

# 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, 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 in Iran, 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, are 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 – something.



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 the 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.*