



The Sheikh's Twin Baby Surprise (The Sheikh's Baby Surprise 1)

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: He paid her to have his baby.
But he never expected twins...

Sheikh Omar Fakim Al-Daqqa has a problem: as presumptive heir to the throne of Al-Thakri, the Middle-Eastern nation's constitution demands that he must have a child in order to accede to the throne. Knowing that his power-hungry brother is desperate to usurp his throne and have a baby before him, Omar knows he must act quickly, and he already has a potential mother in mind...

Carrie Green is Sheikh Omar's personal physician, and she's quickly growing disillusioned with life in Al-Thakri. Wishing to travel the world and put her skills to better use, she needs a way out. However, when the Sheikh makes her a scandalous offer – an outrageous sum of money to have his child, and as quickly as possible - Carrie cannot turn him down.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that Carrie has long harbored feelings for her gorgeous Sheikh employer, but she soon encounters second thoughts. Can Carrie really go through with it, and become pregnant by royalty?

This is a standalone Sheikh romance novel from best-selling author Holly Rayner. It contains a guaranteed HEA, and a tale of romance that will capture your heart.

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ONE

I let out a deep sigh and looked out the limo window. Evening was falling on the desert city like elegant drapery, lights flickering on in buildings and street shops, but the streets were no less bustling than usual.

The culture of Al-Thakri was a lively, social one, and it showed in every inch of its capital city. Beautiful women clapped along the sidewalks in stiletto heels and smart skirts, while men in fine, tailored suits bid them good evening, phones plastered to their ears.

Dotted in between the modern skyscrapers and high-rises, the buildings of old Al-Thakri remained, sand and limestone facades that had survived centuries of wear and war and desert heat to stand as testaments of a glorious past. The sphinx—the symbol of Al-Thakri—was everywhere, used as decoration on buildings new and old alike.

The place was a wonderland; a fairy tale I never would have thought I'd be able to experience.

And yet, even so soon after arriving, I was considering leaving it all behind. It had only been six months since I had been scooped up by the royal family of this beautiful nation to serve as a private doctor to the eldest son, but it felt like much longer.

The limo came to a smooth stop at a traffic light, and at the edge of my attention I heard a soft but insistent voice.

“Dr. Green? What are you thinking?”

It was Omar—or, more properly, the Sheikh of Al-Thakri, next in line to the throne, and my employer.

I turned at the sound of his voice, and saw his dark, handsome face staring back at me with some anticipation. His deep brown eyes glittered. In front of him, he was holding up two velvet boxes, each of which contained a pair of cufflinks.

“Diamond or ruby?” he asked me earnestly.

I took a thoughtful glance at each of the options and let my eyes wander over Omar’s face, and his perfectly tailored tuxedo. Something bright was shining in his eyes tonight.

“Ruby,” I said, pointing a freshly manicured finger at the velvet box on the right.

Omar smiled, as if he had been hoping for that answer. He snapped the box holding the diamond cufflinks shut. “Good choice.”

“I’m not really qualified to make decisions like that, you know,” I said back to him with just a hint of teasing in my voice. “My stylist at the palace would agree. She almost fainted when she saw the wardrobe I brought with me. So my apologies if you happen to get any comments about your cufflinks tonight.”

Omar laughed richly, and a happy bloom spread out in my chest as I laughed with him.

I didn’t add that it was nice to be of some use around him lately. As a physician who had spent two years treating patients in war-torn countries with Doctors Without Borders, the current environment was giving me more than a touch of the doldrums.

It wasn't something I had admitted to the Sheikh—I was having a hard enough time admitting it to myself.

The luxurious living that came with being included in the royal entourage was amazing. The fact that I had earned enough money in six months not only to deal with the angry letters regarding my overdue student loan payments, but also to put away a sizeable nest egg for the next journey in my life, were benefits for which I was extremely grateful. But there wasn't much use for a trauma physician in the entourage of a healthy, young, handsome Sheikh who never got more than the occasional scrape from playing tennis. He hadn't even caught a cold once the entire six months I had been in his employment. Frankly, I was bored out of my mind, and more than a little upset at the implications my boredom made about me as a person.

Maybe I was a terrible person, but the dullness of my employment here made me long for the dust and heat of the field hospitals where my hands actually felt like they were making a difference in the world. I saved countless lives in those two years—and lost a few, to be sure, ghosts that follow every doctor, nurse and midwife in the world. But there was no question that I was making a difference. There was no question that I was loved and appreciated by the people I helped.

But here? In the air-conditioned, oil-rich cities of Al-Thakri, living alongside some of the richest rulers in the world, I wasn't so sure I was making a difference at all, and it was starting to grate on me.

At least I knew how to pick out a pair of cufflinks, I thought bitterly.

“Almost arrived, sir,” the driver, Abdul, called from the front of the limo.

“Wonderful,” said Omar. He finished putting on the cufflinks and gave me a big, beaming smile.

It made my stomach flutter. I did my best to keep from blushing as I smiled back.

The smile—and the butterflies—died quickly when Omar spoke. “I hope Jada is wearing something with a fiery tint to it. It will match the rubies.”

I nodded quickly and turned back to look through the window. “Yes, it would,” I said quietly.

I didn’t want to talk about his date—not this one, nor any of the others he’d had lately. In the past six months, an endless parade of heiresses and princesses had rotated in and out of the Sheikh’s life, all vying for his favor. He’d been set to take the throne ever since the death of his father, some months before I arrived, but he would need a queen alongside him to make it proper—a queen who would give him an heir to continue the royal bloodline.

I couldn’t quite admit to myself just how much it was beginning to hurt to watch the courtships from afar.

I’d long ago stopped resenting the girls personally, and I expected that Jada would be no different. Most of them were too vapid and shallow to hate properly; instead, they had become a faceless mass of competition for a man who didn’t even realize I felt anything for him.

Somehow, that made it all worse.

The car glided to a halt on the curb next to a glittering, high-rise building. Smartly-dressed shoppers glanced curiously at the tinted windows, but didn’t slow their pace down the landscaped sidewalk.

We’d barely waited a moment before the doors of the high-rise were opened by a doorman in a maroon uniform, and out from behind him came the woman who must

have been Jada.

I felt a pit form in my stomach; she was a goddess with tanned skin, black hair, and a body like a supermodel. Her plump lips were stained a beautiful shade of red, and her black eyeliner was painted in a perfect cat's eye that would have taken me weeks to apply on my own. I said a silent prayer for the stylists in the palace that I was able to access.

Of course, she was wearing red.

As she approached the car, I moved to sit next to Rafiq, Omar's most trusted bodyguard who never left his side. Jada stepped into the car, moving carefully in her stiletto heels, and sat down next to Omar, smiling beautifully as he leaned over to kiss her cheek. She gushed

over him until she noticed the rest of the entourage in the limo—myself and Rafiq—and her face squished like she smelled something rotten.

"This is my physician, Dr. Carrie Green," Omar said, with a hand extended my direction. "She and Rafiq are my constant companions."

"Constant?" repeated Jada suspiciously. "Why do you need a doctor everywhere you go? Are you ill?"

"No, no," laughed Omar, sliding an arm around the back of the seat and her thin shoulders. "But a man in my position can't afford to take any risks with my health. If someone were to make an attempt on my life, Dr. Green here could be the one to save me." He looked at me with a glint in his eye. I smiled back.

"Someone is trying to assassinate you?" Jada's voice sounded like she couldn't decide if she was afraid or impressed—maybe a little of both.

Omar shrugged. “One never knows where the streets of his journey will take him.”

Jada said nothing in reply as the royal motorcade pulled back onto the streets, and I couldn't help assuming that she was wondering if she'd bitten off more than she could chew.

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TWO

Omar had hired out the grand ballroom of the city's most exquisite hotel to serve as the venue for the party. I'd been by Omar's side for plenty of black tie affairs, but none of them compared to the opulence of this one—the birthday party for his mother, Mirah, Queen Regent of Al-Thakri.

Paparazzi flash bulbs strobed against the tinted windows of the car as the limo circled the driveway and headed up toward the gilded front doors. Photographers crushed against each other to try and get as close as they could, while the black-suited security detail worked just as hard to form a chain and keep the vultures at a safe distance.

My nerves lit up, as they always did when I had to step out in public as part of Omar's entourage. I still hadn't got used to all the glitz, all the noise, all the attention poured on the Sheikh and his family. It wasn't something a girl like me was used to dealing with, and I wasn't sure it ever would be.

But Jada was clearly not a girl like me. Her thin, delicate hand, glittering with jewelry, reached over to clutch at Omar's hand, and my stomach jumbled in a wave of nausea.

"Sir, we're ready when you are. Security is in position," said the driver. He put the car in park but did not kill the ignition—in the blazing, Middle-Eastern sun, every heartbeat without the air-conditioning was unbearable.

"Thank you, Abdul," replied Omar. He leaned closely to Jada. "My dear, would you do me the honor of stepping out first so the crowd can see what a divine woman I've

been graced with this evening?”

I couldn't look at them anymore. I opened up the sequined clutch purse that matched the hue of my midnight blue dress and dug out the lipstick and compact mirror I had stuffed in there. Rafiq was responsible for carrying my triage bag; all I had to do tonight was look like I belonged at this glamorous party and try to have a good time.

Ignoring the canoodling happening on the seat beside me, I reapplied my lipstick with care, despite the fact that it looked as perfect as it had when we left. The stylists at the palace had done my light blond hair into a sophisticated updo, and borrowed diamond earrings dangled from my ears—dripping waterfalls of sparkling gems that matched the necklace on my chest.

I almost didn't recognize myself, and couldn't think of a single instance in my life where I'd been so gussied up before. I tried to enjoy it instead of focusing on the heartache—or comparing myself to Jada. Her tall, lithe form was goddess-like in comparison to mine. I was average height, with curves and a flat stomach, and while I had never had trouble attracting men, there also weren't a lot of women of Jada's caliber in the dusty towns of Ohio.

Not comparing myself to her was easier said than done, particularly when Omar leaned in to whisper something in her ear, making her giggle as she nuzzled against his clean-shaven face. My stomach tensed as my imagination went wild.

After a few excruciating moments, the valet outside received the signal from the driver and opened the rear of the limo. A furnace of heat rolled into the car, despite the sun setting stubbornly behind the cityscape, and the sounds of the crowd and photographers became loud and unsettling.

Like a practiced starlet, Jada stepped out of the limo and onto the soft red carpet with a beaming smile. Omar followed suit, and as I waited to follow them out, I could see

one of his strong hands resting on the small of her back as he walked her into the building.

Rafiq was staring at me when I looked over at him.

“What?” I asked curiously.

He nodded towards the hotel. “Tonight will be the night, yes?”

“The night for what?”

“The night you tell His Highness about the truth of what is in your heart.”

Cheeks flushing, I shook my head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No need to lie to me, Doctor. I won’t be the one to share this secret.”

“There is no secret,” I replied with a little hiss in my voice, and Rafiq only shrugged and didn’t press the point.

Carefully, I made my way towards the limo door to step out and follow the Sheikh with Rafiq close behind. The paparazzi didn’t give a damn about the two of us, thankfully; we were just the help. We trailed a few steps behind Omar and Jada as they made a show of their approach to the hotel.

Inside, the ballroom had been turned into an exquisite banquet hall, large enough to hold the hundreds of guests invited by the royal family. Debutantes, kings, ambassadors, and even a few journalists mingled in the huge and well-dressed crowd.

As my eyes scanned the room, I realized that well-dressed was an understatement. I had never been in a room full of so much decadence—and that was saying a lot after

this job. Giant chandeliers studded the dark ceiling, dripping with crystals that shuddered when the hall doors closed. Round tables with crisp white linens had been arranged throughout, with gilded table settings surrounding exquisite centerpieces bursting with colorful blooms and feathers. Guests mingled, moving around the tables like shoals of fish, their feet sinking into the plush maroon carpet.

The women in the room looked like they could have been drawn to life by animators of some fairy tale movie, moving with grace and poise in dresses that ran five and six figures, at a conservative guess. Rhinestones and diamonds glittered under the lights, making shining stars of the beautiful women flashing around the room. While most of the men were dressed much more uniformly, there was no denying the attractiveness of their tailored suits, fresh-cut hair, and pampered skin.

My stylist had selected my gown for the evening, something from a designer I'd never heard of, but which she assured me was top quality. Nonetheless, it was hard not to feel insecure in a room full of rich, beautiful, high-class women, even if you were masquerading as one of them.

Fortunately, no one was worried about looking at me. I was just a shadow trailing behind Omar and Jada as they soaked up the attention. Watching Jada cling to his arm tightly, comfortably, I suddenly realized why my stylist had picked out a dark blue dress for me to wear: the color helped me fade out behind the Sheikh's party—behind his actual date.

After all, I was just part of the entourage; an employee of the palace, there to do a job and nothing more. I didn't have any royal bloodline to claim or inheritance to offer, and that's what was needed in Omar's world. The parade of fine ladies he'd been courting for the past six months all had it, and they were all vying for one thing: to become his wife and mother to the heirs of Al-Thakri.

These women that came to earn his heart, they pretended it was love when they were

by his side, but it wasn't, and Omar was smart enough to know it. They didn't know him or care about him, they just wanted to be close to his power and money. They just wanted to cling to his side and giggle, pretending they hadn't been on a thousand dates just like this one as they tried to find the richest and most well-connected man they could. And there would be no better offer than the Sheikh; they turned up their well-practiced charm to the maximum when they were by his side.

But so far, Omar had broken up with each and every one—some of the breakups turning dramatic when the women realized they weren't going to become queen. It wasn't something I had expected, but Omar was often not what he seemed on the outside. He was consumed with trying to gather the power owed to him as the oldest of his father's two sons, and yet it was increasingly obvious that he had no interest in giving up his heart to a woman for whom he didn't care, just to have an heir and gain the throne.

There was warmth to him none of these women would ever see. He wanted true, honest love to produce a child, not just some grab for power.

Feeling anxiety rise in my chest, I took a deep breath and tried to divert my thoughts. It wasn't easy since I was forced to stare at Omar's back as he made his way through the banquet hall, stopping to shake hands and kiss the hands of beautiful ladies.

My skin flushed, and I had to turn away. It was getting harder and harder to deal with the feelings growing in my heart. Danger was on the horizon; I co

uld feel it. Every day I woke up wondering whether it would be the day when I blurted out to Omar how much I had grown to admire him; how much I was falling in love with him.

This job was supposed to be an easy meal ticket, something to clean the dust off my skin after Doctors Without Borders. But now it was threatening to undo everything I

had built. If I told Omar how I felt, I had no way of knowing how he would react. I might be fired, and my reputation ruined forever. Omar's family had the power to make that happen.

My frantic thoughts thankfully began to evaporate as we approached the head table and the buzzing din of conversation grew louder. The guests, even those Omar hadn't personally greeted, were all aware of his arrival, and stood to give him a round of applause as he approached the table. Omar smiled with his trademark charm and waved at the room.

