[Snap Judgement intro]

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Growing up,it's not that I didn't want to be normal. I did. I tried truly, but the kids, even the adults, they have a sixth sense about these things. They smell the weak link and they attack. In retrospect, with distance, I'm glad they beat me up and locked me in a garbage can in the seventh grade. I'm glad, because besides the swollen eye, the busted lip, mostly what hurt was my pride. And they let me know that being one of them, being normal was never going to be an option for me. That was a gift for which I am forever grateful.

And here's the thing. Being normal, whatever that is, it's never been an option for most of you, either. But what if the price for not getting along is much, much higher than some hurt pride from the inside of a garbage can?

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Today on Snap Judgement, one girl decides that she can't make nice, no matter the consequences. We proudly present Genghis Khan. My name is Glynn Washington. And before you say no matter the consequences, my advice is to find out exactly what those consequences are when you're listening. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat and intriguing music]

**Glynn:** We begin in Pakistan with a young girl. Sensitive listeners, please note this story does contain references to violence. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Nancy:** Maria Toorpakai Wazir grew up deep in the Waziristan mountains of Pakistan. She was one of six kids raised in a home surrounded by books. Both of her parents were teachers. They believed being educated was their biggest weapon. For Maria, the books just put her to sleep.

**Maria:** But my dad would sing to me different information and different facts, whether it's about science or Quranic verses, that way I would learn better. He used to say that our house is like a school, like a university.

**Nancy:** And the one thing her dad taught her from the start was that the world was hers for the taking.

**Maria:** To be honest, I had no sense of fear at all. I was like a very different child. I was always running around. I saw the boys playing marbles, they're flying kites, they're doing wrestling with each other, they're playing dodgeball. And I felt that's where I belong, actually more. [giggles] I felt like I really wanted to play outside [giggles] and be among those boys. But every time I try to get my space in there, I get beaten. Like, the older boys like, “Go home.” But I was like, “No, I want to be here.”

**Nancy:** So, one day, a four-year-old Maria decided to change out of her dress.

**Maria:** I put on my brother's clothes, and I took one of the biggest scissors in our house and I started chopping those ponytails. I completely destroyed my hair. And then I collected all the girly clothes, the frocks and I put it outside in the backyard. I knew where my mom cooks bread on fire, and I put some kerosene oil on that and lit the match. I was so happy right beside that fire. I just heard my mom scream so hard. And my dad saw me and he smiled and he laughed, and he said, “From now on, your name is Genghis Khan.” He took me to the barber, and he shaved my head. And my mom and dad, they got me new clothes like my brother.

**Nancy:** This was the mid-90s. Waziristan had become a Taliban stronghold. So, this move her dad made to allow his daughter to dress as a boy was a bold one. But Genghis was just a kid. She didn't know any of this. All she knew was that her life had instantly changed.

**Maria:** I would go with men hunting quails. We would have slingshots hanging from our necks. I would always wrestle hanging outside among those boys. It was perfect for me. [giggles]

**Nancy:** It's like she lived in two worlds. When she'd come home-

**Maria:** My family called me both names, sometimes Genghis Khan, sometimes Maria.

**Nancy:** And sometimes cat.

**Maria:** Because I would drink a lot of milk and yogurt [laughs] all the time. So, my mom would call me cat too. [giggles] To me, the gender things were never a thing. I was a human, whatever name you give me. It was very hard for anybody to recognize me as a goal at all. My behavior, my walking, my talking, the way I took care of my family, I would bring the groceries is everything. That identity as a boy there gave me a lot of freedom, and happiness and a lot of space to explore.

**Nancy:** But there was one downside. If at first not for Genghis, then at least for the boys who crossed her.

**Maria:** I was stronger than a lot of boys who were older than me. So, if I lose in marbles or sometimes, they ruin my kite or in a cricket, they win, it would really piss me off. I would either punch them or beat them. Later on, I would see the kids would come with their parents knocking on our door. [knocking door sound]. So, I would just stand in the back of the house and know what's happening. My dad is going to the front door. Then they would talk to my dad that your son beat our son like this. Then my dad would pay some money.

