

MALALA YOUSAFZAI

Education Activist

BY REBECCA ROWELL

ESSENTIAL LIVES

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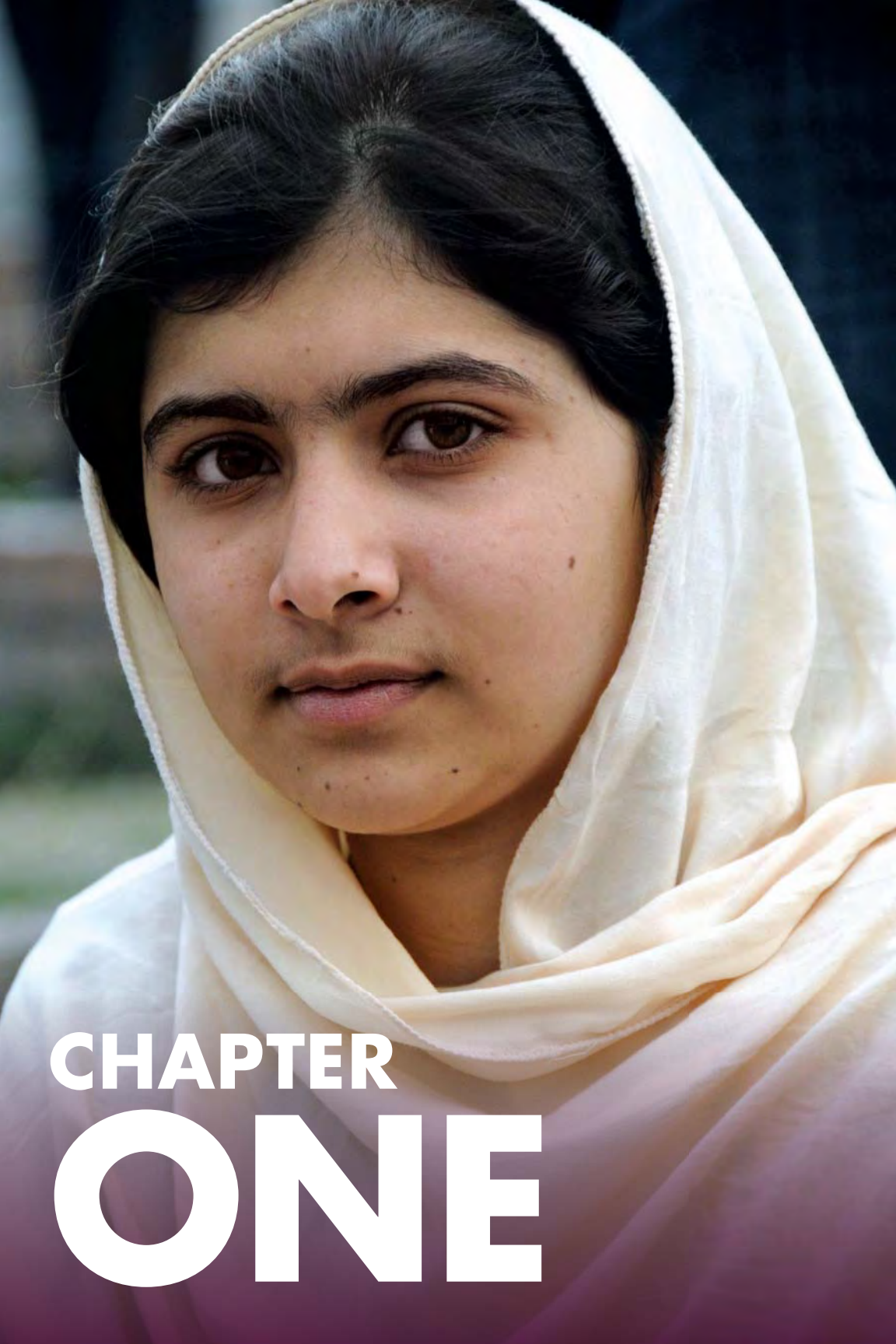
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CHAPTER ONE

ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

The vehicle traveled along the road, taking its cargo of students home on Tuesday, October 9, 2012, just as it did every other day after school. Malala Yousafzai was one of the 25 passengers onboard from the all-girl Khushal Public School. Malala's school was in Mingora, which is the main city in Swat Valley, the area in the northwest Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where the Pashtun teenager and her family lived. When morning classes finished that Tuesday, Malala boarded the vehicle as usual. She sat next to her best friend. The two joked and laughed. The day seemed like any other for the 15-year-old Pakistani girl. Khushal school was one of her favorite places to be. Malala's father was a teacher there and also ran the school. Malala learned from him the importance of education, and she dreamed of becoming a politician.

NOT A TYPICAL SCHOOL BUS

Khushal Public School does not use what people in the United States consider a typical school bus to transport students to and from school. Rather, its school bus is a small Toyota truck. The bus driver sits in the cab, separated from the passengers. The students sit on upholstered benches in the truck's modified bed. Two benches line the side of the truck bed and have cushioned seats and backs. A single upholstered bench with only a seat—no back—runs down the center of the truck bed. A metal frame covered by a light-colored fabric encloses most of the back, except the entrance. Bright turquoise curtains can be pulled from the sides to meet in the middle.

Malala's usual, happy routine of commuting to and from school changed quickly and dramatically that day. Malala would not make it home.

Singled Out

As the vehicle continued on its route, a man halted it by waving down the driver. The stranger asked if the bus had come from Khushal Public School. As the driver responded, a second man walked around outside the vehicle and then climbed onboard. The schoolchildren initially thought the man was boarding their bus as a joke. They soon found out it was not. The man was on a mission. He asked, "Where's Malala, who is

Malala?"¹ As the one Muslim girl onboard who did not cover her face, Malala stood out. Still, she responded to the gunman's questions: "I'm Malala."²