

VEILED
ROMANCE

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VEILED ROMANCE

**A PERSIAN TALE OF
PASSION AND REVOLUTION**



By Simon Sion Ebrahimi

They smell your breath,
lest you might have said I love you.
They smell your heart.
These are strange times, my darling.
The butchers are stationed at
eachcrossroads with bloody clubs and cleavers.

*Ahmad Shamloo,
contemporary Persian poet*

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CHAPTER 1

January 30, 1980

It is my second night in this place. My cell is as dark and cold as a crypt. Yesterday morning, they took me, blindfolded, directly from the Central Revolutionary Committee and threw me in here. I pulled off the filthy cloth and waited for my eyes to get used to the semidarkness. Eventually I saw dust motes dancing in the narrow band of light filtering into the cell from a barred window at the top of the wall. Directly opposite that solitary window was a heavy metal door.

My cell is no more than ten feet wide by ten feet long. It is infested with cockroaches and the occasional mouse. The air is cold and damp. Shoved up against the wall beneath the window is an old, disintegrating mattress with a threadbare blanket. My sharp sense of smell, which I had always thought of as a blessing, has become a curse, for everything here smells foul—my own body and clothing, my sorry excuse for a bed, the air, and more than anything else, my *pasdar*—the member of the revolutionary guard—who is my jailer. I can actually sense him approaching from his skunk stench. That is the name I have given him in my mind, Skunk, although

he has a name tag...Well, not exactly a name tag but a piece of fabric sewn to his jacket with “Zaki” handwritten on it. Skunk’s khaki camouflage revolutionary uniform is several sizes too large. He wears a canvas gun belt with a pistol in a flapped holster. He is short with a small head. Although he has a thick beard, only a few strings of whiskers curl above his lips. His eyes are tiny and yellow-brown. When he speaks, his high-pitched words whistle out from between the gaps of his mossy teeth.

I made Skunk’s acquaintance yesterday morning, after I spent an hour at the Central Revolutionary Committee while being interrogated by a mullah and a little, bearded man who acted as the stenographer at my hearing. When the hearing was over and my guilt—which was a foregone conclusion—was officially transcribed, I was blindfolded and transported here.

“What have you done, sister?” Skunk asked, sitting beside me as we made our journey. I fought back my nausea from riding blindfolded in the bouncing, swaying vehicle.

“Nothing,” I said as I felt his hand moving up my thigh. “I had a fight with this communist man who wanted to touch me.”

He swiftly pulled his hand away. “But you are an anti-revolutionary?”

“No. I’m an observant Muslim woman.”

He spoke no more. Finally, we arrived wherever I am now, and he threw me in this cell and locked the door. He returned perhaps half an hour later with a tray on which was a piece of bread and a tin cup of water. He put it on the stained, grimy floor. “Your breakfast. Sit down and eat, Sister Zahra.”

“Zahra” was the name given to me at the Central Revolutionary Committee by my interrogator, who also warned me that I was to forget my own name, that if I dared to even say it to anyone, including my pasdar, I would be executed. Obeying Skunk’s instruction, I sat, gnawed on the stale hunk of bread, and listened as he laid out my circumstances.

“This place used to be one of the many hidden jails of SAVAK, the Shah’s CIA, may Allah erase his name from the face of the earth,” he began. “He had built hundreds—what am I saying?—thousands and thousands of these with the help of the Great Satan America and the filthy Jews’ regime, the occupiers of the land of our Palestinian brothers. But now that we have been blessed with the first government of Allah on the earth, we are putting all the counterrevolutionaries, the sinners and the enemies of Imam Khomeini, in these houses converted to prisons. Especially whores like you. And soon we will start helping our Palestinian brothers to kick the Jews out of Palestine and...”

I nodded to humor him as I sat shaking like a willow tree in the wind.

“Get undressed,” he abruptly ordered.

“What?”

