PART ONE

MOBILIZATION

1

Miranda

No One Likes a Sulky Soldier

A few minutes past sunrise on the second Saturday of September 2005, the verdant campus of the College of William and Mary was a preternaturally quiet place, so still and lifeless it seemed Miranda had it all to herself. It would be several more hours before her classmates awoke to their frat party–fueled hangovers and headed to the cafeteria for restorative servings of greasy eggs and coffee and later to the cocoon of the library stacks.

Exhausted as she was on these early Saturday mornings, Miranda loved them and always found herself admiring the beauty of the campus. With its Georgian architecture, vast open spaces, and picturesque bridge on which, the legend went, a kiss could lead to marriage, William and Mary, in the heart of Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg, lived up to its impressive pedigree. Founded in 1693 by a charter from England's King William III and Queen

Mary II, the college was the second oldest in the country (behind Harvard) and the alma mater of Thomas Jefferson, whose life-sized statue stood sentry by a brick wall in the center of campus. William and Mary was known as the Ivy of the South, one of the most elite and exclusive colleges in the country. It was home to the best and the brightest students, who joked that the reason the library closed at 6 P.M. on weekends was that the administration thought they studied too much.

Miranda, a twenty-two-year-old senior history major, excelled here; she found great friends and was active in her sorority. But it was only during these Saturday mornings, when she was alone with the rising sun on her way to her one-weekend-a-month National Guard drill, that she felt comfortable enough to wear her uniform on campus, something she rarely did when the rest of the school was around to see her.

It wasn't that she was ashamed of serving in the army. On the contrary: Wearing the uniform was the fulfillment of a dream she'd had since she was a young girl growing up in Indiana. It's just that while William and Mary had a small but dedicated ROTC program, a student in camouflage was still a highly unusual sight, one that attracted the kind of bewildered, blinky-eyed stares that reminded Miranda of the cartoon bunnies in *Bambi*. It was almost more common to see a student streaking—another of the college's traditions—than a soldier decked out in a battle dress uniform like the one Miranda was now wearing: Her black boots polished and laced tight, creases crisp, a specialist's rank insignia on her collar, her beret perched delicately over her carefully primped blond hair so as not to ruin it for later that evening.

She had taken special care with her hair that morning, twirling it loosely into a bun so that it wouldn't come out a tangled mess. It was going to be a big night, and not just because the football team was going to demolish its intrastate rival the Virginia Military Institute later that afternoon. It was the culmination of rush week for the college's fraternities and sororities. Over the years, some chapters had been banned from campus for various alcohol-related infractions, but Greek life was still a big part of the college's social scene. William

and Mary was, after all, where the fraternity system in America began with the founding chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776.

Tonight was to be "Pref night," the crescendo of the mating ritual between pledges and the sororities who were courting them. Miranda and her sorority sisters had stayed up to near dawn discussing which girls they wanted to invite to join. The girls had winnowed their list of sororities to their top three preferences. Now after weeks of casual courtship, it was time for the sororities to sell themselves with a full press. After some negotiating with her army supervisor, Miranda had received special dispensation to leave drill early on Saturday afternoon so she could attend the festivities at Kappa Delta. Over the years, these drill weekends had caused her to miss so much—every single homecoming parade, big frat parties, and even a semiformal dance—but she was not going to miss tonight. Tonight she was not going to be a soldier. She was going to be a sorority girl. She was going to shed her uniform for a black satin dress like all the other Kappa Delta girls, lace her neck with pearls, and demonstrate that she was among the best group of coeds a young girl could ever hope to be associated with. What's more, Miranda had been chosen to address, tonight, on behalf of the sorority, the girls rushing Kappa Delta.

As much as she loved school, she couldn't help but feel somewhat detached this year. She had tried to get into her studies, and to indulge into the wonderful frivolity of rush week when the Kappa Delta sisters pulled all-nighters gossiping about the pledges—who was smart, who was cute, who would fit in. But she just couldn't help but feel apart from it all. "I feel like a ghost when I walk around campus," she had written in her journal just two weeks earlier. "It's like I'm not even here."

Now, with the campus vacant, the cleansing smell of the morning dew, everyone else tucked comfortably away in their dorm rooms, she felt her isolation.

