on "Special Forces," men who would fight in unorthodox condi-

tions against an unorthodox enemy. These were not kids trained for trenches. These were warriors ready for the military equivalent of grand master chess games—only ones where you pushed pawn to queen in the dark. They were one spoke on the Special Operations Forces wheel, but the Teams soon proved unique. Their ability to make critical decisions quickly, in complex situations, marked them apart. A SEAL's best weapon, like a scholar's, is his mind.

ONE

SPOONS

CHADDS FORD, PENNSYLVANIA,
MAY 11, 2011

In the bedroom, Sara finds her running shoes. She has not worn them in a while; there never seemed to be time, although she is no longer sure what she fills her days with, aside from waiting. The neighbors bring their new soups, and she pretends to have new tastes for them, but when they leave, she empties them down the shiny, stainless drains.

She pulls on an old Academy shirt and starts out the front door. Where they live now, the driveway is long, almost half a mile, and she knows a good route for today. If she crosses the neighboring farm's yard, she can catch a path at the lower end of their garden. With that path she can come to their pond, the one she once fished in, and gain access to the main road. The main road leads to a wood, and out the other side of the wood is the highway. This is where she can turn back. Yard, to path below pond, to main road, to highway. If she hits the highway out of breath, she is sure she can hitch a ride. She is a celebrity of sorts now. Everyone wants to help.

She long ago adopted the habit of wearing a hat when she runs. When she puts the hat on, she looks down at laces her son left for her when he was last home. They're bright red. "Running

is fun, Mommy," he'd said. "Don't take it so seriously." He still calls her Mommy even though he is a man now. He is twenty-seven. He has been missing for nine days.

*

As a child he'd played with spoons, not guns, even though they had some of those around the house, too. His father had bought him a Boss sixteen-gauge, one made between the wars, as a baby present. "He has to learn not to be afraid to hold one," his father had said. But the spoons had him. He liked to line them up on the floor. For his third birthday, a godparent gave him a large tin box of multicolored plastic spoons, and soon the phrase "box of spoons" became a proxy for all delights, as in (while watching football) "that last pass was better than a box of spoons"; or (on Christmas morning) "twinkly lights are my favorite thing ever, except for a box of spoons." On his fifth birthday his father sent him a small silver spoon. It was engraved with the date and this phrase: YOU WERE NOT BORN WITH THIS.

He grew up quickly. He was so creative. Leaving spoons aside at last, and reluctantly, for paintbrushes, he was easily the first choice for class pet of every art teacher. Art and writing: these were his early passions. And that pleased her; it somehow reinforced her sense of herself. It reinforced that she had not ever been owned by anyone—not a government, not a military, not a man. It also reinforced her dreams for what she wanted her son to be. She wanted him to be not only different from his father but also free from the demons that had come with what his father did, or at least from what she knew of what he did. She didn't want a son who grew up to be familiar with words like *Kalashnikov*, *katusha*, or *jezail*—unless he learned them from a Kipling poem.

But anyone who met him today would say, *Soldier*. *Fighter*. They would want him on their team. As a mother she was willing to engage in pride over fear and to admit the possibility that his sacrifice was hers, too. His sacrifice was something she had been able to give her country.

Sara felt she had failed in so many other areas of her life, including a chance at an elite education, but she could always say her son is a member of a very special group. If his father had been alive, he would have smiled at the irony. He had claimed to distrust the military, despite his obsession with its history. He was a famously great shot but kept to birds and maintained he'd never trained at a range. He mocked things he did not understand, and the military seemed to have been one of those things. He knew more than enough about it to be clear on his views, but still not quite enough. He didn't understand the difference between the power of an idea and the power to put an idea into action, but his son did. Even from a very young age, their son had a sense of respect for action over talk, and a sense of respect for the things he did not know. His father had opinions; he had questions. And the father's guns remained in the house, but they were no longer of interest to the boy as he grew. Since Jason had signed up, Sara never went dove shooting anymore. An old arsenal sat at rest, except the pistol she kept by her bed.

She has not run more than a quarter mile before her knee begins to ache. Sometimes when she runs, she will reach the point where she feels she cannot go on, but then she thinks about her son, the runs he's endured. Multimile runs, on the beach, at night, wet. "Transportation" runs of two miles to a meal, carrying once or twice his body weight in gear. She approaches the path at the base of the yard and she stops for minute. She notices the sky has darkened; it's about to pour.

*

She had met his father when she was still trying to be an artist at Georgetown. A summer job listing at Langley looked interesting, and she was broke, and the art jobs didn't pay the bills. She was asked in her interview if she knew how to work a coffee pot, and she said yes. She was asked to name the secretaries of defense and state and by some miracle, she knew those. She was asked if she scared easily, and she said no. She got the job. She made coffee, sometimes up to twelve pots a day, and carried it to the "boys on the floor." She learned a lot by osmosis but mainly she kept track of her hours and left as early as she could.

One day for whatever reason she earned an invitation to a conference in Charlottesville, at the University of Virginia. ("We'll need coffee there, too," said her boss, with a wink, as way of explanation.) She would have to work overtime, but she would be meeting interesting people. So she went. And at the other end of the conference room there was a man.

She was just standing there, by her coffee pot. He looked at her tag—SARA—and sang the first line from the Fleetwood Mac song by the same name: *Wait a minute baby/Stay with me awhile.* She didn't know the song well but he told her it was very good and suggested she buy the album. Then he clarified the connection by pointing up the song's spelling of "Sara, no 'h,' just like yours." And he said, "Sara without the 'h' is much less *biblical.*" He was thirty years older. She would only find that fact appalling much later, when she was old enough to know people thirty years her junior. But by that time she was resolved not to think too deeply about things.

When she asked what he did for a living he said, "Writer," then smiled. There were a lot of "writers" in the intelligence industry,

at least according to her nonscientific survey. "Writer" seemed to be the then-contemporary analog to America's Vietnam-era "military advisers." As far as she could tell, the government was madly sending writers all over the place at that time, with varying levels of success. But this one actually looked like a writer. And he talked like one, too. It was 1983. His name was David.

She might have known he was lying when he told her what he did, or what he felt about her, but the lies, which would deepen in complexity along with their relationship, were part of his great game. They were part of what she had chosen to accept when she elected to keep their baby. She was sure that the genes she was incubating had potential to be more—more than a college dropout carrying coffee for smart chauvinists. And more, too, than a midlevel CIA analyst posing as a journalist. Maybe this child could even be something heroic. *Heroic* to her at that time meant someone who helped people or created things. A surgeon. Or a scientist. She would even accept an architect, too.

Part of the blissful ignorance of not yet having had a first child is the belief that you might just be able to influence the course of their lives. Influence them to greatness. And away from danger. Jason came in May, a little Taurus. May 1984. He was small, but he was perfect.

*

The path is becoming slippery with rain; at least she has a hat. Last year the neighbors invited her to help them enlarge their garden. Perhaps they felt sorry for her. She had said yes, and she had planted all the "green things." The neighbor took a picture of her covered in dirt and said, "Sara, you look good in brown." The picture found a place alongside all the other pictures in the

house of young men wearing brown—in deserts, on beaches, and under tarps. Planting had been an exercise in humility and precision since she had never really done it before. The neighbors were forgiving, and they invited her to come daily and monitor her progress. She had not gone in some time.

She can see the young lettuces starting to poke through now. And the green beans, and the broccoli. She slows to a walk and stops to check the radishes. Radishes need rain. *The zucchinis grow so fast*, she thinks. Like a child. If you do not watch them, they disappear into something else before your eyes. A novice can overgrow a zucchini to the size of a watermelon through benign neglect. The meat inside remains edible, but tough. It takes a very sharp knife to slice.

