

PROLOGUE

November 10, 2006 // Tarin Kot, Afghanistan

Assuming her gear scared him, Hannah Nesmith took off her helmet and sunglasses and placed them on the ground. “*Da sta lapaara day,*” she said. *This is for you.*

The boy couldn’t have been much older than seven. He wore navy blue pants and a threadbare shirt, both at least two sizes too big. Dirty toenails peeked out of his sandals, and his heels threatened to strike the rocky ground. Every student at the school was dressed this way. Nothing fit. Everything was covered in sand. His arms and neck and face were tanned and smooth. Any other day, in any other country, Hannah would have been tempted to reach out and stroke his head. He was just a child.

A U-shaped concrete building stood behind them, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by large rocks the color of the desert. There were no roads. The infrastructure for education had crumbled under Taliban rule, which had turned this area of Afghanistan into a haven for opium production and sharia law.

Hannah wondered how far these children had to walk to school, what their parents did all day, and whether or not there was even food at home when they returned at night. In Afghanistan, the average life expectancy was only fifty years. Nearly half of the population was younger than fourteen. And these children were caught in the crossfire.

The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Markham, sent Hannah's platoon on humanitarian missions like this specifically because she was a woman. He said her presence would put the children and teachers at ease. But these students would think she was a Transformer robot before they believed she was a female. She wore an ID patch on the bicep of her uniform and an M16 slung over her shoulder. A Kevlar vest flattened her chest, and before she'd taken it off, her helmet had hidden a bun at the nape of her neck. But surely this boy could overlook her dirty-blond hair and blue eyes for the sake of a free, fully inflated soccer ball, Hannah thought. When their convoy had pulled up an hour earlier, the children were using a ball of trash tied together with string.

She gripped the soccer ball in her hands and raised it a few inches higher. The boy took two steps backward, his mouth closed tight, like he was trying to swallow something bitter.

"For you," she repeated in English, wishing once again that she'd listened to Dani.

Sophomore year at West Point, her closest friend had tried to persuade her to take Arabic instead of Spanish. Of course, Afghan people spoke Pashto, something Hannah hadn't known until she arrived in March. But she wished she had familiarity with the tones and rhythms of Middle Eastern languages, and

would have, had she listened to Dani. But the add-drop period for classes had ended in August—two weeks before the towers came down. The Arabic department at West Point was inundated after that. But the truth was, even if she'd known the future, she probably would have stuck with Spanish. West Point was hard enough without adding another challenge to her schedule. Plus, even if they could speak the same language, the boy wasn't listening.

Hannah wiped a stream of sweat from her forehead. Heat dragged its fingers up the sleeves of her uniform, down her back, against her neck. It was hard to breathe here. Hard to think. She recalled watching heat waves rise from the ground on her grandfather's ranch every summer of her childhood, distorting her vision, like transparent oil in the air. But this—one hundred and twenty degrees—was a formidable home-field advantage.

The heat made the days run together. Hannah had arrived in Afghanistan eight months earlier, in March. She'd taken two weeks of rest and recuperation in the summer with Tim, and now was staring down the barrel of seven more months in the Middle East. She closed her eyes and imagined her husband out kayaking on the water.

Husband. That word sounded as foreign in her mouth as any word of Pashto. The time they'd spent together on Jekyll Island during her R & R was a memory Hannah could hold on to until they were together again. She could still feel the grit of sand in his hair, taste the salt of his skin. She'd never seen him so tan.

People constantly asked her how they did it. By "it" she assumed they meant the deployment, the Army, or long-distance marriage. But to Hannah, it was just part of the package. She wouldn't have

wanted to be married to anyone else. So if this was what it took to be Mrs. Timothy Nesmith, then so be it. No part of her felt resentful of the path they'd chosen. Somehow, it felt right for them—even if it was hard. Maybe specifically because it was. Their time apart intensified their time together, making every moment that much more romantic, that much more precious. They were like a magnet and steel: they felt the pull when they were apart, and when they were together, they couldn't be separated. The sacrifice was part of the sacrament.

She had a canned response ready to dismiss people's concerns. "We just try not to think about it," she'd say with a shrug.

But the truth was, she thought about the calendar all of the time. She counted down the days, the months. June 2007 lingered in the future as though it were their wedding date—even though they'd already had one of those. In less than a year, they'd be back together again. It wasn't that long, really. Not when you compared it to forever. If they could just endure, all would be well in the end. And as the days ticked off of her deployment, moving her closer to home, Hannah had never been more confident that the waiting would be worth it.

The little boy had started to cry. He looked back over his shoulder at his classmates, who were busy running after Private Murphy and Sergeant Willis. Willis and Murphy were terrible at soccer, bobbling around with the ball, holding their M16s to the side so they wouldn't swing around their backs. The children were laughing. It had turned into a game of chase.

"Look," Hannah continued. "See?"

When he turned back to look at her, the little boy's eyes narrowed with hate. Before she could move out of his way, a loogie of spit flew out of his mouth and landed on the shoulder of her uniform. Then he wiped his mouth, ran across the schoolyard to his classmates, and put his hands in the air. The boy was yelling. He pointed back toward Hannah, then at the soldiers, at the sky. Everyone froze, watching the veins in the boy's neck pulse. Wetness spread across his cheeks as deep guttural screams flooded out of his throat.

Slowly rising from the ground, Hannah put her helmet back on her head and had a dismal thought.

How were they supposed to win the war if they couldn't even give away a gift?

INBOX (7)

From: Avery Adams <averyadams13@yahoo.com>

Date: November 16, 2006 5:36 PM EST

To: Dani McNalley <danimcnalley@yahoo.com>

Subject: hi

I just heard. call me.

From: Wendy Bennett <>wendy.l.bennett@hotmail.com>

Date: November 16, 2006 6:24 PM EST

To: Dani McNalley <danimcnalley@yahoo.com>

Subject: Hannah

D, we just heard. Please let us know when the funeral is set. We will be there.

We love you.

