

PROLOGUE

When I close my eyes, I can see my bedroom. The bed is unmade, my fluffy blanket in a heap, because I've rushed out for school, late for an exam. My school schedule is open on my desk to a page dated 9 October 2012. And my school uniform—my white *shalwar* and blue *kamiz*—is on a peg on the wall, waiting for me.

I can hear the neighborhood kids playing cricket in the alley behind our home. I can hear the hum of the bazaar not far away. And if I listen very closely, I can hear Safina, my friend next door, tapping on the wall we share so she can tell me a secret.

I smell rice cooking as my mother works in the kitchen. I hear my little brothers fighting over the remote—the TV switching between *WWE SmackDown* and cartoons. Soon I'll hear my father's deep voice as he calls out my nickname.

"*Jani*," he'll say, which is Persian for "dear one." "How was the school running today?" He was asking how things were at the Khushal School for Girls, which he founded and I attended, but I always took the opportunity to answer the question literally.

"*Aba*," I'd joke. "The school is walking, not running!" This was my way of telling him I thought things could be better.

I left that beloved home in Pakistan one morning—planning to dive back under the covers as soon as school let out—and ended up a world away.

Some people say it is too dangerous for me to go back there now. That I'll never be able to return. And so, from time to time, I go there in my mind.

But now another family lives in that home, another girl sleeps in that bedroom—while I am thousands of miles away. I don't care much about the other things in my room, but I do worry about the school trophies on my bookcase. I even dream about them sometimes. There's a runners-up award from the first speaking contest I ever entered. And more than forty-five golden cups and medals for being first in my class in exams, debates, and competitions. To someone else, they might seem mere trinkets made of plastic. To someone else, they may simply look like prizes for good grades. But to me, they are reminders of the life I loved and the girl I was—before I left home that fateful day.

When I open my eyes, I am in my new bedroom. It is in a sturdy brick house in a damp and chilly place called

Birmingham, England. Here there is water running from every tap, hot or cold as you like. No need to carry cans of gas from the market to heat the water. Here there are large rooms with shiny wood floors, filled with large furniture and a large, large TV.

There is hardly a sound in this calm, leafy suburb. No children laughing and yelling. No women downstairs chopping vegetables and gossiping with my mother. No men smoking cigarettes and debating politics. Sometimes, though, even with these thick walls between us, I can hear someone in my family crying for home. But then my father will burst through the front door, his voice booming. "*Jani!*" he'll say. "How was school today?"

Now there's no play on words. He's not asking about the school he runs and I attend. But there's a note of worry in his voice, as if he fears I won't be there to reply. Because it was not so long ago that I was nearly killed—simply because I was speaking out about my right to go to school.

It was the most ordinary of days. I was fifteen, in grade nine, and I'd stayed up far too late the night before, studying for an exam.

I'd already heard the rooster crow at dawn but had fallen back to sleep. I'd heard the morning call to prayer from the mosque nearby but managed to hide under my quilt. And I'd

pretended not to hear my father come to wake me.

Then my mother came and gently shook my shoulder. "Wake up, *pisho*," she said, calling me *kitten* in Pashto, the language of the Pashtun people. "It's seven thirty and you're late for school!"

I had an exam on Pakistani studies. So I said a quick prayer to God. *If it is your will, may I please come in first?* I whispered. *Oh, and thank you for all my success so far!*

I gulped down a bit of fried egg and chapati with my tea. My youngest brother, Atal, was in an especially cheeky mood that morning. He was complaining about all the attention I'd received for speaking out about girls getting the same education as boys, and my father teased him a little at the breakfast table.

"When Malala is prime minister someday, you can be her secretary," he said.

Atal, the little clown in the family, pretended to be cross. "No!" he cried. "She will be *my* secretary!"

All this banter nearly made me late, and I raced out the door, my half-eaten breakfast still on the table. I ran down the lane just in time to see the school bus crammed with other girls on their way to school. I jumped in that Tuesday morning and never looked back at my home.

The ride to school was quick, just five minutes up the road and along the river. I arrived on time, and exam day passed as

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it always did. The chaos of Mingora city surrounded us with its honking horns and factory noises while we worked silently, bent over our papers in hushed concentration. By day's end I was tired but happy; I knew I'd done well on my test.

"Let's stay on for the second trip," said Moniba, my best friend. "That way we can chat a little longer." We always liked to stay on for the late pickup.

For days I'd had a strange, gnawing feeling that something bad was going to happen. One night I'd found myself wondering about death. *What is being dead really like?* I wanted to know. I was alone in my room, so I turned toward Mecca and asked God. "What happens when you die?" I said. "How would it feel?"