*

Jason was eight when his father died. She had been torn about whether to tell him because at that point they had not seen his father in over two years. Some part of her knew that not telling him would only increase her son's curiosity later. And it did. Eventually, friends of his father's felt it was their role—their duty—to tell the boy about things his father had done. "He helped make this country safer," one of them said, sitting on his porch in Virginia. It disgusted her because she was certain it was a lie. David had done what pleased David, and David had gone where he had the most fun. But then, why ruin a fantasy for a child? It was David, after all, who had given her boy to her.

May 2001 was the birthday when Jason's Washington godfather brought him the photograph: a picture of David standing on an old tank, in a desert (or backed by sand dunes), holding a tiny teddy bear. Sara never knew he had stood on any tank, ever, and

her last memory of that bear was that Jason had lost it years ago, at camp. She never knew David had ever been anywhere near a desert. He always said he was calling from somewhere glamorous and urban, like Paris, and those calls always made her angry because she'd only been to France once (with him). Yet here was hard evidence: the father of her child had carried his son's teddy bear around the world with him. Maybe he had carried it to remind himself of who he was working to protect. Maybe he simply carried it to seduce young girls. She would grant him the former, but suspected the latter was more likely.

Being born out of wedlock might not seem the most auspicious start, but the first hours of Jason's life were perfect. Everyone was present at the hospital that day: one senator, two ambassadors, three surgeons (they knew a lot of people at the hospital), and all four future godfathers—a diplomat, a journalist, a congressional aide, and a law professor. It was a suitably male crew for a baby boy. For those hours at least, they felt like a family. David held the baby and beamed. Sara later thanked him for giving her her own private liberal media elite. She hadn't been consulted on the selection of godparents, but she loved them, every one. She was a kid; what did she know. They would each in their own way help raise the boy, one of them, in particular, over time. None of them believed in God, but no one seemed to mind, or cared to address that irony.

Then he left. He promised to send money, and to write letters, and to come and visit. There was no diamond ring, no allusion to any future, no remorse, and no romance. No one ever even clarified what word would be used to describe his relationship with Jason although "Daddy" felt only slightly less libelous than "Uncle." Having limited family and few close friends (it went with the job, apparently), it was easy to say "The child was an

accident." Or, "a happy product of a lazy one-night stand." But people around the office knew there had been, at least briefly, love involved. They joked that the boy was named after Jason and the Argonauts, given his father's self-celebrated faux-pacifism. David never hid his reverence for "brass," especially when walking the E-ring with generals. But in truth the boy was named after her father, whom she had also lost too early.

There was a lot of talk, and a lot of speculation, and a lot of work. She couldn't sustain her office life and an illusion of ambition when all she wanted was to be home, but the reputation earned working from home in that town was rough. So when Jason turned four—not long after discovering his first set of spoons—she decided to leave. She would take him far away from people who felt church on Sunday mornings was a conflict with *Meet the Press.* She would take him to live in America.

Pennsylvania didn't seem that different from Virginia to a child. But the people he met there were very different. His classmates, no longer the sons and daughters of diplomats who knew the names of senators because they'd dined in their homes, were mostly Republicans. They played ice hockey. They would go on to be investment bankers or corporate lawyers or (in the cases of the really wealthy ones) organic farmers and hops brewers. Kids in this new place were kids: they talked about sports and sugared cereals and apple picking. They didn't study Mandarin or think of "Justice" as a place, with an address. Things felt, for a while, very quiet. And though the local mothers murmured about who the new girl was, Sara didn't care. They said she'd lost her husband in a foreign war. Or they said she'd never been married because she was a Communist—or was it *commune*-ist? But in general people were kind. They were not competitive or ambitious enough to be too nosy or too critical—at least not at first.

*

The "main road" is what the two-lane is called around here, and the relief on her knees as she hits the asphalt after running on the wet grass is visceral. Feeling very little pain, she decides to just keep running since she has nothing to go home to but the endless waiting, and even the best books or worst television no longer provide distraction. Sometimes, when Jason was in his first weeks of training, she would run twice a day on this road. It made her feel more connected to what he was going through. But her runs always ended with rest, and dreams. Where did his runs end?

She reaches that point where her breathing evens, and when she knows she can go for a good long while. Her heart beats very slowly, like an athlete's. It had always given her doctors the impression she was calm; it now gives that illusion to everyone else.

*

Sara told her son that his father died of a heart attack. He was traveling for work. And that work, according to him, was so important that he had had to choose it over being a more traditional dad. She always told Jason that his father worked for an embassy in Europe, because that was her understanding. First it had been France, then Spain; in the last years of his life, it was Sweden. But thinking back to a time before cell phones and e-mail, God only knows where he was and what he did. She was so mired in the process of caring for a little child and, when he slept, patching together work, that over time she didn't even ask anymore where David was or what he was doing. She had no illusion he cared for her or would one day be coming home and sitting at a table for meals with the two of them. She would hear rumors from friends about where he was but peo-

ple didn't ask anymore if she minded. More often they wanted to know how she minded being alone. Didn't she want to marry?

She assumed David did well as the size of the checks he sent began to rise. This meant she could send Jason to good schools, so she forgave the fact that she had no idea what kind of work generated them. She forgave the fact that they came with no letter, no return address. She knew who had sent them. And almost always he would call soon after. "Did you get the cash?" The calls felt cold and transactional, like a drug deal. She quickly stopped caring. She was rational and pragmatic. *Romance is vastly overrated*, she thought.

Jason was a senior in high school when she dropped him off that day in early September ten years ago. As she did on most days, she dropped him off and then returned home to take a nap. She wasn't sleeping well, and the insomnia had worsened as the anniversary—December—of David's death approached. Usually she didn't fall asleep; she just lay in bed, stared at the ceiling, took deep breaths and then made herself get up. When she was ready, she would sit down at her computer and do her work: editing interminably dull research papers written by former colleagues of David's. They all had books, and in the nearer term they had articles, white papers, and always possibly revolutionary essays to be submitted to prize-winning policy journals. They all had editors, too. At first they began giving her work because they felt sorry for her, but then when they saw she was good they would ask her again and again, until the relationship became a dependency, enough of one that they were willing to pay very well for her input. She had a healthy sense of humor about the fact that the content of much of what she worked on was foreign to her; she just tracked the value of the lines by their rhythm and let the politics stand "on author."

It was easy to forget about everything else once she was lost in her work, even as she was filled with mild self-loathing each time she sat down to it. It seemed so odd that she had ended up here, in the "middle of nowhere," poring over details in documents that only a very few people would ever read, and in which most people would fail to see any relevance. But then she would remember she was the mother of an extraordinary boy and she would think, *That's enough*.

Her real job was simply biding her time until school let out. This was perhaps the one reason she had not let Jason have a car. She knew these were the last few months she would have with him. They were already consumed with college applications, and in nine months he would move out. Then there would be marriage, she was sure of it. Jason wanted a "whole" family. When he left, her real work would be taken away. Or, at least, shifted. Being with him was all she had known her entire adult life: she'd become a mother when she was not much older than he was now. Two years older, to be exact.

*

But that September day was different. By nine o'clock, her phone was ringing off the hook. At first, seeing the 202 area code and assuming it was one of her Washington friends calling ("What are you doing with yourself these days?" Or "Have you had time to work on the piece?"), she didn't answer. But then the numbers changed: 202 became 917 and she saw it was Jason's cell, which he almost never used. He was meant to be in math class now. She knew that because he had moaned and groaned about it all the way through egg and cheese sandwiches that morning.

"What's the use of math?"

She tried to argue its practicality.

"Mommy, math never saved anyone's life."

"It might save yours if it gets you into Harvard," she said. Harvard was not out of his reach.

She picked up the phone. Her son was crying. She had not heard him cry in a long time. He possessed a remarkable, almost inhuman gift for tolerating pain, something she'd always attributed to losing a father—not once but twice: as an infant, and then again as a very young boy. To lose the father you never even really had in the first place was a unique tragedy, she knew; it promised a long tail of processing and forgiveness. Yet Jason was stoic. Physical pain didn't affect him at all. The day he'd dislocated his shoulder on the football field he didn't shed a tear. He was the quarterback. He had never been injured in six seasons of play. But that day she was there, and she saw him go down. When he stood up, his arm hung slant from the socket. While they waited for the EMT, the coach said to her, "Miss, I've seen three-hundred-pound linemen weep when this happens. Your boy is tough."

