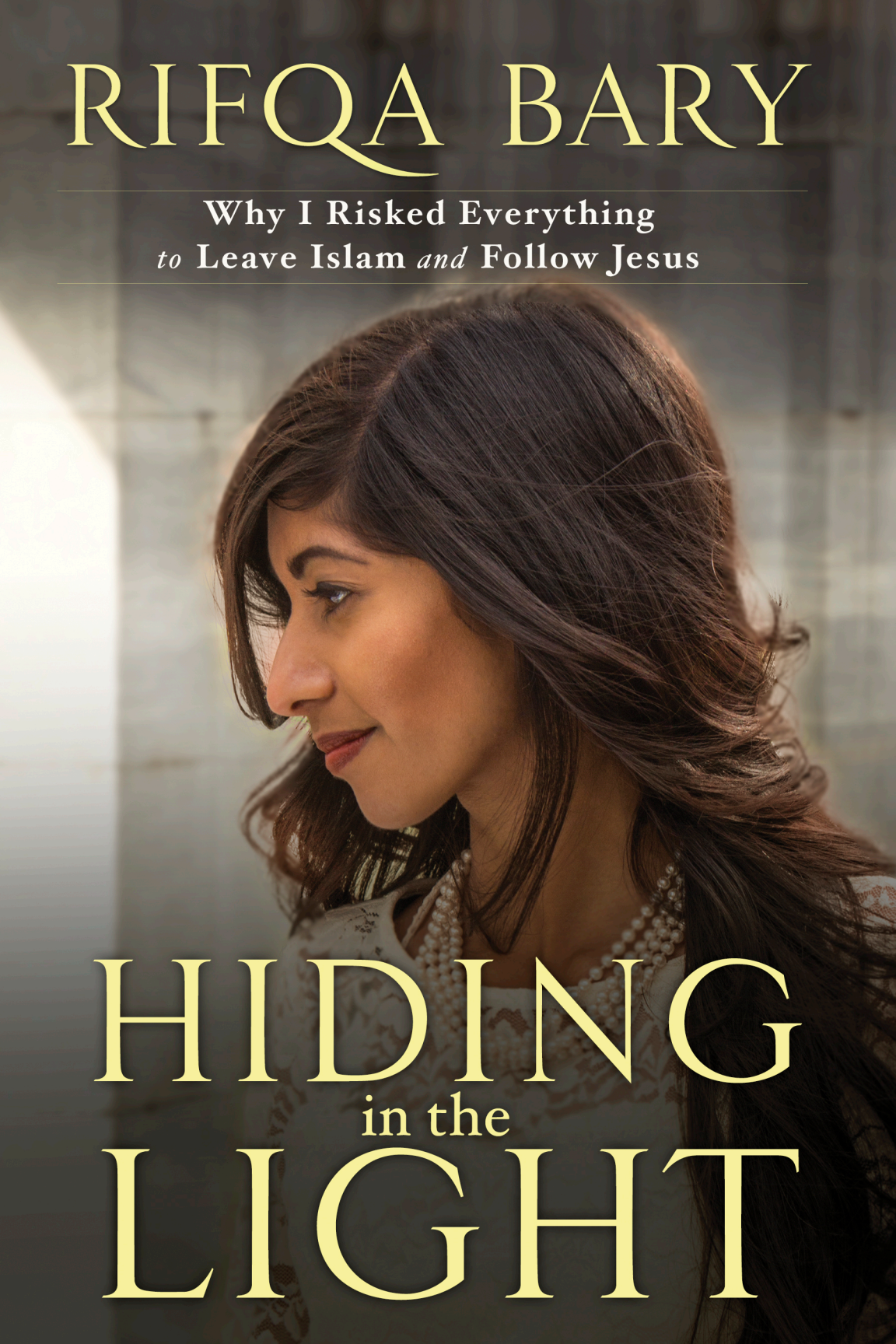


RIFQA BARY

Why I Risked Everything
to Leave Islam and Follow Jesus



HIDING in the LIGHT

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to Leave Islam and Follow Jesus

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To my precious baby brother, Mohamed Rajaa Bary.

I can only imagine the unanswered questions that may plague you. Why did the big sister you adore leave you and never come home again? My hope is that this book is a long letter explaining why.