From: Locke Coleman <lockestockand@hotmail.com>

Date: November 16, 2006 02:59 AM EST

To: Dani McNalley <danimcnalley@yahoo.com>

Subject: r u ok

this is so fucked up. r u ok?

From: Eric Jenkins <ericbjenkins144@aol.com>

Date: November 16, 2006 5:58 PM EST

To: Dani McNalley <danimcnalley@yahoo.com>

Subject: My deepest sympathy

Dani,

I'm not sure if you remember me, but I was Class of '03 at West Point, and Tim and I were both on the parachuting team. I'm stationed at Fort Bragg and my wife and I live right down the street from them. I got your e-mail address from Avery Adams.

We've decided to stay here through Thanksgiving. I just wanted to let you know that everyone here is in shock. They were an incredible couple. Again, I am so sorry for your loss. It's a loss for all of us.

Eric B. Jenkins
Captain, US Army
82nd Airborne Division

From: Sarah Goodrich <goodrichs129@hotmail.com>
Date: November 17, 2006 1:26 AM HST
To: Dani McNalley <danimcnalley@yahoo.com>, Avery Adams
<averyadams13@yahoo.com>
Subject:-(

I can't believe this is happening. Has anyone heard from Hannah's family?

From: Avery Adams <averyadams13@yahoo.com>
Date: November 17, 2006 4:37 AM EST
To: Dani McNalley <danimcnalley@yahoo.com>
Subject: re: re: re: **hi

I have a key to the house. Tim gave it to me before he deployed.

From: Laura Klein <laura.klein@egcorporation.com>
Date: November 20, 2006 05:59 AM GMT
To: Dani McNalley <danielle.mcnalley@egcorporation.com>
Subject: Bereavement Leave

Technically, you only get two weeks of bereavement leave. But that's only for immediately family members. You should check with HR.

Can you resend me your latest draft of the insights deck? I can't find it in my inbox.

Also, for future reference, if you need to leave a meeting, please say so. We have processes in place for emergencies.

I'm sorry to hear about your friend.

LK

BEFORE



Senior Year of High School

Winter 2000

1

Winter 2000 // Columbus, Ohio

From the beginning, Dani McNalley wanted to be known for more than basketball.

Her father had introduced her to the sport in the driveway when she was three years old, teaching her the mechanics of dribbling and switching hands and dodging defenders. She'd grown used to the feeling of thirty thousand little bumps under her fingertips and the hollow sound of the ball hitting pavement. Over the years, she'd advanced from the driveway to club teams, from club teams to a travel squad, and from the travel squad to the roster of the top point guards in America. College scouts had written Dani McNalley's name on their recruiting lists as early as her thirteenth birthday. That she would play NCAA Division I ball was a foregone conclusion—everyone said it was her destiny. What they didn't know was that while athletics was a big part of her life, it certainly wasn't her whole life.

That's why, on a cold February morning of her senior year in high school, Dani didn't feel nervous at all. What was there to be nervous about? She'd get up, go to school, go to practice, and then come home. Sure, there would be news crews, photographers, and a dotted line to sign. But once she announced what she'd decided, the story wasn't going to be about basketball. Not anymore.

Her small-minded suburban town of Columbus, Ohio, had tried to put her into a box. After she'd earned a near-perfect score on the PSAT, a reporter from the *Columbus Dispatch* named Mikey Termini had arrived at her house with a camera and a recording device. He'd only asked her about basketball, and the photo that ran in the cover story was of her shooting baskets in her driveway. He'd buried the fact that she was a National Merit Scholarship finalist below a list of her basketball accolades, and when she'd tried to take him inside to talk, he'd stopped her and said, "I can't take a picture of you doing calculus. People want to see you play."

It was the same story everywhere she went. But Dani worked too hard to believe in foregone conclusions. Anything was possible. Even now, she knew she could surprise herself and change her mind at the last minute. But she wouldn't. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, deep in her psyche, there was something about this day that felt as though it had already happened. Like she could remember it if she closed her eyes and imagined herself from the future.

Grabbing a Pop-Tart from the counter, Dani stuffed her AP Physics homework in her backpack and took the keys to the family sedan from the hook by the door.

“I’m going!” she yelled to no one.

At that moment, her mother, Harper McNalley, shuffled into the kitchen and looked her daughter up and down with the warm disdain of a woman who thought she’d raised her child better. Five foot nothing, Dani’s mother had metal-rimmed glasses and facial expressions that spoke louder than words. Her eyes grew large as she scanned Dani’s choice of wardrobe: sneakers, jeans, and a loose-fitting Nike T-shirt.

“What?” said Dani, sticking her hip out.

Harper reached for the coffee carafe and filled her travel mug. “Why don’t you do something with your hair?” She swirled the carafe through the air, indicating her daughter’s head. “Fix that situation.”

Ever since she was young, Dani had worn her hair in a spiky ponytail. The edges near her forehead were frayed and broken, but athletic pre-wrap headbands did a decent job of keeping the wild parts off her face. She knew her mother was annoyed she hadn’t made an appointment to get her hair relaxed at the salon. But there was no time for that nonsense. Dani didn’t have the patience to sit in a chair and have her head doused with chemicals. There were better things to do with her time. Plus, if they were going to put her picture in the paper, it might as well look like her. Afro and all.

“Go on,” her mother said, pressing her. “Comb it. They should at least know you’re a girl.”

Begrudgingly, Dani ran back upstairs to the hall bathroom, dropped her backpack by the door, and stared at the light-skinned black girl in the mirror. A constellation of freckles graced her

face, as if God had decided at the last minute to splatter dark paint against a light brown canvas. Eighteen, with the attitude and swagger to go with it, Dani pulled a brush through her tangled hair and smothered the ends with oil.

They should at least know you're a girl. Of course they knew she was a girl! She had boobs, for God's sake. She played women's basketball. Just because she didn't wear makeup or wear skirts didn't make her less of a woman. Her mother of all people should have known that. Harper McNalley was a chemical engineer—a black woman at the height of a white man's profession. At times, Dani thought her mom was the wisest, most progressive person in the world. Then she'd go and say a thing like that.

