



prologue

Afghanistan, 2002

“Do you hear it?” The voice was almost a whisper.



Elsa held her breath, and then she heard it too, a faint rustling of footsteps over twigs and leaves. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed several shadowy figures darting through the trees, and when she turned, she saw a glint of sunlight reflecting off the barrel of an assault rifle.

There was no denying it—the Taliban had found them.

Oh, Jesus! she thought. *We’ll never escape.*

Elsa knew the Taliban’s ruthless hatred; the death and destruction they wrought was undeniable.

Seized by a sickening wave of fear, she wanted to cry or throw up, but there was no time. She tried to catch Parween’s eye, but her friend was looking back, intent on finding the source of the sound.

“Run!” someone shouted, and suddenly, the chase was on.

But not for Elsa. Her legs were tangled in the fabric of her all-enveloping *burqa*. She struggled to free herself and finally threw off the covering and ran, her plastic shoes barely touching the ground. She’d never run so fast before, and her heart pounded as she swallowed air in great gulps.

She heard heavy panting.

Was it her own?

Her chest tightened, and a scream rose in her throat, but there

was no sound. She couldn't think clearly. She knew only that she didn't want to die there in Afghanistan.

Oh, God, let us make it, she prayed.

Just ahead was a small house, and though unprotected by the walls that surrounded typical Afghani homes, it was their only hope.

If they could reach it in time. But the distance seemed too great and her sprint too slow. Still, she pushed on, her arms pumping wildly.

After what seemed an eternity, Elsa and the others reached the house. She turned and stopped dead in her tracks. A growing sense of panic washed over her.

Parveen.

Her eyes swept the horizon, but there was no sign of her friend.

Elsa's throat burned as she tried to catch her breath, and she felt as though her heart would explode in her chest.

She buried her face in her hands.

How had it all gone so wrong? What were they doing here?

What was *she* doing here?

A nurse from Boston in *fucking Afghanistan*, for Christ's sake.

Hot tears stung her eyes. With trembling hands, she tried to wipe them away.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "Where *are* you, Parveen?"

PART
I

Elsa





Boston, 1994

It was the hopelessness in their eyes that held sixteen-year-old Elsa's attention. The black and white images of starving, big-bellied babies gripped her with horror, but one photo in particular haunted her—a close-up of a skeletal mother holding a shriveled baby while two other gaunt children clung to her frail arms. It felt like they were looking right at Elsa.

She read the caption, which explained that they were refugees who'd escaped a quick death at the hands of rebel tribesmen only to be trapped in a life of misery. They weren't just starving, the story said, they were dying. All four suffered from malaria and dysentery, and without help they would likely be dead in one month's time.

Elsa flipped back to the cover to check the magazine's issue date and her eyes widened.

The magazine was *two* months old.

A strange feeling—a kind of numbness—came over her, and she sat on the floor, her knees bent up, supporting the magazine. She turned the page and held her breath as she read.

As the tragedy in Rwanda deepens and the death toll continues to rise, world leaders seem paralyzed, unable to act. It is only the valiant efforts of a few doctors and nurses that are making a difference,

snatching thousands from death's certain grip. But more relief workers are needed and the UN has issued an urgent plea for help.

Elsa read the words again and then turned the page.

A large picture revealed hundreds of women and children standing in what seemed to be an endless line, waiting for their food rations. The women, and even the small children, seemed lifeless as they waited their turn. None of them looked at the camera. It was a photograph of utter despair.

Elsa sighed and ran her fingers over the picture. She turned to the next page and found a series of photos, all of corpses—endless rows of babies and children, entire families, lying in the road or in fields, clinging to one another in death. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she closed her eyes.

But when she opened them, the bodies were still there. She turned back to the first page and read the story again. She lingered over that first image, the one of the dying mother and her young children. She wondered where they were, if they'd died or somehow been rescued. It was hard to believe that people lived like this.

How could she ever complain about her own life again?

She paused at a shiny picture of a nurse cradling a baby. The nurse seemed to be crying. The caption explained that the baby was dead and the nurse was looking for his mother.

A nurse, she thought, doing something that matters.

Elsa closed the magazine, breathing deeply to calm herself, before she glanced at her watch. *Four o'clock! Jeez, where did the time go?* She quickly gathered her remaining books onto her cart and hurried to the library's front desk.

"Sorry, Miss James, I lost track of time." She needed this job; she couldn't afford to be fired. "I'll finish these tomorrow."

The old librarian, fidgeting with her hearing aid, smiled up at Elsa. "What, dear?"

