FORMER U.S. MARINE PLATOON COMMANDER

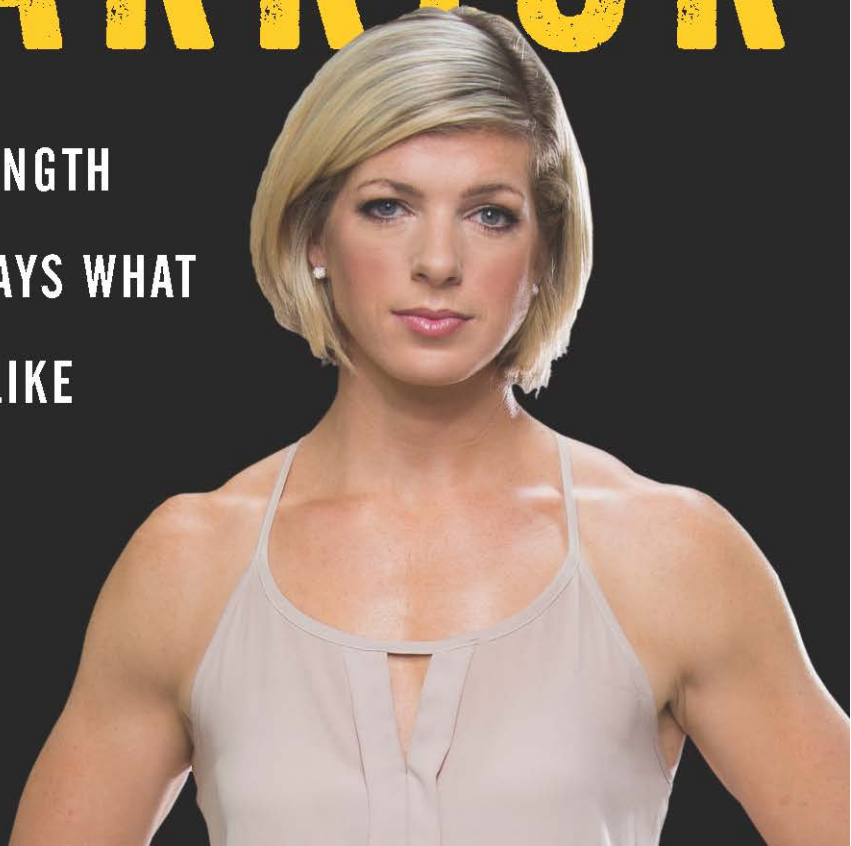
THERESA LARSON

& ALAN EISENSTOCK

WARRIOR

TRUE STRENGTH ISN'T ALWAYS WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A MEMOIR



WARRIOR

Learn More/Pre-Order

WARRIOR

A Memoir

THERESA LARSON & ALAN EISENSTOCK

HarperOne

I have changed the names of some institutions and individuals, and modified identifying features, including physical descriptions, locations and occupations, in order to preserve the anonymity of the individuals and the institutions. In some cases, composite characters have been created or timelines have been compressed, in order to further preserve privacy andto maintain narrative flow. The goal in all cases was to protect people's privacy without damaging the integrity of the story.

HarperCollins website: http://www.harpercollins.com

FIRST EDITION

Designed by Janet M. Evans

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978–0–06–239948–9

16 17 18 19 20 OV/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the most legit and amazing man in my life, my adventure buddy, my best friend: Per Larson, who is my Bucket List of a husband.

To my big brothers Paul and Bob, for being my role models!

"It takes the courage and strength of a warrior to ask for help."

— DAVID FINKEL,
Thank You for Your Service

CONTENTS

1

THE LAST CONVOY

DECEMBER 14, 2005 / FALLUJAH, IRAQ

I SIT ON THE FLOOR OF MY ROOM, MY BACK CREASED into the wall. My mouth feels dry, my lips cracked. I sniff and wipe my nose with the back of my hand.