All summer long, there had been rumors that the 2-224th was headed to Iraq. Suddenly, drill weekends had taken on a heightened

sense of urgency. There were briefings on how to detect roadside bombs. The pilots and mechanics were feverishly trying to get all the Black Hawks in tip-top shape. The medics were performing their emergency drills with even more care and exigency. Now it appeared the only question was when they would all ship out. Miranda hoped it would be after Christmas, so she could at least finish the semester and graduate on time. She'd already interrupted her college career once to go to basic training, and with the possibility of a deployment looming, she had enrolled in summer school to make sure she'd have the credits to graduate early, if need be.

During the first week of school she had warned her professors that she might not be around to finish the semester. This news had come as a shock because few knew she was even in the Guard to begin with, a personal detail Miranda purposely did not advertise. The war did not exist at William and Mary, and Miranda did not want to be the sole manifestation of its ugly existence. As far as she knew, just one other student had left campus to join the fight. There had been a couple of peace rallies on campus, but nothing that rivaled the protests during the Vietnam War, when in 1968 students held silent one-hour peace vigils for seven straight days. By contrast, the Iraq War seemed an abstraction—something to lament and deride in coffeehouse chats, not something for students to fear or protest. It didn't involve them.

When Miranda broke the news to her professors that she might be called to serve, at least one said he had sensed the day would eventually come. He put his hands over his mouth and gasped, "I wondered how long this would take." Young men and women had been shipping off to war ever since 9/11, and it wasn't until now—four years later—that war had finally touched one of his students. Most of her professors were supportive and promised to work with her on independent projects from Iraq if necessary to make sure she would graduate on time. But one told her that to pass his class, she had to be there for it. "You have to make a decision," he said. "Are you a student or a soldier?"

I'm trying to be both, she thought. But she was starting to think that while she had a foot in both worlds, she belonged fully to neither.

As she made the hour-long drive to Guard drill that Saturday morning, Miranda wondered if this would be the weekend that the unit would finally get official word that it was going to Iraq. At the beginning of every drill, while standing in formation, she expected the battalion commander to break the news. She waited for an inspirational speech, a war cry. She imagined something like George C. Scott in the movie *Patton*, standing before that huge American flag, rallying the troops.

But formation on this Saturday came and went without news. No speeches. No talk of war. No bombast. Only more of good old "hurry up and wait," as only the U.S. Army could dish it out. At least the soldiers were all in this together. That camaraderie, the instant friendship that comes with enduring what soldiers sometimes call "the Suck" of military life, was perhaps what she liked best about the Guard. In a way it mimicked the bonds she had with her sorority sisters. But at a time when neighborhoods and schools all across the United States had segregated themselves into neat little enclaves, the army was still one of the last places to get a genuine cross-section of society: whites and blacks, lawyers and firefighters, all working together. Where else did you find that? Not in small-town Indiana, where Miranda had grown up, and certainly not at William and Mary, where the scions of the powerful took their diplomas.

Only a few of her college friends knew that she might be going to Iraq, and Miranda had sworn them to secrecy. News like that would have spread quickly through the Kappa Delta house and across the campus, and she didn't want to be seen as anything other than just another student. Many of her sorority sisters had no idea she was even in the Guard. Miranda—with her penchant for *Vogue* magazine, stylish mid-back-length blond hair, and expressive hazel eyes she liked to accent with mascara—didn't fit the soldier stereotype. "It was like she was on the soccer team, or something,"

remembered Portia Ross, one of Miranda's best friends. The Guard "was this odd little hobby she had."

Her classmates just knew that she often was gone on weekends and could sometimes be seen on the treadmill running with a heavy rucksack on her back. She was a bit more serious, a bit more mature. It wasn't just that she had grown up in a Mormon household. Miranda had always been focused. While she would wear her uniform under the rare anonymity provided by her 7 A.M. Saturdays, Miranda changed back into civilian clothes before returning to campus. Even her roommate had seen her in uniform only once or twice. Miranda just didn't want to have to explain why she'd joined the army to people who didn't know the difference between a corporal and a captain.

