

**THE
UNCAGED
SKY**

**KYLIE
MOORE-GILBERT**

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For Niloufar Bayani and Sepideh Kashani

ای که به هنگام درد راحت جانی مرا
ای که به تلخی فقر گنج روانی مرا

*And for my beloved grandmother,
Marjorie Cameron*

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PROLOGUE

I STARE AT THE wall inches in front of my face. Someone has scrawled something on it in ballpoint. The air-conditioning unit whirs noisily above my head and I shiver despite my layers of clothing. Over my shoulder, a man is making a speech in Farsi; there is aggression in his voice. He seems to be addressing me, although I have no idea what he is saying. I hear the muttering of other men, the creaking of chairs, heavy breathing. The man is shouting now, but the beat of my own heart is so loud that all his words are drowned out. A sense of panic rises in my chest, and I put my hands over my ears. I focus on what has been written on the wall, try to read the Arabic script, searching for words I can understand. Maybe whoever wrote it had sat in the same chair as me, facing the same cold, dirty tiles, overcome by the same fear and confusion.

Someone else is talking now, and gradually the words seep through the fog in my brain. I realise they are in English: ‘... the security of our nation. If you do not cooperate, we will throw you into a dark hole where nobody will find you...’

I turn my head to the left, ever so slightly. ‘Reza?’

‘Yes,’ he mutters, pausing mid-translation.

‘Reza,’ I stammer, ‘I know you people can do anything you want to me here: you can rape me, you can torture me...’ At this I start crying uncontrollably: loud, convulsive sobs.

Somebody barks something in Farsi from behind me, and Reza fires off a few rapid sentences in response. 'Kylie,' he says softly, 'nobody's going to do those things to you – don't worry.'

'But who are all these men?' I whisper. 'What do they want from me?'

The voice starts shouting again, and Reza resumes his translation. 'You will answer every single question we ask you, you will tell us everything you know. If you ever want to return to your country, you must cooperate. Nobody cares about you, nobody knows where you are. If we want, we can make you disappear...'

'Reza,' I whisper again, 'please. I need the toilet. Please, I think I'm going to throw up.'

After a brief exchange in Farsi, a woman appears at my side. She is clad in a black chador, the loose outer garment worn by religious Iranian women that cloaks them from head to toe. '*Cheshmband!*' someone yells, as she motions for me to get out of my chair.

'Put your blindfold back on,' Reza says softly.

I obey, and the woman grasps my wrist and leads me from the room. I pull my own chador tightly around me, clasping it at the throat so that it stays on my head.

We make it to the bathroom, a squalid cubicle with a filthy squatter toilet and hose. 'T-toilet paper,' I stammer peering at the woman from under my blindfold. 'I need toilet paper.'

'No paper,' she says brusquely. 'Hurry.'

We return to the interrogation room where the man resumes his yelling.

'Tell us about the list of contacts you sent the university from Iran,' Reza translates.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I cry. 'I never sent any contact list from Iran!'

Someone moves into my field of vision: I see a swarthy face, an unkempt beard, bushy eyebrows. It is one of the men from the hotel. The mean one. He smiles, revealing black gums and stained teeth, and holds up a printed page. It is an email I sent with a list of emergency contacts should I get into trouble. It includes my academic sponsor from a Tehran university, and the names of other

academics involved in the university program I took part in. Elyas Hossein's name is there too.

'I didn't send that from Iran,' I exclaim. 'I sent it from Australia, before I left. Look at the date!'

Reza says something in Farsi, and the email is snatched away by a third person. The interrogator retreats without a word, and there is a discussion behind me. My tears start to flow once again. I try to focus on the writing on the wall, but the pounding in my ears begins to overwhelm my other senses. I need the bathroom again.