I pick the envelope off the floor and stare at it. I start to open it, and my hand shakes. Finally I direct my quivering fingers—long and scarred, my nails nubs, the skin as brown and hard as the desert outside—toward the envelope's sealed flap. I open the envelope carefully, almost daintily, somehow without tearing the paper. I ease the letter out. I read the first two words and choke back a sob.

"Dearest Theresa."

With my thumb I smother a tear that snakes down my cheek and keep reading.

"Dad is sitting here at his desk with an overwhelming pride for you, as well as deep concern, almost worry. I'm proud that you are

who you are—God's child, my child—who is doing her very best every day of her life. While you affect so many people with your stature and attitude, your life is on a merry-go-round. If you want to stay mentally healthy, then get off and seek help now."

I feel myself go cold. My entire body shivers. I bring my legs tight into my chest. The letter flutters in my trembling hands.

"The key ingredient is your willingness to get help. If it is put off, it will be a silent cancer that will kill you."

I'm crying full force now, tears raining down my face, splashing onto the bottom lip of the letter. My chest heaves.

"You're a very special miracle, who has done more in twenty-four and a half years than most people will do in their dreams. . . . The irony of your situation is that you are in a war, your enemy is not from without but from within. . . . You are a very courageous person, Theresa, for facing your problems straight on. You cannot hope to take care of others properly if you cannot take care of yourself. . . ."

I exhale slowly, trying to halt my hands from shaking, my heart from galloping, my head from spinning. I fasten my eyes on the last sentence of the letter.

"I know that you will do what is right, Theresa. I love you, Dad."

My hands trembling, I fold the letter and slide it back into the envelope.

"I will, Dad," I say. "I will."

I see the mental health officer, a Navy psychologist. I sit in his stark waiting area across from a heavyset, older nurse who overwhelms a small metal desk as she loudly files papers. I jump every time I hear a noise—the whap of the nurse closing a file folder, a phone ringing, laughter from outside the hut. I don't want any of

my Marines to see me in here. I feel nervous and unsteady. And I feel ashamed. Once or twice I notice the nurse looking at me. I can't read her eyes. I'm not sure if she's judging me or somehow sharing my pain, understanding my fear. I check my watch. I've been waiting fifteen minutes.

I can't do this. I can't wait for this guy any longer. I stand, turning to leave, and his office door opens. A man in his late thirties, short, nearly bald, a few greasy strands of hair lying tortured across his scalp like a newly tarred three-lane highway, stands in the doorway. He tries a smile, going for sympathy or warmth, I can't tell, but either way the smile doesn't work, and then he ushers me into his office like a game show host. I walk past him—I tower over him—and catch a last glance from the nurse.

In his office, the Navy shrink does the same game-show gesture toward a chair across from his desk. I sit down heavily. I feel as if I'm in high school, summoned before the principal.

The guy waits, folds his hands beneath his chin, and after another of those confusing smiles, says in a surprisingly deep voice, "So, Lieutenant Hornick, how can I help?"

I shift in the chair, buying time. I look past him, and I say, low, "I'm struggling, sir." I swallow a gob of something sour that has suddenly risen into my throat. I paw the floor with my boot and speak again in a soft, distant voice, so distant it feels as if another person, not me, has spoken from another room. "I have . . . I *may* have . . . possibly . . . an eating disorder."

"Oh?"

"Bulimia," I add, quickly.

"Okay." He lowers his hands flat on his desk. "What are your symptoms?"

I want to flee. Or shove this guy against the wall.

"I throw up," I say, throttling a burning ripple of impatience. "I can't control what I eat." My mouth feels dry, and the room slowly starts to whirl. I wrap my arms around my stomach. "I throw up," I say again, urgently, as if I might heave right here. "I'm not sure what to do. I need . . . help."

"Uh-huh," the shrink says. He flicks his fingers like he's playing an imaginary keyboard on his desk. "What are you dealing with? What are your stressors?"

