

Finding My Way

ALSO BY MALALA YOUSAFZAI

I Am Malala

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

I Am Malala (Young Readers Edition)

Malala: My Story of Standing Up for Girls' Rights

Malala's Magic Pencil

We Are Displaced

My Name Is Malala

Finding My Way

A Memoir

Malala Yousafzai

ATRIA BOOKS

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For Abai, Toor Pekai, and all the Shangla girls

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Introduction

I'll never know who I was supposed to be. Maybe everyone feels that way, curious about the invisible crossroads in their lives, the wrong turns and chance encounters that change everything. But I am haunted by it, the gulf between how I imagined my life and what it became. I can't escape the feeling that a giant hand plucked me out of one story and dropped me into an entirely new one.

On a mild October afternoon, a bullet changed the trajectory of my life, cutting me off from my home, my friends, and everything I loved, spinning me out into an unfamiliar world. At fifteen years old, I hadn't had time to figure out who I wanted to be when, suddenly, everyone wanted to tell me who I was. An inspiration, a hero, an activist. But also a wallflower, a punching bag, a paycheck. To my parents, I was an obedient daughter. To my friends, a good listener. When I was alone, I unraveled—because the hardest thing to be was myself.

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My early twenties were a tangle of anxiety and indecision, reckless nights and foggy mornings, friendship and first love. It was never going to be easy, in this wonder-struck season of life, when the world feels full of possibility, to find the path that was right for me. Still, I tried to shrug off other people's expectations and hear my own voice, to reckon with what I had lost and who I might become. What I wanted, more than anything, was to make sense of my story.

1.

If you get up in five minutes, you'll be on time, I bartered with myself, calculating how long it would take me to brush my teeth and throw on some clothes. Half an hour later, I was still in bed, scrolling on my phone—dorm room décor, virtual campus tours, packing lists. I would start college in just two days, and my brain was buzzing.

New friends! No parents! No rules! I could barely contain my excitement, bouncing on my toes and humming to myself as I got dressed and took the elevator down to a windowless conference room in a midtown Manhattan hotel.

“You’re late,” the PR woman sighed, “and I’m not even going to ask if you reviewed your talking points.”

I smiled and shrugged. Over the summer I’d traveled to four continents, met with nine prime ministers, and spoken at multiple events. Now I was in New York to promote *Malala’s Magic*

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Pencil, a new children's book—six hours of back-to-back interviews and then an overnight flight home to Birmingham, England. It was my last day of work for a while, but my mind was already out-of-office.

The PR rep left the room and, a few moments later, a child entered. I was about to ask if she was lost when I noticed her polo shirt was embroidered with a magazine logo and *Kid Reporter* underneath it.

"When you were little, what did you want to be when you grew up?" she asked.

"A car mechanic!" I replied, adding that I'd always loved puzzles and figuring out how to put things together.

The next journalist was far less charming. He didn't want to hear about my children's book and tried to shift the focus to hot topics, hoping I'd say something controversial enough to spice up a slow news day. Most of his questions were about the American president: "As the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate, what is your message to him on women's rights?" and "You visited the White House to meet with Obama. If the new administration invites you, will you go?" I knew how to avoid having my name plastered across headlines and didn't take the bait.

The last interview was for a morning TV show. The host asked thoughtful questions about my work and day-to-day life. We were close to wrapping up when she leaned toward me, her face full of concern.

"Five years after the attack, do you think about it every day?" she asked.

Inevitable, I thought. *No way I was leaving this room without talking about it.* I wasn't bothered or surprised by questions like this, only by how often people asked them. That part of my life felt so long ago and far away in my mind, yet it always seemed to push past me and fill the air every time I stepped into a room.

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I GREW UP in a remote region of Pakistan, in a place called Mingora. My hometown ran alongside the Swat River, surrounded by forests, wildflower meadows, and colossal, snowcapped mountains. Life in our valley wasn't perfect—most families were poor and strict social norms held back progress, especially for women. But it was a stunningly beautiful and peaceful place.

That changed when I was ten years old. Strange men with long beards and assault rifles came down from the mountains and took over our town. The Taliban began bombing hospitals and hotels; executing musicians, teachers, and policemen in the streets; and issuing new rules over the radio several times a day: No TVs or music allowed, no entertainment at all, not even board games for children. Men must not shave their beards. Women must not leave their homes.