Already seated was Omar's mother, Mirah. The Queen Regent was a gorgeous middle-aged woman with jet-black hair and deep brown eyes, just like Omar's. She wore a lovely, modest dress the color of champagne. She stood and welcomed her son with a beaming, loving smile, wrapping her arms around his strong shoulders in a warm hug. Omar introduced her to Jada, and to my surprise, Jada curtsied appropriately.

To the left of the Queen, Omar's brother Sajid was waiting to greet him, with his wife Alima and three beautiful daughters standing beside him. The brothers exchanged tense smiles and a rough handshake before Sajid pulled out the chairs of each of his ladies and took a seat himself.

Omar turned to face the crowd and was immediately handed a wireless microphone by an attendant who scurried out of the way as fast as he'd shown up. Rafiq and I watched from the other side of the enormous round banquet table as Omar turned on the charm he was well-known for.

"Good evening everyone!" he smiled. "I wish to thank each and every one of you for coming this evening to celebrate the birth of the most beautiful and wondrous woman in the world: my mother, the Queen Regent of Al-Thakri."

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The applause was thunderous as Mirah stood and waved to the crowd, giving them a nod that was somehow both confident and humble.

“As you are aware, my father’s sudden passing shocked us all. The entire country lost a great man, a just ruler, and a true friend. It has been very difficult for my family to endure his loss. It hardly seems that eight months could have passed since he was here with us.”

The room fell into a grave silence. I could swear I heard someone crying, their sobs echoing against the vast gilded walls of the ballroom. Mirah herself looked mournful at the mention of her late husband, and her sadness made my heart ache. I hadn’t met the former king before he passed, but it was clear that he had been a good, righteous man who touched many people with his compassion.

Omar leaned forward to pick up a flute of bubbling champagne from the table. “But tonight is for celebrating. We celebrate my mother and her incredible life. She was a doting wife to my father, a perfect mother to myself and my brother Sajid, and is a joyously happy grandmother to her granddaughters. She is also, just as importantly, our queen regent.”

Glasses raised all across the banquet hall, cheers peppered throughout the crowd.

“So tonight we say cheers, and wish good health upon her—Mirah of Al-Thakri!” Omar ended with a loud, happy tone as the crowd raised their glasses at him and applauded his speech.

Omar took Jada to her seat and then took his own. Rafiq pulled out my chair for me,

almost directly across from Omar, where I now knew I would be stuck watching him and Jada flirt all evening.

I grabbed a flute of champagne for myself and dreamed of the life I'd rejected: a tiny but clean apartment in some big American city where I could have a cat and a fish and not have to watch the man I love, ruler of an ancient country, hit on supermodels in front of me. Each time I had to endure it, I wondered if I had made a mistake accepting this job, or traipsing around the world in the first place. If I had stayed home, maybe I would already have the love I wanted.

The food was served almost immediately, the kitchen prepped to be timed perfectly with Omar's speech. Small talk drifted from the members of the royal family, happy and light, as the meal began. Mirah told them how she'd taken the day off from attending royal duties to spoil herself at a local spa, and thanked her sons for the exquisite gifts they had sent to her to celebrate the occasion.

But by the end of the main course, tensions had begun to build, and were quickly becoming too big to ignore.

Sajid, Omar's younger brother, was never great at holding his drink. In only six months, I'd learned that much. The waiters had already taken away at least three glasses of champagne when Sajid eyed Omar with a dark gaze and said the words that changed the entire mood of the evening.

"So, Omar," Sajid said, nodding towards Jada in her striking red dress. "Tell us about this lovely new lady you've brought to the party."

It was an innocent-sounding question, and Jada was clearly flattered by the attention, even as everyone else at the table took a deep breath.

I looked up and saw a shadow cross Omar's face. He stared at the elaborate

centerpiece in the middle of the table, clearly trying to decide how best to respond to his brother.

“Jada, why don’t you tell my brother a little about yourself?” Omar responded quietly. His voice was dark, angry. I recognized it well.

In recent months, things had become more and more tense between Omar and his brother. Their father’s death had started a contest between them as succession of power became at the forefront of their minds. As the oldest, Omar was in line to take the throne next, but because of Al-Thakri’s constitution, he couldn’t do so until he had a bride to give him an heir. Sajid felt the fact that he was already married with children meant the country should waste no more time on the issue, and skip over Omar and his romantic indecision and allow Sajid to become king.

It was unlike any other family squabble I had been a part of, and made the fights my sister and I used to have over Barbie dolls look pathetic.

Happily, Jada turned toward Sajid to answer him earnestly. “I have representation with the Tom Ford Agency, and am heiress to the Ghaschi Corporation.” There was something mechanical and rehearsed about the way she said it.

Sajid caught onto that, too. He was as smart as Omar. He turned back to the last of his steak with a sly, condescending smile. “Lovely, just lovely. Say, you should get a move on with this one, Omar, if you hope to be king anytime this century. She’s as ripe as the rest.”

Silverware clattered against porcelain as Mirah dropped her cutlery. Jada gasped, her face turning as red as her dress. The anger that had been building on Omar’s face came out in a furious expression that he directed at his brother.

He put an arm around Jada’s shoulder and tried to comfort her. It was a noble gesture,

but it made me nauseous all the same. I surreptitiously reached for another flute of champagne.

“Being power-hungry makes you rude,” growled Omar to his brother. “Jada is my guest, and I won’t have you speaking so disrespectfully towards her.”

“Power-hungry? Yes, I would think that describes us both, don’t you?” Sajid shot back. “But at least I’m the one abiding father’s wishes by producing heirs.” He waved a hand down the table at his daughters, who looked suddenly smaller and embarrassed, trying to shrink back into their chairs.

Omar shook his head. “An heir is a son, or have you forgotten the constitution? I love my nieces dearly, but they do not make you a king.”

“And what have you produced?” said Sajid, his voice rising in both anger and volume. “You haven’t even settled down with a wife! How can we trust you with the responsibility of leading a nation if you cannot even build your own kingdom in a household? I have produced heirs. The throne should be mine. All the rest is technicality.”

“Sons, Sajid. Until one of us produces a son, neither of us will be king,” Omar said through gritted teeth, leaning over the table.

Nearby tables began to notice the emerging row.

All I could do was sit and watch, wanting to help Omar bite back against the sharp tongue of his brother, but knowing I had no place to speak. That was one sure way to lose my job.

“Enough!” Mirah’s sharp voice cut through the bickering, and she slapped a palm on the table for good measure.

Both her sons stopped talking immediately and looked at her with shame in their eyes.

“Mother,” started Sajid—always the first to apologize, just as he was always the first to start trouble.

“Enough!” she repeated. She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’ve had enough of this for three lifetimes. Your father would never put up with this nonsense, and it has been a difficult enough time without him to see you both descend into such petty foolishness.”

Neither of the brothers spoke back.

“None of us wants this to be happening,” she said. “I didn’t marry your father in hopes of becoming a queen one day. I only wanted to be his wife, and mother to his children.” Her voice shook as memories flooded her thoughts. “But Queen Regent is what I have become. And as Queen, I am going to put a stop to this nonsense with a special decree.”

“A decree?” gasped Sajid.

“This succession issue must end. The constitution of our country is ancient, and I am not allowed to amend it. The constitution says the next ruler must be male. So I say, the first of you, my sons, to deliver me a grandson will accede to the throne, and that will be the end of this.”

Omar and Sajid stared in shock at their mother, and I felt a great knot form in my stomach.

Mirah took a deep breath. “I want to retire. I want to spend my last years in the garden with my grandchildren, teaching them poetry. I certainly do not want to

continue moderating the squabbling of my grown sons who continue to fight over the same toy. So let this be the end of it. Produce me a grandson, and you will have the throne of Al-Thakri.”

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THREE

The ride back to the palace was tense and uncomfortable. Exhausted by the emotion of it, I tried to pass the time staring out the window, watching the glittering, faraway desert dunes on the outskirts of the city. Under the moonlight, they shone like beautiful mountains of white diamonds.

Omar and his brother had been shocked by their mother's decree. Mirah had spent the rest of the evening mingling with her birthday guests, while Sajid had swept up his wife and daughters before the family left early in their limo. Omar had tried to enjoy himself, but I could tell he was deeply rattled by the row, stuck in his own mind. Jada must have noticed it, too; she wasn't as cheerful as she had been, and seemed resentful of the fact that Omar was no longer fawning over her.

Her disappointment only seemed to increase when the motorcade stopped to drop her outside her penthouse apartment. Perhaps she had been expecting an invitation back to the Sheikh's palace—or his bedroom; I have to admit that I felt a rush of schadenfreude at the forlorn expression on her face.

Omar followed Jada out of the limo and Rafiq and I waited in awkward silence as he escorted her back up to her penthouse. When Omar returned, all pretense of happiness had dropped from his face. He was angry. I heard it in his voice when he told Abdul to drive on.

I stared at Omar as he gazed out the window, deep in thought. I wanted desperately to comfort him. But I couldn't quite bring myself to move to sit next to him.

Truthfully, I needed to be comforted myself. As a trauma doctor, being in tense situations was nothing new, but there was something vastly different about a royal family in the middle of a heated succession problem. Queen Mirah's proclamation only made things more urgent for Omar. Sajid already had a wife, and was probably trying to produce his male heir as we sat in the limo. Omar had much more work ahead of him, and now his clock was ticking even faster.

I wasn't sure I could stand to be here for the day he introduced me to a beautiful woman who was pregnant with his child. As his physician, I would become her doctor, too. I would be responsible for her health, and for ensuring the health of the heir of Al-Thakri. I would have to smile while I watched the man I loved create life with some other woman.

I glanced over at Omar, who was too busy in his own thoughts to notice me looking. My heart broke as I realized that I didn't have the strength to do it; I couldn't stay there, loving him from afar. I had to quit. I had to leave this place before the heartache of it killed me.

I spend the rest of the limo ride trying to hold back my tears. Like some prophet, Rafiq gave me glances that said he could tell what was going on beneath the surface, but I ignored him.

The motorcade passed the palace gates and wound up the asphalt roads to the rear of the palace. The place was ancient, built long before cars existed, and there was no driveway to take us to the front. Constructing one would have ruined the gorgeous beauty of the symmetrical front walk, dotted with palm trees, water features, and gorgeous blooming flowers. The modern features had been built behind the palace, so the ancient façade could obscure the modern necessities.

Omar stepped out first, with Rafiq following behind. As I stepped out into the semi-darkness, a strong hand was offered to me. I looked up to see Omar waiting next to

the limo door with a soft smile on his face, the first I'd glimpsed since his mother had made her announcement.

I returned it shyly and accepted his hand, feeling the electric shock in my heart that I felt whenever we touched.

"Well," Omar said, offering his arm to me as the valet closed the limo door. "That evening did not turn out as I expected."

I took his arm gently and he walked us under the stone canopy towards the door. For a moment, I felt like I could be his queen.

"I don't know, most birthday parties I go to end with an enormous, life-changing decree."

Omar laughed in relief. It felt good to see him laugh. His whole face lit up when he did. "It sounds like your customs must be even stranger than ours."

"Just more dramatic," I replied teasingly. "And that's saying a lot." I pointed to the giant, gilded statues of sphinxes, erected by Omar's ancestors, guarding the palace doors, and he laughed again.

"Mother is usually very even-handed, but I think she's reached the end of her patience," he sighed.

"Seems that way," I agreed. "I can't really blame her, though. Ruling a country must be hard even when you've always expected to end up doing it—I can't imagine being thrust into power the way she's been."

"It has been hard on her. All the more reason it's important that this heir situation gets remedied, and quickly."

Talk of Omar's heir made me clam up, suddenly uncomfortable. He must have noticed, because he looked at me curiously for a moment before he spoke again. "It's been a funny old night. How would you feel about a nightcap?"

I wanted to say no. I wanted to return to my private suite and end the evening alone, probably crying in my giant bathtub as I figured out how to pen my resignation letter. But I couldn't resist spending time with him, even if it hurt.

The palace hallways were quiet, most of the staff having gone home or retreated to their own quarters for the night. Only the night guards were alert, positioned evenly throughout the hallways and at the entrances, politely ignoring us as we sauntered slowly by.

Omar led us to his library, one of my favorite rooms, where the walls were two stories high and one had to use a ladder to get to the topmost books on the shelves. He poured us both a glass of brandy from the collection of bottles at the bar in the corner.

"Cheers," he said and clinked my glass.

"Cheers." I smiled back and took a sip, feeling the warmth melting down my throat.

After a few moments of silence, Omar asked me, "You seem lost in your thoughts tonight, Carrie. Is everything all right?"

The question startled me and I cleared my throat. "Lost is about right. I just have a lot on my mind, I guess."

"May I ask what?"

I gave a nervous little laugh. "Don't you have enough on your plate without worrying

about my problems?”

“You’re my trusted doctor, and you live in my palace. Your problems are my problems.”

I blushed. He never said things like that to the other staff members, even though I know he did care about them. Unlike the rumors and stories everyone has heard about how powerful people treat the people who work for them, I hadn’t experienced anything like that in Al-Thakri. The Sheikh treated everyone with respect, and never yelled even when he was angry.

It was just that he seemed to treat me a little differently; he paid me just a bit more attention than anyone else—something that made my heart flutter to think about. I tried to tell myself it was nothing, but my heart wouldn’t listen.

I stalled with another sip of brandy. “I don’t know... I’ve just been thinking a lot, lately... about my place here.”

Omar frowned, his face darkening. He stepped closer to me. “What do you mean? Are you not happy with your quarters, or your salary? You know you can discuss those things with me if something is bothering you.”

“No, no, it’s not that,” I answered, shaking my head. “My room is a palace unto itself, and the pay is incredible. I just...” My words faded out as I scrambled for a believable excuse. This wasn’t the way I intended on delivering the news, but the words rose in my throat before I could do anything to stop them. “I think I need to resign,” I blurted out. “I’m not... I’m not sure I can stay here and be your physician anymore.”

The look on Omar’s face broke my heart, as much as it took me by surprise. His shoulders slumped. “Carrie, is this true? You want to leave me?”

I sighed. "It's... it's not that. I'm just not sure I'm cut out for this. It's been six months, and I still don't feel any more... comfortable. I'm a trauma physician; my place is somewhere more violent and desperate than between your palace walls. Besides, it's not like

you really need a doctor around you all the time. You never get sick or hurt. To be honest, I feel like I'm withering away here."

"But what happens if I do need you by my side one day? Anything could happen. My father's heart attack hit him suddenly, even with his healthy diet and lifestyle. Who will be here to help me if you leave?"

"You can hire another doctor," I said, laughing hollowly. "There are hundreds of qualified applicants, probably many of them already in your country. There has to be someone who would better enjoy this quiet life than me." Someone who is not steadily falling in love with her employer and threatening to ruin her whole life over it.

Omar fell silent. He moved away from me and collapsed tiredly into one of the brown leather reading chairs, downing his brandy in one big gulp.

The silence grew between us and made the tension in my chest even worse. Did he want me to leave the room? Did this mean my employment was officially over? I stood there, frozen like a statue, waiting for him to react.

Omar took a deep breath and finally spoke, but the words that came out of his mouth were not those I expected to hear. "What if I made you a different offer?"