I tighten my arms around my middle. I suddenly feel a fireball of rage scorching my insides. I force myself to speak in a near whisper; otherwise I know I will scream. "I'm an *officer*," I say.

"Yes."

"I'm in charge of . . . so many people . . . in my command. I run convoys several times a week. I'm an insurgent escort for the regimental commander."

The lines in his forehead undulate like waves.

"I escort female insurgents," I say, hoping that with this clarification he will comprehend what I'm saying. "I'm under a lot of pressure. A lot of stress. Stressors? You want a list? We're in a war zone."

"Yes, I see. That is a lot of stress for a woman Marine."

I burn a stare into him. "I prefer to be called just a Marine, sir."

He flushes. "Of course, yes. I think, then, that we have to figure out how to manage your . . . *behavior* . . . with your stressors. . . ."

I don't hear much else. My arms flop to my sides. I sit on my hands and try to latch onto the words I see floating out of his mouth trapped in air bubbles, random words, connected in no way to the word preceding or following—" . . . *journal* . . . *triggers*

. . . *another session* . . ."—and then, on wobbly legs, I somehow find myself outside the Navy shrink's closed door, gripping the edge of the nurse's desk for balance.

"Do you want a glass of water?"

I nod.

I hear the scraping of a chair. The swish and rustle of movement. Water trickling into a glass from a pitcher. The nurse presses a cool glass into my hand. I gulp down the water. Thoughts swirl. *Get the fuck out of here. Cry. Lead my Marines. Throw up.*

"You shouldn't say anything." The nurse stands a foot away from me. She gently rests her hand on my shoulder. "You can't."

"I'm not sure I—"

"These walls are thin. I know what you're dealing with." She pauses, perhaps gathering up her own courage or deciding how much she should reveal to me, a stranger, technically her superior. "I've had bulimia for twenty years."

I look at the closed door, then back at the nurse.

"If you admit this to your company or your battalion, you'll be done," the nurse says. "You'll lose your career. You'll never get it back. I can't afford that. I'm divorced, got two small kids."

I again look at the shrink's door.

"He's all right. He knows about me. He just doesn't get it." She speaks rapidly through a funnel of pursed lips. "You have to be careful who you tell. Be very careful who you talk to."

She takes the empty glass from my hand, places it on her desk, sits, and dives back into her paperwork. I feel that for one moment she lowered a partition between us, and now she has brought it back up with a thud. I absently rub a file on her desk. "So, how do you—?"

"You suck it up," the nurse says, hard and far away. "You deal."

I head back to my room, my head throbbing, my stomach in a clinch. Before I reach my barracks, I take a detour and go directly to my safe place: the bathroom. I flip the sign on the door to "*Women*," go to the sink, and start scrubbing my hands. I look at myself in the mirror, and I think, *I have work to do.* In a matter of days, the free people of Iraq will elect their first permanent National Assembly under the new constitution. It's our job to oversee the elections, to make sure they're conducted properly, the voters protected, safe. I will lead a convoy of thirty or more trucks, 150 Marines. We will set up jersey barriers—barricades—to control the flow of traffic at the polls. I have come this far, fought this hard, and now I have a ton of work to do, planning, organizing, scheduling, training . . .

You can do this, Theresa, I say to my smudged reflection. *You can do it. Once more. One last time.*

I move away from the mirror and get down on my knees. I look toward the heavens.

"Help me," I whisper.

Deal, I think.

I lift the toilet lid, stick my finger down my throat, and for the fourth time today, I throw up.