Although you may never understand my answer, my prayer is that the words bound within these pages allow your heart to heal. My prayer is that one day you will forgive me for the pain I have caused you. I left not because I did not love you enough. I left because I encountered a God who was worthy of forsaking all . . . even the most prized little man in my life.

If only you could peer through my dreams and see how I ache to hold you in my arms like I did so many years ago . . . but this time never let you go.

Author's Note

In 2009–2010 my story broke in national and international media. As often happens, many of the news reports centered on speculation and untruths. This book fulfills my desire to give an accurate account of my personal experiences within my family and community. Please understand it is not my intention to malign Muslims or Islam in general.

Though the story contained in these pages is true, I have changed the names of many individuals for reasons of privacy and safety.

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Introduction



The mosque discovered my secret.
And now my parents knew it too.

The cover of early morning darkness was fast slipping away. Mom was still sleeping. Dad had cut his trip short and was on his way home. I had to get out of there *now* to survive. It was the only way I could escape the penalty, not for any crime I'd committed but for what I believed.

I wrote with trembling hands in those final, desperate moments, inches before sneaking from my bedroom to the front door and out into the unknown:

Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. I refuse to deny Him, nor will I ever. I pray and hope you find His mercy and forgiveness.

I took one last look over the room that had been my refuge. I propped the note on my pillow, whispered a breathless goodbye, and was gone.

What I was running away from was certain.

But what I was running toward . . .

God only knew.

Fifteen



Ten minutes passed.
Twenty minutes passed.
Forty minutes passed.
Nothing.

The only thing barely shielding me from discovery (if my mother was already looking for me) was the large tree trunk I was hiding behind. Hunched into a ball on the ground, I wondered if I'd missed seeing the taxi come by. Maybe it had already come and gone. How was I supposed to know where to be looking for it?

The morning chill cut through my frail body, nerve endings already twitchy and on edge. Shivering, I rubbed the arms of my thin brown sweater and tried to stay warm. As time stretched on, I couldn't help feeling swallowed by anger and helplessness. I'd put all my hope in God, and this is what I was getting in return? Waiting for help that wasn't showing up? Sneaking around like a criminal? I'd been gone from home nearly an hour yet was still dangerously close to our apartment property, with no one to help me and no clue what to do next.

By this time the intermittent bursts of faith and bravery that I'd felt the night before were all gone. Picking up pebbles and loose gravel that were sprinkled around me, I flicked them with anger toward the sky. "You said You would protect me! You said You would lead me! WHERE ARE YOU?"

The next thought that breathed through the air, however, with some of my nervous energy now expended, was a stream of inspiration through Scripture: "By faith, Rifqa. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called. And he went out not knowing where he was going. By *faith*"—a passage I

recognized from Hebrews 11, a listing of heroes from the Bible. Immediately I knew what I was supposed to do. Faith requires action, and the time for action was now.

So I decided to start walking.

Dusting the dirt off my backpack, I stood to my feet. My green dress was wrinkled and stained from the ground, and my muddy legs epitomized the muddled state I was in. But what I looked like didn't matter. What mattered was getting a move on.

I spun my back to the apartment buildings and walked toward the adjoining street. Soon my brisk pace sped into a jog and then a runner's sprint. My lungs started to burn as the backpack thumped and pounded me with every step. By the time I approached a residential area, I was panting and drained.

Then, like a snap of sudden insight, I knew exactly where to go. *Katie's house*. She'd told me on the bus that I could come there if I needed to, and I'd never needed to get anywhere more desperately than I did now. It had been years, though, since I'd actually visited her house. I only barely remembered where it was and what it looked like. I couldn't remember the street name. But I knew it was around here somewhere.

"Lord, help me!" I pleaded.

It was 6:30 by this time, maybe later. For all I knew, my father could be showing up at home any minute. And from there his first move would be to drive around and scan the sidewalks. I was hardly inconspicuous—a sixteen-year-old Sri Lankan girl walking around in a dress and backpack on an early Sunday morning. So while the focus I needed for locating Katie's house required a lot of my attention, I also needed to stay alert for my father. He might be looking for me already.

The only thing that registered with me as I continued swiveling my head back and forth, trying to place which house belonged to the Jacobs family, was a white car ahead of me, parked in the driveway. Drawing

closer, I could hear its engine running, but no one was inside. Looking at the house directly in front of it, I felt an inner urge that told me I was in the right spot, that I needed to approach. The house looked vaguely familiar, but I still wasn't sure. Suddenly, after hardly setting foot on the driveway, I spotted a black woman behind the glass door.