She knew that. This was a kid whose father, while brilliant and very funny, was no model in the morals—or the courage—department. His father played tennis and chess. Jason liked contact. He was an excellent experiment for scientists studying nature versus nurture, or tiger mothers keen to divine the special sauce for making great men, because the template was there was no template. There were genes. She'd done nothing but love him unconditionally. She had loved him and treated him with respect. She had tried to discipline him, but he disciplined himself. Sometimes at night she'd hear him running sprints around the house.

But that September day when he called, he was shaken. He was begging her to come to school and collect him. So she did, and in the car on the radio she heard the news. When they got

home, they sat in front of the television, liked two stoned Deadheads post-show. Realizing it was almost nine o'clock, Sara went to make dinner.

"Forget Harvard," Jason said. He was standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

They ate in silence until Sara said, "What do mean, 'Forget Harvard'?"

"I'm not going there," he said. "I'm going to apply to the Naval Academy."

And she looked at her little philosopher with his steaming-hot shepherd's pie, and she knew the argument was over.

"I know what I want," he said.

This phrase took her breath away. Sara had never said those words. *He's still in shock*, she remembers thinking. We all are. This will pass.

*

There are not many cars out, and she keeps heading to a traffic light she has designated as her turnaround point. If she makes it to the light, she will have gone five miles, and so ten by the time she is home. She plans to slow her pace, putting off the return. She knows the house will be clean. She has never had help and it is strange to have it now. Someone from the town sent—and paid for—two housecleaners. They were invisible and meticulous; she rarely saw them but she knew they were there. There was always mess, because her home had become a fort, and a retreat. It had become a base for all those who felt called to protect her.

After years of nights alone, there were so many others around all the time now. They were all good people. She has become close with the local cops; she has their numbers, and they all want

to help. One of them offered to move in, too, but she thinks that is overkill. No one is out to hurt her. People only want her story. At the traffic light she stops, and bends over, and takes some very deep breaths.

*

Her increasing interest in all things military ran parallel to her son's becoming an officer. With Jason at the Naval Academy, she got back to D.C.—and Virginia—regularly. She would meet friends for lunch. They were all amused to see how she had changed. She was only thirty-seven, so to many of them she was still a girl.

"You've traded Athens for Sparta," teased her old boss from Langley, the only boss she'd ever had, the one who had got her to the conference where everything had started. Or ended, depending upon your point of view.

"Yes, I guess I have," she said. She was proud of her son. She thought about that trade and thought she was fine with it. Sparta suddenly struck her as mission-driven, and relevant, Athens as lazy. But that wasn't really what was changing in her. What was mission-driven and relevant was what had always been: her love for her boy. Had he decided to join the circus, she might have developed an obsession with elephants.

Elephants would have been easier. There was a new generation of soldiers and sailors born that September day. Sara had not lost a son on 9/11; she lost him later to something she could not provide at home.

*

Rather than slow down she decides to speed up her pace. *What if I could make it home in half the time it took me to make it out here?* she thinks. *What if I could increase my time by ten percent on each run? At what point will my body simply say, Stop.* She runs so fast that, coming to the two-lane she almost trips over a branch thrown down by the storm—one too skinny to see in the dusk but still thick enough to break your leg. The near-miss is exhilarating. She feels like she has been given another chance. She can see the garden up ahead. The tomato vines are bent with rain.

*

The call came late on May 2, the first day of what should have been the last ten days of Jason's fifth tour. First, last, fourth, fifth: everything in military life involved numbers—or letters. This rigorous precision was not just for art; it was necessary for saving lives. Soon she got good at math, at placing events in time precisely, like a criminal witness. She had not known where he was; he had not been able to tell her throughout this deployment. She had given up reading newspapers, although old friends who knew Jason reached out regularly with a question or a view. *Yemen? Libya? It must be the Maghreb.* She simply wanted to know he was safe.

Since it is spring, people at the market talk about yesterday's tennis or last week's lacrosse games; they discuss plans for the upcoming antiques show or their newly cleaned infinity pools. People rarely mention the war because most of them care very little about it. Those who know her and know she has a son serving don't ask either; they are not sure what to say. Sara hasn't met any local veterans although she has heard that there is a retired Army Ranger around. When she thinks of her son, she still thinks

of her baby, lining up spoons. She hopes he has enough socks. "Socks" was the request she found most often in a book that was a collection of letters written home by soldiers during World War II. Jason had given it to her.

She'd spent so many years educating him, but now he educated her. *Phronesis* is a word she never knew before she read about it in a memoir written by a former Team guy, a memoir she never would have noticed or even known about at another time in her life. *Phronesis* is a quality. "The most interesting people are the people we don't know," said the father of another Academy boy at graduation. He had leaned over and whispered this to Sara as they sat there in the thick heat, watching their sons, all in white. She had only just met him and thought his comment was a compliment, perhaps a pass, but when she thought about it later she realized he was talking about all the kids that day, the kids who would leave and fight foreign wars for little pay and less power. And she thought: *The bravest people are the people we do not know*.

Phronesis was a word that cropped up once, and then increasingly often, in the e-mails she would receive periodically from her son. She never knew where he was when he was writing them, but his heart and his character were the same as they had always been, despite what had gone on in the course of his days. He was not writing about politics or about war zones. Mostly he was writing about what was on his mind that day, and more and more he was preoccupied with the question of whether to come home. Or, how to come home. Any shrink would have loved that. A father and son, both living the better part of their lives in undisclosed locations.

Phronesis, according to Aristotle, is wisdom learned from action that allows you to make choices about what to do in a given situation. It stands in opposition to *sophia*, or wisdom gained from

books. *Phronesis* was less for scholars than for soldiers. And what Sara learned over time was that each division of the military had its own, even if slight, variation on the larger code and culture of the overall enterprise. The Teams had very strict code. Part of it was from their training. Part of it is soldered in the fight. Her son had elected to join the military when there was a major fight on.

"We don't lose our men, ma'am," she was assured, when they—a chaplain, and a casualty assistance calls officer—arrived at the house that May morning, the morning following the phone call, to talk to her in person. On the phone she had only been asked if she would be at home. They had not told her anything more. On the phone, she had imagined a brigade. In person, there were two of them: an older man, maybe in his mid-fifties, in uniform, and a younger man who didn't look much older than her son. He was an officer home on leave. He had heard the news of Jason being missing and had asked that he be the one allowed to come, to be there when she heard. He lived three thousand miles away from where he stood now and had been spending his short time at home with the girl he planned to marry, but he had taken a plane and then driven a car across the country to be there to tell Sara this news. He knew her son. He had trained with him at Coronado and at Otay Lakes, and he had lived with him briefly at Virginia Beach. His name was Sam. She had met him before, but she had forgotten him. He looked older. He was missing an eye. When she saw that, she remembered his story.

The two men asked her to sit down, and then she was told: her son had been missing for two days. They said that they had a general idea of where he was, but that they could not tell her any more than that. They told her that Jason had been part of a very important mission, one she might even read about in the papers, but they could not tell her what that was, either—or where it was.

Sara didn't sense any drama from the word *mission* because it was what her son did every day—and every night. Missions were routine. That was the job. The older man told Sara her son would come home. *Dead or alive; is that implied?* she thought at the time.

As she listened to them talk, her mind drifted back to that night at the same kitchen table they were sitting around now. "Not Harvard" had been about belief; after that, there had been no turning back. She had been so proud throughout those next years, through all the Academy games and then, later, the early, tense selections for "Mini BUD/S," followed by her son's increasingly odds-defying failures to fail. She resolved to remain proud now. And strong. She was not ready for this. She could feel herself starting to faint. It's okay, she thought; one of these guys will catch me. I know how the protocol works.