2

IN DREAMS SHE CAME

1981–1991 / WOODWAY, WASHINGTON

I AM SIX YEARS OLD. WHIPPET-THIN, HEAD COCKED, dirty blond hair flying, a hot-wired bolt of energy packed inside my brother's faded flannel shirt, which brushes my scabby knees. I cannot sit still. Even when the family goes to church on Sunday and I'm wearing my pretty calico dress Mom made herself, even when we're sitting in the front row so we can hear Mom sing in the choir, trying to pick out her voice among the others, I feel as if my body is pulsing, poised to blast off like a rocket. I've always been this way. Born to *move*. Desperate to keep up with my crazy older brothers, racing, running, grappling, biking, always on the move themselves.

Our family, the Hornicks—my mom, Mary Ann, my dad, Joseph, my brothers, Bob and Paul, and me—live in a log cabin on over an acre of land in Woodway, a tiny town outside Seattle made

up of houses with big backyards abutting a forest. My dad built the log cabin himself, with a little help from some friends, on weekends and days off from his commodity broker' job. The log cabin is one huge room, wide and bright, the sun pouring in from glass ceilings and skylights. In the front as you walk in, past a braided blue-and-white rug, sit three small tree stumps where we put our shoes—the tallest stump for Bob, the middle one for Paul, the smallest for me. Looking back, I find it funny that the three of us were ever identified by "stumps," me being the shortest among us at six one.

Bookshelves, a grand piano, cushy couches, and a wood-burning stove fill the wide-open living area downstairs. A spiral staircase winds upstairs to a loft, which eventually becomes my room. For now, though, because I'm the youngest and the only girl, my room is just off the main downstairs area. Life seems "normal," even uneventful, until one night, when everything changes.

Mom tells us the news at dinner.

"I'm sick," she says. For a moment I hear only a hush, and then my world seems to go dark.

"I'm getting treatment, going to the hospital, taking a very strong medicine. I have a very good doctor."

Nobody speaks for a while. Then my older brother Bob clears his throat. "What do you mean . . . sick? What do you have?"

My mom looks at my dad. I can see that they're holding hands under the table.

"Cancer," my mom says.

My brother Paul absently turns his plate in a slow circle. "Are you . . . ?"

"I'm going to be all right," Mom says. "I'm going to be fine."

I look at my family, take in their faces, my two older brothers, my dad, and then I look at my mom. She smiles at me. She smiles, but I can see through her smile, even though I just turned six. We're outnumbered in this family, three to two, and when Mom brushes my hair, she sometimes says, "We girls have to stick together."

We have a way of looking at each other and knowing what the other is thinking without saying a word. We just know. And tonight, the night she tells us the news, I know she's scared.

I go with her to chemotherapy. I sit on her bed in a curtained-off space the size of a closet before she's hooked up with needles in her arms to a bunch of liquids in plastic packets, then I pull a chair next to her bed and hold her hand. After a while, she falls asleep and I work on my coloring book. At home after her treatment, she spends most of her days in bed or in the bathroom throwing up. Soon her hair starts falling out. She buys a wig and a batch of colorful scarves. I go shopping with her, and together we pick out a fancy scarf that she says she'll save for special occasions. I don't say much when I'm with her, but when I'm alone, I pray. She doesn't have to tell me she's in terrible pain. I just look at her. We look at each other. And I know.

My father quits his job and starts a vending machine business out of our house. He wants to spend more time at home with my mother. He works nights doing deliveries, and sometimes I go with him. He tries to be optimistic, even upbeat, but I can see he's living in his own private sorrow. One night, during a delivery, I start to doze off on the way home, my head leaning against the glass of the window. Nearly asleep, I feel his hand gently touch my arm, and I hear him say to me, or to himself, or to a

vision of my mother, or perhaps to God, "I'm doing the best I can."

My mother's a fighter. She tries to keep her spirits up and live a normal life, or as normal as she can. She goes to church, helps me with my homework, and some days drops me off and picks me up at school. On rare occasions, we even go shopping. One day, after a year or so, my father gathers us for an early dinner and announces that the cancer has gone into remission. My mother lowers her head and nods and cries. I blink back tears and whisper a prayer of thanks. But then, not long after, the cancer comes back.

