

ACCLAIM FOR *INDIVISIBLE*, THE MOVIE

“INDIVISIBLE, an intensely powerful portrayal of the emotional stressors of combat and military separation impacting faith and family. It depicts the struggle of a young chaplain and his family as they confront the realities of war with an idealistic perspective of faith. INDIVISIBLE views their journey coping with various losses which challenged the very foundation of their faith. Yet, through a greater spiritual awareness and understanding, provided by seasoned chaplains and mentors, they were able to overcome these challenges of faith and continue their ministry to the military.”

—James E. Agnew, Chaplain (Colonel), US Army Retired

“A masterful movie bringing to life God’s ability to restore war-damaged marriages and families. A great story of hope and restoration.”

—Clair Hoover, National Coalition of Ministries to Men

“Service, mission, sacrifice, brotherhood, loyalty, family, and God all wrestle for a man’s top priority in the action-packed movie INDIVISIBLE! Terrific!”

—Brian Doyle, president, Iron Sharpens Iron

“As a retired army chaplain, watching INDIVISIBLE was like experiencing reality for me, because I lived through much of what it portrayed. I cried at numerous points while viewing INDIVISIBLE, because the movie tapped into my emotions, experiences, and the tragedies I have experienced and personally helped many soldiers work through. INDIVISIBLE was indeed true to life, reflecting the experiences of tens of thousands of soldiers. I highly recommend INDIVISIBLE to all military personnel, and to every family, church, synagogue, mosque, or organization—secular or religious.”

—Chaplain (MAJ) James F. Linzey, USA (Ret.), founding president, Military Bible Association

“INDIVISIBLE is gripping and poignant in its open portrayal of real-life challenges. Learn how community, asking for and accepting help from others, and the gift of faith can help you face your own trials with courage. A brilliant reminder that we are never alone.”

—Lisa M. Hendey, founder of CatholicMom.com and
author of *The Grace of Yes*

“As America’s longest war carries on and couples face struggles in an ever-changing world, this film points to how we can remain Indivisible in our marriages and in our walk with God.”

—Justin D. Roberts, director of *No Greater Love*, former
army chaplain

“INDIVISIBLE is an authentic story of God’s enormous power to heal marriages, elevate faith, and strengthen families. A must-see movie!”

—GJ Reynolds, CEO, Women of Faith

“Military couples have an uphill battle to maintain healthy marriages, whether in deployment or stateside. INDIVISIBLE is one of the best films on marriage I have ever seen. It is an honest look inside the homes and hearts of our heroes bringing hope and encouragement that they can win the battle!”

—Dr. Gary Rosberg, America’s Family Coaches, author of
6 Secrets to a Lasting Love

INDIVISIBLE

A NOVELIZATION

WRITTEN BY TRAVIS THRASHER

FOREWORD WRITTEN BY DARREN
TURNER AND HEATHER TURNER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Indivisible

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Published in association with the literary agency of WTA Services, LLC, Franklin, Tennessee.

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Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. New York: HarperOne, 2015. First published 1946 by Geoffrey Bles.

Publisher’s Note: The novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author’s imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-0-7852-2405-1 (trade paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP data is available upon request.

Printed in the United States of America

18 19 20 21 22 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is dedicated to the chaplains of the
United States Armed Forces and the soldiers who
valiantly serve to protect our freedom.*

A wound that goes unacknowledged and unwept is a wound that cannot heal.

—JOHN ELDREDGE, *WILD AT HEART*

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

—EPHESIANS 6:10–12

FOREWORD

BY DARREN AND HEATHER TURNER

In January 2008, a reporter from the *Atlanta Journal* shadowed our battalion for a few weeks during my (Darren) deployment. She wanted to focus on the chaplain's role in combat, since there was plenty of war coverage in other articles during that time. She thought it would be unique to see things through a chaplain's angle. So she shadowed me and got an eye full (we had mortars come into our camp often, casualties from missions outside the camp, I traveled a lot to remote locations, I conducted Easter services and baptized guys, etc.). She then returned and published eight different articles in a row that told the story of her trip. When she contacted us a couple of years later and heard about our marriage problems and how we patched things up, she added that last part to what became an e-book called *Chaplain Turner's War*.

VII

In the summer of 2011, filmmaker David Evans contacted us after seeing our story on a news website. His idea of making a movie about our story sounded interesting but unrealistic. We didn't think it would really happen.

After David contacted us, we wanted to meet him and hear his pitch. So he and his wife, Esther, drove to Fort Campbell and we had a long lunch. After that meeting, Heather and I felt very comfortable with David and Esther. They were sincere, cared way more about our story than we did, and had a passion to share this on film. Most importantly, they saw this as a way to glorify the grace of Jesus Christ. After that lunch meeting, we waited a few days before responding. We wanted to pray about it and not make an emotional decision in the moment. I talked with our army folks to get their opinions, and once everything looked right, we said yes to David's offer and also shared our personal journal from the deployment to use for development of the screenplay.

For David and the rest of the filmmakers, their passion and persistence ended up resulting in the film and book for *Indivisible*. We could never have conceived and developed this, especially since we simply don't have the time or space to do something on such a scale like this. We simply agreed for them to use our story and names, and David and his team did all the rest. We have watched everything unfold in amazement, and we are proud of the results.

Having seen the movie, it's still very strange to see and hear our names and watch our lives unfold onscreen. Of course there were artistic licenses taken, but for the most part it's pretty accurate. Some of the scenes brought back a lot of unexpected

emotions. We were surprised by that. It was good to recall some things that we needed to remember again, especially God's wonderful gift of redemption.

We have many hopes with *Indivisible*. First, we hope those watching the film and reading this book can be honest with themselves, others, and the Lord. Second, we hope that nonmilitary Americans will understand our vets better and maybe even get involved in their lives.

Ultimately, we pray our story blesses folks and frees people to be real and honest about where they are in life. Our desire is for people to consider *the* solution to our fatal condition of sin and selfishness.