“You’re all *jendeh*, whores,” he muttered, walking toward me. He unbuckled his gun belt and carefully tossed it behind him into a corner of the cell. “Yes, you and your mother and her mother were all prostitutes. Your mother is the bride of a thousand grooms, and your father, a faggot who sleeps under donkeys.”

He began to fumble at his trousers. He seemed to be having trouble with his zipper. Despite my terror—or maybe because of it—I had the craziest impulse to burst out laughing,

even though to do so would certainly mean serious physical injury or even death at the hands of this monster.

“What are you waiting for?” he yelled, charged toward me, and yanked off my hijab, my headscarf. He grabbed me by my hair and flung me onto the dirty floor, then straddled me and tried to rip off my shirt.

I screamed, clinging as hard as I could to my top. He put the palm of one hand on my mouth and pressed his other hand against my throat. “Shut up before I shut you up!” he snarled. With every word, he tightened his grip on my throat. “You can scream as much as you want, no one will hear you in this prison. Now take off your shirt, or I will kill you and leave your body here to rot!”

Unable to breathe, panicked, I cried out with my last exhalation, “*Allah fayaghfar men al yasha va yoazeb man yasha, va Allah ala kole sheian ghadir.*”

He lurched off me. “You know the verses of the Koran and you know them in Arabic?” he asked, sounding incredulous.

“And Allah forgives or punishes, for only He is the Almighty,” I muttered the translation. I took advantage of his confusion to sit up and cover my hair with my scarf.

“But...but...whores like you have no right to even utter sacred verses!” he growled. Nevertheless, he moved back all the way to the door of the cell. “The holy words of our *Kalam-Allah* from *your* mouth?” He shook his head in disapproval as he lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. “That’s a blasphemy. Where did they teach you this, in the Great Satan’s CIA?”

“No,” I replied. “I told you. I am an observant Muslim woman, and I pray—”

“Even though you have been to America, you know the Koran?”

“Yes.” I folded the moldy blanket from my mattress to use it as my prayer rug. “Come to think of it, I haven’t recited my morning prayer yet. I don’t know Kiblah, the direction of Mecca. Which way is it, please?”

Looking dumbfounded, Skunk pointed to the door. I laid the blanket in that direction and sat on it in a prayer pose. “Allah be with you, brother. May I ask you to bring me a prayer seal this afternoon?” And before he was able to answer, I began my *namaz*. “*Ghol hova Allah ahad, Allah...*” And as I murmured my prayer, the genesis of finding a way to escape this dungeon began to take shape in my mind. The first thing I needed to do was ascertain the whereabouts of my jail. But how?

Skunk hurriedly retrieved his gun belt. As he fumbled with his keys to unlock the cell door I gestured that he should stay until I was done. He froze, as I suspected he would, for even one as ignorant as he would know it was a major sin to interrupt any prayer.

“I need to go to the bathroom, Brother Zaki,” I said when I was done.

“Very well,” he grumbled as he opened the door. “Follow me.”

We left my cell for a long corridor dimly lit by three bulbs hanging from the ceiling. We passed another metal door like mine on my left and one on my right. Two more such doors were at the corridor’s end. One I supposed was the way out of this corridor of cells. The other turned out to be the toilet.

“Go in,” he said. I walked into the filthy place and he began to follow me in.

“Brother Zaki!” I said patiently. “Tell the believers to cover their private parts. That is purer for them. Verily, Allah

is all-aware of what they do.’ That’s from An-Noor, chapter twenty-four, verse thirty.” I stared at him obstinately.

“Shut your filthy mouth!” he yelled at me. I heard other voices—those of two other women—coming from the cells along the corridor

“Allah Akbar...There’s another woman...Please be kind to her, Brother Zaki.”

“You shut up too,” Skunk cried, then turned to me and said, “All right. I will turn my back to you, but I am not going to let you shut the door.”

And that is what he did.