As the bombs and gunfire got louder, our lives got smaller. We lived in constant dread of breaking some new rule that we had not yet learned. A man in a nearby neighborhood was killed because the Taliban said the hem of his pants was too long. One day I saw my five-year-old brother Atal digging a big hole in the yard and asked what he was doing. "Making a grave," he replied.

When I was eleven, the Taliban announced that, in three weeks' time, girls would be banned from going to school. Fear gripped my heart. If I kept going to class after the deadline, they might kill me. If I didn't, my life was over anyway. Even at that age, I knew the fate of uneducated girls in my community: marriage in your early teens, several children before you turned twenty, the rest of your life spent behind the walls of your husband's house. It was a future I could not bear to face.

I started writing an anonymous blog for the BBC, chronicling life under the terrorists' rule. *Our school told the girls not to wear our*

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uniforms, I wrote, because it might make us targets. We all showed up in our favorite pink and purple dresses. Then they told us not to wear colorful clothes because the Taliban don't like that either.

As the deadline for girls to leave school drew closer, I went public, declaring to anyone who would listen that education was my right. The Taliban could not keep me from learning, I vowed, no matter how many schools they destroyed. On national TV, I demanded that our leaders stand up and defend us. The fear I had felt over the last two years was replaced by outrage and indignation. I could not let these men take away my future.

Eventually the Pakistani army launched a large-scale military operation against the extremists. My parents, two little brothers and I, along with thousands of others, fled Mingora when the fighting began. After a few months, the army prevailed, and we returned to our homes and life went back to normal. But the Taliban were not gone for good, and they had not forgotten my defiance. When I was fifteen, a gunman boarded my school bus and asked, "Who is Malala?" Before I could answer, he shot me in the head at point-blank range.

In an instant, my entire world changed.

I came out of a coma a week later, waking up to find myself in Birmingham at a trauma center that specialized in complex brain injuries. Before the shooting, I'd never left Pakistan; now I was surrounded by strangers. I spent the next several months there, undergoing multiple surgeries and learning how to walk and talk again.

As my story traveled around the world, people began to describe someone I didn't recognize—a serious and shy girl, a wall-flower forced to speak out when the Taliban took away her books. They made me into a mythical heroine, virtuous and dutiful, predestined for greatness.

Sometimes the absurdity of it made me laugh. Growing up in

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Mingora, I was a troublemaker. At school, I ferried bits of gossip back and forth between groups of girls and cracked jokes that made my friends laugh and scold me in the same breath. If a classmate did better than me on exams, I cried bitter, undignified tears at the injustice of it. At home, I was messy, rambunctious. I'd watch John Cena—my favorite wrestler—on TV and try out his moves on my little brothers, then tattle to my father when they fought back. Even on my best day, I was not the reticent saint that everyone now claimed I was.

I was still in the hospital when people came with offers to turn my story into books and films. Journalists jockeyed to land my first interview. Talent agents wanted to represent me, though I wasn't sure what talents they thought I possessed. "Why are you famous now?" Atal asked. I told him I didn't know.

Before I understood what was happening, I was thrust into an unfamiliar, unbidden life—crossing the globe to give speeches and pose for photos, spending most of my time with adults. Backstage at big events, one of them would spin me around by the shoulders and cry, "High energy, Malala! Give them everything!" To these grown-ups, I was a public figure and a product to be marketed; they were blind to the awkward teenager sitting next to them, trying to do her homework. In their orbit, I withdrew, becoming the quiet girl they assumed I'd always been.

Everywhere I went people asked the same question: "What do you remember about the shooting?" When I said that I couldn't remember anything about it, they seemed almost disappointed, as if it was impolite of me not to recall my fear and suffering. As if the worst thing that ever happened to me was the most interesting part of my life. It made me feel like a butterfly with a straight pin through its heart, forever trapped under dusty glass. The living girl in front of them was not as captivating as the one on the school bus, a young dreamer about to die.

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“DO YOU THINK about it every day?”

I blinked at the morning show host. It would be easy to say what she and her audience wanted to hear—that, at times, I felt afraid or that I might never fully recover from my injuries. Why complicate the tidy, tragic narrative that people seemed so drawn to?

But something was changing inside me—I didn’t want to play the part anymore. I was ready to be young and free, to go on adventures and make mistakes, to have a life that happened somewhere other than airports and conference rooms. The future was wide open and waiting for me.

“I don’t think about it at all,” I said. “My life is moving forward.”

2.