It's the summer of 2018, and we're spending some of our days and evenings relaxing on or near the lake we live by. We're looking forward to a busy fall when the film and book are released. It's going to be a lot of fun to see people's reactions to the incredible film David and his team have made. We remain honored and humbled to be part of this amazing journey.

God still has big plans for our family as He does for you, too. We thank Him for His many blessings, including continuing to help tell His story throughout our lives.

PROLOGUE

She carries the memories and always will. She doesn't need to think long when the chaplain asks her to pick a moment from the past.

So many special times to choose from. I have hundreds of good memories. But we've stopped making new ones.

She glances over at her husband, sitting in a chair only inches away from her, yet miles removed from her life. Heather forces a smile as she turns to the chaplain.

“The day we met,” she begins, “I was taking photos on campus when he drove by, looking at me, just as he ran his motorcycle into my shot of the chrysanthemums. And ruining both the photo and the flowers! He just kept going too, and I thought, *Who is this hotshot?* But later that day I saw him again. It turned out he was the guest speaker for Campus Ministries, and as he shared his mission work, I saw a man with a heart for God. *And he was hot, so—*”

“What do you mean, *was hot?*” Darren shoots back, the first sign of any amusement from him during this counseling session.

“Hey, don’t push it,” she says.

Chaplain Rodgers gives her a steady nod and grin. “Okay, time—Darren? Whaddaya got?”

Her husband’s silence feels like nails pounding into her, one second after another. She looks at him, waiting, willing him to say anything, watching him trying to find an answer but unable to say a single, simple thing.

“And this is where we are,” she finally says. “Anything that truly matters—he shuts down.”

Darren tries. “Memories have just been . . . I mean, every time I try to think back, what I don’t want to remember takes over. Like there’s a wall in my timeline, or . . .” He doesn’t finish.

Heather closes her eyes, swimming in the familiar emotions she wakes up to and falls asleep with. A lonely and drifting sensation, bobbing up and down in the middle of the ocean, with no land in sight and nobody around to hear her cries for help.

“That’s very normal, Darren,” the chaplain says. “And Heather, post-traumatic stress is a mind inhibitor that requires time and intentional rebuilding of the muscles and tools we use to control our thoughts.”

“But I’m pretty much outta time,” Darren says.

Heather never could have imagined such words of defeat coming from her husband, much less hearing the tone in his voice. But he’s right. They have run out of time.

She hopes—no, she desperately *needs*—the Darren she fell in love with and knew so well to come back home.

PART 1

PREDEPLOYMENT 2007

WINTER AND SPRING 2007

1

Twenty-one days before signing into Fort Stewart, Darren Turner listened to the president addressing the nation on television, not to hear what America was doing abroad, but to learn where he might possibly be headed in a few months.

“Good evening.” President George W. Bush spoke from the Oval Office in the White House. “Tonight in Iraq, the armed forces of the United States are engaged in a struggle that will determine the direction of the global war on terror and our safety here at home. The new strategy I outline tonight will change America’s course in Iraq and help us succeed in the fight against terror.”

The children were asleep, Elie and Sam in their beds, infant Meribeth snug in Heather’s arms. Darren turned up the volume and shifted on the couch, his focus solely on the president as he spoke about the historic elections in Iraq two years earlier and the hope that they might bring the people together—resulting in a need for fewer American troops.

“But in 2006, the opposite happened. The violence in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad, overwhelmed the political gains the Iraqis had made. Al-Qaeda terrorists and Sunni insurgents recognized the mortal danger that Iraq’s elections posed for their cause. And they responded with outrageous acts of murder aimed at innocent Iraqis.”

Darren glanced over at his wife as President Bush continued. He could see the concern in her expression.

“The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people, and it is unacceptable to me. Our troops in Iraq have fought bravely. They have done everything we have asked them to do. Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me. It is clear that we need to change our strategy in Iraq.”

Darren knew there was a big reason for the president to be talking to the American public on this Wednesday night in January. He was leading up to an announcement.

Only a year ago, he and Heather would have been watching like the rest of the country, listening to hear what was happening to other men in foreign countries. Now, however, he watched and waited to hear what might be happening to him.

“Our past efforts to secure Baghdad failed for two principal reasons: there were not enough Iraqi and American troops to secure neighborhoods that had been cleared of terrorists and insurgents, and there were too many restrictions on the troops we did have.”

The president spoke about a new plan that could work, how the Iraqi army and national police brigades and local police

would be engaged in operating locally to conduct patrols, set up checkpoints, and go door-to-door to gain the trust of Baghdad residents.

“This is a strong commitment,” President Bush stated. “But for it to succeed, our commanders say the Iraqis will need our help.”

This time Darren didn’t look at Heather. He stared at the screen, anticipating what was coming next.

“So America will change our strategy to help the Iraqis carry out their campaign to put down sectarian violence and bring security to the people of Baghdad. This will require increasing American force levels. So I have committed more than twenty thousand additional American troops to Iraq. The vast majority of them—five brigades—will be deployed to Baghdad. These troops will work alongside Iraqi units and be embedded in their formations. Our troops will have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs.”

Darren moved over and reached for Heather’s arm that held the sleeping baby. He smiled, letting her know that things were going to be okay, that God had this taken care of and they shouldn’t worry. He knew she was thinking the same thing, yet both of them felt the gravity of this moment sink over them.

Twenty thousand additional troops.

Will I be one of them? Darren wondered. He pictured their children and what it would be like to say goodbye to them.

This is the choice I made. The choice we made.

President Bush was still speaking. “Will America withdraw and yield the future of that country to the extremists, or will we stand with the Iraqis who have made the choice for freedom? Let me be clear: The terrorists and insurgents in Iraq are without conscience, and they will make the year ahead bloody and violent. Even if our new strategy works exactly as planned, deadly acts of violence will continue. And we must expect more Iraqi and American casualties.”

This is our new reality. And we've known about it ever since I chose to join the army.