Later that same day there was another knock on the door. And then another one. First, it was the local Catholic priest. He wanted to pray with her. Then it was the retired Ranger. He looked like he could really break some glass, and she took his number. He said he would come back every day and that she didn't have to worry. Then a man in a beautiful suit. He was a former Middle East–based CIA station chief who had traveled from his retirement in northern Maine and who insisted he would stay as long as she needed, down the road, at the little inn. This was all through word of mouth, as far as she could tell. Neighbors flooded her porch with offerings: sweets and alcohol and honey-baked ham. Someone sent a cook to help organize the kitchen and make dinners. A new refrigerator was installed, a gift from a local store. One of the state's senators arrived and promised to protect her from the press. She thought that was pretty funny. He said the governor would like to come and what time would be convenient for her? She had not even brushed her hair.

Like most people living through such a moment, she did not hear most of what was said or remember who had said it. She knew that things like sleeping and eating were necessary but remembered to do them only when prodded. People fell into various active roles and informally but carefully kept watch over her and the scope creep of her chaos. *Come on in. Yes, please. What beautiful peonies.* She suddenly did not want to be alone.

She was happy to have Sam in her son's room. His left eye was the most sensational blue. Ocean blue. And in the place of his right eye was a glass orb, with the NSW Trident inked onto it. She wanted to look at it closely but knew asking that would sound strange. She knew what the Trident was. Like most Team moms and wives, she had read what she could find of the existing literature and history. And she had heard about the glass-eye Tridents, but she had never seen one up close. It was the contrast with the boy's other eye that made it uniquely upsetting. And yet it was beautiful.

The Trident is made up of four elements: an anchor, a trident, a pistol, and an eagle. When her son had asked her for her interpretation of it, she'd said, "Well, the trident's for Neptune." She paused and said, "And the pistol's for strength?" Jason gave her a little essay on the Trident's meaning (the kind of thing she loved), which she had saved in a drawer somewhere. The part she always remembered was the part about the eagle. Something along the lines of "the eagle keeps his head down, because humility is the true sign of a warrior." When the guys are awarded their Tridents, at the end of their qualification training, their diplomas carry not only their own names but also the names of men killed in action. This tradition was not subtle, but it was powerful.

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When Jason was seven, Sara left him overnight for only the second time. An old friend was marrying another old friend, in Washington. In her toast, the young bride mentioned Naval Special Warfare training. She had seen a documentary about the base in Coronado that her husband had ordered from the Military Channel. Watching what those young men did, she said, made her think that perhaps they were preparing for the real fight of their lives: marriage. Everyone laughed. The groom worked on the Hill, and the only way he was likely to get close to the barrel of a gun was a weekend skeet shoot. He had an idea of his work as deeply civic and virtuous, and he liked to spend late nights watching reenactments of Civil War battles. He always told his wife and friends that he wished he'd gone into the military, but that given the chance at Stanford, well, there had not been any contest. He would marry this girl, they would raise a family, and he would make his mark in some more socially and politically less flammable way. He would write laws and work hard to try and pass them.

The bride was beautiful. Sara envied her dress. Sara envied the whole experience and ritual, one she knew now for certain she would never have. As the bride's toast went on, the room quieted down. She soon unintentionally stunned the clinking glasses to silence. She was describing an exercise—what they called an "evolution"—known as drown-proofing. In drown-proofing (the bride read this from a printed page), a boy's hands and feet are tied. He is also blindfolded. Like this, he jumps into a pool. He has to bob, and he has to swim fifty meters under water, without emerging for air. This is meant as much to test the will as it is to test physical stamina. And it is meant to test fear, because the fear that results from anticipation of failure is enough to keep a boy from ever reaching the edge of the pool. The bride had been trying to say something about commitment, and about romance, but

all anyone could talk about the entire rest of the night was those boys, bobbing in the water, blindfolded.

Driving north the next morning, Sara remembered thinking about the toast. How noble to enter into something so you can save the lives of others; no one she knew did that. What was she doing that was remotely noble? She'd woken feeling guilty about the sandy-haired seven-year-old at home with a sitter. When she got back, it was dark. She sat on the end of his bed for a long time while he slept. She looked at him and she thought, *You are the product of a very poor decision, but you are the most important thing in my life.* She thought, *I could easily swim fifty meters underwater for you.*

*

She checks her watch. She has been gone for nearly two hours. The last stop at the garden must have been longer than she realized. It is time to go home. It is almost all uphill through the neighbor's yard, and it looks different now. It is wet and dark. Does anyone even live there anymore? When was the last time she had seen those neighbors? Were they the ones who brought the blueberry pies? She can't remember. The ground evens out. She can see her favorite tree now in her own yard, a tree that once held a swing and that later served as poor protective cover for a target board. This is the lawn where she learned to shoot the little guns. As she reaches the top of the driveway, she can see a new car out front. It is not a police car, but it has government plates. There are two men standing by it. One of them is in uniform. They have come to bring her news.

ATHENS FOR SPARTA

CORONADO, CALIFORNIA,
NOVEMBER 2006

Jason jumps in feet first. As his heels hit the water, he fills his lungs with air one last time. He knows this test well. He read about it before he practiced for it, and he has practiced for it many times before now performing it in front of his peers. Not all the men will pass this test. He knows that the most important thing is to stay calm and not to panic. Panic is the assurance of failure.

If he can maintain his mental equilibrium, the rest is just water games, at least here. This is not a battle. This is a beautiful pool, near a beautiful beach, in one of America's most idyllic coastal communities. Dinner will be served later, and it will be good. And then he will have a bed to sleep in, a book to read, and rest. Sleep never seemed like a luxury when he was little, but he understands well the price of its absence now.

When he'd searched for information about drown-proofing online, back home, Jason found a chat room where one aspiring operator described how he had trained for drown-proofing by wrestling his brother underwater until one of them passed out. Jason thought that was ridiculous. But then, something about that post stayed in his mind as emblematic of the outlook of so many who wanted to succeed here. Whether or not they had prepared

in unwise or sophisticated ways, all of them had prepared. On its own, each element of the training might appear absurd, like a lone tennis player tasked to stand and volley cross-court for forty hours, without a racquet. But for the serious athlete, practice demands breaking down the diverse parts of the body—and of the equipment. Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training is what practice looks like when the game is special operations warfare.

Drown-proofing had earned its celebrity within and beyond the community because its simplicity was emblematic of the fact that an operator's best weapon is himself. In drown-proofing, there is no gear, no guns, and no camouflage. With your hands and feet tied, you not only swim underwater but also have to balance, bob, and stay afloat.

Jason sneaks in reading when he can, mainly at bedtime. Books had always been his escape growing up as an only child, alone much of the time, a car ride away from any friend. Books were the excuse not to come downstairs when his mother needed him, when he didn't feel like being needed. And books were his rebellion against the fact that he felt she'd taken him away from what might have been a more exciting place and life, and perhaps she'd also taken him away from his father. What little he has known of David he has known from books: books on topics he knows his father loved, or books written by friends and colleagues of his father's.

Having exhausted those categories, Jason started reading stories he imagined his father might like, or stories his godfathers would tell him had been meaningful to David. Sometimes his godfathers would lend him things that David had lent to them; within their little group, they had an active system of exchange and borrow. You could tell a lot about a man from his library, per-

haps even more than from the story he told about himself. Libraries don't lie in quite the same way. David's library seemed to be, like those of most people, aspirational as much as it was honest: it held the things he wanted to have read. But it was also romantic. Arthurian legend was a particular passion.

When Jason read things he thought might be like the man to whom he owed so much, he'd underline a passage. He did know that David loved to travel, and he wanted to be a traveler, too. He knew that David did work he loved, and he hoped to find work he loved, too. And he knew David didn't need anyone, or at least that was what his mother always said, and he longed not to need anyone either. Most of all, he longed to be far away from the familiar, far away from the kids who teased him about the fact that he had no dad.