In the rare instances when people asked her why she was in the army, she told them the truth: She desperately needed the GI Bill to pay William and Mary's $20,000-a-year tuition. But it was also an easily digestible answer that seemed to make sense to civilians. She knew that any other explanation—like patriotism or service or love of country—would have been met with consternation, if not outright disbelief. The rest of the story, though unspoken, was that Miranda would have enlisted even if the National Guard wasn't going to give her one cent. She loved the army. She even loved basic training. She loved that the military had lived up to all the corny recruiting ads, that she pushed herself and realized how much she could really accomplish. She loved the teamwork and the discipline, and getting up early and doing more by 9 A.M. than everyone else did all day. The army had taken a slight, insecure young woman and turned her into a damn good soldier: strong and strong-willed, able to run a six-minute mile, pump out sixty push-ups, and even order around a squad of soldiers without taking any of their guff.

If she had to pinpoint the genesis of her fascination with the army, it would be, oddly enough, seeing the film *Forrest Gump* in the fifth grade. Tom Hanks's character was the oddball outcast who with the army finally found a place where he fit in. During the awkwardness of adolescence, a place to fit in was exactly what Miranda was

looking for. As a sixth grader she'd given a class presentation on Shannon Faulkner, the first female cadet who enrolled at the Citadel after the courts forced the once all-male military institution to admit women. When Miranda was thirteen, she begged her parents to let her join the Civil Air Patrol, an air force cadet program for teenagers. She often was the youngest of the group, and the only girl, but she toughed out the four-day camping trips. She forded rivers and rappelled down rocks just like everyone else. She even was able to catch her own food just as she was taught. And if the boys expected her to be squeamish at skinning a rabbit, they were disappointed. Soon the boys couldn't help but be impressed, and Miranda's confidence grew.

Her parents thought this would turn out to be a passing fad, something she'd outgrow. "We could think of much worse things she could be doing," her father, Carl Summers, recalled. "So we supported her."

He was a college professor with a doctorate in psychology, and a devout Mormon who taught his three children early on that they should decide not to drink or have premarital sex, so when the opportunities presented themselves they could say they had already made up their minds. Before she died of cancer when Miranda was fifteen, Miranda's mother was the chair of the Educational Psychology department at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, where Miranda spent most of her childhood. Carl Summers's second wife, Vanessa, was also an academic with a "Dr." before her name. Miranda was destined for a life of higher learning, her father felt—college and then graduate school. The army wasn't part of that picture. But during her senior year of high school, Miranda decided she was sick of school. She wanted a soldier's life, and so she'd forgo college and enlist. She was so determined that the best her father could do was strike a deal. Miranda would apply to the service academies: West Point or Annapolis. If she didn't get in, she'd go to a regular college.

She made the first cut of the Naval Academy's rigorous application program, but a knee injury kept her from passing the physical. So the following fall she enrolled in George Washington University.

She hated it from almost the moment she stepped on campus. She was a country girl from Indiana. George Washington was in the heart of Washington, D.C., and she didn't take to the big-city vibe. The whole place was just overwhelming. The only reason she had agreed to go in the first place was that her father had landed a job there teaching statistics, which meant she could attend at a reduced rate.

She complained to him that she didn't like her classes or her professors, and she wasn't making friends. All of this was true. But Miranda probably would have felt the same way about any college in the country. Then a couple of weeks into her freshman year, American Airlines Flight 77 hit the Pentagon two miles from GW's campus, and as the country was swept up in a patriotic fervor in the weeks that followed the 9/11 attacks, her desire to be a soldier intensified.

She waited until the end of the semester before dropping out and moving back to Indiana. She felt she owed her father that much. But shortly after arriving she looked up the Muncie recruiting offices of the Army National Guard in the Yellow Pages and called. "I want to join," she said. The recruiter promised to come and pick her up because she didn't have a car, but then never showed. When Miranda called back, he apologized and said he didn't think she was serious: The only people who call out of the blue to say they want to enlist are the prank callers who like to torture recruiters, he said.

Well, I'm serious, Miranda told him. A few days later she was on her way to the army's processing center. It wasn't until after she had signed the paperwork that she told her father what she had done because she knew he would disapprove—and he did, angrily, as if it were a personal betrayal: "How could you?"

