



The Sheikh's Fake Bride Scheme

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Description: He's offering her everything she's ever wanted,

She just has to marry a stranger, and lie to a king...

Keira Harding is from a racing family, but she never saw herself behind the wheel. Having forged a career behind the scenes, she's the best at what she does, and hungry for success.

When a handsome stranger asks to shadow her, she assumes he's just another fan. The last thing she's expecting is for him to tell her he's a sheikh!

Kareem Nusaybah can be very persuasive when he sets his mind to it, which is exactly why when he proposes a potentially dangerous scheme, Keira finds herself listening to what he has to say.

He wants to launch a new motorsports event and make his country the new world stage for racing, and the pay he's offering is more than generous, but there's just one condition – they need to get married first. And the most important part? No matter what happens, the king cannot find out...

Keira knows the sensible thing would be to run the other way, but she's had enough time in the shadows; she can handle a short-term marriage if the payoff is as good as he promises it will be.

She thinks she can keep things professional with the dangerously charming prince. But as the two get to know each other better, all these certainties begin to crumble, and Keira wonders if what should have been the adventure of a lifetime, is actually the biggest mistake she's ever made...

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CHAPTER 1

KAREEM

“Let’s make this quick, Kareem. I have a number of meetings today.”

Sheikh Kareem Nusaybah kept his face composed as his father, King Hassan, settled into his seat. He knew better than to show any emotion, even though internally he was already boiling. He didn’t feel that he should have had to schedule a meeting to talk to his father, but it was the only way he could truly hope to be taken seriously and he knew it. His father had written him off a long time ago. After all, Kareem’s two elder brothers were ahead of him in line for the throne, so presumably there was no reason his father needed to take him seriously.

He had done this his father’s way, though — he’d scheduled a meeting. And now that he had done that, he was determined to be heard out. He could see his father checking his watch, already with his mind on therealmeetings that lay ahead, but Kareem wasn’t going to be dismissed so easily.

“I’ve been thinking about our economic problems, Father,” he said.

“We haven’t got economic problems,” his father scoffed. “Our coffers are as full as they’ve ever been. How do you think you’re able to afford that expensive car you drive all over the city?”

“I’m not talking about our family’s finances,” Kareem said, frustrated. Only his father could have such an inflated sense of his own importance that he would think of

his own finances as the economy. “I’m talking about the well-being of our country as a whole.”

His father raised his eyebrows. “What would you know about Qalmar’s economy?”

“I know that unemployment is at an all-time high,” Kareem said.

“Did you read that on the internet?”

“Only because you don’t share the royal briefings with me. I’m sure it’s been mentioned in there.”

“You don’t need to read the briefings. Besides, they’re classified.”

“And I have clearance. I am your son, you know.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” his father said. “And you don’t need to worry about the economy, either. These things have a way of sorting themselves out if you give them some time.”

Kareem shook his head. “We’re the leaders of this country, Father. We can’t just sit around and wait for the economy to stabilize. We owe the people better than that.”

“Well, I don’t know what you want to do about it,” his father said. “You’re not an economist, Kareem.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I can’t have ideas. And that’s why I called you here today.” Kareem took a deep breath. “I think we should host a motorsports event.”

His father stared at him for a long moment — a moment during which Kareem actually dared to have some hope.

Then he burst out laughing, and Kareem's heart sank.

"I should have known!" he exclaimed. "I should have known that this would just be the same thing it always is with you — another opportunity to talk about race cars. You'll never grow up, Kareem. This is the interest of a little boy, not a man who might someday be in charge of a nation."

"I never will be in charge of Qalmar, Father," Kareem reminded his father, feeling stung. "You tell me that all the time."

"Yes, and thank God for that fact. Thank God I have your brother Amir to inherit my throne," Kareem's father said. "You're unfit to lead a country if the response you have to an economic crisis is race cars."

"So you admit that there's a crisis."

"Kareem, I don't want to discuss this with you. I have a meeting with my financial minister — he is the one who will help put the economy to rights." The king began to rise to his feet.

"Wait," Kareem insisted. "At least tell your financial minister what I suggested, Father. He'll see the sense in it even if you don't. All right, I have a passion for motorsports, and you don't that's a suitable interest for a man of my station. We can disagree on that. But you must see how a major event would boost tourism and elevate us on the world stage."

"We would be a laughingstock."

"No, we wouldn't! Many nations have events like this, and nobody laughs at them."

"The nations you're talking about are global superpowers, Kareem. Titans of trade

and innovation. They can afford to do something frivolous every now and again. But if this is the way Qalmar appears on the world stage — if this becomes the thing we are best known for — we will be a joke, and I won't have that for my country."

"You're not even going to hear my proposal, Father? I worked hard on this, you know."

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“I’ve heard enough. You could have saved yourself some time, frankly, if you had told me what you were going to propose. You can’t solve everything with race cars, Kareem.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Just let me show you?—”

“No.” King Hassan rose to his feet. “That’s enough. You know, when you called me here, when you said it was a business matter, I thought you might actually be ready to take the tech job Amir has been offering you since the day you left university.”

“I told you I have no interest in tech, Father. I’ve told you many times.”

“Yes, you want to be a race car driver. I know.”

“I don’t want to drive. But I do have a passion for racing, and I don’t understand what’s so wrong with that.”

“I know you don’t.” His father started for the door. “You come and see me when you’re ready to take your future seriously, Kareem — but I won’t hold my breath for that day to come any time soon, I can tell you that.”

He saw himself out.

Kareem was left behind, staring at the door in shock. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that his father hadn’t been willing to hear him out — when had his father ever done anything of the kind? Yet he had to admit that he had hoped. He had believed in this idea — he still believed in it. He wanted to think it could work.

It stung that his father hadn't listened to a word of it. He had assumed from the very start that Kareem was being foolhardy and childish. He hadn't even given Kareem's pitch a chance, and now all the planning and pondering would be for nothing.

And then Kareem paused.

Would it be for nothing?

All right, so his father hadn't agreed to his idea. Why did that matter? He wasn't asking his father to fund the motorsports event he'd wanted to throw. Yes, he had hoped the national treasury might sponsor it, but in the end, it was supposed to be a boon to the economy. And that meant he ought to be able to pull it off without costing the country money.

He could do that. It wouldn't be as grand as what he had originally envisioned but he could finance this event. At least for its first year he could manage. And after this year, his father would see what a good idea it had been and would want to get involved in next year's race. Yes, that was it. That was how he was going to make this work.

The Spritzer Cup was set to take place next week in the United States — already, Kareem's mind was racing, his thoughts rich with plans. He had wanted to go anyway, but he hadn't been able to think of a good enough reason — one that would justify leaving Qalmar against what he knew his father's wishes would be. Now, though, he had his reason.

The top talent in the world would be at the Spritzer Cup. Kareem would go to scout, to see who was currently the best of the best. He would recruit top racers — and not just racers, but players behind the scenes — to help him put on his event. That way, he could make sure that his event was one everyone in the world would be talking about.

The Qalmar Cup, he thought, envisioning the name in lights. No, maybe the Nusaybah Cup? His father would hate that, but if Kareem was honest, that thought only made it appeal to him more.

He had met with his father in the executive wing of the palace, which was just as troubling as anything else — why he had to meet with his own father here, instead of in the residential quarters, was difficult to contemplate. But Kareem was used to this sort of thing from his father, and at least it didn't catch him by surprise anymore. He made his way through the halls and back out to the front of the building, where a valet had already brought his car around for him.

“We can arrange for a driver to take you wherever you'd like to go, Sheikh Kareem,” the valet said.

It was the same offer his father's valets always made to him. Kareem had to remember not to be angry at them. They were only following orders. Even though he had answered this question a hundred times, they were beholden to follow his father's orders. They couldn't simply decide to stop asking.

“It's all right,” he said. “I'll drive myself.”

The valet handed him the keys and Kareem got into the car. As soon as he was behind the wheel, he began to feel better. He knew his father saw his choice to drive himself places as an extension of his childish obsession with cars, but that wasn't it. Driving was one of the few things Kareem had the freedom to do in his life that made him feel as if he was in control. He knew he would never give it up.

The streets of Qalmar were quiet at this part of the afternoon. Everyone was at work — or at least, those who had jobs were. Kareem couldn't help noticing the people on the street, mere blocks away from the palace. The number of unhoused people here in Qalmar was on the rise, no doubt thanks to the flagging economy. Something really

did need to be done.

His resolve intensified. Yes, this motorsports event would be a good time for him, an indulgence of a hobby he had always loved. He could admit to that. But that didn't mean it wasn't a good idea.

He pressed a button on the dashboard of his car and was treated to the rhythmic tones of a dialing phone. A moment later, a pleasant female voice answered. "How may I assist you, Sheikh Kareem?"

"I need a flight, Fatima," Kareem told his assistant.

"A flight?" Fatima repeated.

"I need you to get me a plane. Not my father's. He's not going to approve of this. One of the other royal planes — a small one will do. Something I can take without raising too many questions."

"I'll make the arrangements," Fatima agreed. "But where are you going?"

"I'm going to Las Vegas, Nevada. And I need to leave tomorrow."

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If Fatima was fazed, she didn't show it. She was a wonderful assistant. "Very well," she said. "I'll make sure everything is in order."

"Thank you, Fatima. I knew I'd be able to count on you."

Kareem ended the call. In spite of how poorly the day had gone, he found a smile threatening to take over his face.

He was going to the States. He was going to see the Spritzer Cup.

And what was more, he was going to achieve his lifelong dream of bringing motorsports to Qalmar. With or without his father's approval.

Feeling considerably better than he had when the meeting had ended, he drove the rest of the way to the estate where he lived — smaller than the homes of either of his elder brothers, much smaller than the palace, but perfect for Kareem's needs.

He had preparations to make and packing to do. And he needed to get a good night's sleep for tomorrow's journey — he never did sleep very well on planes, and he wanted to be rested so that he would be in good shape when he landed in Las Vegas.

Kareem knew he was being bold, but he had never been more certain of anything in his life — this was going to be a great success.

CHAPTER 2

KEIRA

“Make sure the press area is set up,” Keira called to the members of her staff. “They’re going to want a place to interview the drivers, and I’m not going to have them trying to grab people for interviews in the middle of walkways and disrupting foot traffic — that’s right, over there is great. Has anyone checked the merchandise stands? I heard they were out of T-shirts.”

“I don’t know how you always stay on top of three things at once,” her intern, Meghan, said, grinning at her.

“Well, I’ve been doing this a long time,” Keira said. “It probably seems harder than it is because this is your first year working for me. But I’ve got it down by now.”

“What should I be doing?” Meghan asked. “I feel like I’m not being useful right now.”

That was probably a fair read of the situation, though it was far from being Meghan’s fault in any way. Keira always found it difficult to rely on interns knowing how new they were to the racing scene.

Still, Meghan was good, and Keira owed her a chance to learn the ropes of event management. “Why don’t you go check with merchandise?” she asked. “See if they still need those shirts, and then when you’re done with that?—”

“Did I hear someone was looking for a task?”

Keira closed her eyes briefly and forced herself not to groan aloud. “What are you doing out here, Kevin?” she asked. “Don’t you have a race to prepare for?”

Her older brother sauntered into view. His race suit was unzipped to the waist and hung loose, revealing the fitted tank top he wore beneath it. He carried his helmet under one arm.

Keira found it difficult not to roll her eyes. He always had to show off. This was classic.

“Well, it’s a while until my heat,” Kevin said. “It seemed like a perfect time to meet with some fans.” He smiled at Meghan. “Are you one of my fans?”

Meghan beamed at him.

“She’s my intern, Kevin,” Keira said sharply. “Believe it or not, not everyone is here to fawn over you. She has work to do.”

“Well, maybe I can help out.” Kevin grinned at Meghan. “Did I hear something about merchandise?”

“I’m supposed to go make sure they have the T-shirts they need,” Meghan said, her voice distinctly more high-pitched than it usually was.

“I’ll go with you,” Kevin said with a smile. “I can sign some product. That will be fun, right? I’ll even get them to give you a free hat.”

“Kevin, you’re not allowed to give away merchandise,” Keira called after him, but the two of them were already walking away. She gritted her teeth. Meghan getting a free shirt was fine, but it would be just like her brother to start passing them out to every pretty girl who came by, and they couldn’t have that.

It was her family’s fault that Kevin had such an inflated sense of his own importance, she thought as she made her way back over to the press area. It was Keira’s own choice that she had always been involved in racing — the family passion — in a behind-the-scenes capacity. She loved event planning and had no interest in getting behind the wheel of a car. The trouble was that a hallmark of a great event organizer was not being noticed. Her brother was the flashy one, speeding around the track.

Keira's role was, and would always be, far more subtle.

For the most part, she was content with that. But it wouldn't have killed them to recognize her hard work once in a while, and it might have deflated Kevin's head a little bit.

"Excuse me, are you in charge here?"

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The voice, breaking into her thoughts, spoke with an accent she didn't recognize. She looked up and found herself face-to-face with a man who had big dark eyes, thick hair, and dark skin — he looked Middle Eastern, she thought. And by the sound of that accent, he was a long way from home.

It had stirred something in her. He was attractive, she realized — and it had been a long time since she had thought of any guy in those terms. She was too busy to consider dating, especially when every time she did put herself out there, it ended in disaster.

"I'm Keira," she told the man, extending her hand to shake. "I'm one of the event organizers, yes. Are you a journalist?"

"No." He cocked his head to one side. "What gave you that idea?"

"You're in the press area." Was that not obvious? She would have thought the microphones and cameras would have given it away. "Where are you trying to be?"

"I'm not really sure," he admitted. "I'm interested in the way this event is run. I'm wondering if you can tell me a little more about how you put things together and what your role is here."

She stared at him. What did he think this was, some sort of job interview? "I'm a little busy," she told him. "I haven't got time to explain everything I do to keep things running."

"Just a short explanation, then," he said, as if she hadn't just told him no.

“You’re going to have to return to your seat,” she told him. “You shouldn’t even be in this part of the arena.”

“Oh, I don’t have a seat,” he said. “I’m not here to see the race, exactly.”

“This is a ticketed event,” she told him. “You can’t even get in here if you don’t have a ticket. Let me see yours.”

He shook his head and spread his hands. “I don’t have one.”

“Then how did you get in?”

“Your door guard likes money.”

“My door guard —are you talking about the gate agent?”

“The man with the...” He made a gesture with his hand. After a moment, Keira figured it out — he was miming using one of the handheld ticket scanners.

“So let me see if I’ve got this straight,” she said. “You bribed your way in here?”

“I paid more than the cost of a ticket.”

“You didn’t pay it to the organization, you put it in the pocket of the man working the gate.”

“Who arguably needs it more than a racing organization worth billions.”

“Is that what you’re here to talk to me about?”

“No,” he said. “I want to know the details about how this event is run. That’s what I

came here to learn.”

She threw her hands up. “Why?”

“I’m interested,” he said simply. “I’m an interested party.”

“You’re an interested con artist, is what you are. If you really cared about the race, you would have bought a ticket — which you can obviously afford based on the story you just told me — and come in legitimately like everyone else. The event isn’t even sold out. Why didn’t you go through the proper channels?”

He shrugged. “It didn’t seem that important.”

“Oh my God.”

“Look, I don’t want to bother you,” he said.

“Well, so much for that.”

“I’m serious. Let me shadow you today,” he suggested. “Just let me follow you around while you do your work. Maybe ask a few questions, but nothing more intrusive than that. You won’t even know I’m here.”

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“I definitely will.”

“All right, you will, but it won’t be a problem. I promise I’ll be less annoying than you’re worried about. I really just want to understand what goes into an event like this — what someone like you needs to do in order to keep it running smoothly.”

Keira hesitated for a moment, torn.

On one hand, she really didn’t want to give this man what he wanted. God knew he didn’t deserve it. He had handled this all completely inappropriately, and she should really be calling security to drag him out of here.

But something was stopping her.

She didn’t want to believe it was the fact that he was good-looking, although that was on her mind. She couldn’t help noticing him — but then, she told herself, nobody could have helped that. It didn’t mean that she was forgetting how to be a professional.

No, there was something else about him — something that enticed her to let him stick around in spite of the fact that he was deeply annoying, had bribed his way in here, and was definitely going to get in her way today.

It was the way he was looking at her, she decided after a moment’s consideration. She wasn’t proud of it, but he had won her over by looking at her as if she was interesting and by talking to her like her job was important. When was the last time someone had paid more attention to her than to Kevin? Whoever this guy was,

whatever he was doing here, he hadn't even made an effort to try to meet the drivers. He wanted to know about whatshedid.

Keira knew her reaction to that was a little vain, but she couldn't help it. It felt good to be seen.

"All right," she said. "You can shadow me today. But you better not make a nuisance of yourself."

"I wouldn't do that," he said, but he was grinning as if the whole thing was a joke, and Keira had to turn away so that he wouldn't see her roll her eyes. He wouldn't do that? That was all he'd done so far!

"You'd better tell me who you are if you're going to be following me around," she said.

"My name is Kareem," the man said.

"Where are you from, Kareem? That's not a Nevada accent."

"No, it isn't." He smiled. "I come from a country called Qalmar, but I wouldn't blame you if you hadn't heard of it."

"I haven't," she admitted, feeling slightly embarrassed. "I don't know much about geography."

"Even if you did, you might not know Qalmar. It's very small. Ever since I was a little boy, I've dreamed about motorsports coming to Qalmar, but of course nothing like that has ever happened — so in the end, I decided to come here."

"You came all the way from Qalmar to see the Spritzer Cup?"

“It’s one of the biggest races of the spring.”

“There aren’t many big races at this time of year. It doesn’t have a lot of competition for that title.” She looked at him, more confused than ever. “If you’re that interested in racing, why wouldn’t you buy a ticket? Why wouldn’t you go watch the races instead of hanging around here with me?”

“I will,” he said. “But I’ve seen races before. What you do — that’s something I’ve never gotten a look at, and I’m interested. That’s all. I’m sure it won’t be any trouble for you to show me around.”

“You’re sure of that, are you?”

“Oh, relax.” He smiled at her. “Come on, what were you doing before I came in?”

“Setting up the press area. Which you then proceeded to barge your way into.”

“Well, fortunately, the press aren’t here yet, so no harm done! What will happen when they arrive?”

“They’ll be able to interview any of the drivers who are willing to give up a little bit of their time.”

“They’re not required to do that?”

“Not unless they have endorsement contracts that require them to, and that really has nothing to do with me,” Keira said. “If they have sponsorship deals, part of those deals might include a requirement to give an interview and mention their sponsor.”

“Oh, I’d love to know more about how those deals work,” Kareem said. “How does someone connect with a potential sponsor?”

“For drivers, that generally happens through their agents,” Keira said. “As for me, when I look for sponsors for the race each year, it involves calling around to past and potential donors. I keep a list.”

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“Can I see the list?”

“No!” She burst out laughing. “What would you need to see that for?”

Kareem shrugged and said nothing.

And Keira was left thinking, There is something more about him. Something I haven’t figured out yet.

She didn’t know what he was doing here, what had caused him to travel all the way from Qalmar — wherever that was — to attend a race he wasn’t even watching. But whatever his reason, there was something very unusual about him, and if he was going to spend the rest of the day shadowing her, she was going to need to keep a close eye on him.

CHAPTER 3

KEIRA

“So this is the concession stand?”

Keira took a deep breath to steady herself before she answered. Of course this was the concession stand. What gave it away? she wanted to ask. The popcorn? The soda fountain? The hot pretzels?

But she was determined not to be rude, so she hoisted a smile back onto her face. “It’s one of them,” she said. “You might have noticed, as we’ve been walking around,

that this venue has several concession stands, which enables us to better care for the needs of the guests. We don't want the lines getting too long, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"It seems to me that it wouldn't matter very much," Kareem said. "If people want something, they're going to wait in line for it."

"Sure. Why didn't you buy a ticket to get in here, again?"

He grinned, which confirmed what Keira had begun to suspect.

"You just didn't want to wait in line, did you?" she asked. "You thought that by bribing your way in, you could skip it!"

"Which did work," he said.

"You're real proud of yourself. I could absolutely call security and have you dragged out of here over that."

"Yeah, but you would have done it already," he pointed out.

"Anyway, you can see how people are going to be unhappy if they have to wait in line. And that's not even the most important part of it. It's a crowd control issue. That's what I really need to keep top of mind. If this concourse fills up with people waiting in line, it becomes a fire hazard. We need to give them multiple places to get food. And that's why I hire food vendors."

"Food vendors? Are you still talking about concessions?"

"No." Keira put a hand on his arm to draw his attention and pointed to a pop-up cart that was selling Mexican food on the other side of the concourse.

The moment she touched him, she felt her heart skip a beat. It had been a very long time since any man had had this effect on her, and she had to admit, she was enjoying it a little. It definitely wasn't going to go anywhere — she didn't even like him very much, on a personal level — and that fact took the pressure off. She could just enjoy her attraction to him as if it was an interesting exhibit in a museum — something to be regarded and enjoyed for its superficial qualities, maybe something to ponder, but certainly not anything to worry about.

If Kareem had a reaction to the touch, he didn't let it show. He was looking at the Mexican food cart. "What is that?"

"Tacos and burritos." Couldn't he smell them from here?

He shook his head. "I've never had that before."

"You've never had a taco?"

"We don't have them in Qalmar."

It made sense, she supposed. If she'd estimated Qalmar's location correctly, it was about as far away from Mexico as you could get. "Come on," she said, leading him over. "We'll get a sample."

She didn't know the man who was operating the cart — her dealings had all been with the owner — but when she showed him her badge, he understood at once who she was. "What can I get for you?"

"Just two tacos," she said. She looked at Kareem. "Steak or chicken?"

"Oh. What's better?"

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“It depends what you like.” She shrugged and turned back to the man in the cart. “One of each.”

The tacos were pre-made and sitting in a warmer. He pulled them out and handed them to her. “Add it to the tab,” she told him. She’d put extra money on their invoice at the end of the day to compensate.

“Wait a moment,” Kareem objected. “I can pay for this.”

“Don’t start being financially responsible now,” Keira said. “These cost three dollars each.” She pushed one into his hands. “Go ahead.”

They unwrapped their tacos and bit into them. Kareem chewed thoughtfully.

“That’s a complex flavor,” he said. “I don’t believe I’ve ever had this sort of cheese before. Would you say that this is a standard choice for an event such as this one? I mean to say, would you ever hold a race without including this menu item?”

Keira couldn’t help it — she laughed. “It’s just a taco,” she said. “I bring in these food carts so people will have more options, and people around here like Mexican food, but it’s not like you can’t have a motorsports event without tacos.”

“All right, fair enough,” Kareem said. “You’ll have to pardon me. I’ve never put on a motorsports event before.”

Keira shook her head. “I’ve got to go check on the pit crews, so maybe you and I could go our separate ways now.”

“Oh, I’d very much like to see the pit crews,” he said, falling into step alongside her again. “I mean, that must be such a big job, figuring out who you’re going to hire for that. Is it very difficult?”

“Most of the drivers make their own choices,” Keira said, resigning herself to a little more time in his company. Kareem was difficult to shake. It was a good thing he was as cute as he was, otherwise she would have felt nothing at all apart from her irritation at him. “I have a small team of house crew members in case any emergencies come up, but drivers tend to be most comfortable with people they’ve worked with before, people they’ve selected themselves.”

“It’s so nice of you to allow me to get this look behind the scenes,” Kareem said as they headed down to where the pit crews were set up.

I didn’t exactly let you, Keira thought but didn’t say aloud. She didn’t want to let on how annoyed she was. There was something about this man that still had her confused, and it made her feel as if it might not be a good idea to offend him, even though she couldn’t put her finger on why she felt that way.

But she was nothing if not a good hostess. People like Kevin had the freedom to act like jerks because everyone would admire them no matter what they did. Keira wasn’t like her brother, and in this way, she was proud not to be. She would always treat people with respect and dignity, even if they were annoying and intrusive. Even if they had bribed their way into the event when they could have just bought a ticket like a normal person.

She didn’t think she’d ever get over that. He had bribed his way in, spending — according to him — more money than the ticket itself cost? Who would do such a thing? Nobody liked waiting in line, but could anyone possibly dislike it so much that they were willing to do that?

Add it to the questions that I'll probably never get answers to about this guy.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Allie, her best friend and one of the house pit mechanics. "Hey, K," she said, coming over to meet Keira. She looked Kareem up and down. "Who's this guy?"

"Kareem is my guest for the day," Keira said, wishing that she could give a more enlightening answer. "He's here to see how our operations work. Kareem, this is Allie. She heads up the house pit crew."

Allie folded her arms across her chest and said nothing.

Keira knew what was happening. Allie could be very defensive when she was introduced to men professionally, and if Keira was honest, she didn't fault her for that. Plenty of men made comments about how surprising it was to see a woman — especially a pretty young woman — as a pit mechanic. Some of them even insinuated that Allie wasn't good at or qualified for her job.

But Kareem didn't do that. "It's nice to meet you, Allie," he said. "Show me what you do down here, please."

He didn't frame that as a request, so even though he'd been respectful of Allie as a person, Keira simmered. "She really doesn't have time to play tour guide," she said. "She has a job to do."

"I don't mind showing him around a little," Allie said. "I really wasn't doing anything right now."

"I wouldn't want to keep you from your work." Kareem flashed her a winning smile, and Keira's blood went from a simmer to a boil. He didn't want to keep her from her work? But interrupting Keira's day was totally fine?

She wished she could walk away right now, leave Kareem here with Allie, who obviously didn't mind tending to him. But she knew she couldn't do that. As much as she would have liked to get back to what she ought to be doing right now, she couldn't pawn this man off on her pit crew. They really did have work they needed to be focused on. And if something went wrong in the pit, it could be a matter of life and death. As important as Keira knew her job was, nobody was going to crash and die if she wasn't paying attention to something.

"We're actually on our way up to my office," she told Allie. "I do appreciate your offer, though."

"All right, well, come check in with me after the race," Allie said. "You promised we would get drinks later."

"And we will."

"Maybe you can join us." She smiled winningly at Kareem.

Keira shook her head. "He has somewhere else he needs to be," she told her friend firmly.

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“I do?” Kareem asked, cocking his head at her. “No one told me that.”

Keira took him by the arm and dragged him away from the pit. Kareem allowed himself to be dragged, but he was laughing the whole time — a fact that only made Keira feel that much more infuriated.

“I’m really getting under your skin, aren’t I?” he said as they stepped back out onto the concourse.

“You’re keeping me from doing my job,” she told him. “I have work I need to get done today. I really don’t have time for whatever this is.”