I stare at the wall of my cell, imagine that the patterns in the milky-coloured marble are faces, or animals. I see mermaids, I see schools of fish and trees and pigeons. Someone has scratched 'EV 2018' in Latin script into a piece of metal which runs vertically down the corner of one wall. For the millionth time I wonder who EV is, how long ago it was that she had been here. How long she spent in this windowless box. There are tally marks etched into this metal frame, and into the strip of soft plaster above the door. Twelve days, eight days, twenty-three days. There are names and dates in the Iranian calendar, in Arabic numerals. Some have been scrawled directly onto the marble tiles in blue pen. My brain rages, taking in my meagre surroundings, searching over and over again for something new, for a piece of graffiti I haven't yet noticed, for a new stain on the carpet – anything.



I stare at the crumbling wall next to where I lie on the dusty ground. Someone had once painted it a beige colour, but now its paint is flaking, revealing pale concrete beneath. Yesterday I scratched a bird into its pockmarked surface, trying to copy the shape of the parrots which roost in the plane trees outside my cell's boarded-up window. A guard had come out and yelled at me, motioning for me to stand up and pace around rather than lie on my back in the

dust like I do in my cell. Perhaps she had a point, however, I prefer to look upwards. To keep my gaze fixed on the sky, and the birds wheeling freely away high above me.

I glance across at my drawing – and then look again. Next to my bird someone has scrawled in English: *Stay strong. You're not alone.*

My eyes dart over my shoulder, half-expecting to be caught in the act of reading this forbidden message. The faint hum of television emanates from the guards' room, the bubble lens of its omniscient camera sinister yet silent. I scratch around in the dirt for something sharp, and among the dried leaves and clumps of earth my fingers find a small rock.

Thank you, I etch into the wall's chalky veneer. I am Kylie from Australia.

PART I

SPY GAME

CHAPTER I

'WHY ARE YOU TAKING my bags off the carousel?'

The check-in steward looked up at me, his expression guarded. Emirates had just issued my boarding pass and processed an additional suitcase, full of the souvenirs and gifts I'd spent the past three weeks accumulating. He paused for a moment, then said, 'You told me these bags were fragile, so I'm getting our staff to pick them up directly.'

I considered this for a moment, then shrugged. It was possible I was just being paranoid. I'd been on edge ever since I'd found out that some unknown men had been asking about me at my hotel.

I turned and began to walk in the direction of immigration. People milled around me; mostly secular Tehranis, couples and families, screaming toddlers, businessmen. The queue for passport control was short, and as I waited I sent a message to my husband on WhatsApp to tell him I had checked in to my flight. Then, they approached me.

As soon as I saw them I knew they were the men from the hotel. 'Bad people,' the receptionist had said. There were four of them: three shabbily dressed men in mismatching suit jackets and pants and a woman in a black chador. Their leader, a short, stocky, balding man with glasses, said in English, 'Excuse me, madam, are you Mrs Kaylie Moorie Gilbert?'

I nodded hesitantly; I felt a deep, gnawing sense of foreboding.

'This is a warrant for your arrest.' He brandished a piece of A4 paper with something indecipherable typed on it in Farsi. There was a black stamp in the bottom right corner. 'Please come with us.'

'Wait a minute,' I exclaimed. 'What do you mean my arrest! How do I know what's written on that? I think you're making a mista—'

'You must come with us,' the man with the glasses interrupted. 'We just want to talk to you. Come.'

The woman gripped my elbow and manoeuvred me away from passport control. I looked around frantically, trying to catch somebody's eye – another foreigner, someone I could call out to – but there were only Iranian travellers, heads down, turning away, avoiding eye contact.

I was led towards a series of rooms built into the boundary between the departures hall and immigration. I moved almost mechanically, my mind a jumble of half-formed sentences. I entered a corridor and glimpsed my luggage off to one side before I was ushered into a large office filled with men, all of them wearing black and regarding me with open hostility. I was told to sit at a table at its centre. The chador-clad woman sat next to me. Some of the men sat, too, while others remained standing at the room's edges. Anxiety gripped my chest, but I did my best to appear calm; I wasn't really under arrest, I told myself. They would simply ask me a few questions and then allow me to catch my flight.

The man with the glasses was the first to speak. 'Can you please state your name and the purpose of your visit to Iran?'