2

What am I here for?

The question whispered deep inside of him once again. It was a question he'd been born with and carried around like a shadow his entire life. During his wild and reckless days in college it grew louder, trying to get his attention, urging him to want more out of his meaningless life. So one spring break, instead of continuing to party with his classmates on a beach in Florida, Darren returned home to Canton, Georgia. He also returned to the pages of the New Testament.

He didn't need to “find himself.” Darren needed to find faith in someone else. Realizing it might appear to be foolish and against all that common sense might suggest, he turned his heart over to Jesus Christ, deciding to follow Him. In whatever fashion and form that meant.

What am I destined for? This was the new question that he began to ask.

It remained with him as a student teacher during his senior year at UGA. After graduating in 1997, the question followed him all the way to a teaching position in Mongolia, then back to his alma mater a year later, where he became a part-time campus pastor. After two years, as Darren continued to wonder what God wanted for his life, a door opened for a full-time assistant pastor job at a church in Athens, Georgia.

Deciding to follow Jesus meant saying “Not my will, but Yours be done” . . . and Darren knew it could get messy and uncomfortable sometimes.

After four years of marriage, Darren and Heather began talking about options other than what they were doing in their church ministry. One of Heather’s college friends had married an army chaplain, but at the time that hadn’t stirred their interest. They wanted to invest their time and family with a group they could live life with.

Yet Darren always continued to ask: *How am I supposed to serve, Lord?*

One morning in early January of 2004, he was reading from Psalm 27 when the verses grabbed him. David wrote that even though an army was camped around him and war rose against him, he would be confident in the Lord and not fear. “One thing I ask from the LORD, / this only do I seek: / that I may dwell in the house of the LORD / all the days of my life, / to gaze on the beauty of the LORD / and to seek him in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).

Darren knew right at that moment that this was what he

wanted to do. He wanted to bring faith and confidence in Christ into a place of war. Not long after that, he and Heather spoke to the chaplain who was married to her friend, and then they called an army recruiter. Everything happened quickly, and by August Darren had resigned from his church position and enrolled in seminary.

Now, as he lay awake thinking of President Bush's words to the American public earlier that night, he asked himself another question.

What am I made of?

Each step on the ladder of his life had led to this place. He believed the president's words when he said, "In these dangerous times, the United States is blessed to have extraordinary and selfless men and women willing to step forward and defend us." Darren knew it was true that they "serve far from their families, who make the quiet sacrifices of lonely holidays and empty chairs at the dinner table. They have watched their comrades give their lives to ensure our liberty."

Darren knew who he was, and that God had shaped him with His hands to bring him to this point in his life. Not only had he been called to serve, but he knew he was called to help soothe the souls savaged by the war.

Would he be headed overseas to serve? If he went to Iraq, what would he find there?

What am I made of? He shifted in the bed.

He looked at his wife, sleeping peacefully beside him, and prayed they would both be steadfast and strong as they faced the future.

3

The noise of the four children playing in the living room gave Heather a feeling she hadn't experienced since moving into their new home: normalcy. For the first time, she felt normal again, even though sheets were still draped over chairs and tables and they were still searching in moving boxes for items like the coffeemaker. The rowdy fun the kids were having with the tent they had set up in the living room and named Fort Bumblefoot was something they would have done back at their old house. It had only been a few days, but slowly and surely, she knew they would grow used to living on the army base.

When they had first pulled up to Fort Stewart, she had read the sign at the front of the base: *Welcome to Fort Stewart, Georgia, an Army Community of Excellence*. Below its logo were the words *The world's best installation to train, deploy, live and raise a family*. The February morning had been like today, a cool forty-five degrees with clear skies that showed off the 280,000 acres about an hour west of Savannah. The base contained everything, from ponds and waterfronts to the Heritage Chapel and medical and training facilities. Their neighborhood consisted of pretty suburban houses with small and well-maintained lawns and lots of young families like theirs.

Normally Heather might have suggested that the children set up their tent somewhere other than the living room, but since everything was still in a bit of disorder, she figured they might as well have some fun. As she peered into the room, looking for her husband, she was greeted by almost-four-year-old Sam's

shouts of “Pow pow pow!” He was guarding the entrance to the fort, his Armor of God costume hanging off his shoulders while he swiped the plastic sword in the air and made swishing sounds as he fended off the artillery from the unseen enemy. He waited for his big sister to come around to the front and join him.

“No one gets past Electric Elie!” she shouted as she adjusted the tinfoil wrapped around her forehead and wrists.

“Or Samurai Sam!”

Even though Elie was eight, she wasn’t too big to play with her little brother. She spun around and saw six-month-old Meribeth crawling on the carpet toward the tent.

“Oh no!” Elie cried out. “An in-surgeon!”

Sam steadied himself at the base of their fort. “Quick. Secure the gate!”

Heather watched all this with a grin on her face. “Okay, send the commander back to HQ,” she told the kids. “He has three more boxes to unpack. And stop calling your sister an insurgent.”

“The commander doesn’t have time for boxes,” Sam called out. “Fort Bumblefoot is taking fire.” He tossed a pillow high into the air, shouting, “Incoming!”

Just then her biggest “child” bolted out of the tent, wearing his army combat uniform and commanding, “Pull back! Pull back!” Darren quickly scooped up Sam and then Elie, pulling them into the safety of the tent, while three children giggled and screamed in joy. Then silence covered the room, with a round of shushes coming from the soldiers inside the fort.

Heather shook her head and tiptoed over to the back of the

tent. She burst through the flaps and startled them, howling as she began tickling the kids.

“Sneak attack, sneak attack!” Darren cried. “Evacuate!”

While the kids piled out of the tent to escape, screaming and laughing, Heather called out behind them. “Careful. Don’t tear my sheets.” Then she leaned over and fell into Darren’s lap.

He gave an exaggerated “Oof” and called out, “I’m trapped! Save yourselves. Run!”