The night before I left for Oxford University, I sat on the floor, wishing my bedroom door had a lock. It was broken when we moved in, and no matter how many times I'd asked my parents to fix it over the years, they never got around to it. I reached under the bed, pulled out the contraband items I'd been hiding there, and stuffed everything into my suitcase as fast as I could.

My mom and I had been locked in a cold war all summer, ever since she assigned herself the job of assembling my college wardrobe. This wasn't a new dynamic for us: For years, she hung what she wanted me to wear on the front of my closet before I went to bed. When I tried to exert some independence, emerging the next morning in something other than what she'd assigned, she would say, "Do you think Allah approves of daughters disobeying their mothers?" It seemed unwise to try to answer that, so back to my room I'd go.

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Wherever I went, my mom insisted that I wear the traditional clothes of Pashtun people, the ethnic group to which my family belongs. That meant only one outfit, the *shalwar kameez*—billowy pants, a tentlike tunic, and a headscarf. In our deeply conservative culture, a woman's clothes must cover all skin above the wrist or ankle; garments are shapeless, giving no hint of the female form.

All summer, my mom assembled her “college collection” of shalwar kameez for me. There were hot-pink paisley trousers and a top with matching pom-poms on the cuffs. A lime-green number with heavy silver beading. Delirious floral patterns that could make you dizzy if you stared at them too long. Black, ivory, and tan were out of the question because, according to her, neutrals were a waste of good fabric.

I can't say I had a clear personal style at the time, but I knew I absolutely could not go to Oxford dressed like a set of neon highlighters. So, while my mom was out shopping, I googled “what to wear to college 2017” and ordered what I saw in the pictures—jeans, striped tees, a quilted bomber jacket. A search for “Selena Gomez casual” led me to oversize cardigans and Adidas Superstars. Chunky knit scarves, embroidered sweatshirts, a black dress with bell sleeves, and several pairs of ankle boots were all squirreled away, awaiting their debut.

I stuffed everything I'd purchased in my suitcase and threw a couple kameezes on top in case my mom decided on a last-minute inspection. I knew she would find out about my new look eventually and wouldn't be happy, but that was a risk I was willing to take.

To me, they weren't just clothes—they were camouflage. The Malala everyone recognized, who stood on stages, signed autographs, and shook hands with world leaders, wore shalwar kameez. At Oxford, I wanted to blend in, just another student in sneakers

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and jeans. I had to make sure that college was nothing like high school.



WHEN I WAS released from the hospital and started ninth grade at an all-girls' academy in Birmingham, I assumed I would quickly acquire a gang of friends, Brummie versions of my classmates in Mingora. I imagined us walking home every afternoon, arm in arm, laughing over inside jokes. They would catch me up on all the gossip and tell me which teachers could be sweet-talked and which were strict.

Things didn't turn out exactly as I planned. Most of the girls in my new school had known each other since kindergarten and, years ago, formed tight circles of two or three—not unkind, but not welcoming either. At lunch, I'd take my tray and find the nearest seat, furtively glancing around for friendly faces. If no one spoke to me, I'd take out a book and pretend to read. One day I worked up the courage to ask the other girls a question. Leaning across the table, I pointed to my plate and said, "Sorry, but could you tell me the meaning of 'fish fingers'?" They all looked confused—one of them said, "It's just fish, yeah?"—before returning to their conversation.

If someone told a joke in class, I laughed along with the other girls, pretending I got it too. I couldn't understand any of their references. In Mingora, where almost no one had internet access, we'd only heard echoes of American or British pop culture, those loud enough to ring around the world and land in our valley—*Titanic*, World Wrestling Entertainment, Taylor Swift. What little I knew about life in England came from reading one Jane Austen novel. After my first day at school, I gathered that the book was slightly out of date.

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Sometimes photographers turned up at the front gates, trying to snap photos of me going in or out of school. I hated it, and worried the other girls would think I was either full of myself or fake. But no one cared that I was famous, it quickly became clear, because I simply wasn't cool. We all wore uniforms, but the hem of my pleated skirt fell to my ankles, double the standard length. On top of that, my mom insisted that I wear opaque black tights, even in spring, to avoid showing any part of my legs.

My injuries made it worse. I was fifteen years old and wore a hearing aid. The bullet had destroyed my left eardrum and severed my facial nerve, leaving one side of my face paralyzed. My mouth could no longer form a smile, so an uneasy grimace was all I had to offer my new classmates. Despite months of relearning how to walk in rehab, I moved slowly through the riot of teen girls—a hopeful little ghost, trying to rejoin the land of the living.