Now he reads poetry because if your reading is in ten-to-fifteen-minute intervals, eventually anything longer starts to feel like a waste, or a chore. Poems performed in the right amount of time, and then they left him something to think about. High ROI. He picks up the same poem or collection of poems again and again and again, until they are stuck in his mind. He likes war poems. He has memorized most of Wilfred Owen. He likes Wallace Stevens, too. He likes the poem "Sunday Morning." It is part of a collection he stole from his journalist godfather's library, because he had seen that the book was signed and dated by David and that the date was, by coincidence, Jason's birthday. It had been sent from overseas.

Apparently it was one of the last things anyone received from him. After April, David had stopped calling. After May, he stopped writing. In December, he was dead. David had circled lines from the poem's first stanza:

She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

Sepulchre was underlined, and a definition for it was written in the margin: "burial vault, tomb."

He knows his mother thinks the navy was the death knell of any academic ambition. The thought wasn't her fault. She grew up in the seventies; her parents were lapsed hippies, the kind who went to Woodstock too late, in their thirties, and didn't take drugs. They adopted their era's popular politics—anti-Nixon, pro-Kennedy, LBJ-agnostic—and raised their daughter for the first ten years of her life on a modified commune. They were against war, but their experience of war was an image in a newspaper. And when their parents died, they had no trouble absorbing the houses and cars—and ideas—that went with inheritance. Passionate without the education behind their passions to make them actionable, they sent Sara into the world a kind of rabid anti-romantic. As soon as she was old enough, she ran away, separating herself from them to the extent that she could. She wanted something normal. She wanted order. She took an internship working for the government. She surrounded herself with people who had too much education and discrete wills to practical action.

Sara's fears about the downside of her son forgoing Cambridge

and convention were mainly fears about adverse psychological effects, not safety. Fears for his safety would come later. While he trained, she was mainly afraid of his drifting onto just another kind of commune, one that would set him apart from the majority of his peers and would certainly result in what finance professors call "high opportunity cost." What would he do after? Would Wall Street or neurosurgery residencies still be available? What were the merits of learning to parachute into the ocean and shoot rocket launchers? She worried that there was an element of play in this that was, well, play qua play. And in some very deep place that she would never admit to him, she worried that the games would be so much fun that they would not permit him to reenter the less rarefied air of real life.

That will to orbit Earth was in his DNA. Starting military training was not the sign she had hoped for. This was not an ordinary boy, interested in ordinary things. Jason felt her fears came from her love, and her ignorance. She was his mother, so he forgave her. She was all he had. He knew that she felt he was all she had, too.

*

There aren't many poets in the mix at Coronado, and there aren't many men who talk to their mothers as often as he does. Or maybe there are, but they don't let on. Some have wives, or girlfriends. Some have children. Family life crowds out intellectual pleasures, to some extent. Yet if Jason is sneaking sonnets, no one knows what else was being read at night, after hours. Epictetus? *The New Republic*? His experience with these guys so far is that they're all pretty relaxed, at least on the surface, and yet they're

all inordinately driven. Imagine surfers who hide the *summas* on their degrees.

Leadership is a word used religiously here; and it is about success in action but also about a will to learn. There is a small shelf of books for borrowing at the base. The titles include classics like *Profiles in Courage* and *The Best and the Brightest.* Histories, mainly political or military-based, are stacked up alongside and on top of single volumes left behind by former classes: Clancy, Sledge, Couch, Le Carré, Sun Tzu. Some are signed and dated on the inside; others have annotations that mirror the only-just-post-adolescent enthusiasms of their readers, like "not fucking possible" and "beast." When he describes the books one night to his mother, she says, "It sounds like you need a librarian." Two days later a large box of books arrives with a note from her: "For that shelf." Suddenly the aspiring sailors had Shakespeare. The plays went largely untouched, even *Titus*, but they provided room for broad mockery of the recipient.

BUD/S was about cultivating trust and about learning to attend to detail. The mission of the instructors was not to break their students but to identify and support the best among them. The program had three parts: First Phase, also known as "Two Weeks and a Long Day," was two weeks of rigorous conditioning plus ocean and boat training, followed by Hell Week, where sleep deprivation and disorientation were added to the mix. It is a mystery to physicians and military historians why some succeed and others do not, but often the first boy will drop out within days, and Hell Week can cut what remains of any given class in half. As always, everything is about the team: trust in the team, development of the team, not tipping the delicate ecology of the team. "Being an individual is not the same thing as being a leader," one

of their instructors said. He spat out the word "in-di-vi-joo-*el*" as if it were an expletive.

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Jason soon starts thinking he might choose to spend the rest of his life with most of the men he has met here so far over most of the men he has met at home or in school the last twenty-one years. The men who had moved in and out of Sara's life, who wrote articles about ideas and who positioned and repositioned themselves for increasingly powerful civilian jobs, seemed less intimidating to him now. Was he growing up? Or was he changing. The anger he held against so many of those men was not complicated: he was protecting her. Even after thirteen years, he believed that his father would return. He would return, and they would be a family. And while she would never say as much, he felt that Sara believed this, too, as she carefully deflected each suitor's increasingly serious invitations (dinner, a trip, marriage) by stating that she wasn't over David, and that David was Jason's father. After years of that, they finally left her alone, Penelope unraveling her looms. As far as her son knew, she had not had one real romance in almost ten years, but the admirers remained, lurking around the house like stray cats. She lived a very spare life, and his leaving home had been very difficult but he knew it was time, and he knew leaving would help strengthen her, too.

Training hard with a group brings out emotion. Jason has always prided himself on not showing too much, but cool becomes elusive when you're tired, cold, and wet. He doesn't love running, although he's not bad at it. Sometimes the instructors drive alongside the guys during nighttime runs. If you walk to the beach you can see them, lit by the car's lights. One night the jeep rolls

up and when the window rolls down, Jason can hear someone inside reciting the St. Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V.* "We happy few," etc. It's a message: *You have support, and you will get through this.*

He is not yet sure whom he can trust, although slowly the personalities of his classmates emerge. They are all fiercely independent. They have all been overachievers. Many come from families who understand and value the sacrifices that go along with this training; they understand and value it as necessary—or at least, not abnormal. Most of the men arrive in Coronado quite confident that they will succeed, especially those who are back for the second or third time. Each class is never entirely new; a small percentage is always made up of guys who were "rolled back" from previous classes due to injury. One night Jason asks one of those guys, back for his third—and final—try, "How do you do it all over again?"

And the guy thinks about it and says, "Amnesia?" And then, after a long pause, "I just know it's what I want."

"Can you still make it if you're not sure what you want?"

"Well, that's the first time I've ever heard that question."

Expectations management is only second to pain management in the process of making it through each day. And then, a distant third, comes anger management. Pain management allows you to move through the moment; expectations management allows you to move through the day; and anger management allows you to move through being denied not only any privacy but any acknowledgment of being you. When an instructor tips your drawers upside down during room inspection, then fails you for having clothes spilled on the floor? That is a test of the extent to which you can control your anger, and your desire for praise. A rigged room inspection might break a boy who could run the

beach in three-minute miles, but it might tell a teacher something about that boy's character that no O-course can.

The quiet nights now give him time to think through his accumulated emotions and all those years in which he'd tried not to express them. He doesn't like to spend too much time thinking about them; it's one reason he's chosen a far less cerebral path than so many of his self-appointed mentors in Washington. They still casually question his choice, not to him but to Sara and to one another. He knows and he doesn't care. Do they question it because they worry it is a waste of time, that it is not going to gain him the kind of access they have? They might question it because for many in their generation a choice to join the navy meant something explicitly different.

Jason will be making decisions that affect people's lives at an age when the ones who judge him most harshly were working as interns at newspapers or as junior legislative aides on the Hill. What kinds of decisions are they making now? Then again, whatever choice one makes when one is young is easy to romanticize. He knows that. There is nothing romantic about the experience he is having, but it was one thing: it was better than all the options. Of this he was certain. He tells his mother one night on the phone, "It's pretty intense. You feel a little sick, so they push you harder. Then once they break you, you're really bonded."