'My name is Kylie Moore-Gilbert,' I responded, trying to stop my voice from shaking. 'I am an academic, and I came to Iran to take part in a university seminar.'

He fired off more questions.

'Which cities did you visit in Iran?'

'Why did you go to Qom?'

'Why did you join a seminar about Shi'a Islam?'

I fought desperately to suppress my panic, and tried to come across as mild, good-tempered, accommodating. I answered his questions calmly, explaining that the Middle East was my field of research, and understanding the Islamic world was part of my

job. This must be some sort of mistake, I repeated; I hadn't done anything wrong, and in any case I was about to leave the country. Would he let me go in time to make my flight?

'You won't be getting on that flight.' A man at the back of the room had spoken.

I turned to look at him. He was tall, more than six foot, strong and broad-shouldered, with a completely bald head and striking blue-green eyes. Unlike the others, his suit was relatively stylish.

'Excuse me?' I said, uncomprehending.

'If you cooperate,' said the man, 'we will put you on another flight. But you must first finish answering our questions.'

I felt the panic seize hold of me, and I burst into tears.

'Now Mrs Moore-Gilbert,' the man in glasses continued dispassionately, 'it's time for you to tell us the real reason why you came to Iran.'

Hadn't I just spent the past fifteen minutes explaining this?

'It's not Mrs, it's *Doctor* Moore-Gilbert,' I snapped. 'And I told you: I'm an academic. Look, here's my business card.' I took a University of Melbourne-branded card out of my handbag and gave it to him.

He examined it, then passed it across to a man sitting to his left.

'Who are you people?' I demanded.

'We are a... kind of police,' he answered with slow deliberation.

'And what's your name?'

He paused. 'You can call me Reza.'

'Okay, Reza,' I said, 'I want you to tell me why I am here. Why can't I catch my flight?'

Before he could answer, the tall bald man interrupted. 'Answer the question,' he said sharply. 'What is your real reason for coming to Iran?'

'And you,' I turned to him, 'what's your name?'

'Mohammad Reza,' he replied nonchalantly.

I could tell he had made it up on the spot. Reza sat back in his chair and observed me from behind his wire frames. Choosing his words carefully, he said, 'Who is your *ben zug*?'

Inwardly I started, but I managed to maintain my composure. 'Who is my what?' I knew full well what he was asking. *Ben zug*

is Hebrew for 'partner'. He was asking about my husband. 'I don't know what you're talking about, sorry.'

'You speak Hebrew, don't you? You've been to Israel.' It was a statement, not a question.

I considered this for a moment, then decided to tell the truth. 'I studied a little Hebrew and Arabic as part of my undergraduate degree.'

Reza leaned forwards and looked me in the eye. In broken Hebrew he said, 'How many times visit Israel?'

I looked back at him blankly, pretending I didn't understand. 'Sorry,' I said in English, 'it's been years since I've spoken Hebrew...'

Another man moved from the edge of the room to sit beside Reza. He was short and thin, with rimless glasses and wispy hair covering a bald patch. There was something familiar about him. In an authoritative voice, he started to pose questions to me in Farsi, and Reza switched to interpreter mode.

'How many times have you visited the Zionist regime?'

'Who is your husband?'

I thought quickly, trying to frame my answers in a way that wouldn't incriminate me in their eyes. 'My husband is a Russian man called Ruslan Hodorov,' I said. 'Ruslan is actually a Muslim name – it's a variant of the Iranian name Arsalan. We live together in Australia.'

The thin man continued, with Reza translating: 'Is your husband the same Ruslan Hodorov who served in the Zionist military? The brother of Mikhael Hodorov?'

I gulped. They knew about my husband's military service; they knew the name of his brother. 'Y-yes,' I said. 'My husband was born in Russia, and he lives in Australia. He spent a few years in Israel as a teenager, that's all. They were refugees, after the fall of the Soviet Union...' I trailed off.

Reza was translating my English into Farsi for this new interrogator. Some of the other men in the room were talking among themselves.