I blinked. "A different offer? Like what, more money? As I said, the pay is more than generous... It's more that I just want to feel like I'm actually needed for something. Like I have a purpose. I have skills I'm not using here."

Omar rubbed his lips, as if he were nervous—something I'd only seen him do once or twice. He was not a man who got nervous very often.

When he looked up at me, there was emotion in his eyes that was crushing and heavy. “Well, allow me to explain, and maybe there will be purpose enough in this offer for you. Though I ask you to keep the details of this conversation between us.”

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“Certainly.”

He took another deep breath before continuing. “You may have noticed that my attempts at finding a wife have been... less than successful lately.”

All the air seemed sucked out of the room as I listened to the Sheikh speak. “I... I have, yes.”

“And my mother’s decree this evening has made the situation even more urgent for me, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I would agree.”

He sighed and got up to pour another glass of brandy. After taking a sip, he continued. “Carrie, I don’t know how else to do this, so I’m just going to come out with it: how would you feel about carrying an heir for me, to assure my ascension to the throne?”

The glass in my hand slipped to the floor, spilling what was left of the brandy all over the intricate carpet. Neither of us seemed to notice, as we stared at each other in tense anticipation.

“What?” I finally said, breathless. “You want... you want me to give you a child?”

“That’s correct,” he said. “If my mother needs me or Sajid to produce a male heir before she can step down from the throne with peace of mind, then I need to give her one in order to take it. I can’t waste any more time with these socialites; my brother

already has the significant advantage of having a wife, so I really cannot hesitate.”

“Sure, I understand your urgency. I can even understand you coming up with this as a solution to the problem. But why me? Why not ask Jada, or any of them? They would surely leap at the chance to carry your heir.” There was bitterness in my voice, but I didn’t care to hide it anymore. I’d just quit my job; it was time for honesty—on some topics, at least.

Omar shook his head impatiently. “Because I don’t love Jada, or any of them, Carrie. I’m not going to force a relationship just to produce a child. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I did, and I do not want any son of mine to grow up thinking he was simply created as a tool to get power.”

My throat tightened up. I was trying very hard not to hear the unspoken implication in the Sheikh’s words. Instead, I asked again, “But why me? Why should it be me to give you an heir?”

“I trust you,” he said simply. “You’ve become important to me as we’ve gotten to know each other these past few months. You have a beautiful and kind disposition that I believe would benefit any child, especially one who will one day become a king. You are intelligent, thoughtful, and hard-working, and you truly care about people; what other qualities would better suit an eventual heir to a kingdom?”

I turned red at the bombardment of compliments. For months, I had been dreaming about hearing him talk to me like this; finally hearing it was almost unbelievable.

Omar continued, “I would pay you, of course, for this ultimate labor—enough to wipe out any debts you may still have and keep you salaried for the rest of your life. I understand this is an incredible request to make of any you, to ask you to give up your bodily autonomy and produce a life, but I assure you I have every intent of making sure you are adequately compensated, in any way you should request.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Blood rushed in my ears like the sound of the raging ocean, fast as the thoughts that swarmed my shocked mind.

Finally, I had to let out a deep breath. "I'm sorry, this is just all so unbelievable. I have nothing but questions in my head. What if it doesn't work? What if I have a girl? What if your family won't accept a child born of me?"

He walked towards me slowly, standing in front of me with his glass of brandy, hope written on his handsome face. "Your payment would not change. And you would be under no obligation to try again for a boy. I'm only asking for one chance to produce the heir I need to take the throne; one chance with someone I trust and care for. My family will not be a problem. The constitution states clearly that the child must simply be my heir. The writers of the ancient world did not make any emphasis on who the mother should be. My seed is enough to ensure they will not bother you."

My heart was pounding. I couldn't process my emotions fast enough, despite the eagerness on Omar's face as he waited for my answer.

"Carrie?" he asked after a few moments of my panicked silence. "What do you say? Will you help me?"

Finally, in a tight voice, I replied. "This isn't the conversation I expected to have with you tonight."

"Nor I," admitted Omar. "But it's something I've been thinking about for a few weeks now."

"A few weeks?" The thought of Omar considering me as the mother of his child without me even knowing made me weak in the knees. "Did you know your mother was going to make the decree tonight?"

“No, of course not. But with every failed relationship I’ve endured in the past few months, it has dawned on me that there was no reason to force myself to be with a woman I do not love, just for the sake of producing an heir; modern science has freed us from such problems. Then the question simply became: with whom would I want to create a child, one that could grow up to rule the nation I love? And, well... the answer was very clearly you.”

I shook my head, feeling the long tendrils of my hair which were beginning to escape the upsweep on top of my head. The Sheikh’s words were shaking me down to my soul, and I didn’t know how to deal with it. He had no idea how I felt about him, and no idea of the true significance of what he was asking of me.

“I’m sorry, I can’t give you an answer yet. My head is swimming right now, Your Highness.”

“Hey, enough of that,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I told you a long time ago you don’t need to use such titles with me in private.”

“Still,” I replied. “I can’t give you an answer right this second. This is all too much, too fast. I mean, hell, I was ready to leave this job ten minutes ago, and now you’re asking me to have your child. Until right now, I was of the mind that having children was an adventure I was never going to have.”

He frowned. “Why do you say that?”

I shrugged, suddenly self-conscious at blurting out such private information. “I don’t know. The lifestyle of a globetrotting trauma doctor isn’t exactly conducive to raising children. I just figured I had to pick between the two, and I

made my choice when I entered med school.”

There was sadness on his face. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that you thought that, Carrie, but it seems now that fate has presented you with the option to do both.”

“Sort of,” I retorted. “The child wouldn’t be coming with me, though. He would stay here with you; I would basically be a surrogate.”

He opened his mouth to answer, but seemed to think better of his response, and hesitated. “I suppose... I suppose that’s true, yes.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“That’s a totally different ball game. I’m just going to need time to think about this, okay?” I took a few steps forward. “I’m flattered, I really am. I just have to think about this. It won’t do either of us any good if I agree to this and end up miserable.”

He stared deep into my eyes and shook his head. “Of course, Carrie. It would kill me if I made you unhappy. You’re under no pressure to accept my offer unless you really feel that you want to do this.”

I gave him a tight smile even as his words touched my heart. “Then I need some time to think, please.”

The Sheikh nodded gravely. “I understand. Please let me know as soon as possible whether you are staying to help... or leaving.”

I swallowed against a tight throat and nodded back to him. Too shocked to say anything else, I simply bowed my head a little and turned, hurrying out of the library and down the palace hallways.

By the time I rounded the corner near my private suite, I was practically running like Cinderella trying to catch her pumpkin before midnight struck, hot tears streaming down my face.

FOUR

Relaxing after the talk with Omar was almost impossible. Neither the jet tub nor a few more glasses of wine did anything to wring out the tension that galloped through my muscles at the thought of the decision before me. I paced around the plush carpet of my private suite for hours, trying to weigh the pros and cons, asking myself the hard questions. It had been daunting enough to consider quitting this job and finding myself a new place to live and work. Now on top of that, I had to consider a much bigger, more life-changing decision, and one I never expected to have to make.

The man I secretly love asking me to carry his child—as a business arrangement. What had my life become? Six months ago, I was tying tourniquets gritted with sand and trying to get my hands on any local remedy that would wash the constant smell of blood out of my hair. Now, there was an evening gown on the floor of my plush suite, looking like a dark puddle of water in an ocean of cream-colored carpet, and I had to decide if I wanted to carry the heir of one of the oldest countries in the Middle East so that the man I loved could take the throne.

Desperate for guidance, I rang my family back home, hoping in some vague way that the time difference suddenly wouldn't matter and my mother would answer, bright-eyed and ready to help. But she didn't.

Teary-eyed, I sighed as I hung up the call, hovering on the edge of my enormous canopy bed. It was probably for the best, anyway. There was no easy way to explain what was happening here, and my mother would be horrified at the prospect of me selling out my womb to anyone, Sheikh or not.

My mother was a traditionalist, as were most of my family back home in Ohio, and I couldn't think of any way to explain this to them. They didn't understand a lot of my life decisions. My mother cried for three days when I told her I was headed to be a doctor in a war-torn country. She was proud of me, sure, but she didn't understand why I would give up the comfort of middle-class American life for one of danger, uncertainty and struggle. I had no idea how to explain it to her, just like I had no idea how to explain that I was thinking of having a man's baby for money.

The thought hit me like a landslide. That's what he was asking of me, wasn't it? To rent out my reproductive organs in order to produce something he needed. Some part of that realization horrified me.

And yet, how many young women found themselves pregnant and with no father around to help raise the child? At least Omar was willing to make sure I never wanted for anything—and our child certainly wouldn't. He or she would be raised in one of the most prosperous places in the world, taught by world-class tutors and coaches, brought up with every advantage in order to become a fine ruler one day. How many mothers would happily pay any price to ensure that for their child? Was I selfish if I turned it down? If I had my own kids one day, outside of such an arrangement, I doubted I would be able to provide them even a fraction of the kind of security Omar could offer.

And then there was the whole business of surrogacy—willing, healthy women carrying children for couples who couldn't otherwise conceive, so that the joy of parenthood could be spread. Was there anything dishonorable about that profession? Of course not. As a doctor, I knew surrogates and egg and sperm donors brought an immeasurable amount of happiness to people's lives, giving them hope when they had none. There was nothing shameful about it; they were helping people, and at great personal sacrifice. It was exactly the kind of life I wanted to live.

So why did I feel so badly about the idea?

After a hot bath, I dressed in one of the silk nightgowns from my dresser and moved to lay in bed and finish off the bottle of red wine I had opened. Sleep was going to be elusive tonight, and I figured I would try and coax her in with a little bait.

I lay there and looked down at my body, and my flat belly. With a soft hand, I rubbed it, and imagined myself with child. My body would go through some drastic changes if I made this decision, some of which would be permanent. I would never be the same woman after it was over, even if it was a business transaction and not a family choice. The weight of that realization settled over me like a wet wool coat. My body, my mind, my spirit, everything would be changed forever once I went through the experience of carrying and giving birth to a child.

Tears began to stream down my cheek with sudden timing. A family choice; that was the choice I really wanted to be making. Having children was always in my life plan, ever since I was a little girl. Being a doctor, and one who was attracted to dangerous work, had put a bit of a delay on that plan to be sure, but the hope never really died.

I'd always figured I would eventually find some attractive fellow doctor or nurse who enjoyed travel and excitement as much as I did, and we would run off together, healing people and raising our kids as worldly little nomads who understood the truth of culture, beauty and people. Part of me always worried that it was just a pipe dream, and that eventually I would have to give up one or the other in order to survive. With every year that passed, the less likely it became, and I knew that a day would come when it would be impossible for me to bear children. One of my dreams was always doomed to die, an ugly voice in the back of my head told me.

But what girl dreams of selling her womb to a sheikh? Was this really the way I wanted to bring a child into the world—as a business transaction with a man who saw me only as an employee? Even though I loved him, it was a one-way street. This wouldn't be an act of love on his part, so much as self-preservation.

Flashes of social media pages and birth announcements from my girlfriends back at college entered my mind. They were easy enough to ignore when I had more pressing, life-saving issues at hand. But in the dark of night, I had to admit that being in my thirties, watching all my peers settle down and start families was starting to bite at my heels like a yappy dog. I always knew that having a baby while I was on my own and out in the world wasn't feasible. I didn't have the time, money, or energy to trot the globe with a baby on my back, and it wouldn't be fair to any child to make them go without just because their mother wanted to be a globetrotter.

But Omar's offer seemed to fix that conundrum. I could have a child, and know that he would want for nothing, while I continued on with my adventurous lifestyle. Omar would make a wonderful father; I was certain of that much. I had seen him with his nieces enough times to have faith in his ability to be patient, caring, and loving to any child. He was a good man. It would crush me not to be a parent alongside him to a child of our making, but my feelings weren't the point here.

Omar wasn't asking me this because he loved me. He needed an heir to ensure his life continued on the track he had been planning. And my love for him couldn't factor into this; that was a surefire way to get my heart broken.

FIVE

I tossed and turned between the sheets of my borrowed palace bed for most of the night. Come morning, the sun rose with an orange heat over the desert horizon, and the soft sounds of songbirds in the palace garden floated in on the same breeze that gently shook the curtains of my open windows. The land around the palace was a peaceful place, far from the city center and the noise of the freeways and airports, and the only sounds that greeted me each morning were natural and beautiful.

I couldn't help thinking that a child waking up in this place every morning would be one lucky child. He would be safe; he would be loved. And, one day, he would be in a place of power where he could, in turn, help a lot of other people.

If what I wanted to do was make a difference in the world, having a child who would one day rule a country would certainly do that.

Even though there was heaviness in my heart at the prospect, I knew then what I needed to do. My decision could provide future security for all of us—myself, Omar, and our child. Saying no would rob us all.

Thinking I should clean myself up from the rough night of sleep, I moved from the bed to the enormous, marbled bathroom. I gave my face a gentle wash to get rid of the tear-stains and puffiness from lack of rest, and let down my hair from the upsweep it was still holding onto half-heartedly, brushing it out into gentle waves that framed my face. I stared back at the girl in the mirror and took a deep breath.

I changed quickly into casual workout clothes; the palace had rules about ladies being

seen in their nightdresses outside their chambers, and it was a custom I had adapted to after the first two times the guards yelled at me for it. Living out in the desert with Doctors Without Borders quickly stripped a person of any semblance of modesty and privacy—at least as far as the high-class world defined it.

I stepped out into the hallway, which was still quiet. Soon, it would be bustling as the palace reacted to Queen Mirah's decree, which would be announced publicly today.

I had to see Omar before all hell broke loose.

The guards near my room shifted stirred at the sight of me. I still hadn't learned all their names, but the closest one today was a mountain of a man, a head taller than even Omar's impressive stature, with shoulders twice as wide. He seemed surprised when I stopped in front of him.

"Is the Sheikh awake yet?" I asked.

He blinked a few times before nodding wordlessly.

"Do you know where he is? He's expecting to talk with me this morning."

The guard stared at me suspiciously. Then he looked down the hallway and spoke in Arabic into the tiny microphone implanted in the wrist of his suit jacket. He listened as someone answered him back in the speaker in his right ear. I could only hear the sound of a voice, but couldn't make out what it was saying. The guard exchanged a few more words with whoever was on the other end, eyeballing me the whole time.

"His Highness is taking breakfast in the east courtyard," he said finally, in a booming voice. His English was very good, but his accent was heavy, and he took care pronouncing each word. "You may go to him."

I nodded and thanked the guard, turning around the other direction to head for the east courtyard.

As per the traditions of many Middle-Eastern countries, the Sheikh's palace was bursting with courtyards, arboretums, gardens and water features. In a land of dry desert, there was nothing more celebrated than water and nature.

It was one of my favorite traditions of this place. Warmth spread throughout my body when I imagined my son enjoying them, learning about varieties of bright blooming plants and visiting tropical birds. He would giggle and squeal when he reached in the ponds and felt the slimy scales of a fish swim by his hand, or the futile paddling of the water turtles' feet when he picked them up.