The pitter-patter of feet running down the hall followed by echoes of laughter were sounds she would never grow tired of. Meribeth tried her best to keep up, crawling in her own little way to chase Sam and Elie. Capturing her breath and looking up at her husband, Heather once again felt normal, resting there in Darren’s strong arms.

“And don’t come back for fifteen minutes!” she called, as Darren smiled his approval. He gently kissed her, then studied her for a moment. She felt like she was a kid again too, and was making out with the homecoming king.

“It’s good to hear you guys having fun,” she said in a soft tone.

“It’s good playing with them. Especially Elie.”

The move had been toughest on their bright second grader, who had hated saying goodbye to her friends.

“The house feels cozy,” Heather said.

“Or maybe it’s just me,” Darren said as he snuggled closer to her. “I kinda like Fort Bumblefoot. What about you?”

Before she could answer, a high-pitched squeal of tires came from out in their front lawn. They gave each other questioning

glances, then she led the way out of the tent to see what was going on. Looking through the front window, they saw a truck in the middle of the lawn at the house directly across the street. A man in uniform was at the door, pounding on it and shouting.

Darren quickly headed to the garage, no doubt wanting to see if there was anything he should do, so Heather followed. They navigated past stacks of moving boxes and other items filling up the garage as they heard the shouting across the street.

“Tonya! If you changed these locks again on my own house—”

The door opened and a woman appeared, staring up at her husband and refusing to budge an inch.

“Really?” she said. “This is what ‘I promise to do better’ looks like?”

“Just let me in,” the man said, trying to shove past her, but the woman stood her ground.

Heather felt like they should go back inside, not watch and listen like nosy strangers.

“You smell like a whiskey plant,” the woman said.

“I’ll sleep it off, don’t worry.”

“After a long walk, maybe, because it won’t be here.”

The woman looked about Heather’s age, short with caramel-colored skin and an expression on her face that said she would not suffer fools lightly. Heather doubted this was the first time the couple had argued like this. As the woman started to shut the door in her husband’s face, his arm stopped it from closing all the way.

“You know I got your commander on speed dial?” she said. “So help me, Michael, you can quit caring about me, but you better find a way to be the man those little girls in there need

you to be. No—*deserve*—for you to be. Or more than the old door locks will disappear.”

For a moment the man stood there, then he turned around and strode to his truck, which was still running. As he was climbing in he noticed Heather and Darren watching.

“Hey!” he called out to them. “Mind your own business!”

Heather quickly grabbed a box to at least pretend like she was in the garage for some other reason than to snoop. Darren was still standing there, his gaze unmoving.

“Honey, he’s staring right at you. Pick up a box.”

Instead Darren waved while the truck accelerated down the street. Heather couldn’t believe it, yet she felt a little better seeing the driver’s hand giving a subdued wave back. As the sound of the truck faded, the woman on her doorstep was joined by two girls, one at either side.

Darren turned around, his friendly expression not having changed a bit.

“Well,” he said to Heather. “Guess we met the neighbors.”

4

Darren believed these words from one of his favorite books, *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge: *Every man is a warrior inside. But the choice to fight is his own.* Yes, the choice to fight was his own, but the choice facing him now was when he would actually decide to go. That decision wasn’t his alone to make. Heather needed to weigh in as well.

Two weeks after signing into Fort Stewart, Darren met with the division chaplain to see where they would be putting him. Once President Bush announced the surge, it was a foregone conclusion that he would eventually be heading over to Iraq. The only question was when.

After taking his first couple of weeks to in-process into the army, Darren learned he would be deploying with a unit at a later date. He met with fellow chaplains and his future chaplain's assistant from this brigade. Everything seemed set; he knew the brigade he'd be serving with and started to get to know the men and women in it.

Then suddenly everything changed. He was told they were putting him in an infantry brigade, one that was surging. Both the division chaplain and the brigade chaplain asked him if he was okay with the change, and he said yes—but he wanted to talk with Heather about it first.

As always, his wife's response was levelheaded and thoughtful.

"Do you remember after we first met," she said, "when you were still working in Athens and I was preparing to go back to China to teach English?"

"Yeah," Darren said. "You were going to be gone a few years."

"But after we got engaged, I decided I would only go for a year, then come back and get married."

Darren nodded. They both knew Heather didn't, in fact, return to China. Instead, they proceeded to get married just a few months later.

“I remember talking to Cindy about it one day and crying about that decision. About how long I’d have to be gone. I knew that at the end of our lives, I would look back and say I wished we’d taken every opportunity to spend it together.” She took his hand in both of hers. “I think that maybe this is the Lord’s way of getting that year back from each of us. He simply had another destination in mind. Not China, but Iraq.”

Darren couldn’t help but kiss his wife, still feeling like the luckiest guy in the world to have her by his side.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.

The next day, he went back to talk to Chaplain Colonel John Rodgers to give him an official answer. He could tell by the colonel’s face that this was a monumental decision; the stakes were high.

“The timing is not ideal, son,” Chaplain Rodgers said. “I know you just finished basic, and I’d like to see you get more noncombat experience first, but a military-wide shortage on chaplains says otherwise.”

“I understand, sir. They’re putting me in the infantry battalion. Under Lieutenant Colonel Jacobsen.”

Rodgers gave him a somber nod. “Surge unit. Serving folks who spend their days clearing roads laced with IEDs. Means they have confidence in you.”

That’s where I’m meant to be. Where God wants me to serve.

“I’m ready, sir.”

“The 1–30th is going to be at the tip of the spear in Iraq,” Rodgers said. “There’s going to be a high risk of casualties.”

“I understand that, sir.”

“Look, Darren—the death of a soldier is the toughest thing you’ll face as a chaplain. There are other meaningful ways you can serve the army without heading straight into the thick of it.”

“I signed up to be where the need is, sir,” Darren said. “And twelve months’ll go by fast.”

“Bit faster than fifteen, for sure.”

“Fifteen, sir?”