The army, he thought, was "not exactly the ideal situation for a young woman," especially if she was his daughter. "I tried to talk her out of it," he recalled. "But there's a point where you push, and she pushes back. So I made a decision that if this is what you want, I'll support you."

He had been similarly disappointed when Miranda decided she did not want to be a practicing Mormon, like the rest of her family.

Just twelve years old, she informed her father, "I'm not going to lie about what I believe in." The decision came as a blow, but it was clear she'd made up her mind and wouldn't budge. There was no talking her out of it. And so Carl Summers decided to support her then, too. Before landing the job at GW, he had been out of work for a while and as a result was "going through a financial crisis at the time," he said later. "I couldn't support her, and the military must have looked like the best option."

Actually, it looked like the only option, which is what she told him: "This is how I'm going to get through college—on the GI Bill." The demands of the military—the weekends, the physical pain, the mind-numbing routine—would be worth it if it meant she could strike out on her own. But Carl Summers wanted to make sure she understood how serious this was. "Once you sign the dotted line, they own you," he said. And even though the Guard boasted that the only commitment for help with one's tuition was one weekend a month, just two weeks a year of service, he warned her that she could get called up for combat. She didn't dispute that, but quietly she thought, there's no way I'm going to war. So the following year, after graduation from basic training, she transferred to William and Mary and became one of a handful of citizen-soldiers on the campus.

After yet another formation without any news about Iraq, Miranda thought of sneaking out to her car to take a nap. She was exhausted after having stayed up so late the night before, talking about the different prospects rushing the sorority. She wanted to be in top form for Pref night. But she had a pile of socks in the supply room to distribute. The more quickly she handed them out, the sooner she could go back to the campus. As she got started, she noticed a sergeant passing out pieces of paper. Probably yet another bureaucratic form from Uncle Sam, she thought.

"Here's yours," the sergeant said, arm outstretched as if distributing Halloween candy.

"You are ordered to active duty as a member of your reserve component unit for the period indicated unless sooner released or unless extended," it read. "Report to home station 18, October, 2005. . . . Period of active duty: Not to exceed 545 days. Purpose: OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM."

At last, here it was. But more than what the capitalized words portended, it was the two figures—18 October and 545 days—that stood out. Miranda shuddered when she realized that her report date was a little more than a month away, which meant she wouldn't be able to finish the semester on campus after all. If she couldn't get her professors to agree to let her finish her studies from Iraq, her graduation would be postponed until after the deployment, which at 545 days, or eighteen months, was going to be even longer than she had expected. Her heart sank when she thought she could be in her mid-twenties when she graduated.

Her father had been right after all. The army owned her, and now the steep debt of her many semesters' worth of college benefits had suddenly come due. But even though she had the legal orders in hand, with dates now set, she hoped that somehow they'd be pushed back just enough so she could finish the semester and graduate on time.

"I keep hoping and praying that I can push it off until December," she wrote in her journal. "I just want to graduate before I go. Somehow things seem to be going too perfectly for this to happen now. I can finally pay for school, I have the credits I need, the classes I need, great friends, great sorority. . . . Somehow, deployment just seems like an idle threat not intended for me, like chlamydia or West Nile [virus]. I just have so much faith that it will all work out. I suppose that I should be a little more upset about this, but something just keeps telling me that school, Iraq, and everything else is all part of the master plan for me."

But she wasn't going to Iraq today. Nothing was going to keep her from enjoying Pref night. Not the army. Not the deployment. Not war. She'd have time to worry about all that later. Pref night was the most important thing. She had a speech to give. Only now

she'd have to do some last-minute editing. She had a secret she was finally going to share.

There was no point now in changing out of her uniform before returning to campus. She was going to Iraq. If people stared as she crossed campus back to the Kappa Delta house, she didn't notice—or care. Let them see me in uniform, she thought. She had other things to worry about. Plus, she was running late. She had only about a half hour to spare before the Pref night festivities were to begin, and despite the care she had given her hair that morning, her army beret still left it a tangled mess that only a good brushing and a curling iron could remedy. For a split second she paused to think about how surreal this all was: How can I be more worried about my hair than going to Iraq? But she was. Maybe it was denial. Maybe it was a deeply ingrained determination to lead a normal college life. Maybe it was the fact that Iraq was still an unimaginable abstraction, while a head of nearly unsalvageable hair was now staring at her in the mirror while the rest of the sorority was beginning to filter into the common room downstairs.