Every step I took, I felt more and more like this was the right decision.

The two guards at the entrance of the east courtyard barely gave me a sideways glance. I moved between them and out towards the soft morning sunshine that was just beginning to light up the palace walls. At a thick bronze-and-glass table setting, surrounded by plush trees, Omar sat with a tray of breakfast food and a pile of newspapers, catching up on what was happening in his kingdom.

His cup was halfway to his lips when he looked over and saw me standing at the entrance. His eyes widened and he immediately put the cup down, spilling some coffee on the table in his hurry. He tossed the newspaper aside and stood up to greet me.

He looked so dashing in his casual white linens, contrasting against the smooth glow of his bronze skin. The curls in his jet-black hair were still a little mussed from sleep; he clearly hadn't met with his stylist yet. Judging by the puffiness around his deep brown eyes, he'd had as rough a night's sleep as I had.

The eagerness in his expression as I approached made my heart hurt. No matter when or how I did it, leaving Omar would be the most difficult thing I ever did.

“Carrie,” he said. “Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

I laughed softly. “No, of course not. Are you telling me you did?”

He gave me a sweet half-smile and ran a hand through his hair. “No, not at all. I couldn’t stop thinking about you all night.” He cleared his throat and immediately corrected himself. “About your decision, I mean.”

I nodded and licked my lips. My hands, as they always did when I was at my most nervous, began to fidget with each other. “Well, hopefully we can both sleep better tonight, because I think I’ve made my decision.”

“You have?” he was surprised, and eagerly took a few steps forward. “What is it?”

I smiled at him. “My answer is yes. I will give you an heir on the conditions you set.”

Omar’s face lit up in a beaming smile. Instantly, the lines disappeared from the corners of his eyes, as if he were suddenly ten years younger. “This is wonderful, glorious news! I am thrilled, simply thrilled at this. You will not regret the decision, Carrie. I promise, I will ensure our son has everything he could ever need or want. He will grow up a compassionate and caring man, and a just ruler.”

“I know you will take care of him,” I replied. “I’m not worried about that at all. I’ve seen you with your nieces and other children that come around. I know you’ll be a great father.”

“Thank you for this gift. Thank you, my friend.”

Omar stepped forward without warning and threw his arms around me in a tight embrace. It was the most we had ever touched in the six months I had known him, and I wasn't prepared for it. I wrapped my arms around him in return, relishing the feeling of his warmth against me.

It was only when one of the guards at the door cleared his throat that we realized how long the embrace had gone on for. Omar stepped away from me sheepishly, redness tinting his sharp cheekbones. He ran a hand through his hair again and gestured towards the table with the other.

He waved at me first, then at one of the attendants waiting patiently near the doors, just out of earshot. "Please, sit. Let's get you breakfast, and then we'll talk about what happens next."

SIX

A few days passed before Omar was able to find the time for us to take the next step in our adventure together. There seemed to be no end to his royal duties, and he had to deal with the fallout of his mother's decree, both to the press and the subjects of his country. He hadn't spoken with his brother since the disastrous birthday dinner, but all the darkness and anger of that night seemed to have faded completely from his mind. Despite dealing with the headache of the work, Omar was in great spirits.

Knowing I had helped make him so happy only made me happier, even if that joy came with a lot of fear attached.

It was late afternoon when Omar called me into the palace's medical ward, where he had gathered the country's top OB/GYN physicians for a consultation regarding the little bundle of royal joy we were trying to cook. Since I wasn't Omar's queen, the only option left to us was artificial insemination.

Even as a doctor, I was a little nervous about the procedure. It wasn't something I had ever imagined myself doing, and there was a type of coldness about it I didn't appreciate. I knew that any number of complications and surprises could happen when doctors tried to replicate the natural reproductive system, but it was what Omar needed, and so I would do it for him.

Being the patient was another thing I wasn't used to. As if sensing my nervousness, Omar took my hand and helped me gently up onto the examination table. After a few words of encouragement, he politely left the room as one of the doctors sat down to examine me. Once I was dressed, Omar re-joined us so the doctors could explain

what would happen next.

“Dr. Green is in perfect reproductive health,” beamed Dr. Issa, a warm, middle-aged woman who was born and raised in Al-Thakri. Omar smiled at me as the doctor continued. “For your needs, we recommend the intrauterine insemination procedure. Assuming your blood tests and physical exams come back with good news, we will then do an analysis of His Highness’ sperm. If he is as healthy as you are, Dr. Green, we won’t need to worry about administering any fertility drugs to assist with the process. You are both at ripe reproductive age.”

Omar and I exchanged a somewhat awkward but excited smile. I had the urge to reach over and grab his hand, but suppressed it. The need to try and make this more comfortable for us both was overwhelming.

“I will need you to track your ovulation cycles,” the doctor said to me. “That way, we may be able to double the insemination procedure each cycle and hopefully get you pregnant much faster. Once His Highness’ sample is processed, we will apply the sperm inside you using a catheter and syringe, before using a cervical cap to ensure it remains in place. Your Highness,” she continued, turning to Omar. “We recommend that you be here with Dr. Green during the procedure. She will need to be at her most relaxed, and your presence should help with that.”

Omar looked to me, as if looking for confirmation of what the doctor was saying, and I smiled with a gentle nod.

“That would be great,” I agreed. “Doing this alone would be much harder.”

“You’re not alone,” said Omar, before looking back at Dr. Issa. “Of course I’ll be here—whenever Carrie needs me to be.”

“Are you sure that’s do-able?” I asked him quietly. “I mean, your royal duties...

you're not going to be able to just drop everything for this. If you need me to handle it alone, I can do that. I've been on my own in much more stressful situations."

Omar gave me a sly smile that made my stomach flutter. "This is the most important thing I've ever done—and it is my country's future. Let someone try to stop me from being here for every minute of it."

I could feel my cheeks flushing and looked away before Omar could notice.

"Do I need to make any lifestyle changes?" I asked the doctors.

"It never hurts to start treating your body better—preparing the den for the cubs, so to speak," smiled the elderly male doctor to the left. "If you smoke, it's essential that you quit now. Cutting back on alcohol, making sure you're exercising and getting a balanced diet; all of these things will help your overall health as well as your chances of conceiving."

"I'll pass on orders to the kitchen staff," nodded Omar. "I'll have my nutritionist assist with Carrie's meals. It shouldn't be a problem."

"And I'll start visiting the palace gym more often," I added. "Lord knows I pass by it enough; I guess it's time to start actually going inside."

The doctors laughed at that.

"Conceiving a child isn't always easy," said the elderly doctor. "Don't be hard on yourself if the process takes some time. The human body is a delicate thing, and each individual has her own needs. There isn't a magic solution to anything. Just be patient and calm."

Omar rubbed his hair, a gesture I was realizing came whenever he got a little nervous.

“You see... patience is not necessarily a virtue we have time for, doctors. The heir needs to be born before my brother can produce one.”

The doctors exchanged concerned glances.

“Ah yes,” said the elderly doctor. “We did hear about the Queen Regent’s decree.” He shrugged a little helplessly. “We’ll certainly do everything we can to make this process a speedy one, but we aren’t gods. Just make sure you follow our directions closely, and come to us if there is any change that concerns you, even if it seems fickle.”

“I will,” I agreed with a nod. “Having you all so close is a big help.”

“Indeed, and one of us is on duty twenty-four seven,” he said.

Omar looked at me intently. Then, without warning, he reached over and clasped one of my hands in his. The sensation was warm and loving.

“Thank you so much for doing this for me, Carrie,” he said with wet eyes. “Our baby is going to be a wonderful ruler.”

Blushing slightly, I squeezed his hand back. “Yes, he will.”

SEVEN

A few weeks went by after the first insemination procedure without any noticeable change to my body. As the doctors recommended, I made adjustments to my day-to-day life, but it wasn't looking positive. Omar and I met with his nutritionist and the palace chefs to design a perfectly balanced meal plan for a woman my age looking to get pregnant. Even though I preferred to get my exercise by running from triage to triage, saving lives, I still dragged myself out of bed as the sun rose every morning to head to the palace gym, which included an Olympic-sized swimming pool. The water was much more inviting than a treadmill, so five days a week, I did laps until I was too tired to move.

Even though I appreciated that I was getting more lean and toned, that wasn't the point. In fact, I needed to get the opposite of lean and toned. I needed to be getting bigger, specifically in the belly region.

As the weeks went by, the frustration began to build for both me and Omar. He would wait eagerly in my private suite while I took pregnancy tests in the bathroom, but every time I came out with the same dejected expression. He would sigh and put his arms on my shoulders—just shy of an actual embrace—and smile at me with hope. “Don't worry, Carrie,” he would say. “It will happen. The doctors said we should be patient, so let us try harder to be.”

I knew he was more worried than he let on—I could see it in the wrinkles at the corner of his eyes, the way they were growing darker around the edges from losing sleep. Sajid and his wife would be trying every single night, most likely, to get her pregnant again in hopes of beating Omar to the throne. Every day that passed without

the process working was another day Omar could lose everything.

It was almost a month later when I finally approached Omar, who was doing paperwork in his incredibly beautiful office. He sensed the frustration on me even before I spoke.

“Is everything all right?” he asked immediately.

I shook my head. “I can’t understand why this isn’t working. I think we should go speak to the OB/GYNs again. There has to be something else we can do.”

Omar shrugged. “Sometimes things just take time. There’s nothing wrong with you, Carrie.”

“That’s not how I feel,” I said glumly, crossing my arms over my chest—even though, deep down, I was feeling more and more inadequate as each day passed.

Worry crossed Omar’s handsome brow. He put down his pen and stood, coming around the desk to put his arms on my shoulders and gaze into my eyes, his expression full of concern.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” he repeated, refusing to look away from my gaze. “You are a beautiful, strong, intelligent woman, and I know you are going to give me a wonderful son. I dare say you seem more eager even than me at this point. Are you in such a hurry to be gone from here?” There was pain in his voice when he spoke the last line, even though he capped it off with a soft laugh.

I shook my head immediately. “No,” I promised. “I haven’t thought about leaving again since we agreed to this, actually. All I can think about is... him. Our son.” I put my hands on my stubbornly empty belly. “And about how much this means to you and your future. I don’t think I’ve wanted anything so badly since I was applying to

med school.”

Omar’s expression fell into something both happy and sad. He rubbed his hand gently up and down my arm. “You are truly an amazing woman, Carrie. You shouldn’t be worried about my future or happiness, and yet you are. Our son is going to be the luckiest boy in the world to have such a gentle and caring mother.”

I blushed and looked away from him. “Thank you.”

“If you’re worried, we can make an appointment with the doctors today,” he said. “You are the goddess here, bringing forth life into the world. Whatever you need, just ask, and I will deliver it. When do you want to meet with them? Say the word, and I’ll make it happen.”

I shrugged. “The sooner the better, really—this afternoon would be ideal. I don’t like carrying all this doom and gloom around with me.”

“I don’t like it, either,” agreed Omar. “This afternoon it is. I’ll call you as soon as I confirm the time.”

“Okay. I’ll be in my suite.”

“I’ll find you there.” He smiled and squeezed my arms.

It was just before dinner when we met with the doctors, and in a rambling, breathless rant, I expressed my worries about the procedure not working, begging for some answers. Omar sat next to me the whole time, silent and supportive. The doctors listened intently and didn't make me feel guilty for being so worried about what was—or wasn't—happening.

When I was done, I felt like a weight had been lifted from the room. Even as a doctor myself, I was surprised at the intense anxiety that came with trying to conceive a baby.

Dr. Issa stepped forward with a soft smile. "It's normal for you to be concerned, Dr. Green. After all, this is the start of many more worries you will have—all of them normal. This is part of motherhood."

"But what can we do?" I asked urgently. "There has to be something else we can try to help this along."

The doctor was thoughtfully silent before she spoke again. "How is your stress level?"

"Well, bad, obviously," I half-laughed. "I'm stressing about not being pregnant already most of the time."

"Certainly, but is there anything else weighing on you that you may not have considered yet? What about your duties to the palace?" she turned to look at Omar.

“The usual,” I said with a shrug. “I give His Highness and the Queen Regent a short exam each week—just the basics. One of the security staff has been ill lately, so I’ve been attending to him. He’s caught whatever bug it is that half of Al-Thakri have endured this spring.”

“Is he stable?”

“Oh, yes. It’s nothing life-threatening.”

“And is there anyone under your care that is in dire straits?”

“No, not at all,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s all very minor, as usual. Why do you ask?”

“Even so,” Dr. Issa said, “work can be a stressful activity that can prevent you from focusing on relaxation. Perhaps you should think about taking some time off and having His Highness hire another doctor to take over for you, at least through the conceiving stage, if not the entire pregnancy.”

I looked at Omar questioningly. We hadn’t talked about me quitting my duties since my decision to stay on and have his baby. But the look on his face was determined, and he was clearly taking Dr. Issa’s words to heart.

“She will take leave,” said Omar without hesitation, nodding at me. “I will hire another physician to be on-call in her stead. I’ll make the arrangements at once.”

“Are you sure?” I said to him in a quiet aside. “I hate the idea of not doing my job. That’s what I came here for, after all.”

“You are doing your job,” countered Omar. “You agreed to be the mother of my child. That is your most important job right now. There are other doctors in the city;

let them deal with the minor scrapes of my staff.”

I felt a little uncertain about the decision. Being a doctor was all I knew—I hadn’t taken a break from it since I entered med school.

“I’m afraid,” I admitted to him. “Work has been my whole life up to now.”

“Well, now you have a different life,” said Omar softly. “At least for a little while. You deserve a break, Carrie. You’ve been working hard your whole life, saving others in war zones and the like. What could be wrong about taking a few months off to bring your own life into the world?”

“I agree with His Highness,” said Dr. Issa. “Your reputation precedes you, Dr. Green. I’ve heard of your work in Africa. No one would ever doubt your commitment to your duties, or how much you love your work. Everyone deserves a break once in a while.”

I took a deep breath. They were right. If my goal was to give Omar a healthy son who would take the throne one day, then I should do everything I could to make that happen, even if it meant taking a break from work.

“Okay,” I told them finally. “I’ll step down from my position, at least until the baby is born.”

“I think that is wise,” agreed Omar with a smile.

After a few more of my nervous questions, we left the OB/GYN’s and walked casually back toward Omar’s office, where he had more work to attend to.

Outside Omar’s office, Rafiq was in his usual protective spot. He gave me a sly glance when I passed him by. I returned it with a playfully sour one, but he only

winked at me knowingly.

“Do you feel better?” asked Omar once we were alone. He poured us both a glass of pure spring water from one of the underground wells on the palace property, iced and garnished with cucumber.

I took a glass from him and nodded. “I do, in fact. Much better. Thank you for indulging my neurotic nature.”

“It’s nothing,” said Omar with a smile. “My only concern is you and your health.”

I blushed and looked away. “It’s not every day a girl gets to hear that from the ruler of a kingdom.”