You're not here to socialize anyway, I told myself after weeks of trying and failing to make friends. *School is for making good grades, so you can get into college*. Then I saw the scores on my first few tests: 41% in English, 57% in Biology, 63% in Geography. Having always been a top student, I was stunned and embarrassed.

In Pakistan, teachers focused on memorization. You didn't need to grasp the underlying concepts as long as you could parrot the textbook. My new school expected critical thinking and analysis, a way of learning that I didn't understand. For a while, my only solid grade was in Algebra, as math seemed to have the same set of answers everywhere in the world.

Eager to restore my academic standing, I studied for hours every night. I read the books my teachers assigned and supplemental reading I assigned myself. When I came across a word I

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didn't recognize, I looked it up and wrote the definition on a Post-it note. Soon the walls of my bedroom were covered in little yellow squares, scrawled with the meanings of "cat burglar," "crepuscule," and "pensive" in my loopy handwriting.

While my grades steadily improved, my social life did not, and I often found myself watching the clock throughout the day. It was noon in Mingora when I arrived at school in the morning. My old friends were eating lunch, pooling their rupees to buy samosas and mango juice. A few hours later, while I pushed cold peas around a cafeteria tray, they were in front of the TV, catching up on *Shararat*, an Indian knockoff of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Maybe if any of the Birmingham girls thought about approaching me, they were put off by the haunted look in my eyes, the way I always seemed to be somewhere else in my mind.

Every few weeks, I called my best friend, Moniba, and quizzed her on the latest news and gossip. *What Bollywood song is everyone singing on the bus these days? Who got in trouble at school? What are the older girls up to?* I did my famous impressions of our middle school teachers just to hear her laugh. But she always knew when something was wrong. "Why do you never talk about yourself?" she asked.

"Pfft, because everything at my school is boring," I'd demur. "Trust me, you'd fall asleep on the phone." I didn't want to tell her that I was no longer the fun, talkative girl she remembered.

After six lonely months, I decided to take action, trying everything I could to restart my life. On Field Day, I signed up for the fifty-yard dash and came in last place. I ran for student council and lost the election. When the popular girls insisted everyone participate in a flash mob, I did as they commanded, standing on top of my desk and clapping off-beat to a song I'd never heard. It was all as awkward as it sounds.

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Then, finally, I made a friend. Alice had fallen out with her best mate, and I was available to fill the role. I clung to her in the hallways and at lunch tables, whispering questions in her ear when I couldn't follow the other girls' conversation. Sometimes she came over for dinner. She liked my mom's pakoras, and I liked feeling normal for an hour or two. When Alice went to parties that I wasn't allowed or invited to attend, she sent pictures so I didn't feel left out.

As grateful as I was for her, I yearned to belong to a group of girls again, to be surrounded by people who understood me and shared my memories. My childhood friends had shaped me in ways I couldn't explain to Alice or anyone else. In primary school, we survived a massive earthquake, huddling together in our classroom as the room began to shake and the floor cracked beneath us. A few years later, the river swelled and flooded our classroom, covering everything in chest-high mud. The odor was awful, but we cleaned the floors and walls together. The school was our world, a place where we could be ourselves, and we wanted to take care of it. On the last day of class before the Taliban's deadline, we stayed in the courtyard long after the final bell rang, playing freeze tag and singing songs. When the teachers told us we needed to leave, we hugged each other and cried. Whatever disasters or dangers we encountered, I always felt safe when we were together.

When the army ran off the Taliban and we went back to school, we were euphoric, unshakable. On a field trip to the mountains, Moniba and I stood under a waterfall, singing "Love Story" by Taylor Swift at the top of our lungs. Later that year, our class traveled to Islamabad, the capital city, where we watched a play, tried duck pancakes at a Chinese restaurant, and marveled at women walking down the street without headscarves. It was our

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first glimpse of the world beyond our remote mountain town, and we came home with wild dreams for the future.

I thought we would go to college together. At fifteen, I hadn't thought much past that, but I'd never imagined a life without my friends. Now I was heading to Oxford alone, carrying a bag of trendy clothes and dreams for a less lonely life.

3.

