DEBORAH ELLIS

ONE MORE MOUNTAIN

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To those who keep climbing, long past when they should have to.

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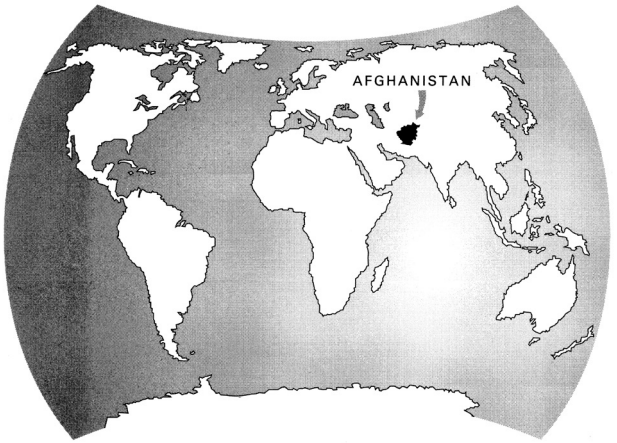
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ONE

'No one can help me,' Damsa said. 'You can't help me.'

She teetered at the very edge of the roof of the ruined building.

'I really can.' The policewoman stood on the roof behind her. She took a step towards the girl.

'It's no good,' Damsa said. A shuffle of her feet sent stones tumbling down three storeys to the broken concrete chunks below. 'My father wants to kill me.'

'Yes, I imagine he does.' The policewoman took two more steps forward. 'There are men who want to kill me, too.'

She held out her hand towards Damsa, and actually smiled.

'But they'll have to find us, first.'

TWO

Damsa peered through the screen covering her eyes. She had never worn a burqa before, but the officer had taken two out of the police car, pulled one over her own head and insisted Damsa wear the other one.

'It will be safer for both of us.'

It was also safer for them to abandon the police car in the weeds by the ruined house where Damsa had almost jumped off the roof.

'The Taliban are hunting down women in uniform,' the police officer told her.

They walked for three hours, ducking and hiding each time a pickup truck full of Taliban soldiers drove along the highway.

Now, finally, they had arrived.

'We're here.'

High grey walls framed a large, bright pink gate decorated with painted flowers in orange, blue, and yellow.

Damsa read the name on the gate.

Green Valley.

The policewoman pressed the buzzer and then flipped

back her burqa so that the eyes on the other side of the small opening could see her face. Damsa heard a bolt slide back. The door in the gate was swung open by a girl Damsa's age.

'Shauzia!' A boy of around eleven let go of the big suitcase that he'd been pulling towards a car in the courtyard. He ran to the policewoman and gave her a giant hug.

'I thought you wouldn't get here on time,' he said.

'Do you really think I'd let you go to the other side of the world without a proper goodbye from me?' Shauzia asked. 'Rafi, I should arrest you for even thinking that.'

Rafi laughed.

'Maryam's giving Mama a hard time,' he said.

'Another day at the office, then.' Shauzia hugged Rafi close again. Then he ran off across the yard.

'Mama! Shauzia's here!'

'I'm glad you made it,' said the girl who had let them in the gate.

'Not half as glad as I am,' said the officer. 'This is Damsa.'

'Hello, Damsa,' the girl said. 'I'm Larmina. I'll get you something to eat.'

She left them in the yard.

Officer Shauzia led Damsa to a bench in the yard under a tree.

'You can take off the burqa,' she said.

Damsa was relieved to sit. She'd been on the run for days, with no food and very little water. She'd been too afraid to sleep much.

Now that she was seated, she was too tired to even lift the burqa from her face. The policewoman did it for her.

Larmina brought a tray with water, dates, and walnuts and left it on a little table beside the bench. Shauzia poured Damsa a drink and handed her the glass, then poured herself some water and sat down beside her.

'Welcome to Green Valley,' Officer Shauzia said, and drained her glass.

Damsa tried to raise her glass to her lips but her hand was shaking. She used both hands and took a long drink.

She looked around at where she was.

There was colour everywhere. So much colour that the rest of the world Damsa had known seemed dull and dusty by comparison. The bright whitewashed walls around the compound were covered in designs and murals. Carpets and quilts aired in the sunshine.

Even the bench she was sitting on was painted light blue, with purple irises.

Many gardens bloomed. Tidy pathways wove between the gardens, leading to a one-storey main house and several smaller outbuildings towards the back. The main house had a large awning for protection from the sun and the rain.

The whole place was neat, and yet a bit messy and full of life.