By the time the pledges, known by the more politically correct term "potential new members," or PNMs, arrived, Miranda and her Kappa Delta sisters were in their black dresses, and any of the exhaustion Miranda had felt earlier after a night of virtually no sleep was superseded by the nervousness she felt at the prospect of delivering her speech.

The PNMs who gathered in the living room of the sorority house seemed so young, so innocent. Even though she had been in the same position just a few years before, Miranda couldn't fathom how wonderful it must be to have what sorority would invite you to join as your chief concern. When it was time for her to speak, the sisters gathered all the PNMs into the dining room. The sisters stood behind Miranda, who began by saying how much the sorority had meant to her. "Kappa Delta is a chapter of women who accomplish. I have never seen a group of women with so many

goals and aspirations, but moreover, I have never seen so many women achieve these things so often," she said, reading from a sheet of paper.

She talked about how the sorority had accepted her as a transfer student. How loving they were, how nurturing. "Kappa Deltas not only support each other, we support each other to an extreme that I can only call enabling," she continued.

Her sisters supported her, she went on, when, after 9/11, "I found myself feeling strangely disconnected from campus life. School was okay and I loved my sisters. But I started feeling like I belonged somewhere else, and that place was the army. I was scared to tell my sisters that I wanted to enlist. I thought manicured sorority girls would be the last people on earth to understand that I wanted to sleep in the mud and crawl under barbed wire. But when I finally brought it up, they were incredibly supportive.

"One of the first letters I got at basic training was from my big sister. The packages and letters kept coming, and seeing the brightly decorated letters in the mailbag would always make things seem a little better. My drill sergeants thought that it was hilarious that I was in a sorority, and they would make me do extra push-ups to get my letters that were on Kappa Delta stationery. I think that I have the dubious honor of doing more push-ups for Kappa Delta than anyone else here."

At that, everyone laughed. It seemed so incongruous to think of Miranda, the high heels–wearing sorority girl, as Miranda the mud-spattered recruit doing push-ups while being yelled at by drill instructors. But Miranda kept her head down, trying to focus on her speech.

"I found out this summer that instead of preparing for my senior year, I should be preparing to go to Iraq," she continued, hearing gasps from the sisters standing behind her. "Although I'd known it might happen for years, when I found out, I was scared and angry that things weren't going to go my way. I had to decide if I was going to come back to school this fall, knowing that I would never make it through the school year. I knew that I didn't have much

time left before I leave everything I know for almost two years, and I had to make some choices about how I wanted to spend it."

Aside from the sounds of muted sobs, there was an almost funereal silence, and Miranda could feel her own tears rising. Even some of the PNMs standing in front of her, girls she barely knew, were crying. She pressed on.

"As I get more details and see that there is more of a chance that I'll be leaving before the end of the month than before the end of the year, I'm so thankful that I came back here. My officers, my parents, even the college ask me why I'm back at school this fall when I know I'm not graduating. The answer is simple: I know that I only have a few weeks left, and there is nowhere else on earth that I would rather spend it."

She rushed immediately into an adjoining room because she couldn't hold her tears back any longer, and she didn't want to break down in front of the PNMs. Portia Ross followed her in, and she and a couple of other sorority sisters huddled around her.

"Are you sure you have to go?" they asked. "Are you positive? Isn't there anything you can do to get out of it?"

"I'm going," Miranda said. "There isn't anything I can do."

Giving her Pref night speech about going to Iraq would be the hardest part, or so Miranda thought. But now the word was out on campus, and she became the Girl Who's Going to Iraq, the subject of stares and whispers. She loved her friends and classmates, but they sure could come up with some odd questions and observations about the war.

"Will you have to cut your hair?"

"Yeah, probably," Miranda said.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," she said trying to sound confident, though she actually had no idea if she was prepared for this.

"Will you have to shoot anyone?"