“You could have left me with your friend. She was happy to show me around.”

“She has work to do too. I’m not going to inflict you on anyone else.”

“That’s a little harsh.” He laughed again. “Are you really going to take me to your office? I’d love to see documentation of everything you did to get ready for the Spritzer Cup.”

“I’m definitely not going to show you all our documentation,” Keira said. “In fact, maybe it’s time to cut this tour short. I do have work to do, papers I need to look over before the race begins.”

He fell into step alongside her once again. “I’d love to see that.”

Keira thought she might be about to lose her mind. It wasn’t that he was incapable of

taking a hint, she thought — it was that he was refusing to take one. She had indicated to him any number of times that she was ready for this to be over, and he refused to hear her. Until she faced him down and told him that she flatly refused to play tour guide to him any longer, there would be no getting rid of him — that much was obvious.

It shouldn't have been such a problem for her. She had never had trouble telling vendors that their prices were too high or insisting to her employees that they needed to get back on the job. She had grown up with Kevin, who had always tried to hog the spotlight, and had learned from a young age how to advocate for herself. Getting rid of Kareem should have been easy for her.

Why couldn't she seem to just tell him to go away?

And how could it be that there was no shaking him?

Keira made her way up the stairs that led from the concourse to the mezzanine level, where there were doors leading to club boxes and to a few private offices. Her own had a large picture window that looked out over the racetrack, giving her a quiet place from which to watch the race.

She sighed. If there was no getting rid of Kareem, she might as well embrace the inevitable.

She turned to face him. "Would you like to come inside and watch the race with me?"

CHAPTER 4

KEIRA

"You work very hard," Kareem told her as he settled into one of the comfortable

loungers that faced the window looking over the track. “I appreciate you taking time out of your day to play host to me. I know that must have been inconvenient for you.”

Keira couldn’t help herself. “You didn’t act as if you knew it was inconvenient.”

“You’re right,” Kareem said. “And the truth is that I owe you an apology for my behavior today. It was most unbecoming of me.”

Keira blinked. An apology at this stage was the last thing she had expected. “All right,” she said.

“I’m very sorry,” he told her. “I was so eager to come and see the Spritzer Cup — to learn everything about it. You see, I’m a big fan of racing. Of all motorsports events. I have been all my life. And if I’m able to arrange for a race to be held in Qalmar, I will have achieved one of my life’s greatest ambitions.”

“Is that why you were following me today?” It all made sense, suddenly. “You wanted to see what goes into the organization of a motorsports event?”

“So that I can arrange my own, yes. But it’s more than that. I’m doing my best to make connections with some of the biggest names in the field. I want to meet top drivers and pit crew workers and people such as yourself so that I can arrange for you to be a part of that.”

“I see,” Keira said. “You’re looking for help getting your own event off the ground.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, you’re going to need to start with an appeal to the government,” Keira said. “I don’t know how things work in Qalmar, but we could never have held this event without the proper permits from the city. I’m sure there’s something like that you’re

going to need to navigate.”

“No, that won’t be a problem,” Kareem said.

He sounded so certain. Keira frowned. “That’s absolutely what you should be worrying about first and foremost,” she said. “I mean, way before you concern yourself with what kinds of foods you’re going to have available at the event.”

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“No, sorry, I wasn’t clear,” Kareem said. “I don’t need government approval because of... my position.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“I haven’t introduced myself properly.” He held out his hand. “My name is Sheikh Kareem Nusaybah, of Qalmar.”

Keira felt the breath leave her lungs. “You’re— you’re who?”

“I’m sorry. Now I think maybe I should have told you right away. I didn’t want you to treat me differently because of who I am.”

“Well... you did want me to treat you differently,” Keira pointed out. “You wanted me to devote my whole day to giving you a tour.”

And then, instantly, she could have kicked herself. “I’m sorry, Your Grace— Your Highness—” She shook her head, confused. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to address you. I’ve never met a sheikh before.”

“Kareem is just fine,” he assured her. “And I know that I’ve imposed on you today. I’m sorry for that. This is what I meant, though — I don’t want you to feel as if you can’t be yourself around me. I can see you now, worrying about what you might have said today, worrying that you might have been inappropriate. Am I wrong?”

He wasn’t. “I wouldn’t want to show disrespect,” she said, shocked by how soft her voice was. She wasn’t used to knuckling under in the presence of anyone.

And he didn't want her to, she understood. She squared her shoulders. "You're right."

"Am I? What am I right about?" He smiled complacently, and Keira thought, This is a man who is used to being right. Or at least, used to being told that he's right.

"You're right that you went too far today," she said. "You asked too much of me. I'm here to do a job. I don't care if you are the Sheikh of Qalmar — if that's the right way to describe you?—"

"I'masheikh of Qalmar."

"Whatever. You shouldn't have made demands of my time the way you did, and you certainly shouldn't have cheated your way into the event. I know you could afford a ticket. I could press charges if I wanted to." She had no confidence at all that that was true. He probably had some sort of diplomatic immunity. She was probably doing herself more harm than good by even mentioning the idea of getting the law involved. Besides, she knew she wasn't going to go that route. If she'd wanted to do that, she should have done so back at the very beginning.

Kareem made eye contact with her and held it for a moment. His gaze was soft yet penetrating, and Keira's heart fluttered.

This would all be so much easier if he wasn't so attractive!

"I apologize for that," Kareem said. "In truth, my reason for not buying a ticket was simply that I had no American currency."

"I don't understand. Why would you come to America without changing your money?"

"It was a bit of a last-minute trip," he explained. "The royal treasury has some US

dollars, but my father didn't know that I was coming, so I couldn't exchange my money there. And... well, to tell you the truth, I don't usually need money in my day-to-day life, so I didn't think about it until I was here."

"How did you bribe your way in if you didn't have any money?"

"I gave the man at the gate my watch," Kareem explained. "It's worth much more than the cost of a ticket, but I couldn't have used it to purchase a ticket. It seemed the most honest way to get in without leaving and going to a currency exchange." He shrugged. "Perhaps I should have done that, but it did seem rather like a victimless crime. I'm happy to have the cost of the ticket wired to you once I return to Qalmar."

Keira shook her head. "You don't need to do that." It was enough that he had conceded the fact that his behavior had been out of line — truly, she hadn't even expected that much.

"Then perhaps I might take you out for a drink?" Kareem suggested. "You must let me do something to thank you for today, Keira." He hesitated. "I've just realized that I never learned your last name."

"Well, I'm not secretly the ruler of a country. My identity isn't going to change anything."

"I'm not the ruler of a country either," Kareem told her. "That's my father. I'm not even in line for the throne — or rather, I am, but both of my elder brothers are ahead of me in the line of succession."

"And that's why you have time to flit around the world setting up motorsports races?"

"Something like that." For the first time, Kareem didn't respond with a lighthearted smile, and Keira wondered whether she had struck a nerve. She had intended to give

him a bit of a hard time, but she hadn't meant to be truly insulting, and the fact that maybe she had done so made her feel a little guilty.

She returned to the safer waters of his original question. "I'm Keira Harding," she said. "It's nice to have met you."

And, to her surprise, she found that that was actually the truth.

Kareem's jaw dropped. "Wait. Did you say you're Keira Harding?"

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“Oh.” She should have seen this coming. “If you’re a racing fan, you know my family, I suppose.” Kevin wasn’t the first driver in the family — far from it. Keira’s father, her Uncle Steven, and her Grandpa Joe had all raced in their younger days. The Hardings were an institution.

“Of course I’m familiar with your family,” Kareem said.

“I can probably arrange a meeting with Kevin for you.” Of course that was what he would want. And even though Kevin wasn’t always the most agreeable about the idea of sitting down with fans, Keira thought that for a sheikh he would probably make an exception.

“Oh, no,” Kareem said, waving a hand. “That’s all right. You don’t need to do that.”

“You don’t want to meet Kevin?”

“Well, of course I’m happy to if you’d like. I’m much more interested in being here with you, though.”

“With me?” This was new. Keira couldn’t remember a time a racing fan had had the chance to meet Kevin and had declined in order to spend more time with her.

“I just know that you’re the person who established the ProBar Cup in Oklahoma last year,” Kareem explained. “Right? That was you?”

“You know about that?”

“Sure I do. It was a big deal. The first motorsports event to feature solely female drivers. It really made a mark on the sport. You must be so proud of that.”

“Well... yes, I am,” Keira admitted. “Everyone in my family thought it was pretty stupid, though. They told me there were lots of races for women.”

“And there are, but the male drivers do tend to take up a lot of the spotlight, don’t they? They’re always the headlining attraction when it comes to things like endorsements and interviews...”

“Well, exactly!” Keira was impressed that he’d understood. Maybe he was less annoying than she had originally taken him for. “That was the reason I did it. I wanted to create an opportunity for female drivers to gain attention and sponsorship deals without having to compete against the men who always tend to get noticed more for no real reason.”

“I thought it was great,” Kareem said. “You know, I told my family about the ProBar Cup at the time, but they don’t really understand racing. But I’m so happy to have the chance to meet you now.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe I spent the whole day with the Keira Harding and didn’t even realize it.”

It was Keira’s turn to laugh. “I don’t think I’ve ever been called the Keira Harding before.”

“Well, you are. The one and only. I’m so glad I met you,” Kareem said. “You’ve got to let me take you out for a drink, Ms. Harding, to thank you for everything you’ve done today.”

Though Keira had spent most of the day trying to get away from Kareem, looking forward to the end of their time together, she found that in the last few minutes, her feelings had changed rather dramatically. He did have respect for her and for what

she did. He was genuinely interested in getting to know her better and in understanding her hard work. He was a true racing fan, not just someone looking to take advantage of her unwillingness to throw him out of the venue.

She could respect that.

“All right,” she agreed. “I know a nice bar not far from here. Once I’m finished for the day, we can go over there and talk some more.” She smiled. “Actually, I’d like that quite a lot. Like I said, I’ve never met a sheikh before, and I wouldn’t mind getting to know a little more about you too.”

“It sounds like we both have a lot to learn from each other,” Kareem said. “Though I don’t see how my life can be of any particular interest to you. As I said, I’m never even going to rule. I’m a sheikh only because of who my father is — nothing more. But even so, I’m happy to get to know you better and answer any questions you might have.”

“It will certainly be more exciting than spending the evening with my brother and hearing about how he almost won his race,” Keira said.

“You don’t think your brother is going to win his race?”

“He never wins. He likes to brag about his skill as a driver, but the truth is that he isn’t that talented. But let’s see if he proves me wrong.” She gestured to the track. “The race is about to begin.”

Sure enough, the cars were pulling up. Keira recognized Kevin’s car from here, bright yellow and emblazoned with the sticker of the men’s body spray that sponsored him — a product Kevin didn’t even use.

She found her eyes wandering, though, as the race began. She was unable to focus on

the track.

Instead, her gaze returned again and again to the face of the handsome sheikh sitting beside her.

CHAPTER 5

KEIRA

“So here’s the problem,” Kareem said. “I’m putting this event together without my father’s knowledge.”

“I thought you said having the approval of a head of state wasn’t going to be an issue,” Keira said. “Isn’t your father the head of state?” The inner workings of Qalmar politics were still confusing to her, but she thought she understood that much, at least.

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“That’s right,” Kareem said. “My father is King Hassan.”

“Well, I mean, admittedly I don’t know anything about how things work in your country,” Keira said. “But I would imagine you’d need the approval of the king. I couldn’t put on the Spritzer Cup without notifying the Governor of Nevada and getting his blessing first, and this seems like a similar situation. I think you’re going to have to tell your father what’s going on.”

“Oh, you don’t know my father,” Kareem said. “There’s no world in which I discuss this with him and he decides to cooperate. No, I’m going to have to simply do it on my own and hope he comes around after the fact.”

Keira shrugged. If he thought that was best, who was she to argue? After all, she knew nothing about the inner workings of Qalmar politics.

She swirled her martini slowly, stirring it with the stick of olives. Then she pulled the stick out and sucked one of the vodka-saturated olives into her mouth, giving herself time to think about what he had said. If Kevin had been here, he would have made some comment about the type of drink she’d chosen. He would have insisted that everyone involved with racing ought to drink beer, and he would have ordered her one without waiting to see what she thought about that.

Kevin had spent his entire life trying to make Keira fit into his vision of her role in the family. And so had her parents.

If she helped Kareem now — God, was she truly considering helping him? — she would really be putting her mark on the sport. Establishing a race in Qalmar, a totally

new venue... that was something that she would be able to claim as her own for the rest of her life. It would make the ProBar cup look like small potatoes, especially if the Qalmar race succeeded and became a major event on the world stage.

But could they pull it off if King Hassan didn't approve? Going against a king seemed like a bigger task than Keira could hope to take on.

"What will happen when your father finds out?" she asked him. This was the real sticking point. If there was a risk of anyone who'd been involved in the race getting into serious trouble, Keira couldn't involve herself.

"Worst-case scenario, he'll shut it down," Kareem said.

"You don't think he'd retaliate? I mean, you're asking me to help you plan this thing. If he learned I'd been involved, would he be angry enough to take some sort of action against me?"

"Oh, no, definitely not," Kareem assured her. "You can trust me on that. I've been disappointing my father all my life, and every time he finds out about it, he just moves to cut me off in some way. If he finds out about this, he'll put a stop to it, but he'll assume the whole thing is my fault. He won't blame anyone else who was involved."

Keira nodded. "In that case, I can consult on the project," she said. "In fact, it sounds exciting. I'd like to help you. I'm not sure exactly how I'll be able to help — after this race is over, I'm going back to Iowa for a few weeks."

"Iowa is your home?"

"That's right. I have a few weeks off before the next event I need to work on, so I'll be taking some downtime."

Kareem frowned thoughtfully. “What event is that? I’m not aware of another race.”

“No, it isn’t a race,” Keira said. “It’s a publicity event, in Chicago — a chance for sponsors and racers to connect, but we also position it as an opportunity for fans to meet their favorite drivers.” A knot formed in her stomach at the thought of that event, one of her least favorites of the year. It should have been a good time, but she knew there would be the usual arguments with her family when she tried to convince Kevin to take part. He would insist that there was no good reason for him to be involved, and, as usual, the rest of the family would take his side. Then, when he wasn’t given any new sponsorship deals heading into the summer season, they would blame Keira and demand to know why she hadn’t done a better job arranging meetings for him with potential benefactors.

“So you have some time off,” Kareem said. He had a faraway look in his eyes.

“What are you thinking?” Keira asked him.

“I’m thinking it might be a suitable time for you to come to Qalmar with me and help me get my event off the ground,” he said.

Keira laughed. “You want me to take off to Qalmar? Just like that?”

“Do you have a passport?”

“Sure I do, but... are you serious?”

“Why not? You were just going to go back to Iowa. You said it yourself. Wouldn’t you rather get away for a little while? It’ll be difficult for you to help me with this if we’re on separate continents, but if you’re right there, on the ground, that will make it easy. Come on — you’re exactly who I need. You’ve got experience establishing new races and maintaining old ones. You know the recipe for success. I don’t think I can

do this without you, Keira.”

She shook her head slowly. “You’re saying that to try to convince me. You know you could do it without me.”

“I don’t,” he countered. “Not really. This is going to be a challenge for me. I don’t know if I’m going to be successful or not. And the reason I came to Las Vegas in the first place was in hopes of meeting with some people who had already found success at this, and how lucky was I that the first person I met was you? It’s as if it was meant to be.”

He smiled at her, his eyes shining.

He’s dangerous, Keira thought.

This was a man who knew how to charm people in order to get what he wanted. For all she knew, all sheikhs could do that — maybe it was something the royal family trained its sons in. Or maybe it was just Kareem himself. Maybe what she was experiencing right now had nothing to do with the fact that he was royal. Maybe it was nothing more than his natural charisma.

If that was the case, she definitely shouldn’t consider traveling all the way to Qalmar with him.

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The unfortunate thing was, every time she looked at him, all the reasons she needed to tell him no slipped right out of her head.

And there was a good reason to do it, even if she only focused on what was practical. It would be an opportunity to show her family how good she was at her job. If this race in Qalmar got off the ground, Keira would have her first international event under her belt. She would stamp her name on the world stage of motorsports. Even Kevin hadn't done that.

If I do what he's proposing, the family will finally have to take me seriously.

"Say for a moment that I go along with this idea," she said.

"You'll do it?" He sat up straighter.

"I'm not saying I'll do it. I'm saying I'm thinking about it. It would be nice to travel." She took a sip of her martini, inviting the looseness of thought that came with having a drink. By the time she reached the bottom of the glass, she knew, she would be free of her tendency to overanalyze everything. "The problem is, if your father isn't okay with this... I know you're saying you're the one he'll hold responsible, and it's not that I don't believe that. But I'll be on my own in a foreign country."

"You'll be under the protection of the crown. It's not as if you're going to be on your own in some discount motel. You'll stay with me in my estate."

"I'll stay with you?"

“It’s a big estate,” he assured her. “You’ll have several rooms to yourself, if it’s your privacy that’s worrying you.”

It was, but that wasn’t the only thing she was concerned about. “Kareem, how is your father going to fail to notice that something is going on if you bring back an American woman and move her into your estate? He’s going to catch on so fast. And there won’t be any point to my having traveled all the way to Qalmar, because we won’t be able to get the event off the ground. Even if I don’t get into any trouble over this, it’s not going to be worth the effort we’ll have to put in. I’ll be on a plane back home in three days.”

“Well, I thought about that,” Kareem admitted.

“You did?”

“Yes. And I have a solution... but it’s a bit of a strange one.”

“It’s not going to be any stranger than anything else you’ve said to me today.”

Kareem laughed. “Wait until you’ve heard me out before you say that,” he said. “You’re right about how my father is going to respond. The moment he gets a clue that I’m moving forward with this race, he’ll do whatever he can to shut the whole thing down. And having you around is going to be a major clue that we don’t want to deal with. So here’s my solution — you and I get married.”

He had said it so quickly, so matter-of-factly, that for a moment it didn’t even register with Keira just how odd that statement was.

Then it hit her.

She lowered her drink slowly. “What did you just say?”

The question sounded hollow in her ears, as if she was hearing herself speak underwater, and she wondered if she was starting to dissociate. Or maybe this whole thing had been a dream. Because surely this couldn't be real. Surely a handsome sheikh hadn't walked into the Spritzer Cup and asked her to marry him. Even with context, the whole thing was ridiculous.

"It wouldn't be permanent," Kareem said quickly. "I'm talking about a temporary arrangement. Something to explain to my father why I'm moving a woman into the estate."

"He'd believe that you just randomly married an American he had never met before? Is that the kind of thing you ordinarily do?"

"I've been known to be impulsive," Kareem said. "And my father will have no trouble believing the worst about me. No, I've never been married before. But this won't shock him at all."

"Why don't we just say we're married?"

"The crown will demand that paperwork be filed. They'll want proof."

The hair on the back of Keira's neck stood up. "And what's that going to mean for me? Will I be... royal? Will I have some kind of responsibility I have to fill? Oh, God, they're not going to want me to produce an heir, are they?"

"Nothing like that," Kareem assured her. "Remember, I'm not the heir either. My brother Amir is the one who has to worry about an heir. And you and I will go our separate ways long before you'd have to worry about royal duties of any kind, I promise."

"I don't know, Kareem." The martini glass was empty now, but Keira was feeling

less sure of herself than ever. Why was she even considering this?

“I’ll pay you for your time,” Kareem said.

Her eyes widened. “You’re going to pay me to marry you?”

“Of course not! What do you take me for? I meant I’d pay you a consultation fee,” he said. “You’ll get a percentage of what we earn on the event — say, thirty percent?”

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“Thirtypercent? Kareem, you can’t pay me that much. You’re going to have to pay your vendors, your staff, you’re going to have to rent a venue?—”

“I’ve thought of all that,” Kareem said. “But I’m not going to take a cut for myself. This is a passion project for me. I don’t need to earn money doing it. So I can afford to give you a significant portion of the earnings.” He swirled his own martini, still half full, in his hand. “Would that make it worth your while to come to Qalmar with me?”

“And to marry you?” She hesitated. It was a huge thing to ask.

But it was beginning to seem more and more alluring, if she was honest with herself. Not only would she stamp her name on what would hopefully become a big world event, but she wouldalso have the money to ensure that the ProBar cup was able to continue successfully for years. Keira would become the biggest name on the production side of motorsports. F1 drivers wouldbegfor a place in her events, and everyone would have to take her seriously. It would change her status within her family once and for all.

Besides, what was she really being asked to do? Travel to an exotic location and spend time with a charming and handsome man? It was outlandish, but itdidsound like fun.

“Give me your phone number,” she told him. “I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know what I decide.”

KEIRA

“You’re joking.”

Allie had been tightening a lug nut, but now she dropped the wrench she’d been holding and stared at Keira, wide-eyed. “That guy wants to marry you?”

“It’s not like that,” Keira said. “I explained it to you. It’s not like he wants to marry me. It’s just a way of dodging his father, and it would be strictly temporary.”

“You’re talking about a handsome prince who wants to marry you and move you into his palace.”

“He’s a sheikh, not a prince.”

“That’s the same thing! His father’s a king, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“Prince!”

“You’re being dramatic.

“Why aren’t you being dramatic?” Allie demanded. “This is a dramatic situation, Keira. At times like these, drama is called for.” She held up a hand. “Wait a minute. Is there going to be a royal wedding?” She gasped. “Am I going to be the maid of honor in a royal wedding?”

“No, we’re not doing that,” Keira said. “If anything, we’ll go over to the Chapel of Love or something.”

“Oh my God, tell me you’re joking. You’re going to take the Sheikh of Qalmar to the Chapel of Love and marry him with piped-in elevator music and a rented internet priest? You cannot do that, Keira.”

“If we do a big royal wedding, everyone will take it too seriously,” Keira said. “The idea is to get the royal family to believe that we did something spontaneous and irresponsible, not that we made a well-thought-out choice. Besides, weddings like the kind you’re talking about take months to plan. We need to get this over with quickly so that we can focus on what really matters.”

“Which is creating a racing event in Qalmar.”

“Right.”

“You do get how crazy this all is, right?” Allie said.

Keira sighed. “I know. Do you think I shouldn’t do it?”

“I didn’t say that.” Allie picked up her wrench and resumed work on the lug nut. “I just wanted to make sure you knew you were being crazy. You’re kind of freaking me out, you know?”

“Why? It’s not like you’ve never done anything crazy.”

“Yeah, exactly. Of the two of us, I’m the one you’d expect to find getting married at the Chapel of Love. I almost did that one time, remember?”

“I’ll never forget,” Keira chuckled. “You called me and woke me up at four in the morning so I could come down and be your witness.”

“And you came racing over to talk me out of it,” Allie recalled, a fond smile on her

face.

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“By the time I got there, the guy had wandered off and you were playing Princess Slots as if nothing at all had happened.”

“So you can see how it would worry me to see you acting like this, right?” Allie asked. “I’m supposed to be the irresponsible one of the two of us. You’re supposed to be the one who’s on top of things. The one who makes good choices.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure this is irresponsible,” Keira said. “It’s not like I’m getting married because I think it’s going to lead to some kind of happily ever after. You have to think of it as a business investment. I fly to Qalmar, spend a few weeks playing happy housewife to this man, and then we end the marriage and sign divorce papers and I fly back home, simple as that. Except that when I get back, I’ll be set up for the next phase of my career. It really is a perfect opportunity.”

“Keira, you already have a great career,” Allie pointed out. “You oversee three different racing events. Do you know how rare it is for a woman to be in charge of one?”

“Of course I know,” Keira said. “It was hard enough for me to break into this, even with family connections on my side. But with the money I could get working with Kareem, I could take the ProBar cup to the next level. I could make it international. Could you imagine, bringing in top female drivers from all over the world? I could make it the biggest women-only race anywhere — a real headliner of global motorsports.”

“And that’s the reason you’re doing this?”

“Why else?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Allie scrunched up her mouth in the way she did when she was pretending to think hard about something. “Maybe because this guy is a real-life handsome prince? Maybe because being swept off to a foreign country by a handsome prince is literally the thing we’ve dreamed about since we were little girls?”

Keira laughed. “It’s what you dreamed about,” she said.

“True,” Allie agreed. “Well, that and fixing cars.”

“I never dreamed about handsome princes.”

“Which makes it all the more wild that you’re the one this is happening to!” Allie sighed. “Keira, to tell you the truth, I don’t think I’ll ever forgive you if you walk away from this.”

“I thought you thought I was making a rash decision!”

“I do think that,” Allie said. “I also think making rash decisions every once in a while would be good for you. You play things way too safe, and I think it would be to your benefit to take advantage of an opportunity like this one.”

“You also think it’s good for my career, then?” Keira asked.

“I mean, maybe it is, but that’s not why I’m saying this. Hand me the pressure gauge, will you?”

Keira picked up the tire pressure gauge that lay on the floor and passed it to Allie. “Don’t overfill those tires.”

“You think this is my first time? I know you’re a hotshot event coordinator, Keira, and you might be marrying a prince?—”

“A sheikh. If I marry him, you’re going to have to start getting that right, Allie.”

“Well, prince or sheikh, I still know more about car maintenance than you do.” Allie’s eyebrows shot up. “Hey, wait. If you marry a sheikh, what will that make you?”

“A sheikha,” Keira said. “I looked it up.”

“Wow. My best friend, a sheikha.”

“Don’t get excited. Remember, it would only be temporary. Only until we ended the marriage and came home. Then I would go back to being just regular old Keira.”

“But this would always be part of your story,” Allie said dreamily. “You would always know that for a few weeks, you had been a princess.” She caught Keira’s eye and sobered up slightly. “Or a sheikha. Whatever. But the point stands, right?”

“And here you were just telling me I was being crazy.”

“I support it,” Allie said firmly. “I encourage it. Becrazy. I really can’t convince you to have a royal wedding?”

“I’m kind of on a timeline here,” Keira laughed. “If we do this, we do need to do it quickly. But I’ll let you come down to the Chapel of Love with us. You can be my bridesmaid there.”

“Well, that’s every girl’s dream.”

“And you can wear anything you want. My treat. We’ll go shopping and pick you out the most gorgeous dress imaginable, and because it’s the Chapel of Love, you won’t have to worry about being inappropriate or anything. You can get something totally sexy. How’s that?”

“Well, I hope you’ll bring me to Qalmar to see the palace before this is all over!”

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“I’m not going to be living in a palace,” Keira said. “I’m going to be living in his estate. The palace is where the king lives.”

“You’re going to meet a king,” Allie said, her voice breathless. “Can you believe it?”