This time we know it's the end. None of us talks about it that way, but I stop praying for the cancer to go away. I just pray for my mother to not be in pain.

I read to her almost every night, and one night, as I settle in with a book, she says, "Sing for me tonight, Theresa."

I laugh. "You're the singer, Mommy. I have a voice like a mule."

"You have a beautiful voice. Come on. Let me hear you sing."

She reaches out and squeezes my hand. Her fingers seem so light, and as pale as a ghost's.

"I don't know what to sing," I say, but then on her nightstand I see the CD from *Phantom of the Opera*, her favorite musical of all time. I don't really know the songs from the show, but she's played the CD so often that I'm able to croak the first line, "In sleep he sang to me . . . in dreams he came . . ."

She beams.

I keep going.

"That voice which calls to me and speaks my name . . ."

I stumble through the rest of the song, making up lyrics as I

go, humming when I have to, and coming to the coda, my voice rises theatrically, holding and screeching the last line, "THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERAAA IS HERE!!!"

I bow. Mom squeals and applauds weakly but with all her heart.

Another time she doesn't want me to sing or read to her. She just wants to talk. She pats the bed next to her. I curl up and lie next to her, our heads touching on her pillow. "I want you to know something, Theresa."

"Okay, Mom," I say, feeling a sense of dread.

She holds until she knows I'm not only listening, I'm hearing. "I'm not going to get to see a lot of things," she says. "I'll miss your eighth-grade graduation. Your high school graduation. Your prom. Taking you to college . . ." She pauses and takes a deep breath. "But I will always be with you. Inside you. Always."

I bite my lip.

"You need to live your life, Theresa, *live* it. Believe in yourself. Believe in God. And always keep going forward. Don't look back. Keep moving."

"I will."

"I want you to know something else. The most important thing." She lifts her head off the pillow and slowly, painfully sits up. She looks at me, her stare a laser. "Don't be afraid. Things could get bad . . . things *do* get bad . . . but you can't let anything stop you. Ever."

"I won't. I promise."

She drops her head back onto the pillow. "Life's not fair, Theresa. But you can't dwell on that. You can't let that get you down. Life is *not* fair. But that's never the point."

I help Mom pack a go bag with her medication, some snacks for us, and several bottles of water. I watch as she meticulously winds her special-occasion scarf over her wig and help her tie a knot under her chin. We load up the car and prepare for a rare road trip. We are driving to Vancouver, British Columbia, two and a half hours away, to see a production of *Phantom of the Opera*. Bob and Paul promise to behave and not torture me or each other on the trip as long as I promise not to sing. My brothers and I shake on it.

I sit next to Mom during the play. She watches, riveted through the first act, her eyes filling with tears during the songs. After intermission, into the second act, she starts to get restless. She grunts a few times and shifts in her seat, attempting to get comfortable. At one point she snaps her eyes closed and grabs my father's hand. After the play, as we begin the short walk to the parking lot, my mom stops abruptly. She's in too much pain to continue. My brothers and I move her out of the way of the people flowing out of the theater and wait with her while my dad gets the car.

About an hour into the drive home, my mother starts to cry. She asks for her pain pills. Bob rummages through her bag and hands her the bottle, which has only two pills left. Mom gulps them down with a bottle of water I hand her and closes her eyes. Twenty minutes later, she starts to moan. The pain, dulled momentarily, returns with a fury and begins to overwhelm her. She tries to find a comfortable position in her seat, but moving around intensifies the pain. She moans again, louder, and then, always the

gentle soul, always a lady, she apologizes. From the backseat, I see my dad grip the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white, his eyes slits zeroing in on the road. Less than a half hour from home, Bob says quietly, "We drove past our exit."

"We're going to the hospital," my dad says.