"Now that does sound like love," Sara said, and laughed.

*

His classmates came from all over. That year, in addition to Jason, there were two sets of twins, a BUD/S first. One set was blond, one set brunette. They were the four tallest guys in the class,

just over six feet, and heavier than the others. Their boat crew is quickly christened "The Knicks" for its NBA-esque height average. Most of the guys arrived here in shape; they'd played ball, or wrestled, or captained local water polo teams. They'd raised cattle on family ranches. They'd had preternaturally physical brothers, or brothers already in the SOF community. In most cases, you might not notice them on the street. You wouldn't pick them out of a lineup and say, *That's the one who can kill me with his bare hands.* The average shape of a Naval Special Warfare operator, in this way, was its own covert operation. They looked less like Patroclus than like European soccer stars: lean, compact. They were diplomatic—at least the ones who would make it far in the game. Only in NSW do enlisted men and officers train together; there was not a lot of room for attitude when the guy who lacks your academic pedigree is the guy who leaves you begging for breath at the water's edge, or six minutes behind him on a timed run. Yet there was never a clear-cut formula: it was not having been all-American plus tall. It was not your education plus your accent. It was not prior service in an overseas war, even one in which you had proven your valor.

They were all ambitious, but they learned how to measure and play it, like gifted political rookies. The guy who liked to brag about his Oxford boxing, and his altruistic aspirations, didn't make it until midnight the first day of Hell Week. When asked about it later, he'd said simply that he could not stand the noise. He said that the noise of the gunshots during "breakout," the traditional start of the week, had driven him momentarily mad and that he knew then that he was not cut out for that kind of a fight. If pressed, he would go on to say that in fact the very nature of fighting was "inhuman" and in some way "banal"; that the trainee

treatment in Coronado was too close to "torture" for his taste. He would tell a newspaper that the NSW culture lacked the nobility of a kind of education he'd thought "would make him a true warrior." He was ridiculous, but sophisticated in the story he told himself, the same story he would tell others for the rest of his life when they asked, at dinner parties, about the time he almost joined the Teams.

This culture was not about how you prepared before you came here, or where you thought the course would take you later on—or at least, it was not only about that. It was about remembering that after this hour, right now, there will be another hour, and it will be harder. After this day, right now, there will be another day. And it will be harder. And after this night's sleep, you will wake up and start all over again. And it is *your choice*, so feel grateful that you have been given the privilege to participate. While Jason had no real idea what he had signed up for, in some small place inside himself he felt sure he could do it. But when he arrived and looked around at the other guys, he realized: *They all think they can do it, too.* All of them arrived carrying pasts that had driven them to this particular point. Jason's past was this: having grown up without a man in his life, he was now determined to pass the world's hardest test for becoming one.

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When a boy elects to quit, there is also a process. He can approach an instructor and ask to DOR, or Drop On Request. The instructor will often make some attempt to help him change his mind. If he is certain, he knows where to go: there is a bell hanging at the edge of the Grinder, the main courtyard by their rooms, and this is the bell used to "ring out" your DOR. You ring the bell

three times, and remove your helmet. The helmets are placed in a line so that all the others can see who has dropped and when. Most say, after ringing the bell, that they regret it. What waits on the other side of that bell—warmth, rest, home—is powerful, especially when you're processing those thoughts under duress. There would be times in training history when ringing the bell would not be necessary to drop out, considered too dramatic, but in the end a new master chief always brought the bell back, feeling that the public nature of the act made it less likely, and so lowered their attrition rates.

One day one of the twins decides to DOR. At six foot five, he is standing on the beach and begging the instructor to let him quit. He had been at the Academy with Jason. They'd played football together. Of all the people Jason knew, this was the one Jason thought would be chairman of the Joint Chiefs one day.

"Don't do this," Jason says. The instructor is shouting something else, something slightly less generous.

The boy's brother is there and he says the same thing Jason is saying: "Don't do it."

And then the older (by three minutes) twin grabs his younger brother, picks him up, and holds him hard until he stops shaking.

"I'm all right," the younger twin says, finally. The rest of the class is half a mile down the beach, and they'll have to catch up. The older twin says to Jason, "Don't you wish you had that on video?" And Jason thinks, *Not as much as I wish I had a brother.*

When Jason's class arrived at Annapolis, in the summer of 2002, they were all filled with purpose. The first class coming in after 9/11, most of them knew they would elect to serve, and most thought they'd perhaps spend the better part of their lives in the military. No writer then would compare them to the Greatest Generation, but the parallels were there: they would enter this

war by choice, and they would not question it, and they would feel proud of their decision. They would graduate into a time when the global map was shifting, and their country needed them.

In his last week before graduation, Jason's mother came to take him and a few friends out for dinner. She'd been in Washington for a meeting, and even as she would be returning in a week, she made the drive. She'd picked up his godfather in Georgetown, the one who'd sent the box of spoons all those years ago—he was now chief of staff for the Senate Judiciary Committee. Over dessert, Jason mentioned that he had been given the chance to try for the Teams. His godfather put down his scotch.

"You have got to be kidding me. Why would you want to do *that*? You're talented, Jase. I'll hire you. Or I will find someone to hire you. Do you want to go to Congress? What about the State Department? Do you know how long that training is? It's like a medical residency. And you can fail! You can fail anytime. It's like a medical residency with no insurance of becoming a doctor! It's not for kids like you. If you come work in my office now, before you know it you'll be participating in drafting policy."

His godfather had worked in politics for as long as Jason could remember. He clearly thought "drafting policy" was a sexy sell. He'd started out as a Senate page, progressed swiftly to speechwriter, then evolved into a gifted statistician, an accidental policy wonk who rapidly won favors by keeping his head down and his ideas free and apolitical, posing as a scholar among the power- and pleasure-seekers. Everyone thought he would win a Nobel Prize one day—"not a Peace Prize," he would say, bashful, when pushed on the tease. He was only a few years older than Sara and someone once told Jason that he was also, possibly, a "lost" son of David's, his mother having been notoriously promiscuous, and David's type. He rarely talked about where he was from, his family, his

roots. He talked about the pressing questions of the present, like housing starts and interest rates; and he talked about his dreams for the country's future. He was an idealist. He had been to Princeton, Harvard, and Yale (English, business, law: the late twentieth century's most glittery trifecta). Yet he had the heart—and soul, and superficial cynicism—of a salesman. He knew how to talk in a way that was neither grand nor rhetorical; he knew how to argue and how to charm. He felt proper education was incompatible with military service—or rather, that the former allowed you to bypass the latter and still retain a sense of mission and meaning. He felt that if you had a brain and could train it, you could do anything—an *anything* underscored by an unspoken, quietly implied *non-life-threatening*.

Jason knew all this. It had come up before. This was Jason's favorite godfather, a man in his eyes almost infinitely infallible, and a man always watchful of ones he loved. Yet Jason felt sorry for him. He felt that for all his degrees, he had no model for an exception to his elegant rules. His friends had never really lived through a war and had certainly never served in one. His friends believed in diplomacy and tradecraft. They believed in ideas. They believed in progress measured in cups of tea sipped by men who'd never held guns. They were the soon-to-be smartest guys in the room in the smartest room in the world. And they believed that the smartest guys in the room were always right.

Sara cut off an argument by clinking her glass and making a toast. She ended by saying she'd never known what love of country meant until she'd observed her son, and seen him develop his own instinct for it. She described the time four years earlier when she'd given him extra money to buy something special at the market, something to boost his spirits. "I recommended champagne," she said, "or steaks. But my son came home with a flag." She

toasted his godfather, too (" 'age cannot wither you, nor custom stale your infinite variety' "—words that reminded everyone of their ongoing casual, platonic flirtation), and recalled the spoons of her son's youth.