**Nancy:** Among the many things her dad stood for, nonviolence was certainly at the top. He didn't like to see Genghis beating up kids. But even then--

**Maria:** He said nothing to me. [laughs]. He would just put me to some kind of physical work, like, “Oh, go clean the house. Go fill those big gallons of water, bucket by bucket, one by one.” So, he just wanted to make my anger go down, aggression, so my energy can be channelized in a very different way.

**Nancy:** Genghis might have been under everyone's radar. Up to this point, no one questioned whether she was a boy. But her family--

**Maria:** At that time, my parents were running away from a lot of people moving from area to area.

**Nancy:** Genghis’s mom went out of her way to teach young girls.

**Maria:** My mom would go in different villages on those dirt roads and visit those houses, families and asking them to allow their daughters to the school.

**Nancy:** When he wasn't teaching, you could often find Genghis's dad helping around the house.

**Maria:** And he would sometimes wash the dishes, sometimes cook, and sometimes clean the house. You would not hear a man doing that in those areas. He always talked so openly and so unapologetically about women rights and education, and promoting my mom, my sister. A lot of people had objection about that, and they thought, he's dishonorable man, and he's against Islam and he's bringing dishonor to the family and us. He had a lot of threats.

**Nancy:** One evening, they were all home when Genghis's dad decided to step outside.

**Maria:** Then he saw a shadow and he said, “Taimur.” He called my brother's name. This was not Taimur. And this man ran toward the back of the house. So, my dad didn't follow him. Next day, he saw a huge hole in our house in the back of that room, that empty room. That's how he got in. My dad got really scared for us. And after that, my dad, next day, he bought a gun. I was 10 years old. He taught me how to use guns.

**Nancy:** But the threats kept coming.

**Maria:** In Dara Adamkhel, our family was attacked a few times. And my mom and dad were thinking, “What to do? We should move to another area now.”

**Nancy:** So, once again, the family packed up all their things. Genghis's mom flagged down a truck driver and convinced him to help them move. But this time, instead of going to another village in Waziristan--

**Maria:** My dad is like, “How about we move forward to Peshawar?”

**Nancy:** It was a full day's drive north to the big city. They settled into a mud-house on the outskirts of Peshawar, where Genghis's mom could keep teaching, where her sister could go to school, and where Genghis, well, could beat Genghis, which, for the most part, hadn't become a problem until now.

**Maria:** Somebody beat my twin brothers. I am very attached to my siblings. My youngest brothers, especially the youngest three, I was the one who was always home and taking care of them.

**Nancy:** So, when she learned that a neighbor twice their age had beat them up, she rushed out the door.

**Maria:** I'm like, “I'm going after him.”

**Nancy:** She found him near the market.

**Maria:** That guy was 17 years at the time, and I was around 12 years. I held his collar, I started punching them. And then his sister came and I said, I told the girl, I'm like, “Listen, you're a girl. Just stay away from boy’s fight.” By mistake, I slapped her. I felt so bad. I was like, “You know, I told you not to come.” [giggles] Some men separated us, and then I started walking with my twin brothers.

This guy was screaming and shouting, and he had a huge brick in his hand. He started running towards me. So, I was thinking, if I run back, that would be such a coward thing. So, I'm going to just stand there. And I stood there. The brick comes to my back of my head. I got a bit dizzy, but I still held him. The whole market was surrounding us. I got on top of him. I was punching his face. And all of a sudden, I realized that the blood is dripping on his face. Then I realized that I'm actually bleeding.

**Nancy:** And that's when Genghis spotted her dad. He reached through the crowd of people that had gathered. He grabbed her by the collar and dragged her out of the fight.

**Maria:** I ran away from my dad. My dad ran after me and he held me from my neck and took me home. He said, “You're not fighting.” I am angry that why my dad dragged me out of the fight. He brought me home and my mom screamed. She thought I lost my eye because that much blood. My dad was like, “No, everything's okay. I have to take her to the hospital.”

