“I can’t take this anymore.” A heart wrenching sob caught in her throat as she watches him walk out on her and their small kids once again for a night with the boys. It had been three months since his return from Afghanistan and this seems to be the recurring theme. All he talked about while he was gone was how much he missed her and the kids, and yet each night, he headed out to the bar, leaving her to put the kids to bed, clean the kitchen and any messes the kids had left behind as they played the day away, oblivious to the mother who was slowly numbing herself to the pain.

She stomps across the cracked linoleum, her faded sneakers not making nearly enough noise to satisfy the growing heat in her belly. She reaches into the back of the cabinet to grab the ever-lighter bottle of vodka. A fat, hot tear burns down her cheek as she pours the clear liquid into a thin, slightly chipped, water-stained drinking glass. She brings the glass to her lips, catching a glance of herself in the kitchen window and pauses. She looks into her tear-filled brown eyes. Men used to say drove them mad, but now they are shot through with red lines from waiting up all hours of the night waiting for him to come home and keeping him quiet so he didn’t wake the kids, and then getting up early to get the oldest off to school. Her long flowing tresses she used to spend an hour on every day getting the curls just right is once again pulled back into a sharp ponytail to keep the youngest from pulling it as he seems to take delight in doing as of lately.

How easy it would be to just toss this back, and let the lovely soul numbing liquid sear down her throat, working its magic. To put the kids to bed and float off into oblivion for a few minutes. But tonight, is different. Something within her has snapped. She pours the liquid down the sink, rinsing the glass and setting it in the dish rack automatically without thought. She whips into her room, pulling the giant suitcase they always use when they PCS out from the back of the closet. She doesn’t pack much, just a few pairs of jeans, T-shirts, and underwear. She looks fondly at the ball gowns hanging in their dry-cleaning bags. Her mind wanders off to the last ball she went to with him. Oh, how she loves dancing with him. He would whirl her around until she was dizzy and them wrap her in his arms and rest his head on hers until they both stopped spinning.

With a shake of her head the memory fades. She tucks her little jewelry box in the suitcase and them heads into the children’s rooms. She grabs a week’s worth of clothes for each of the children and smashes them into the big suitcase, sitting on it so she could zip it shut. “Ok kids,” she calls out from her bedroom, her cheerful voice betraying the heartache inside, “we’re going to go visit Gramma and Grandpa. Can each of you pack your backpacks with your favorite toys? We might be there a few days, so make sure you grab the ones you can’t live without.”
The kids run squealing down the hall to the room they share. They love going to their grandparents and think this is all a fun surprise. She grabs a backpack herself and goes over to the fireproof safe they have under their bed. She tucks the cash, her passport, a checkbook, and then hesitates. The only thing left is a small Sig Sauer P226 she had bought to protect the kids while Todd was away in Afghanistan. She never liked having one around the kids but also wanted to be able to protect them. She put the magazine and double checked that the chamber was clear and slipped the weapon into the backpack.

She zipped the backpack shut just as Matty, the oldest came in. “Mom, me, Sarah, and Matty are all packed up. Is it time to go?”

“Did you all go potty?”

“No but we will now.” There is a smile in his voice. Matty had matured a lot since his father left. Even at the tender age of seven, he was her helper. While the kids use the bathroom, Molly tidies up the house. Mostly just to keep herself busy and to keep from having second thoughts.

“Oh, Mom, we’re ready!”

“All right! Thanks for getting ready so fast, guys! Grab your pillow and blankie and head out to the car.”

They squeal in delight, running down the hallway. She got everyone situated comfortably in the Subaru and goes back into the house, making sure lights are off. She locks the door and takes a step back. Silently saying goodbye to the house that had been home for the last 18 months. Another tear betrays her as it rolls down her cheek. She wipes it away with the elbow of her sleeve and sniffs. If the kids suspect she’s been crying they’ll have a million questions and she’s just not ready to answer any of them yet. She turns the engine on and backs the car out of the garage. They had bought this car when she found out she was expecting. Oh, how excited they were to start their family. The headlights flash for a moment on the note she had left taped to the door.

“I’m gone. I’ve got the kids. We’re safe. Don’t come looking for us. I’m sorry.” Her ring is in the middle of the kitchen table.

She stops at the local ATM and withdraws as much cash as she can. Tomorrow morning first thing she will go to the bank and take out half of their savings. She would have about two days before the kids started to realize they weren’t going to Gramma and Grandpa’s house. “Where would be go? How will the kids adjust? Will he come looking for us? Am I a bad mom for doing this?” The questions race through her head.

“Mommy,” Sarah’s sweet little voice brings Molly back to the present, “Spongebob pwease?” Molly turns the video on and the little blond heads of the three kids are basked in the glow of the DVD light.

She drives until her eyelids feel like sandpaper. She pulls into the next Motel 6 that she sees. She pays
cash and asks for a room at the back of the hotel, not wanting her car to be visible from the road. She pulls around and parks right in front of the room, carrying her littles one by one into the room and tucking them into bed. The faint smell of cigarettes reminding her of her days working in the bar. Serving drinks in a low-cut blouse to the hundreds of horny soldiers all flirting shamelessly with her. Not one had caught her eye, not until Todd. He didn’t even try to flirt with her. He just asked for a beer and thanked her once she had it. He then spent the night at a table with his buddies, his slow smile spreading across his face when the others made a dumb joke or got up to drunkenly sing karaoke. Every now and then, he’d make eye contact with her and nod his head. That was all it took. They married three months later. Her friends thought she was crazy. But for six years, they had been truly and utterly happy. Then the deployment orders came. He promised he would return home the same. They made sure to call as often as they could. She saw him drawing more and more into himself during the calls and told herself it was just his way of maintaining self-preservation. By the end of the year, the calls were almost painful with long silences. She kept telling herself he would come home to her. Come all the way home.

And now, here she was with three young kids in a Motel 6 with no idea where she was headed. She sighed as sleep finally won, her lids closing for the night.