The dramatic true story of a woman who volunteered to kill infidels—and then faced death for becoming one.

DEFYING JIHAD

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**Author’s Note**

*This memoir is the true story* of my journey from growing up in a militant Muslim family to my life-changing encounter with Jesus. For the protection of my family—both those who remain in Pakistan and those in the United States—I have changed some of the names and specific locations, and in the case of my children, I have created a composite character to safeguard their identities.

I would also like to acknowledge that my story is just that—my story. Not all Muslims are extremists, and not all Muslims interpret jihad the way my community did. I hope this book gives you a window into a life you may not know much about, and I hope it encourages dialogue among people of various cultural and religious backgrounds.
I step back from the window and try to ignore the noise of the mob gathering outside my home. They are even more agitated than the last time they came and shattered the nighttime peace of our quiet, respectable street. They should be agitated. After what I have done and who I have become, it is only a matter of time before their anger turns to rage.

Standing in the entryway, I close my eyes, but I can still see them bathed in the orange glow of a single streetlight. The young men with their mouths twisted in anger, fists punching in the air. The women, their faces hidden behind burkas, leaning from the windows of neighboring houses. The old men watching from the side, their eyes fixed on the man in the middle of them all. The man with more power than any of them.

My father.

I exhale and work harder to still my thoughts. I let the individual cries of “Allahu Akbar!” and “Bring out the girl!” blur and fold into one another. I don’t want to hear their voices, and I don’t want to see their faces. Not because I am scared, though. I am—a little. But fear is the last thing I need right now.
I just need to be able to think. I want to cast out my anchor and steel my mind against these fierce currents that are pushing past me, trying to drag me down into panic. I want to hold on to what is real. Whatever is coming next, I must hold fast to my faith.

I bring to mind the book I was given, one of the two books I have kept secret from almost everyone else in my house. Behind its creased and faded cover are tales of men and women who died professing their allegiance to God. The deaths described are brutal, but the power of their stories is enough to make my breath quicken within my chest and my heart swell with hope.

I have read those stories again and again—so many times that I know them as well as I know the fig trees and guava trees in the courtyard. Right now, they are the only living things separating me from the mob.

I think about the other book I have hidden—the one with the black leather cover and the pages so thin I am always afraid I will tear them if I do not handle them with the greatest of care. I think about the stories those pages contain. I think about Paul and Stephen and so many others who died a martyr’s death.

Did they feel this same fear I feel when they faced their mob? Did their minds race and their hearts rage as the end drew near? Did they struggle the way I do now, battling to keep their thoughts on the eternity after death instead of the moments before it? If they did, is there hope for me?

My life is paper thin right now. My time here on earth is about to end. I am ready to arrive in heaven. But leaving earth behind? That is harder. Will I be erased from my family’s story? Will they forget about me? Will the memory of me be wiped out?
The noise from outside takes a leap forward, like a tiger pouncing on its prey. Someone has opened the front door. I squeeze my eyes, willing them to remain shut. I can feel the warm summer breeze on my cheek.

I hear my mother’s voice mingling with the crowd. Is she shouting at someone? I have to ignore her, too.

Daniel. That is who I choose to think about. I picture him facing the mob calling for his death; I see him being thrown into the den of lions, trusting that God and God alone is in control. I recall Daniel’s three friends, too, as strong hands pushed them closer to the furnace. I do not even have to imagine the heat—I can practically feel it on my own arms.

I remember the fourth man who was seen among the flames—the man nobody could name but everybody could see. The man who turned the mob and the whole kingdom back to God. The man who changed everything.

I open my eyes to see my mother standing in front of me, her face framed with a veil. She arranges a dupatta on my head, covering my hair and the lower part of my face with the cloth. She is staring into my eyes with tears in her own.

“Send her out!” says a deep voice behind her. My father’s voice is always the loudest.

I can tell my mother wants to say something, but the words catch in her throat. We embrace, and I feel her tears on my cheeks.

“Remember that he is our refuge,” I tell her. “He is our deliverer and our ever-present help in trouble. Whether I live or die, Jesus Christ will come to rescue me. To rescue us both.”

I follow my father out the door and through the courtyard. I keep my head down, counting the steps that take me past the fig trees and guava trees and into the street.

Only when my father stops do I look up and take it all in.
He turns around to face me, but I know he will not look at me. Instead, his eyes survey the crowd. I let mine follow his.