A heavy fist pounded against the bathroom door three times in a row. *Bang, bang, bang.*

"Just a minute!" Dani shouted.

"Dani, I've got to go!"

High-pitched and incessant, her little brother's voice had yet to change. She could imagine Dominic standing outside the door with his little Steve Urkel glasses, holding his crotch and crossing his ankles. Dominic was a confident little boy, always reading some book too advanced for his age. A few nights earlier, he'd recited a Shakespearean soliloquy for the family at dinner. She loved him for how fiercely he chose to be himself. Of course, their father would have liked it better if their talents had been switched at birth, Dani knew. Tom McNalley had hoped to have an athletic son and an artistic daughter. But realizing there was no changing his children, he'd enrolled Dominic in every music lesson, acting class, and audiovisual club the greater Columbus area had

to offer. And when Dani showed promise on the driveway basketball court, he'd signed her up for club teams, private coaches, and ultimately, the AAU team that had shaped Dani into the point guard she was today. All opportunities available to white children were equally available to the McNalleys: Tom and Harper had worked hard for that to be so.

Dani knew the stories. Her parents had both grown up in the South—her mother was among some of the first children to integrate her white North Carolina elementary school. After meeting at Howard University in the late 1970s, Tom and Harper uprooted and replanted in Ohio, hoping to chart a new future for their family. They lived in a gated community, the children attended great public schools, and they had two cars in the driveway. By every measure, they had “made it”—whatever that meant. Dani still wondered sometimes if they'd swung the pendulum a bit too far. They were the only black family within a twenty-mile radius, and though it didn't bother Dani to be different, she wondered if there was something she was missing, some experience that she'd lost, in the shelter of their suburban zip code.

“Dani, I must say, I've never seen a black person with freckles,” her friend's mother had said once, as if Dani were a new species at the local zoo. “Where does that come from? You know, in your gene pool?”

At the time, Dani just shrugged it off and said she wasn't sure. But if she were asked that same question today, she would say, “Mrs. Littleton, no offense, but I would never ask about your gene pool.” Or, more likely: “That's easy. One of your ancestors probably raped one of mine.”

Smiling, Dani would of course add that she was joking. But every joke comes with a dose of truth, and sure enough, when Dani's aunt had dug into the family history several years earlier, it turned out their great-great-grandmother, Scarlet McNalley, had birthed eight children with her slave owner's son. That was why light skin ran in the family genes.

Most people in the community had pigeonholed Dani as a superstar athlete. She couldn't really blame them, since her most public achievements took place on the court. But when she earned a near-perfect score on the PSAT, suddenly, Dani was being recruited by the Ivy League for her brain even as state schools chased her for her brawn. People kept assuming that Dani was going to UConn or Tennessee. But that's what made today so exciting. Because while everyone in the community thought they knew where this shooting star was headed, they were wrong.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Open up, D!" her brother shouted. "I'm going to wet myself!" Opening the door, Dani stared straight ahead at her little brother, dressed in long khaki pants and a maroon shirt, the uniform for the arts school he attended. He pushed his glasses up his nose. "I don't really have to go. Mom just said to—let me see if I can do this right." Twisting his face and sticking out his hip, Dominic pointed a finger toward his sister and turned his voice into his mother's. "Get your ass out the door or you're going to be late!"

Wrapping her little brother's head under her arm, Dani rubbed his cranium with her knuckles until his glasses nearly fell off. "Well why didn't you say that, bro?"

THE COURSE OF her fate had changed last fall, when a thin brunette woman arrived at the Lincoln High School gymnasium. Though she hid in the shadows, the woman's tall and thin silhouette was the picture of pure authority. Her dark hair was sliced with streaks of silver and cut short for easy maintenance. Close-set blue eyes with raised eyebrows made her look strangely alert. Her nose was small and upturned, softened by rosy lips and a quick smile. The femininity of her facial features was offset by the rest of her body: ungraceful and bony arms and legs mimicked the sharpness in her fingers. She was a beautiful woman, but intense, for sure. A hunter.

Unlike other university recruiters who'd leave halfway through practice, Catherine Jankovich stayed to the very end, through conditioning. When she stepped out of the shadows and introduced herself as the head women's basketball coach at West Point, Dani was impressed by her stature.

West Point. Standing in front of the coach, Dani racked her brain to remember how she'd heard of it before. Eventually, a picture from her AP history textbook surfaced in her mind. Thomas Jefferson and George Washington had chosen West Point as a strategic position during the Revolutionary War. A hillside overlook onto a narrow hairpin turn in the Hudson River, West Point was the perfect position from which to capsize British ships as they tried to navigate north from New York City. Against her better judgment, she was intrigued.

"West Point?" repeated Dani. "Is that a high school?"

"No. It's a college," the coach said.

"They have a women's basketball team?"

“Would I be here if we didn’t?” the coach said, setting her jaw slightly. “I know you’ve got a lot of other colleges trying to get you to pay attention to their programs, Dani. And that’s great. You deserve those choices. You’ve earned them. But I happen to think you need to go to a school that will serve you athletically, academically, and personally. West Point is not exactly a normal school. But I have a feeling that you’re not necessarily a normal girl.”

That in itself might have been enough to convince Dani to pack her bags and buy a pair of combat boots. But when the coach explained how West Point operated, Dani felt transfixed. An interested applicant couldn’t just apply—she first had to interview with her congressman or senator to receive a nomination. With that nomination in hand, an applicant could send on essays and transcripts and SAT scores to West Point’s admissions office. But even then, only 10 percent of applicants were accepted. Of those, less than 15 percent were female. As a university, West Point had a reputation for excellence, and its students went on to leadership in business, military, and government sectors. It wasn’t a normal school. It was better.

Coach Jankovich had insisted on flying her in for an official visit, and three weeks later, when she stepped on campus, her decision was made.