At home a week later, Dad moves Mom out of their bedroom into the living room, setting up her hospital bed under the skylight. Hospice care workers attend her regularly, and friends, family, and people from the church arrive every day to keep Mom company and clumsily say their good-byes. One woman from the church, the harp soloist, comes once a week, lugging her harp, which she sets up in a corner of the living room and strums soothingly for an hour. My mother dozes during most of these visits. When she wakes briefly, she gazes at her visitors through filmy, unresponsive eyes.

Dad sleeps on the living room couch next to Mom. I carry my sleeping bag out of my room every night and roll it out on the floor at her feet. I sit with her and do my homework or read to her, and sometimes, softly, I sing. When I feel myself starting to fade, I crawl inside my sleeping bag. One night, before I go to sleep, her breathing slower, more labored, I take her hand and say, "I don't want you to be alone." And then I lean in and whisper an even deeper truth, "I don't want to be alone."

After a couple of months, fewer people visit. Restless all day at school, I rush home as soon as the bell rings. Thinking only about my mother, I forget to do my homework. I fall behind in my classes, and my grades suffer. I want to spend every minute I can,

every waking minute, with my mom. But sometimes I'm not sure if she even knows I'm here.

"Do you think she realizes I'm with her?" I ask my dad.

"Oh, she knows, Theresa. And being here with her, the time you're spending with her, that is love. Doesn't matter what you say to her—even if you say nothing—that is love. Time is love."

Every night before I get into my sleeping bag, I kiss her on the forehead, squeeze her hand, and tell her I love her. But I don't have to. She knows.

My mom passes away at four o'clock in the morning. I'm asleep. In a dream, I feel something pass over me, something floating, then I see my mom's face, smiling, and I wake up. My dad kneels next to me, shaking my shoulder. I blink myself awake.

"Mom passed," he says, tears streaming down his face. "I was with her. I held her hand. It was beautiful, Theresa. I could see her soul lifting. There was a light rising off her body."

She's free I say to myself. *She's not going to be in pain anymore.*

I bow my head.

God answered my prayer.

I have no idea that her loss will carve a permanent hole in my heart.

At her funeral, I wear a dress my mom made me and an enormous bow in my hair that we made together. My dad, my brothers, and I help carry the casket. At the service I read a passage from the Bible, I think. I'm not sure. Everything that day feels hazy and unreal. I feel as if I'm standing apart from everything, a bystander. It's like I'm watching a movie of somebody else's life.

I spend the next week walking through each day as if my feet are stuck in cement. I hear the words "I'm sorry" so many times I want to scream. A couple of weeks after my mother's funeral, my dad insists that my brothers and I go to grief counseling for children who have lost parents. We enter a stuffy room in a church basement and take seats in the back row as a kid my age shares a story about his mom's death. Squirming in my folding chair, I whisper to my brother Bob, "I don't want to hear this."

"We'll leave as soon as—"

"Bob, I can't *breathe*." I shoot out of my chair and sprint out the door. Outside, I lean over, rest my hands on my knees, and gulp breath after breath of air.

I raise my head and look up into the sky. "Mommy," I say.

It's all I can say.

I am ten years old.

3

MY FIRST PLATOON

GRADES 4–8 / SAINT LUKE'S SCHOOL

Afternoons and weekends, we play basketball, usually Dad and me against Bob and Paul. We play to win.

When Bob guards me, he goes easy. He keeps his elbows in, doesn't body me up in the lane, mostly shoots from the outside. He's seventeen, six feet eight, a star at Seattle Prep. He dominates every game he plays, including this one, the one outside our barn, the backboard nailed to a tree.

Paul, fifteen, *has* to win and goes all out. He'll elbow me, grab me, shove me, slap me. If I call a foul on him, he looks stunned, and as soon as Dad turns his back, he gives me the finger. Paul doesn't know that we share the same obsession: I need to win as much as he does.

Except the team I'm on never wins in these games, and it kills me. Paul and Bob are just too strong and too competitive. Paul, I think, resents me and believes that Dad favors me, not just in these backyard games but all the time. When Dad says, "Paul, don't be so rough on her, it's only a game," it doesn't help. It's not just a game, to any of us.