The mob is bigger than I thought it would be. There must be two or three hundred people here. Their anger is fiercer than I expected too, and I can feel their hatred, sense it burrowing into me.

“Shoot her!” one of the young men near me shouts.

I glance at him briefly. His beard is wispy, barely covering his chin. I wonder if I have ever met him before.

Soon others join in, adding in cries of “Kafir!”—branding me an infidel. But the noise around me means nothing to me. Something far more powerful is happening within.

It happens in an instant. Suddenly I am filled with an otherworldly kind of courage. I feel the words churn within me like a chemical reaction. Like phosphorus burning in a lab, they burst into life and force their way out.

“Yes!” I shout. “Kill me!” My voice is loud, louder than I ever remember it being. And it is strong, too. As new as this voice is, I know it is mine. This is me speaking, from the deepest part of me.

“If you want to shoot me, then do it,” I spit, looking straight at the boy with the half beard. “But do not do it here. Take me to the main junction and let the whole city know. I want everyone in Pakistan to hear that today I am giving my life to Jesus Christ.”

There is the briefest moment of silence before a man behind me shouts, “Cut her!”

“Yes!” I spin around to see him holding a blade as long as his hand. The words are coming faster and louder now, the furnace within me growing hotter and hotter. Even if I wanted to, I could not stop myself from speaking like this. Nothing could silence me right now. “You can cut my throat,
but I believe God is powerful and mighty to do incredible things—yesterday, today, and forever! If you kill me, I believe that many people will hear about what happened to me and ask who Jesus is. And when they seek him, they will find him!”

“Burn her!”

“Yes!” I say. “Burn me, and I believe I will go with him and he will come down. You will all see his glorious face, and many of you who are standing here will see that he is the true God. However you kill me, many of you will become Christians this very day!”

Everything slows down as I look around me. In that moment, I see more clearly than I ever have in my life. I can see the blindness in the men shouting their hatred at me. I sense the fear and the pain in the women with their veils, hiding behind walls and windows. I know that not too long ago, I was like them. I was wounded and lost, a lone sheep that had strayed too far and had lost all hope of reaching safety.

But not now. Now I am ready. My struggle is over. I am ready to die. I close my eyes and exhale a silent prayer of thanks. Soon it will be over. Soon I will be . . .

“Wait.” My father’s voice cuts through the noise of the crowd. My prayer turns to stone, and my blood becomes lead.

I open my eyes. He is standing close to me—so close that I can smell the faintest hint of his cologne. If I wanted to, I could reach out and touch him.

I cannot remember the last time we were this close.
I cannot remember ever being this close.

He is looking behind me, but I am staring at him, studying his face the way I used to study samples under a microscope. From this close, the familiar seems strange and foreign. From this close, nothing about my father is the way I remembered. He looks old. Weary.
“Wait,” he says again. For the first time I can remember in all my twenty-one years, his eyes lock onto mine.

The look he gives me is not the look of a father. It is not a look of love or kindness or care. It is not the way my mother looks at me. My father stares at me through the eyes of a man who feels nothing for what he sees.

“I have a better idea,” he says. He blinks twice and turns away.

I do not know what he is planning, but I know what he is thinking. He sees me differently now. He sees me as his jihad. Somehow, I will have to pay.
Part 1
EVERYONE HAS TO DIE SOMETIME
I was wounded the moment I came into this world. Not that there was a problem with my birth—I was born strong and healthy, with a cry loud enough to shake the trees. Nor was there anything wrong with my mother. She cried with delight when she saw me, took me to her breast, and looked with love on my full head of dark hair and my wide-eyed stare. She welcomed me just as she had welcomed her first two babies when they were born one year and two years earlier.

The wound came from my father.

He wanted a son. I was his third daughter.

The first time my mother gave birth to a girl, he had accepted it as the will of Allah. He was a little more reluctant the second time it happened. But to be given three daughters? It was not good. Why had he not yet been blessed with a son? How could a man hold up his head with pride when his wife had given him nothing but daughters?
And so, instead of coming to visit me and give me a name after my birth as he had done for my sisters, he refused to see me. He didn’t tend to my mother or look at me with pride. He didn’t visit the mosque to pray or invite the ulema to visit us at home as every good father should. Unlike my sisters and the other children born in our neighborhood, I had no visit from a scholar, nobody to whisper the call to prayer into my newborn ears, informing me that there is no god but Allah, that Muhammad is the messenger of God.