A young man approached and handed me a piece of paper. On it was written the details of several of my email accounts, some of

them defunct. I noticed that my main personal account was not on the list. 'Passwords,' he commanded, handing me a pen.

Another split second in which to make a decision.

I looked at Reza. 'My emails are my private business.'

'If you don't give us your passwords,' he replied coldly, 'it means you're not cooperating with us. If you don't cooperate with us, you don't go home. Simple.'

I wrote down the passwords for my rarely used university alumni account and an old Gmail address which I used to give out to companies and online retailers. I gave them an incorrect password for my university staff account. The youth silently took the piece of paper and left.

There was some movement at the back of the room, and two or three of the men shifted towards the door.

Mohammad Reza approached. 'Give me your passport!' he commanded.

I stood up and rummaged through my handbag. Willing my fingers not to shake, I handed over my passport.

'Come with me,' he muttered, and the female guard beside me rose and once again took my elbow. I wrested it away from her.

'Where are we going?' I asked as Mohammad Reza strode out of the room. I felt the tears rising once more and looked back at Reza, confused.

'Go with them,' he said. 'We're not finished with you yet.'

One of the men in the group appeared to be from airport security. He was young and tall, with thick black hair and a goatee. Unlike the others, he was wearing a uniform. He led us to passport control, where my passport was stamped by a clerk. I tried desperately to catch his eye, but he avoided my gaze. We then proceeded to a different office, this one open to public view via a long glass wall. Various uniformed officers were sitting behind desks piled high with files. I was instructed to sit down on a plastic chair and wait.

I waited a long time. Officers came and went from the room, and my captors engaged in lengthy discussions with their uniformed counterparts. I was exhausted. My brain could no longer compute

what was happening, and I no longer cared. All I wanted was to go to sleep in a warm bed, and wake up again to find these past few hours had been nothing but a bad dream. To start my day over again and to catch my flight out of Iran, like I was supposed to.

I suddenly realised I was weeping, and that tears were streaming unchecked down my face. I sniffed, and Mohammad Reza looked up. His gaze rested on me for a moment, then he turned away and continued his discussions. I pulled a tissue out of my pocket, ashamed of my inability to get a grip on my fear. *Be strong*, I told myself. *It will all blow over. They will realise you're just a researcher, and in the end they will deport you. Maybe that's what they're doing now with your passport.* The thought cheered me, and my tears abated.

A few minutes later, the airport security officer with the goatee re-entered the room and took my passport from the desk of one of his colleagues. The female guard motioned for me to stand, and we were once again on the move.

Instead of heading for the departure lounge, we returned to what I now understood was an airport interrogation room. I resumed my seat next to Reza, unsure what my trip through passport control and back had meant. I noticed that my handbag had disappeared from my chair.

Reza, noticing my red eyes, said quietly, 'Don't cry. If you cooperate, I promise we will send you home in the end.'

At that moment Mohammad Reza appeared carrying a tray with an enormous piece of chocolate cake. He put it on the table in front of me, along with a large takeaway cup of black coffee. Confused, I looked up at him. 'Is this for me?' He nodded, then strode back to his former post at the edge of the room. I stammered a thank you, and sipped the coffee gratefully. The cake I left untouched; I was worried I wouldn't be able to keep it down.

The small thin man was back, and appeared to regard the cake with displeasure. He started barking out questions in rapid Farsi, once more forcing Reza to translate. Why did I visit the Zionist regime? What was the real reason for my trip to Iran? Why was I interviewing Bahrainis in Iran? Had I visited Bahrain? Why wasn't I arrested when I travelled to Bahrain? Why did I want to study Islam?

I tried to explain that I had written my PhD about Bahrain's Shi'a community, and agreed with the position of the Iranian government that Shi'a citizens were discriminated against within that country. I had published articles advocating for the rights of the Bahraini Shi'a, I told them, and I'd been invited to participate in a seminar on Shi'a Islam by an Iranian university. Yes, I had visited Israel in the course of my studies, but I had studied Arabic as well as Hebrew and had spent time in many Arab countries too. This was the wrong thing to say, it would turn out, but I didn't realise it at the time.