Rodgers gave him a short nod. “Fifteen.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The infantry unit’s already been out in the field training, but you can join them for their final week. You’ll have March and April to get ready before deploying. You’ll be doing lots of boring stuff like sorting out your medical and legal things. But the good news is you’ll have two weeks of leave for a final vacation before you go. My suggestion is you enjoy every second of your time here before May arrives.”

5

There was something thrilling about taking a broken and abandoned piece of furniture and restoring it. Heather loved finding pieces from Goodwill and fixing them up, turning them into beautiful furnishings for their home. Friends had even asked her to do this for certain pieces they had found. Today she was finished with her latest big project: restoring a dresser. She couldn’t wait to show it off to Darren when he got home.

The original was a bulky piece with loose drawers and an

ugly faded brown color. After painting the dresser, she put in new metal drawer slides and handles. The white chalk paint allowed the detail and hardware to pop, especially the intricate wood carving along the top edges.

When she heard Darren open the door and greet the kids, Heather walked into the family room to meet him.

“Hey, babe,” she said as he leaned down and gave her a kiss. “I want to show you something.”

Leading him to their bedroom, she threw out an arm like the hostess on a quiz show to point out the new centerpiece of their room.

“Did you just buy that?” he asked.

“No! It’s that dresser I picked up a month ago. The one sitting in the garage taking up space.”

Darren walked up to it and felt the edges. “It looks brand-new,” he said.

“See? I told you it had potential. All it needed was some TLC. And a little time to make it happen.”

“I think you should start doing this for a living,” he said with a smile. “Open up a little shop. Sell these for ten times the price you make them for.”

“So does that mean you’ll stay at home with the kids and homeschool them?”

“Oh, that’s right,” he joked. “Details. This really is something, though.”

“Little by little we’re getting there.” She was making the new house their own, slowly but surely, in small and significant ways.

6

They may be misplaced, forgotten, or misdirected, but in the heart of every man is a desperate desire for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue.

The writing leapt off the pages and into Darren's heart. He didn't simply feel *inspired* to action; he felt *ignited*.

As Darren scanned through highlighted portions of *Wild at Heart*, he remembered why he had felt so strongly about joining the army and serving with men and women. He knew his calling, and a big part of him was excited to be taking this next step.

So there comes a time in a man's life when he's got to break away from all that and head off into the unknown with God.

It spoke to him as a man, but a man made in God's own image. *Yes, a man is a dangerous thing*, Eldredge wrote, using the scalpel as an example of being able to both wound and save a life.

Chaplain Rodgers had initially thought he would be better suited sitting behind a desk in a safer environment, but Darren knew he was ready. He believed he would be strong and brave. He would provide important emotional and spiritual support for soldiers after their combat missions.

With a stack of books next to him on his desk, Darren knew there would never be enough time for him to spend studying. First and foremost, he spent hours in the Word, knowing how vital it was not only for his position but for his very being. There was a battle going on even greater than the one in Iraq: a spiritual battle raging every day, and the only way to survive and win was spending time with God. Seeking Him required discipline

and determination. And now that he would be heading overseas, Darren knew he needed to arm and prepare himself even more.

Eldredge encouraged all men to take journeys like this. Not necessarily physical ones, but spiritual ones: *To recover his heart's desire a man needs to get away from the noise and distraction of his daily life for time with his own soul. He needs to head into the wilderness, to silence and solitude. Alone with himself, he allows whatever is there to come to the surface.*

As he turned off the lights in his office to head to bed, Darren wondered what the wilderness would feel like, and what things were going to come to the surface.

He couldn't wait to discover them.

7

The days are long but the years are short. The longer time went by, the more Heather thought of this quote she had heard from another mother once.

As she looked for candles in the kitchen to put on Sam's birthday cake, she couldn't believe how four years had simply blinked by. One minute she was holding her little baby boy, who wasn't that little at ten pounds. The next minute he was wobbling desperately to walk, then he was running and climbing over everything. Sam was all energy and excitement. He spoke more in his actions than with his tongue, except, of course, when he was giving his older sister a hard time.

The days are long . . .

After looking for the candles for fifteen minutes, she gave up and called for reinforcements.

“Babe, could you do me a big favor?” she asked after reaching Darren on his cell phone.

“Sure.”

Today he was meeting with a financial adviser who was helping them get all their accounts and banking issues in order before he left for Iraq.

“I need you to pick up some candles for the birthday cake. I know I had a box of them but I can’t find any.”

“They must be in that missing box. You know—the one with those picture frames and my Bulldogs socks.”

“Yep,” she said. “We’ll add candles to the list.”

There were still quite a few boxes in the garage waiting to be unpacked, but she had already skimmed through them and couldn’t find the half dozen framed family photos she had carefully wrapped and boxed herself. For some reason, the one box she had made sure to keep track of herself during the move had vanished.

As for Darren’s nasty Georgia Bulldogs socks . . . She might have “accidentally” left them back at their old house. And they might have somehow made their way to one of the garbage bags they filled with stuff to throw away.

She didn’t mean to deceive him. Heather planned to go out and buy him some new socks. The old pair had holes in them and seemed to smell even after they were in the wash. Some things did *not* need to come with them with this move.

“Any particular type of candles?” Darren asked.

“I’m sure your choice will be perfect.”

When Darren arrived back home an hour later, he showed off the candles he’d bought with a boyish pride. They were green army men candles.

“The set came with five, so we’ll have an extra,” Darren said. “Look—each guy has a unique pose.”

One soldier carried a rifle, while another was talking on the phone.

“Should I be worried there’s someone throwing a grenade on our son’s birthday cake?” she teased.

“My personal favorite is the guy with the rocket launcher.”

It was no surprise that this was Sam’s favorite army man candle as well. He seemed almost more excited by the candles than the cake itself.

Darren had picked up not only the candles but also some pizzas from a new favorite joint near their house called Maciano’s. Sam loved bacon, so one of the pizzas had bacon, pepperoni, and sausage on it. Before eating, Darren asked God’s blessing on their meal.