**Nancy:** Genghis came home with 12 stitches.

**Maria:** I had, what do you call, bandage, bandage over my head.

**Nancy:** Her dad hadn't said much to her.

**Maria:** He was very worried about me. He didn't want you to tell me that I'm a girl and shouldn't leave the house anymore and this is going to be dangerous. It will destroy me inside if he does that, say that to me.

**Nancy:** And she was right. He didn't say any of that to her. Instead--

**Maria:** He said, “How about we, tomorrow we go to--? There is a sports complex. How about we find out what people do there?”

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** When Snap returns, Genghis Khan goes to the gym. Stay tuned.

[upbeat and intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Genghis Khan episode. Listeners, please note this story does contain references to violence. When last we left, Genghis had gotten into yet another fight. This time, she came home with 12 stitches to the back of the head. But her dad never wanted to lose hope. He has one more trick up the sleeve. Snap Judgement.

[upbeat music]

**Nancy:** Genghis's dad took her to the local gym.

**Maria:** It was a room, small one room, and had basic gym equipment.

**Nancy:** The first person they met was a weightlifting coach who immediately took notice of Genghis.

**Maria:** I was always a bit heavy and strong. My bone weight is very strong, heavy too. And he said, “Your son, yeah, he looks strong. I can teach him. He can be a student with us.” And my dad's like, “Sure, I have this one and I have another son, so both of them can come,” my older brother and myself. So, that's how I started weightlifting.

**Nancy:** And she got good quick. So good that she started competing.

**Maria:** They announced my name, that, Genghis Khan is going to lift 45 kg snatch. I won the championship. I came home. I was so happy. And I was feeling so pumped. I felt so strong. My dad got very nervous with my body language because he thought, I'm going to look for more fights now, it seems like. [giggles]

**Nancy:** And then one day in the gym, Genghis went outside to take a small break when she noticed a group of boys with the rackets.

**Maria:** They had beautiful shorts on, and they had these wonderful rackets, colorful. And people will sit outside the squash court, and these kids would play with the squash ball, jump, dive, all those things. I just really got drawn toward this sport. And going back to the weightlifting room, it was quite empty for me, feeling like I'm lifting weights by myself.

**Nancy:** So, when she got home--

**Maria:** I told my dad, “Can I play this sport? I like this sport.” And my dad was like, “What kind of sport?” So, he came to the squash court with me. I said, “This sport.” He was so relieved. He said, “I like this sport for you. From now on, you're going to hit the ball against the wall. You won't hit people. [laughs] Yeah, you can start it right away.”

**Nancy:** They ask around the gym-

**Maria:** “How my son can start this sport?”

**Nancy:** And they learn that in Peshawar, there's a squash academy run by the Pakistan Air Force.

**Maria:** So, my dad took me to this academy and we met the Director of the academy, and he was such a nice guy.

**Nancy:** Her dad introduced her the way he always did.

**Maria: “**Genghis Khan wants to play squash.” The wing commander said, “You would need a squash racket, and also provide us with the birth certificate of your child.” So, my dad was like, “Oh, okay. Well--” Because birth certificate is where they would come to know about me.

So, my dad actually said to him, “This is actually not my son. He's actually my daughter. She's Maria.” He told him, because he was a nice guy and wing commander, educated guy. So, my dad thought it's a good way to tell him.

**Nancy:** The wing commander was quiet. At the squash academy, there were 300 to 400 boys. No girls.

**Maria:** And then he looked at me very carefully and he laughed and he said, “You know what? Are you sure that's your daughter?” [laughs] And my dad is like, “Yes, that's my daughter.” [laughs] Yeah. So, the guy was like, “Okay, well, we need the birth certificate.” And you know what? There was a bell sitting on his table and he ringed that and some guy came in and the Director of the academy asked him to bring a new racket. He actually gifted me a squash racket, a new squash racket.

**Nancy:** It wasn't long before words spread about the new squash player, who happened to be the only girl.

**Maria:** The boys at the club, the teachers, the coaches, they were treating me different. Their behavior, their attitude, their tone, everything completely changed. Even the boys that I was hanging out with, I could feel in their eyes that they see me as I am inferior, what am I doing here, and I don't belong here and I shouldn't be here. It's very disrespectful for girls to play sports.