The very next day Sara again sat her son down and pressed him on whether he was sure about his choices. She asked if he would not consider waiting a year or two, maybe taking a master's degree or working at home, just doing something to engage him in another, less stressful environment, to pique potential other interests, to have some fun. She wanted him to understand the implications of doing something that seemed, well, so narrow. She expressed her Libran preference for options and for keeping roads open. She felt that the navy was the opposite of that, and that he had done so much "in service" already by spending those four years at the Academy. She saw things so differently. He barely said anything. And because he wanted to please her, he said he would take a day and think about it. And he did.

He didn't really know, even then, what it meant to belong to a culture of warriors or to be affiliated with "special" operations, but he knew he wanted more of a challenge, and the chance to try for the Teams was the best challenge he could get. It was because he felt confident that the military was one place he could excel. He felt sure that it might be the place where he might make an impact and that was something he desperately wanted to do. His skills were physical. But still, he thought about it for a day.

And then, just like that, his mind was made up. And though his mother always said that he had never been indecisive—he had been. But he would never let it show. That was another reason the military's culture suited him: its ethos of invisibility matched his. Somewhere he had developed a deep belief that a man was someone who acted, not someone who spoke, and that honor was

about discretion and progress. Honor wasn't about discussing a political decision you hadn't been a part of over vodka tonics. He was not yet nineteen when he began to form these ideas. They were aspirational, and they were naïve. But as he held on to them they deepened, and soon the ideas began to form him.

Jason looks at the long stretch of swimming pool and thinks, *You and I are going to be close friends.* It was ten times the size of even the biggest pools he'd seen as a kid. It is the first morning of the first week in California.

"Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary* while swimming laps," Jason says. As soon as he says it he wishes he hadn't, but the joke was one frequently repeated in his house, meant to underscore the artist's dislike of exercise.

"That water's fucking cold," says Sam, to another boy in his class. He'd dipped a toe in.

"It's not as cold as the ocean."

"Admirable optimism."

"Survival."

It is the first week, otherwise called INDOC, for Indoctrination Course. INDOC was the crucial first step, five weeks in which, among other things, the guys get to know one another—and get to know the water: the pool, and the surf. It's about about getting acquainted with the cold, with being wet, and with a culture of self-preservation and endurance. BUD/S is the base camp of an aspiring operator's Everest, and it is here that they begin to learn

the language, draw the boundaries, and fall even more for the lure of what could lie ahead if they are allowed to progress.

In just days, Jason loses several pounds. He is not quite sure why. He is almost certain that the opposite should have happened. Even with all this running and rolling and pushing and lifting, his muscle mass should be increasing, and so should his base weight. Still, when he looks in the mirror, he can see his ribs. He is covered in sand, but he can still see his bones poking through.

Calories: the concept of counting them is ridiculous, something for silly girls on diets, not for warriors. But calories provide key data points, and calories give you what you needed to survive. Survival means making it successfully from one evolution to the next without dropping out. *The only easy day was yesterday.* This is one of many mantras they will learn and then internalize. *There is no second place in a gunfight* is another one. That one is easy to tease about in the early days of training; it will be only about eighteen months from now when their proximity to the reality of those words will make them much more serious. "Attention to detail, men. Attention to detail is what is going to get you through this. Attention to detail and commitment to team."

The instructors yell variations of the same seemingly simple ideas and words over and over, until they become oddly foreign, and then newly familiar as particular to this time and place. *Team. Detail. Drop. Push. Hoo-yah.* Master Chief Jones is the instructors' instructor, and he is very precise in how he talked to his class. Jason thinks that in another life and another time, the master chief and his mother would have made a great match. He can see them fighting about language and politics—about everything, really.

But he can also see them caring deeply about the simple things. Jones, not unlike Sara, despised pretension.

Detail and *Team* are two of Jones's favorite words, and they describe the larger concept: little things matter, and the fabric holding together the little things is the fabric of the Team. When a Team doesn't coalesce, the entire Team is blamed. There is no room—yet—for entrepreneurial thinking. And there is no room for assholes. Jones drills things into them. For him, training was an almost philosophical experience.

Once the focus of their training moves to the pool, Jason earns a nickname: Priest. Jones starts to call him that because he's so quiet and because he paces the hallways at night while reading ("prepping the sermons"), but also because all the instructors tease him saying that he must have a direct line to God from the pool. His ability to stay underwater without breathing for so long, and with such ease, was something they had not seen before. The others guys notice this gift and how lightly he wears it. "What do you say in your prayers," shouts the master chief. "Do you pray we don't find your third lung?"

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When he was a baby, Jason and his mother lived in a tiny one-bedroom apartment. There was no bathtub. Sara would bathe him in an old plastic crate she'd emptied of books, set on the floor of the shower stall. He was swimming at two. "My little fish," she'd tell friends as they watched, horrified, as she pushed him out into the pool. "Don't worry. He can do it." By six he was swimming lengths underwater, for fun.

*

He isn't writing novels but sometimes, when he is underwater, when he is swimming as opposed to performing a task, Jason lets his mind wander. He thinks about the moments that have led to this one, and he questions his decision. He will never admit it, but sometimes he does question things. These concentrated thoughts allow him to forget the physical pain. He has made mistakes. On the obstacle course, in the second week, he had slipped and fallen, badly. His ankle had swelled up like a softball, but because he had heard of guys who kept running on broken legs to stay in training, he tried not to let it show. He had always had a system for managing discomfort, and until this point in his life it had worked well: he let his mind wander. He thought about his father. He would imagine meeting him in some exotic place—maybe near the Indian Ocean, maybe in the Middle East, maybe in "Mecca," a word he'd first heard on the answering machine in one of David's runic messages. These waking dreams acted like anesthesia. And he needs them now: for the first time in his life, Jason is experiencing true, sharp physical pain.

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That last day that last summer at home before he'd left for San Diego, his mother had sat on his bed while he packed and begged him to reconsider his future. Again. She had said, "Don't make me beg." And then she said, "And I want you to know that if you get hurt, you have to tell someone. You cannot hide it anymore." He understood. The irony of which they were both aware that day was the fact that Jason's sense of determination, the same thing that gave rise to his pride, had to have come from somewhere. It had to have come from someone, and it could only have come from her. At least that was what Jason was thinking. Sara was thinking about

the fact that her life was a case study in purposelessness. And here was her son, potential future four-star admiral.

If he survives. That was the subtext of her fears. And very soon she would learn that every choice and every moment and every thing in the military, and in the lives of family members who waited back home for their fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and sons and daughters and lovers, was infused with the same fear. The threat of imminent, physical danger, something she'd only read about in books, was now going to be a central part of her life. But he wanted it. He was clear-headed and that clarity would serve him well.

Sara's height belied her strength. She was five foot six to her son's five foot eleven. He'd surpassed her in fifth grade. When he'd started at Annapolis, she'd taken up running, a form of exercise she'd long mocked as a "transportation sport." She had been born to dreamers, fallen in love with a dreamer, and then given birth to a dreamer, but she was furiously practical. She saved ribbons. She clipped coupons. She didn't dye her hair. Everything about her appearance was natural, another aberration for twenty-first-century postfeminists, everything right up to yet excluding the bright streak of white in her otherwise true brunette hair. It was a birthmark. David used to say, "No, it's my illuminated landing strip, so I can find you from thirty thousand feet at night, when necessary."

She didn't care what people thought about her, which made her a revolutionary in small-town life—or at least that was how Jason saw her. She was well known among his friends primarily for being beautiful, cool—and young. She was careful and consistent in her denial of traditional female rituals, adamant about being the girl who would never wear makeup to the movies or

profess to care about her clothes. But most other women considered Sara less a threat than a tragedy, a spouseless loner in a socially networked world. She preferred reading to shopping. She loved ideas and grew into a woman who helped edit the ideas of others.