That day, the Hudson River was like a long glittering road, reflecting mountains on the east and granite on the west. Gray stone buildings towered over a green parade field, oozing with history and dignity. The campus teemed with handsome, athletic students in gray uniforms walking to class with full backpacks and square jaws. There were kids of every race, and girls like

Dani, who didn't seem to mind that they were wearing the same uniform as the guys.

Dani's mother had never been the type to cut out newspaper articles about Dani's successes. Her ribbons and trophies had been lost or thrown away, not displayed around the house. "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth," was Harper's favorite proverb, a biblical reminder to her precocious daughter not to become a braggart. But walking around campus at West Point, Dani met the gaze of every cadet that passed her by, and saw in their eyes a familiar self-assuredness, like she was looking in a mirror. Here, confidence wasn't a quality to hide; it was essential to survival.

For twenty-four hours, a sophomore on the basketball team named Sarah Goodrich showed Dani around, answering her questions and introducing her to everyone they passed.

"What's it like playing for Coach Jankovich?" Dani asked, right when they started walking to class.

"I don't know. I haven't played for her yet," explained Sarah. "You know, this is her first year. You're her star recruit."

With dark black hair, fair skin, and striking green eyes, Sarah looked like Snow White in a military uniform. Over lunch, she told Dani that she was one of five siblings who had all attended West Point, and that even though she'd been recruited by a different head coach, she would have played for anyone, just to say she played at Army. A psychology major, she planned to be an intelligence officer in the Army after graduation.

"But that's still two years away," Sarah said knowingly. "A lot can change in two years."

At other colleges, kids wore pajamas to class. Here, they wore “as for class”—a uniform of dark wool pants, a white collared shirt, and a flat wool cap with a shiny black bill.

“Then there’s gym alpha,” Sarah had continued, counting off the uniforms on her fingers. “Gray T-shirt, black shorts, ugly crew socks. Most of the time, I’m wearing gym-A. BDUs—that’s ‘battle dress uniform,’ and they’re the most comfortable. Then you’ve got full dress gray, which is the whole shebang, brass buttons, maroon sash, big feather on the hat. Sorry, am I going too fast?”

“Nope,” said Dani.

“Some girls take their uniforms home to get them tailored, but I don’t care that much. You get over it pretty fast. Looking like a dude.”

Dani laughed at the casualness of Sarah’s confidence. Her face shined with the kind of dewy skin normally seen in celebrity magazines, and when Sarah talked about West Point, it was like she was in some kind of secret club where everything had a code name. There were so many inside jokes and terms, Dani wondered if she would ever learn them all.

After shadowing her classes, Dani followed Sarah back to her dorm room, which was about as barebones as any Dani had ever seen. Two single beds sat on opposite sides of the room, wrapped tightly in white sheets and green wool blankets. Sarah explained that she rarely slept under the covers, since it took so long to make up her bed to regulation standards. Instead, she and her roommate both slept on top of the sheets with blankets they kept stowed in their trunks.

Two desks held identical government-issued desktop computers, part of every cadet's incoming equipment. Sarah and her roommate both had wardrobes that housed their uniforms, hung in perfect order, the hangers evenly spaced two inches apart. Everywhere they went, doors opened and people shouted Sarah's name—like she was famous.

"Is there anyone here you don't know?" Dani asked. They were on their way to dinner in the mess hall, guided toward a pair of arched wooden doors by a row of lights and a stream of students. The autumn air felt just cold enough for a jacket, but Dani's whole body felt warm and alive.

"That's just how it is here. Four thousand students isn't really all that many. You'll see," Sarah answered, reaching for the iron door handle. She paused and gave Dani a mischievous look. "You ready to see something crazy?"

Dani nodded and Sarah pulled the door open, revealing an expansive room of wood and stone. Inside, the mess hall walls stretched thirty feet high and were covered with golden lamps, state and Revolutionary War flags, oil paintings of epic battle scenes, and towering stained glass windows. The hall spanned the length of two football fields and it overflowed with the raucous, jovial sound of four thousand people breaking bread all at once. Cadets were seated ten to a table and there were 465 tables in perfect rows across six wings, likely in the same place they'd been for centuries. Each wing bustled with clinking plates, glasses, and silverware. Steaming dishes passed from one hand to the next, family style. One homemade pie rested in the center of every table, waiting for a knife.

“Come with me,” Sarah said in Dani’s ear. “We’ve got to get all the way to the back.”

In the back wing of the mess hall, the noise increased by a few decibels. On the far left, Dani identified the football team: hefty boys nearly busted out of their uniforms and chairs, shoveling food into open mouths. The men’s and women’s lacrosse teams sat on the right, the boys leaning back in their chairs, roaring at some joke, the girls leaning forward, rolling their eyes. Sarah guided Dani toward a sundry crowd of girls—some tall, some muscular, some white, some black—that filled three tables in the center of the wing.

“Save yourself!” someone shouted from another table. “You’ll hate it here!”

“Ignore them,” Sarah said. “Of course everyone hates it here. But we love it too. It’s hard to explain.”

When Sarah introduced Dani to the team, they quickly pulled out a chair for her to join them.

That’s all it took. An invitation and an empty chair. In that moment, Dani watched her future unfold before her. Wearing a uniform, joining the military? All that was secondary to the things she saw in the eyes of her soon-to-be teammates. They were like her. From that point forward, imagining a typical college, with its redbrick buildings and kids wearing hoodies and jeans, seemed lackluster. Boring, even.

And so, when she returned to Columbus two days later, Dani canceled every other college visit she’d scheduled. Her parents tried to encourage her to keep her options open, but there was no need to look anywhere else. She’d found her path. Her future existed in the Corps Squad wing of Washington Hall.

It was just like Coach Jankovich had said. At West Point, Dani could be all of herself. Not just a part.