“He’s not going to like me,” Keira said. “That’s a part of all this. We know he won’t like me. We’re planning for him to not like me.”

“You might be able to win him over,” Allie said bracingly. “And by the way, Keira, I don’t know whether you noticed, but you’ve decided to do this. You’re talking about it like it’s something that’s going to happen, not like it’s a crazy idea that you want to be talked out of. You’ve made up your mind. It’s a good thing you know what you want, isn’t it?”

Keira hadn’t even been aware of the shift in the way she was speaking, but now that Allie drew attention to it, she saw that her friend was right. What was more, the difference was there in her thoughts as well. She had made up her mind.

She was going to do this. She was going to marry Kareem and go to Qalmar with him.

“Oh my God,” she realized. “I’ve been so worried about what his father is going to think that I almost forgot about my own family.”

Allie burst out laughing. “Kevin is going to freak,” she said. “He’s going to absolutely lose his mind, Keira. He still thinks you’re his assistant.”

Keira nodded. She had worked in that capacity for exactly three months, when she and Kevin had both gotten their start on the racing scene, before accepting a marketing job that had eventually led to her current position. But the intervening years hadn't prevented Kevin from treating her as if she lived to serve him. "You're right," she said. "He's probably going to try to forbid me from going or something. As if he could."

"It'll be worth it for that alone," Allie said. "Just for the moment he tries to tell you that you can't go and has to deal with the fact that it's not up to him. I wish I could be a fly on the wall when you have that conversation. Do you think you're going to tell your family that you're getting married?"

"No, I can't see how that would do any good," Keira said. "It is a pretty crazy move, and if I tell them that they'll probably think they have a good argument for trying to stop me. It's better if I just tell them it's a business opportunity and handle the rest of it without involving them at all. After all, the marriage will end before it could possibly be relevant to them, so there's no reason they need to know about it."

Allie nodded. "You're right," she said. "And I think that's the right decision. I promise, they won't hear a word about it from me."

"Because they're definitely going to come to you for answers once they realize I've skipped the country, even when I do tell them I'm trying to establish a race in Qalmar," Keira said. "They'll know something's up. They're not used to me doing things like this — being so spontaneous."

"That's true," Allie said. "Ordinarily, if you were going to go to Qalmar, you would have planned it out for months in advance. If we weren't having this conversation about it right now and I found out you had gone, I would be worried. If your family asks me, I'll just say I don't know any more about it than they do."

“Good,” Keira agreed. “That won’t satisfy them, but at least it will make them come to me for answers instead of bugging you about it.”

“So you’re really going to do this, Keira?”

“I really am.” Keira could hardly believe the words were coming out of her mouth, and yet she knew as she said them that they were true. “I’m going to marry the sheikh.”

CHAPTER 7

KAREEM

“Tell me that’s not the way most Americans do weddings,” Kareem said as they boarded the jet. They had been married for all of an hour, and were now headed to Qalmar, wasting no time in enacting the next stage of their plan.

“Of course it isn’t,” Keira said. She had just stepped off the stairs that led into the plane, and now she turned a slow circle, taking it in. “And I’m assuming this isn’t the way most people from Qalmar do air travel?”

“It’s not the standard, no,” Kareem admitted with a smile. “I can’t fly commercial for security reasons — nobody in the royal family can. But also, I can’t think why anyone would want to. Commercial planes seem horrible.”

“Have you ever been on one?”

“No, but I’ve seen them in movies. They look like torture devices to me. All those people packed into such a small space, practically sitting on top of one another. I don’t understand why anybody does it.”

“For most people, it’s the only realistic way to travel,” Keira said. “Most of us can’t afford private jets with plush interior carpeting and wide, comfortable chairs, you know?” She looked around. “Which seat is mine?”

“Whichever one you want.” Kareem settled in one of the seats. “Make yourself comfortable. It’s a long flight to Qalmar, and you’re going to need to meet my father when you arrive, so you’ll want to be rested.”

“Wait. I’m going to meet the king? Right away? I thought I would have some time to adjust, Kareem.” She planted her hands on her hips, and Kareem was both pleased and impressed to see that she was more annoyed than she was intimidated. A reaction like that boded very well for how she might handle herself in front of royalty. Of course, she wasn’t going to be able to act indignant around his father — she would have to be more respectful than she was currently. But the worst thing she could possibly be was cowed, and that didn’t seem like a risk.

“You’ll have to meet him first thing, because if I take you back to my estate, the staff will let him know that I’ve moved an unknown person onto the premises, and he’ll start to draw his own conclusions.”

“Wow,” Keira said. “I thought my family was bad. You really don’t have any privacy at all, do you?”

“More than just about anyone else in my family does, actually,” Kareem said. “I’m under less scrutiny than either of my brothers. And it was worse for me when I was younger, because everyone wants to take pictures of the king’s adorable children. Every time we left the house, flashes would go off in our faces. There are pictures of me all over the internet, if you search for them. It’s different now.”

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“There aren’t pictures of you anymore?”

“There are, but it isn’t the same. Usually something has to happen. I’ve been named Qalmar’s Sexiest Bachelor a couple of times, and there’s usually a big burst of pictures around that.”

“You’re Qalmar’s Sexiest Bachelor?” Keira stared at him.

Kareem laughed. “Is that so unbelievable? I know I’m not as handsome as the American men you’re used to.” He winked so she would know he was teasing. American men were no competition. They drank cheap beers and laughed far too loudly, and most of them had no idea how you ought to treat a woman. The idea of being intimidated by an American man was laughable to Kareem.

Keira blushed. “That’s not— I wasn’t saying you weren’t handsome.”

So she thought hewashandsome? That was interesting. “Go on.”

“I only meant that it’s an impressive title to have,” she said.

“Well, it’s not as impressive as it probably sounds to you. Qalmar is a small country, and I’m a public figure. It isn’t like they’re going to name some random person nobody has ever heard of as Qalmar’s sexiest bachelor. It’s got to be someone they can leak some juicy gossip about and sell photos of on magazine covers. It has to be someone the people are going to recognize.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” Keira agreed. “This wedding is going to put you back in

the limelight.”

“It will, but less so than usual, I think,” Kareem said.

“Really? You think being Qalmar’s Sexiest Bachelor is going to be more interesting to the people of your country than the fact that you got married?”

“No, don’t misunderstand me — they’re going to be over the moon about the fact that I’m married. It’s the juiciest thing to hit Qalmar in years. But it isn’t me they’re going to be interested in, Keira. It’s you. You’re the one the paparazzi will be chasing. You’re the one everyone’s going to want to know about.”

“Oh,” Keira said, her eyes widening. “I never thought about that.”

“Truly, you didn’t? You never realized that the people of Qalmar would want to know about their new sheikha?”

“Well, it makes sense now that you say it,” Keira said. “But no, I didn’t think about it. I guess I just thought... I don’t know. I paid attention to things like impressing your father. I wasn’t concerned with what it would mean to the rest of the country that we were married.”

“But you’ll be all right,” Kareem said, a prickle of nervousness making its way through the calm he had maintained effortlessly so far during this process. He had been counting on this fact. “You know what it’s like to be a public figure, so none of this is going to be new to you.”

“I’m hardly a public figure,” Keira countered. “Not in the way you mean it. Look at what you told me about being named your nation’s sexiest bachelor. Nothing like that would ever happen to me.”

“I can’t see why not,” Kareem said. “You’re very attractive, Keira.”

It was true. He had thought so from the moment he’d met her. She had an athletic build, leading him to believe that she must spend a lot of time running or going to the gym — but then again, maybe it was just the intensity of the job she did. He’d shadowed her for a single day and it had left him feeling exhausted. He could only imagine what it must be like to have such days on a regular basis, and for the first time, he had gained a true appreciation for the ease and comfort in which he lived his own life. He had to go to the palace gym if he wanted to bulk up, because his everyday life didn’t give him opportunities to exert himself.

Keira’s fit frame was offset by delicious curves, and though Kareem knew it was a little inappropriate, he’d found himself repeatedly checking her out when she wasn’t looking. He wasn’t sure whether the fact that she was his wife now made it more or less acceptable for him to stare at her butt when she walked away from him. It wasn’t as if theirs was a conventional marriage, and he had the idea that she probably wouldn’t like it if she knew he was doing that.

Then again, maybe she would. She was wearing very tight jeans, after all.

Now she raked her hands through her auburn curls, arranging them into some semblance of order. The attempt made Kareem smile. He hadn’t known her long, but he had spent enough time with her to know how quickly her hair would fall back into a disorderly state. He enjoyed it. It was a part of her charm.

“I can’t walk right off a plane and meet the king,” she told him. “I was counting on having a chance to go shopping first. I need something to wear.”

“You didn’t bring a dress?”

“Not a meet the king dress, Kareem!”

“You don’t have to go to any trouble,” he told her. “Wear whatever you have. You can change on the plane.”

“Oh my God. Your father is going to completely disapprove of me.”

“Yes, he is.” Kareem smiled. “But you could show up wearing the most expensive Qalmese fashion on the market and that would still be true. He’s not going to disapprove because of anything you do, Keira. It’s going to happen because he doesn’t approve of me, and so any woman I marry is automatically going to be unworthy in his eyes. You need to let yourself stop worrying about that. There isn’t anything you can do to impress him. That’s not what this meeting is for. We just need him to know who you are — to understand who’s moving into the estate and for what reason. Then he won’t have any questions about it, and he’ll leave us alone to go about our business.”

Keira sighed and knit her fingers together. “I don’t like this.”

“Take it easy. It’s going to be completely fine, I promise.”

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She turned away from him and stared out the window, and he decided to let her. The truth was that he was experiencing plenty of anxiety of his own. It took a lot to rattle Kareem, but the experience he was facing was doing it. He was so close to getting everything he had ever wanted, achieving a lifelong dream, but if he and Keira put a foot wrong over the next two weeks, it was all going to slip away.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep. The next thing he knew, the sharp shock of the plane's wheels striking the jetway was jolting him awake. He looked over at Keira and saw that she was red-eyed and sitting bolt upright, as if she'd had an iron bar fused to her spine.

"You haven't slept at all, have you?" he said.

Keira shook her head. "Couldn't."

The anxiety that had been simmering in Kareem's gut hours earlier erupted into a full-blown boil. He composed his face carefully. She couldn't be allowed to see how nervous he was — it would only make her own nerves worse. And besides, what he had told her was true. There was no way for this to go well, no way his father was going to be impressed.

She didn't look at him as they disembarked and walked over to the car that awaited them. Kareem decided that he wasn't going to try to engage her in conversation. Instead, he simply opened the car door for her and allowed her to slide in before walking around to join her on the other side.

They passed the ride in utter silence. Kareem, who had broken the habit of biting his

fingernails before his seventh birthday — it was unseemly for a member of the royal family — felt the urge to do it again for the first time in years. At least it would have settled his nerves.

There was no reason to be nervous. This meeting didn't matter. He wasn't introducing his father to his real wife. He didn't need his father to like Keira. All he needed was for the man to accept his reason for having her here in Qalmar. And that wasn't going to be a problem. His father would easily believe that Kareem had indulged in an impulse marriage. If anything, he would be surprised that it hadn't happened sooner.

Still, their arrival at the palace seemed to happen altogether too quickly. Kareem found himself breathing more rapidly than was normal as he got out of the car, and he forced himself to settle down. For Keira's sake, he had to stay calm.

Her face was composed as they made their way up the walk, but he noticed that her hands were trembling. Without thinking too hard about it, he reached out and took one of her hands in his own, giving it a squeeze.

She looked up at him. Their eyes met, and for a moment Kareem nearly forgot that this wasn't real. It felt real. His heart was hammering and her eyes were wide with nervous anticipation... surely this was exactly what introducing a real wife to his father would have felt like, had he ever attempted such a thing.

"Do they know I'm coming?" Keira asked.

"Oh." Kareem grinned sheepishly. "I knew there was something I was forgetting."

"You didn't tell them? Kareem!"

She pulled against his grip, but it was too late to go back now. The front doors were

opening, and the valet had stepped out.

“Sheikh Kareem,” he said. “Welcome home. Your father has asked me to bring you directly to him.”

“Thank you, Ismail,” Kareem said. “We’ll go right away.”

“May I have your guest escorted to the library, perhaps, to await you?”

“No,” Kareem said firmly, gripping Keira’s hand more tightly in his own. Now that they were here, they were going to have to sell the image that they were husband and wife — two lovers so madly smitten with one another that they hadn’t been able to resist a reckless marriage. “We’ll both go to meet with my father, thank you.”

Ismail’s eyebrows disappeared into his hair, but he asked no follow-up questions. He nodded, turned on his heel, and led the way toward the throne room.

CHAPTER 8

KEIRA

King Hassan turned out to be a heavyset man in his early sixties. Upon first sight, Keira’s thought was that he looked like the father of anyone else her age. His hair was graying and there were lines on his face. She felt herself begin to relax.

Then he spoke. “Kareem, who have you brought before me?”

It was so formal, and his voice was so tight, that Keira’s muscles froze right back up. She was hard-pressed not to turn and run away.

Only Kareem’s hand in hers kept her where she was. “There’s someone I want you to

meet, Father,” he said. “This is Keira Harding. My wife.”

The room was so silent that Keira could hear the echo of her own breathing, which suddenly seemed thunderous. She held her breath, trembling.

“Your wife?” the king repeated, his tone ominous.

“We married in the United States,” Kareem said.

“You just met this woman?”

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“Sometimes you know that quickly that someone is right for you,” Kareem said blandly. “With Keira, it was love at first sight, Father.”

“She hasn’t even been vetted. She’s probably trying to take advantage of the crown.”

Keira felt her face flush and her pulse accelerate. Who was he to suggest such a thing?

But could she defend herself to the king? What were the rules here? Was she even allowed to speak without being spoken to first? It wouldn’t help matters at all if she offended him right out of the gate.

“Keira wouldn’t do something like that,” Kareem insisted.

His father snorted. “You hardly know the woman. And she’s an American. What would make an American want to come all the way to Qalmar with a man she hardly knows? There’s got to be something wrong with her.”

“Get to know her,” Kareem said. “You’ll come to see her the way I do, Father. She’s wonderfully clever — and lovely, as you can see.”

Keira took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was excruciating. There was nothing she could do or say to make it go any more smoothly. And yet, if she could just get through this painful encounter, good things lay ahead.

“Very well,” the king said abruptly.

For a moment, Kareem didn't speak. Keira looked over at him and saw that his jaw had dropped slightly.

"Very well?" he managed.

"If you want me to accept this woman, the two of you will stay for dinner tonight. When the meal is over, I'll give you my decision."

King Hassan rose and departed the room abruptly, without another word.

Keira and Kareem watched him go for a moment, neither one of them saying a word. Keira didn't think she could have spoken if she had wanted to. Her throat was tight, as if she was about to start crying, even though she didn't think she was. She dabbed at the corners of her eyes to be sure, but they were dry.

"All right," Kareem said. "All right. This is good."

"This is good?"

"He's giving you a chance to impress him."

"I thought you said I couldn't impress him." Keira's breath was coming fast and erratic now. "You did say that. You said not to bother trying, that I just needed to get through this meeting so that he would understand who I was. You told me there wasn't going to be any chance of approval from him. Now we're staying to dinner because... because we want his approval? Which we aren't going to get? What's happening, Kareem?"

"I thought he would shout at me, ignore you, and send us away," Kareem said. "The fact that he's having us stay means that he does want to give you a chance to win his favor."

He smiled.

Keira couldn't believe it. He was smiling now? "Can't we go, like you said we could?" she asked, and now the tears were pressing at the backs of her eyelids. She swallowed hard. "I'm still in my jeans, Kareem. I can't wear this to a royal dinner."

"You can. I'm in jeans too," he pointed out.

"But that's different. You belong to this family. I'm just an outsider who he thinks is scamming you."

"He might think that's happening, but you and I know it isn't. And by the end of this dinner, he'll know that too. Don't worry," Kareem soothed her. "This will be wonderful. A real Qalmese meal to welcome you to the country. The only thing is..." He hesitated.

"Is what?"

"You know you and I are going to have to pretend to be in love, don't you? That's the only way this will work. That's how we convince my father that you're not taking advantage of my position. He has to think you're so in love with me that we simply had to marry, that you were willing to give up your whole life back in the States and come back here with me without a second thought. He has to respect you, but also think that your love for me was more important than anything else."

"You're asking a lot." Keira's mouth was dry.

"If this works, if he approves of us, the rest of what we're trying to do will become much easier," Kareem said. "He'll take a step back and we'll have more freedom to go about our business. I know it's difficult, but trust me when I tell you that it's the right choice."

Keira nodded. She straightened her shirt and did her best to finger-comb her hair into some semblance of order, highlyconscious of the fact that she hadn't had a shower since they'd boarded the plane. This couldn't possibly be going any worse.

A low chime sounded. It didn't seem electronic — it was as if someone had actually struck a bell somewhere nearby. Keira looked at Kareem.

“That’s dinner,” he said.

“You get called to dinner by a bell?”

“That’s how we know it’s ready.” He shrugged, as if such things were normal.

“Does that happen at your house too?”

“Would it be a problem if it did?” He smiled. “No. I’ve dispensed with a lot of royal formality at my own home. I dismissed most of the staff a few weeks after I moved into the place.”

“You fired your staff?” Keira frowned. “That seems heartless.”

“No, I made sure they found other positions,” Kareem assured her. “With a recommendation from the royal family, you can work almost anywhere in Qalmar. They’re fine. It was just that I preferred the idea of having my own routine, rather than fitting with the established one — one more thing for my father to be unhappy about. Don’t bring that up at dinner.”

Keira added it to the growing mental list she was keeping of things not to talk to the king about.

The dining room was cavernous, and Keira couldn’t help hugging her arms tightly around her body as they walked in — the air seemed chilly, somehow. She didn’t think it was actually any colder in here, but it was difficult to relax her muscles all the same.

King Hassan sat at the head of the table. To his right was a woman Keira hadn't seen yet. She had the same thick, dark hair as Kareem, and unlike the king, she wasn't going gray at all. She had Kareem's large, dark eyes, too, and the shape of her mouth was just the same. Keira was sure this had to be Kareem's mother.

"Right here." Kareem led her to a chair all the way at one end of the table, right next to King Hassan. Keira wished she could have asked to be seated farther away from him. He was staring at her as if waiting for her to do something wrong. As for the queen, she fixed her eyes on Keira, frowned, and said nothing at all.

Show some spine, Keira. You face men who think they know how to push you around every single day. You can handle this.

She faced the king directly. "Your Majesty, it's so very gracious of you to ask me to stay for dinner," she said. "I know this must all come as a surprise."

"Yes, it's been quite a shock." He watched her beadily. "This is my wife, Queen Rajiyah. Kareem's mother."

"It's such a privilege to meet you, Your Majesty," Keira said to the queen.

Queen Rajiyah said nothing, just observed her quietly. Keira trembled.

"You do know that Kareem will not inherit my throne, don't you?" the king asked her.

"He's told me that." Keira laughed. "And what a relief. I don't know that we'd have been able to marry if he had a responsibility like that. I'm hardly fit to be queen — this is the first time I've ever been to Qalmar! I only hope I can prove myself suitable to be the wife of the king's youngest son."

“We’ll see.” The king leaned back as the cover was lifted off his plate. “I apologize, this food won’t be anything you’re familiar with.” The smug smile on his face belied his words. “Had I known a westerner was joining us today, I would have arranged for a different meal.”

Keira looked down at her plate.

The dish was one that would surely have made anyone from home flinch. It was meat, but the meat was so very red that Keira doubted it had touched a frying pan. She could smell onion, allspice, and nutmeg, and there were a few sprigs of parsley and mint finely arranged over the top of the plate.

The king was watching her. “I can have the cook whip up some buttered noodles,” he said. “I daresay you would like that better.”

Kareem was watching her too.

He wouldn’t be disappointed, Keira was sure. She could send this plate back. She could take the buttered noodles, which did appeal more and suited her palate better.

She didn’t need to impress the king and queen.

But she smiled instead. And the smile was genuine, because she had been dealt a card she knew how to play.

“Kibbeh nayyeh,” she said.

The two men looked at her. King Hassan’s eyes were wide with disbelief, but Kareem was clearly having trouble holding back a smile.

“You’re familiar with it?” the king asked at length.

“Oh, very. A client I worked with once was Lebanese, and he always insisted on having this dish whenever possible. I’ve tried it before. But I’m sure what we were able to get in America doesn’t compare to what you serve here at the palace,” she added.

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“Who was this client? You haven’t said what you do for a living, Ms. Harding. What kind of clients do you have, that you find yourself needing to serve them Lebanese cuisine as a function of your job?”

She glanced at Kareem. “I’m in events planning.” It was the story they had agreed to tell, and now that they were here, Keira was glad they had. It was obvious that King Hassan wouldn’t respond well to hearing that she had ever had anything to do with motorsports. Kareem had made it clear how little his father cared for that sort of thing, so to talk about her family’s involvement with it would make entirely the wrong impression.

She took a bite of the Kibbeh nayyeh, maintaining her smile. It was better than what she’d had of this dish before, though still a bit of a shock — she didn’t think she would ever become someone who ate raw meat regularly.

“Well,” King Hassan said to his son, “your new bride is, at least, more cultured than I feared she would be. You can be grateful for that. Perhaps she won’t have such a terrible time fitting in here in Qalmar as I might have thought.”

And then he smiled at Keira. “You know,” he said, “no one else in this family appreciates good Kibbeh nayyeh. My son would never eat it if I didn’t serve it to him. Perhaps that’s something you and I might have in common.”

The sentiment nearly made Keira drop her fork, so little had she expected it from him.

It wasn’t a big smile on the king’s face, to be sure, nor was it the charming smile that

she had come to expect from Kareem. He wasn't making any attempts to win her over. But his eyes had softened, and Keira no longer felt as if he despised her or resented her for having come into his life in the way she had.

Maybe Kareem was right. Maybe this experience wasn't going to be as bad as they had feared. Maybe they would even have some fun with it.

CHAPTER 9

KAREEM

After dinner was over and the plates had been cleared, Kareem's father rose quickly to his feet.

Kareem was glad of it. It would have been inappropriate for anyone to rise from the table before the king had done so, and it was only just now occurring to him that Keira might not know that. She hadn't dined with royalty before, so she couldn't be expected to know the protocols. The dinner had gone very well — the fact that she had eaten the kibbeh had been especially beneficial to their cause — but the whole thing might be ruined if she inadvertently caused offense on such a large scale.

Suddenly, he was eager to separate his father from his new wife. "I think Keira and I will head home for the evening, Father," he said, standing up himself. "We've had a long journey, and I know she's probably eager to rest."

In fact, he wasn't sure she was. He would have expected her to be terribly jet-lagged. It was seven o'clock in the evening here in Qalmar, but it was nine in the morning back in Las Vegas, and Keira hadn't slept on the plane.

But she continued to surprise him. She was sitting upright, not slumped the way he might have been if he was overtired. Her eyes were wide and alert as she looked

around, taking everything in.

“You can’t go yet,” his mother said, speaking for the first time. Kareem was momentarily startled. Her voice was so rarely heard when someone was visiting the palace.

But then, that didn’t apply to his brothers’ wives. Maybe things would be different with Keira. Maybe...

He shook his head. No, that didn’t make sense, because Keira wasn’t really his wife. Whatever he was experiencing now, it wasn’t going to last. This was all temporary, and he had to remember that.

His father turned to face his mother. “Rajiyah, I think Kareem is right,” he said, his voice low and quiet. “We should allow them to go home. Theyhavetraveled a long way.”

“Nonsense, Hassan. This young lady is my new daughter-in-law, and I’m eager to get to know her better,” Kareem’s mother said. She turned to Keira. “Allow me to take you for a tour of the palace gardens, my dear.”

Kareem swallowed hard. His mother had done this with both his brothers’ wives, but in their cases, it had happened before the marriages were official. The dinner had been his father’s way of determining whether his choice of a wife was a worthy one. A tour through the garden was his mother’s way of doing the same thing — and this time, it would happen without Kareem there to intervene.

But eventually Keira would have to stand on her own two feet, and he knew she was more than capable. He forced himself to remain where he was as his mother led Keira away.

She didn't even look over her shoulder as they left, and Kareem's heart swelled with pride. The more time he spent with her, the more he was pleased with his choice. It was hard to imagine bringing anyone better home to meet his parents. The fact that she had been able to hold her own against his father at dinner was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

His father was also watching the women walk away. "I must admit, there's more to her than I'd imagined," he said.

"You do approve, then?" Kareem asked, turning to face him.

"I didn't say that." King Hassan folded his arms across his chest. "You still made a rash decision, Kareem. Marrying someone without having her vetted by the palace — truly, I can't imagine what you could have been thinking. You saw what we went through when each of your brothers chose to marry."

"And can you understand why I would want to avoid all that when it came to my own marriage?"

His father sighed. "None of us want to do the things we have to do sometimes as members of this family," he said. "To be royal is a great privilege, Kareem, but it's not without its duties, and you've never understood that. You've never taken the responsibility of your position in life seriously. I don't know how to make you see that some things are more important than what you want. I don't know how to get you to take your duties to heart."

"At least I'm married now. I thought that would make you happy, Father. After all, you've expressed your wishes many times that I settle down. And Amir and Saif are even worse — they've tormented me about it for years."

"Everyone just wants to see you happy, Kareem. That's all we want."

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“It isn’t, Father. I know that’s not all you’ve ever wanted, because you know I’ve been happy to date women all this time. You wanted me to marry for the good of the crown, even though I’ll never inherit.”

“It reflected badly on the family, the things you were doing.”

“And now those days are at an end.”

Kareem felt a pang of guilt as he said that. His days of womanizing and having fun weren’t at an end at all, and he knew it. He would set those things aside for the duration of his marriage to Keira so as not to blow their cover, but he had every intention of going back to the pursuits he’d always enjoyed once this fake marriage came to an end. He was intentionally misleading his father right now and he knew it.

“You should have told me,” his father said sternly. He fixed his eyes on Kareem. “You shouldn’t have just done this in the United States without so much as speaking to anyone in your family about it first.”

“I know. You wish you had been able to vet her. I promise, you won’t find anything when you do.”

“It isn’t only that — although how you can claim to know that when you’ve known the woman such a short time baffles me. But you should have given us a chance to know her. Didn’t you see how hurt your mother was?”

Kareem blinked. “Hurt?”

“She was devastated. You couldn’t tell?”

Watching his father interpret his mother’s emotions when his mother always kept her cards so close was like watching a magic trick. “She didn’t say anything.”