“Dear heavenly Father, thank You for this day and for this celebration of life. We thank and bless Your holy name for giving us Sam. We praise You as we watch him becoming a young man before our very eyes. Thank You that he replenishes those around him rather than depletes. Please, Lord, help Sam continue to grow up being a person who gives to people. We ask this in Your Son’s name. Amen.”

“What’s *replemish*, Daddy?” Sam asked.

“Well, a lot of people in this world don’t give to others;

they only take,” Daddy said to him. “They don’t think of others. But you do. And we think it’s a great thing to see you be kind.”

“He’s not always kind to me!” Elie chimed in.

“Be nice,” Heather said. “It’s his birthday.”

When they were ready to sing “Happy Birthday” to their little man, Heather found herself getting choked up. She stared at the lit candles and the joy in Sam’s face as his big sister proudly looked on and the little sis sat in her high chair, mesmerized by the flames.

It was a simple thing, Darren swinging by a store to get the candles and picking up the pizza. A simple and easy thing to do. But it was help.

How am I going to do all of this on my own?

As they sang to Sam and laughed throughout at Daddy’s voice thundering through the kitchen, Heather knew the days were about to get longer. But . . .

I hope the next year is short. The shortest I’ll ever have to experience.

8

“I’m going to miss these walks,” Darren said as they strolled through Freedom Park on the picturesque afternoon.

“Me too,” Heather said. “I can’t believe it’s only a month away.”

“Yeah. I can’t believe how busy the battalion has been.”

The “surge” announcement really sped up the timeline for getting ready for deployment. He had already been able to do some overnight exercises with the battalion, going for five nights to do training with them. When they weren’t in the field, the days were full of packing containers, getting uniforms and equipment ready, and prepping vehicles. There was an element of anticipation in seeing soldiers running around town buying everything in sight.

“It’ll be fun going to see your family this weekend,” Heather said, thinking about their upcoming trip to Atlanta.

“I can’t wait until we have our block leave.”

“You just can’t wait to go to Disney,” Heather joked.

Everyone was encouraged to take personal leave before deploying for Iraq. They planned to visit Disney World for a few days, while the rest of the time would be spent packing his personal things and trying to have quality family time. There were still lots of “honey-do’s” that needed finishing around the house.

They walked toward the gazebo and sat down on the steps. It was nice to be together and alone, with the kids at home with a babysitter.

“I’m already getting a dose of what things are going to be like out in the field,” Darren said. “But people are in pain everywhere. And that’s when they’re ready to invite God into their lives. Some of these guys are going through rough times. A few of them have opened up to me already.”

She squeezed his arm. “It’s easy to open up to you. You’re pretty likable.”

“Oh yeah? You think so?”

“Hmmm. Sometimes.”

They both laughed as she leaned against him.

“It doesn’t seem real,” Darren said. “Not yet. It still feels like I’m just imagining that I’m going to be overseas playing soldier.”

“I’m sure it won’t take long before it becomes very real.”

“Yeah.”

“And when it does, you’re going to be the chaplain people are going to turn to.”

He nodded, hoping those words would prove to be true.

9

As she scanned the lawn, camera in hand, Heather spotted Meribeth bouncing in her jumper, her cheeks even rounder with her big grin, loving the sudden ability to maneuver up and down without falling. She zoomed in for a snapshot, then kept walking and guiding their expensive new toy on to the rest of the family. She found Darren pausing for a moment during the game of tag, trying to explain in terms they could understand the news he had delivered to them.

“It’s like when we play Fort Bumblefoot and somebody gets hurt,” he said to Elie and Sam, while they waited to see if he was going to move to try and tag them. “I’ll be there to talk to the soldiers if they need someone to help them feel better.”

Then without another beat, Darren raced over and made a lunge at Sam, diving into the thick grass.

“Gotcha!”

Sam scampered away. “No, you missed! You missed!”

“Oh yeah?” Darren looked over at Heather and smiled. She kept taking pictures, knowing these moments would be precious a few months down the road.

Darren sprang up and ran over to Sam, scooping him up in his left arm, then kept running until he reached Elie, grabbing her with his right arm. He spun them around, their arms and legs dangling while their laughter floated by. Darren pretended to lose his balance and stumbled forward, letting the kids drop down onto him while they hollered and laughed. Sam, of course, bolted back up to get away, but Elie remained on her back, sadness suddenly overshadowing her again.

“But Daddy,” she said. “What happens now when we need you to cheer us up?”

Darren shifted back onto his legs, but before he could answer, the sound of Elie’s familiar wheezing could be heard. She was wincing, her lungs gasping for air.

“Elie, your inhaler,” Heather said.

Elie searched her pockets but came up empty. “I don’t . . . know.”

Heather rushed over to her side. “When did you last have it?”

Elie didn’t know and couldn’t get any words out anyway. Heather turned and ran back into the house.

“Stay with her,” she shouted to Darren. “I’ll get a backup. Sam, look in the grass!”

“I’ve got it! Heather—I found it,” her always-calm husband said just as she reached the doorstep.

Darren handed the inhaler to Elie, who squeezed it and took

a long breath in, then slowly began to breathe again. Heather finally could breathe too, and she walked slowly back over to them.

“You’re okay, sweetie,” Darren said as he sat down next to her. “You’re okay.”

Elie leaned back on the grass, steadying each breath as she looked at the sky. Her father did the same, and so did Sam.

“Who’s going to find my inhaler when you’re gone?” she asked.

“I think that should be Sam’s responsibility,” Darren said. “Sam—do you think you’re up for this job?”

“Sure!”

All three of them were now lying back on the grass, looking up at the blue heavens. Heather picked up the camera and took a few more pictures.

“I wanna start a countdown, Daddy,” Elie said. “When will you be home?”

The zoom of the lens captured Darren’s bittersweet smile.

“Well, probably a few months after your next birthday, Bug.”