DANI SAT AT the center of a table in the Lincoln High School gymnasium, staring at a gathered crowd of parents, students, and reporters. Two football players sat on her right side, hefty and smiling, while two cross-country runners sat on her left, emaciated and frail. Each of the five athletes had a contract and a ballpoint pen waiting in front of them. Dani read the page for what felt like the millionth time.

I certify that I have read all terms and conditions included in this document . . .

When she looked up, she saw Mikey Termini, the short, balding reporter, in the front row rubbing the lens of his camera with a cloth. He'd written more stories about Dani's basketball achievements over the years than she could count, and seeing her smile, he snapped a photo of her, checking the light in the room.

"So where's it going to be, Dani?" he asked. "UConn? Georgia?"

"Ah, come on, Mike. You know I can't tell you that for another . . ."

Dani checked the clock on the gym wall. "Thirty seconds."

The crowd laughed. Dani's parents stood near the back of the gym, their smiles only dimly hiding what Dani knew was a growing sense of dread. They were nervous, understandably. Dominic was seated behind them, his legs crossed in a pretzel shape underneath him, reading a book, as if all this fanfare was beneath him. In the moments that remained between her past and her future, Dani replayed all the reasons she'd made this decision, and all she felt was confidence.

“Athletes, it’s time.”

The boys on either side of Dani quickly picked up their pens and scribbled on the page, exactly what everyone already knew they would write. Dan Williams had committed to play football at Auburn. His tie was blue and orange. Tyler Hillenbrand had signed to play for Miami of Ohio—though Dani wondered if he’d ever see the inside of a classroom. The other two, both runners, had pledged to go the distance at Ohio State. Dani waited for the hubbub with the boys to pass. Then she leaned over, pen in hand, and carefully filled in the blank.

She paused before the waiting crowd. Mikey Termini snapped a photo, sending a flash of light throughout the quiet gymnasium. Then Dani picked up the contract and read the final line.

“This is to certify my decision to enroll at the United States Military Academy at West Point.”

A gasp emanated from the crowd, followed by a roar of applause and a whistle from her father—the tallest man in the room, forefinger and thumb in the shape of a circle under his black mustache. Dani smiled, the freckles on her face nearly jumping with excitement. Classmates shook her hand. A line of adults formed around her to ask questions and offer hugs and well wishes. While the boys still had nine months before they headed to college, Dani had to report to West Point for Reception Day on June 29. As she scanned the room from right to left, she tried to etch the scene into her mind, so she could remember it forever.

If this was her destiny—if this was her fate—then so be it.

Winter 2000 // Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Snow fell from a charcoal sky, sticking to the ground and melting on the surface of a hot tub full of teenagers. Underneath the surface, legs and arms tangled, while above it, Avery Adams closed her eyes and swayed to the sounds of Third Eye Blind coming over the radio.

Wisps of platinum-blond hair curled at her neck, which was encircled by the black strings of her bikini top. The warmth of alcohol inched toward her cheeks and the smell of chlorine seeped into her skin, while inside Kevin's house, the party grew louder. Though she could have stayed here forever, eyes closed, muscles relaxing in the Jacuzzi, Avery knew she needed to get out before the steam and alcohol went from her cheeks to her head. She was an experienced enough drinker to know when she'd hit her limit.

As she stood, Avery's body emerged from the heat into the cold,

drawing the eyes of every high school boy at the party. Toned shoulders, slender stomach, muscular legs—she had the body of an athlete, hewn from years sprinting up and down basketball courts, encouraged by the voice of her coach on the sidelines, shouting: “Faster, Avery! GO!”

She shivered, quickly realizing the difference in temperature between water and air.

“Hey, hand me one of those,” she ordered.

A football player named Marcus Jones reached over the side of the hot tub and grabbed a folded towel from a plastic chair. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asked as he passed it over.

“Inside,” Avery explained, then shook her cup. “Time for a refill.”

“Here,” he said, reaching for her cup. “I’ll get it for you. Stay.”

“I can take care of myself.” Avery stepped over the edge of the hot tub. Her mother always told her never to take a drink that someone else poured; it was one of the few rules Avery actually followed. “Plus, I wouldn’t want your pruney hands all over my cup, anyway.”

“These?” he said, raising his palms out of the water—they were large, wide-receiver hands, dark on top and pink on the undersides. “You and I both know what these hands can do.”

The rest of the guys in the hot tub laughed, while the girls seemed to share a collective sigh of relief that Avery was leaving. Her presence attracted attention from the boys that they hated to share, Avery knew. But she was used to both responses—the attraction and the jealousy. She wavered, sometimes relishing

her role as queen bee, and sometimes trying to shrug it off her shoulders, a weight she'd never intended to carry in the first place.

Ignoring Marcus, Avery wrapped herself in the towel and weaved her way through the warm house, between people dancing. A crowd encircled the dining room table, watching a group of guys who were in the middle of a game of flip-cup.

“Go! Go! Chug!”

Avery rolled her eyes. She was so ready for high school to be over. Senioritis felt like sitting in a brand-new car with no gas: all of the promise, none of the horsepower. Kids from her high school talked a big game about going to college out of state, but in the end, they'd all end up at the University of Pittsburgh. The boys would play the same drinking games in college until they were fat and bald. The girls would join sororities and attend themed parties until they gained communications degrees or engagement rings or fetuses—whichever came first. It was sad, Avery thought. So predictable. So convenient. So *not* her future, if she had anything to say about it.

She'd seen what the American dream achieved—and it wasn't happiness. Her mother and father coexisted in their house. Other than attending Avery's basketball games as a pair, they might as well have been strangers.

Avery's relationship to her parents was like that of a business owner to a bank. At the beginning, they were happy to finance her way to big dreams. Hank and Lonnie Adams justified the money they spent on private coaches and summer basketball camps with the assumption that Avery's future would be financed by her skill in basketball. But the more time passed, the more the pressure

built for Avery to perform, and the more uncomfortable they looked writing the checks. Every day, her mother asked whether or not any college coaches had called, and while she waited for an answer, Avery could see her mother doing math behind her eyes. *Have you been worth it?*

Walking toward the kitchen, Avery held up the towel around her body and filled her empty cup with water, guzzling it quickly to counteract the anonymous pink punch she'd imbibed earlier. A cooler of beer sat on the counter and the smell of weed wafted in from outside, pungent and earthy. She wasn't much of a smoker, especially not during the basketball season—it took away her edge—but the smell sent her shoulders rolling down her spine. Maybe she would stay a little while longer. After all, what good was having an edge if she was just going to end up in the same place as everyone else?