“She wouldn’t, in front of a guest. And she didn’t want to hurt your feelings. But you’re her son, Kareem, and now you come home and tell her that you fell in love and decided to marry without ever letting your family know. She would have wanted to celebrate that with you. Surely you can see that.”

Now Kareem was beginning to feel sick to his stomach. He clenched his fists at his sides to keep himself from resting a hand on his gut to try to settle it. “I thought it would be a good surprise. For you and for Mom.”

“Wouldn’t it have been a good surprise for you to bring her home to us and tell her that you intended to marry her? To let us enjoy the moment with you?”

“Father, you wouldn’t have enjoyed it.” Kareem couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Don’t you remember when Saif brought Laila home and told us of his plans to marry her? You and Mother thought she was unworthy, and her father is a sheikh in his own right.”

“We always believed Saif would marry the daughter of a king,” Kareem’s father explained.

“Yes, I know. Laila was noble — a member of high society — and she very nearly wasn’t good enough for you. Now I come home married to a woman whose position in society couldn’t possibly be more different from ours. Do you really expect me to believe it wouldn’t have bothered you at all?”

His father sighed. “Kareem, I don’t wish to be unkind, but you must know that we

never had the same hopes for you as we did for your brothers. We always knew you were willful. To me, the miracle is in the fact that you've chosen to take a wife at all. I didn't anticipate that happening any time soon, and I'm very glad that it has. The fact that she isn't noble... I can look beyond that as long as you're happy. And it's clear to me that you're very happy indeed."

"Is it?" Kareem's heart missed a beat.

"I've never seen you smile as much as you did at dinner tonight — or as openly. Usually, when I see you smile, it looks as if you're enjoying some joke that no one else is a part of. There's something prideful about your smile. But tonight, it was like you didn't even realize you were being watched. Every time you looked at Keira, I saw you relax. How could I not be happy about anything that brings my son such joy? I'm glad to see you married, Kareem. I'm glad that you will finally bring honor to this family, that you're finally settling down and living up to the expectations of your station. But I'm equally glad that doing so is making you happy, because you deserve to be."

And then Kareem's father reached out and placed a hand gently on Kareem's shoulder.

For a moment, Kareem couldn't move. His feet were rooted to the ground, and his muscles were so tense that they ached. His mind whirled.

When was the last time his father had put a hand on him?

King Hassan had never struck any of his children in anger. He wasn't that sort of man. But he also wasn't the sort to embrace them in love, especially now that they were grown men. Pride in their accomplishments was communicated verbally, or occasionally with a rare smile, and actual affection was never seen.

His father's hand on his shoulder was nothing short of miraculous.

All too soon, though, the moment passed. His father stepped away. "You had better see to it that the young woman gets home," he said. "Your mother will keep her out in the garden all night long if we allow it."

"Right." Kareem stepped back too. The world seemed to have turned upside down. He had never imagined leaving here with anything like approval from his father, and though approval wasn't exactly what he had gotten, he had come much closer than he would have dared to dream he might.

He moved toward the doors that led to the garden, but as he did so, he saw that Keira and his mother were approaching from the other side. A moment later, the doors were pulled open and the women entered.

"No, it was wonderful," Keira was saying. "I'm so looking forward to a longer tour sometime in the future."

"That's right," Kareem's mother agreed. "We'll make sure that happens soon. I suppose we have all the time in the world now that you and Kareem are married — though we will have to plan a royal wedding. It would be simply too scandalous not to have one. I'll start making the arrangements at once."

Keira's eyes darted to Kareem, who could tell that she had no idea what to say.

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He spoke up on her behalf. “It’s no great rush, Mother,” he said. “We’ll have a royal wedding eventually. I know how important that is to you and Father. But since we are already married, there’s no reason to hurry things along.”

“People will find out you’re married if you wait too long,” his mother fretted.

“That’s all right,” Kareem’s father spoke up, and everyone turned to look at him. “It’s all right if people know,” he repeated. “They’re young, and they fell in love with one another. It happens. Looked at in a certain light, it’s very romantic, and I think the people of Qalmar will appreciate that. And they’ll appreciate that this young woman, who knows so little of our customs, was willing to come all the way back here and seal her vows in the Qalmese way.”

He looked at Keira, a penetrating stare, and Kareem heard the implied mandate. You must do it our way if you want to make it all right that you rushed this marriage.

Keira nodded. “Of course,” she said. “Honoring Qalmese customs is very important to me. I’m happy to respect your marriage traditions.”

She glanced at Kareem, whose heart swelled with sudden affection for her.

And then he remembered —she’s only saying that because she knows she’ll never have to follow through.

KAREEM

“This will be your suite while you’re here,” Kareem told Keira, opening the double doors that led to his best guest accommodations.

She let out a gasp. “All of this? Are you sure? I don’t need this much, Kareem. I would be fine with a single room.”

“I don’t have a single room,” he said. “Not unless you want to go and stay in the servants’ quarters.”

“There are servants’ quarters?”

“They have to live somewhere, don’t they? There is space there, if that’s what you’d like, since I let a lot of the staff go after moving in. But I don’t think it would be a very good idea. If anyone found out you were living in that part of the house while we’re allegedly married to each other, it would raise questions we don’t want to have to answer.”

“No, no,” Keira agreed, walking around the room. She let her fingers come to rest on the marble vanity, on the thick velvet curtains, on the gossamer canopy over the bed. “This room is...it’s perfect. I’m very happy with it. I’m a little surprised, that’s all. But it’s good.”

“You’ll be comfortable here?”

She turned to face him. “I shouldn’t be surprised, should I? You did tell me that I would be coming to live in a manor. I should have known it would be this nice. But I can’t help it. I’ve never lived in such an upscale place before.”

“You’ll have a maid assigned to you while you’re here, and if you need anything,

she'll be able to get it for you." He indicated the call button on the wall. "Just press that button and she'll come to see to your needs."

Keira rocked from one foot to the other. "I don't think I'll ever use that," she confided. "I can't imagine summoning a servant to wait on me. I would feel so awkward about it."

"Remember that your maid is being paid to do a job," Kareem advised her. "It's really no different from allowing a waiter to tend to your needs in a restaurant. And remember, too, that you are currently in a country that is entirely unfamiliar to you. You don't know our customs. You don't know anything about the ways of Qalmar, so you are going to need help. You should take advantage of the resources at your disposal, even if they do feel somewhat uncomfortable at first."

"You're right," Keira agreed. "This has just all been so much so fast."

"I'll leave you alone to unpack, if you'd like. And I know you'd like to get some rest."

"Actually, I don't think I would," Keira confessed.

Kareem turned back to her, eyebrows raised. "You're not tired? I thought you would surely be exhausted after our trip."

"I'd have thought that too, but with all the excitement today, I just don't think I could sleep," Keira confessed.

"Would you like to come with me to my office? I was going to go over some of my ideas for the racing event. I had intended to share them with you tomorrow, after you'd gotten some sleep, but if you're really feeling alert, we could do it now."

“I think I’d like that,” Keira said. “I did think I would want sleep, but now that we’re here... I don’t know. I think I’d like to work, strange as it seems.”

“Well, by all means.” Kareem’s heart fluttered with excitement. He had also anticipated that Keira would need some time to herself, and he had resigned himself to the fact that he’d have to wait to show her his ideas. The fact that she wanted to see them right away after all had him churning with excitement.

He led her from the suite and down the hall to the room that served as both his office and his library. Her eyes went wide all over again as they stepped inside. “You have so many books!”

“You’re welcome to borrow any of them as long as you’re here.”

“Are they in English?”

“Many of them are,” he said. “That shelf there is in Arabic, and that shelf is in Qalmese, but the rest are English, and you’re welcome to any of them.”

“That I might take you up on.” She grinned.

“Yeah? No moral qualms about that one?” He smiled back at her.

“It’s definitely easier to accept a book loan than it is to be waited on. Besides,” she added, “I’ve borrowed books before. Dozens of times. I’ve loaned them out myself. That seems normal to me.”

Kareem nodded. Their lifestyles were very different, and yet, on occasion, they found things they had in common. Now, in addition to racing, it seemed that they were both lovers of books.

It made him think of his parents, who had had an arranged marriage. They had often recounted fondly how little they had known of one another on the day they had married, and what an exciting journey it had been for them to learn more about one another and fall in love slowly throughout the course of their marriage.

Kareem had always sworn that he didn’t want what his parents had had. As much as he respected them, an arranged marriage wasn’t right for him. And when he had gotten older, he had been sure that he didn’t want to marry at all.

Now, though, standing here with Keira, he could see the benefit of it for the first time.

It was a pleasant thing to be tied to someone and to discover gradually that you were compatible.

But wait — what was he thinking of? He and Keira were here on a business arrangement, not in a real marriage. Any personal compatibility between the two of them was meaningless. In two months' time, this would all be ancient history, and it would no longer matter what had existed between the two of them. Their story would be over.

He cleared his throat and went to his desk. "Here are my plans," he said, pulling out the notebook he had used to write them down. "You can feel free to look over them."

Keira picked up the notebook and flipped it open. "You've done so much already."

"I've been thinking about this for a long time."

She nodded, her eyes on the pages. "You want to have a musical guest?"

"Well, I've been paying attention to American sporting events," he explained, "and I've noticed that something you often do is to have a performer come and put on a pre-show or a halftime show."

"I suppose that's true," Keira said. "Still, I don't know if that's the kind of thing that will work at an event like this one."

"Well, I've made up my mind about it already."

She looked up at him, eyebrows raised. "You've made up your mind?"

"Like I said, I've been thinking about this for a while."

“I thought you brought me here to advise. What if I don’t think your ideas are good ones?” she asked him. “Are you saying I should just keep my mouth shut?”

“Of course I’m not saying that. I’m just saying... well, obviously I’m going to be the public face of this venture, so what I want is what’s going to happen.”

“Wait a moment.” Keira put the notebook down and folded her arms across her chest. “Obviously you’re going to be the public face of this?”

“You’re here in an advisory capacity. I thought that was clear.”

“Kareem, the whole reason I agreed to come was that I thought it might benefit my career. How is that going to happen if I have to stay behind the scenes all the time?” Keira demanded. “I’m trying to make a name for myself doing this, not hide in your skirts.”

“Hide in my skirts?” Kareem raised an eyebrow.

“You know what I mean. When this is all over, I want it on my resume. I want people to know that I had a hand in it. If all you wanted was advice, I could have stayed at home. I could have not gotten married.”

“Are you regretting the marriage?” Kareem wasn’t sure quite how to account for the pang he felt at her words.

“I’m only regretting it if you’re saying I can’t be involved in the decision-making and put my name on this project, the way I thought I would be able to,” Keira said. “You have to understand how important this is for me, Kareem. I like you, but I didn’t come all the way over here as part of some philanthropic desire to help you achieve your dreams. This is about my dreams too.”

“It’s also about being practical,” Kareem said. “Remember, this is only going to work if my family doesn’t discover what we’re doing. You’re going to be background checked if you marry into the royal family, and it’s only a matter of time before someone discovers that you have a racing background. We have to maintain some deniability, and that means keeping you as far removed as possible from anything to do with racing while you’re here. If we’re not careful, someone will piece all this together, and our plans will be ruined before they can get off the ground.”

“Well, I’m not willing to take a backseat in all this because you’re afraid of getting caught,” Keira said.

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Kareem sighed. “It’s not fear,” he told her. “I’m being sensible, and you should be too. If we’re discovered, the event won’t take place at all. Is it so important to you to take credit for it that you’re willing to sacrifice that?”

Keira stared at him. “You’re asking if my work is so important to me that I don’t care about getting credit for it? Not really, Kareem. I’m passionate about racing, but I’m not so passionate that I’m willing to abandon all thought of recognition for my work. I’m trying to make progress.”

Kareem gritted his teeth. The truth was that he knew she was right, even though it inconvenienced him. She had come all the way to Qalmar, and she had a right to be as involved as she wanted to be, and to have her name on everything the two of them achieved together.

“All right,” he said. “I’m leaving for Monaco tomorrow. I was going to have you stay here, since it’s a short trip and it would be better for you to keep a low profile, but why don’t you come along with me?”

“Monaco? What’s there?”

“A couple of high-profile drivers that I’m hoping to persuade to enter our race,” Kareem told her. “There’s a private event taking place — you have to qualify to enter, and the criteria are demanding. I think we might be able to meet with the drivers and tell them what we’re planning to do, though, and if we could get them to come to our event as headliners, we’ll be able to bring other people on board a lot more easily.”

“Of course I want to come with you,” Keira said at once. “That’s the kind of thing I should be included in.”

She probably had a point. Still, Kareem was nervous. It was difficult enough bringing home a surprise bride and telling his parents that he had gotten married without their knowledge. When his father discovered that Keira had an interest in racing — which was beginning to seem inevitable — what little approval he had extended to the two of them so far would go up in smoke.

But Kareem didn’t need his father’s approval, he reminded himself. All he really needed was to make sure his father didn’t find out about the racing event he was planning — until it was too late for him to put a stop to it.

CHAPTER 11

KEIRA

“Welcome to your private suite, Your Highnesses,” the concierge said, opening the only door in the hallway on the top floor of the luxury hotel.

Keira stepped inside and gasped. She had never seen anything like it before.

Kareem had told her that the two of them would be staying in a suite, assuring her that she would have her own bedroom on their trip. But Keira had been picturing two adjoining hotel rooms, perhaps with a shared bathroom — similar to the sort of places she had stayed before.

This suite was nothing like that.

The first thing she took in was the fact that the wall opposite the door was entirely windows, floor to ceiling. A person could stand there and look out over the city of

Monaco, take in all the sights below. Immediately, Keira wanted to rush to the window and do exactly that, but there was too much else to see to focus on looking outside right away.

She crossed the marble floor, mindful of the way her low-heeled shoes clicked against it. It even sounded luxurious.

The room she had walked into was clearly meant to serve as a living space. It had a U-shaped sectional sofa facing a large television, which was mounted over a fireplace. Someone had set out a fruit basket and an array of meats and cheeses on the heavy coffee table. The TV was on and displayed a welcome message. Kareem found the remote control and began to cycle through the channels until he landed on footage of a race. He muted it and left that on.

“The master bedroom is here,” the concierge said, walking past Keira to open a pair of double doors.

Keira peered in, but the truth was that the master bedroom didn’t hold much interest for her. It would belong to Kareem during their stay. She could see that it was splendid, with a king-sized bed and another large TV, but she was more interested in the room that would be hers.

There was no good way to express that to the concierge, though. “Thank you so much for your help,” she said. “I think we’d like to get settled in now.”

“Please don’t hesitate to call the front desk if there’s anything you need,” the concierge beamed. “I’ll leave you to unpack.”

He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Keira wandered around, letting her fingers brush over various things in the room —

the marble countertop, the back of the sofa. Then she walked toward a door that stood closed on the far side of the room.

“What are you doing?” Kareem called after her. “I thought you wanted to unpack.”

“That’s what I was going to do,” Keira said, looking back in confusion. “I figured this would be the door to the other room.”

“You should take the master,” Kareem said.

“Oh, I couldn’t do that.”

“Sure you could. You’re a lady, and you’re here as my guest. You can’t possibly think I’m going to take the good bedroom.”

Keira laughed. “Kareem, this has to be the nicest hotel room in all of Monaco,” she said. “I’m sure all the bedrooms in this suite are wonderful. It’s not like you would be making me sleep on the couch.”

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“Just take the master,” Kareem insisted.

“You’re not worried about what that would look like?”

“No, why would I be?”

“Are you kidding? All you do is worry about what things are going to look like. That’s why you wanted us to get married in the first place.”

“Okay,” he allowed. “But it’s different now that we’re here. We don’t have to worry about what people are going to think, because my father is back in Qalmar. These people — the staff of this hotel — they won’t make any assumptions. They’re just honored to have the sheikh and the sheikha staying with them.”

Keira pulled at the collar of her shirt, feeling awkward, as she always did when he referred to her as the sheikha. It had only happened a few times, and she knew it was accurate — the title did apply to her, since she was officially married to Kareem. But even so, it didn’t feel like her. It didn’t feel like what she was.

Maybe that was why Kareem’s focus on outward appearances had been bothering her so much — she felt as if her true self was getting lost. This fake marriage was a difficult thing to maintain, but what made it harder was feeling as if nothing at all in her life was authentic. It would have been easier if she had been able to be her true self.

“We’ll leave for the venue in two hours,” Kareem told her. “Why don’t you take that time to freshen up and settle into the suite?”

“There’s no race tonight,” Keira said, surprised. “Why are we going to the venue?”

“There’s a VIP event,” Kareem explained. “It will be our best opportunity to mingle with the drivers and get to know them. We’ll be able to talk to them about our race.”

“You want me to come with you to that?”

“Keira, you have to come. This is your area of expertise. You’re the one who has done this before. I have no idea what I’m doing. I need you to manage public relations for me.”

Keira laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“This is just such a shift from the conversation we had back in Qalmar. You were adamant that you wanted me to stay out of things as much as possible. You said that my involvement in any public-facing capacity risked allowing your father to find out what we were doing, and that it would all be ruined if he did.”

“Well, I know that,” Kareem acknowledged. “But being away from him... I feel a little more secure about it all. It seems safer to let you get involved. And besides, I want you there. I had fun with you at the Spritzer Cup. Didn’t you have a good time that day?”

“Better than I thought I would,” Keira admitted.

“You’re a fun person to spend time with.”

“I didn’t realize you saw me that way.”

“I don’t have anyone else I can enjoy racing with,” Kareem explained. “No one in my family appreciates it. Actually, they outright dislike it. My father thinks it’s a childish waste of time, as you know, and my brothers find it boring. It’s a pleasure to have a friend I can share my interest with.”

“Is that what we are? Friends?”

Kareem laughed. “I suppose so. I mean, we’re husband and wife, but we can be friends as well.”

“We’ve done things in a strange order.”

“Well, not that strange. My mother and father were married before they knew one another at all, and they grew to like each other over time. We can be the same way — except that instead of falling in love, you and I will grow to be good friends.”

Keira found herself smiling. She wouldn’t have thought she would feel so comfortable with Kareem so quickly, but he was different here in Monaco — more relaxed. He’s more like the man I met back in Vegas, she thought. He has a sense of fun.

She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed this side of him when it had gone away.

“All right,” she agreed. “We’ll be friends.”

“So go into the master bedroom and unpack. We have a party to get ready for.”

“You really don’t need to give me the master bedroom. I appreciate that you’re being chivalrous, but it’s not necessary. Truly, any room in this place is going to be the nicest hotel room I’ve ever been in.”

“Just take it,” Kareem said with a light laugh. “You’re doing me a kindness by allowing me to give something back to you. You’ve been so helpful to me, after all.”

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“It isn’t as if there’s nothing in this for me,” she said.

“You seemed to feel that way back in Qalmar!”

“I felt that way when I thought you weren’t going to include me in things. Now that you are, of course it’s different. Of course I feel like this is all going to benefit me as much as you.”

“Well, I’m glad,” Kareem said. “But I’m also going to ensure that you enjoy yourself as much as possible every step of the way, Keira. Remember, you are only going to be a sheikha for a short time. I’m going to be in this position for the rest of my life, but you should take advantage of the luxuries we’re afforded as much as you possibly can while you have the chance. So take the master bedroom.”

“All right,” Keira agreed, finally swayed. That argument made a great deal of sense to her. “Thank you, Kareem.”

“Thankyou. I haven’t lost sight of the fact that you’re helping me to achieve my dream.” He grinned at her. “Go get yourself ready for the party. We have an exciting evening ahead.”

Keira nodded and went into the master bedroom, pulling the double doors closed behind her.

Once inside, she saw that the room was even more luxurious than she’d realized. There was a balcony on the far side that looked out over the city, and when she went to take in the view, she saw that there was a jacuzzi on the balcony. Her body

shivered with excitement at the thought of relaxing there later. She hadn't brought a swimsuit, but that was all right. She could buy one in the hotel gift shop, maybe, or—well, this was a private balcony, after all. Maybe she didn't need swimwear.

She opened the drawers of the ornate wooden dresser that stood on one side of the room, unzipped her suitcase, and began to load her things into it. It felt odd to do this — they were only going to be here for a few days, after all, and ordinarily she would have simply lived out of her suitcase for such a hotel stay. But it didn't seem appropriate to do that on this trip. It's not what a sheikha would do.

Keira smiled wryly to herself. Maybe she was getting more accustomed to her temporary title than she'd realized.

With her suitcase emptied, she stowed it under the bed. Then she flopped down on her back and stared up at the ceiling. Above her, a wide-bladed fan rotated lazily, stirring the air in the room and adding a bit of pleasant ambient noise to the space.

I can't believe Kareem gave me this room. He didn't have to do that. He's more caring than I've given him credit for.

She thought about what he'd said about the two of them — how they made such good friends. It certainly wasn't anything she had expected to hear from Kareem. Neither one of them had gotten into this arrangement out of a sense of genuine friendship for the other one. And yet... well, there was something to it.

Keira could relate to what he had said about not having anyone who appreciated the same thing she did. Her whole family loved racing, of course — she and Kareem were opposites in that way. But none of them appreciated what went into planning an event, staging a race. None of them could appreciate the hard work Keira put into everything she did. Now that she knew Kareem, she felt as if there was someone in the world who truly saw her for who she was and how hard she worked, and that was

a wonderful feeling.

She closed her eyes. It would be good to take a quick power nap before tonight's festivities. She had no idea what a VIP party in Monaco might entail, but she did know that she was going to need to be at her best. This might be the event that would make or break their entire plan. If the right people were present, and if she and Kareem were able to persuade them of the benefits of a race in Qalmar, there would be nothing to stop them from achieving success.

If enough high-profile drivers get on board, even the king won't be able to shut us down.

A smile crossed her face at the absurdity of the fact that she was even having such a thought. Here she was, lying on a bed in Monaco, thinking about the best way to thwart a king.

How had this become her life?

One thing was for sure — Keira was determined to enjoy it as much as possible for as long as she could.

CHAPTER 12

KAREEM

"You look beautiful," Kareem told Keira as they rode the elevator up to the event center at the top of the stadium.

She fidgeted. "I can't believe you had a dress sent in for me to wear."

"Do you not like it?"

“I love it. It’s beautiful. Of course I like it. It’s just... so fancy. This is nicer than anything I own, Kareem.” She bit her lip. “Which I guess is why you had it sent — because nothing I own would have been nice enough.”

“I didn’t mean it in an unkind way,” Kareem assured her. “I’m sure your clothes are lovely.”

“No, don’t worry,” she said. “I didn’t take it personally. You’re right. Everything I own comes from department stores. I don’t own any of the kind of thing anyone would expect to see a member of the royal family wearing.”

“And that would be perfectly fine with me,” Kareem said. “I don’t want you to feel as if anything you did wouldn’t have been good enough for me. I just wanted you to have this option so that you would feel as if you fit in at the party. You would have been fine to come to this party in jeans and a T-shirt, if that was what pleased you.”

Keira chuckled. “I don’t know what I was expecting to find in Monaco, but this certainly wasn’t it. Maybe we should just stay here.”

“If only we could!” Kareem said. “I’ve often thought that it would be easier just to move to a country where motorsports are already a part of the culture and do my best to become a part of the racing scene there. It would certainly be easier than trying to build a whole racing culture in my father’s country against his wishes. But I can’t leave Qalmar. Even though I’m not in line to rule, I am passionate about my home country, and I could simply never bring myself to leave it behind.”

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Keira beamed up at him. “That’s a beautiful sentiment, Kareem,” she said. “I really admire how passionate you are about Qalmar, in spite of the fact that you aren’t going to rule it. I think there are a lot of people who would have been perfectly willing to leave it behind in your shoes.”

Kareem felt his cheeks flush and was grateful that it was dark in the elevator. No one had ever said such a thing to him before. His father loved to talk about what a disappointment he was to the people of Qalmar and how fortunate it was that he had elder brothers to take on the responsibility of ruling, since Kareem himself would be so unfit for such a thing. But Keira made it sound as if she didn’t see things that way. She seemed to think that Qalmar ought to be proud of him — grateful to have him as a part of its royal family.

He would have loved to believe that something like that was true. Even knowing that she thought it was enough to make him feel warm inside.

The elevator stopped, and Kareem pulled himself together. It wouldn’t do to be caught up in his emotions at this party. There was work to be done.

“Are you ready?” he asked Keira.

“I think so,” she said. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Remember, all we’re trying to do is make some friends. You’re good at that. Just talk to people. Find out about them, and if you can, bring up our event and let them know we’re looking for participants. Don’t make any offers. We’ll gauge who’s interested tonight, and if we want to make formal offers, we’ll call around in the next

few days and do that. Tonight is just about information.”

“Right,” Keira said.

The elevator doors opened.

The event space was bustling — the party was already in full swing. Kareem took Keira by the arm, mindful of the fact that they were supposed to be husband and wife. It was true that the act mattered less here in Monaco, but even so, if things went well tonight, these were people who would eventually be joining the two of them in Qalmar. It made sense to ensure that they believed in the marriage.

Besides, Kareem found that he wanted to be physically close to Keira. It made sense, of course. She was a beautiful woman. The dress he had ordered for her — black and floor-length with pearl embroidery — hugged her curves, and the fact that it was strapless made her look taller than she normally did — or perhaps she was wearing heels. Kareem had always favored short women, and the fact that she stood a bit taller than she normally did had him entertaining a fantasy of taking those heels off her.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. He couldn’t afford to think about things like this. Not only was Keira not really his wife, she was his business partner, and the two of them had to keep things utterly professional if their endeavor was going to have a chance of success. There was no room for fantasy or romance.

But at least he could walk her around the room and show her off. For tonight, at least, he could pretend that he had some sort of claim to her, and no one would know any differently.

They stopped at the bar. Kareem picked up a glass of champagne for each of them and handed one to Keira, and she accepted it with a nod.

“How are we going to do this?” she asked him. “Divide and conquer?”

“No, we’re here as newlyweds,” he reminded her. “No one will believe it if we separate from one another. And besides, we work much better as a team. Your experience putting racing events together will be invaluable here. I know what my dream looks like, but if I try to explain it to these people, I’ll risk sounding like a little boy who’s just excited about race cars.”

Keira laughed. “I don’t think that’s how you sound when you talk about motorsports.”

“You don’t?”

“No, I think that’s your father talking, not you. You’re passionate about this. I feel the same way. And I think it’s a very reasonable thing to be passionate about! My whole family is like this, remember — I don’t think of it as a strange or childish interest. In my life, it’s always been very normal to care about racing.”

Kareem nodded. “You see? This is why I need you by my side, Keira. You make me feel as if I’m normal, and I’ve never had that feeling before.”