**Nancy:** Then they started putting their hands on her.

**Maria:** Andlaugh at you and use filthy words, vulgar words, I would say just to humiliate you. I don't think this is appropriate way to talk to anybody. That really was torturing my mind. Like, what changed? I'm not used of that kind of treatment. I went to the staff every 2nd, 3rd day like, “This guy did this. That coach did this.” Every day they would ban somebody for two months, for three months like that. But then I realized that the more I complain, because every 2nd, 3rd person was like that, so I'm like, “They would eventually ban me to not come.” It was like I didn't go to squash for a few a week or so. I wasn't very happy. And then my dad was like, “How about you go to school with your sister?”

**Nancy:** This wasn't the solution Maria was looking for, but who was she to say no to her dad, the person who always had her back. Maria had been homeschooled her entire life. So, it wasn't just formalized education that she had to adjust to. Now she was forced to dress the part, that part of girlhood she had gladly burned to the ground when she was four years.

**Maria:** I had to wear girly clothes, the uniform. I went to this school bus, and there were boys sitting in the back of the bus and girls sitting in the front of the bus. I sat right in the middle of boys and all the boys got so shy, they shied away. They were like, “What's happening?” And the teacher got so mad, she said, “Come here. Sit in the front with us.” And I said, “No, I'm not coming.” All the girls were laughing and nobody's talking to me. I was like, I had no idea how to talk to them either,” and I was completely lost with my identity and everything. I shouldn't be here. That's what I was thinking.

I'm not fit in girls, and I'm not fit in boys, and I'm not fit as a squash player and I've never been to school. So, I was sitting on a bench crying, and my sister, she heard and she came to me. She was a topper of that school. She looked at me and she put her hand on my head and she said, “That's okay. You know what? I'm going to finish my last class and then we go home, okay? Don't worry.” We came home, and then I'm sitting and I'm thinking, what am I going to do with my life? I'm not kind of the person you can just married her away. So, where is my future? What's going to happen?

So, my dad, just to cheer me up, he said, “Let's go to the market.” He knew that I like to get a haircut. So, he took me to this barber shop and he said, “What haircut you want?” I was just grumpy at the moment. So, I'm like, “Whatever.” So, he said, “What about bus cut or let's give you a soldier cut.” And then we went to the earring shop. He got the biggest ring. I looked at him and I'm like, “I'm not wearing that.” He said, “Why don't you wear one?” I was standing there with my soldier cut, and I'm 12 and a half, and my dad is putting this earring in my ear. And the market, the men would all looking at me and the women walking by, they were looking at me, and they were all so surprised that what's wrong with this man who is putting an earring in his son's ear?

My dad said, “Let's go now to the middle of the road.” My dad is doing a parade, and I'm after him, right behind him. My dad looks so weird, and I am walking behind him, and the whole market was laughing and staring at us. There was a fear in my heart. And my dad was like, “You see, we need to just focus on where we want to go. People will always talk, people would always laugh, people will always make fun. This is the world. This is how it works. We should just keep going in our destination, in our direction.” And that gave me a lot of courage. And I decided I'm going to go every morning to the squash court and hit by myself and learn squash by myself.

Then I prepared my racket that day, and I put my shoes in front of me. I would arrive at the squash court and I would hit from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM all by myself and close the door, put a bottle of water in the corner, and hit, and hit and hit each corner of the court, each angle and each different heights, try to hit each shot hundred times and create drills that can include the footwork itself, like a dance, forward running backward, running side, shuffle, corner to corner.

**Nancy:** She would come home in the evenings exhausted. Her arms and thighs covered in rashes from the countless lunges she'd done.

**Maria:** My mom would still be away doing her school thing. So, I would cook for my brothers, and then I would go to sleep right after that.

**Nancy:** And as she fell asleep, she'd also practice in her mind, visualizing her every move.

**Maria:** Every shot-

**Nancy:** And every sound-

**Maria:** Like, dup. The best sound, the best touch feeling on the racket strings. So, I would train again the next day hard, hard, hard and then that was my whole day every morning.