“Yo, Avery!”

Turning, Avery spotted Kevin Walters across the kitchen, holding a corded telephone in his hand. The plastic spiral dangled from the phone to the floor and back to the wall, where it was plugged into the base. Rotund and jovial, with bright red cheeks and dark brown hair, Kevin had avoided years of bullying by making fun of himself before anyone else could, gathering friends by the dozen. It also helped that his parents were frequently out of town and chose to ignore the signs that he held ragers in their absence.

“Phone's for you,” he said. He held a puffy hand over the receiver and extended it toward her.

Avery's thin, tweezed eyebrows immediately crunched together in confusion. Who in the world would be calling her here?

Swallowing hard, she walked across the kitchen, still barefoot, aware of the sticky layer of smut she was accumulating on the pads of her feet.

It couldn't be her parents.

Definitely not. In four years of high school, they hadn't once asked where she was going. They never waited up on the couch when she didn't come home by curfew. She wasn't even sure she had a curfew. If she did, her parents had never enforced it. Maybe that was because they'd assumed Avery would be like her older brother, Blake—bookish and square. At sixteen, her younger brother, Caleb, had only had his driver's license for a month. Plus, it wasn't like he had anywhere to go. Caleb was a sophomore with nerdy friends that were always watching sci-fi movies or playing board games, the names of which Avery couldn't pronounce. *Settlers of Catan*. *Dungeons and Dragons*.

But as lame as Caleb Adams might have been, at least he could keep a secret. Any time Avery arrived home from a party in the single-digit hours of the morning, smelling of guilt, her little brother would pretend not to notice. Bleary-eyed and drunk, Avery would place a single finger over her mouth in the universal symbol for "shhh," and then tiptoe up the stairs to her room. It was their secret. Don't ask; definitely don't tell. And Caleb never told.

She took the phone from Kevin.

"Hello?" Avery plugged her other ear with a finger, trying to block out the sound of Dave Matthews in the background.

"Avery?"

The voice on the other end of the line was quiet, shaking—and unmistakable.

“Caleb? Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“I need you—” her little brother said, hiccupping like he’d been crying for hours. “I need you to come get me.”

“Okay,” she said, quickly trying to assess whether or not she was sober enough to drive. “I’m on my way. Where are you?”

“The Riverview police station—”

“The what?”

“—on the parkway. Hurry, Avery. They say they’re going to call Dad.”

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Avery’s little brother sat in the passenger seat of her beat-up Honda Civic, his Kurt Cobain hair hanging like a sheet in front of his eyes.

A six-inch piece of duct tape held a rip in the back seat together and the left rear window hadn’t rolled down in more than a year, but there was no money to get this piece-of-shit car fixed.

“It has four wheels and an engine,” her father had said. “Be grateful.”

For her eighteenth birthday, Avery’s mother had given her one of those cassette tapes with a cord that attached to her portable Discman, so at least she could play her CDs. That fact alone had bought the car another few years of life. Plus, she wasn’t about to ask her parents for anything else. Not before, and definitely not now. Sitting in the driveway looking at the split-level house in front of them, she realized that this night would destroy any chance she’d ever had at getting a new car.

“Shit, Caleb,” Avery said. “Do you even realize how much a lawyer costs?”

"I'm going to be sick," he said.

"Oh God. Not in the car. Open the door!"

And he did, spilling the contents of his stomach onto the concrete in the driveway.

Avery's jeans and black T-shirt were wet from the bathing suit she still wore underneath, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Her brother sat up again, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Dad's going to kill me." A moment passed, and then he leaned forward, his head in his hands. "How could I have been so stupid?"

"If you'd just set the beer down, they probably would have let you go with a warning," Avery said. "Why did you run to the car? Why'd you take the keys?"

Caleb turned his gray-blue eyes on his sister, looking like a hurt puppy. Saliva gathered at the corners of his mouth. "How was I supposed to know, Avery? I've never even been to a party!"

"Shhh, shhh. Calm down." She worried his shouts might wake the neighbors. She looked at their house—every light was on. "It's going to be okay. Just . . . when we get inside, go to your room. I'll deal with Mom and Dad."

"He's going to kill me, Avery."

"He's not going to kill you. It's going to be okay."

She wasn't certain it would be. But, assuaged by her promise, Caleb walked up to the house, through the front door, and disappeared down the back hall. The bathroom door slammed hard behind him, followed by the sound of a loud retch. Liquid splattered against porcelain, then she heard the toilet flush.

At that moment, Avery's mother, Lonnie, appeared in the hallway, her shining face and worried eyes showing all that Avery needed to know. Her mother tightened the red terry-cloth robe around her waist.

"How did this happen?" her mother snapped. Her voice was as thin and cold as the snowflakes still falling outside. "Were you with him?"

"No . . . he called me from the station. Seriously, Mom. Everything's fine."

Moving past her daughter, Lonnie hustled down the hall toward the bathroom and began to bang on the door. "Caleb! Caleb! Open up. Now!"

From the front door, Avery could see into the kitchen, where her father, Hank, paced back and forth across the linoleum floor, holding the cordless phone to his ear. Lean and imposing, Hank Adams had dark features and a permanent five o'clock shadow that looked as though he'd spent his life in a coal mine, which, to be fair, he would have, if he'd been born a quarter century earlier. He was fit, though, with muscles that hadn't diminished over the years since he'd played football at Notre Dame. And despite the fact that he spent his life above ground, selling coal, there was always dirt under his fingernails, always a rasp in his voice, like he carried an aluminum pail to work every day. Avery felt the same grit in her blood, just underneath the surface, trying to break free. Coal was stubborn that way. It stayed in your veins.