“I didn’t say you were normal,” Keira chuckled. “I still think you’re a very strange person. I just don’t think racing has anything to do with that.”

Kareem had to laugh too. “All right,” he agreed. “Fair enough. Come this way. I’d like to introduce you to someone.”

“Who?”

“Hugo Devereux. He’s a French driver.”

“Oh my God. You know Hugo Devereux?”

“I should have assumed you would know who he is,” Kareem realized, feeling foolish.

“I can’t believe you know him!”

“Oh, no, I don’t know him.”

“What? How are you going to introduce us, then?”

“It’s easy. I know who he is. I know who you are.”

“Kareem—”

But Kareem had already caught the driver’s eye. He towed Keira over. “Good evening, Mr. Devereux. I hope you’re enjoying the festivities.”

“Oh, very much,” Devereux said, his French accent so thick that it occurred to Kareem that Keira might have trouble understanding him. He himself interacted with French people regularly, so he was used to the accent, but Keira certainly would have encountered it less frequently.

“Are you one of the hosts tonight?” Devereux asked.

“Oh, no,” Kareem said. “Not tonight. Although I do hope to take on that role in the future — and that’s why I came over to speak with you. My name is Sheikh Kareem Nusaybah, of Qalmar. This is my wife, Sheikha Keira.”

“How lovely to meet you both.” Devereux’s eyebrows raised slightly, but other than that, he gave no indication that he was particularly impressed at the fact that he was meeting with royalty. Kareem had to give him credit for that. He always appreciated it when people were able to keep their cool around him. It was one of the things he had liked about Keira — she had been shocked to learn who he was, but it hadn’t changed the way she had acted toward him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Devereux,” Keira said, stepping forward slightly. Then she said something else — something Kareem didn’t understand.

Devereux’s eyes widened again. Kareem thought he looked a bit more surprised than

he had when he'd learned he was talking to royalty, which was certainly interesting. "You speak French!"

He sounded positively delighted. Kareem had to admit that he was surprised to learn this new fact about Keira, but he couldn't allow his surprise to show. She was his wife. Things like her linguistic abilities shouldn't come as a surprise to him. He schooled his expression carefully so that his reaction wouldn't be visible to Devereux.

Keira smiled. "I don't speak much," she said. "Just enough to get by. I've worked with plenty of F1 drivers in my time, and as you know, some of the best in the world come from France."

"Well, that's very true," Devereux said, beaming. "Your Highness, your wife is a very clever and well-spoken lady."

"I agree," Kareem said, feeling rather bemused. No matter how well, he thought he had gotten the measure of Keira, she seemed to keep surprising him.

"Can I speak to you about our project, Mr. Devereux?" Keira asked. "Kareem and I are hoping to bring motorsports to Qalmar, and we're very excited about the potential."

"I'm not familiar with your country," Devereux admitted.

"Few people are. That's one of the things we hope will change as we implement the new race we're trying to create."

"It will be an annual event," Kareem chimed in. "We're hoping to put on the inaugural race in a few weeks' time, and if we're able to pull that off, it will be a wonderful opportunity for someone to become the first ever winner of this event. It

would allow whoever walks away with the trophy to stamp their name on the history of motorsports.”

Briefly, a faraway look came over Devereux.

Kareem glanced at Keira and saw that she was looking back at him and smiling. He felt a swelling of satisfaction at how well this was going.

Devereux returned from his reverie. “You want to have this race soon?”

“Very soon, yes. We’re hoping to find some top-notch racers who are able to come and compete, and of course we thought of you right away.”

“When we heard you would be in Monaco for this event, we knew that we had to come and speak to you,” Keira added.

Kareem thought it was a nice touch. Of course they hadn’t come here specifically for Devereux, but he didn’t need to know that.

Maybe he did know it, though, because he smiled at them. “You two make quite a pair,” he said. “I can see why you chose to marry. It’s always refreshing to see a couple whose love is so powerful that it enhances the rest of their lives. I can see that the two of you work well together because you care so deeply for one another.”

The words felt like darts to Kareem’s heart.

It was a misconception, of course. He didn’t work well with Keira because he was in love with her. That wasn’t the nature of their relationship.

And yet...

And yet he found that hewantedit to be true.

On some level that he couldn't quite comprehend, he wanted to know what it would be like to love a person that deeply, the way Devereux had described.

He didn't imagine that was something he would ever get a chance to feel.

CHAPTER 13

KAREEM

The moment they arrived back in Qalmar, Kareem found himself missing Monaco. Ordinarily, it would have been good to be home — it would have been refreshing and calming to be back in the place that was more familiar to him than any other.

But a part of him felt as if something vital had been left behind in Monaco. While they had been there, he had felt free to enjoy himself with Keira. He had stopped thinking about the fact that their relationship was a sham, that they needed to make sure to perform every moment so they wouldn't be caught. He had simply gotten to know her better — and he'd liked it.

Now that they were back in Qalmar, though, things were different.

He spread the paperwork detailing his agreement with the racing venue before him and tried again to focus on what he was doing. These papers needed to be signed and returned today. Renting the space was the biggest investment they were going to have to make, and once they had done so, it would be very hard to undo what they'd done. But Kareem knew this was where he would take his largest risk, as well. Putting his name down on paper officially meant that people here in Qalmar would know what he was doing. They would know that he was trying to organize a race. And once that became known, it was only a matter of time until the word got back to his father.

“What are you doing?”

He looked up. Keira was standing in the doorway, watching him.

For a moment, he felt robbed of breath. He couldn't seem to get used to his beautiful she was. She'd allowed her auburn curls to hang loose around her shoulders today, and she wore linen pants and a tunic — a Qalmese style. It was exciting to see her adapting to the culture here, and every time Kareem saw her take another step into living life as a Qalmese woman, it made it more difficult for him to remember that she would not be staying. Eventually, she'd go back to America, and he'd never see her again.

It doesn't have to be like that. We're friends now, aren't we? And friends keep in touch with one another.

Yes, they were friends. But their lives were so different. He didn't know how he would manage to maintain a friendship with a woman who lived so far away. They could write emails and text one another, but it wouldn't be the same as seeing each other every day, and eventually they would grow apart.

This was always the plan. Why do I care so much all of a sudden?

"Are you okay?" Keira asked, stepping into the office. "You seem a million miles away."

"I'm all right," Kareem assured her. "I'm just looking over these documents."

"Is everything what we expected it to be?"

"It is, yes."

"Then you should sign them so we can return them quickly," she said. "It's for the best if we don't keep the venue waiting. After all, we can't do anything until we're sure we have that."

“No, I know,” Kareem said. “It’s just that... once I put my name down on this form, it’s official.”

“Don’t you want it to be official?”

“Yes. I just don’t want my father to find out.”

Keira sighed.

“What?”

“Nothing, I just... I don’t like how fearful you are when we’re in Qalmar.”

“I’m not afraid of my father,” Kareem said. “But I am realistic about the power he wields. He has the ability to shut this down. All he would have to do would be to discover what we’re doing, and I’m sure he would put a stop to it. You don’t want that any more than I do.”

“No, I don’t,” Keira agreed. “But we’re going to have to take that chance. If your father finds out what we’re doing, he will stop us — you’re right. But if we never sign the papers, the event will never get off the ground in the first place, and that isn’t any better — right?”

Kareem found himself smiling. “You’re right,” he admitted. “The only thing to do is to take the risk.”

He scrawled his name on the signature line.

“Perfect,” Keira said, picking up the papers. “I’ll get these faxed over right away.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Kareem felt a stab of guilt. Handling faxes seemed like a

job for a secretary or an assistant, and he didn't want Keira to feel like he thought of her as beneath him in any way.

She laughed. "Kareem, you don't know how to use the fax machine."

"Well. There's some truth to that."

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“I can teach you how later, if you want. That’s really a skill you should have, especially if you’re going to keep running this event after I go back home,” she said. “You’re going to need to get in touch with vendors next year.”

“Hold on.” Something had just occurred to him. “You’ll come back and help me with next year’s race, won’t you?”

“Well... I don’t know,” she admitted.

“You were adamant that you wanted your name on this,” he said. “That you wanted it to be part yours. Do you still want that?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then you must want to come back and be a part of it next year. And every year.”

Keira frowned. “I thought what you wanted was my expertise to help you get the event off the ground,” she said. “Why are you pushing to have me come back and help with it in the future? What difference does it make to you whether I do that or not?”

Kareem couldn’t answer. The truth was that there was no good answer. The reason he wanted her back was that he would miss her when she was gone — and that simply wasn’t something he could admit to. He couldn’t acknowledge that he cared about her enough that it would matter to him when she was out of his life.

“Just think about it,” he said, unwilling to write the idea off. “Wouldn’t it be nice to come back here every year and be a part of things?”

“It would be,” she said. “But I don’t know where I’ll be in a year — personally or professionally. I came over this year because I didn’t have anything else going on, but I don’t know if that will be true this time next year. It might be more difficult for me to fly halfway around the world and leave everything behind.”

Kareem heard the words that went unspoken. She didn’t know where she would be personally— that meant she might be dating someone. That was the only thing it could mean. And of course she might be. How could he expect anything else? She was a beautiful woman, and by this time next year, their sham of a marriage would be long over. It was ridiculous to think that she might not find something else.

It was ridiculous to hope that she wouldn’t. She wasn’t his wife. She wasn’t even his girlfriend. They were friends, nothing more, and barely that. If friendship was what he wanted from her, surely he would want to see her find happiness with someone?

He did want that. Of course he wanted her to be happy.

But he couldn’t deny the sharp twinge of jealousy he felt at the thought of her finding that happiness somewhere else. With someone else. When he thought of her — a year from now, after she was long out of his life — in the arms of another man.

She isn’t mine. I have no grounds to feel like this! I have to stop.

“Just keep it in mind,” he told her. “That’s all I’m asking.”

She nodded. “I will,” she said. “You’re right — it would be nice to be able to come back every year. And maybe it will be possible! We’ll have to see where life takes us.”

“I suppose we will,” Kareem murmured. He cleared his throat. “You’d better go send that fax. Our vendors are waiting to hear from us, and we can’t get in touch with them

until we know we've got our venue secured."

"Right," Keira agreed. "I'll take care of it right now. After I do, would you like to go out to dinner?"

"Out to dinner?" Kareem repeated.

"I thought it might be a nice way to celebrate this milestone," Keira said. "We'll have our venue booked — that's huge, right? It means we know that the race is officially on."

"Well, it would be good to celebrate," Kareem allowed.

"So let's get dinner," Keira said with a smile. "I haven't had many opportunities to explore Qalmese food since I got here. Of course I appreciate you keeping the house stocked with American favorites, but I'd also like to make the most of my time in this country by trying some new things."

"All right," Kareem replied. "Let me wrap up what I'm doing, and then we'll go out. I can think of a few places nearby that might be good."

"Do we need to make a reservation? If you'd like to give me the names of the places you're thinking of, I can call around."

"No need," Kareem said. "Any of these places will take me as a walk-in."

"They will?"

"My father's the king," Kareem reminded her. "If I ask them to, they'll shut down the whole restaurant and just focus on serving the two of us."

“Oh, don’t ask anyone to do that,” Keira said, her face flushing.

“Are you sure? It can be nice to have dedicated attention at a good restaurant,” Kareem said.

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“I wouldn’t want them to lose a whole night’s profits.”

“They won’t,” Kareem said. “The crown reimburses businesses for things like this.”

“Do you mean you would have to pay for it? Because you’re sinking so much of your money into this race already, I hate to think of you sacrificing even more.”

“No, no,” Kareem said. “Not me. The money would come from my father. It’s all right if he knows we went out to dinner together, so we can let him pay for that. Actually, it’s a good thing if he knows we’re going out to dinner, since that’s exactly the sort of thing newlyweds would do.”

“I see,” Keira laughed. “We’d be helping our cover story.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, if it’s like that, how can I refuse?” She smiled at him. “Going out to dinner and allowing the crown to foot the bill sounds wonderful to me.”

“Perfect. I’ll send a message ahead to a restaurant and let them know we’ll be coming — that way they can make the appropriate preparations,” Kareem said.

“Do I need to go home and change? This sounds like a fancier affair than what I originally anticipated.”

“No, not at all. Remember, we’ll be the only ones in the restaurant, so we get to decide how fancy or casual the night is. If we wanted to, we could go in our

pajamas.”

“Being a member of the royal family has perks I never imagined,” Keira confessed. “If you’d asked me, I would never have guessed that this would be an element of my life here in Qalmar — going out to nice restaurants on a whim and taking over the whole place. I mean, it’s the kind of thing you tell yourself will be possible when you fantasize about being a princess, but it also sounds like something out of a daydream.”

Kareem beamed. “I’m glad my country has made you feel like your dreams are coming true.”

Immediately, he felt as if he could have swallowed his tongue. What Keira had said hadn’t been nearly as dramatic as his response. Surely she would think he was foolish for making such a big deal out of it.

But if she felt that way, she gave no sign. She just smiled at him. “I’m glad to be here in Qalmar,” she told him. “This really has been the adventure of a lifetime. I’m glad I took you up on your offer.”

“I’m glad you did too,” Kareem said quietly.

The truth was, he was beginning to feel — already — as if he couldn’t imagine his life without her.

And that was a dangerous thing indeed. Because, soon enough, she would be gone.

CHAPTER 14

KEIRA

“I still feel like I should have gone home to change,” Keira murmured.

“You’re fine,” Kareem assured her. “You’re dressed just as well as I am, after all.”

Perhaps that was true. Keira couldn’t be sure. It was true that her outfit and Kareem’s were similar — they were both made of linen — but men’s clothing and women’s were different in Qalmar, and she hadn’t yet mastered the nuances of how to dress appropriately in her new culture. She counted on Kareem’s staff to help her choose appropriate outfits each morning, and this one had been chosen for the office.

She would just have to trust Kareem. This was his country, after all. He was the one who lived a publicly scrutinized life. He would let her know if there was something wrong with the way she was presenting herself.

She had to admit that it came as a surprise to find herself worried about this at all. It wasn’t her usual way. Keira was more apt to dress for her own comfort, style, and pleasure, and as long as she wasn’t wildly inappropriate — something that had never happened — she was content to let other people think whatever they liked.

Turning her thoughts around in her head, she realized that what was really worrying her tonight wasn’t what the public at large thought, but rather, what Kareem thought. She didn’t want him to be disappointed — but she would have to take him at his word when he said that he wasn’t, that he thought her attire was perfectly fine.

“Good evening, Your Highnesses.” A maître d’ was waiting at the door of the restaurant to welcome them. “We’re so pleased that you’ve chosen to dine with us tonight. Our chef is preparing a delicious menu for you. Please, come in.”

Keira felt as if she had stepped into another world. The restaurant was draped in gauzy fabrics, and the tables were covered with rich velvet cloths. The style was so different from any place she’d ever eaten before that she thought she would enjoy

spending an afternoon here, just taking in the sights. It was something she knew at once she would always remember.

Kareem didn't seem anywhere near as stunned by the opulence and beauty of the place. He wore a neutral expression — smiling mildly, but other than that, looking as if nothing out of the ordinary was taking place. Of course, Keira was sure he had been here many times before in his life, so there was no reason it would be particularly special for him. She was the one who was having a unique experience.

If there were ordinarily a lot of tables in this part of the restaurant, someone had taken it upon themselves to clear those tables away. At the moment, there were very few. They were led to one in the center of the space. "Please take a seat," the *maître d'* encouraged. "Someone will be along to go over tonight's menu with you in just a moment."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Kareem said with a smile. "You can go ahead and tell the kitchen to get started. I'm sure we'll be more than happy with whatever you have in store for us."

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“Very good, Your Highness.” The maître d’ nodded and withdrew.

“This is amazing,” Keira said. “I’m so glad we decided to do this.”

“I think you’re really going to like the food,” Kareem said, smiling at her. “You know, this place was one of my favorites when I was growing up.”

“You came here as a child?”

“Frequently, yes.”

“It doesn’t seem like a very child-friendly place.”

“No, but we weren’t really normal children,” Kareem pointed out. “Father said that my brothers and I needed to learn how to conduct ourselves appropriately at state dinners, and we would come here to practice for that. Amir used to complain about it and ask why we couldn’t just practice at home, but I understood what Father was trying to do — a part of handling state dinners is being able to get out of your comfort zone, and it wouldn’t have done us any good to practice formal dining etiquette at the same table where we ate all our meals. By coming here, he was able to make it feel as if we were at some sort of special event, and I think it did change the way we behaved.”

“Were you good at your etiquette lessons?” Keira asked.

“I was the best of the three of us, actually,” Kareem laughed. “I think it annoyed my father, because my brothers were the ones who really needed to learn those skills —

Amir especially, but I know Father hoped to make Saif a member of his cabinet, and that would have required the same skill for international relations as being king one day will require of Amir.”

“Why didn’t your father consider making you a member of his cabinet, if you were the one who was better at etiquette?”

“Because I’m the youngest,” Kareem said simply. “Having me in that position was never part of the plan.” Keira’s indignation must have showed on her face, because he added, “There’s no need to be upset about it. That’s the way things are in the royal family, the way they’ve always been. A third-born son has no place in politics. There are things he can do to be a valuable and cherished member of the Qalmese population, and oftentimes the public ends up loving a youngest son more than any of his brothers because he isn’t responsible for policy. I have the freedom to do things that my people will enjoy — things like planning races.”

“I see,” Keira murmured.

“You seem unhappy. Have I said something to upset you?”

“No, not at all,” she assured him. “It’s just that I know what it’s like when your family favors your elder brother and doesn’t pay attention to your accomplishments.”

“What do you mean?” Kareem asked. “Your family is a racing family. They must care a great deal about everything you’ve accomplished in the motorsports world.”

“You would think so,” Keira agreed. “But it hasn’t been that way at all. My brother is a driver, as you know, and so were my father, my uncle, and my grandfather. Driving is what my family cares about. They look at Kevin and see someone who’s a tremendous success, even though he’s only a mediocre racer and has never won a major cup. And when they look at me and what I do... I think what they see is

someone who failed.”

“How could they possibly see that?” Kareem reached across the table and took Keira’s hand in his. “You’ve succeeded in so many different ways. I can’t imagine how anyone could look at you and see a failure.”

Keira froze at the feel of his hand on hers.

She couldn’t pretend that this wasn’t something she had spent time thinking about. Every time they were in close proximity, her mind wandered to what it might be like to feel him touch her. But it had seemed impossible — like nothing more than a fantasy. To have that fantasy suddenly jerked from the back of her mind to reality was jarring.

Kareem seemed to realize at the same time that he had crossed an unspoken line, because he took his hand back and cleared his throat. “All I meant was that it seems obvious to me that you’ve worked hard and achieved great things,” he said. “It surprises me to hear that your family doesn’t see that.”

“You know how families can be,” Keira said. “They see what they want to see. Your family does, right? They want to see your oldest brother Amir as the leader, the one who is qualified to manage the affairs of a country. And they want to see you as the irresponsible one who can’t be trusted with anything and whose ambitions are nothing but the idle fantasies of a little boy.”

Kareem laughed. “I couldn’t have put it so well,” he said. “And it really isn’t funny — but yes, you’re right. That’s exactly how they see me.”

“It’s the same with my family. They decided something about me a very long time ago, and I don’t know that they’ll ever be able to move on from that decision. It’s just the way they see me now.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Kareem said quietly. “I know they’re your family and that you love them, but I also think you deserve to be seen and recognized for your hard work and all the great things you’ve done for the motorsports world. It’s hard for me to believe that anyone could have the Keira Harding as their daughter and not realize how amazing that is — how amazing you are.”

“Most people don’t think of me the way you do,” Keira told him, smiling.

“Well, they should.” Kareem’s expression was serious. “Any real racing fan knows what an important mark you’ve left on the sport, and if your family can’t find a way to understand and appreciate that, they don’t have their eyes open, Keira.”

A lump rose in Keira’s throat. How long had it been since someone had spoken to her like this — had truly recognized the effort and skill that was present in everything she did for her job? Had it ever happened?

“Thank you, Kareem,” she said, aware that her voice sounded huskier than it normally did. “Thank you so much for saying all this. You don’t know what it means to me to hear it.”

“No, I think I do,” Kareem said quietly. “Being around you has made me feel validated in a way I never expected, Keira. For the first time in my life, I don’t feel like the family joke — like a lazy fool who can’t be counted upon to achieve anything or to take anything seriously. Even when I first came up with the concept for this race we’re putting together, I couldn’t help feeling as if it was a very self-indulgent thing to do with my time. But being around you has changed that for me, because I’m able to see how someone who loves racing the way I do is also someone to be admired. You’ve allowed me to see myself in a new light, Keira. I will always have that to hold on to now, even — even after you’re gone.”

Keira shifted awkwardly in her chair. Though she hadn’t mentioned it to Kareem —

she would have been far too embarrassed — she didn't like thinking about what would happen when the race ended. She had never intended her life here in Qalmar to be permanent — far from it — and she did want to go back home. But at the same time, it was hard to picture saying goodbye to everything here. She'd fallen in love with the warm breeze that greeted her each morning, the sound of the Qalmese accent — even, to her dismay, the luxurious surroundings in Kareem's estate. She'd gotten used to being waited on, something she had promised herself wouldn't happen. But she hadn't been able to help it. The fact of the matter was that being a sheikha was a lot of fun.

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And being with Kareem... that was proving to be even more fun.

It was hard to believe there had been a time when she'd found him unbearable and wished that he would leave her alone. It was true that he could be annoying from time to time, of course. She still burned inside whenever he got caught up in his worries about what his family would do if they found out about the race. But at the same time, she understood the way he felt. It was very difficult to try to do something on your own for the very first time. She could imagine the anxiety it must cause him to know that at any moment, his father might intervene and put a stop to all their plans.

After all, what if her own father had had the kind of power King Hassan did? What if he'd been the ruler of a country, able to push people in any direction he wanted them to go?

Keira knew the answer. If her father had had his way, she would be behind the wheel of an F1 car right now, and she would never have been able to discover her true passion.

Kareem might be a privileged member of the royal family, but Keira knew he was much more constrained by his position in life than she had ever been by hers, and that fact made her heart ache with a desire to help him.

She would do all she could to ensure that his race was a success.

CHAPTER 15

KEIRA

“Are you sure it’s all right for us to walk home?” Keira asked as they left the restaurant.

“Of course it is,” Kareem said. “Like I said, someone will come to pick up the car. We don’t need to worry about that. I do this all the time, Keira.”

“It’s not the car I’m worried about.”

“Is it the neighborhood? Because I can assure you that it’s very safe.”

“No, it isn’t that,” Keira said. “Though I do feel as if all of Qalmar is very safe! That’s been one of the most pleasant surprises to me about my time here.”

“Yes, you’re right about that,” Kareem agreed. “Qalmar is ranked among the ten lowest countries in the world for instances of violent crime, and we’re also on the top-twenty lists when it comes to safety for women and tourists. It’s something we’re very proud of.”

The way Kareem spoke about his country warmed Keira’s heart. Not for the first time, she wondered how his family had allowed themselves to pass up the opportunity to put him into a political position. Kareem clearly loved Qalmar, and he was a wonderful person to represent it.

“It’s not safety I’m concerned about either,” she said. “It’s publicity.”

“Publicity?”

“Having our picture taken. I know we run the risk of that every time we step outside, but to walk along a public street like this... it seems almost inevitable, doesn’t it?”

“I didn’t realize it was something you felt so negatively about,” Kareem said,

stopping mid-stride. “Should we summon the car?”

“No, we don’t need to,” Keira said quickly. “I didn’t mean to imply that I minded having my picture taken. I was under the impression that you didn’t like it. Or that maybe you’d want to avoid it with me.”

“Getting my picture taken isn’t my favorite thing,” Kareem admitted. “But it’s kind of unavoidable when you live this life, and I’m not about to let that stop me from enjoying a nice walk in the warm weather sometimes. If you want me to call the car back, I will. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable. But if it’s me you’re worried about then don’t be. I’m more than happy to take the risk of being photographed.”

Keira smiled. “All right,” she agreed. “As long as you’re comfortable with it, I think a walk home sounds like a great idea.”

“Did you enjoy your meal?” Kareem asked as they made their way along the footpath that ran parallel to the road.

“Very much,” Keira enthused. “You were right about that restaurant — it was wonderful. And I’ve never had an experience like that before. I felt a bit selfish, having them shut down the whole restaurant just for us, but it did make things feel very special. You should do that when you take women on dates.”

Her gut clenched as she spoke the words. She’d meant to be light-hearted, but it didn’t feel that way now. It felt as if she had spoken something into being — something she wasn’t sure she wanted. It was like she’d given Kareem permission to date other women.

A ridiculous thought. He didn’t need her permission to do anything. They weren’t really married. Or rather, they were, but only as a formality. The relationship wasn’t one that required any sort of loyalty to one another, and Kareem was at perfect liberty

to do whatever — with whomever — he wanted.

There was no justification for how sick that made Keira feel. It was as if she was grieving something she'd never even had.

Kareem didn't respond to what she'd said. Keira didn't know what to make of it. Was he imagining being with other women? Picturing the dates he would take them on? In three months' time, would he be sitting in that same restaurant, but this time opposite someone else? And Keira would be far away, back in the US, all of this just a memory.

Of course she couldn't come back for this race again next year. Eventually, Kareem would have a girlfriend, or perhaps even a wife. It would break Keira's heart to see him with someone else. She couldn't do it.

Kareem cleared his throat, breaking the silence. "Why don't we walk down by the river?" he suggested. "I don't think you've seen it at night."

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Keira shook her head. “I haven’t.” She had only seen the river from a car window, in fact. She had passed by it a few times over the last week or so, but you couldn’t get a great look at it from the road, and she did want to see.

Kareem led her down a side street. Keira found herself moving closer to him as they walked.

Of course I’d do that. Qalmar might be an incredibly safe country, but the US isn’t, and walking alone at night is an intimidating thing. Of course I’d want to stay close to the man I’m walking with.

She forced down the thoughts that tried to rise up within her. The thought that she didn’t feel unsafe, not in the slightest, so there was no reason for her to seek protection. The thought that she knew perfectly well she was trying to get close to Kareem for some other reason altogether.

That reason couldn’t be allowed, couldn’t be acknowledged. It was impermissible.

They reached the river’s edge. It was so dark that Keira couldn’t see it very well — it was just an interruption of black amid the lights of the city. But she could hear it lapping against the shore, sounding astonishingly close.

“Here.” Kareem guided her to something large and a bit chilly. “You can sit here.”

“What is this?”

