

Praise for *My Name is Parvana*

‘Her prose is quick; her passion is evident; and Parvana is as compelling a character as ever.’

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‘subtle and accomplished’

Maclean’s

‘powerful and effective’

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‘a thoroughly tense and engaging portrait of a girl and her country . . . Readers will learn much about the war in Afghanistan as they cheer on this fiery protagonist.’

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‘vivid story-telling with a visceral sense of place, loss, distrust, and hope . . . a must-buy title.’

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My Name is
Parvana

Also by Deborah Ellis

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Parvana's Journey

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My Name is Parvana

Deborah Ellis

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*To those who get up every morning
and face the struggle of the day.*





ONE

“Is your name Parvana?”

The girl in the dusty blue chador gave no response. She sat without moving on the hard metal chair and kept her eyes lowered. The cloth of the chador covered the lower half of her face. If her mouth twitched in recognition of the English words, the uniformed man and woman staring at her could not tell.

“Is your name Parvana?”

The woman repeated the man’s question, translating it into Dari, then Pashtu. Then, after a pause, into Uzbek.

The girl stayed still.

“She’s not answering, sir.”

“I can see that, Corporal. Ask her again.”

The woman cleared her throat, then repeated the question in all three languages.

“Is your name Parvana?”

The words were louder this time, as though

it were a lack of volume that kept the girl from responding.

The girl did not move and she did not answer. She kept her eyes on a scuff mark on the floor and did not look up.

Sounds reached the little office, sounds muffled by walls and from far away. A truck engine. Boots pounding sand. A jet flying overhead. The whirl of a helicopter blade.

The girl knew there were other people around. She had seen them when they rushed her from the truck and brought her in to sit in this small room on this hard chair. She had not looked around then, either, keeping her eyes on the sand and rock of the yard then on the cement block stairs and then on the hard gray floor of the long hallway leading to her chair. But she had heard the voices.

“Perhaps she is deaf, sir.”

“She’s not deaf,” the man replied. “Look at her. Does she look deaf?”

“I’m not sure . . .”

“If she were deaf, she would be looking all around, trying to figure out what was going on. Is she looking around? Has she raised her head? No. Her eyes have been lowered since

she was brought in, and I haven't seen her raise her head once. Trust me, she is not deaf."

"But she hasn't spoken, Major. Not a word."

"She probably said something when they grabbed her and put her in the truck. Did she scream or yell anything?"

"No, sir."

"Well, what did she do?"

The girl in the dusty blue chador heard the sound of papers fluttering as the woman in the green army uniform read through a report.

"Sir, it says here that she stood still and waited."

"Stood still and waited." The man said the words slowly, as though he was chewing them around in his mouth.

"Corporal, what is your gut telling you about her?"

There was a pause. The girl in the blue chador imagined the woman was trying to figure out what sort of answer would please the major.

"Sir, I don't have enough information to be able to form an opinion."

"Corporal, are you a career soldier?"

"No, sir. I was called up from the Reserves."

“And what are you in civilian life?”

“My family runs a small-town bakery.”

“Bread?”

“Some bread. Cookies, squares, pies, cakes. Things like that.”

“Apple turnovers?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“My favorite.”

“If you like, I can ask my parents to send you some.”

“Thank you, Corporal. They will be stale by the time they get here, but still pretty good, I’ll bet. So, a small-town bakery with a little bit of everything. And when you work there, you do a bit of everything—baking, calling suppliers, dealing with customers?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ever get the feeling that someone is up to no good?”

“Sir?”

“Someone comes into your store, and they don’t do anything bad and they don’t say anything bad, but still you think, ‘There’s something off about this customer.’ And so you watch them closely and you’re glad when they leave.”

“I suppose so, sir. It’s a small town but bad things happen everywhere.”

The man tapped his pen against the edge of the desk. He tapped for a while. The girl in the blue chador knew she would have to work hard to keep it from annoying her.

“Look at her,” the man said.

There was the sound of bodies shifting in seats.

“She hasn’t spoken a word and she stood still and waited to be arrested,” he said. “What does that tell you?”

“I don’t know, sir. Perhaps she’s afraid.”

“Does she look afraid?”

There was another pause.

“No, sir. She doesn’t. Perhaps though—perhaps there is something wrong with her. Maybe she isn’t smart enough to be afraid.”

“You were a baker, Corporal. I worked Security. I’ve learned how to spot trouble. And this girl is trouble. What do we know about her?”