Instead, my father buried himself in his work. From sunrise to sunset, he traveled the city, buying and selling spices just as his father before him had done. When he came home at night, he made a point of avoiding the room where my mother was crying, surrounded by relatives and friends who tried, and failed, to console her. He ignored my mother’s tears and the gentle advice from people who told him not to be angry and to accept that a third daughter was clearly Allah’s will.

After three days, he finally gave in. He entered the bedroom where my mother was quietly nursing me. “Business has been good,” he said, explaining his change of heart. “Perhaps Allah has chosen to bless me after all.”

He inquired after my mother’s and my health, then turned to leave.

“We will call her Zakhira,” he said as he walked out the door.

†

Even though I grew up being known by a name that means “wealth,” I felt like a beggar. The story of my first three days followed me around everywhere I went. It was the first thing people would mention when I met them. I lost count of the
times I was introduced by my mother at a gathering with extended family and heard, “Oh, so this is the girl your husband refused to look at, eh?”

The sound of their clicking tongues as they feasted on the gossip twisted the knife within me. It was one thing to be unloved by my father, but the fact that everyone else knew it made the wound even deeper.

The older I got, the more questions I asked of Allah. At prayers, kneeling alongside my sisters, who taunted me for being the one my father never wanted, I would press my head onto the musty-smelling mat and pray silently while tears filled my eyes. Why hadn’t my father accepted me? Why had Allah made me a girl? Why punish me from my first breath?

I never heard any answers.

Instead, I started to name the feelings that stirred within me. Emptiness. Loneliness. Restlessness. Was there nothing I could do to get my father to see me?

My mother became pregnant again, delivering into my father’s open arms the son he had always wanted. Another girl came along too, and there were times when it seemed like things were finally changing for me. Like the season when my father would bring one child at a time with him on a trip to the market. He was rigorously fair, and whenever it was my turn, he allowed me to select the chicken we’d eat that night or the spices my mother required at home.

“I know you will choose well, Zakhira,” he would say to me. “You’re lucky. You brought me a lot of money.”

Precious as those memories are, what I remember most are the other conversations that occurred in the market. When we bumped into one of his old friends, they would stare at
me and ask, “Who is this? Is it the third one? The one you wouldn’t look at?”

My father never said he was sorry, and I never spoke to him or my mother about it. It was not the kind of conversation a girl in Pakistan could have with her parents. The only choice I had was to deal with the pain myself.

Prayer helped. I learned to pull the sheet over my head at night and call out to Allah, whispering in my own language, Urdu, as the tears escaped my eyes.

When I was seven, I enrolled at school, as my older sisters had done before me. That’s when I stumbled across a brand-new way of dealing with my troubles: I discovered I could make my father proud.

After several weeks of lessons, my parents were called in to a special meeting with my teacher. I sat beside my father and mother, my eyes fixed on my feet as my legs swung from the edge of the chair.

I listened as the teacher spoke at length about what a good student I was. “She’s very well behaved, always respectful, and very organized. She’s the smartest in her class and loves to ensure that the other girls are sitting down and not disturbing me.”

I looked up to see my mother staring at me. Through the slit in her veil, I could see her eyes dancing, and I knew that beneath the black fabric was a smile as wide as an ocean. But it was my father’s reaction that most took me by surprise.

“Yes.” He looked straight at the teacher, his hands spread wide as if he were about to accept a gift. “We are very proud of her.”

His voice was somber, but the words were like honey to me. I could feel them make their way deep inside me, soothing and healing as they went.

I wasn’t surprised that he didn’t look at me once during that meeting or that he never mentioned the teacher’s words
to anyone else. I wasn’t surprised that my sisters renewed their teasing of me with even greater vigor later that day. But I vowed to do better, to work even harder. Maybe once I did, my father would finally look at me.

†

Perhaps because my father was cold and distant, my relationship with my mother was especially close. She and I talked constantly, and when school finished for the day, I took delight in walking alongside her as she picked her way through the chaos and color of the local market. Together we would duck into a low building, past the thin curtains that hung in the doorway. Those curtains marked the end of the outside world and the beginning of my mother’s kingdom. It was there, in the low-ceilinged room lit by the lights that buzzed gently overhead, that my mother ran her dressmaking business.

It was a magical place. I would sit on the stool beside her and look around, my eyes wide as my mother and her team of two other women sat surrounded by piles of brightly colored cloth. There were endless rivers of silks and cottons, boxes of buttons, and the constant chatter of three electric sewing machines. They were old and dented, but they could still perform miracles. They turned lifeless material into dresses that were every bit as beautiful as those I saw in magazines.