After what felt like hours of questioning, the men rose abruptly from their seats. The clock on the wall indicated it was almost midnight; my flight had long since departed. Mohammad Reza appeared displeased. 'You didn't cooperate!' he growled. 'You gave us fake passwords. We go to the prison!'

I was so tired by now that I no longer cared. 'Okay, let's go then,' I snapped, adding in Arabic, 'Enough already, *yallah*, let's go.'

His green eyes widened and he said something back to me in Farsi. I looked at him uncomprehendingly.

'I knew you speak Farsi!' he said in English, his lips curving into a triumphant smile. 'I knew it!'

This too was an important moment, but again I didn't realise it. I just rolled my eyes in exasperation and was escorted from the room by the female guard. Outside in the corridor, my bags had been slashed open at the seams, their contents spilling out onto the floor.



'Excuse me, sir.' I tapped Mohammad Reza lightly on the shoulder from the back seat of the car. He flinched, and I remembered too late that in Iran women should not touch men unless they were relatives. 'Where are we going?'

'Have you heard of Jason Rezaian?' Mohammad Reza said, without removing his eyes from the windscreen in front of him.

'No,' I replied.

'He's an American spy. If you don't be careful, you could end up like him.'

'I don't know him,' I said, 'but I'm not a spy. I just want to be allowed to leave the country and go home.'

'You are lucky I'm here,' continued Mohammad Reza. 'These guys' – he gestured towards Reza, who was driving – 'wanted to take you straight to prison, however, I called my boss and he has approved a different approach. If you don't cooperate, though, we will have no choice but to send you there.'

The lights of Tehran illuminated empty suburban streets, the occasional vending stall or kebab shop still open for business. It must have been past one in the morning. Any time we encountered traffic, which even at 1 am was a regular occurrence in congested central Tehran, Reza switched on a police siren and the other cars moved out of the way.

We crossed into the city's leafy north, where the shops and apartments were noticeably more opulent, the vibe more sophisticated. Reza said something in Farsi, and Mohammad Reza replied. The latter then turned to me and said, 'We are supposed to be blindfolding you at this point. Please put your head down between your legs.'

After a few minutes, we drove into the underground car park of an apartment complex and took an elevator to the second floor. I was ushered into a spacious and modern-looking suite and was instructed to take my shoes off at the door. The living area was divided by a temporary partition, on one side of which was an assortment of film equipment, including several cameras mounted on tripods, a lighting umbrella and a green screen. A number of doors led off a central passage towards bedrooms and a makeshift office, where I was installed behind a battered wooden desk, with a female guard.

Here, hungry and sleep-deprived, I oscillated between adrenaline-fuelled indignation and weary indifference. I was questioned for hours by a succession of men, at times in Farsi with Reza's translation, or in English by Reza or Mohammad Reza themselves. They seemed to have decided that I was a 'fake

academic' and that my job at the University of Melbourne was merely a cover story. To prove I actually had a PhD, I logged into the university's library catalogue and showed them my doctoral thesis. This only led them to assert that the university must be a front for espionage activities.

I sat through the shifts of four different female guards, one of whom had been called in at the last minute and brought her child along with her; I could hear his voice as he played in an adjoining room. I might have been struck by the strangeness of bringing a toddler along to an interrogation, but by this point I was beyond exhausted. At times both the guard and I fell asleep in our chairs, our heads resting on the rough wooden desk in front of us.

At around 6 am, I was allowed to take an hour-long nap. I was given a blanket and told to lie on the floor in the living room, among the film equipment. It felt as though I'd only closed my eyes for a second when I was startled awake by Mohammad Reza yelling at me. 'Get up!' My hijab had fallen off my head and my hair was in disarray; my skin felt greasy and I badly wanted a shower. I stood up and stumbled into the interrogation room. This time I had to explain a series of emails the men had found on my computer. They had evidently been using my nap time to analyse my email accounts. Periodically men would enter the room with printouts of new material of interest for the interrogator. I felt drunk on lack of sleep and hunger; I had worn out my reserves of adrenaline and even my fear had dulled to numbness.