“Very little, sir. She was picked up in an abandoned ruin that used to be a school. We suspect that it is now being used as a staging area for the Taliban to launch attacks against

us, and our intelligence gathering among the villagers seems to confirm that, although no one will speak openly. This girl was the only one there. And she had a tattered bag over her shoulder. In the bag were some papers that had the name Parvana on them. That's why we think that might be her name."

"Let me see the bag."

"Sir, I believe the analysts have it."

"Go get it. I can't wait for them to do their fine-tooth comb thing. They'll take as much time as they get. Chase it down. Bring it back here. If they squawk, tell them it's an order."

"Yes, sir."

The girl in the chair saw the woman's army boots cross the floor and leave the office. As the door was opened, more noises came in from the outside—phones ringing, people speaking, filing cabinets opening and closing. The girl kept her ears open and her eyes on the floor. She knew the man at the desk was watching her. She did her best to ignore him. It was difficult. She used an old trick she had used to keep herself going when she was scared in the wilderness.

She recited multiplication tables to herself.

Nineteen times seven is one hundred and thirty-three. Nineteen times eight is one hundred and fifty-two. Nineteen times nine is one hundred and seventy-one.

She made it all the way through the twenty-eight times table before the woman's boots entered the office again. She heard the sound of her father's shoulder bag being put on the desk.

"This looks like it has seen better days," the man said. "Let's see what we've got in here."

He named each thing as he took it out of the bag.

"One notebook. What does this writing say?"

"Sir, that says, 'Property of Parvana. Everyone else keep out.'"

"That's just what my own teenaged daughter would have written. What language is it?"

"Dari. But we don't know that it is her notebook. She could have been scavenging or—"

"Pens," the man said. "And a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in English. What would a girl like this be doing with an American classic? But look. It's got pages torn out—even looks like someone's taken bites out of it! Why are

we even trying to civilize these people?” He threw it on the desk.

The girl in the chair had a very hard time not jumping out of her chair, grabbing the book and hitting the man over the head with it.

She heard someone flipping through the notebook.

“Who is this girl? What is she up to?” the man asked. “Maybe she was, as you say, just scavenging. That would fit. Her clothes are covered in dust. Her feet are filthy. She looks as if she has been sleeping outside in the dirt. Was there anything else of value in that building?”

“To these people, everything is of value, sir,” the woman said. “But, yes, there were other things she could have taken. A radio. Some kitchen things.”

“Things she could use, in other words. Or sell. So, if she were just a scavenger, she would have taken them. Instead she takes this ratty old shoulder bag full of useless scraps of paper and one half-eaten book. No. My instincts are right. She was up to something. And we are going to get to the bottom of it. Lock her up.”

The words caused a jolt of fear to zip through the girl’s body.

“There is a problem, sir,” the woman said.
“The cells are all full of men.”

“No women’s cells?”

“There hasn’t been a need for them,”

“Well, there’s a need now. This girl isn’t going anywhere.”

There was another pause. The banging of the pen on the desk started up again.

“What about the brig?” the man asked, after a while.

“The army brig? That’s for soldiers.”

“It has cells, doesn’t it? Are they secure?”

“Yes, but . . .”

“But what?” the man asked.

“The cells in the brig are a bit nicer than the ones we use for the Afghan prisoners.”

The man laughed. “This is hardly a lucky day for this girl, Corporal. However nice the cell is, it’s still a prison. One she may be in for a very long time.” He picked up the telephone and punched in some numbers.

The girl in the chair tried to go back to her multiplication tables. She needed to stay calm. She needed to not let anyone know how afraid she was.

The man hung up the phone. “Done. Get

her settled. We can't get anything from her if she won't talk. Get her to talk to us. Keep asking her name. Ask it over and over again until she tells it to you just to shut you up. That's all."

The woman stood up. "Yes, sir!"

She took hold of the girl's arm and led her out of the office and down the hall. Once more they were back in the sunshine. The girl was led across a yard, past a line of tanks and armored cars, past a group of soldiers doing jumping jacks, past several large gray metal buildings. They went up some steps into another building and walked down a long hallway. They stopped before a row of gray doors.

She heard the key turn in the lock and the door open. She was given a little nudge and stepped into the cell. The door closed behind her.

She could tell the woman was watching her through the small window in the door. The girl kept her back against the door and didn't move.

"We can keep you locked up here for a very long time," the woman finally said, speaking softly. "Talk to me. Is your name Parvana?"

The girl remained with her back against the door. Silent.

She heard the woman's boots walk away down the hall. She stood and waited, listening hard to see if the boots would come back.

When she was sure she was alone, the girl in the dusty blue chador finally spoke. "Yes," she whispered. "My name is Parvana."