**Nancy:** Until she was good enough to start competing.

**Maria:** I got so good, and I went to under 13 Championship.

**Nancy:** But when she signed up for her first tournament to compete in girl squash, the irony was not lost on her.

**Maria:** The tournament people and the parents of these girls, everybody argued that I am not a girl and I'm a boy and I shouldn't be in this tournament against girls. Everybody asked for my birth certificate, so they got it. And then they were like, “Oh, it is a girl.” I didn't care anymore. I'm like, “If you put me with boys, I'm going to still win. Don't worry.” It was like that kind of attitude. And then I would serve so hard that nobody could pick it up. So, I would win every match by just serving. I won that championship. Then after that, I won under 15, under 17.

In 2007, I turned professional squash player. The first tournament that I traveled for was in Egypt. It was called Alexandria Open. I was still very young. I think I was 16 years old at the time. Nobody was expecting that I'm going to win even the first match. But I won my first match, second match, third match, fourth match. I ended up in the quarterfinal. It was news all over Pakistan. Only girl from Waziristan, the first girl, Pashtun female who is playing so well. She made it to the quarterfinal and she beat this world number this, world number that all those. News were all over Pakistan. That was unimaginable for the federation, for the squash federation, to grasp that a girl from Pakistan now is playing internationally at that level.

**Nancy:** She came home to a hero's welcome.

**Maria:** So, I landed at the airport, and I see the Pakistan Squash Federation. They were waiting for me with flowers. And the media was there of taking pictures and interviews.

**Nancy:** From the airport, she was taken straight to the prime minister's house. She was even gifted a car.

**Maria:** A nice small car, Cultus, I think. And you know what? I gave those keys to my dad and I'm like, “Dad, I got you a car.” My dad had tears in his eyes. And I gave him the car. I was very proud. I was very proud, I was happy, I was more determined to do even better and now play much better for Pakistan and win. That year, I was selected as the youngest rising Player of the Year by the International Squash Federation. I had that feeling finally that I achieved something. People are praising me. I did something and I proved myself and then that happiness did not last. And then this thing came up, this threat came up. After that, I got death threats from the Taliban.

**Nancy:** A letter arrived at Maria's home. It was addressed to her father, but now it had everything to do with her.

**Maria:** Our girls from Waziristan, our Pashtun daughter and girl, if she is wearing skirts and playing sports and so un-Islamic in front of all men, while we are telling others to not do this, saying that this is so disrespectful. They were telling my dad that this will not be ignored. They don't want to see our women outside my mom, my sister, myself.

**Nancy:** At the time, everybody in the region was on high alert.

**Maria:** Every Friday, mosques were attacked. My mom, where she was teaching, her school was bombed three times. So, they don't have a building anymore. They just teach in tents. Wherever you would go, you're not sure if you will come back alive. These things were happening all around me. But I just was playing squash morning to evening every day. Only squash, squash, squash. Like, eating squash, sleeping squash, drinking squash. That’s who I was.

When I got threats after that, I started thinking, what can happen if I'm kidnapped? What kind of dishonor it will bring to my family, and pain, suffering and what can happen. So, my dad, he came to me, he's like, “Don't worry. If you want to keep playing, I will support you, whatever your choice is. I care about that only.”

There some national games happening, and they asked me at the time, the local government, to lift the baton and walk with the baton during this opening ceremony of these games. They put my posters there. But then they realized that it's dangerous, and then they told me not to come to the games. I had to decide what I want to do.

**Nancy:** So, Maria decided to lay low for a while, take a break from squash, just until things calm down.

**Maria:** I didn't want to tell anybody, because it could bring more danger. Some other people can take advantage of this opportunity for them, and hurt me and my family in the name of Taliban. I was also thinking about other kids. If something because of me and a bomb blast happens in a squash court, there is so much glass in there that other kids will be killed because of me.

Sometime later, I got a phone call from the air marshal, and he was the President of Pakistan Squash Federation at the time. He called me and he said, he heard that I'm not playing that much right now. And I broke my silence and I had to tell him the truth, what's happening. I told him on a phone, and he hung up without saying anything. I'm like, “What happened here?”

