

## Chapter 13: Class Dismissed

A couple of days before the official school closing, my father was going to Peshawar to meet two video journalists from *The New York Times* and I went with him. They had invited my father to ask him if they could follow him on the last day of school, but at the end of the meeting, one of them turned to me and asked, 'what will you do if there comes a day when you can't go back to your valley and back to school?' Because I was stubborn and full of hope, I replied, 'That day will not happen.' He insisted that it might and I started to weep. I think it was then that they decided to focus their documentary on me as well.

The morning of the last day at school, a two man camera crew appeared at our house. I was still sleeping when they arrived. They told my father they were there to document my day – from start to finish. He was surprised; he had agreed to cameras in his school, not in his home. I heard him try to talk the reporter out of this idea. Eventually he gave in and the filming began.

'They cannot stop me. I will get my education,' I told the camera man. 'If it is in home or school or anyplace. This is our request to the world – save our schools, save our Pakistan, save our Swat.' I sounded hopeful, but in my heart, I was worried. As my father looked at me, smiling uncomfortably with a mixture of pride and sadness for his daughter, I pictured myself stuck at home, reading whatever books I could find until I ran out of books. I was eleven years old. Was my schooling really going to end now? Was I going to end up like girls who quit school to cook and clean? What I didn't know was that my words would reach many ears. Some in distant parts of the world. Some right in Swat, in Taliban strongholds.

Later, as my friends and I passed the school gate and the video camera recorded our every move, it felt as if we were going to a funeral. Our dreams were dying. What a strange world it was when a girl who wanted to go to school had to defy militants with machine guns.

Finally the bell rang for the last time and Madam Maryam announced it was the end of term; but unlike other years, no date was announced for the start of term. My friends and I all stood in the courtyard, hugging one another, too sad to leave.

That night the air was full of artillery fire and I woke up three times. The next morning my family and I talked half-heartedly about leaving Swat or sending me to a boarding school far away. But as my father said, Swat was our home. We would stand by her in this time of trouble.