"Only if I really have to," she said. But again, she had no idea.

And then there was the one girl who said, incredibly, "I thought only poor people went to war."

As Miranda soon realized, once you mention you're going to Iraq, everyone feels compelled to give an opinion of the war, and the opinion generally wasn't good. Not that Miranda was a die-hard supporter—she wasn't, and like the rest of the country she grew more disenchanted with the occupation the longer it lasted. But she was a soldier. And soldiers do what they're told, even if that means dropping everything and leaving a plush college life of cello lessons and Civil War history classes and Saturday afternoon football games. They pack their bags and go, knowing they may not come back. Miranda wasn't exactly thrilled to hear about what a waste of a war she was about to enter from people who did not have to worry about making out a will, or making sure they left specific instructions about how they wanted to be buried.

In her journal, she developed several "tips for breaking the news." Among them: "Do not slide the fact that you're going to Iraq into otherwise pleasant conversation. While it is completely okay to use it to get out of uncomfortable conversations, such as when sleazy guys ask for your number at bars (I'd give it to you . . . but I'm going to Iraq), this is not something good to say, when, say, people ask what your postgraduate plans are."

For the most part, she deflected talk of the war with humor. When people asked what Iraq would be like, she'd say it would be a heck of a lot better for her because she was bringing her ultra-soft, 800-thread-count bed sheets. When people asked her what they could send her in care packages, she joked that she was starting a deployment registry at Target, as if she were getting married. "I mean, getting deployed is a big moment in a girl's life," she'd joke. The more concerned her friends were, the lighter she kept the conversation, even boasting that she was going to bring a much-needed dose of style to the desert by wearing pink toenail polish every day of the deployment. This, she soon learned, was the sort of everything's-going-to-be-all-right insouciance that people wanted to hear from their resident soldier. Outside of a few

close friends, no one wanted to hear about her worry, or about her frustration at having her life so drastically interrupted, and certainly not about her fear, which was focused on nothing as specific as death or injury or failure but rather on the ominous unknown that lay ahead.

"Keep a chipper attitude," she wrote in her journal. "No one likes a sulky soldier."

If she was a curiosity to her classmates, she was to her professors a physical manifestation of the war itself, a reminder of their own draft-fearing past and in a couple of cases a lesson to be quickly highlighted in class as part of the curriculum.

"Both of my teachers today announced to the class that it would be my last day and to wish me well," she wrote in her journal shortly before leaving campus in October. "I managed to not cry both times, although there was some definite lump in the throat action. I imagine that I had about the same look on my face that people get when a friend announces to the entire room that it is their birthday. I wasn't sure if I should smile, look sad, or pretend like the professor was talking about someone else. In both classes, I could hear gasps of true shock. It's uncomfortable to be a living, moving occurrence that proves that a largely unpopular war is not ignorable. I wished that life was like a movie, and there would suddenly be an American flag for me to stand behind while I placed my hands on my hips and boldly exclaimed that I would make the world free for democracy if it was the last thing that I do."

Her last Saturday night on campus, her sisters surprised her by throwing a good-bye party at which they presented her with a pile of cards she couldn't bring herself to read just yet because she knew they'd be too painful. The girls hung on her, sobbing into her shoulder, while she remained, for the most part, stoic, ever the good soldier. She was touched and moved, but all the teary hugs and farewells made her start to feel as if she were attending her own funeral. What she really wanted to do was party. She was going to

Iraq, damn it, and not even the most heartfelt sobs were going to change that fact. Enough, she finally declared to her sorority sisters. Let's get out of here. Let's get drunk and stupid and act like freshmen.

"I refuse to be a downer," she dictated. "And I refuse to let you guys be a downer around me. We're going to have a blast."

As she changed into her toga, Miranda shed her usually abstemious personality. Soon she was dancing with such childlike abandon that she was able, as if in a dream, to forget completely who she was and where she was going.

At about one in the morning, some of the frat boys announced they were going to streak the campus green, and Miranda convinced some of her friends to go along. As the boys ran wild, Miranda struggled to undo all the pins holding her toga together. But soon it slipped off, and she took off running across the grass in the moonlight, her sheet fluttering behind her like a cape in the wind.