If I died, I wanted to be able to tell people what it felt like. "Malala, you silly girl," I said to myself then, "you'd be dead and you couldn't tell people what it was like."

Before I went to bed, I asked God for one more thing. *Can I die a little bit and come back, so I can tell people about it?*

But the next day had dawned bright and sunny, and so had the next one and the one after that. And now I knew I'd done well on my exam. Whatever cloud had been hanging over my head had begun to clear away. So Moniba and I did what we always did: We had a good gossip. What face cream was she using? Had one of the male teachers gone for a baldness cure? And, now that the first exam was over, how difficult would the next one be?

When our bus was called, we ran down the steps. As usual,

Moniba and the other girls covered their heads and faces before we stepped outside the gate and got into the waiting *dyna*, the white truck that was our Khushal School "bus." And, as usual, our driver was ready with a magic trick to amuse us. That day, he made a pebble disappear. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't figure out his secret.

We piled inside, twenty girls and two teachers crammed into the three rows of benches stretching down the length of the *dyna*. It was hot and sticky, and there were no windows, just a yellowed plastic sheet that flapped against the side as we bounced along Mingora's crowded rush-hour streets.

Haji Baba Road was a jumble of brightly colored rickshaws, women in flowing robes, men on scooters, honking and zigzagging through the traffic. We passed a shopkeeper butchering chickens. A boy selling ice-cream cones. A billboard for Dr. Humayun's Hair Transplant Institute. Moniba and I were deep in conversation. I had many friends, but she was the friend of my heart, the one with whom I shared everything. That day, when we were talking about who would get the highest marks this term, one of the other girls started a song, and the rest of us joined in.

Just after we passed the Little Giants snack factory and the bend in the road not more than three minutes from my house, the van slowed to a halt. It was oddly quiet outside.

"It's so calm today," I said to Moniba. "Where are all the people?"

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I don't remember anything after that, but here's the story that's been told to me:

Two young men in white robes stepped in front of our truck.

"Is this the Khushal School bus?" one of them asked.

The driver laughed. The name of the school was painted in black letters on the side.

The other young man jumped onto the tailboard and leaned into the back, where we were all sitting.

"Who is Malala?" he asked.

No one said a word, but a few girls looked in my direction. He raised his arm and pointed at me. Some of the girls screamed, and I squeezed Moniba's hand.

Who is Malala? I am Malala, and this is my story.

PART ONE

Before the Taliban

1

As Free as a Bird

I am Malala, a girl like any other—although I do have my special talents.

I am double-jointed, and I can crack the knuckles on my fingers and my toes at will. (And I enjoy watching people squirm as I do it.) I can beat someone twice my age at arm wrestling. I like cupcakes but not candy. And I don't think dark chocolate should be called chocolate at all. I hate eggplant and green peppers, but I love pizza. I think Bella from *Twilight* is too fickle, and I don't understand why she would choose that boring Edward. As my girlfriends in Pakistan and I say, he doesn't give her any lift.

Now, I don't care much for makeup and jewelry, and I'm not a girly girl. But my favorite color is pink, and I do admit I used to spend a lot of time in front of the mirror playing with my hair. And when I was younger, I tried to lighten my skin

with honey, rose water, and buffalo milk. (When you put milk on your face, it smells very bad.)

I say that if you check a boy's backpack, it will always be a mess, and if you check his uniform, it will be dirty. This is not my opinion. This is just a fact.

I am a Pashtun, a member of a proud tribe of people spread across Afghanistan and Pakistan. My father, Ziauddin, and my mother, Toor Pekai, are from mountain villages, but after they married, they relocated to Mingora, the largest city in the Swat Valley, which is in northwest Pakistan, where I was born. Swat was known for its beauty, and tourists came from all over to see its tall mountains, lush green hills, and crystal-clear rivers.

I'm named for the great young Pashtun heroine Malalai, who inspired her countrymen with her courage.

But I don't believe in fighting—even though my fourteen-year-old brother, Khushal, annoys me to no end. *I* don't fight with him. Rather, *he* fights with me. And I agree with Newton: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. So I guess you could say that when Khushal fights with me, I oblige him. We argue over the TV remote. Over chores. Over who's the better student. Over who ate the last of the Cheesy Wots-its. Over whatever you can think of.

My ten-year-old brother, Atal, annoys me less. And he is quite good at chasing down the cricket ball when we kick it out of bounds. But he does make up his own rules sometimes.

When I was younger and these brothers started coming along, I had a little talk with God. *God*, I said, *you did not check*

with me before sending these two. You didn't ask how I felt. They are quite inconvenient sometimes, I told God. When I want to study, they make a terrible racket. And when I brush my teeth in the morning, they bang on the bathroom door. But I have made my peace with these brothers. At least with a pair of them, we can play a cricket match.