CHAPTER 2

Leila Omid. This is my name. I'm the daughter of Aria Omid, who is my *pedar*, my dad, and Mitra Hormozi, who is my *madar*, my mother. Pedar is the son of Major General Bahman Omid, who was deputy minister of war to both Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah—the Shah—until over a year ago, in February 1979, when he was overthrown by the Iranian Revolution.

“At the time your mother and I married in 1953,” I remember Pedar telling me, “I was a medical student at Tehran University. I was twenty-six and she, a nursing student, was twenty-two. Our marriage was not easy. My in-laws—who were from Jewbareh, the Jewish ghetto in Esfahan—were resolute-ly against their daughter marrying a gentile. They would say, ‘A dove flies with a dove, and an eagle with an eagle.’ I volunteered to pretend to convert to Judaism, but it wasn’t good enough for them.

“Pretend, Father?” I asked.

Pedar smiled. “Don’t get ahead of my story,” he said. “Anyway, ‘To marry my daughter,’ your grandfather asserted, ‘you have to be of Jewish seed...to have been conceived in a Jewish mother’s womb.’ And so, at the risk of putting my

father's high military position in jeopardy," Pedar explained to me, "I gave them the shock of their lives. I told them that I was born Jewish.

"I swore your maternal grandparents to secrecy and then revealed my family's great secret: that my father, General Omid, was the great-grandson of Rabbi Hezekiah, of Mashhad. I explained how in the early nineteenth century, during the reign of the Qajar dynasty, the Jewish community of Mashhad was pressured to convert to Islam. Many Jews at first resisted, until the executions started. The elders of the community, Rabbi Hezekiah among them, told all the two hundred Jewish families that God would forgive them if they should pretend to convert to Islam, a faith they then pretended to practice. In the meantime, they took their true faith underground. Still indentified as *Jadidi*—new Islam converts—they named their sons Ali, Hussein, and Mohammad, but gave those boys secret Jewish names. They even went to Mecca and Medina on required Islamic pilgrimages.

"And all that while, within the basements of their houses, they made hidden synagogues," my father continued. "They bought meat from Muslim butchers, which they gave to their pets, and slaughtered the sheep and goats they bought on the sly according to kosher laws. They hid their daughters at home until they came of age and then married them to members of their own community. They lived under these harsh circumstances until the constitutional revolution in the early nineteenth century. In the meantime, a few daring community members rose to claim high government positions—overtly

as devout Muslims. None of them, however, ceased their ties to Judaism. As would be expected, Jewish rituals fell away, but one thing they insisted upon: that their children should marry within their ancestral faith.”

In counterpoint to Pedar’s side of the story, Madar told me how her parents eventually came around to supporting the marriage, but they insisted on a Jewish wedding. How to marry the deputy minister of war’s son according to Jewish tradition in Iran became the next hurdle. Again, my paternal grandfather, the general, came up with the solution.

“Your grandfather, the general, arranged for both families to go to London,” my mother recounted. “There, we were married by a rabbi.”

In 1957, two years after I was born, Pedar built a modest country house in Tabas, a small town on the edge of the Lute Desert near Yazd Province. Here, we spend most of our winter holidays, exchanging the cold of Tehran for the region’s mild tropical weather. In the middle of Tabas is a source of fresh water surrounded by sturdy palm and willow trees. Wheat farms, vineyards, woods, and, ultimately, the vast desert extend out from this oasis, like the planets that orbit the sun. I remember Tabas so vividly. How when I was a teenager I would spend my afternoons by the oasis, gazing at the reflections of the willow trees on the surface of the tiny lake. I took long walks along the paths that snaked between the tall yellow wheat stacks and green vineyards, all the way to the outskirts of the village. There, I would sit and watch the silhouettes of camel caravans crossing the tawny sand dunes against the fiery backdrop of the setting sun.

My parents' priority for my two brothers and me was always education. Reward commensurate to academic achievement, as Pedar liked to say. And that was why when my parents sent me to America to study, they were adamant that I be admitted to a respectable university.