I was desperate to find out everything I could about those machines. I peppered my mother with questions about how they worked. I was a little disappointed the day my mother showed me the foot pedal that started and stopped the motor. Until that point, I’d honestly believed the machines had a life of their own. I soon got over the disappointment, however, and started begging my mother to allow me to try one of the machines myself.
When you’re older,” she said. She guided me to a dress that was finished apart from the buttons. “First you must learn how to sew as I did.”

No men ever came in through the curtain. My older sisters visited only occasionally, and I don’t remember my brother ever coming. Sometimes I had to share my mother’s attention with my younger sister, but I didn’t mind much. There was enough magic for both of us in that little room.

All the women would remove their burkas as soon as they were inside. They could talk freely in the workshop, and there were days when the air was full of laughter. Other times everyone was quiet, but whatever the mood, I always felt safe within those walls.

When I wasn’t asking how electricity worked or quizzing my mother about how the needle combined the two threads together so neatly, the conversation often turned to matters of religion. Not that I did so much asking. My mother steered those conversations, teaching me what it meant to be a good Muslim with even more passion than she taught me how to sew on a button.

“You must always give praise to Muhammad and give thanks to Allah,” she would say almost daily. “Remain pure, Zakhira. Don’t let yourself be taken off the path the Prophet has marked out for us.”

She had a beautiful singing voice, but the only kind of songs she sang were naats—songs that praise Muhammad. She never allowed us to go to the movies, even though my older sisters begged her to let them see the latest Indian blockbuster their friends were talking about. And even though she ran a successful business making beautiful dresses, she was careful to do so without straying from Islam.

“If you wear nail polish, Allah will pluck out your nails,”
she would say. “Wear lipstick, and your lips will get sewed up with metal. Can you imagine how painful that would be?”

I could if I tried hard enough, but my mind was too full of thoughts about electricity and the engineering of the sewing equipment to worry too much about makeup, romantic Bollywood movies, or eternal damnation.

†

When I finished my second year of school, I gladly spent the days of summer break with my mother in the workshop. That was the summer when I took my first steps as a seamstress, watching in awe as the sewing machine growled into life when I pressed the pedal.

It was also the summer I learned about hell.

The conversation happened on an afternoon like any other. When my mother and I were sitting alone in the workshop, she shifted the topic away from makeup and movies. As she spoke, a darkness fell across my mind.

“If someone lies,” she said, “Allah will pull their tongue out hard and nail it against the wall.”

The image was so vivid and shocking that it took me a while to respond. When I could finally speak again, my voice sounded far away. “How does Allah know when we lie?”

“There are two angels watching over you all the time—one on your left shoulder and one on your right. The one on the left writes down every bad thing you do, while the one on the right keeps a record of everything you do that’s good.”

I thought about my father and all the times I’d felt angry with him. I felt a chill run down my back. When I spoke next, my voice was even weaker.

“Ami, what if I have thought bad thoughts about someone? Does the angel on the left write those down too?”
My mother smiled and reached out to stroke my cheek. “No, my child. They can’t hear your thoughts. It’s only our actions that count.” She paused, and the smile faded from her face. “Everybody dies someday, and when they do, they will find themselves standing in front of Allah. On one side will be the angel who has written down the good, and on the other will be the angel who has written down the bad. In front of Allah will be a set of weighing scales. If the good deeds outweigh the bad, the person goes to heaven. If the bad are heavier, they go to hell.”

Later that evening, my mother and I were at home, preparing the evening meal with my sisters. As I was baking chapattis, my concentration wavered and I burned my arm on the pan. The pain was immediate, though I did my best to swallow my tears.

Throughout the rest of the evening, I checked the welt on my arm. I was convinced that I could feel my flesh continue to burn. Even when I went to bed, I was agitated and anxious, my arm still too sore for me to sleep.

When sleep finally came, my dreams were terrifying. I was standing before a throne made of black stone. On each side stood an angel. As I looked, the angel on the right turned away from me while the angel on the left reached out his hand. I could feel his fingers clasp tightly around the spot on my arm where the pan had burned me. Then I could feel my feet moving as he dragged me beneath the floor.

The closer we got to hell, the hotter it became. Soon my whole body was burning up in the heat, as if every inch of my flesh had been seared by the frying pan.

I awoke in the darkness. My arm was throbbing, and my back was covered in sweat. I tried to call out for my mother, but for the longest time no sound came.