What my brothers don't know and what I will never tell them is that I look up to them. The truth is, I want to *be* them. Well, mirrors of them. I don't want to be a boy, but since Mom died, I don't much like being a girl. I'm not interested in wearing girly clothes or getting my hair or nails done, or going to the mall. Everyone knows this. At school, I'm not invited into the cool cliques—I'm not invited into *any* cliques—so I keep to myself. I've become an outcast with very few friends. I'm *that* girl, the one whose mom died. I'm different, bordering on weird. I'm taller than all the other girls—by a lot—quieter, more awkward socially, and mainly interested in sports.

Even if I did care about the way I looked and wanted a trendy wardrobe, Dad wouldn't be able to help me the way Mom would have. He feels that sort of thing is materialistic and shallow, not to mention that we're on a strict budget because money's always tight. He sees no problem with me mostly wearing my brothers' hand-me-downs. I go to Saint Luke's, a parochial school. We wear uniforms every day. That makes it easy. If I need to go somewhere after school or on the weekend, I just throw on one of Paul's old flannel shirts over my jeans. If I complain that I have no clothes of my own, my dad takes me shopping at Goodwill.

At school, during lunch or recess, I usually sit alone. Sometimes I stare at this one group of girls, several of whom used to be

my friends, and wish they would include me. The thought rapidly dissolves, because I know that even if they did bring me in, I wouldn't know what to say. I've become closed, socially clumsy, and very shy. Worst of all, I feel like a reject, as if having lost my mom has somehow made me inferior, even damaged.

One day during lunch, I see a group of girls circling around someone I know only slightly, Alisha, a heavyset girl in my class. The girls are taunting her, calling her "Fat-ass" and "Loser," then they get more insulting and obscene. Alisha cowers and begins to cry. I push myself away from the lunch table, where I'm eating alone as usual, and shove my way through the circle to Alisha. I pull up next to her, stand between her and the other girls, ball my hands into fists, and feeling the heat rise to my cheeks, I pick out the leader of the pack and stick my face an inch from hers. "Leave her alone," I say. "She's a human being. Her name is Alisha."

I glare at this girl, daring her to say something to me, wishing she'd put a hand on me, willing her to do it. "Maybe you'd like to say something to me," I say. "Why don't you call me a name?"

The girl reddens, realizes that if she says one word, I will knock her the hell out. With two years of unchecked rage roiling inside, I wouldn't mind letting off a little steam. I shift my feet, waiting for her to make a move. She backs away, her friends following her in retreat.

"Come on, Alisha, let's go." I put an arm around her and escort her through the remnants of this so-called inner circle, slightly surprised at the courage I managed to dredge up, relishing that I'm a teeny bit of a badass.

Alisha and I don't become more than nodding acquaintances after that, but nobody picks on her again.

My dad practices a no-nonsense parenting style of equal parts discipline and tough love. He runs our family like a military unit, he the officer in charge and we kids the lowly recruits. He orders us to report on our schoolwork and assigns chores, all of us taking turns cleaning the house, hauling in wood from outside (my least favorite chore, especially in winter), feeding our small menagerie of pigs, sheep, chickens, cats, and dogs, and cooking dinner three nights a week. Bob, a budding chef, enjoys cooking and comes up with a variety of scrumptious and exotic entrees, such as Thai noodle pasta and chicken parmesan, having chopped off the chicken's head earlier that day (I take it back: *that's* my least favorite chore). I create my one signature dish, a delightful taco salad, about which Paul grumbles, "Taco salad again? Really?" When it's his turn, Paul, with all the enthusiasm of a hair-netted cafeteria worker, throws together half-hearted grilled cheese sandwiches, scorching the toast into charred, inedible shingles and filling the kitchen with smoke, about which I say, "Burning the house down again? Really?"