I was dozing between sessions when Reza entered the room and told me that we were leaving. A female guard was instantly by my side, and we took the elevator to the car park, where once again I was directed into the back seat of the car.

I must have nodded off, because I was suddenly prodded awake by my escort. I opened my eyes to find we were in a residential street in central Tehran. Judging by the position of the sun, it was around midday.

The thin man who had interrogated me at the airport appeared and led the way into the lobby of a small hotel sandwiched between apartment buildings. An English sign above the door ironically

declared it to be the Ideal Hotel, which optimistically purported to be four stars. A contingent of men stood with me in the lobby and conversed with the receptionist, a young woman wearing copious make-up and a loose hijab positioned far back on her head. They checked me in and my battered suitcases were produced, now held together with duct tape. Reza handed me a room key and told me to get some sleep. Under no circumstances was I to leave the hotel, he informed me. I could leave my room only for breakfast, which was served in the hotel basement. If I wanted food at other times, I was to call reception. I should expect them tomorrow morning, he said.

And suddenly, I was alone.



My room was on the top floor of the hotel. I stopped only to take off my shoes before stumbling to the bedroom and collapsing on the bed fully clothed. I instantly fell asleep.

I woke around six o'clock that afternoon, groggy and confused. My joints ached, my head was pounding, and I felt drained of all emotion other than a dull sense of anxiety deep in my chest. I went to the window and gazed at the foot traffic on the street below, looking for signs of the men who had brought me here. Were they watching? Was that man leaning against the fence on the other side of the street one of them? Were there cameras in this hotel room? I inspected everything – the television, the light fittings, the smoke alarms – but I didn't really know what I was looking for. I found an old aluminium kettle and some teabags, and lit the gas stove in the small kitchenette. It had been almost twenty-four hours since I'd last had a proper meal.

My luggage was in disarray. They had trawled through my possessions and removed all my electronic devices and travel documents. My notebooks of research material were also missing. I found some clean clothes and took a shower, willing myself to relax. *The interrogation is over. You're in a hotel, you're safe now.* But deep down I wasn't so sure. It didn't feel like they'd finished with me yet.

I called reception and tried to order food. There was no menu, and the only dish I knew in Farsi was kebab. Once it arrived, however, I found I couldn't keep it down.

The living room of the suite featured a few shabby lounge chairs arranged in a U-shape around a television set and a glass coffee table. There was nothing to read, other than a trilingual Qur'an which looked as though it had never been opened. A small dining table and chairs occupied the space between the front door and kitchenette. Along with my bedroom and a bathroom cubicle, this space would be my world for the next week. At the time I found it restrictive; little did I know how much worse it could get.

I spent many long hours searching for ways to occupy my time. The only English channel available was Press TV, a state-run news outfit targeting international viewers sympathetic to Iranian interests. The content was heavily propagandistic and most of the presenters of the channel's news and current affairs programming did not even bother to appear impartial and unbiased. Conspiracy theories were heavily promoted and the West was blamed for any and every misfortune which befell Iran and its allies. I did not see myself as an enemy of Iran, but after hours of watching Press TV I began to understand that all Westerners were automatically suspect, especially a person like me, who had visited Israel in the past and whose husband held an Israeli passport. I thought I had exercised due diligence before I accepted the invitation to attend the academic seminar: I had consulted widely among university colleagues and had been vetted and approved for my visa in advance by the Iranian embassy in Canberra. However, at the end of the day I had not properly understood the risks. While it was still possible to glean information about what was going on in the world from Press TV's news broadcasts, the thought that the twisted worldview it promoted reflected that of my captors chilled me to the core. What hope did I have of convincing these men that I had come to Iran with a genuine interest in learning more about their society, religion and culture? Was it naive to hope that they would honour their promise to send me home?