On the first day of orientation week, I woke up and surveyed my shabby kingdom. The dorm room carpet had frayed edges and burn marks left by former students ironing their clothes on the floor. Sickly yellow paint was flaking off the walls, and the sink in the en-suite bathroom was no bigger than a soup bowl. But all of it was mine—a place where no one could tell me when to go to bed or what to eat—and I immediately fell in love with it.

I opened my phone and scrolled through Instagram, where other students were already posting about their morning runs, breakfast in the dining hall, or trips to the bookstore. Not wanting to miss any of the action, I hopped out of bed, got dressed, and was halfway down the hall when a voice behind me called, “Wait for us, please!”

“Sorry, guys,” I said, spinning around and walking back. In the room next to mine were two Metropolitan Police officers,

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members of the Specialist Protection unit who provide security to high-profile people. After I came to the UK, the government informed me that they were monitoring threats to my life and offered their services. I was thousands of miles away from Pakistan, but my life was still in danger, as the Taliban periodically renewed their pledge to kill me. Since then, the security team had become part of my everyday life: dropping me off at school, picking me up at the end of the day, and watching over my parents' house at night.

A few weeks before I went to Oxford, the officers laid out their plan: They would bunk in the dorms and walk with me to all my classes. Anywhere I couldn't walk, they would drive me in a bulletproof car. If I went out to dinner or a party, a few middle-aged dads in blazers and earpieces would be there too. *Just what every college girl wants*, I thought. I was grateful for their protection and understood it was necessary, but I hoped they wouldn't create a barrier between me and the other students.

With security following discreetly behind, I walked to the registration center to complete my first task of the day: taking a photo for my Oxford ID. *Smile, make eye contact, be approachable!* Since arriving the day before, I had exchanged hellos with a few students on my floor, but hadn't really talked to anyone yet. Now was the time to get serious about meeting people. *It's everyone's first day. This isn't high school. I don't need to hang around waiting for someone to talk to me.*

After picking up a map and a schedule for the week, I spotted another girl standing on her own and walked toward her. She was short like me, with strawberry-blonde hair, tortoiseshell glasses, and a reassuring smile.

"Hey, I'm Malala," I said, trying my best to sound casual but friendly.

The other girl took a step back and didn't speak. *Not this again.*

“Sorry, sorry! Brain freeze,” she blurted out. “I’m Cora—nice to meet you.”

“What do you study, Cora?”

“PPE.”

“Me too!” I beamed, delighted that I’d met someone else in my major—Philosophy, Politics, and Economics—on my first try.

Cora and I walked together to the Freshers’ Fair, a carnival-like event showcasing Oxford’s extracurricular activities. The cavernous Examination Hall was transformed into a maze of hundreds of stalls, jam-packed with enthusiastic older students pitching their clubs and wide-eyed newbies trying to take it all in. We followed the flow of bodies in a daze, not sure where to start.

“Do you play any instruments?” Cora asked, as we walked past booths for heavy-metal fans, Irish folk musicians, and a jazz ensemble called the Oxford Gargoyles.

“No,” I said. “I like to sing, but I’d be *terrified* to do it in front of other people.”

We turned a corner to see a boy in an Oxford Cheese Society T-shirt passing out samples of brie and Gruyère. “A cheese-tasting club? That’s a thing that people do?”

Cora laughed. “A thing that posh people do, yeah. Not my idea of a night out, but whatever makes them happy.”

In the sports section, I made a beeline to sign up for cricket and badminton, games I had loved to play on the streets and rooftops of Mingora. Then, on a whim, I joined the rowing club too. On the walk to the fair, I’d seen students in little wooden boats meandering down the river that ran through campus, and thought it looked like a dreamy way to spend an afternoon.

The women at the Islamic Society stall called me “sister” and invited me for mocktails later in the week. Next I joined the Christian Union and the Hindu Society, hoping to learn more about the faiths practiced by religious minorities in Pakistan.

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I may have also heard a rumor that the Christians brought baked goods to your dorm room and the Hindus threw the best parties.

We hadn't been at the fair for a full hour when the complimentary tote bag I'd received at the entrance was bulging with new-member packets, event flyers, and free pens. I handed over my contact information and money for membership dues to anything that caught my interest—a philosophy reading group, a film club, the Pakistan and South Asia societies. Cora, by contrast, had signed up for only two organizations—the Conservative Association and the pub quiz team. “I definitely want to socialize,” she explained. “I’m just not particularly sporty or musical or into whatever speedcubing is.”