So, few hours later, I see on a national television, it's in the news right now. My safety issue, my security issue is under discussion in the parliament right now. And I'm banging my head. I'm like, “This is not right.” So, I get a phone call again.

**Nancy:** It was the air marshal.

**Maria:** He said, “You know, you'll be fine. Don't worry.” The next day, the area from my home to the squash court, the entire area was sealed. They put check posts on that area. And the squash court was completely sealed. They put snipers on the top of the squash court, and they put a tank right beside the squash court. And till date, there is a tank right now, even till date. It made me more uncomfortable, and it felt like more of a security risk. I don't like guns, I don't like war, I don't like those kind of things. I feel like it's more dangerous, everything. But then I had to realize that in Pakistan, a prime minister can be killed, governors can be killed, then who am I? So, I have to take my own wise steps.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Now when Snap returns, will Maria give up squash altogether to protect her family, or will she find another way? Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Genghis Khan episode. My name is Glynn Washington. When last we left, Genghis had come out as a girl, as Maria, in order to play squash. She falls in love with the sport, but now she has a target on her back. Taliban does not approve, threatening her and her family. Rock meet hard place. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Nancy:** Maria was back where she started practicing squash alone, but this time, in hiding.

**Maria:** I was stuck at home, and I was training against my bedroom wall in the night. And the daytime, I would sleep. There were times when neighbor complained, and I had to switch the wall. It was mentally exhausting. I can say that there was one abandoned squash court that my brother found.

**Nancy:** So, one night, her dad changed the license plates on his car and drove Maria and her brother to the squash court.

**Maria:** We broke the lock, which was very abandoned and old, and it had a rusty door, it had cobwebs and everything. We cleaned everything. And the wooden floor was broken. Me and my brother would play there. We would play from 11:00 AM to 12:00 AM, then come home.

**Nancy:** Back to her bedroom, where she drilled down.

**Maria:** I was jumping, and I was doing lunges on a concrete floor. And that was the time I was in a lot of pain, physical pain, my legs, my arm. It was year 2007, and then 2007, 2008, 2009.

**Nancy:** This is how Maria spends the next three years of her life.

**Maria:** Most of the time, I would stay at home and train all night against my bedroom wall. I think deep inside, I was struggling a lot, exhausted, and I wanted to breathe. There was a time I thought of keeping a cyanide pill, which I didn't. But I was thinking that in case something happens like this

**Nancy:** Until one day, her dad tells her, “Enough is enough.”

**Maria:** My dad talked to me. He said, “It's impossible for you to play in this country. You got to get out. There is no way you can play here. You have to leave or if you want to quit or you want to continue,” whatever. He said he will always support me. So, that made me realize, I'm like, “How can I get out? What should I do?”

**Nancy:** With the help of her sister, Maria begins drafting an email.

**Maria:** And that email says, I'm Maria. I'm a professional squash player. I'm very good.

**Nancy:** Then she offers to be a parttime coach.

**Maria:**  With one condition that you can provide me a safe place to train. I want to play and I want to have a time for myself. I'm looking for a place where I can play with peace of mind. I send that email to all over the world, to different schools, universities, colleges, academies. It was like copy-paste, copy-paste, copy-paste, a lot. A lot.

I sent thousands, thousands of emails. Every time, I send an email, it gives me hope. I was so excited every morning and I'm checking the email and see if somebody replied to my email. Maybe there is a reply. Maybe there's a reply. I never heard back anything. I was so fed up with all those three years at home.

**Nancy:** Maria is 18 years, almost 19 years. She's lost three years of her life, three years of her playing career. As her inbox sits empty, she knows there has to be another way out.

**Maria:** I realized that I have a visa which was going to expire anytime soon. There was world junior happening in India at the time. So, in 2009, that was my last year and the last chance ever to play world junior. This is some kind of everybody's dream to play like Olympics, for example. It is like Olympics.