Omar seemed suddenly nervous. He ran a hand through his thick black curls and cleared his throat. “So I will go about the work of finding you an immediate replacement on the staff.”

“That would be great. Do you need my help in the vetting process?”

“No, no,” laughed Omar. “We’re trying to get you away from work, remember?”

I turned red and laughed. “True. I guess I just hate not being able to help.”

“You are helping,” said Omar. “But my staff can handle the transfer. In the meantime, I’ll ask Dr. Issa if she’d be willing to pick up emergency duties in the palace grounds until your replacement is found.”

“That’s a good idea.”

He cleared his throat again, then looked away. “Since you’re no longer under my

employ, there's something else I wanted to ask you, Carrie."

"Oh?" I asked, fidgeting with the telescope that was stationed by one of the office's floor-to-ceiling windows. "What's that?"

"I wondered if perhaps you would like to go on a date with me."

I turned so fast, I knocked the telescope off its settings. Omar only laughed.

"You—you what?" I asked. "You want to go on a date? Like... a real date?"

"Yes, a real date." I was sure I could see a red tint to his beautiful face.

"I... I had no idea you felt that way about me."

My heart raced as Omar shrugged self-consciously. "It wasn't exactly an easy topic to approach. You were my employee, after all, and with all this succession business... sometimes having power doesn't actually provide one with the power he truly needs. The time was never right to ask. But now, I feel, is as good a time as any."

I was breathless, my head swimming with happiness. "Omar, I would love to go on a date with you."

He beamed and stood straighter, taking a few steps closer to me. "You would? Carrie, you don't have to agree to this just because of the baby, you know. I fully understand that it's not the same."

"It's not that," I promised with a shake of my head. "I've wanted to go on a date with you for a while, too."

Omar beamed. He picked up my hand and planted a sweet, long kiss on it. With the

other, he pushed my hair out of my face and caressed my cheek. “I’ll arrange for us to have dinner in the gardens tonight. Would you like that?”

“That sounds perfect,” I whispered.

Omar grinned in a way that made my knees weak. He turned back to his desk for just a moment, rummaging in one of the drawers, until his hand emerged, holding a small velvet box.

“For you,” he said, holding the box out to me. “I got them for you the night after I asked you to carry my heir. I was going to save them for his birthday, but I think you should have them now.”

Stunned, I took the box and opened it gently. A pair of gold and ruby earrings glittered inside, looking very much like the cufflinks I had picked for Omar the night of his mother’s party.

“They remind me of fire—of you,” he added. “I want you to have them.”

“Omar,” I said softly, touching the earrings with my fingertip. “These are so beautiful.

1. No one’s ever given me something like this before.”

“It is the first of many gifts,” he promised. “You’ll find I’m a bit of generous heart that way. I can’t help it.”

I felt like a school girl, the way I smiled back at him. My heart fluttered at the glittering in his eyes as he looked at me.

“Why don’t you head into town? Buy whatever you’d like to wear tonight. And anything else you want, especially for the baby. You should ask my mother about her

favorite spa—she swears by its healing powers. Give yourself some pampering. You deserve it.”

“Is that a royal decree?” I teased.

He pursed his lips in a playful smile. “If it must be, yes.”

“Well then, I wouldn’t want to disobey a king.”

“I’m only a sheikh, my dear.”

“Not for long, you aren’t.”

EIGHT

Never in my life had I been so nervous getting ready for a date. I took Omar's advice and spent most of the rest of the afternoon shopping in the luxurious downtown district of Al-Thakri's capital, where the blistering desert heat was offset by shady green trees and giant misting fans to keep the shoppers cool. Queen Mirah made an appointment for me at her spa, and it was clear to me why she recommended it so highly. Even though I only got a few services, including a facial, a manicure and a massage, I felt like a queen myself by the time I left.

From the window of one of the boutiques, a soft flowing dress called my name. It was bold pink with a hem that fell just above the knee and a gorgeous layer of sheer fabric over the shoulders and back. After excitedly trying it on, I got the pink dress, along with some beautiful gold gladiator sandals with a tiny kitten heel, wondering vaguely when was the last time I had bought a piece of clothing that wasn't purely functional.

Back at the palace, I took a relaxing bath before getting dressed. My nerves got worse with every passing hour and it took me more than a few tries to put on the sparkling ruby earrings Omar had gifted me. Once they were on, though, I was almost taken aback at my own reflection. They glittered like fire on either side of my face, lighting up my eyes.

Omar asked to meet me in the royal gardens, one of his favorite spots—and one of mine, truth be told. To have an oasis so deep in the desert sands meant a great deal to the culture of Al-Thakri, and that love and respect lived deep within Omar's blood. Every step I took down the palace hallways made my heart pound faster and faster.

Remembering what the doctors had said, I instinctively raised a hand to my belly and rubbed gently, concerned. I slowed my steps and took deep breaths to calm my racing heart, and it worked. By the time I arrived at the beautiful sandstone archway that led to the gardens, I was feeling much more like myself.

That only lasted for a few seconds, however—until I saw Omar, handsome and dashing in his casual white linens, waiting for me with a beaming smile. He had picked one of the tropical flowers from the garden and held it out to me as I approached.

Blushing deeply, I took the bloom and brought it to my nose. The scent was clean and sweet. “This is beautiful,” I said to him.

“As are you,” said Omar, eyeing my flowing pink sundress. “I don't think I've ever seen you wear something so bright before. It suits you.”

The feeling of his eyes wandering over my body made me flush anew. “There's not very much about a dress like this that says 'professional'. I never wanted to seem out of place in your entourage.”

“That's because you are a woman of integrity,” smiled Omar. He lifted his hand, beckoning silently for mine. I placed my hand in his and he brought it to his lips, planting a gentle kiss on top. “It's part of what makes you so attractive to me.”

“Really?”

“Truly,” said Omar with a nod. “So few people live with integrity. That's one truth you discover very quickly when you are born into power. Some people only care about themselves, or what they can scam out of a person. But you aren't like that, Carrie. You only care for how you can help people.”

I shrugged, my heart fluttering at this unexpected attention. “I don't know what to say. I just try to do the best I can with what I've got.”

Omar smiled at me, as if my response only proved his point. “Come,” he beckoned, offering his arm to me. It was the same gesture he made the night we arrived home from his mother's gala, and yet, this time, it felt so much more significant.

I slid my arm into his and he led us slowly through the stone walkways of the garden, pointing out some of his favorite flowers and teaching me their proper names. We were surrounded by blooms unlike any I had ever seen, save on exotic nature documentaries.

“Part of me never wants to leave this garden,” I said to him. “Something about this place just makes me relax.”

“Good,” replied Omar, squeezing my hand gently. “We need you relaxed. You shouldn't be concerning yourself with anything except taking care of yourself.”

“Well, that's a little hard for me,” I admitted with a sheepish laugh. “You may have noticed I'm a bit of a workaholic.”

Omar chuckled. “It had crossed my mind, yes. I saw the panic on your face when the doctors suggested you take some time off. After all, only a workaholic would accept a position like this in the first place, being on-call constantly for a royal family.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, blushing. “You got me there.”

“Saying that,” added Omar, “even though we've spent so many hours beside each other, there's still so much I don't know about you, Carrie.”

“I guess getting to know each other is what we're supposed to do on a first date,

right?" I said, and he grinned warmly. "I don't really know where to start. My family is a pretty typical Midwestern bunch. I've always been kind of a restless person. I drove my parents crazy when I was a kid, getting into trouble and refusing to be clamped down. They wanted me to be more like my older sister, who loved school and following the rules."

"You mean you've experienced sibling rivalry as well?" laughed Omar with wide eyes. "I suppose that makes watching this nonsense with Sajid much more understandable."

"Oh, yes," I giggled, leaning my head towards him. "I understand completely. I'm just glad my sister and I never had a kingdom to fight over—we had a tough time just sharing the treehouse. I decided to go into medicine because I figured it would cure my restlessness with the crazy hours and the adrenaline that comes with saving lives. Signing up for Doctors Without Borders was always my goal. I knew I wanted to be out in the world where I could do good for the people who needed it most. And, selfishly, I knew I wanted to travel as much as I could."

Omar's face lit up at that. "You love travel too?"

"More than almost anything," I said.

"Me too," replied Omar. "There are so many beautiful places on this planet. I remember my father taking Sajid and I on occasion when he would make diplomatic visits. Those are among my favorite childhood memories—when I was encouraged to take in the world around me in wonder. Father nurtured my curiosity; he wanted me to be excited about new cultures and places. He knew it would make me a more compassionate and informed ruler. It's something I want to instill in our son."

The memory was touching in ways I didn't expect. To hear Omar talk of what he wanted to give our son made my heart ache.

“That's beautiful,” I said quietly. “I wish everyone could travel. I think they would all get along much better once they realize everyone is just trying to make it the best they can, same as us.”

“I couldn't agree more,” said Omar.

“So why don't you travel more? We haven't had a single trip outside the kingdom since I've been here.”

Omar sighed, and I felt immediately guilty for turning the mood of the date. “Things have just been hectic since father's death.”

I gave his arm a gentle, loving squeeze and changed the subject as we rounded a corner and came upon a huge aviary tucked within the greenery. Exotic birds began to caw and flap their wings at the sight of us. One of them talked back to Omar when he spoke to it in Arabic, and he smiled at me, impressed with himself.

“Just like Doctor Doom,” he said.

I laughed. “What?”

“That character from your country that can speak to animals.”

“That's Doctor Dolittle,” I corrected with a teasing smile. “Doctor Doom is far less nice than him.”

“I did think that was a strange name for a veterinarian,” he laughed.

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Omar led us through the aviary as we the conversation moved to lighter fare. We discovered we had much more in common than might be expected of a sheikh and a western doctor. Both of us had grown up restless, taking part in sports and any activity we could be a part of to stave away the dreaded specter of boredom. We both had huge soft spots for animals, and cared passionately about the rights of the oppressed and the working class—some

thing Omar had demonstrated many times in his official work for the kingdom.

I couldn't believe that my date with the Sheikh was swiftly becoming the most successful date I'd ever had. The chemistry we'd been fighting for so many months flowed out of us like a river in spring runoff, surging and full of life.

I realized how foolish I'd been to not see it before; Omar had been holding feelings for me just as long as I had held feelings for him. It was an endless relief to know I hadn't just been holding a candle in the dark, waiting for a day that was never going to come. All that time, Omar had been thinking about me, too. He had dreamed about me like I'd dreamed about him. And we were both so happy to finally come together and say it.

When we reached the garden's intricate fountain, there was already a table set out for us. A selection of Mediterranean delicacies had been spread out over pure white dishes; meats and cheeses, olives, figs, fresh-baked bread, grapes, and dipping oils beckoned to us. Two bottles of wine chilled in a silver, ice-filled bucket, and a small but decadent-looking chocolate cake waited enticingly under a glass dome.

“I know the doctors said to cut back on alcohol, but I figured since you're not

pregnant, a glass of wine might do wonders helping you relax,” said Omar as he lifted one of the bottles out of the ice bucket. “May I?”

“Please,” I said, grateful for the nerve-calming alcohol.

Dinner was a playful affair. Omar told me stories about growing up as a royal son, and I shared with him the gory details of working my way through college and medical school. For some reason, he was enchanted by my stories about growing up in boring old Ohio—stories I usually kept out of my repertoire because they were so mundane. But for someone who had grown up on the other side of the world, learning how to rule a country, hearing about carefree summers catching bullfrogs and climbing trees was like hearing a fairy tale.

“Do you know how I got interested in medicine?”

“No, tell me,” said Omar, a hint of tipsiness teasing his expression.

“I started collecting animal bones I would find along the train tracks outside of town, trying to rebuild the skeletons. Of course, most of them ended up abominations because I had the wrong parts, in the wrong places. Mom hated my collection—she thought it was terribly macabre—but I was just trying to understand how the animals were built so that one day I could help them. Eventually, I decided I cared about helping people more than animals.”

He seemed delighted at that anecdote. “You truly are a scientist at heart.”

“Or maybe I was just a morbid little kid,” I joked.

“Well, if it brought you to such an honorable calling—and to me—then I’m glad for your morbid childhood,” laughed Omar with a wink.

“It certainly got me the hell out of Ohio,” I said, sighing heavily and gazing up over the tall façade of the palace as a flock of white birds passed by overhead, sparkling in the sun. “It’s brought me to some amazing places. I can’t wait to start traveling again.”

Omar’s wine glass was halfway to his lips when he paused suddenly and lowered it, deep in thought. He looked almost sad.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Did I say something?”

He shook his head insistently. “You did nothing wrong. I was only thinking—wishing, really—that travel was still an option for me.”

“Why do you say that it’s not?”

“This,” he said, waving his hand toward the palace. “My kingdom needs a constant, steady hand to guide it, or she will fall into disrepair and millions of people will suffer. Their leader cannot be gallivanting around the world, appeasing his own whims. He has to be here, supporting and living among them, attending to all the duties that keep everything running.” Omar sighed. He looked sadder than I’d ever seen him. “Carrie, I fear that when I become king, I will never be able to leave my country again.”

“That’s not true,” I said, desperate to comfort him. “What about diplomatic missions, like the ones your father used to take you on?”

He scoffed. “That isn’t traveling. It’s just business negotiations in faceless meeting rooms.”

I couldn’t help but laugh hollowly at that. “I’m sorry, Omar. I feel awful hearing you say things like that. I want you to have what you want.”

He looked at me softly, studying the details of my face as if he were trying to memorize them. After a few moments of silence, he spoke quietly. “What I want is to travel the world with you.”

I couldn’t take it any longer. The feelings I’d been trying to hide for so long bubbled up too strongly, and there was nowhere left for them to go.

Without warning, I leaned forward and smashed my lips against Omar’s. He moaned in surprise for a moment, but then melted into the kiss, pulling me into his lap as his tongue pushed gently into my mouth.

And suddenly, the feelings we’d been holding inside came bursting out. Omar wrapped his strong arms around me, holding me close as he passionately kissing me, both of us moaning into each other’s mouths. One of his hands tangled itself carelessly in my hair, bringing my face closer to his as if he wanted to meld us into one body.

“Carrie,” he whispered against my lips. “I’ve dreamed about this so many times.”

“So have I,” I replied, my voice deep with lust. “So many nights I’ve wanted to feel your lips against mine.”

Omar smiled and kissed me again, holding me tight. In one sweeping motion he stood up and brought me with him, holding me like a fairy-tale princess and making me squeal in girlish delight. I didn’t care how silly we looked to the entourage of guards stationed all over the garden, I was just happy to finally be in Omar’s arms.

Moments later, he was carrying me into the palace where, hand in hand, we rushed back to his royal suite as fast as our legs would take us.

NINE

The next fortnight felt like a blissful paradise; I was being swept away by a handsome prince and showered with love and affection like I had never known. Since my duties at the palace had ended, my days were spent pampering myself, resting, eating fresh fruit, and enjoying the gardens until Omar was able to tear himself away from royal business to be with me. We spent hours in bed, cuddling and talking and sharing dreams of our future child.