“A rock. This was where I would sit when I’d come here as a teenager.”

She settled on the rock. “Don’t tell me — your family made you come here to practice the way a sheikh ought to behave in the presence of water?”

She could tell by the tone of his voice that he was smiling. “My family never even knew I came here,” he said. “I used to sneak out and come down here when I wanted to be alone. Of course, I always had to disguise myself to avoid being noticed and having my picture taken — as you said.”

“You disguised yourself?”

“Not well. I’d just wear western clothes. Lots of Qalmese people do, of course, but no one expects to see the royal family in jeans and sneakers. And just in case, I’d wear a hoodie, so you couldn’t really see my face. Someone would have had to get very close to figure out that it was me — and nobody ever did.”

“Why did you sneak down here?”

“I had to get away sometimes,” he said. “I’m sure you can understand, now that you know what it’s like in my family. It’s all right for me now that I’m an adult and can choose how and when I interact with them, but when I was younger it was much more difficult. I had to deal with my father’s disappointment in me every single day. I had to stand next to my brothers and feel the weight of my parents’ comparisons and expectations every day. It was terrible. Sometimes I just needed some distance from all of that.”

Keira nodded. “That makes sense,” she said softly. “I can understand why you would feel that way.”

She felt the warm presence of another person next to her on the rock and knew that Kareem had sat down beside her. “You can’t see the river now,” he said. “But you can hear it.”

“I was just thinking that.”

“Listening to it is the main reason I’d come here,” he said. “You can see the river from a lot of places in this city — including a few of the windows at the palace. But to be so close to it that you can hear the water rushing by is a different experience. It got rid of all the noise in my head, somehow. It made me feel calmer.”

“You should spend more time here now,” Keira said.

Kareem chuckled. “Are you saying I need to calm down?”

“I think we could all stand to calm down a bit,” Keira said seriously. “It’s not a you thing, but everyone has a tendency to take life too seriously from time to time. God knows I do it.” She stared out at the river she was unable to see, thinking about just how true that was. How much trouble she had relaxing and going with the flow sometimes, and how much better off she would be if she could bring herself to do it.

“I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you, Keira,” Kareem said after a long silence. “I would have thought that this would be strictly a business arrangement. That was my intent when I brought you here. But it hasn’t been that, has it?”

“I’ve never sat beside a river and talked about life with anyone who was just a business partner,” Keira said softly. “But I never expected a sheikh of Qalmar to become one of my... good friends.”

“It’s almost less surprising to have you as my wife,” Kareem agreed. “At least that was something I expected. That was a decision we made. But this — I never saw this coming at all.”

“I wish I understood why it feels so surprising,” Keira said. “It isn’t as if you’re the first unexpected friend I’ve ever made.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment, but the air felt heavy with tension, and Keira wondered whether Kareem could possibly be thinking what she was thinking.

Her heart hammered as she waited to see what he would say.

It felt crazy to hope that he might be thinking the way she was — but then, it had been crazy to imagine him taking her hand at dinner, and that had happened. For that matter, it was crazy to imagine a sheikh marrying her at all, even if it was purely for business reasons. A lot of strange things were happening in Keira's life lately.

She felt his arm brush up against hers.

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She thought he might pull away, that perhaps it had happened accidentally in the dark.

But he didn't pull away.

Instead, he leaned closer, and Keira's breath caught in her throat.

His hand found her waist. Her head swam. This was really happening. He really had been thinking of her in the same ways she had been thinking of him. And even if it was leading nowhere —of course it's leading nowhere, he's a sheikh and I'm just some girl— even so, right now, in this moment, they were together and they wanted exactly the same thing.

And it was going to happen. She knew it as surely as she had ever known anything in her life.

"I've been thinking about this from the moment I saw you, Keira," Kareem said in a low voice. "But I never believed we'd actually get here. I never thought we would be in this moment."

Keira couldn't speak. She was too afraid of breaking the spell that seemed to have fallen over the two of them.

When he kissed her, it was like something out of a dream. It was surreal. Keira couldn't believe it was happening — and yet, the sensations were so powerful that she couldn't doubt it, either. The scent of him seemed to surround her, and his warmth blocked out the night wind. The only thing in the world was him.

At the back of her mind, a voice protested, reminding her that this was a bad idea. That this had never been the plan. She was supposed to be here for a few weeks, nothing more. She was supposed to fake a marriage. Nothing about it was supposed to be real.

But right now, in this moment, Keira thought this was the most real thing she'd ever experienced in her life.

CHAPTER 16

KAREEM

"You'll be fine to meet with the vendors by yourself today?" Kareem asked.

"I'm on top of it," Keira assured him with a warm smile. She rested a hand briefly on his shoulder as she picked up his breakfast plate, and Kareem's heart missed a beat.

He had worried that things would be awkward between the two of them following the unexpected kiss — and to an extent, they had been. They'd spent the following day stealing glances at each other and speaking much less than they ordinarily would have. But now, two days after that, things had settled into a comfortable routine — even if it was a routine that gave Kareem more questions than answers.

Like now. The way her hand lingered on his shoulder. What was he to make of that? Clearly she was choosing to touch him, not shying away from close physical contact. Did that mean she had been so unaffected by the kiss that she simply didn't perceive touches like this one as meaningful or unusual? Did it mean that she was trying to force things to seem normal between the two of them? Or did it mean... could it mean that she wanted another kiss and was trying to steer things in that direction?

He didn't know. All he knew for sure was that she wasn't choosing to avoid him, and

for that he was deeply thankful.

“Remember, we need to sign the contracts with all of the food vendors by the end of the week,” Kareem said.

“I know,” Keira told him with a smile. “I’m on top of it, I told you. You don’t need to worry. Focus on your meeting with your father — do you know what it’s all about?”

“No. He just said that he needed to see me.”

Keira said nothing, and Kareem was sure that she was thinking the same thing he was. A summons from Kareem’s father might be very bad news indeed. It could mean that he had found out about the race, and if he had, there was simply no telling what his response might be.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Keira asked.

“No. You need to meet with the vendors. That has to happen today. Besides, I don’t think it would help matters for us to go together,” Kareem said. This might turn out to be nothing at all. Maybe he wants to have lunch with me because he’s interested in how things are going in our marriage. Maybe he wants to do something kind to welcome you to the family. We shouldn’t jump to the worst conclusion.”

“You’re right,” Keira said with a smile. “And whatever it is, I’m sure we’ll be able to handle it.”

Warmth spread through Kareem when she said we. He liked that they were a team. It did make him feel more confident, more capable of taking on whatever lay ahead for them. This, he thought, must be the reason people chose to get married in the first place — so they would have someone to stand by their side during whatever life threw at them. It didn’t mean that he was going to get married, of course. But it felt

good to understand the motive for that behavior nonetheless.

“Call me if you need help with anything today,” he said, getting to his feet. “But I trust you to make the right choices for us. I know you’ll do what needs to be done to get us prepared for the event.”

“I’ll do my best,” Keira said.

Kareem wasn’t worried. He had the utmost faith in her. The only thing that worried him was what he might be in for when he faced his father — but there was nothing for it but to head over to the palace and get this meeting over with.

His father was waiting for him when he arrived. His expression was somber — lips pressed into a thin line, gaze fixed on Kareem’s face. Kareem’s anxiety elevated. Whatever was going on, it was clear that it was no minor thing.

“What’s this about?” he asked his father.

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“Come into the study and sit down, Kareem,” his father said.

Kareem followed his father, seeing no way out of it. He felt as if he was a very young man again, about to be reprimanded for something he’d done wrong. His father’s scolding hadn’t gotten to him in years, but right now he knew that his father had the power to take away the thing he wanted most, and that was a very difficult thing to face.

“Sit down,” his father said, and Kareem sat.

His father sat across from him and looked him square in the face. After a few moments, it became obvious that he was waiting for Kareem to speak first.

Kareem had long since learned not to fall for that. If he spoke first, he risked getting himself into worse trouble than he was in already. He would wait to see what his father already knew.

“You were aware,” his father said eventually, “that any woman you brought home would have extensive background checks run on her. You were aware that we would investigate her thoroughly and find out everything there was to know. Did you think we wouldn’t catch on?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Kareem said.

“Keira Harding,” his father said. “Her family is well known in the United States, aren’t they?”

“I wouldn’t say they’re well known.”

“Stop it, Kareem. I already know, so you might as well admit it. You didn’t bring Keira here because you fell in love with her. You brought her here because of who she is.”

Kareem said nothing.

“Go on,” his father said. “Tell the truth. I looked into things here in Qalmar, and I know that a venue has been reserved for a major sporting event. That race you asked me about. You’re going ahead with it anyway, aren’t you? Despite my objections. Despite the conversation you and I had about it. You’ve decided to organize it anyway.”

Kareem drew a steadying breath. This would always have happened eventually, and he knew it. At some point, his father was always going to find out about the race, and Kareem would have had to admit to what he was doing. It was happening earlier than he had expected it to, but he had still known that it was coming, and he could still deal with it.

“All right,” he told his father, doing his best to maintain an even tone. “You’re right. I am planning a race.”

“And you’ve been lying to me about it, thinking that I wouldn’t find out.”

“I knew you’d find out,” Kareem countered. “I always planned to tell you eventually, Father. I just wanted to make sure that we had the plans in place before I spoke to you about it.”

“You did that because you wanted to make it more difficult for me to cancel the event,” his father said. “You wanted to make sure that it would go ahead. Isn’t that

right?”

“I did want that,” Kareem agreed. There seemed to be no point in lying about it now. “I wanted to make sure our plans would come to fruition. I’ve worked hard on this. And, Father, I didn’t use any of the crown’s money. I respected what you said when you told me that you didn’t want to contribute to an event like this. I used my personal funds.”

“I suppose you think that makes it all right?”

Kareem waited. In fact, he was sure that it wouldn’t be all right with his father. But he wasn’t yet sure what the reasoning would be.

“You knew perfectly well that I didn’t want you to do this,” his father said. “You know what I think about racing and how I feel about your involvement with it.”

“Yes, I do,” Kareem said evenly. “I also know that you and I are never going to see eye to eye about this, Father. And I’m very sorry about that, but you simply cannot expect me to structure my entire life around trying to please you. The fact of the matter is that I have never been able to win your approval. I don’t believe I ever will be able to. I had to abandon the attempt eventually. I had to move on and allow myself to live the life I want to live. I’m sorry that’s disappointing to you, but you must acknowledge that everything I do is disappointing to you.”

“I have no hesitation about acknowledging that,” his father said. “I’ll happily let you know what a disappointment you’ve been — and frankly, your passion for racing has very little to do with that.”

“Don’t expect me to believe this isn’t about racing, Father. That’s why you called me here today — because I’m planning a race and you don’t like it. Because you look down on motorsports and you always have.”

“I think it’s a foolish hobby,” his father agreed. “But people have foolish hobbies. You know I don’t like the fact that you’re publicly attaching your name to such a thing, but at the end of the day, it is your name, and you didn’t use crown money, so I can appreciate that. But the real problem is that you manipulated me and your mother. Pretending to be married in order to disguise what you were doing — that’s going too far, and I’m surprised that you didn’t realize that. I can’t believe you could bring that woman home and lie about a marriage to her in order to get what you wanted. I never dreamed you were so selfish.”

“It isn’t a lie. We really did get married,” Kareem insisted.

“And is it your intention to remain married?” his father asked, raising his eyebrows.

There was no good answer to that question, of course, so Kareem remained silent.

“You thought I wasn’t going to figure out this part of your plan,” his father surmised. “You knew that eventually I would catch on to this race of yours, but you thought I would never realize that you meant to end your marriage — or rather, not until it was too late for me to stop you. You thought you could use a marriage as a way to manipulate this whole family, to trick us into supporting you and turning a blind eye to your behavior. Isn’t that right?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Kareem said.

"All right. Tell me what it was like."

There was nothing Kareem could say. The truth was that his father did have the measure of the situation, and although it hadn't been as mean-spirited as what he was describing, Kareem couldn't dispute the facts. He'd wanted his marriage to stop his family from looking too closely into his actions. That was the reason he had chosen to marry Keira.

There was more between them now. His feelings for her had changed, and it no longer felt as clear as it had before they had come to Qalmar.

"Father," he said. "It might have begun that way, but things are different between the two of us now." Surely his father would understand this. Hadn't he talked all Kareem's life about how his affection for Kareem's mother had grown slowly? This wasn't the same situation, but surely he would be able to acknowledge the value in a friendship that had grown where Kareem had not expected to find one.

But he shook his head. "What matters is that you lied," he said. "You lied to me. You lied to your mother. You let us believe that this woman was joining our family, but it was all a ruse to help you get what you wanted. This is why I've always felt that you were too immature to be trusted with anything important, Kareem. I don't think you're even able to see why this is such a problem. Truly, I am very disappointed."

He sighed. "You can have your race," he said. "Since it was so important to you, and since you've already invested so much money in it — I won't interfere. Do what you want. But the woman must leave Qalmar at once. I won't take the risk of any more public attention being drawn to this sham of a marriage. And I expect you to finalize

your divorce, quickly and quietly, as soon as you possibly can.”

Kareem felt as if a lead weight was sinking into the pit of his stomach.

“You're dismissed,” his father told him, not bothering to look up.

CHAPTER 17

KEIRA

“Thank you again,” Keira said as the final food vendor packed up his sample plates.

“We’re so excited to be working with you. It’s going to be a wonderful event.”

The vendor thanked her profusely. Keira flushed with happiness. She knew that the opportunity to be a part of Qalmar’s first major international racing event was important for all the vendors she had chosen to work with, but she hoped they knew that she hadn’t signed on with any of them out of charity. She felt that all the selections she had made were the right ones, and she knew that the food at the race was going to be perfect — exactly what she wanted to have available for the racing fans who would attend. She had settled on a good mix of traditional Qalmese food and international cuisine, hoping to appeal to both locals who chose to attend what might be their very first race and guests from abroad.

She gathered her things and made her way back to the car, beaming the entire way. As she drove back to Kareem’s estate, thoughts played in her mind about what she would say to him. She couldn’t wait to let him know how well today had gone — she was sure he was going to be thrilled.

There was a worry at the back of her mind, knowing that he had spent the day with his father. But perhaps it would be for the best if the king did know about the race. If he did, they would at least be able to stop sneaking around. They would be able to

simply plan their event in public. That was an appealing idea.

She parked the car and got out, noticing as she did that Kareem's car was already in the garage. He had returned before she had. Was that good or bad? She frowned, trying to sort through it. Maybe it meant that his father hadn't been that upset to learn about the race. Maybe it was a good thing.

She went inside and headed to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Kareem sat at the dining room table. He didn't look up when she entered. Keira's heart sank. She could tell by the slump in his shoulders that he hadn't gotten good news from his father.

"What happened?" she asked quietly.

Kareem took a deep breath. "He knows. He knows everything."

"Well, we always knew that was going to happen eventually, right?" Keira walked over to the table and sat down opposite him. She reached out hesitantly and covered his hand with hers.

Kareem pulled away from her, and Keira's heart sank further. She had wanted to help him, but she had also wanted contact. Closeness. Ever since the kiss that had taken her by surprise, she had found herself longing for more intimacy. It was difficult to go through the day and not reach out to him, to rest a hand on his shoulder or his waist when they were in close proximity. Now, seeing how upset he was, she ached to wrap her arms around him and comfort him.

She couldn't do that. As of right now, the two of them were still nothing more than business partners. But more and more, Keira had found herself wondering if it was possible that they could become something more. Her feelings for him were

significant, and she was beginning to realize that she couldn't simply dismiss them. They would end their marriage soon, but they had both spoken of wanting to continue their friendship. Maybe that friendship would grow into something more significant.

But he was pushing her away right now, and that felt like a knife to the gut.

Still, Keira did her best to understand. He'd had a difficult day. He had been forced to confront the thing he had been worrying about all this time. Of course he wasn't himself. She should give him the space to get his bearings.

"What can I do?" she asked. "Would you like to hear about the vendor meetings?"

Now he did look up at her. "Is that really all you have to say?" he asked. "I tell you that my father has found out about everything we've been doing, and you want to talk about food vendors?"

"I'm trying to be helpful," she said, stung. "I thought it might take your mind off of things."

"You think this can be solved by distracting me?"

"Kareem, why are you upset with me? We've talked about this. We always said that as long as we were deep enough into the planning when your father found out about the event, everything would be all right — he wouldn't be able to stop it from moving forward. Do you not feel that way anymore? Do you think he's going to try to put a stop to it after all?"

"No," Kareem said heavily. "He isn't. He's going to let us move forward."

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“Then I don’t know what you’re so upset about!” Keira said. “The race is on, Kareem. We don’t have to worry anymore about what will happen when your father finds out. What did he say?”

Kareem looked away from her.

“He says you’ve got to leave Qalmar,” he said quietly. “You have to go back to the States. He’s given you three days.”

Keira was stunned. She was sure that she must have misunderstood — his words quite literally didn’t make sense.

“Three days?” she repeated. “I can’t go back in three days. That’s before the race.”

“That doesn’t matter. He’s going to let me go ahead with the race, but he won’t let you stay for it. He’s offended that we lied about our marriage.”

“So he’s just kicking me out of the country?” Keira shook her head. “What if I refuse to leave?”

“You can’t do that, Keira. He’s the king. He has the resources to have you removed against your will if you fight him on this, and believe me, you don’t want that. It would not be pleasant.”

“Don’t I have resources?” Keira asked. “I thought I was a sheikha.”

“That doesn’t compare to the power of the king. Especially since your marriage is

being considered illegitimate.”

“You mean our marriage?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean.”

“Kareem... I don’t understand. Are you telling me that you’re just going to allow this to happen? After everything I’ve done for you? After all the work I’ve put in to help you achieve this dream, you’re going to let your father do this to me?”

“There isn’t anything I can do about it, Keira. It’s like I just told you — he’s the king. There’s nothing to be gained by trying to stand against him.”

“Did you even argue with him? Or did you just roll over and agree that I should leave?” Keira couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Fury swelled within her like a flame. “I guess you don’t think it’s very important to keep me around now that you’ve gotten what you want — is that it? You know that your race is going to be successful, given all the work I’ve put in, so why bother going to any trouble to keep me around?”

“In fact, I’ll bet you’re glad this is happening. You never wanted to let me put my name on this. You told me you were worried about what would happen when your father found out, but that never did make sense to me — it was really that you didn’t want to share the credit, wasn’t it? You thought it would be better if I was gone, and now you’re getting your wish. You got all the benefit of my hard work, and now you’ll get to pretend that you were the one responsible for the whole thing.”

“It isn’t like that, Keira.”

“Don’t bother. I know you could have fought for me to stay if that was what you really wanted.”

“We have three days. Maybe there’s something we can do, some way of stamping your signature on the race?—”

“Oh, stop it,” Keira snapped. “You must be crazy if you think I’m going to hang around here for three more days.”

He looked at her.

“I want you to book me a flight out of here tonight,” Keira said. “It’s the very least you can do, after everything I’ve done for you. I want to be on my way home as quickly as possible.”

“Keira, don’t do this. We don’t need to end things this way.”

“Don’t act like I’m the one who’s ending things,” Keira said. “It sounds to me like things are already over. I just want to get out of here and move on with my life, now that I know this has all been a waste of my time.”

Unable to bear being in the room with him any longer, she turned and walked away as quickly as she could. She hoped he hadn’t seen the tears in her eyes before she’d turned her back on him. The last thing in the world she wanted was for him to realize how much all this hurt.

The truth was that she had always known this marriage was temporary. She had always known this moment lay ahead. There was no excuse for feeling as though her heart was being ripped out because he had told her it was time to go home.

But she couldn’t help it. She did feel that way.

As she packed, Keira told herself that what she was feeling was just betrayal. He had brought her here under false pretenses, promising that it would be a significant

moment for her to advance her career. That was the reason she'd agreed to come in the first place. And now that wasn't going to happen. Her time had been wasted, because she would never be able to claim this event as something she had helped with.

But the truth was that — although she was angry and did feel taken advantage of — what she really felt was something much deeper and more painful.

She had genuinely begun to believe that there was a future for Kareem and herself. She'd thought that, perhaps, when their marriage came to an end, something else might happen.

She had hoped for it.

Not only was it not going to happen, it was also abundantly clear now that he had never felt the same way. He had never envisioned any sort of future with her. He'd only been biding his time until they went their separate ways. To know that his father was sending her away and that Kareem hadn't even tried to prevent it was a worse blow than Keira could have imagined, and it weighed heavily on her heart as she packed her things.

How could he not even try? Did she mean nothing to him at all?

The tears she had been holding back finally spilled over as she zipped up her suitcase. In the end, it had taken such a short time to get all her things together, and it felt like a sign of just how little she had mattered. When she got on the flight tonight, she would disappear from Qalmar and from Kareem's life as if she had never been here at all.

That was probably the most difficult thing to face — how little she would matter, in the end. How easily she would fade away and cease to be a part of Kareem's story. He had indicated that he wanted her to come back and help with next year's race, but she knew now that when that time came, he probably wouldn't think about her at all.

She picked up her suitcase and left the room, forcing herself not to look back at what she was leaving behind. She didn't want to think about it. She would miss this place too much — it had truly begun to feel like home.

But this wasn't home. This had never been home.

And Kareem had never been anything real to her.

All Keira wanted now was to get back to the US and forget that any of this had ever happened.

CHAPTER 18

KAREEM

“I must say, this is a splendid venue,” Hugo Devereux said, looking around at the arena. “I’m glad that I signed on for this. It’s going to be good to be part of the first annual Qalmar Cup — and even better when I take the win home for France!”

Kareem forced a laugh. Lately, it felt as though all his laughs were forced. He didn’t want to tell Devereux that this might be the last Qalmar Cup as well as the first — he didn’t want to admit that, or even speak it into being. But the odds were not good that his father would allow this event to take place again next year, and Kareem knew it. The stakes were incredibly high — he needed everything to go perfectly and for the event to be an unmitigated success if he was even to have a chance at making it happen again. He would have to offer a compelling argument that the Cup had been the right thing, not just for himself and the participants, but for all of Qalmar.

If only Keira were here.

It was a thought that came to him several times a day in the weeks since she had gone. He missed her terribly, and everytime he ran into any sort of difficulty, he couldn’t help thinking that things would be easier if he had her by his side. She would come with ideas for things he could do to make sure the event was successful. She would know exactly how to explain things to Kareem’s father, so that he would see the benefit to an event like this.

But she's gone. I have to stop wishing she was here, because she's not and she never will be again. That part of my life is over.

"Come with me," he told Devereux, anxious to put his worries out of mind. "I'll show you to the ready room. I'm sure you'll be spending plenty of time there in between races."

"I'd like that," Hugo said. "I'd also like to know which other drivers you've booked for the event, so I'll know who I'm going to be racing against."

"You're the first to arrive in town," Kareem said. "That's really all I'm at liberty to say right now. We're not releasing the list of names until the day before the race, in order to make sure no one has an advantage over anyone else."

"How would that provide an advantage?"

"We haven't finished recruiting, and don't expect to finalize the list until the eleventh hour," Kareem explained. "Anyone who's added to the roster at the last minute will have less time to size up their competition if the list is released early. That's why we made the decision not to do that."

"I see," Devereux said. "You say we — is that you and your wife? I must admit, I've been disappointed not to see her here today. She was such fun when we met in Monaco, and I had been looking forward to conversing with her at greater length."

"Keira won't be joining us, I'm afraid." Kareem heard his voice tighten and knew that Devereux had likely heard it too and would suspect that something wasn't right. But he didn't want to discuss Keira with anyone else. He didn't want to explain that they were no longer married and have to receive Devereux's sympathies. Lately, it felt like the only thing that kept him feeling steady and able to function was focusing on work, so that was what he wanted to do.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Devereux said. “I liked her a lot. She did seem genuinely interested in racing, and as if she knew a lot about the sport.”

“She does. And yes, her interest is genuine,” Kareem said. “She’s loved racing all her life — as I’m sure you know. You recognized her family name, didn’t you?”

“I did. I just wasn’t sure how she fit into the picture. I know there are many drivers in her family, and she doesn’t seem to have followed that path.”

“It’s not for everyone.” Kareem felt oddly defensive of Keira, knowing that if she was here she wouldn’t appreciate being compared to people who had chosen to get behind the wheel. “She decided to get involved in another capacity — much like myself.”

“I can see why the two of you decided to get married,” Devereux said. “You make such a good match. I thought that when I first met you, and I still believe it today.”

He was only trying to be polite, Kareem thought. He could have no idea how painful those words were. “Thank you for saying so,” he said. “If you don’t mind, I need to go and check on something. Feel free to explore at your leisure.”

He hurried away before the conversation could go any further, unwilling to spend a moment longer discussing Keira. It was just too painful to talk about her.

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Even thinking about her was hard. Kareem revisited the memory of the night she'd left Qalmar several times a day, wondering what, if anything, he could have done to get her to stay.

"Don't do this," he had said as they'd sat in the car outside the entrance to the private airfield. "Don't leave like this."

She had stared out the window, avoiding his gaze. "What's the point in anything else?" she'd asked. "This is already over. You made that clear, so why would I stay? Why would I want to hang around in Qalmar when there's nothing left for me here? I would just be running out the clock. Besides, you let me know that your father hates me, and that definitely doesn't make me want to stay here. It will be better for everyone when I'm gone."

"My father doesn't hate you," Kareem had protested.

"Then why have the two of you aligned against me?"

"That isn't what's happening."

"Spare me. You're not on my side, Kareem. If you were, you would actually do something, and you haven't. You're just sitting there asking me not to go without giving me any kind of reason to stay."

It was the last thing she had said to him. She'd gotten out of the car and grabbed her luggage from the trunk before Kareem could muster his thoughts to go and help her, and he had watched through the windshield as she'd crossed the tarmac and boarded

the plane.

He hadn't driven away at first. That had felt too final, and a part of him had held onto the hope that she might change her mind and come back. But eventually, one of the air traffic controllers had knocked on his window and told him that he was very sorry, but that the pilot was requesting that the tarmac be cleared so that the plane could safely take off.

He had heard from Keira one more time. She'd texted him to let him know that she had arrived safely at home. But when he had tried to text her back, he had received an error message, and he'd understood — she had blocked his number. She didn't want to hear from him again.

Kareem had been torn between feelings of anger — how dare she shut him out that way? — and grief. It did hurt to lose her. He had always known that she would leave eventually, but even in his worst, most painful imaginings, it had never looked like this. He had never imagined that their parting would be filled with such anger, or that the door would close on the possibility of their ever speaking to one another again.

He missed her. Every moment of every day, he missed her. That wasn't supposed to happen either, but it had.