Of course, we have to eat everything on our plates to be excused and are not allowed to complain about the quality of the cooking. If a complaint slips out, Dad says, "You have two choices: take it or leave it."

We know if we leave the food that's served, we're not allowed to ask for anything else and have to go to bed without supper. The guys, Dad included, don't exactly have discriminating palates. They inhale every morsel on their plates. They eat fast and they

eat a lot, often going back for seconds, even when Paul serves up his blackened grilled cheese tiles.

Dad pushes us to take up a sport. Bob, already a high school basketball legend at Seattle Prep, for the most part knows how to deal with Dad, keeping both his cool and his distance, rarely making waves. Paul, slammed in the middle between Bob, the prodigal son, and me—according to him, daddy's little girl—rebels by acting out, fighting with Bob, torturing me, and testing Dad. When he chooses a sport, he picks golf, a sport he grows to love, one Dad never gets. I choose two sports—cross-country, because I'm the strongest runner in my class, and basketball, because I'm tall, Bob plays, and Dad thinks I should.

It's not easy living among all men. I do my best to navigate my way around Paul's moods and Dad's demands. Sometimes I feel like I'm walking through a minefield. At one point I move out of my room and into the loft so I can have my own space and keep above the steadily rising tide of testosterone. I choose to spend much of my time in my room, alone, except when my brothers head outside to run, bike, hike, shoot hoops, or play catch. I want to be part of that. I want to compete with them because I want them to respect me. I'm as good as they are, and I want them to include me. In fact, I *need* them to include me, because the truth is I don't really have any friends.

Bob and Paul become Boy Scouts. This means that I too want to be a Boy Scout. I tell this to Dad. As Paul rolls his eyes, Dad suggests that I try Girl Scouts first.

I attend one Girl Scout meeting, the troop made up of a group of girls from my school that I avoid and who avoid me. We spend

the meeting baking cookies, mending clothes, and reciting a bunch of lame pledges. I want to punch my fist through a wall. I tell Dad I refuse to go back and that I will never be a Girl Scout.

"Why not?" he asks. "Give me one good reason."

"Because it's for *girls*," I say.

Dad gives in. To my brothers' annoyance, I accompany them and my dad on a Boy Scout hike and campout. I don't need to get special permission from the troop leader. The troop leader is Dad.

During the hike, I keep pace with my brothers and the rest of the troop. As we cross the clearing back to the campsite, I hear someone say, "She can hike better than a lot of these guys," and then I hear Paul answer, "Yeah, well, we don't want her here."

Of course, I'm crushed, but I shake it off because I've proven myself to them, to Dad, and to myself.

I make the eighth-grade basketball team. No shock there, having put in countless hours playing backyard hoops against my brothers, especially Bob, who's one of the best players in the state. I'm built for the sport—I'm tall, strong, and fast—and I've developed an unstoppable hook shot. I'm a natural center, the next Hornick to become a hoop star.

There's only one problem. Every time our point guard passes me the ball, I freeze. I'm not sure why. At least not at first.

My dad tries to help in his own way, the only way he knows how. With him coaching me, pushing me, we put in extra hours after practice in the gym and work out at home in the backyard until it gets dark. I don't mind this. I never back down from a

challenge, and I actually like working out with Dad. The extra work pays off. I improve in practice. But during games, I fall apart.

"What's the matter with you?" Dad says in the car on the way home after a typical game in which I looked and felt disinterested on the court. "I don't understand. You had so many opportunities to score. You have to get in there. You have to be aggressive."

"I'll try."

"That's a rubber word," he says. "Either you do something or you don't."

Lying in bed that night, staring at the ceiling, visualizing myself on the court, at a loss, as frozen as a statue, not wanting the ball, wanting to *hide*, it hits me. To play basketball well, you have to *react*. I don't want that. I want to play a sport where I'm in charge.

I want to be in control.