

THREE

Mother gently placed the sleeping Ali on an uncluttered spot on the floor. Maryam had fallen asleep, too, and was carried over to sleep beside her brother.

"Let's clean up," Mother said. Slowly, they put the room back together. Parvana's back and legs ached. Mother moved slowly, too, all hunched over. Mother and Nooria replaced things in the cupboard. Parvana got the whisk broom down from its nail in the lavatory and swept up the spilled rice. She wiped up the spilled tea with a cloth. The ripped toshaks could be repaired, but that would wait until tomorrow.

When the room looked somewhat normal again, the family, minus Father, spread quilts and blankets on the floor and went to bed.

Parvana couldn't sleep. She could hear her mother and Nooria tossing and turning as well. She imagined every single noise to be either Father or the Taliban coming back. Each sound made Parvana hopeful and fearful at the same time.

She missed her father's snoring. He had a soft, pleasant snore. During the heavy bombing of Kabul, they changed homes many times to try to find a safe place. Parvana would wake up in the middle of the night and not remember where she was. As soon as she heard her father's snoring, she knew she was safe.

Tonight, there was no snoring.

Where was her father? Did he have a soft place to sleep? Was he cold? Was he hungry? Was he scared?

Parvana had never been inside a prison, but she had other relatives who had been arrested. One of her aunts had been arrested with hundreds of other schoolgirls for protesting the Soviet occupation of her country. All the Afghan governments put their enemies in jail.

"You can't be truly Afghan if you don't know someone who's been in prison," her mother sometimes said.

No one had told her what prison was like. "You're too young to know these things," the grown-ups would tell her. She had to imagine it. It would be cold, Parvana decided, and dark.

"Mother, turn on the lamp!" She sat bolt upright with a sudden thought.

"Parvana, hush! You'll wake Ali."

"Light the lamp," Parvana whispered. "If they let Father go, he'll need a light in the window to guide him home."

"How could he walk? He left his walking stick here. Parvana, go to sleep. You are not helping the situation."

Parvana lay down again, but she didn't sleep.

The only window in the room was a small one, high up on one wall. The Taliban had ordered all windows painted over with black paint so that no one could see the women inside. "We won't do it," Father had said. "The window is so high and so small, no one can possibly see in." So far, they had gotten away with leaving it unpainted.

For short periods, on clear days, the sun would come through the window in a thin stream. Ali and Maryam would sit in that ray of sunshine. Mother and Nooria would join them there and, for a few moments, the sun would warm the flesh on their arms and faces. Then the planet would continue its spin, and the sunbeam would be gone again.

Parvana kept her eyes on the spot where she thought the window was. The night was so dark, she could not distinguish between the window and the wall. She kept watch all night, until the dawn finally pushed the darkness away, and morning peeked in through the window.

At first light, Mother, Nooria and Parvana stopped pretending they were asleep. Quietly, so they didn't wake the young ones, they got up and dressed. For breakfast they chewed on leftover nan. Nooria started to heat water for tea on the little gas stove in the bathroom, but Mother stopped her. "There is boiled water left from last night. We'll just drink that. We don't have time to wait for tea. Parvana and I are going to get your father out of jail." She said it the way she might say, "Parvana and I are going to the market to get peaches."

The nan fell from Parvana's lips onto the plastic cloth. She didn't argue, though.

Maybe I'll get to finally see what the inside of a jail looks like, she thought. The prison was a long way from their home.

Buses were not permitted to carry women who did not have a man with them. They would have to walk the whole way. What if Father was being held somewhere else? What if they were stopped by the Taliban in the street? Mother wasn't supposed to be out of her home without a man, or without a note from her husband.

"Nooria, write Mother a note."

"Don't bother, Nooria. I will not walk around my own city with a note pinned to my burqa as if I were a kindergarten child. I have a university degree!"

"Write the note anyway," Parvana whispered to Nooria, when Mother was in the washroom. "I'll carry it in my sleeve."