The night before his last day back east, before she would drive him to the airport, and perhaps in some gesture toward the symbols of commencements, Sara wore a white sundress while helping him prepare. Jason knew it was her very best one. She had her hair down that day, too, tied with a white ribbon, a style she rarely chose as she knew it made her look even more like a girl, even less like a mother, perhaps. He was twenty-one and she was forty. As he had moved around his room, finalizing his packing, she must have tucked the tiny wrapped box, his graduation present, under his pillow. It was a simple gold locket, with a St. Christopher on the outside and, on the inside, a picture of the American flag he had brought home from the market that day, the one that now hung outside their house. When he found it he walked down the hall to her bedroom to thank her.

"I can't believe how corny this is and how much I love it," he'd said.

"I'm allowed to be corny now." There were tears streaming down her face.

*

There were very few whose fathers had not been present at Academy graduation. And there were very few whose ideas of their fathers did not factor into their aspirations to be operators. And the father of all the other fathers is the master chief. It's the mas-

ter chief who leads the men on their drills and on the long beach runs. Master Chief Jones is tough. He's witty. He has been in the Teams for thirty years. He tells the men stories from other wars, even as he never talks about his own service. He leads the hardest runs during the third week, the Long Day. Have you ever tried running after three nights of no sleep? It's a bit like kickboxing in honey.

It is dark. It is three in the morning. It is the fourth night of Hell Week, so by process of deduction, it's Wednesday. The men are very wet, cold, sandy, and tired. The Hell started on Sunday, with the "breakout." The thinking behind the breakout is that most battles begin in chaos. Chaos can be accurately simulated. Breakout—and Hell Week, more broadly—attempt to simulate the conditions of battle. These five days and five nights take the stress of extreme physical conditioning, then tack on sleep deprivation and the element of surprise.

Breakout begins with the men being told to wait in one large room. They are told they can talk and read and eat and relax, but they've heard the stories. They know exactly how breakout works: by creating chaos—and fear. When the first shots are fired, some are relieved; they've been ready. Others are broken. Suddenly they are in the closest thing they've been in to a live fight. And even knowing it's a simulation, and that adequate safety precautions are taken, some of the bravest-seeming among them will ring out within the first hour. The shock is too much. By Wednesday, those who remain think they will make it one more night. They put one foot in front of the other and rely on muscle memory. They are ready for relief. The Master Chief's songs are a form of relief.

They all know them by heart by now, because he has been singing them since day one—on the beach, on the Grinder, while

checking their rooms. He likes to sing. And he likes you to sing, too. Sing softly, and you will drop and push them out. Sing too softly, and you gain the privilege of running once more into the water, and it's like ice. Then you can drop for a hundred more push-ups, in the process of which sand gets in your nose, your mouth, your eyes. The illusion that sand might lodge in your lungs and slow you on runs—or choke you—is powerful. Once you have that image in your mind it is tough to erase.

As the master chief sings, he will periodically slow his pace, or even run in place, allowing him to observe his men. A month ago, this class started with one hundred sixty trainees. Now they were thirty. He can see how red their eyes are. He can sense how close each one of them might be to the edge of breaking. They have been running in and out of the water on this one night for close to four hours. Running is like breathing here. Run to the O course. Run to eat. Run to rest, briefly. Run to gain the privilege of another, longer run.

Most of them are unaware of what hour or even what day it is. Still, somewhere underneath the exhaustion, the pain of spliced tendons and stress fractures and stomach muscles stretched to unholy lengths, there is a sense of release. This is what the singing does. The song goes like this:

I've seen the bright lights of Memphis,
And the Commodore Hotel,
And underneath a streetlamp,
I met a Southern Belle.
Well, she took me to the river
Where she cast her spell
And in that Southern moonlight
She sang her song so well
"If you'll be my Dixie Chicken

I'll be your Tennessee lamb
And we can walk together
Down in Dixieland.
Down in Dixieland."

After Hell Week, the class size shrinks again, to nineteen. After Hell Week, they will have nine weeks of dive training and three weeks of hydrographic reconnaissance work. After that, their class size will stand at seventeen, one guy having injured himself during drown-proofing, another having failed pool competency, the one test Jason never tells his mother about, although she could have found out about it online if she'd wanted. Then the men leave the pool and learn land warfare. In this third and final chapter things become increasingly what might be called fun. The ones who remain will most likely complete the course. The tests they have endured up until this point have been largely psychological. The way their bodies have changed attested to the physical rigors they've endured.

Men about to end BUD/S are like steeplechase jockeys days before a race, only imagine jockeys who have not yet seen a horse, who are unable to distinguish a foal from a thoroughbred. They will have time to train, to learn more about what it means to fight and about which tools they will use. They will learn more about themselves, too. Self-knowledge makes the real warrior, and self-knowledge coupled with tactical skill allows a guy to say he is an operator. Throughout those early weeks, almost everyone was thinking the same thing: *Why did I make it, and why did he fail?* They will have years ahead to talk about it, but over time it will become clear.

On the last night, the few guys left gather at the master chief's house; he's invited them for beers, but most take Cokes. Master

Chief sits at his piano. It is a beautiful instrument, an ebony Steinway grand, a gift from someone at the Department of Defense, or so the story goes. He can really play. The rumor went around that he'd turned down Juilliard for the chance to make the Teams. Another rumor went that he'd been court-martialed after inviting Bobby Seale to speak on counterinsurgency at Quantico, in the 1970s. He played music familiar to most of them, Brahms, Beethoven, and Mozart; he knew the canon. But he knew Bob Dylan, too. He took requests when the class had had a good day. When Jason landed his boat crew on the rocks in a nasty rainstorm, he requested "Queen Jane, Approximately," a song Sara loved.

This night, their last night, he plays the song that has become theirs, a song that would serve for the rest of their lives as a reminder of what they'd been through these last six months. Phrases from it would stand as code in later years when they would meet classmates in unexpected places, allowing them to recognize one another. Only this night Jones sang a slightly different version, with lyrics they hadn't heard before. The guys sing along with the chorus once they get a handle on the words. It goes like this:

I've seen the bright lights of Beijing
And the Chairman Mao Hotel
And underneath the streetlamp
I met an Asian Belle
Well she took me to the River
Where she cast her spell
And in that Chinese moonlight
She sang her song so well:
"If you'll free my Dixie Mission

I'll free your Tokyo lamb;
And we can sleep together
Down in old Ya'nan"

Dixie Mission, more formally called the United States Army Observation Group, was an Allied outpost in China during World War II. Jones tells them the story: how the "missionaries" were actually CBI Theatre experts sent there to observe and report. They were the first post-OSS team to go into China, and the rumor was that their name came from the presence of so many southerners in their midst. Critics keen to flame the fires of Communist fears demonized the Mission's men; they claimed the real mission was Red sympathy. But when the young envoys' reputations were shredded and they were individually stripped of roles at State and elsewhere, they took their case all the way to the Supreme Court to prove their innocence and won.

It was a story of uninformed fears, panic, and blame, of how intelligence collection and things in the category of "classified" are inherently controversial. It was also, Jones tells them, a story of wartime intelligence operations in their infancy. That story continued, in some ways, with Vietnam's Studies and Observations Group, or SOG, America's first joint unconventional force. The first frogmen were there then, and they were meant to be warriors, but they were also trained as witnesses and as interpreters—not of speech but of actions. They were trained to see things, remember them, and report them back home. Time on target ("at the objective," as they say) was preceded by time spent studying the opposition. Everything they did then entered the collective memory banks of mission histories, histories later locked up in places with very few keys.

*

Jason's class has begun the work, but they are not yet warriors. They have proven their ability to do certain things and to withstand others, but they have not yet experienced the hardest parts of the climb. They have not yet been forced to choose whether to take a life. They have not yet been confronted with the delicate task of lying to a loved one in order to protect her. They have not yet held a colleague's broken body in their arms. "The Strand is only a beginning," Jones said that last night, referring to San Diego's Silver Strand State Beach. This was their beach. Its name came from the silver-shelled oysters that washed up on the sand in scores. "The world is yours," Jones said, flipping one, like a coin, in the air.