We both agreed that joining the Oxford Union, one of the oldest debating societies in the world, was essential. As a member, you could attend events and hear well-known politicians, writers, and artists argue over statements like “Celebrity icons have corrupted the feminist movement” or “Democracies should never ally with authoritarian regimes.” You even got access to the Union’s secret library.

The sign-up queue snaked around the room and out into the corridor. It was so densely packed that I couldn’t even see the stall. As Cora and I approached the front of the line, a banner featuring the Union’s famous former speakers came into view. I scanned each face: Albert Einstein, Malcolm X, Queen Elizabeth II, Ronald Reagan, and . . . me.

Oh no. My stomach dropped. I had nearly forgotten my first visit to the Union four years earlier. The details of my speech were long gone, but I remembered looking out at the students in their seats, wishing to fast-forward to a time when I could be in the audience, and not at the podium. Now I was finally here, and I had to resist the urge to run away. How was I going to be a normal student with my spotty teenage face blazed across the Freshers’ Fair?

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If Cora noticed that my cheeks had turned bright red, she didn't let on, though I was sure she'd seen the banner too. I kept my head down while I filled out my membership paperwork, trying not to make eye contact with my younger self.

As we walked away from the table, I noticed a group of girls staring at me and whispering. One of them rushed over. "Can we take selfies with you?" she asked. I was mortified, but declining felt rude, so I smiled and said yes. As soon as they snapped the first picture, I realized my mistake. Other students had noticed what was happening and began to form a line. When they started handing their phones to Cora to take group pictures, my chest tightened, certain that this would be our first and last outing together. Why would she want to be my friend if other students were pushing past her to get to me? But Cora just smiled as the line grew longer. "Maybe I should sign up for photography club," she joked, handing back the last selfie-seeker's phone.

"I'm so sorry," I said, and I meant it. I didn't want Cora to think that I was some sort of diva, the type of person who expects her friends to stay in the shadows while she takes the spotlight.

"Oh, it's completely fine," she said. "Though it must be pretty weird for you, no? Having people stop you like that?"

I gave her a surprised smile—it was rare for anyone to acknowledge the strange conditions of my life. "I mean, I'm used to it," I replied. "But I don't want people to treat me differently at college. I just want to blend in, be a normal student, you know?"

"Yeah, of course. Though I have to tell you . . . when my mom saw the news that you would be studying PPE in my year, she was so obnoxious. She said I should read all about your life in case we met!"

"Oh . . ." I paused. "Did you?"

"No! I told her it would be weird to go into uni knowing

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everything about you, like a stalker,” Cora said, rolling her eyes. “I figured if we got on, I could just ask you questions.”

But Cora never asked about the shooting or the Taliban, meeting celebrities or being famous. In our first days on campus together, we talked about the dining hall food, her life growing up in Wales, the fact that we both had little brothers, what music we liked, whether we’d met any other nice people at Oxford so far. Sometimes we sat in my room, drinking tea and scrolling social media, not talking at all. The more time I spent with her, the more relaxed I felt.

My habit of curating myself and thinking before I spoke—shaped by years of being onstage and in front of cameras—started to fade in her presence. I must have seemed years younger to Cora, who, like most other students, came to Oxford with her first hangovers and heartbreaks already under her belt. But she didn’t mock my outsize enthusiasm for every part of college life, from getting my own mailbox to seeing shirtless boys run past us in the park. Whatever I wanted to try, she was ready and willing to be my wingwoman. I even dragged her to Quran Club at one point.

As much as I wanted to get swept up in all the activity on campus, I found I was equally happy taking a long walk or sitting quietly with my new friend. In those early days, Cora gave me what I needed most—a blank page to write whatever story I chose.

4.

On Friday of Freshers' Week, I tumbled into a small, rectangular office two floors above the dining hall. "I got lost—I'm sorry," I stammered. Arriving twenty-five minutes late to our first meeting was not the way I hoped to meet my academic advisor, the professor assigned to monitor my progress for the next three years.

Lara had short brown hair and wore a simple navy frock, no makeup. I guessed she was in her mid-thirties. "First appointments are for finding your way," she said, gesturing for me to sit down.

I suspected I would need a lot more than one appointment to navigate this new world. Oxford is made up of forty-three different colleges—each with its own history, character, and campus—all under the banner of one university. I was studying at Lady Margaret Hall, otherwise known as LMH, a college set in a quiet corner of town on twelve acres that are mostly riverbank, forests,