“You should get him a pet,” I told Omar as we lounged around one afternoon, waiting for our appointment with the OB/GYN doctors. “Like a good dog, or a cat that will follow him around the palace and chase birds to make him laugh.”

“A pet?” asked Omar curiously. “I never did have one of those, unless you count the birds in the aviary, or the fish.”

“No, I mean something that could be his own,” I said. “I had a dog, growing up in Ohio, and it was the best. You always have companion with you. It helps a lot with loneliness.”

The suggestion seemed to stick with Omar, who had expressed his own loneliness as a child to me during one of our deep evening talks. He nodded thoughtfully.

“Plus, if you get a big, well-trained dog, he could even act as another bodyguard to keep him safe.”

“I suppose we should start thinking about the best breed, then,” agreed Omar. “I’ll

have my researchers begin looking around for trainers, as well. Wouldn't it be ideal to have the puppy around soon after he is born, so they can grow up together?"

"I think that's just about the sweetest thing I've ever heard."

Omar leaned over me where I lay in his bed, and gave me a gentle kiss. "I'm so lucky that you'll be carrying my heir. He's going to inherit so much of your goodness and beauty, I just know it."

Grinning, I kissed Omar again. "And he'll inherit your strength and smarts."

"He'll be unstoppable," joked Omar.

We made our way through the palace slowly until we reached the medical ward, where the doctors were waiting to conduct the second insemination attempt. Even though they had told me to be patient, and to prepare for it taking several tries, I was still feeling pretty wound up inside about the first attempt not having taken.

Again, Omar waited outside the examination room while I was given a pelvic exam before the process could begin. The doctors assured us that, as before, he would be invited back in to support me during the procedure; it was invasive and uncomfortable, and having him by my side made it much easier.

Having taken a blood sample, Dr. Issa returned from the lab with a curious expression on her face.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not at all."

There was a grin on the corner of the doctor's lips as she spoke.

I could hardly hear anything over the sound of my heart pounding in my ears. “What is it?”

“The hCG test is reading a positive,” said the doctor. “But we’ll need to do another test to confirm.”

Quickly, the doctor painlessly drew a second sample of my blood. I re-dressed and went into the hall to wait anxiously with Omar as she did the lab work.

She called us both back into the exam room after ten tense minutes. The doctor was grinning widely.

Omar sat next to me, concerned, and took my hand. “What is it, doctor? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Your Highness, we just won’t be performing the procedure today.”

“Why not? We’ve done everything you recommended—”

“Because Carrie is already pregnant,” said the doctor in a triumphant voice. “Congratulations to you both!”

A wave of shock rolled over my body. It seemed impossible—we knew the procedure hadn’t worked the first time, the doctors had confirmed it. And yet... here I was, with child.

As Omar’s wide eyes looked deeply into mine, I realized that I must have gotten pregnant the night of our first date, two weeks ago, when we made love for the first time. I gasped and covered my mouth as tears streamed down my face.

“We did it,” he whispered, his forehead nuzzling against mine. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close to his chest. “We did it, Carrie. We created a new life.”

“Omar, I can’t believe it.” I grasped his white linen shirt in my hands and put my head on his shoulder, completely overwhelmed. A life—our shared life—was growing inside of me already. It seemed like a waking dream.

“I’m so very happy for you both,” Dr. Issa beamed.

Omar turned to her, his cheeks stained with tears. “Doctor, thank you. Thank you so much for helping with this miracle.”

“If this isn’t too forward of me, Your Highness, from the looks of it I didn’t have much to do with this at all,” she teased.

We both turned red as we shared a knowing glance.

“Please, Doctor,” Omar said, “keep this information to yourself. While my family is fully aware that I’m trying to create an heir, none of them know about Carrie yet. I have to find the right time to tell them, and it has to be done delicately.”

“Sir, say no more. This is all doctor-patient confidentiality. My team and I are here for you, Carrie and the baby, and that’s all.”

Omar nodded happily and gave her a sudden, intense hug. The doctor laughed and returned it, patting him warmly on the back.

“I think I can see now why people choose OB/GYN over trauma care,” I said jokingly to her.

She nodded from over Omar's shoulder. "Bringing in new life is just as satisfying as saving one."

TEN

We left the medical wing in a dazed happiness. Omar whisked me back to his suite and immediately ordered dinner from the chefs, including some celebratory sparkling apple juice. “I will quit drinking alongside you, my dear,” he told me after hanging up the phone. “We’ll endure a new, healthy lifestyle together for the sake of our child.”

“Our child,” I said thoughtfully, rubbing my still-flat belly. “I can’t believe we did it. All that medical science, but all we needed was to come together naturally.”

“And now our son will be born of love, and nothing else.”

I held my breath at his words. “Omar, do you love me?” I asked tearfully.

He stepped over to me and wrapped his arms around me. “Of course I do, Carrie. I’ve loved you for a long time; this past fortnight has only confirmed all the beautiful things I already knew about you. And now you’re going to give me the greatest gift of all: a beautiful baby boy.”

“Or girl,” I teased through my tears. “It could still turn out to be a girl, you know.”

“And I shall love her with all the fire in my heart,” he replied.

“I love you too, Omar. I’ve been waiting so long to speak those words to you. So many months watching you spend your affection on other women... it was so difficult.”

He stroked his hand gently over my hair and kissed my forehead, then my lips. “Those days are over now. It’s the dawn of a new time, and a new family—our family.”

His words melted my heart. I leaned into Omar and let him envelop me in his strong arms, listening to his heart beat underneath his skin.

Our family... that’s what this would be. And yet, this had all begun as a business arrangement—a labor I was carrying out for money. I’d never planned to stay around and be with my son after he was born. My intention had been to earn enough money to follow my true passions, and leave behind the doldrums of being a palace doctor.

But that was before all of this, and before Omar had confessed his feelings to me. Before we had finally made love and spent the night wrapped in each other’s arms, sharing dreams and fears and hopes for the future. Was I going to leave all of that behind still? Would I be able to do it, even if I wanted to? Would I be able to look into the face of my beautiful son, and the eyes of his father that radiated so much love for me, and turn and walk away?

Or would I be here forever, in this decadent but sedate life, away from the people who needed my help and the career I had dedicated my entire life to building?

There were no easy answers to these questions, and they began to haunt me, gnawing at my gut. Omar must have sensed the change in me, because he became even more doting and attentive than usual, turning down a phone call from one of his senior staff members in order to stay with me and make sure I had what I needed. When dinner arrived, he made me stay in bed and did all the serving and cleaning up.

After dinner, when he finally asked me what was wrong, I only told him that the shock of everything was settling, and the reality that a baby was growing inside me was beginning to take hold. “I think I’m just tired,” I said—not entirely untruthful.

Omar seemed to understand that, and readily accepted that the pregnancy was already doing things to my mood and body. “What do you need, my love? Ask for anything and I will bring it to you.”

“The only thing I think I want right now is some chocolate ice cream,” I giggled at him, running my hand through his hair.

He smiled at me. “Then you shall have it. I’ll call the kitchen.”

“With sprinkles!” I called after him as he moved across the enormous bedroom to the telephone.

As Omar made the call, I fretted over whether to burden him with my worries about staying or going. Everything had seemed so simple before, when I was providing a service to him and saying my goodbyes.

But now everything was different, and I didn’t know what I was going to do.

I couldn’t tell him, not now. The joy on his face at knowing he was finally going to be a father was too much. I couldn’t strip that joy away from him so quickly; I couldn’t break up the dream he clearly had of us being one big, happy royal family.

I didn’t know what I was going to do when the baby arrived. I only prayed the coming weeks and months would light a path for me that made some sort of sense.

ELEVEN

Four Months Later

Omar squeezed my hand and pulled it into his lap, sitting next to me on the plush limo seat. I looked over at his loving face and smiled.

“You look absolutely stunning, my love,” he told me, pulling my hand to his lips and giving it a soft kiss.

“I can’t say I feel very stunning,” I replied, only half-joking. Already, our son was proving to be a healthy, growing boy. My belly felt like it was getting bigger and bigger every day, and he was quite an active little thing, doing summersaults and kicking his tiny little feet into my ribs every chance he got. As I thought about him, he moved again, and I instinctively put a hand on my belly.

Omar repeated the gesture and grinned, his whole face lighting up when he felt the baby move. Even though he’d felt it dozens of times already, it still never failed to amaze him. “You are stunning, Carrie. Pregnancy is kind to you; your skin is absolutely glowing. You look like a goddess.”

I blushed and planted a kiss on his lips. “You’re too sweet to me.”

“Nonsense.”

From the other limo seat, Rafiq chuckled to himself, making both Omar and I look over with curious surprise.

“What’s so funny, Rafiq?” Omar asked lightly.

“Nothing, sir,” he answered quickly, looking suddenly shameful and self-conscious.

“Come now, out with it.”

Rafiq looked at me with a warm grin. “It is only that I remember teasing Dr. Green months ago, in this very car, saying that she needed to tell you about her feelings, and she promised me there was none to speak of. And now, here we are.” He followed up in a speedy voice. “I do not mean to speak out of place.”

I squished up my nose and gave Rafiq a playful little glare. “Yes, yes, you were right, Rafiq. Happy now?”

He chuckled again and nodded before turning away from the conversation.

“Well, his job is to be observant,” shrugged Omar with a laugh.

“Maybe he’s observed enough to tell me how your family will react to the news tonight,” I said, biting my lip with worry. “I’m still very unsure about this. I think you should tell them without me around. I don’t think they’re going to react well.”

“But why? You are the mother of my child and I love you.”

“I love you, too. But your mother scares me.”

Omar laughed loud and long at that, kissing me warmly when he’d calmed a little. “She is not as scary as she seems—that’s only her queenly demeanor coming out to take over when she needs it to do so. My mother grew up in a very different royal family; she was taught a different way of showing her power.”

“And do you think she might be keen to show it to silly American girls who fall in love with her son?”

“Not at all. You have nothing to worry about, my love. I’m going to be there right by your side through this whole dinner, and the baby will be here sooner than we think. Once he is born, neither my mother nor Sajid’s opinions—whatever they may be—will matter at all. I will be king, and they will have no choice but to accept that I love you. And I trust completely that they will come to love you, too.”

Omar meant his words to be comforting, but somehow they weren’t. There was nothing in my upbringing or experiences—even the most adventurous ones—to

prepare me for this: a dinner with a royal family, during which we would announce that I was pregnant with the heir to the kingdom.

Not only that, but we would also be announcing our own deep love for each other, and revealing that this wasn't simply a business arrangement. Tonight would be a night of history, and turning points, and as sure as Omar seemed to be about what would happen, I knew there was no telling

how his family was going to react to the news. In my darkest anxiety dreams, I had imagined them disowning Omar, or trying to shame him, or hurt him for his decision to love me and have me carry his child. I worried about what would happen to his legacy.

But Omar wasn't worried. He was still overjoyed at the thought of becoming a father to our son. He was already doting on him by doting on me, and never let me lift a finger around the palace. He had hired me my own assistant, a young woman named Zaynab who was helpful and intelligent and kept me company when Omar had to attend to his duties. Even though she was younger than me by almost a decade, we had become fast friends and had lots of fun going shopping or having lunch in the gardens. My fear of boredom meant I couldn't just sit around in bed, waiting for the baby to arrive and doing nothing until he did. Zaynab seemed to understand that, and helped me find safe activities to keep my mind occupied and my body healthy.

Every day, Omar came in with new gifts for me and the baby. He had already rearranged his enormous suite to include a grand nursery in one corner, complete with every bit of furniture we would need for the baby. I spent hours in the rocking chair, resting my back and feet that ached anew every day, reading stories to my unborn son, hoping he could hear.

Omar had come to every single check-up with me, beaming with joy when the doctors announced all was well and the baby was perfectly healthy. He promised

them all raises and the finest casks of wine and whiskey the kingdom could offer, and they would just laugh at him and tell him they were just doing their job.

Watching Omar's happiness at his impending fatherhood made me happier than I ever thought I could be. I could only imagine how much better it would get when our son finally arrived—even if a kingdom's-worth of anxiety came along with it. On top of everything, I was simply terrified of giving birth. Even as a doctor, I knew the experience was going to be joyous and scary, painful and incredible.

I couldn't imagine doing this alone; I couldn't imagine doing it without Omar by my side.

We arrived right on time at the restaurant Omar had reserved for dinner with his family. The place had been fully bought out for the night so that the royal family could dine undisturbed, and a cadre of security guards was already surrounding the building, creating a wall of black suits to allow us clear passage to the front doors. A few paparazzi were here, anyway, trying to snap photos and get any gossip they could.

Omar kept a protective arm around me as we left the limo for the restaurant.

"Aren't you worried about our pictures appearing in the gossip rags?" I asked him, pressing my lips against his ears.

"It won't matter after tonight," he replied. "Once my family knows, there will be no reason to keep our relationship a secret. No one will be able to do anything about it, no matter how much they dislike it. Let them gossip, I don't care. I only care about our family."

I smiled up at him and let him lead me delicately inside. The restaurant's maître-d' was waiting eagerly for our arrival. He didn't seem to think my presence was odd or

unusual—either that, or he was very good at his job of not looking like he cared about his guests’ business.

“Your Highness! Good evening, good evening.” He bowed before us. “Welcome, both of you. Your brother and his family have already been seated. We’ve received word that your mother is on her way, but that she’s running a bit late. Appetizers have been served to the table.”

“Wonderful,” said Omar. “Can you please find some pomegranate juice and bring it to the table, chilled? My love has grown quite fond of it lately.” He gave me a smile and squeezed my hand.

“Certainly, sir, right away. Let me take you to your seats.”

He led us through the romantically-lit restaurant. All the other tables had their place settings out, waiting perfectly for dinner guests that would not arrive tonight. The table Omar had reserved was near the back, far away from the prying eyes of the street crowds or paparazzi, where the family could talk together in private.

As we approached, Sajid stood from the table, as did his beautiful wife and daughters. I could see the dawning shock on his face as he realized Omar was leading me by the hand—not something one would do with an employee. Sajid frowned at us, as if he were trying to figure out what was going on, as we approached the table and Omar pulled my seat out for me.

“Brother,” said Omar. “I’m sure you remember Dr. Green?”

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“Of course,” said Sajid curiously, reaching out to take my hand for a polite kiss. “How are you, Doctor?”

“I’m well, thank you,” I replied with a stiff smile.

Omar greeted his nieces and sister-in-law with kisses and hugs, complimenting each of them as he did. The girls giggled at him, and I smiled; I loved seeing how wonderful he already was with children. Even Sajid’s wife turned a little pink in the cheeks when Omar complemented how beautiful she looked in her glittering gold and white dress.

“Mother should be here soon,” Sajid said. “And then we can get on with this big news.”

“Yes, it is big,” agreed Omar. He thanked the waiter who had interrupted to serve me the pomegranate juice. I’d been craving it something fierce ever since the second month of my pregnancy—Omar told me it was just the legacy of my son’s Middle-Eastern blood coming forward, craving the fruit his ancestors had loved for centuries. I loved the idea.