"Sure," Hank was saying. "Can we do it in installments? Oh. Okay. Understood. Well, then, we'll get the retainer to you tomorrow. All right, Dan. We'll see you Monday."

Slamming the phone on the base, Hank turned to look at Avery, who put her chin up, pretending to be calmer than she felt. She'd never seen her father's eyes look so intense, his pupils so small. The dark hair on his forearms seemed to stand on end.

"Two thousand dollars, just to take on the case," her father told her.

A silence filled the room, so thick Avery struggled to breathe.

"Dad . . . I—"

"He watches you, you know," her father said. His lower lip quivered. "You go out. Drink. Carry on. And what happens? You get voted homecoming queen. He does the same thing, and his life is fucking ruined."

"Dad." Avery nearly felt like crying. "His life isn't—"

"What exactly do you think you know about life, Avery? Huh? I'm sorry to break it to you, but beauty doesn't exactly pay the bills. And you have the audacity to tell me about life? That's rich."

He paused his rant, rubbed his temple.

"All I know is, you better be on your knees thanking God that this wasn't you. Because you and I both know, it could have been."

He pushed past her and down the hall. "*Caleb!* Open the damn door!"

ON MONDAY, HER parents took her little brother, dressed in an oversized suit and tie, for their first meeting with the lawyer. Avery drove herself to school and pretended to pay attention in class, when in reality, all she could think about was the disappointment painted all over her father's face as he'd yelled at her Saturday night, and as he'd ignored her the next morning. For

years, Avery had lived her life without fear of any consequences. But watching her brother suffer because of her bad example, she suddenly felt like she'd swallowed a toxic cocktail of anger and shame. Anger that her father would accuse her of causing Caleb's mess; shame that he was probably right.

ON FRIDAY EVENING, the gymnasium doors opened at five o'clock, sending a flood of light and a pack of girls into the darkened parking lot. They walked slowly under the weight of their backpacks, chatting idly while parents pulled up to pick up the freshmen. Soaked in sweat that defied the near-freezing temperature outside, steam rose off of Avery's bare limbs into the cold.

"Great job at practice today, Mandy," Avery said to one of the more promising freshmen. "I liked that little behind-the-back pass you did."

Mandy quickened her pace to catch up to Avery's side. "Thanks. Hey . . . I was going to ask, are you going to Kevin's tomorrow night?"

Avery walked with her chin up, blond hair glistening with sweat. She knew instinctively that Mandy Hightower wasn't looking for information; she was looking for an invitation.

"Doubt it," Avery replied flippantly.

She reached for the keys in her backpack before remembering with a surge of anger that they weren't there, and wouldn't be for another week. In a rare feat of parenting, her father had grounded Avery from driving—for what she wasn't quite certain. It wasn't

like *she* was the one who'd been arrested. As she made her way across the parking lot, Mandy followed, hoping, Avery assumed, for the invitation that wasn't going to come.

"I've got a shit-ton of homework this weekend, Mandy," she said by way of explanation, "and nothing good happens at those—" She was going to say *parties*, but at that same moment, she noticed a dark and hulking figure standing in the middle of the parking lot. So instead she said, "Shit."

Following Avery's gaze, Mandy's eyes filled with concern. Standing on the passenger side of Avery's black Honda Civic, a short and stocky man waited with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Who's that?" Mandy asked. "He's hot."

With a sigh, Avery shifted the backpack on her shoulder and started walking faster toward her car. "That's my dad."

"Oh. Well, call me. Maybe we could go to Kevin's together on Saturday!"

When she reached her car, Avery rolled her eyes.

"You don't have to make such a scene, Dad."

Avoiding her father's gaze, she threw her backpack in the back-seat and reached for the handle of the passenger-side door.

"Ah, ah, ah!" he said. "We had a deal."

Next to each other, Hank and Avery looked nothing alike. Avery was ethereal and glowing, her father earthen and rugged. But they shared a competitive spirit, or a persistent stubbornness. And any time Avery reached a goal Hank set for her, he raised the bar higher.

"*We* never had a deal," she said. "*You* had a deal."

Starting Avery's freshman year, Hank had driven up to the school like all the other parents, pretending to pick his daughter up from basketball practice. But instead, he'd instruct her to throw her backpack in the back of his car, start a timer, and send her on the three-mile run home. Each day she tried to beat the previous day's time. He'd presented it as a game—a way for Avery to work on her endurance.

Within a few months of starting high school, Avery could run a six-minute mile without breaking much of a sweat. Her father's mantra rang through her head as she ran: *The only way to run faster is to run faster*. In four years, Avery had learned that she could outrun just about anything. She could outrun her teammates. She could outrun the competition from other schools. She could even run the insecurities right out of her head, if she was willing to go hard enough. It was easy to be confident when you were faster than the boys.

The game had ended last year, when she'd started driving herself to school. But now, here he was, looking at the watch on his wrist. "You better get going. Clock's started."

"Dad," Avery said, her voice sounding desperate. "Coach made us do thirteen suicides at the end of practice. I can't."

Hank laughed out loud. "This from the girl who applied to West Point? It's hard enough to imagine you with a gun, Ave. But you gonna say 'I can't' when they hand you a fifty-pound rucksack and say *go*?" His tone turned dark. "You've gotta get serious."

Staring at his dark features, Avery knew suddenly why he was here. This wasn't about her future in Division I basketball, or even the long-shot application she'd mailed to West Point six months

earlier, which he was now apparently using against her. This was about Caleb.

The parking lot cleared of cars, leaving rectangular imprints outlined with dirty snow. Avery stood in silence until she realized her father wasn't going to back down.

"I'll be in counseling someday talking about how you made me run three miles home every day like a maniac."

"Nah." He waved a hand through the air. "You love it." He unlocked the door of his daughter's car and jumped inside, immediately starting the engine and the heat. His hands slapped together, rubbing out the cold. "Better get moving."