At home in Pakistan, the three of us ran like a pack of rabbits, in and out of the alleys around our house; we played a chasing game like tag, another game called Mango, Mango, a hopscotch game we called *Chindakh* (meaning "Frog"), and Thief and Police. Sometimes we rang the bell at someone else's house, then ran away and hid. Our favorite, though, was cricket. We played cricket day and night in the alley by our house or up on our roof, which was flat. If we couldn't afford a proper cricket ball, we made one out of an old sock stuffed with rubbish; and we drew wickets on the wall in chalk. Because Atal was the youngest, he would be sent to fetch the ball when it sailed off the roof; sometimes he grabbed the neighbors' ball while he was at it. He'd return with a cheeky grin and a shrug. "What's wrong?" he'd say. "They took our ball yesterday!"

But boys are, well, boys. Most of them are not as civilized as girls. And so, if I wasn't in the mood for their boyish ways, I'd go downstairs and knock on the wall between our house and Safina's. Two taps, that was our code. She'd tap in reply. I'd slip aside a brick, opening a hole between our houses, and we'd whisper back and forth. Sometimes we'd go over to one

house or the other, where we'd watch our favorite TV show, *Shaka Laka Boom Boom*—about a boy with a magic pencil. Or we'd work on the little shoebox dolls we were making out of matchsticks and bits of fabric.

Safina was my playmate from the time I was about eight. She's a couple of years younger than me, but we were very close. We sometimes copied each other, but one time I thought she had gone too far, when my favorite possession—my only toy, a pink plastic cell phone my father had given me—went missing.

That afternoon, when I went to play with Safina, she had an identical phone! She said it was hers; she said she'd bought it at the bazaar. Well, I didn't believe her, and I was too angry to think straight. So when she wasn't looking, I took a pair of her earrings. The next day, a necklace. I didn't even like these trinkets, but I couldn't stop myself.

A few days later I came home to find my mother so upset she wouldn't look at me. She had found the stolen trinkets in my small cupboard and had returned them. "Safina stole from me first!" I cried. But my mother was unmoved. "You are older, Malala. You should have set a good example." I went to my room, drenched in shame. But it was the long wait for my father to come home that was worse. He was my hero—brave and principled—and I was his *jani*. He would be so disappointed in me.

But he didn't raise his voice or scold me. He knew I was being so hard on myself already that he had no need to

reprimand me. Instead, he consoled me by telling me about the mistakes great heroes had made when they were children. Heroes like Mahatma Gandhi, the great pacifist, and Moham-mad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. He relayed a saying from a story his father used to tell him: "A child is a child when he's a child, even if he's a prophet."

I thought of our *Pashtunwali* code, which governs how we Pashtuns live. One part of that code is *badal*—a tradition of revenge—where one insult must be answered by another, one death by another, and on and on it goes.

I had had my taste of exacting revenge. And it was bitter. I vowed then that I would never partake in *badal*.

I apologized to Safina and her parents. I hoped Safina would apologize, too, and return my phone. But she didn't say a thing. And, as difficult as it was to keep my new vow, I didn't mention my suspicion concerning the whereabouts of my phone.

Safina and I quickly got back to being friends, and we and all the neighborhood children were back at our running and chasing games. At that time, we lived in a part of town far from the city center. Behind our house was a grassy lot scattered with mysterious ruins—statues of lions, broken columns of an old *stupa*, and hundreds of enormous stones that looked like giant umbrellas—where, in the summer, we played *parpartuni*, a game of hide-and-seek. In the winter, we made snowmen until our mothers called us in for a cup of hot milky tea and cardamom.

For as long as I can remember, our house had been full of people: neighbors, relatives, and friends of my father's—and a never-ending stream of cousins, male and female. They came from the mountains where my parents grew up or they came from the next town over. Even when we moved from our tiny first house and I got my “own” bedroom, it was rarely my own. There always seemed to be a cousin sleeping on the floor. That's because one of the most important parts of the *Pashtunwali* code is hospitality. As a Pashtun, you always open your door to a visitor.

My mother and the women would gather on our veranda at the back of the house and cook and laugh and talk about new clothes, jewelry, and other ladies in the neighborhood, while my father and the men would sit in the men's guest room and drink tea and talk politics.

I would often wander away from the children's games, tip-toe through the women's quarters, and join the men. That, it seemed to me, was where something exciting and important was happening. I didn't know what it was, exactly, and I certainly didn't understand the politics, but I felt a pull to the weighty world of the men. I would sit at my father's feet and drink in the conversation. I loved to hear the men debate politics. But mostly I loved sitting among them, hypnotized by this talk of the big world beyond our valley.