With a sigh, he took his phone out of his pocket, pondering the possibilities.

He couldn't text or call her — she had his number blocked. But there might be other ways of reaching out. Perhaps he could find her brother's phone number somehow. Kevin Harding was a public figure, and there must be ways of contacting him, especially for someone in Kareem's position. He was unused to feeling so powerless, unable to contact the people he wanted to reach. It wasn't a problem he'd ever had before. And for the person he was attempting to contact to be someone so important to him — it was a problem he had been entirely unprepared to face.

He left the arena and drove back to his office. His thoughts were a thousand miles away, in the United States, with Keira, and his mind lingered on the kiss the two of them had shared.

Had it meant nothing to her? How could she have cut him out of her life so easily after something like that?

Did she simply kiss people all the time? Maybe that was the reason it hadn't mattered very much to her. Maybe it was a regular occurrence.

Kareem sighed. It wasn't as if he never kissed women. That was one of his father's main criticisms about him — that rather than settling down, he had chosen to live a life of fun and freedom.

Could he fault Keira if she had done, and continued to do, the same thing?

Of course he couldn't. She was free to live whatever life suited her, and it was Kareem's own fault that he had different expectations. He had always known that their arrangement was a temporary one. He had gotten into this knowing that it would end.

The fact that he had realized now that he didn't want it to end... that didn't matter. The realization had come too late, and there was nothing he could do about it now. He had to let her go.

He pulled up in front of his house and went inside.

Because it was the middle of the day, the place was bustling. The staff members he kept were in the middle of their daily routines — cleaning, polishing, making sure everything was as it should be. Kareem walked right past them all. He didn't want to speak to anyone. He had not explained to the household staff the reason for Keira's

sudden departure. He knew they were speculating about it behind his back — gossip was only to be expected — but they had been diplomatic enough not to let him hear a whisper, and he was grateful for that. He didn't want to know what was being said, what they were guessing might be the reason for the sheikha's choice to leave.

He went up to the room that had been hers while she had been here and paused outside the door.

He hadn't been into this room since before Keira had arrived. While she had been here, he had stayed out to respect her privacy, and once she'd gone, he had struggled with the idea of going in, knowing that he would feel the lack of her more acutely.

He needed to start getting past this. The entire reason for her presence in his life had been to help get the race off the ground. The race was going to be a success now. He had nothing to complain about.

Opening the doors, he stepped into her room.

Immediately, he was hit with a familiar scent — a scent he wouldn't have said he recognized until this moment. It was her. It was like hibiscus — it must have been some product she used. He couldn't believe it had lingered. But then, the room had remained closed all this time. Perhaps that was the reason why.

He should make sure to leave the doors ajar when he left so that the aroma would fade.

But instead, he found himself hurrying to pull them closed. He was reluctant to lose this last little piece of her. He wanted to hold onto it, as if it would serve him as proof that she had been here at all.

CHAPTER 19

KAREEM

“It feels like forever since you and I last spoke,” Queen Rajiyah said. “You live right here in town, Kareem, and yet we never see you. Why is that?”

Kareem let out a sigh and looked out over the river. He was surprised that his mother had chosen this place when she had asked him to come for a walk with her today, but he was also grateful. He didn’t know if he would have had the strength to face it on his own. After all, this was the site of his kiss with Keira. Even now, being here, it was impossible not to think of her and of what they had shared — but he didn’t want to think about it. He wanted to put her from his mind and focus on the race, which was now only a week away.

“I’ve been busy,” he told his mother. “I’ve been caught up in preparations for the race. And besides, I don’t think Father wants to see me.”

“Your father is not the sole decision maker in this family,” the queen said firmly. “He may be the king, but when it comes to our children, I have always taken the more forceful hand.”

“Would you say so?” Kareem asked. “You know how Father has always been — determined to let me know what he thought of all of my choices, to make sure I was aware he didn’t approve of the way I live my life.”

“That’s right,” his mother agreed. “He doesn’t approve. But has he ever acted to stop

you? He wants you to work in a tech-related job, and you've never shown any interest in that. He could have forced your hand by sending you to college or arranging a job for you, but he hasn't done those things."

"He will now," Kareem said dully. "He told me himself that once the race is over, he expects me to settle down in a tech job. There won't be anything I can do about that."

"No, I'm afraid there won't be now," his mother agreed. "But at least he's allowing the race to go ahead. That's my doing, you know. He wanted to cancel it the moment he heard, but I convinced him that it should be allowed to go forward."

"Oh," Kareem said. "I hadn't realized that."

"Well, it's the truth. So for you to stay away from home because you're afraid your father doesn't want to see you..."

"No, you're right," Kareem agreed. "I shouldn't have done that, Mother. I should have come around sooner to see you. I'm sorry I didn't do that."

"You don't need to apologize," the queen said mildly. "Just don't stay away like that again. You're my child, Kareem. I will always want to see you, no matter what you might have done."

"Do you also think it was a mistake for me to plan the race?"

His mother sighed. "The truth is, I don't feel the same way your father does about that," she said. "I don't think there is anything so bad about your passion for these races. I'm glad you have something you loved, Kareem, and I would want you to pursue that passion whenever you possibly can."

"You do seem disappointed in me, though. I don't think that's only Father."

“I wouldn’t have said disappointed.”

She was quiet. Eventually, Kareem prompted her, “What would you have said, if not that?”

“I’m hurt,” she said. “I’m hurt that you got married without telling me, Kareem. I’m hurt that you didn’t involve me in that.”

Kareem felt a sick stab of guilt. “You know why I didn’t discuss it with you,” he told her. “It wasn’t a real marriage. If it had been, things might have been different, but I always knew that it wasn’t going to last.”

“That’s what I told myself,” his mother said. “You know I was very hurt when you first brought Keira home after not being honest with me about your plans. I had always assumed that if you chose to marry, you would allow the family to share in your joy, and I was sure we must have done something to offend you if you’d decided otherwise. I felt awful about it.”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel that way, Mother. Truly.”

“As time went on, I came to realize that things weren’t as they seemed,” the queen said.

“You did?”

She laughed lightly. “You’re my son, Kareem. I know you very well. Better than you give me credit for. I could see the way you were with her. At first, it was as if you hardly knew her.”

“I hardly did,” Kareem admitted. “But I never thought anyone would be able to recognize that.”

“Most people wouldn’t have. You two did a good job presenting yourselves as what you claimed to be. I think I was the only one who realized early on that something wasn’t right. Your father was shocked when he discovered who she truly was. He would never have known, I think. But I wasn’t surprised to learn the truth. I had suspected there was something I didn’t know about your situation almost from the very start.”

“I suppose I should have known that you would put it together,” Kareem said. “Mothers always seem to know these things.”

She laughed. “There is some truth to that.”

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“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings,” he told her. “I didn’t intend to do that.”

“I know you didn’t. You felt as if it was the only way. Now that I know more about what you were doing and why, I understand that. You could have been honest with me, but I understand why you felt as if you couldn’t. I’m sorry it was like that for you, Kareem.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t place more trust in you,” he said.

“I understand why you didn’t. And I’m not telling you this because I hoped to hear you apologize for what happened. What’s done is done. I want to tell you, though, that I still don’t think you’re being completely forthcoming about things.”

“I am,” Kareem said, surprised. “I’m not keeping any more secrets, Mother. You know the whole truth now.”

“Perhaps it’s yourself you aren’t being honest with,” his mother said. “Do you think I can’t see the way you looked at her? And how different you’ve been since she left? I think you have yourself convinced that your marriage wasn’t real — but I think that if you were honest with yourself, you would have to admit that there was something real in it. Something more than just your desire to put on a race for the people of Qalmar.”

The shiver that went down Kareem’s spine reminded him of a feeling he had often had in his youth, when his mother had seemed to know things she shouldn’t have been able to know about what he was doing. It had seemed to him in those days as if she had a sixth sense for the behavior of her children, and it felt the same way now. How could she possibly know with such accuracy what he had been thinking and

feeling since Keira had gone home?

“Am I right?” she asked him. “You care for her, don’t you?”

Kareem wanted to deny it, but he felt tired of trying to keep his feelings under wraps. It all seemed too difficult all of a sudden.

“It doesn’t matter how I feel,” he told his mother.

She stopped walking and turned to face him head-on. “Never say that, Kareem,” she said firmly. “Of course the way you feel matters.”

“I don’t mean it doesn’t matter,” Kareem amended. “I just mean it doesn’t change anything.”

“But you do feel something for her?” his mother pressed.

“That wasn’t the agreement between the two of us. This wasn’t an arrangement that was supposed to leave room for any feelings.”

“Kareem, answer the question.”

“Of course I feel something!” The words seemed to explode out of him. “She’s beautiful, she’s smart, she has the same passions I do — how could I not feel something? The only surprising thing is that I didn’t see it coming. I should have known something like this would happen if I spent too much time in her company. I should have known better than to let her get close.”

“Oh, Kareem,” his mother sighed. “It saddens me that your response to finding love is to say that you should have known better than to get close to the person you feel it for.”

“I never said love.”

“You didn’t have to. I’ve been in love myself,” she said. “I recognize it when I see it. You’ve been different since Keira left. You’ve been hurting. I can see how difficult it’s been for you.”

Kareem raked a hand through his hair. “None of this was the plan. None of this was supposed to happen.”

“Life doesn’t always follow your plans,” his mother told him gently.

“It did for you,” Kareem pointed out. “You and Father made an arrangement to marry, and you followed through on it. I would have thought that if anyone would appreciate the importance of sticking to a plan, it would be you.”

“That’s what you took away from my story?” His mother laughed. “That was never the point of the story I told you about my marriage, Kareem. It’s not a story about good planning. It’s about how love can surprise you. How it can find you even when you’re not expecting it. Yes, your father and I had an arranged marriage, but we came to truly love one another. That could be true for you as well. You might find love in your marriage, even though you and Keira didn’t come together for that reason. You shouldn’t rule it out as a possibility. And if you’ve discovered that you have feelings for her, I think that’s something you need to follow through on. You need to give yourself the chance to find out what those feelings might lead to.”

“It can’t happen,” Kareem said. “Father sent her back to America. If I wanted any sort of future with her, even something casual, I would have to leave the country. And no matter what I might feel for her, I’m not sure I can just leave Qalmar behind forever.”

“I’m not suggesting that,” his mother said patiently. “But I do think you should bring

her back here for the race. If nothing else, Keira deserves to experience the fruits of her labor, doesn't she? You both worked hard to make this event a reality. I'm sure it must matter to her as much as it does to you." His mother's voice carried a slight tone of recrimination, and Kareem realized with a pang that she was disappointed him.

It hurt. "I wanted her to stay," he defended himself. "It was Father who said she had to go. And if he was an ordinary father, I might have defied him, but he's the king. He could make trouble for her if she tried to stay here against his wishes."

"You let me worry about your father," the queen said firmly. "The only question for you to answer is, do you want to see her again?"

"Of course I do," Kareem said quietly. It wasn't even a question.

"Then I'll speak to your father."

"He won't agree."

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“Leave that to me. Like I told you, I know how to make him see reason. You just worry about reaching out to Keira and letting her know that she’s welcome to come back.”

Kareem nodded, but he didn’t allow his hopes to rise. After all, Keira had blocked his number. Getting in touch with her would be all but impossible. And even if he somehow managed to do it, there was no reason to believe that she would want to see him. She had made it perfectly clear that she was finished with their relationship.

What his mother was saying was kind, and in a way, it was nice to hear. But, like everything else having to do with Kareem’s relationship with Keira, it was just too little, too late. They had squandered a good thing, and Kareem had little hope that they would be able to recover it.

He would try. He knew that his mother was right, and that if nothing else, Keira deserved to be here for the race. He would do his best to reach her, and he would ask her to come back.

But he didn’t believe that it would do any good.

CHAPTER 20

KEIRA

“So you’re still married to him?” Allie asked, her eyes wide.

Keira laughed, not because she felt like laughing, but because the whole situation was

so surreal that sometimes laughing seemed like the only adequate response. “I am,” she said. “I’m sure he’s going to send the divorce papers for me to sign any day now.”

“This is wild,” Allie said. “Technically that means you’re still a sheikha of Qalmar.”

“Technically, yes,” Keira agreed. “But it doesn’t really mean anything. It’s not as if I’m ever going to visit Qalmar again. I don’t think I’m even allowed to go there. It would probably cause some sort of international incident if I did, since I was thrown out by the king.”

“I can’t believe my best friend was banished by a king,” Allie said. She grabbed a bottle of champagne from a display as they walked past. “We need to get this.”

“Allie, I invited you over to eat ice cream.”

“I know that, but come on, this is about to be the most gossip night the two of us have ever had. It needs champagne.”

This time, Keira’s laugh felt more genuine. “I missed you while I was in Qalmar,” she said. “All right. We’ll get champagne.”

“Good. I want to hear all about it. And I want to know if he’s a good kisser or not.”

“How did you know we kissed?” Keira hadn’t mentioned that detail.

Allie smirked. “You just told me.”

“You are an absolute menace.”

“A menace who wants to know what it’s like to kiss a sheikh, so you’re going to have

to tell me all about it. I mean it, Keira. You can't have an adventure on the level of something like this and then not spill absolutely every detail to your best friend. It's my right to know what happened over there."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," Keira assured her. "Honestly, it will probably feel good to talk about it, after everything that happened. I never felt like I could be completely open with Kareem about how I was feeling, and obviously I can't discuss it with my family. They wouldn't understand."

"Imagine telling Kevin that you'd been to Qalmar, launched a new international cup, and married a sheikh," Allie giggled. "He wouldn't be able to stand it. His whole identity is centered on feeling like he's the most important person in your family. He would hate to think that you had done something cool that had nothing to do with him."

"He'll never find out about it." Keira's heart sank a little at the thought. There was a part of her that would have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to tell her family about everything she had achieved. But now that things had ended the way they had, she knew she would never be able to tell them. They would see the situation in Qalmar the same way Keira herself did — as a failure. She would be lucky not to be mocked for it, and it would probably become one of those family anecdotes that was retold for years to come at her expense. Either that, or else Kevin would decide she'd made the whole thing up. It wasn't hard to imagine him drawing that conclusion, even though Keira had no history of doing anything like that. It was easy for Kevin to imagine that someone might tell an egregious lie for no reason other than to get attention. It was the kind of thing he himself would have done.

Keira and Allie went through the checkout line, and Keira paid for their purchases. "You've got to let me give you some money for all this," Allie insisted.

"No, I don't," Keira said firmly. "I'll be getting a lot of money from Kareem before

all this is over.”

“You think he’s still going to pay you?”

“Yes. He turned out to be a jerk, but he’s an honest man,” Keira said. “He won’t hold back on the payment he promised me. He might even pay me extra out of guilt.”

“Well, that would be cool.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Keira sighed. “I don’t want him to try to buy my forgiveness. It isn’t for sale. I blocked him for a reason. I’m not interested in anything he might do to try to weasel his way back into my good graces. I should never have trusted him in the first place, and I regret doing it.”

“If you say so,” Allie said dubiously. “I think you’ve got feelings for him, personally.”

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“You had feelings for Steve Morris two years ago,” Keira reminded her friend. “That didn’t mean he was anything more than a toxic grease monkey.”

“Oh man,” Allie whistled. “You’ve got Steve-Morris-level feelings? This is serious, Keira. I thought you just had a minor crush on the guy. Do I need to do an intervention?”

“You absolutely don’t. I’m never going to see him again, remember?”

As they drove home, talk turned to an upcoming race, for which Keira was thankful. Talking about Kareem hadn’t gotten any easier. Almost every day, she experienced a moment of wanting to unblock his number, to see whether he was still trying to reach her. She always managed to resist the urge, but it was getting increasingly difficult to do that, and she was afraid that one of these days she would break.

Back at home, she ran down to the mailbox and picked up the day’s mail while Allie carried the groceries into the house. It wasn’t until she had gotten inside herself and begun to sort through the bills and ads that she realized what she was holding.

“What’s up?” Allie asked, noticing her standing still in the middle of the kitchen. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Keira shook her head. “Not a ghost.” She held out the envelope.

Allie frowned. “What is this?”

“That’s a Qalmese address.”

“What are you saying? It’s a letter from Kareem?”

“I can’t think why he would write me a letter. I think it has to be the divorce papers.” Keira bit her lip. This would really be the end of everything. She had no good reason not to sign these papers and return them immediately, and she also knew that once she did it would officially be over.

Wasn’t that what I wanted? Isn’t that the reason I blocked his number?

She no longer knew the answer to that question. All she knew was that she was filled with grief at the thought that their story was coming to an end.

She sat down at the kitchen table, the envelope in front of her.

Allie cleared her throat. “Listen, never mind the champagne. Maybe we need some vodka.”

“I don’t want to drink,” Keira said. “Not until after I’ve had a look at this, anyway. I think I should be clear-headed.”

“At least you won’t have to think about it anymore after you sign the papers,” Allie said.

Keira knew her friend was trying to cheer her up, so she gave no response, although the truth was that the idea of not thinking about Kareem anymore felt awful. It wasn’t something she was ready to contemplate.

“Do you want me to open it?” Allie asked.

“No,” Keira sighed. “I need to be the one to do it.” She slit open the envelope and pulled out the papers inside.

And paused.

These weren't divorce papers. This wasn't a formal document of any kind.

She was looking at a handwritten letter.

Dear Keira,

I apologize for reaching out to you in this manner. I understand from your decision to block my phone number that you no longer wish to speak to me, and I want to respect that choice. However, there is something I think you should know before we go our separate ways.

I have spoken to my family, and they have agreed that you have the right to be present for the Qalmar Cup. You played an invaluable role in helping it come to fruition, and you should be here when it takes place.

I would like to formally invite you to return to Qalmar for the Cup. I will take care of your travel arrangements, of course.

If you wish to accept this invitation, please unblock my number and reply in the affirmative. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume that the answer is no, and I won't trouble you any further. But I hope to see you again. This event won't feel right if you're not in attendance.

I'm sorry again for the way things ended between the two of us. Very truly, I hope that we might be able to set it right someday, though I hold no expectations.

Hoping you're well,

Kareem

“Hoping you’re well? What does that mean?”

Keira looked up. “Did you read the whole thing over my shoulder?”

“Obviously,” Allie said. “Any best friend would have done the same thing. Wow. What are you going to do? Are you going to go?”

“I don’t know,” Keira sighed. “I feel like I should. I do care about the Qalmar Cup. But on the other hand, he’s right that I blocked his number for a reason. I don’t want to see him again. I don’t want to talk to him again.”

“Keira...”

“What?”

“Respectfully, you know that’s a lie, don’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Of course you want to see him. It’s so obvious you miss him. You’ve just been telling me about your feelings for him. Did you forget about that?”

“No, but that’s all the more reason to stay away. I don’t want to get sucked into a place of feeling things that can never amount to anything real. He’s not asking me back because he cares about me. He just thinks I have a right to see the race. It sounds

like he's feeling guilty, more than anything else."

"Of course he feels guilty," Allie pointed out. "He didn't defend you against his father. He should feel guilty about that. But I don't think he would go to all this effort if he didn't care, Keira. Why would he? After all, you blocked him, not the other way around. If he didn't care about you, he would let things lie. But that's not what he's decided to do. He cares about you, all right. And I think you need closure."

"I don't know if this is a good idea."

"It's the only thing that's going to bring you peace. Just think — all these conversations you're having with me, you could be having with him. And wouldn't that be so much better?"

"Or it could be so much worse."

"I guess it could. I don't think it would. I think that if you talk to him, you're going to be glad you did. At least consider it. If nothing else, going back would mean that you'd be able to see the results of your hard work on the Qalmar Cup. Maybe you'll feel like you can tell Kevin about it. That would be a good thing, wouldn't it?"

Keira laughed. "I don't know if bragging to my brother is enough of a reason to fly all the way back to Qalmar and face Kareem again."

"It's not the reason," Allie said gently. "I'm trying to get you to do it for your own good, Keira. I think it's the right choice for you, and I think you'll be happier once you've done it. I'm your friend. I know you better than almost anyone."

Keira nodded. That much was true. "But what if I go over there and find out that he wants nothing to do with me?"

“Then at least you’ll know,” Allie said. “And once you know, you can start to move on.”

She was right, and Keira knew it. “I don’t know how you keep talking me into these things.”

“It’s because I’m your smartest friend,” Allie said with a grin. “Now go on — text the man. And maybe see if he’s willing to offer an extra seat on the plane. I’d like to come with you this time.”

Keira nodded. “All right,” she said. “But I think I’m going to do things a little differently. I’m tired of letting Kareem have control of the situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that this time, I’m going to do things my own way.”

CHAPTER 21

KAREEM

The opening day of the Qalmar Cup dawned bright and sunny. Kareem couldn’t enjoy the fine weather, though. In fact, it only made him feel more bitter to see how nice it was outside and to know that everyone else was waking up in a good mood because of it.

His feelings didn’t reflect the sunshine at all. Instead, he found, he didn’t really even want to attend the race. And much to his chagrin, he knew exactly why.

Keira hadn’t contacted him.

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He had tracked the letter he'd sent to her, so he knew for certain that it had been delivered. There was only one possible conclusion — she had read it and had decided that she didn't want to talk to him.

He wished he had never reached out. He wished he hadn't listened to his mother's advice. All it had done was open the door for Keira to break his heart all over again. And now that he had really thought through his feelings on the subject, he was forced to admit that his heart was broken.

His mother was right. He had truly loved her.

He had let himself get too close, something he had sworn he would never do with any woman. And now he was forced to face the consequences.

Kareem sighed. Today was, by many metrics, the most important day of his life. A dream he'd had for years was finally about to be realized, and he ought to be over the moon about it. Instead, he just wanted to go back to bed and miss the entire thing.

But he wouldn't give in to his own negative feelings. He forced himself to dress and prepare for the day. After all, he had responsibilities. He needed to be at the venue before the race began for the kickoff events — events that he and Keira had originally planned together, that they had once looked forward to executing together. It wasn't going to happen the way he'd imagined it, but it was still going to happen. He couldn't let everything fall apart at the eleventh hour.

The drive to the venue only made him feel sadder. He had envisioned this as something he would do with Keira. He could picture her now, sitting in the seat

across from him, her auburn curls swept up in an elegant style. She would be chattering excitedly about the day's events, and her excitement would elevate Kareem's own excitement. By the time they arrived at the venue, they would both be filled with anticipation for the day ahead.

Instead, as he parked his car, he felt nothing but dread.

The day would no doubt go off without a hitch. Kareem was confident in the plans he had made. Unfortunately, he couldn't see any way in which he would be able to enjoy himself—not now that his relationship with Keira had fallen apart. Not now that he knew she disliked him so thoroughly that she had decided to disregard his apology letter.

I should never have sent that letter, he thought furiously. If she's not even willing to meet me halfway, why would I bother?

But he couldn't stick to his convictions on the matter. She did deserve an apology from him, even though it had been painful to give it. He didn't regret the message he'd sent her. Not really.

What he regretted was the fact that he had gotten his hopes up for a response. That was the thing he should have known better than to do. Keira had made it very clear by blocking his number that she had no interest in communicating with him again. It wasn't her fault that he hadn't left well enough alone.

He stepped out onto the concourse level of the arena. From here, a person could look over the track. It was immaculate, clean and ready for the racing to begin. A stage had been erected in the middle of the arena, from which Kareem would give his speech welcoming racers and spectators to the event.

It felt surreal that he would be standing up there and giving that speech without Keira

present. He had always imagined that she would be here for this. But he knew that he shouldn't have made that assumption. Even before things had gone wrong, they had never articulated how long she would remain in Qalmar. Maybe she would have gone home before race day.

He should never have counted on anything. That was the lesson in all of this.

As he stood watching, people began to file into the stadium and take seats. It was still about an hour and a half before the first race, but people seemed to have decided to come early to enjoy the atmosphere, and Kareem felt a stab of happiness through the cloud of grief that seemed to have settled over him. It meant that people were excited about the event. He already knew that ticket sales had been good — they were playing to a packed house today — but it was good to see that they were more than just curious onlookers, that they were actually eager to be here today.

Now, if only Kareem himself could have mustered that same enthusiasm.

He glanced at his watch. It was time to go down and take the stage, time to deliver his address to the spectators. He still didn't know what he was going to say. He had tried to write something down last night in preparation for this moment, but the words had eluded him, and now he thought he would probably just have to get up there and see what came out of his mouth.

He walked down, passing through the ready room. The drivers were in front of their lockers getting ready for their races. Some of them were laughing and joking lightly with one another, while others prepared more quietly and less interactively. All of them stopped what they were doing when they saw Kareem, though, and watched him walk by, clearly waiting to see what he would say.

He probably should have said something. He probably owed them some sort of comment on what was about to happen. But it was hard enough to think of the speech

he was about to have to give — he found that he had no words for these drivers.

If I don't pull it together, and fast, this event is going to fail, Kareem thought miserably. And if that happens, this will all have been for nothing.

It was true, and he knew it, but that didn't make it any easier to face what needed to be done.

He stepped out onto the racetrack.

From here, he couldn't make out the faces of any of the spectators. He knew that they were up there, that they were looking down at him and waiting to see what he would do, but it was easier to ignore them and pretend that he was here on his own, as he had been every other day for the past few weeks.

Kareem walked across the track and took the steps leading up to the stage. A microphone had been placed there for him, and he approached it, looking out at the place where he knew people sat watching him, even if he couldn't see them.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I want to begin by welcoming everyone to the first annual Qalmar Cup."

He paused, almost as if he was expecting a response. Imagining this as a two-way conversation made it easier, somehow.

Drawing a deep breath, he continued. "I'm so pleased with the turnout we've had, both in terms of our competitors and the people who have come to watch the races that will take place over the next few days. If you've consulted the week's program, you certainly know that we have many high-profile drivers here to compete over the next few days — and next year, we hope to have even more. I want to thank each and every person here for being a part of the first annual event. The nation of Qalmar and

the royal family are honored to have you with us.”

He was about to conclude his speech and step down from the stage — after all, what more was there to say? He had introduced the event. He had welcomed everyone.

But he didn’t feel done.

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And as he turned it over in his mind, he realized that he knew exactly why that was.

He couldn't leave. Not without at least mentioning the one person who had made all this possible. Without her, it wouldn't be happening at all. He would never have had the courage to do this on his own.

So Kareem cleared his throat and continued.

“Before I step down and leave you to enjoy today's program,” he said, “I need to mention someone who wasn't able to be here today, but who was absolutely instrumental in organizing this event — Keira Harding. Those of you who have followed this sport for a while may know her.”