And I said, “You know what? No matter what, I want to play this tournament. I want to play this championship.” And even though I had threats and everything, I'm like, “I'm going for it. I'm going for it.” And I send message to the Pakistan Squash Federation that I want to go to compete in this competition. Can you please enter my name, and I will pay for my own ticket.

**Nancy:** The Pakistan Squash Federation decided to let Maria travel to India to compete in the 2009 World Junior Squash Championship.

**Maria:** After so many years, I'm finally in a real squash court watching people playing. I am there. You can see the banners everywhere, billboards everywhere with the tournament signs and where it's happening, the venue. Yeah, the athletes’ pictures are there. There were girls and junior boys from all over the world. Every team is wearing their own shirt, shirt with their country's names.

**Nancy:** But Maria, she has no monogrammed warm up suit of her own. She has no coach, no proper training.

**Maria:** But again, I'm happy. Now I'm back among them. It just makes me excited. I was there just to play and enjoy the real squash environment, play in a real squash court and against somebody human, real. Nobody was expecting that I'm going to win. I had my first match, I won that. I had my second match, I won that. Third match, I won. Fourth match, I won.

**Nancy:** Her next match, she has a difficult opponent, a well-known Egyptian player.

**Maria:** Her name is Kenzy. She was famous as Crazy Kenzy, because she dives and hit. She would jump, dive and get every shot.

**Nancy:** Kenzy is a player with a long, fast body.

**Maria:** Like, all girls and boys, they usually do hit from a very-- They make a big swing. I don't have a big swing, because for three years, I did short hitting against my bedroom wall.

**Nancy:** So, by now, Maria's body is screaming. Her arms and legs in pain.

**Maria:** I'm sitting on a chair, and this girl is warming up. I didn't want to do some warm up, because I thought it will shoot the pain more. I'm like, “I don't know how it's going to happen.” But she is ready to serve, I'm ready to receive, and she swings hard. Both of us are trying to put the ball away from each other in the best possible way, hitting it with angle that is so precise.

**Nancy:** They play with kill shots that would normally end a game.

**Maria:** Then if I play crosscourt, she runs to the crosscourt. She gets the crosscourt. She plays a both.

**Nancy:** Kenzy bounces the ball from wall to wall. Still, Maria hits it.

**Maria:** I play a drop.

**Nancy:** That's a fake out. She soft bounces the ball at the front of the court, but Kenzy gets that.

**Maria:** She plays drop back on that.

**Nancy:** Maria sends a ball to the back of the court.

**Maria:** I'm hitting, hitting, hitting and she will return every shot. I'm like, “When are you going to let it go?” [laughs] We are so good in retrieving it that the ball does not die. There is no timer.

**Nancy:** Squash matches can go on for hours.

**Maria:** She wins a point by playing a crosscourt shot that dies right away. I have no chance to return that. Then I play something like a perfect drop that she can't return. But I was playing good. The weather was hot, so it really helped my body to move better. My footwork was amazing. The ball was landing properly on the strings of my racket. You can say a good squash match is happening right now. Like, it's music. It has a soul to it.

**Nancy:** The crowd is riveted. They haven't moved for what seems like an hour.

**Maria:**  Definitely more than an hour.

**Nancy:** The players take a break. They're tired. Maria is happy, but she doesn't show it.

**Maria:** I come out and sit casual. Like, who does that? A lot of people will be like, “Oh, what should I do? How am I going to go win? Tell me something.” I'm not asking anybody to help me or to coach me during my match. I'm just sitting there. I'm like, “Okay.” And soon as say, referee says, time, which means you got to go back on court, I just get up and go on court. Only one thing is going on my mind, I remember, “I'm tired. I am tired, exhausted. How am I going to finish this last game?”

The rally starts again. I'm leading now. Now it's game point for me. If I win this point, I win the match. And I hit such a strong shot, the ball is like shooting really low to the back of the court. And she just dives and get that ball. I go to the ball, and I hit it back again to the other corner so hard. My legs are shivering. She dives and gets that ball again. And I hit it against deep shot. She gets it again. And I hit the kill shot, and that was the shot she did not return. My back went against the glass wall behind me, and I stood right there behind that and I'm like, “Did I win?”