Nooria agreed. Her penmanship was more grown-up than Parvana's. She quickly wrote, "I give permission for my wife to be outside." She signed it with Father's name.

"I don't think it will do much good," Nooria whispered, as she handed Parvana the note. "Most of the Taliban don't know how to read."

Parvana didn't answer. She quickly folded the note into a small square and tucked it into the wide hem of her sleeve.

Nooria suddenly did something very unusual. She gave her sister a hug.

"Come back," she whispered.

Parvana didn't want to go, but she knew that sitting at home waiting for them to return would be even harder.

"Hurry up, Parvana," her mother said. "Your father is waiting."

Parvana slipped her feet into her sandals and wound her chador around her head. She followed Mother out the door.

Helping Mother down the broken stairs was a little like helping Father, as the billowing burqa made it hard for her to see where she was going.

Mother hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. Parvana thought she might be having second thoughts. After that moment, though, her mother pulled herself up to her full height, straightened her back and plunged into the Kabul street.

Parvana rushed after her. She had to run to keep up with her mother's long, quick steps, but she didn't dare fall behind. There were a few other women in the street and they all wore the regulation burqa, which made them all look alike. If Parvana lost track of her mother, she was afraid she'd never find her again.

Now and then, her mother stopped beside a man and a woman, or a small group of men, or even a peddler boy, and held out a photograph of Father. She didn't say anything, just showed them the photo.

Parvana held her breath every time her mother did this. Photographs were illegal. Any one of these people could turn Parvana and her mother over to the militia.

But everyone looked at the photo, then shook their heads. Many people had been arrested. Many people had disappeared. They knew what Mother was asking without her having to say anything.

Pul-i-Charkhi Prison was a long walk from Parvana's home. By the time the huge fortress came into view, her legs were sore, her feet ached and, worst of all, she was scared all over.

The prison was dark and ugly, and it made Parvana feel even smaller.

Malali wouldn't be afraid, Parvana knew. Malali would form an army and lead it in a storming of the prison. Malali would lick her lips at such a challenge. Her knees wouldn't be shaking as Parvana's were.

If Parvana's mother was scared, she didn't show it. She marched straight up to the prison gates and said to the guard, "I'm here for my husband."

The guards ignored her.

"I'm here for my husband!" Mother said again. She took out Father's photograph and held it in front of the face of one of the guards. "He was arrested last night. He has committed no crime, and I want him released!"

More guards began to gather. Parvana gave a little tug on her mother's burqa. Her mother ignored her.

"I'm here for my husband!" she kept saying, louder and louder. Parvana tugged harder on the loose cloth of the burqa.

"Hold steady, my little Malali," she heard her father say in her mind. Suddenly, she felt very calm.

"I'm here for my father!" she called out.

Her mother looked down at her through the screen over her eyes. She reached down and took Parvana's hand. "I'm here for my husband!" she called again.

Over and over, Parvana and her mother kept yelling out their mission. More and more men came to stare at them.

"Be quiet!" ordered one of the guards. "You should not be here! Go from this place! Go back to your home!"

One of the soldiers snatched the photo of Parvana's father and tore it into pieces. Another started hitting her mother with a stick.

"Release my husband!" her mother kept saying.

Another soldier joined in the beating. He hit Parvana, too.

Although he did not hit her very hard, Parvana fell to the ground, her body covering the pieces of her father's photograph. In a flash, she tucked the pieces out of sight, under her chador.

Her mother was also on the ground, the soldier's sticks hitting her across her back.

Parvana leapt to her feet. "Stop! Stop it! We'll go now! We'll go!" She grabbed the arm of one of her mother's attackers. He shook her off as if she were a fly.

"Who are you to tell me what to do?" But he did lower his stick.

"Get out of here!" he spat at Parvana and her mother.

Parvana knelt down, took her mother's arm and helped her to her feet. Slowly, with her mother leaning on her for support, they hobbled away from the prison.