"I'll finish tomorrow," Elsa almost shouted. "And this," she said, holding out the magazine, "can I keep it? It's two months old."

"You want the magazine?" Miss James confirmed. "That's fine, dear."

Elsa trudged home along the narrow, crowded streets, the magazine

stuffed into her backpack. If she hurried, her mother could still get to work on time. Rushing into the house, she pulled the magazine from her bag and showed the pictures to her mother.

“Oh God, Elsa, why do you look at that stuff? Jesus, it’s awful,” her mother said, slipping her arms into her old coat.

“But, Mom, I was thinking, I could be a nurse, maybe help someday.”

“That’s just a wish, don’t ya think? Nothin’ good ever came from wishing for things you can’t have. Look around, honey. We’re in the crummiest three-decker in the crummiest part of Dorchester. And with Diana getting sicker, I don’t see things getting any better.”

“But if we don’t wish for more or try for more, things will never change.”

“I’ve worked two jobs since your father died, and every single day, I’ve wished things would be easier. I just don’t want you to be disappointed is all.”

But Elsa *was* disappointed. She was always wishing for things she couldn’t have—her friend Annie’s wild red hair, a nice house, a real family. There was always something else she wanted. God knows, there was a lot to wish for when you lived in Dorchester.

“Learn to be happy with what you’ve got, Elsa. There’s always someone else who’s got it worse.”

“That’s just it—these refugees *have* got it worse. I want to help.”

“Well, you can start with Diana. I fed her, but she needs to be changed and put to bed. I’ll see you later.” With a quick peck on the cheek, her mother left for work, the second shift at the supermarket where she rang up groceries she could barely afford.

Life isn’t fair, Elsa thought glumly, *but that doesn’t mean you just sit back and accept it*. She shed her coat and moved toward Diana, who sat awkwardly in an oversized high chair. Unable to hold her head up, it bobbed on her spindly neck until Elsa set a pillow behind her.

“There, Diana. Is that better?” she cooed.

Diana, the four-year-old daughter of Elsa’s older sister, Janice, was hopelessly disabled, or so the doctors said. It took all of Elsa and her mother’s efforts just to feed and take care of Diana. Janice was never home, and her brother, Tommy, the oldest of the three, only came home long enough to swipe money from either his mother or Elsa.

It hadn't always been that way. Though money had always been tight, they'd been a family once, and when Diana was born, she'd brought smiles and laughter into the house, at least for a while. Those were the good days, when even Annie, Elsa's only close friend, still came around.

Annie had lived with her Polish grandmother in another dingy three-decker on the next corner. It was Annie who'd sat with Elsa when she'd fed, changed, and babysat Diana, and it was Annie who'd poked through Janice's bureau drawers one afternoon until she discovered an old tube of lipstick called "Misty Mauve." At Elsa's urging, Annie had opened it and swiped it across her lips. Though the color was hopelessly outdated, they'd taken turns applying it.

Annie, her red hair straining against the elastic that held it back, had peered into the mirror and declared that it was a bad color for her. "With my hair, I need something brown. This is awful."

Elsa, small and narrow, had always wished for hair like Annie's, something that would set her apart. When it was her turn, she'd stood in front of the mirror and swiped the waxy mauve over her mouth. She'd pressed her lips together to spread the stain and peered at her reflection, suddenly boasting violet-colored lips. Against her brown hair, the color had been perfect. She'd turned to Annie.

"Well, what do you think?"

Annie had looked at her friend admiringly.

"You look beautiful, Elsa. You should wear lipstick all the time."

Elsa had looked in the mirror and smiled again. The face that stared back at her was pretty—*really* pretty—she had to admit. She'd grinned at her reflection as though she were seeing herself for the first time—shiny hair, creamy skin, upturned nose, and full violet lips. The very act of applying the lipstick—the gentle stroke of color, the pressing of her lips to spread it evenly, and finally, the gaze into the mirror—fascinated her.

This lipstick is amazing, Elsa had thought. It didn't just put color on her lips, it put an unmistakable glow in her green eyes and made her feel, if only for an instant, as though she were *somebody*, like one of those important women in the fancy magazines. Women who mattered wore lipstick. She smiled at her reflection again.

Lipstick in Afghanistan • 9

“Jeez, Elsa,” Annie had declared. “You were made for lipstick.”
I am, Elsa had thought. *I really am*.

The memory of that afternoon still made her smile, and though Annie had long since moved away, Elsa’s love of lipstick was the same. A swipe of bold plum or soft pink was enough to raise her spirits, and in Dorchester, that was a necessity.

Lipstick was magic.