The courtyard at Damsa's father's house had been all grey stone, meticulously swept by servants who scurried away like frightened mice whenever a member of the household or a guest appeared. Her father liked the help to stay out of the way.

A woman with a straight back and a determined jaw came out of the main building, took two steps towards Shauzia, then turned back and called through the open door.

'Maryam, if you are not out here in five minutes, they are leaving without you!'

'I don't know why you shout at her, Parvana,' said Shauzia, leaving the bench and crossing the yard to her. 'You know it does no good.'

'They have to be at the safe house before dark,' Parvana said. She and Shauzia loaded the big suitcase the boy had been pulling into the open boot of the car. 'I won't have them on the road after dark.'

'I'm sure Asif knows that,' said Shauzia.

'You're sure I know what?'

A man on crutches, an empty trouser leg neatly pinned up, came into the yard with two backpacks over his shoulders.

'I'm sure you know not to cause your wife extra worry.'

'That I do know,' he said, tossing the two packs into the car's back seat. 'How bad is it out there?'

'There are Taliban on the highway,' said Officer Shauzia, 'but if you stick to the back roads, you should make it to Kabul without a problem.'

'Inshallah,' he said. 'Princess Maryam is on her way out.'

'Soon she'll be Nooria's problem,' said Parvana. She put her arms around Rafi. Asif joined them in the embrace.

A voice called from the house.

'I am here. I am ready. I couldn't find my gold. I turned all my music earnings into gold chains to take with me, but I couldn't find them. Then I remembered they are already around my neck.'

A woman, younger than Parvana and Shauzia, and much more beautifully dressed in an elaborately embroidered tunic, came into the yard pulling a small suitcase.

'I don't know why we have to leave so early,' the woman said. 'Our flight doesn't leave until midday tomorrow.'

Damsa nearly dropped her glass of water. She couldn't believe what she was seeing! All exhaustion fell away as she got to her feet and practically flew across the yard.

'You're Maryam Gulalai,' she said. 'You're Maryam

Gulalai! I know all your songs!'

Maryam's face went from annoyed and flustered to smiling and gracious.

'Aren't you kind?' she said, adjusting her chador so that it draped more elegantly. 'What is your name?'

'Damsa. I . . . I did a YouTube video of me singing one of your songs, "Almond Trees in Bloom". Did you see it?'

'I'll look it up when I'm in the airport,' Maryam said. 'Goodness knows I'll have lots of time.' She glared at Parvana.

'Get in the car, Maryam,' said Parvana, but when Maryam started to do that, Parvana grabbed her and hugged her. 'I love you and I am so proud of you,' Damsa heard her say.

Damsa felt herself shoved out of the way as other girls rushed out of the house and into the yard, all saying goodbye and crying. She went back to her bench. Shauzia got the girls through their farewells and back inside the house.

Then it was just Parvana, Rafi, Asif, and Maryam left by the car.

Rafi started to cry.

'Mama! Don't make me go! I don't want to go!'

Parvana knelt down so she could look him in the eye. 'Yes, you do. You want to go and become a famous Afghan ballet dancer. You will show all those students

at that school what it means to work hard and dream big. You will create dances of such beauty that people will look at them and say, 'That is Afghanistan!' And if you decide that dancing is not for you, that is fine with me, because whatever you do you will be a good, kind man. And your father and I will get our visas and will be visiting you in New York before you know it.'

Shauzia came back outside carrying a battered shoulder bag, which she handed to Parvana. Parvana held it up to Rafi.

'You know what this is,' she said to him. 'It belonged to my father, your grandfather. I carried it when I went with him to the market to read letters for people who couldn't read for themselves. Then, after he died, I had it with me when I met your father in a cave, back when we were children not much older than you.' She put it over his shoulder. 'We will always be with you,' she said.

She stood up, nodded at Shauzia, and Shauzia got the boy into the front seat of the car.

'You get them safely through the airport and then you drive right back here. You hear me, Asif?'

'Parvana, the general,' he joked. 'Always giving orders.' He got in the car and closed the door. 'I won't let anything bad happen to our son.'

'What about to me?' Damsa heard Maryam ask from the back seat.

'You, I'm feeding to the wild dogs, first chance I get.

And put that burqa on. Your fans might want to see your face but the Taliban certainly does not.'

The car started up. Shauzia opened the gate. And then they were gone.

Officer Shauzia closed the gate and stood beside Parvana. Damsa watched them cry.

Damsa's eyes got heavier and heavier, and then they just closed.