He thought of mentioning that fans might be familiar with her brother or her father, but he decided against it. Keira was noteworthy in her own right. He wouldn't speak about her as if what mattered was who she was related to. What made her worthy of notice was who she herself was.

“Keira Harding has been a presence on the racing scene for many years,” he said. “She's been behind the scenes of many prestigious events. If this isn't your first motorsports cup, you've probably crossed paths with her before, whether you realize it or not. Though she couldn't attend this function, I want to be sure everyone knows that this would not be happening without her — that she was involved in every phase of the planning and deserves the credit. I was privileged to work with her in putting the Qalmar Cup together.”

He hesitated. There was more to say, but did he want to say it?

Then again — could he keep it to himself?

“She’s a remarkable woman,” he murmured, aware that speaking under his breath like this in front of the assembled crowd was strange. They would think something was wrong with him.

Maybe something was.

He cleared his throat. “She was a remarkable woman,” he said again. “I was proud to call her my friend and my partner. And though I never intended to say these words — I found myself falling in love with her.”

The stadium seemed to fall silent.

Kareem was sure he had startled everyone present with his confession. After all, he was a member of the royal family, and here he was confessing his love for a commoner — a foreigner — a woman many of them didn’t even know. Locals would know that he had been married to her, but they would also know that she had left the country under mysterious circumstances, and that there was rumored to be a divorce in the works.

He should not have made a statement without the approval of the crown.

But he couldn’t help himself.

“I fell in love with Keira Harding,” he repeated. “I love her to this day. And I wish she was here to celebrate this moment with me, because without her by my side, nothing about this race feels quite right.”

He stepped away from the microphone and surveyed the crowd, hoping he hadn’t made a fool of himself — but ultimately, not really caring if he had.

CHAPTER 22

KEIRA

Keira sat perfectly still in the crowd, the words washing over her, almost unable to believe what she was hearing.

He loves me?

She hadn't dreamed it. His letter hadn't implied anything of the kind. She had expected — at most — an apology for his behavior. She had thought he would tell her that he knew he had been wrong not to fight for her to stay, and that was the reason he had called her back. She'd assumed the question would be whether or not to forgive him, and whether there was any path for collaboration moving forward.

Allie nudged her. "You need to go down there," she hissed.

"I can't!"

"The man is pouring his heart out, Keira. Are you really going to leave him hanging? You have to go down there and tell him how you feel. You know you love him too!"

"I'm not going to do it in front of all these people, Allie!"

"Of course you are. How else would such an epic love story end? If you don't get down there now, I will never let you hear the end of it. Go."

Keira knew her friend was right. She also knew that she had no excuse. She knew this stadium inside out. She knew exactly how to get from where she was sitting to the stage in the center of the track. The only question was, would she be able to get there before Kareem left? If he walked off the stage, who knew how long it would be

before they were able to find each other?

She found herself wishing, as she hurried out of her seat and up the steps that led to the mezzanine, that she had simply taken him up on his offer to fly her out on his own plane. If she had, she would already be with him now — not to mention the fact that she would have saved herself a good deal of money on the plane tickets.

The trouble was, she had been too proud. She hadn't wanted to allow herself to be dependent on him for anything given what had already transpired between the two of them. The idea of allowing him to have control over her arrival and departure had been intolerable. It would be much better to simply buy her own ticket and fly out independently.

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But doing so had proven complicated. It had turned out that you couldn't fly into Qalmar's small international terminal without express approval from the king. So few flights came here that he actually had time to review the passenger manifests of each one. Keira didn't know what King Hassan would do if he saw her name on a flight list, but she didn't want to find out. It was likely that he would stop her from entering the country at all.

So she and Allie had flown into Dubai and had rented a car. She had worried about being stopped at the border — and they had been — but she had shown the border guard her letter from Kareem, and the man had recognized her as the former sheikha and had agreed to let her in. Had that plan failed, Keira knew she would have had to contact Kareem directly to let him know where she was, and she was glad the story hadn't ended that way. She'd been relieved to check into the hotel she had booked, secure in the knowledge that he didn't know she was in the country and that she could choose when and if she wanted to see him.

But now that seemed like an irresponsible plan. If she had let him bring her to Qalmar the way he'd intended — yes, she would have had to swallow her pride a little bit, but at the same time, she would have been assured of seeing him. Right now, it felt as though she might have come all this way for nothing.

What was I thinking? she wondered as she ran around the perimeter of the mezzanine. Did I actually believe that I could just walk up to his house, as if I still lived there, and knock on the front door? That that would be the right way to connect with him again, after everything?

Hearing his speech had brought home to her just how much she had done wrong. Yes,

Kareem should have made more of an effort to keep her in the country after his father had insisted that she needed to leave. But Keira had given up far too quickly on the idea of their relationship. She should have told him she had feelings for him before leaving the country. She should have given him the chance to say it back to her, and she hadn't.

She rounded the curve with the stairs that would lead her to the ready room and hurried down them, not even bothering to hold onto the railing. She could still hear Kareem's voice over the speaker system. He had moved on to talking about something else, but she didn't have time to stop and take in what it was. All she could do was hope that his message would last long enough for her to reach him.

Keira pushed open the door to the ready room.

It was full of drivers. They all stopped what they were doing and stared at her as she burst in on them, and for a moment, Keira forgot that she was rushing and stared back at them. Seeing them all assembled in one place like this brought home to her just how successful all their efforts had been. It was an impressive group.

Hugo Devereux rose to his feet. "I thought you weren't going to be here today," he said. "And it sounds like His Highness didn't know it either." He pointed at a screen above his head, where Kareem's speech was being broadcast.

That brought Keira back to reality. "I need to go and speak with him."

"You're going to tell him that you love him, aren't you?" another driver said, giving her a saucy smirk.

"Don't listen to him," Devereux said. "But he'd have to pass through here to get out of the track, if you'd like to wait for him."

Keira shook her head. “I need to talk to him now.” She couldn’t wait a moment longer. Allie had a point about the poetry and the drama of approaching him in front of the crowd, and Keira liked that, but her ultimate reasoning was simply that she couldn’t wait another moment. Not after everything that had happened between the two of them. She needed to tell him what was on her mind and in her heart.

She walked through the ready room and out onto the track.

At first, she went unnoticed. There were pit crews here on the track’s perimeter, getting ready for the main event, and anyone looking would have assumed that she was one of them, or perhaps one of the media people lining the edges of the track waiting for their chance to photograph the competitors when they came out for the race.

It wasn’t until she had crossed the track and stepped onto the grass in the center that she was noticed.

She knew it had happened at once, because a roar went up from the crowd. Kareem fell silent. He wasn’t looking in her direction, but he must have registered the crowd’s response and wondered what was going on.

Keira wondered how close she would be able to get before he noticed her. She was torn between hoping she would make it all the way to him and wanting him to notice her — wanting to see the expression on his face when he realized she was here after all.

Even now that she had heard his confession of his feelings, she couldn’t help feeling nervous. Would he be angry with her? After all, she’d cut him off, and then she had come back into the country without telling him what she was doing. Keira knew that in his place, she might feel some anger.

Then he turned toward her, and her suspense ended.

He saw her and immediately froze in place, jaw dropping slightly. Keira thought he looked as if he had seen something impossible.

She stopped where she stood too, suddenly too afraid to approach.

He stepped down from the stage, leaving the microphone behind him, so that the next time he spoke his voice was natural and unmagnified.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Her heart pounded. “You asked me to come.”

“I did.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t let you know I was coming.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” His voice was tight, and her heart sank. Hewasangry.

All she could do was to tell him the truth. “I didn’t know why you wanted me to come,” she said. “I knew you were trying to make things right between us, but I didn’t know if that was just out of a sense of guilt or shame, or... I don’t know what else. I needed to do this on my own and not rely on you to get me here and send me home.”

Kareem nodded, his face revealing nothing.

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“I’m sorry,” Keira said again, and was dismayed to hear her voice crack.

He strode across the grass until he was standing right in front of her.

“No,” he said.

“No?”

“Don’t apologize. You don’t have to apologize to me, Keira. This has been awful. This has been a mess. I’ve done a million things wrong.”

A shiver passed through Keira’s body. It seemed to start in the pit of her stomach and radiate outward through her. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” she said. “We were in an impossible situation.”

“No,” Kareem said quietly. “Actually, I think our situation was pretty simple.”

He reached out and took her hand, and Keira found it hard to catch her breath.

“I guess you heard the things I’ve been saying,” he said, a wry smile crossing his face. “I guess all of Qalmar heard what I’ve been saying.”

“Well, I don’t think all of Qalmar is here,” Keira said, a smile breaking over her face. “I know this event has been successful, but we never dreamed of that level of success.”

“Yeah, but there are reporters here,” Kareem said. “By morning, the whole country

will know that I proclaimed my love for my wife.”

“I wonder what they’ll make of it,” Keira mused.

“I’m sure people will say all sorts of things.”

“Maybe we should give them something extra to talk about, then. Since everyone is watching.”

She never knew what it was that had suddenly emboldened her. All she knew was that she knew what she wanted and she was determined not to sabotage any more chances to get it. She was going to take advantage of this second opportunity.

She reached up, pulled him down to her, and kissed him.

Kareem’s arms wrapped around her, and he returned the kiss with equal fervor, and for a moment, Keira felt as if the whole world had disappeared. The only thing that mattered — the only thing she was even aware of — was him. The warmth of him, the smell of him, and the surety that he was just as happy to be here as she was — that he wanted her and cared for her as much as she did for him.

The roar of the crowd permeated the bubble of happiness in which she had found herself ensconced, and she pulled back and looked at Kareem with a smile. “I guess the cat’s out of the bag now,” she said.

“This is going to be on every news website in Qalmar in the morning,” he agreed.

“Well, I’ve always wanted a little fame.”

He laughed. “If that was what you wanted, you could have become a driver like your brother!”

“Kevin’s going to be absolutely sick when he hears about this. He’ll hate the idea that I’ve done something impressive that he can never match.”

“We’ll find him a princess.”

“Sure we will.” Keira grinned. “But in the meantime, I’d like to focus on this, if you don’t mind.”

“Nothing would make me happier,” Kareem said.

He kissed her again, and the crowd roared its approval.

CHAPTER 23

KEIRA

The fourth of the opening day’s races drew to a close. Keira sat back in her seat, feeling a spike of adrenaline that didn’t seem to want to quit. It was as if she was standing at the edge of a cliff and looking down.

She and Allie had been asked back to Kareem’s private box, now that he knew they were here. Allie and Kareem had greeted one another warmly, like old friends, which had surprised Keira since they’d only met once previously, but maybe she should have expected it. They had both heard enough about each other that they must feel a connection.

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“We should always sit up here,” Allie said, leaning back in her lounge and accepting a drink from one of the waiters. “This is much nicer than the regular stadium seats. I shouldn’t have let you talk me into flying commercial, either. I can’t believe we missed out on the chance to fly in a private plane.”

“I’ll have my plane take you home, Allie,” Kareem said, not taking his eyes off of Keira. “But you might be on your own for that trip.”

Keira felt herself blush.

“You’re staying, Keira?” Allie asked her.

“I think I am,” Keira said quietly. “For a while, at least. If I can.”

“If it’s up to me, you’ll never leave,” Kareem said quietly. “But I understand you might have obligations back at home to tend to.”

“I don’t have anything coming up,” Keira said. “We’re heading into the off-season, so I was going to have a few months free before I need to start gearing up for the next major race. I usually spend those months on marketing and publicity, but there’s no reason I can’t do those things from Qalmar.”

“Then I’d like you to come back to my estate,” Kareem said. “I would like you to move back in with me, and we can take the chance to get to know one another better.”

“You’re going to move in together and start dating?” Allie asked, giggling. “I’m

sorry, I don't mean this critically. But you have to admit, it's very unconventional."

"Everything we've done has been very unconventional," Keira pointed out. "I can't see why this should be any different."

"And we aren't dating," Kareem said. "We're married."

"You filed for divorce," Allie reminded him.

"That divorce hasn't been finalized," Keira said. "I didn't sign the papers."

"You didn't?" Kareem asked.

"I couldn't," Keira said. "I never received any."

"I did send them."

Keira laughed. "I'll take it as a sign from the universe," she said. "Maybe we're not supposed to get divorced."

"So you're going to stay married?" Allie asked.

Keira shrugged. "I think so," she said. "I know it's strange to marry the way we did, and maybe I'm crazy to believe that it can work, but it doesn't feel right to divorce someone I love."

"We got married the way my parents did," Kareem said. "We married for practical reasons — and then, over time, we discovered that we actually meant something to each other." He smiled. "The main difference is that we haven't known each other as long as my parents had when they made that discovery. I feel like we still have so much to learn about one another."

“That doesn’t scare you?” Allie asked.

“I thought you supported this,” Keira said.

“I do!” Allie insisted. “So much. I just... well, I would like to imagine finding something like this myself one day, and it’s hard for me to think that I wouldn’t feel scared if I was in your shoes. But I look at you, and you both seem so confident. So sure of what you’re doing.”

“I do feel that way,” Keira said with a smile. “I wouldn’t have expected to. But Kareem brings it out in me.”

“I’m so happy for you, Keira,” Allie said. “I can’t imagine what that must feel like, but I know that there’s no one in the world who deserves it more than you. I’m so glad you’ve found love — and you’re going to be a member of the royal family!”

“Technically, she already is,” Kareem said. “And this is the only part that does scare me a little, Allie. We have to go and speak to my father about all this. He’s not in the best mood when it comes to the two of us.”

“I’m not worried about it,” Keira said easily.

“You’re not? I thought you had concerns about my father’s opinion.”

“I did. But I don’t feel that way anymore,” Keira said. “Things are different now. You’ve proclaimed your love for me so publicly, and it’s obvious that we have the support of the people of Qalmar. At this point, it will be hard for your father to get rid of me, even if he wants to do that. It would be a PR nightmare — which is something I know a little bit about.” She smiled at the thought of King Hassan having to explain to an angry kingdom why he had come between two people in love. “He might not be my biggest fan, but he is a practical man. He’ll do the right thing to win the support

of the people.”

“You understand him better than I would have believed,” Kareem said with a smile. “But we do have to go and speak to him. We need him to know that you’re here, and that you intend to stay. And it would be best to do it quickly, because he may already have heard about what happened here from someone else. We can’t afford to look as if we’re trying to keep secrets from him.”

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Keira nodded. “You’re right,” she agreed. “Allie?—”

“Go,” Allie said. “I’ll go back to the hotel, and you and I can catch up later. I expect you to give me all sorts of gossip about this when we get back together, though. I mean it. I want to know everything!”

Keira laughed. She was beyond grateful to have a friend here with her at such a pivotal moment in her life. “You’ll hear everything,” she said. “That’s a promise.”

“Let me call a car to take you back to your hotel,” Kareem suggested.

Allie shook her head. “We rented one, and I’m enjoying driving around here.”

“She’s great behind the wheel,” Keira said. “I’d think we might even see her in a race in the future.”

Allie flushed.

“All right,” Kareem said. “But if there is anything the crown can do for you during your stay, please don’t hesitate to let Keira or myself know. We want you to feel welcomed and taken care of during your time here.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Allie beamed. “I’m thrilled to be a guest of the royal family. I’ll definitely be taking advantage of the perks.”

Kareem and Keira shared a laugh as she tossed them a cheeky grin and showed herself out. “She’s fun,” Kareem said.

“I’m glad you think so. I’d struggle to be happy in a marriage to someone who didn’t appreciate my best friend.”

“No worries on that score, I think she’s great,” Kareem assured her. “I don’t know if my father would feel the same way, but that’s one thing we don’t have to worry about.”

“Are we going to the palace?” Keira couldn’t help feeling slightly nervous, in spite of her assurances that she was nothing but confident. She did want King Hassan to like her.

Before Kareem could answer, there was a knock on the door.

Kareem and Keira froze and looked at one another. Keira felt like a child who had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. She knew at once that that knock could mean nothing good.

The door opened.

King Hassan stood there, his face neutral. “Well,” he said. “I think the three of us have a few things to discuss.”

Kareem rallied quickly. “Father,” he said. “Keira and I were on our way to speak with you.”

“Well, I should think so,” King Hassan agreed. “That little display was quite unexpected.”

“I apologize, Your Majesty,” Keira said. “I know that wasn’t very restrained of me.”

“Don’t apologize,” Kareem told her. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t say

you're sorry unless you actually regret it."

Keira shook her head. "You know I don't regret it." She reached out and took his hand, even though it was a little intimidating to do that with the king watching them. She couldn't help herself. The idea that Kareem might think for a moment that she regretted what had transpired between them was heart-rending, and she ached to put him at ease.

He gripped her hand for a moment and pulled her closer so that they were standing right alongside one another.

"We're going to stay married, Father," he said. "We love each other. We're going to try to make things work between the two of us."

"I see," King Hassan said slowly.

"And if you truly want Keira out of Qalmar — well, I guess you'll be kicking me out too," Kareem said.

Keira gasped. "Kareem, no. You can't do that."

"I'll do what it takes," Kareem said firmly. "I love my country and I don't want to leave, but I should never have let anything come between the two of us. I've never felt for anyone the way I do for you, Keira, and I'm not going to risk losing that. If I have to immigrate in order to keep you, I will."

The king held up a hand. "Let's not be hasty," he said. "Kareem, I never wanted to force Keira out of this country. My problem was never with her." He looked at Keira. "You seem like a lovely young woman," he said. "It's the lying I didn't appreciate. I felt that my son manipulated me into believing in a marriage that wasn't real."

“I did do that,” Kareem said. “I can admit to it. But, Father — I felt as if I had no choice. It was the only way to make this race happen. I needed Keira’s help, and I had no other plausible reason for bringing her to Qalmar. I needed something that you would believe for long enough to let me achieve my dream.”

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“I still don’t appreciate you lying to me,” King Hassan said. “I especially don’t like that you lied to your mother. She deserves better. But... I can acknowledge that we made you feel as if you couldn’t give us the truth. I’m sorry for that.”

Kareem nodded. “I’m sorry too.”

“You must know that all we’ve ever wanted was to see you happy,” King Hassan said. “And if this woman makes you happy, we will support your marriage to her.”

“Really?”

King Hassan allowed himself to smile for the first time since entering their box. “You did put on a very good event, Keira,” he said. “I think the people of Qalmar really enjoyed it — and I’m sure they’ll enjoy next year’s even more.”

“Next year’s?” Keira could hardly believe what she was hearing.

“This is an annual race, is it not? You’re going to have to get started on plans for the next one. And I wouldn’t wait. This was a good race, but with a whole year to plan, I think the next one could be truly legendary. Like you always said, you could change the face of the motorsports world.”

Kareem tensed. “I didn’t realize you heard me when I said that.”

“I do listen,” King Hassan said with a gentle smile. “I realize I haven’t put a lot of faith in your ideas, Kareem, but I believe in you. And you really proved me wrong today. This race was a success — and I believe that your marriage can be just as

successful.” He smiled. “I trust you.”

Keira hadn’t known Kareem that long, but she knew enough about him to recognize just how powerful it would be to hear those words from his father.

She leaned her shoulder against his, proud and happy for him, and beyond thrilled to be able to share this moment with the man she loved.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: KAREEM

“And... we’re sold out,” Keira announced. “The last of the tickets just sold.” She turned away from her computer and faced Kareem, beaming.

He returned her smile. “That was brilliant, saving a handful for the last minute,” he said. “How did you know that last-minute sales would be such a thing?”

“It’s been like this at every event I’ve ever managed,” Keira said. “But usually people who decide they want to attend at the last minute are simply out of luck. They have to get tickets illegally, from scalpers and resellers, at a ridiculous markup. My idea should help to put those people out of business by reassuring racing fans that they’ll be able to access tickets even if they leave it until the last minute.”

“I love that,” Kareem said. “You think of everything.” He took Keira’s hand, pulled her to her feet, and kissed her.

She returned the kiss, and for a few moments the two of them remained lost in one another, but then Keira pulled away. She smiled up at Kareem. “You know,” she said, “I love how much credit you give me for everything, but it isn’t that big a deal. Anybody could have thought of this idea.”

“But you’re the one who did,” Kareem said. “And it’s thanks to you that our race is taking off the way it is this year. The Qalmar Cup is going to become a famous international race, just the way we dreamed it would, and it’s all because of you, Keira. You’re the one who made this possible.”

“You give me too much credit. We definitely did it together,” she said with a smile that lit up her face. Kareem’s heart warmed at the sight of her happiness — there was nothing he liked more than to know that his wife was happy.

“I wasn’t sure we would be able to pull this off,” Keira said. “Given that we took six months off after the last race, I mean. I thought we might need the whole year to make it a success. But I have to admit, it’s all come together brilliantly. I’m so proud of us.”

“Incidentally, I have a message for you from my father.”

“Oh, really?”

“He called earlier. He wanted to know when you’re going to come over and cook with him. He has a new recipe that he wants to teach you.”

Keira laughed. “Any time!” she said. “I love cooking with your dad.”

“He loves it too. He can’t believe his good luck, actually. Nobody else in the family likes to cook. I honestly never realized how sad that made him until he met you. It was like a switch flipped that day. It lit him up. I didn’t know he wanted someone to cook with so badly.”

“Well, I’m glad we found something we could bond over,” Keira said with a smile. “I’ll give him a call later tonight and we’ll make a plan — although it probably won’t be able to happen until the race is over. Maybe next week.”

“He understands how busy we are with all this,” Kareem said. “Actually, I think he’s just as excited as we are for this year’s event. He didn’t know a lot about racing last year, but he’s paid attention to the events throughout the past year. He’s told me how much he wants to be able to participate in my interests.” He wasn’t able to keep the smile off his face as he said it. He’d never dreamed that his father would care about participating in his life. It had taken the Qalmar Cup for King Hassan to see that racing was a legitimate thing that mattered to a lot of people — that it wasn’t just a childish interest of Kareem’s. And now that he was taking it seriously, he was truly giving it his full attention. Kareem couldn’t have been any happier about it.

“Is your dad planning on coming to the races?” Keira asked.

“Oh, he’s going to be there all four days,” Kareem assured her. “I asked him if he wanted to make a speech or anything, but he said he doesn’t want to attend in his capacity as king. He just wants to be a spectator.”

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“That’s kind of sweet, actually.”

“I thought so. He’s going to join us in the private box, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course it is. I won’t call him back about the cooking, then. We can just discuss it there and make our arrangements.”

“I wish you’d done it before the race, to be honest,” Kareem said with a laugh. “If you had, we could have brought the food up to the box and eaten it while we watched.”

“I’m not catering for you,” Keira said, swatting him gently on the arm. “Your father has a kitchen staff if that’s what you want. Not to mention the fact that we have dozens of food vendors available who will help you get whatever you need. You don’t need me to cook for you at the race!”

“It isn’t my fault your food is the best I’ve ever had.” Kareem affected a wounded expression. “I know you’re busy with management, but really, knowing your food is out there, how can I be expected to fully enjoy anything else?”

“Maybe I missed my calling,” Keira said. “Maybe I should have been a chef instead of a motorsports tournament coordinator.”

“It’s never too late to pursue a new dream,” Kareem teased her.

Keira laughed. “Actually, in my case, I think it might be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not going to have much time on my hands after this,” Keira said. “I’m going to be pretty busy with my next project — I might even need to take a step back from the racing world for a while.”

“Your next project? You didn’t mention any next project to me,” Kareem said, surprised. “I mean, don’t get me wrong — you have my full support, and you always will. But I didn’t know there was something else you were intending to get involved with.”

“I’ve been waiting for the right time to tell you,” Keira explained. “I’ve only known myself for a few days, and I wanted to let you know when it felt like a perfect time — but now I don’t think I can wait any longer to talk to you about it.”

“Talk to me about what?” Kareem asked her. “Whatever this is, I want to support you. You know I always try to support you. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Well...” Keira seemed unable to keep the smile off her face. “The thing is... I’m pregnant, Kareem.”

Her words stopped Kareem’s heart for a moment.

The two of them had talked in the abstract about the idea of starting a family. They had both agreed that it was something they wanted to do someday. They had also agreed that there was no rush — that they’d like to focus on the upcoming Qalmar Cup and revisit the conversation when it was over. But secretly, deep inside himself, Kareem hadn’t been able to let go of the thought of a child.

He would never have imagined that it was something he wanted. He hadn’t wanted it — not until he had found himself with Keira. But now that they were together, he wanted to do everything with her. He wanted every experience life had to offer,

including parenthood.

He had been sad about the fact that they were delaying the baby conversation, though he hadn't admitted it, not wanting to put pressure on the situation. And now it was coming up again — and in the best possible way.

“You're pregnant?” he repeated, dazed, needing confirmation that it was really true.

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner,” Keira said. “I wanted to tell you the moment I found out. But I also wanted it to be special when I did tell you.”

He nodded, taking that in.

“Are you happy?” she asked tentatively.

“Are you kidding?” He stared at her. “Do you really have to ask? Keira, this is the best news of my life. I've never been happier about anything.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her passionately, running his hands up and down her back. Her body bowed against his and she hummed gratefully as the kiss deepened.

After a moment, he pulled away. “Does anyone else know?”

“Of course not. I couldn't tell anyone before I told you,” she assured him. “I've wanted to. I've been dying to tell my family, and Allie, of course. But I had to tell you first.”

“My family is going to be over the moon,” Kareem said. “My parents have been dying for me to have a baby since before I met you.”

“Even though you're not in line for the throne?”

“You never can tell. My brother’s children might abdicate.” Kareem laughed to show that he wasn’t serious. “No, I think they just want to make sure the royal family is big and diverse. They want us to have the power to make connections with royal families in other nations to strengthen Qalmar’s political situation. But also... my parents really love their grandchildren. They just want a big family, and they’re going to be excited by a new addition.” He beamed, imagining their response. “I can’t wait to let them know.”

“We can tell them as soon as you want,” Keira said. “I’m happy to go ahead and share the news.”

“Let’s keep it between the two of us for one more night,” Kareem said. “I know you’re ready to tell them, but we’ll never have this moment again — knowing that we’re going to have our firstchild.” The joy that welled up within him was so massive that he felt as if he had swallowed a sun. It threatened to burst forth from his pores, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to contain it for long. “I want this to be just ours. Just for a little while.”

Keira’s eyes flooded with tears. “Sounds good to me,” she whispered.

He pulled her to him and kissed her forehead, sweetly and tenderly, in awe of all the wonderful things she had brought into his life.

And then he kissed her again, this time, meeting her lips with his, relishing in the fact that the two of them belonged to one another and that nothing would ever drive them apart again.

The End