Katie's mom!

At the sight of her face, I bolted up the walk as she spun the door open—a bright, loving smile on her face. I started to cry, barely able to speak. I knew I looked like a madwoman, with my windblown hair and muddy legs. I lunged into the entrance of her home anyway, sobbing uncontrollably, stating emphatically, “I’ve got to get to the church! I’ve got to get to the church!”

“Sure, honey,” she said, surprisingly calm. “I’ll help you.” I told her which church I meant. “Okay,” she said as she hurriedly gathered her purse. “I’ve been up waiting here for you since four o’clock. The Lord told me you would come. I was just about to give up and leave, but I came back in the house when I realized I’d forgotten my purse.”

Really? Seriously? It made no sense.

By faith, Rifqa . . . By faith . . .

We both ran out of the house, and I dove into the car as fast as I could. Without explaining why, I ducked my head under the dashboard, wondering what she must be thinking but not wanting to take the time to tell the whole story. Maybe Katie had told her some of it. I hoped she knew how to find this church, because I sure didn't. I'd never been there before.

“Do you need me to drop off food anywhere?” she asked me. “Is there anything else I can do to help you?” But that's all the inquisition she made into my bizarre behavior. Her generosity and kindness made me want to weep. “No, thank you,” I said, inching my head up enough to peek out the window. I could see the church in the distance. “Thank you for doing this,” I gushed, preparing to make a fast exit. Then as we slowed and I got

out of the car, I looked back at Mrs. Jacobs and said, “Thank you! Thank you!” over and over. I wondered if I’d ever see her again as I hugged her goodbye one last time.

Sprinting toward the entrance to the church building, I felt like I was leaving my dark world of oppression behind. A sense of liberation coursed through my body. I could go in here and scream JESUS! as loud as I wanted, and nobody—not my father, not my family, not the Imam himself—could stop me!

The door was unlocked so I stepped in. It was about 7:30. The lobby that led into an elegant hall was mostly quiet and vacant. I knew I wasn’t home free, but at least I’d made it this far, and I was in a lot better shape than I’d been an hour before. Prancing into the large, open hallway, I said at half-volume, “I’m free!”—delirious at hearing my words dance off the walls and echo back around me. I couldn’t believe what I was feeling. I didn’t need to hide or be quiet. I squealed with delight.

But it was going to be a long wait. This place was going to be my hideout for the day. So I climbed the stairs and found a small table in the empty church balcony. From there I had a clear view of the entrance doors, where hopefully Brian would soon appear.

Over the course of the next few hours a number of busy Sunday services started and ended. No one had done much more than wave and say hello to me. I was glad of that. I certainly wasn’t here to get on the mailing list or be trotted around like a Sunday school visitor. By early afternoon the last of the crowds had dwindled to barely a handful of people, and the sky visible through the front windows had darkened to a gloomy gray. I hopped off the table and peered around, trying to figure where I needed to go to keep from looking like a squatter and yet not venture too far from the front door.

For a moment I thought I’d slip alone into the sanctuary. I was enraptured by the size and spaciousness of it. I wondered if any of the thousands of worshipers that morning had been as hungry to enter this place as I was.

Did they realize what a privilege they had to enjoy, to actually walk into the house of God and praise Him without the slightest hindrance? I sat on a seat near the back and took off my shoes. The cool carpet rubbed against my feet. It felt good. Then I pulled my legs up and wrapped my arms around my knees, staring with disbelieving wonder into the large, darkened auditorium. Faint light from the stormy sky blanketed the room in softness and silence, and my whole body relaxed under a covering of momentary peace.

Hours ticked by. No movement. No Brian. Just me and God, alone with a lifetime of thoughts. In between runs of free-flowing prayer and worry, I found myself thinking of little Rajaa, saddened at the notion of missing out on his precious life, maybe forever. I even thought of my mother—her big brown eyes and her lips that looked so much like mine. I was often very afraid of her, and yet I strangely found myself missing her, enough that I shamelessly wept while the empty room echoed my grief. Would I ever see her again? Of course not. This path to freedom only led one way, and going home wasn't on its flight plan.



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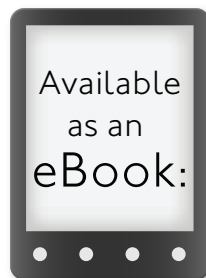
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