[cheers and applause]

**Maria:** There is so many people around us, so much crowd. My ears were blocked like I was underwater. This guy taps my shoulder and he tells me, “You have to go and do a dope test.” And I'm like, “Why do I have to dope test?” And they were like, “You are in a semifinal, and everybody has to do the dope test.” I'm like, “What? So, you mean I'm in the semifinal?” He said, “Yes.” “Wow, I made it to the semifinal.” That was the time, I was like, “Really? I made it to the semifinal? I had no idea.”

**Nancy:** Maria never imagined she'd make it this far.

**Maria:** I came to the event with nothing. I had pain. I had no proper training and anything. From that moment, I thought I am going to win the tournament now. I was thinking about winning.

**Nancy:** But the next day, when she stepped onto the court for her semifinal match--

**Maria:** I couldn't move on the squash court, and I lost very easily, 3-0. I said, “I was done.”

**Nancy:** At the award ceremony the next day--

**Maria:** There was a podium for number one, number two, number three. The third position went to me and another Indian girl, because we both were in the semi-finals. I secured bronze medal in the world juniors.

**Nancy:** And just like she arrived in India, Maria lands back in Pakistan alone. There's no hero’s welcome, no flowers, no press, no flashy gifts.

**Maria:** Just me and my trophy. [giggles] I'm with my bags, I'm with my trophy, and I'm in the bus now from Lahore to Peshawar. I'm holding onto this trophy and I'm looking at it. I did something excellent. My whole idea was to participate. And then from participation, it turned into a victory. I couldn't win the tournament, but I'm not going home empty. And that was incredible for me. And then I arrive home, put the trophy on the mantle, and my parents, they're just happy I'm home.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you to Maria Toorpakai Wazir for sharing your story with the Snap. Now, remember the hundreds of emails Maria sent around the world looking for a safe space to train and play squash? Well, about three years after Maria came home with her trophy and bronze medal, she got a reply.

**Maria:** Yeah. A thousand emails later, I got one email, one reply from Canada, Jonathan Power. This was the same guy from Canada, World Champion, who reached out to me and saying that he is very moved and he wants to help me. He said, “Come to Canada.” And I got so excited, like, unbelievable excitement. But then all of a sudden, that excitement went away when I realized that it could be a prank. Somebody is actually making fun of me, just like happened in the past. I'm like, “I don't know if that is really Jonathan. What if he's not Jonathan?” I entered a tournament in Canada and I applied for my visa. And luckily, they gave me visa. When I landed at the airport and I came out, Jonathan was right there standing, waving his hand.

**Glynn:** In 2011, Maria moved to Toronto to train with Jonathan Power, a World Champion at Men's Squash. Maria writes about this and so much more in her book, *A Different Kind of Daughter: The Girl Who Hid from the Taliban in Plain Sight.* She has also set up the Maria Toorpakai Foundation encouraging families to educate girls and allow them to play sports. And she still has one more dream to pursue.

**Maria:** I want to build a sports school for girls in Pakistan, especially for the girls of Afghan refugees and tribal girls. I really need support from people, and I wish that people will come forward and contact me and support this project.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** The original score for that piece was by Dirk Schwarzhoff. It was produced by Zahra Noorbakhsh and Nancy López.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Bravery, daring, twist, a whole other universe of experience. Is Maria not made of magic. Understand, we are our stories. Life is a story. And right now, you can get the Snap Judgment storytelling podcast for free everywhere. A first-class plane ticket for your mind. Subscribe before it's too late. Snap is brought to you by the team that never, ever does what they're told, including the Mark Ristich. He just does all kinds of things, never what he's told. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, Bo Walsh, Marisa Dodge, David Exumé and Regina Bediako.

[cheers and applause]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Now this, this is nothing news. No way is this the news. In fact, through hard work, through effort, you can learn to play squash, tap into the millions upon millions of fanatical fans all over the world, clinics, leagues, stadiums, to come back home to Michigan to tell friends and family about the exciting world of squash. And they could ask you, “Squash? Why are you playing with vegetables?” And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. This is PRX.

[upbeat music]

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