"Hold your horses!" She pulled off her sweaty jersey, grabbed a dirty long-sleeved fleece from the backseat of her car, and yanked it over her head with force. Then, shooting her father a murderous look and a middle finger, she took off running.

Fury drove her legs over and over again against the cold. Tucking her fingers into the sleeves of her shirt, Avery pushed the pace. From her high school to their home was exactly 3.4 miles. She'd measured it at least ten times with her car odometer, hoping it would get shorter, which it never did. Wind whipped over her ears and eyes, giving her a slight headache. *Note to self*, Avery thought as she hit her stride, *tomorrow, pack a hat*.

Once her breathing steadied, she settled into a rhythm. That was the sole benefit of these long runs: they provided time alone, time to clear out the clutter in her mind.

First and foremost—she hated the fact that her father was using West Point against her. Back in the fall, her AP history teacher, Ms. Williams, had forced her classes to fill out West Point's initial

screening form online. In the library computer lab, Avery typed out her GPA, SAT scores, list of extracurriculars, without thinking twice. But that night, the phone rang, and suddenly there was a deep-voiced man on the other end of the line, asking Avery a series of questions with military precision. When she'd placed the phone back on the stand, Avery stared at it for a long time before her mother's quiet voice broke through the silence.

"Well?" Lonnie Adams had asked. "What was that all about?"

Avery's parents were sitting still at the kitchen table, their forks suspended in midair. Oblivious to the phone call that had just taken place, Caleb shoveled a bite of spaghetti into his mouth.

"That was an admissions officer from West Point," Avery had said. "They want me to apply."

"You?" her father had grunted. He shook his head and went back to eating. "Will they let you wear your tiara while you shoot your gun?"

"West Point?" her mother repeated. "Do they even admit girls?"

The disbelief in their eyes was all it took for Avery to decide to apply. In the weeks after that phone call, Ms. Williams had helped Avery navigate the application. She explained that the U.S. Military Academy wasn't just an athletic and academic powerhouse of a school—it was also *free*. Free. As in zero dollars. That fit into Avery's framework. She didn't want to owe her parents anything anymore. And she was smart enough to know that they didn't have savings just lounging around in some bank account.

After some research, Avery learned that in exchange for that free education, West Point graduates committed to serve for five years as officers in the U.S. Army. But that didn't sound like that

bad of a deal. She had a cousin who'd joined the military and got stationed overseas in Italy. So, a free education *and* a guaranteed job after college, possibly in an exotic location? To Avery, that seemed like the deal of the century.

Almost too good to be true.

After Avery passed the Candidate Fitness Assessment—the push-ups, sit-ups, and shuttle run came easy—Ms. Williams told Avery that she needed a nomination from a congressman, a senator, or the vice president.

“Uh,” Avery had said with a laugh, “my family doesn’t know anyone in politics.”

In response, Ms. Williams set up an interview for Avery with the famed Pennsylvania senator Arlen Specter. When his nomination came in the mail, Avery started to think that she might just have a chance. On her own, she'd reached out to the women's basketball coach, a woman named Catherine Jankovich, whose e-mail address had been listed on West Point's athletic website. She'd mailed the coach videotape of games and practices, as requested. The coach had offered Avery a position on the team if West Point offered her admission, but Avery noticed she'd placed particular emphasis on the word *if*.

“Unfortunately, there's really nothing I can do to stamp your application through,” Coach Jankovich had said over the phone. “It's quite competitive. We'd love to have you, of course, but I can't make any promises.”

It was just the kind of challenge that Avery lived to overcome. *You say I'm not strong enough? Watch me flex. You say it's competitive? Watch me compete.*

And yet, February had nearly come and gone. A cloud formed in her chest, which distracted Avery from the tears in her eyes. Why hadn't she heard anything from West Point?

They probably don't want you, Avery told herself, in a voice too brutal to be her own. The voice was right, though. West Point was a *reach*. A long shot. Who was she to think she was special? Who was she to think she could get out of Pittsburgh? She was going to have to tell everyone that she'd been rejected, and everyone would secretly laugh, knowing she'd never had a chance all along.

She tried to ignore the voice in her head by moving faster. The harder she pushed, the more pain she felt, which released her emotions through sweat, rather than tears. It was simple math. By wrecking her body, she didn't have to face her wrecked soul.

But her father's words cut through the ache in her muscles, whispering like wind into her ears. *He watches you*. Was he right? Had Avery ruined her little brother's life, simply by setting a bad example?

She wanted Caleb to see her do something good. Something responsible. Something important. But time was running out. And she couldn't slow down. Not now.

Not ever.

Streetlights drew Avery westward, spilling an orange haze on bare tree limbs. She pushed to the top of the hill with long, purposeful strides, listening to her own breath: in through her nose, out through her mouth. The cold dried the sweat on her face and her slender legs flew past fences, children in white yards, and half-melted snowmen. The smell of wood-burning fireplaces filled her head as she sucked air and heaved toward the finish. She leaned

forward as she passed the mailbox in front of the home at the end of the cul-de-sac. Her father was standing on the stoop, holding his stopwatch.

“Twenty-five thirty-two. So much for that six-minute mile pace.”

“I’ll get it back, Dad,” she yelled, placing her hands on her head. “I’ll get it back.”

“That’s my girl,” he said, leaving her out in the cold.

Exhausted and sweating, Avery walked toward the mailbox, just in case. Inside, there was a stack of mail: a circular of flimsy coupons, a pink envelope with the words *Final Notice* printed on top, a *People* magazine, and a large manila envelope with West Point’s gold crest glittering in the top left corner.

“Dad!” she shouted, ripping through the paper. “Dad!”

Her father stepped back onto the porch. The rest of the mail fell to the ground. Avery held her breath, frantically opening the leather-bound announcement.

“I got in,” she mumbled to herself. Then, raising her eyes to her father, she screamed, “I got in!”