It wasn’t long before Mirah arrived, looking as gorgeous as ever with her long black swept up on top of her head. She beamed at her sons as she walked around the table to greet everyone. Though she was used to the sight of me around the palace, there was some surprise on her face as she saw me standing at Omar’s side.

“Apologies for my tardiness,” said Mirah as Omar helped her take her seat. “There was some nonsense business at the palace to attend to; some problems with the

caterer for next month's fundraiser."

"Don't worry, Mother, we haven't been waiting long," assured Sajid.

"And I hope I haven't missed the big announcement?" Mirah asked.

"Of course not," smiled Omar, pouring her a glass of wine. "But let us have some dinner first. There's no need to rush into official business."

As she picked at the appetizers already laid out on the table, Mirah seemed to agree. But Sajid only snickered at his older brother in a way that made me angry and want to jump in and defend Omar. I stayed quiet.

"Must this all be so dramatic?" mocked Sajid. "Or is it that you want us to have food in our tummies because you the news you need to share is less than pleasant?"

"Quite the opposite. I only thought it would be more civilized of us to enjoy each other's company instead of meeting simply to exchange news," retorted Omar. "We are still a family, are we not?"

For whatever reason, that line made Sajid shut up, and he accepted Omar's suggestion of waiting until after the meal had been served. The cook had prepared an amazing feast of roasted pheasant spiced with flavorsome peppers, and garnished with an array of roasted veggies and potatoes.

The baby started to kick much more after the meal, but I said nothing to Omar. I knew what he would say. My son is already remembering the spices and flavors of his kingdom.

The family made small talk during dinner, most of which I was left out of simply by virtue of my position. They discussed diplomats I had never heard of and big royal

plans that were far above my pay grade. Both Alima, Sajid's wife, and I were silent during most of the meal. I stole glances at her, and noticed she looked a little bit paler than I remembered. I thought perhaps she must be feeling ill, but had said nothing, not wanting to inconvenience anyone. I didn't know her very well, so couldn't be sure—we had only spoken a few times over the last six months, and it was always little more than small talk and pleasantries.

Once dinner had been cleared away and dessert had been served—a chocolate mousse Omar had arranged just for me, knowing how bad my chocolate cravings had gotten—Omar cleared his throat, clearly deciding

it was time to discuss the big news.

“My family, thank you for coming here tonight,” he began. Under the table, he grasped my hand and pulled it into his lap. “I know the last year has been very hard on us. We have carried a great heaviness in our hearts at the loss of father, and at the issues of succession we have to face.”

I expected Sajid to have a snotty retort to this, but he was silent, staring at his brother intently.

“But I have some joyous news that I hope will begin to pull us out of the darkness we have had to endure.” He looked to me with a gentle, loving smile and brought our joined hands up on the table for all to see. “It appears I have finally fallen in love—with the ravishing woman sitting next to me, Dr. Carrie Green.”

Mirah gasped audibly, while Sajid and Alima looked up in shocked surprise, eyes wide. I felt myself shrinking under their gazes, but Omar only squeezed my hand and made me feel brave again. Being by his side was all that mattered, and I held onto that thought alone.

“Is that so?” said Sajid curiously. “Of all the women in all the kingdoms of all the world, you choose your own doctor? What’s come over you, Omar?”

“Love chooses us,” replied Omar. “I cannot control who I love any more than you can, brother. And Carrie is the woman I love.” He grinned at me happily. “And more than that, she is going to be the mother of my child.”

“What?” gasped Mirah, leaning forward in her seat. “What are you saying, my son?”

“I’m saying you are once again going to be the most beautiful grandmother in all of Al-Thakri, because Carrie is pregnant with my child. And we’ve just today had an appointment with the doctors which confirmed that our child is a son. The next heir of Al-Thakri will be born in only a few short months.”

Mirah squealed, overjoyed in a way that I didn’t expect in my wildest dreams. Her big brown eyes filled with tears, and she stood up quickly from her chair to come around the table towards me. I could barely get to my feet fast enough before she was embracing me, throwing her arms tightly around my shoulders.

“This is glorious news!” cried Mirah. “Finally, an heir to continue on the line and put this succession business to rest. I have grown so weary of ruling, and wearier still watching this battle tear my sons apart. And what a beautiful mother my grandson will have!” She pulled away to search my face, smiling so widely that her whole face lit up. “I’m so happy to welcome you to the family, Dr. Green.”

“Please, I think you can call me Carrie at this point,” I replied with a grin.

“Of course—Carrie. You’ve been a trusted part of my son’s entourage and protected his life, and now you will be the ward of my grandson’s life. I’m so thrilled my eldest son has finally found love.” She put her hands on either side of my face as she spoke, and then gave me a gentle kiss on my forehead.

Tears welled in my eyes, despite my best efforts to keep them at bay. I hugged Mirah back and relished in the warmth of a mother's love—something I had been so far away from since leaving the States to pursue a life of adventure.

“Thank you, Your Highness. I'm so happy to be here.”

“And you had best get used to calling me ‘Mother,’” laughed Mirah. “May I?” She gestured gently towards my just-protruding belly with her hand.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “Your grandson is already full of fire and life. He barely wants to sleep. He would rather run around my belly all day, playing soccer with my organs.”

Mirah laughed uproariously as she put her palm on my belly. Almost immediately, my son responded with a series of kicks, and Mirah squealed in delight. “Omar was exactly the same way,” she said. “He was ready to be born, ready to face the world and all the adventure it had to offer. He hated being cooped up, even in the womb.”

“Well this is certainly his son,” I nodded and laughed. “This kid cannot wait to get out.”

“I'm so happy for you, my dear.” She turned to Omar and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, kissing his cheeks. “And for you, my precious son. You've waited so long for happiness to find you. It has been difficult as a mother to watch.”

Omar seemed emotional at hearing her words, and patted her arms, giving her hands a kiss. “I'm very happy, too, Mother. It has been a long time coming. I'm anxious to be the best father I can be to my son.”

“Have you decided on a name yet?”

“Not yet,” I told her. “But we have a short list we’ve been thinking about.”

Across the table, Sajid finally couldn’t take any more. He threw his napkin down on the table and everyone turned to look at his angry, sullen face.

“This is an outrage,” he said firmly. “You think this is cause for happiness, Mother? You think this is what will put the succession issue to rest? That your oldest son, our supposed king, is going to have an heir from a western woman?”

Next to him, Alima gasped and put a gentle hand on his arm, but Sajid ignored it.

Omar’s expression darkened noticeably. “Sajid, must you be so selfish as to interrupt every happy moment this family has? First, you had to pull a tantrum at mother’s birthday gala, and now this? Is it so much to ask that you simply be happy for me, or do you hate me so much that this is an impossible request?”

“I don’t hate you, Omar. But I love Al-Thakri more than you do. I love this country as much, if not more, than father ever did.”

Mirah hissed. “Watch your tongue, my son. How dare you speak ill of your father? This country was his world.”

Sajid continued, “No monarch of this country has ever been born of a foreign woman. It’s unheard of, and an outrage. You should have found yourself a woman of Al-Thakri, or at the very least a woman with some sort of civilized upbringing.”

I flushed red, embarrassed, with no response to give Sajid. I could feel my son becoming upset by his words, and he began to kick and twirl in earnest, making me grasp my belly to try and calm him down.

Omar rose from his chair, somehow looking even taller than he was, his broad

shoulders squared and his hands clenched into fists. “Brother, I will not have you insult Carrie. She is a talented, accomplished woman with a beautiful heart and a gentle soul. She has spent her life training to help people as a doctor, and instead of working in a cushy American hospital, she chose to travel the world and help people who were suffering in much more desperate circumstances. She has sacrificed everything in order to make the world a better place. How dare you sit there and insult her when you’ve barely been outside the country’s borders to see how the rest of the world is fairing. You sit in your palace and move your chess pieces trying to ensure more power for yourself, and then dare to look down your nose at someone who has saved lives?”

Sajid seemed to blush, his brother’s words hitting home in some way I hadn’t expected. Omar’s passionate defense of me made my heart swell and my eyes water. The pregnancy hormones only compounded things, and tears began to fall down my cheeks before I could stop them.

“This is enough, Sajid,” said the Queen. “It’s time for you to grow up and accept that things do not always go the way you think they should go. I know you are still raw about your place in the line of succession, but this has been the way of the monarchy for millennia, and you have to accept it or your anger will kill you while you are still young. Is that what you want? To leave your daughters fatherless, your wife without her husband’s embrace while she raises your girls? Is it so important to you to beat your brother? Why not join him—work with him to make this country you claim to love a better place, instead of wasting all your energy bashing your head against a wall?”

Before Sajid could form any sort of response to his mother’s crushing words, Alima suddenly stood up from her chair looking dazed and afraid. Sajid turned from his mother suddenly to ask what she was doing, but he could barely get out a full question; no sooner had she stood up then she began to wobble on her feet, grasping for the back of her chair. It only lasted a few seconds, but we all watched in ho

rror as she fainted before our eyes, slipping to the floor with a loud thunk.

“Alima!” cried Sajid, leaping out of his chair. The couple’s daughters screamed out in fright, and the youngest, barely older than six, began to cry in fear.

Mirah rushed to comfort her granddaughters while Omar and I moved swiftly around the table to attend to Alima. Omar barked at the staff to bring water and a cold compress, and they hurried to fulfill his orders.

I kneeled next to Sajid on the floor and quickly examined Alima. She was breathing steadily, still fluttering on the edges of unconsciousness.

“Rafiq, my bag,” I ordered. Quickly he delivered it, his strong face tainted with worry at the scene before him.

I dug inside my doctor’s bag and instantly found my stethoscope. I placed it on Alima’s heart and listened to its quick, steady beating. It was slowing every second, which was a good sign, but I could hear something else in the echo of the stethoscope that made my own heart flutter a bit.

Curiously, I moved the chestpiece down to her belly and was shocked at what I heard within: another, separate heartbeat.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“What is it?” cried Mirah, her granddaughters huddled around her like frightened baby ducklings.

I looked up at Sajid. “Alima is pregnant.”

The look on Sajid’s face told me that Alima hadn’t yet told him the news. He stared at me in shock, as if he were waiting for me to say “just kidding!” But when it didn’t come, he placed his ear on his wife’s stomach to listen for himself. I handed him the ears of the stethoscope so he could get a proper listen, and his eyes filled up with tears at the sound of his child’s heartbeat deep within his wife’s womb.

“By God, it’s true,” he whispered.

I looked up at Omar, who was hovering over me with worry all over his face.

“That’s why her blood pressure dropped,” I said to Sajid. “She needs to go home and get some rest, and be seen by her OB/GYN.”

“But why did she collapse?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but her vitals are steady. I think she’s probably just tired, stressed and overheated. Some pregnancies are difficult.” I didn’t add how grateful I was in that moment that mine had not been so far.

As I spoke, Alima’s eyes were fluttering open, consciousness returning to her like a slow awakening from a dream. She moaned under her breath, mumbling words that didn’t make sense.

I shushed her quietly and told her to rest, not to try and move. “Your family is here,” I told her in a soft, even voice. “Just relax and breathe deeply. Everything is fine.”

“Call an ambulance,” said Omar to the wait staff.

To his own bodyguards, Sajid said, “Get my palace doctors ready to see her

immediately. I want the same OB/GYNs that delivered my daughters and I want them waiting for us by the time we arrive.” Sajid then looked at me and humbly asked, “Is she all right, Carrie? Is our child okay?”

“She’ll be fine, she just fainted,” I told him, putting my hand on his. “I can’t tell anything about the baby from this, but I’m sure the child is fine, too. We just need to get her back home so she can rest.”

By the time Alima came to, the ambulance had arrived and carefully helped load her into the back. The EMTs confirmed what I suspected: that there were no signs of anything serious happening to Alima, only exhaustion and strain on her delicate body as it worked to grow a child in the blistering desert heat. Mirah insisted that Sajid ride with his wife, while she would take the girls in her limo to meet them back at Sajid’s palace.

Before he stepped into the back of the ambulance, Omar stopped his brother with a silent gaze and put a strong hand on his shoulder. Something quiet passed between them for just a moment, before Sajid disappeared into the back of the white truck.

Omar and I stood off to the side of the movement. He held me close to him, rubbing my back lovingly.

“All the dinners you take me to are so interesting,” I joked, breathlessly.

Omar let out a single chuckle and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, kissing the top of my head. “I’m glad Alima is going to be all right. I don’t know what my family would do if they lost another member.”

“I know.”

“It all happened so fast.”

“It usually does,” I said.

“I’m glad you were here,” he said, pulling me closer into his side.

“I didn’t do much,” I insisted.

“You are a goddess.”

For a moment we stood in silence, watching the reflection of the setting sun in the windows of the city high-rises.

“Well,” I said to him with a sigh. “I suppose it’s a race, now.”

“A race?” he said.

“According to your mother’s decree, if Alima is pregnant with a boy, whichever of our babies is born first will declare the heir of Al-Thakri,” I said with some sadness in my voice. “I’m sorry, my love. I thought we had guaranteed your rule.”

Omar gave me sweet half-smile, and put his lips on mine gently. “Whatever happens, Carrie, you have already given me the world.”

TWELVE

Four Months Later

I groaned as Omar's strong hands rubbed my tired, aching back muscles as we lay together in bed. The plush penthouse had once been only his, but now it was ours, all my belongings moved in and mingled with his, along with the belongings of our son, who was due to arrive any day.

And I couldn't have been more grateful for it. Most of my anxiety about giving birth had been replaced by eager desperation to have my beautiful but active son out of my body. Over the last few months, my belly had grown so enormous that feeling attractive was a laughable pipe dream, and now even getting to the pool with Zaynab had become a task of the highest difficulty. I could barely walk under all the weight, but the swimming did wonders for relieving my joint pain, so it was a catch-22 that I was still determined to solve.

"How are you feeling, my love?" asked Omar softly. "Can I get you the heating pad?"

"That would be glorious," I responded with another moan. "I feel like my back hasn't stopped hurting in six months."

"Indeed, my son is making you work for his arrival." Omar gave a soft little laugh and leaned over to kiss my cheek.

He left bed just long enough to grab the heating pad before returning to place it on

my lower back muscles. The soothing heat helped instantly, and I could feel myself relaxing just a little bit more.

“I hate to see you in such pain,” Omar said. “Will you be able to get to sleep?”

“I’m sure I will,” I said. “Eventually. As long as I don’t break the bed when I roll over.”

Omar laughed, leaning over to plant a kiss on my nose. “You are a beautiful treasure, Carrie. I know you don’t feel like yourself right now, but I assure you, you’ve never been more attractive to me.”

“Well, no offense, but I hope we get back to the less-attractive version of me very, very soon,” I replied with a laugh, rubbing my belly. “This son of yours has wanted to get out from the earliest days of this pregnancy and I think we will both be much happier when he does.”

The pregnancy hadn’t been complicated, and I knew I was lucky to have had such a comparatively easy time. After all, Alima had been put on bed rest only a few short weeks after she fainted at the family dinner. Her doctors were concerned about her low blood pressure and demanded she stay as restful and quiet as possible. I couldn’t imagine having spent the last four months cooped up in bed; it was bad enough that I barely got out of the palace anymore.