Eventually I'd leave the room and linger awhile among

the women. The sights and sounds in their world were different. There were gentle, confiding whispers. Tinkling laughter sometimes. Raucous, uproarious laughter sometimes. But most stunning of all: The women's headscarves and veils were gone. Their long dark hair and pretty faces—made up with lipstick and henna—were lovely to see.

I had seen these women nearly every day of my life observing the code of *pardah*, where they cover themselves in public. Some, like my mother, simply draped scarves over their faces; this is called *niqab*. But others wore *burqas*, long, flowing black robes that covered the head and face, so people could not even see their eyes. Some went so far as to wear black gloves and socks so that not a bit of skin was showing. I'd seen the wives be required to walk a few paces behind their husbands. I'd seen the women be forced to lower their gaze when they encountered a man. And I'd seen the older girls who'd been our playmates disappear behind veils as soon as they became teenagers.

But to see these women chatting casually—their faces radiant with freedom—was to see a whole new world.

I was never much of a hand around the kitchen—I'll admit that I tried to get out of chopping vegetables or cleaning dishes whenever I could—so I didn't linger there long. But as I ran off, I'd always wonder how it felt to live in hiding.

Living under wraps seemed so unfair—and uncomfortable. From an early age, I told my parents that no matter what

other girls did, I would never cover my face like that. My face was my identity. My mother, who is quite devout and traditional, was shocked. Our relatives thought I was very bold. (Some said rude.) But my father said I could do as I wished. "Malala will live as free as a bird," he told everyone.

So I would run to rejoin the children. Especially when it was time for the kite-flying contests—where the boys would skillfully try to cut their competitors' kite strings. It was an exciting game, full of unpredictable escapes and plunges. It was beautiful, and also a bit melancholy for me to see the pretty kites sputter to the ground.

Maybe it was because I could see a future that would be cut down just like those kites—simply because I was a girl. Despite what my father said, I knew that as Safina and I got older, we'd be expected to cook and clean for our brothers. We could become doctors because female doctors were needed to care for female patients. But we couldn't be lawyers or engineers, fashion designers or artists—or anything else we dreamed of. And we wouldn't be allowed to go outside our homes without a male relative to accompany us.

As I watched my brothers run up to the roof to launch their kites, I wondered how free I could ever really be.

But I knew, even then, that I was the apple of my father's eye. A rare thing for a Pakistani girl.

When a boy is born in Pakistan, it's cause for celebration. Guns are fired in the air. Gifts are placed in the baby's cot. And the boy's name is inscribed on the family tree. But when a girl

is born, no one visits the parents, and women have only sympathy for the mother.

My father paid no mind to these customs. I've seen my name—in bright blue ink—right there among the male names of our family tree. Mine was the first female name in three hundred years.

Throughout my childhood, he sang me a song about my famous Pashtun namesake. "*O Malalai of Maiwand,*" he'd sing. "*Rise once more to make Pashtuns understand the song of honor. Your poetic words turn worlds around. I beg you, rise again.*" When I was young, I didn't understand what any of this meant. But as I grew up, I understood that Malalai was a hero and a role model, and I wanted to learn something from her.

And when I started learning to read at age five, my father would brag to his friends. "Look at this girl," he'd say. "She is destined for the skies!" I pretended to be embarrassed, but my father's words of praise have always been the most precious thing in the world to me.

I was far luckier than most girls in one other way, too: My father ran a school. It was a humble place with nothing more than blackboards and chalk—and it was right next to a smelly river. But to me it was a paradise.

My parents tell me that even before I could talk, I would toddle into the empty classrooms and lecture. I delivered lessons in my own baby talk. Sometimes I'd get to sit in on classes with the older children, in awe as I listened to everything they were being taught. As I grew, I longed to wear the uniforms I

saw the big girls wearing when they arrived each day: *shalwar kamiz*—a long deep blue tunic and loose white pants—and white headscarf.

My father started the school three years before I was born, and he was teacher, accountant, and principal—as well as janitor, handyman, and chief mechanic. He climbed up the ladder to change the lightbulbs and down the well when the pump broke. When I saw him disappear down that well, I wept, thinking he would never come back. Although I didn't understand it at the time, I know now that there was never enough money. After paying the rent and salaries, there was not much left for food, so we often had little for dinner. But the school had been my father's dream, and we were all happy to be living it.

When it was finally time for me to go to classes, I was so excited I could hardly contain myself. You could say I grew up in a school. The school was my world, and my world was the school.