“Aw, but I just had one,” she said.

Heather lowered her camera.

Make this good, Chaplain.

“Well, I promise we’re all gonna get through this just fine,” Daddy said.

“We *know*. It’s because ‘God is always with us.’”

“Wow. Tough crowd.” Darren paused for a moment, still looking up. “But that’s right. Because when He’s with us, He’s also there to give us what we need. To protect us. Help us feel

better. Even help us have fun while we wait for something that's hard to wait for.”

Well done, Heather thought, knowing it had been hard to utter without becoming overcome with emotion. Mommy and Daddy had to be strong for the children.

“To have fun, like playing tag!”

With that Darren changed the reflective moment, tapping Sam while springing up in the air and helping Elie to her feet.

“You're it, Sam! Elie, run!”

Darren held hands with Elie as they tried to evade Sam. He tagged Elie, and she then chased after her father, all while Meribeth continued bouncing and chomping at her fingers with her gums.

Normally the busyness of life wouldn't allow her to slow down to watch and be mindful of this time, but Heather was totally there, solely focused on the simple fun her family was having.

The simple moments are the ones we're going to miss most.

10

The get-together that Heather and other family members planned to say goodbye to Darren turned into a full-fledged party with a lot more people than he'd expected. Almost every stage of his life was covered, from family members he hadn't seen for years to longtime friends and even teachers and former neighbors. The flow of smiling faces bringing their shared

histories with them made him feel both honored and humbled to have so many in his life. All he could say was how blessed he happened to be, and how he gave God the glory.

While playing the role of both the host and the guest of honor, Darren was also showing off his grilling skills. He wouldn't be cooking with his big grill for some time. The hot dogs were already well cooked but he was monitoring the hamburgers and the chicken as he saw a family of four walking across the street toward their lawn.

I can't believe she persuaded him to come.

Their neighbors, the Lewis family, slowly made their way toward Darren while he closed the lid on the grill and went to greet them. They had gotten to know Tonya and the twins, Mia and Nia, a little more since their awkward first encounter after moving in. Yet besides a few customary waves or hollered hellos from their opposite sides of the street, Darren hadn't yet spoken to Michael. Even now, it looked as if Tonya was all but pulling her husband to the yard adorned with streamers and balloons.

"Hey there! Thanks for coming, guys," Darren greeted them, quickly looking back to the house to find the rest of his family. "Heather, kids, look who's here!"

Michael's grip was strong, his expression nothing but serious.

"Darren Turner—*Chaplain* Turner, actually. Nice to meet you."

His neighbor's eyes shifted for a split second. "Major Mike Lewis."

"Good to see you again," Tonya said as she shook his hand.

Heather appeared and greeted their new guests. “Girls, the rest of the kids are in the back by the trampoline.”

The twins thanked her and went in search of others to play with.

“They’re so pretty,” Heather said. “How old are they?”

“Twelve going on twenty,” Tonya said, rolling her eyes. “It’s so great you guys are doing this. We really should be the ones hosting, since we’ve been here four years and know the drill.”

“We love doing this, but we don’t know ‘the drill,’ so I’m all ears.” Heather led Tonya toward the party indoors so the men could talk.

Mike stood there on the grass, wearing the expression of a man in a women’s clothing store waiting while his wife tries things on in the dressing room.

“Hope you’re hungry, because we have a lot of food,” Darren said.

“I already ate. Got a cold one?”

“You kidding? Been icing them down since dawn.”

Stepping over to the cooler, Darren dug into the ice and pulled out a drink, tossing it through the air and watching Mike catch it without missing a beat. As his neighbor looked at the square juice box in his hand and then back at Darren, his face said it all.

“Hey,” Darren said, “if grape’s not your flavor, I have mixed berry and prune. Which the mature crowd seems to like.”

Mike didn’t even bother to feign a smile. He took off the straw and jabbed it into the box, taking a sip that might have drained it in one big swoop.

“Chaplain, huh?” he said, finishing with another slurp. “So, our occasional fights you’ve seen—they’re not what they look like.”

“Hey. All I know, Major, is we all got life goin’ on in our houses. And family or not, life’s plain hard. Especially, as I can only imagine, for parents of twin girls.”

Mike’s tense frame appeared to relax just a bit, seeing Darren wasn’t going to launch into some kind of lecture or judgment.

“Yeah, twins can be something else. I mean—the family I got in Iraq is one crazy, ugly bunch. But a whole lot easier to deal with than this one.”

Darren gave a chuckle that sounded more bleak than amused. “First tour for me, so I’ll take any advice you’ve got.”

Just then a volley of laughter fell over them, and they looked to see the twins running with Sam and Elie. Mike’s stoic, distant glance didn’t change as he looked back at Darren.

“My advice? Just leave your heart at home.”

11

There was no way Darren could personally thank every person who came to the party, so instead he left each of them with a note he had written.

Thank you for coming today. I appreciate your support. It’s humbling to receive this type of recognition. Many

people making the same sacrifice never get this sort of party. I honor them today as well.

The decision I made three years ago to pursue this ministry has finally panned out. I didn't choose to go to war, but I did choose to be in the army and risk the possibility. Now it's no longer a possibility, and in about three weeks I am going to war. Let me say up front that it is a privilege to be a part of this. I make no apologies for doing it. Men and women are laying their lives on the line every day, and I want to be right there with them as their chaplain.

Please don't grieve for me—grieve for the soldiers and Iraqis who don't know the great salvation of God: "Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying" (Heb. 2:14–15 NLT). That's the message I will share with soldiers as they are being shot at.

I believe this is God's will for my life. Heather feels the same way. If she didn't feel the same way, I wouldn't be doing this. Since that's the case, I'D RATHER BE WHERE GOD WANTS ME THAN WHERE I THINK IT'S BEST TO BE. My life is His, and I believe this is His plan for us. It feels more "right" than anything I've ever done. I am blessed, because I've found what I was made for!

