

SEVEN

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The next morning, after breakfast, Parvana was back on the street. "Take your father's writing things and his blanket, and go to the market," Mother told her. "Maybe you can earn some money. You've been watching your father all this time. Just do what he did."

Parvana liked the idea. Yesterday's shopping had gone well. If she could earn money, she might never have to do housework again. The boy disguise had worked once. Why shouldn't it work again?

As she walked to the marketplace, her head felt light without the weight of her hair or chador. She could feel the sun on her face, and a light breeze floating down from the mountain made the air fresh and fine.

Her father's shoulder bag was slung across her chest. It bumped against her legs. Inside were Father's pens and writing paper, and a few items she would try to sell, including her fancy shalwar kameez. Under her arm, Parvana carried the blanket she would sit on.

She chose the same spot where she had gone with her father. It was next to a wall. On the other side of the wall was a house. The wall hid most of it from view. There was a window above the wall, but it had

been painted black, in obedience to the Taliban decree.

"If we're at the same place every day, people will get to know we are here, and they will remember us when they need something read or written," Father used to say. Parvana liked that he said "we," as if she was part of his business. The spot was close to home, too. There were busier places in the market, but they took longer to get to, and Parvana wasn't sure she knew the way.

"If anyone asks who you are, say you are Father's nephew Kaseem," Mother said. They had gone over and over the story until Parvana knew it cold. "Say Father is ill, and you have come to stay with the family until he is well again."

It was safer to say Father was ill than to tell people he'd been arrested. No one wanted to look like an enemy of the government.

"Will anyone hire me to read for them?" Parvana asked. "I'm only eleven."

"You still have more education than most people in Afghanistan," Mother said.

"However, if they don't hire you, we'll think of something else."

Parvana spread her blanket on the hard clay of the market, arranged her goods for sale to one side, as Father had done, and spread her pens and writing paper out in front of her. Then she sat down and waited for customers.

The first hour went by with no one stopping. Men would walk by, look down

at her and keep walking. She wished she had her chador to hide behind. She was certain that at any moment someone would stop, point at her and yell, "Girl!" The word would ring out through the market like a curse, and everyone would stop what they were doing. Staying put that first hour was one of the hardest things she had ever done.

She was looking the other way when someone stopped. She felt the shadow before she saw it, as the man moved between her and the sun. Turning her head, she saw the dark turban that was the uniform of the Taliban. A rifle was slung across his chest as casually as her father's shoulder bag had been slung across hers.

Parvana began to tremble.

"You are a letter reader?" he asked in Pashtu.

Parvana tried to answer, but she couldn't find her voice. Instead, she nodded.

"Speak up, boy! A letter reader who has no voice is no good to me."

Parvana took a deep breath. "I am a letter reader," she said in Pashtu, in a voice that she hoped was loud enough. "I can read and write in Dari and Pashtu." If this was a customer, she hoped her Pashtu would be good enough.

The Talib kept looking down at her. Then he put his hand inside his vest. Keeping his eyes on Parvana, he drew something out of his vest pocket.

Parvana was about to squish her eyes shut and wait to be shot when she saw that the Talib had taken out a letter. He sat down beside her on the blanket. "Read this," he said.

Parvana took the envelope from him. The stamp was from Germany. She read the outside.

"This is addressed to Fatima Azima,"

"That was my wife," the Talib said. The letter was very old. Parvana took it out of the envelope and unfolded it. The creases were embedded in the paper.

"Dear Niece," Parvana read.

"I am sorry I am not able to be with you at the time of your wedding, but I hope this letter will get to you in time. It is good to be in Germany, away from all the fighting. In my mind, though, I never really leave Afghanistan. My thoughts are always turned to our country, to the family and friends I will probably never see again.

"On this day of your marriage, I send you my very best wishes for your future. Your father, my brother, is a good man, and he will have chosen a good man to be your husband. You may find it hard at first, to be away from your family, but you will have a

new family. Soon you will begin to feel you belong there. I hope you will be happy, that you will be blessed with many children, and that you will live to see your son have sons.

"Once you leave Pakistan and return to Afghanistan with your new husband, I will likely lose track of you. Please keep my letter with you, and do not forget me, for I will not forget you.

"Your loving aunt, Sohila."

Parvana stopped reading. The Talib was silent beside her. "Would you like me to read it again?"

He shook his head and held out his hand for the letter. Parvana folded it and gave it back to him. His hands trembled as he put the letter back in the envelope. She saw a tear fall from his eye. It rolled down his cheek until it landed in his beard.

"My wife is dead," he said. "This was among her belongings. I wanted to know what it said." He sat quietly for a few minutes, holding the letter.

"Would you like me to write a reply?"

Parvana asked, as she had heard her father do.

The Talib sighed, then shook his head.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Pay whatever you like," Parvana said.

Her father had also said that.

The Talib took some money out of his pocket and gave it to her. Without another word, he got up off the blanket and went away.

Parvana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings?

Parvana found it all very confusing. Soon she had another customer, someone who wanted to buy something rather than have something read. All day long, though, her thoughts kept floating back to the Talib who missed his wife. She had only one other customer before she went home for lunch. A man who had been walking back and forth in front of her blanket finally stopped to talk to her. "How much do you want for that?" he asked, pointing at her beautiful shalwar kameez.

Mother hadn't told her what price to ask. Parvana tried to remember how her mother used to bargain with vendors in the market when she was able to do the shopping. She would argue the vendor down from whatever price he named first. "They expect you to bargain," she explained, "so they begin with a price so high only a fool would pay it."

Parvana thought quickly. She pictured her aunt in Mazar working hard to do all the embroidery on the dress and around the cuffs of the trousers. She thought of how

pretty she'd felt when she wore it, and how much she hated giving it up. She named a price. The customer shook his head and made a counter-offer, a much lower price. Parvana pointed out the detailed designs of the needlework, then named a price slightly lower than her first one. The customer hesitated, but didn't leave. After a few more prices back and forth, they agreed on an amount. It was good to make a sale, to have more money to stuff away in the little pocket in the side of her shirt. It felt so good that she almost felt no regret as she watched the vibrant red cloth flutter in the breeze as it was carried away into the crowded labyrinth of the market, never to be seen again.

Parvana stayed on the blanket for another couple of hours, until she realized she had to go to the bathroom. There was nowhere for her to go in the market, so she had to pack up and go home. She went through many of the same motions she went through when she was with her father—packing up the supplies in the shoulder bag, shaking the dust out of the blanket. It made her miss Father.

"Father, come back to us!" she whispered, looking up at the sky. The sun was shining. How could the sun be shining when her father was in jail? Something caught her eye, a flicker of movement. She thought it came from the blacked-out window, but how could it? Parvana decided she was imagining

things. She folded up the blanket and tucked it under her arm. She felt the money she'd earned, tucked safely in her pocket.

Feeling very proud of herself, she ran all the way home.