Heather and the kids . . . they are the true heroes of this story, as are all military spouses and kids. Pray for them!

They will need your love and support on a regular basis. I will miss them immensely, but I long for the day when I will get to see them once again and not take for granted their hugs and kisses.

12

Holding the remaining plates from the barbecue, Darren walked into the kitchen, where the radio was turned on a little louder than usual. A slow ballad played as Heather washed dishes, swaying and humming to a Rascal Flatts song. Darren stopped and watched her for a moment, a wave of wonder washing over him.

She really is the very definition of lovely.

Life was often too busy to simply pause and appreciate its beauty. But for a handful of seconds, Darren looked at the woman he'd married, knowing how much he wanted and needed her. Remembering the gift God had blessed him with.

She turned to call out, "Hey, babe! Can you—" and then noticed Darren standing just across from her.

"Oh, you're here." Suddenly she grew self-conscious. "What?"

"Nothing. Just watching you."

"Oh yeah? I look real cute now." She held up her soapy hands and then pushed falling strands of hair out of her eyes.

"Come here," he said to her, slipping an arm behind her and embracing her. "Cute isn't the word I'd use."

For a moment they swayed to the music. Heather couldn't

help laughing as they moved, but as she looked up at him, a realization seemed to fall over her. The same reality that was hitting Darren. They said ten thousand words without uttering a single one, looking at each other with weighted smiles.

“Fifteen months without this face,” Darren said.

He leaned down and gave her a gentle kiss, and then he felt her bury her face in his chest. They stopped moving and simply held one another. The world was on pause. For a few more moments. Heather hugged him as if her very life depended on it.

“Hey,” she said as she moved to look back up at him. “God’s in this, right?”

“I know He is.”

“Then you’ll be fine. And so will we.”

They kissed again and resumed their slow dance. It might be the last one they would have for some time.

13

This is gonna hurt.

Fathers had to be the strong ones. They had to set the example. Perhaps that’s where that false belief that “real men don’t cry” came from. Darren certainly didn’t ascribe to this notion, yet he also knew if he suddenly became an emotional wreck, the rest of his family would follow suit. Well, perhaps Meribeth wouldn’t, but she might already be crying because she wanted some more animal crackers.

It was comforting to know everything in their house was in order, with bills paid and the oil changed in the van and a guy hired to mow their lawn. They had even finally gotten a will, and the power of attorney had been done. Sobering tasks, but necessary.

With so much to do these past few days, it was easy to overlook the reality of his actual departure. To forget that he was about to say goodbye to his family not for hours or days but for months. His gut ached knowing he would soon be kissing his wife and kids for the last time.

Hosts of families lined the area just outside the red-roofed hangar at Hunter Army Airfield, bidding their loved ones goodbye before they passed through to board the massive C-17 transport plane waiting on the tarmac. Seeing all his fellow soldiers gave Darren a mixture of strange feelings. He was sad and anxious to leave at the same time. The reality hung in the air, the truth that something bad could and would happen in Iraq. Nobody needed to express it but everyone felt it. Darren knew he was blessed to have this wonderful family to bid goodbye. Not every soldier had one.

He spotted a stoic Michael standing in front of his twins, giving each of them and his wife a quick kiss on the cheek before turning to leave. As he departed, Tonya called out, "I love you!" Michael waved without even turning around.

Maybe he was hiding some tears he was shedding.

Heather bounced Meribeth in her arms, bracing herself for this moment. Kneeling in front of Sam and Elie, Darren put his arms around them. "Okay, bring it in, kiddos. Big hugs!"

As Sam and Elie smothered him, Heather and Meribeth joined them. Then as the two eldest kids finally let him go, Darren held on to his wife and their baby.

“Make sure this little one remembers me,” he whispered to Heather.

“Why do you think I made you suffer through all those photos?”

Darren kissed her, first on her lips as a tender husband, then giving her some more kisses on her cheeks, the kind a loving and playful daddy might give to mommy while the kids laughed. With everybody in good spirits, he high-fived Sam and Elie and then grabbed his gear to head to the plane.

Seconds later he heard Elie call out.

“Daddy!”

She ran toward him, past the line where family members could go. Heather called out for her but Elie was too fast, making it to Darren to give him another big bear hug.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, Bug.”

The adoring face looked up at him with those precious eyes so sad. “But Daddy . . . what if you get shot?”

This was a moment to be strong. Darren didn’t have to fake it. He felt God giving him strength today. He gave Elie a reassuring smile, then pulled something out of his pocket.

Darren loved the Armor of God coins designed for Christian chaplains serving in the military. With their design recalling the spiritual “armor” described in Ephesians, the coins were meant to be an encouraging reminder of faith.

He handed Elie a coin. “Remember, honey,” he said. “I’ve always got my special armor on.”

“I know, Daddy,” she said, not exactly sounding as though she meant it.

“You keep this coin safe, okay? Whenever you get scared, or miss me, just hold on to this, and remember who’s protecting me.”

“Okay.”

“And keep saying the Bible verse you’ve been memorizing. Remember?”

Now Elie just nodded. She had recently memorized Psalm 18:1–3 as part of the homeschooling that Heather did with the kids. The verse was especially fitting today.

Darren wrapped his arms around Elie once more and lifted her up. “I love you like crazy.”

“I love you like crazy,” she repeated. “Don’t forget to send us goofy-face pictures, ’kay?”

“I won’t.”

Elie ran back to Heather as Darren waved to them one more time and gave them a big confident smile.

14

The words of King David comforted Darren as the plane took off and Heather as she drove the kids back home.

I love You, LORD; / you are my strength. / The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; / my God is my rock, in whom I find

protection. / He is my shield, the power that saves me, / and my place of safety.

They both knew their strength couldn't come from themselves. They needed God to give it to them. They knew He could shield and protect them. They believed He could do the same thing He had done for the psalmist who wrote the following words: *I called on the LORD, who is worthy of praise, / and he saved me from my enemies.*