From the looks of my belly, I was going to give birth to an enormous baby, and even though it was going to be the most beautiful day of my life, I was also more afraid than I had ever been of anything.

Omar listened patiently to all my fears. He wasn’t afraid, not even a little. He was overjoyed with every day that got closer to the day his son arrived. He kissed my tummy gently and leaned his head against it to listen to the sleepy movement of the

baby in my womb.

I ran my fingers through his hair and let out a deep sigh, momentarily content.

I couldn't believe how happy it made me just to lay here in bed with the man I loved while he worshiped me for carrying his child. It was its own kind of adventure—a much more blissful kind than those I had been on before.

But like all adventures, it had to come to an end, or at least a fork in the road.

As he worked to massage the pain out of my muscles, I could sense Omar growing nervous, clearing his throat. When I saw him put his hand in his curly hair, I knew he had something on his mind.

“What’s bothering you?” I asked him. “Is something going on at the office?”

Omar looked surprised for just a moment, and then he gave me a small smile. “Your intuition is only getting stronger every day; you know that? Being a mother is good for you.”

“And I think you try and use that silver tongue of yours to change the subject when you don’t want to talk,” I retorted playfully. “Tell me, love, please?”

Omar sighed. “I just worry this is not the best time to bring up my concerns, that’s all. The last thing I want to do is cause you or the baby undue stress.”

“When would be the best time, then? After the baby is born and I’m exhausted from being up all night breastfeeding and crazy with hormones?” I laughed. “Now is the only time.”

Omar hesitated a few moments, his gaze running over my face as I turned to look at

him. Finally, he relented. “There is something I want to ask you... about our future, Carrie. And we are running out of time to discuss it.”

Carefully, and with great ache, I rolled over to face him properly. I had known deep down that this conversation was coming eventually, but some foolish part of me had been hoping we could somehow bypass it. I was never great at planning my future, and just as bad at talking about my emotions. Of course, the future had been on my mind every single day since Omar had asked me to carry his child. With every step we had taken beyond that, the questions had only become more and more urgent.

I had always liked my life with an escape hatch so that I never felt trapped. I didn’t want to grow old and regret tying myself right back into the Leave-It-to-Beaver family I had grown up in. Sure, I wanted that at some point, perhaps, but wasn’t that what older age was for? What good was my youth if I spent it simply re-creating the life I had already experienced as a child? I wanted to see the world. I wanted to feel the warmth of the sun on every ocean’s shore, to experience how different it felt on my skin.

But Omar was right. Time was running out for me to face that fork in the road. My son—our son—would be arriving any day, and there would be no turning back after that.

“My love,” whispered Omar as he nuzzled against my face. “I need to know what you intend to do after the baby has arrived. I know his creation began as a much more practical arrangement, but I think he—and we—have grown beyond that.” He curled his fingers in mine and pulled my body against him.

“Yes, we have,” I agreed, squeezing his hand.

“Our son was born of love, not through a procedure in a medical lab,” said Omar. “And I am truly grateful that, whatever happens next, I can tell him that with utmost

honesty. He will know he was the product of love.”

“Yes, he is,” I said, smiling. I ran a hand down the side of Omar’s smooth, handsome face. “I do love you, Omar.”

“And I love you.” He kissed my hand. “I think you know what I would ask of you. I want to know if you intend on following through with our original arrangement, or if you could be persuaded to stay here in Al-Thakri with me, and our son.”

Hearing the decision laid out so starkly only made my anxiety and fear loom bigger. I took a deep breath and let it out, trying to suppress the groan that came with it. I didn’t want to hurt Omar’s feelings. He was only doing what was right, confirming with me how I felt so that we could think about the future together, like mature adults. But in that moment, I didn’t want to face reality.

I didn’t want to face it because I still didn’t know what I was going to do. Shameful or not, I was still torn between the old, adventuring me, and the new Carrie who was emerging just as surely as her son was: one day at a time. Neither of them had pulled ahead of the other in this internal civil war, and I didn’t want to break Omar’s heart by telling him that. Not when he was in such joyous spirits about our son.

Omar waited, searching my face for any hint of what was in my head. Before I could form any sort of reasonable answer to give him, a sharp pain erupted in my belly, and I cried out. My hands flew to my stomach.

“Oh my God,” I whispered breathlessly.

Omar’s expression twisted in worry as he sat bolt upright. “What is it? Are you all right?”

I grasped my belly and waited, trying to breathe, when the pain came again, stronger

and deeper this time. “Oh God. Omar... the baby is coming. He’s coming right now!”

He blinked twice at me, as if I’d spoken in a foreign language.

“Omar, I said the baby is coming!” I repeated with a stressed laugh.

“Now’s not the time to gape at me like a fish!”

Reality hit him all at once. His eyes lit up and his face flushed with the rush of adrenaline. “The baby! My son is coming!”

He leaped from the bed and ran for the hallway to call in Rafiq, who was posted outside in his usual position. Omar ordered his faithful bodyguard to gather up the overnight bags we had packed weeks ago.

“Get them down to the garage and load them in the Rolls Royce,” he said to Rafiq, who seemed more than a little disoriented at the sudden interruption. “We have no time to arrange the royal transport. We’ll take her ourselves.”

Rafiq turned a little pale. “Sir?”

“Go, go!” Omar waved his hands toward the door. “We’ll be right behind you!”

Rafiq didn’t argue. He gave me a tight-lipped, nervous smile before turning on his heel and disappearing out the door with my leather bag full of necessities. The heels of his dress shoes echoed in the hallway, pounding on the marble floor as he ran for the garage.

The contractions were still at an early stage, but already the pain was beginning to be too much to bear. Suddenly, all the toughness I used to feel when dragging patients around in desert dust, protecting them from nearby artillery shells, seemed to

evaporate.

“Omar, we have to hurry. Do you have the wheelchair? I don’t think I can—”
Another agonizing wave of pain came over me and stole my words as I moaned out.

“Yes, my love, hold on!” Omar fetched the wheelchair we had procured from the medical ward and helped me move delicately into it from the bed. He kissed my forehead and kneeled down in front of me. “Do you need anything else before we go?”

“Everything should be in the bag,” I replied in a tense voice, bending over as much as I could to try and absorb another contraction. “Make sure to grab my phone from the nightstand. My mother will murder me if she’s not the first to get a picture.”

“Yes, of course. Pull the brakes up, let’s get you to the hospital.”

THIRTEEN

We had arranged for a private ward at the local hospital for the baby's birth, too concerned about complications to have the labor at the palace. Even though we trusted our doctors implicitly, the palace simply didn't have the equipment on-hand to take care of any eventuality. All the scans and tests of our son had been positive, but we weren't going to take a single chance. We wanted to be where all the help was if anything happened to go wrong.

Omar wheeled me swiftly but carefully down the palace halls. The guards who were on duty stared in wonder as the Sheikh and future king of Al-Thakri rushed by them, pushing his pregnant lover who was clearly in dire pain. I sensed that they wanted to try and help, but had no idea what to do besides open doors and make sure the hallways were clear. It was help enough.

Rafiq had the car waiting, engine running, in the garage by the time we got out of the elevator. Together, he and Omar lifted me into the backseat like I weighed nothing—a welcome sensation. Omar climbed in the back with me, leaving the wheelchair for one of the guards to attend to.

“Step on it, Rafiq, but by God, make sure you drive safely,” said Omar. “The very future of your country is counting on it.”

The bodyguard nodded, stone-faced, and obeyed. He weaved expertly through the bustling streets of the city, almost as if he had taken some sort of stunt driving course in another job before this. At one point we hit traffic just as the contractions began again, and I thought for sure I was going to end up giving birth in the back of a

leather-clad Rolls Royce. My mother in Ohio would never believe it even if I did send her pictures.

We finally arrived at the memorial hospital Omar's grandfather had built and named after Omar's grandmother—Adilah Memorial Hospital. It was a beautiful building, and when Omar had told me its origins, I'd known there was no way we could pick anywhere else to have our son. Maybe it was the hormones, but the thought of giving birth to Omar's heir in the hospital his grandfather built brought me to tears.

Rafiq pulled around to the emergency doors to allow us to exit before he parked the car. As the hospital staff helped Omar load me into another wheelchair, Rafiq suddenly pointed and asked, "Your Highness, that car there has royal plates. Is it your brother's?"

Omar and I leaned to look around to where Rafiq was pointing. Indeed, a Jaguar bearing the plates of the royal family was parked haphazardly near the emergency exit. Recognition fell over Omar's face.

"It is," he confirmed. "That's Sajid's car."

I looked up at him from the wheelchair. "I bet Alima's in labor, too. That has to be it."

Omar laughed breathlessly and shook his head. "I'm starting to think this is the work of my father from the afterlife, teasing us one last time. He always did love to point out to my brother and I how powerless we were to fate."

"Well, let's hope you were his favorite," I joked, even as I winced in pain. "Because this race to the throne is about to go down to the wire."

Quickly, I was whisked away to the private ward that Omar had arranged for the birth

of his son. Somewhere, we suspected, Sajid had set up exactly the same facilities for Alima, but we had no time to go search him out and hospital staff was strictly forbidden from sharing their patients' details without permission.

In my suite, my doctors from the palace were all there, waiting to help me through the birthing process, assisted by the best staff the hospital had to offer. The room was filled with all manner of medical equipment, and even though I recognized most of it, it still made me nervous to see it all—as if they were anticipating a problem.

As soon as I was laid back and comfortable in the hospital bed, Dr. Issa put a gentle hand on my shoulder, as if sensing my worry. “Don’t worry, Dr. Green. This is all just precaution—and part of the perks of having a private ward.”

“Perks?” I said through my heavy breathing.

“Whatever might go wrong, we have something in this room that can deal with it. There are only a handful of hospitals in the world that can say that tonight,” she assured me. “Nothing is going to go wrong. You are about to have a beautiful, perfect son.”

Things calmed down for a little bit once I was set up in bed, hooked up to IVs and monitoring equipment, and surrounded by a room full of medical experts. The doctors got Omar outfitted in sterile scrubs and made him wash his hands like a surgeon, and I tried to memorize the moment, because I knew it would be a long time before the King of Al-Thakri obeyed someone as intently as he did the doctors. He wasn’t a king then—he was just a man about to become a father, overwhelmed with the emotion and worry of it all. His whole world was in this room.

Once he was cleaned up, Omar came back by my side and stood, holding my hand and caressing my hair to comfort me. When contractions hit, he bent his head down against mine as if he could absorb my pain, holding me tight. After a few sets had

passed, one of the nurses exposed my enormous belly to the air and slathered on some cool, lubricating gel in order to perform an ultrasound.

“Let’s do a quick check on this little guy and make sure everything looks okay before your contractions get closer together,” she said with a bright smile.

All three of us watched the screen intently, listening to the mechanical waves and the loud, beautiful sound of a fetal heartbeat.

“Huh? But that’s...” Omar was first to notice the unusual sound.

But the nurse didn’t seem to hear him. “Everything looks good, Your Highness! Your boys are ready to come into the world.”

Omar and I looked at each other with loving smiles, but as the nurse’s words dawned on us, those smiles faded into shocked, open mouths.

“Excuse me—my boys?” I demanded. “Plural?!”

The nurse turned pale. “Boys, yes... Your twin boys.” She pointed to the image on the ultrasound and raised an eyebrow as if we were playing some kind of joke on her.

“Twins?!” I screeched. “I’m having twins?”

Dr. Issa rushed over to the bedside at the sound of the commotion, and immediately her jaw dropped at the sight of the ultrasound. “Heavens, how did our scans miss this?” she gasped.

“Twins...” muttered Omar.

“Well that explains why I feel like a beached whale,” I said, somewhat relieved. “I’ve

got two little guys hanging out in there.”

“I can’t believe this,” whispered Omar. “Carrie, we’re having twins?”

“Well, we were having trouble deciding between the first two names on the list. I guess now we can use them both.”

Omar laughed. “What a beautiful twist of fate.”

“Beautiful? I’m the one who has to give birth twice today!” I tried to laugh about it, but inside, I was terrified.

“And I’ll be here with you the whole way through,” he promised, kissing the top of my head. “Look at how amazing you are. I ask you to give me an heir, and you bring me two. You truly are a goddess. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Omar,” I replied.

My smile quickly faded as another wave of contractions overcame my body—much, much worse than the last had been. The sensation was unlike anything I could imagine, crushing my insides and blinding me to almost everything in the room. I felt every inch of my enormous body and nothing else.

For hours, with Omar staying diligently by my side the whole time, I worked to deliver his heirs into the world. The doctors and nurses kept me as pain-free as possible, but there was nothing that was going to dull the pain of this most purely human act. Each set of contractions became closer together and more painful until finally, the babies were rotated and positioned and ready to be born.

Dr. Issa was positioned between my knees, her dark hair done up in a powder blue hair net, her face covered by a mask. Her eyes still smiled above it, assuring me

everything was fine, using her calming voice to guide me through the contractions.

Omar told me to squeeze his hands as hard as I could as I pushed. He didn't complain a single time, only kept his he

ad pressed against mine, whispering in my ear how much he loved me and how grateful he was for what I was giving him.

When our first son came crying into the world, we looked at each other and called him Roni. It was the name of Mirah's father, and his entrance meant that he first would be destined to rule in his father's stead someday.

Roni's brother, Zamir, came along a few minutes later. This name, I had chosen from a book I'd found in Omar's library, an old book of children's tales from Al-Thakri. The story was about a little boy who could talk to birds.

As soon as they emerged, my sons were whisked over to sterile bassinets to be cleaned off and examined for any possible problem. My breathing heavy, sweat still pouring off my skin, I clung desperately to Omar's hand as we waited. It was the longest wait of my life.

Moments later, two nurses with wet eyes and happy smiles brought our sons over to us, swaddled in pure white blankets. They handed one baby to each of us—Roni to Omar, and Zamir to me.

"They're perfect," one of the nurses said. "Perfectly healthy, happy boys."

I looked down into Zamir's beautiful, sleepy face, puffed up and red from his birth and from crying, and I started crying too. His skin was so soft underneath my fingertips, and already he was grasping to hold them in his tiny little hands. I looked up at Omar and saw that he was staring down at Roni in complete, total awe, as if he

were seeing the face of God.

“My beautiful sons...” he whispered. He turned to me, his big brown eyes filled with tears. “Thank you, Carrie. Truly, I can never repay you for what you’ve done for me.”

“For us,” I said immediately. “Omar, aren’t they gorgeous?”

“They are the most beautiful children ever to be born in this country,” he said. “My mother is going to be overjoyed.”

I gave a chuckle. “Especially when she finds out she got three new grandchildren today.”

Omar’s face lit up, remembering that we had seen Sajid’s car out front when we arrived. As I moved to begin nursing Zamir, who was already clamoring for his first meal, Omar went to the door and invited Rafiq to meet his older son. Even from the bed, I could hear the pride in Omar’s voice as he introduced his lifelong bodyguard to Roni. Rafiq stared down at the baby with a soft look on his face, and I swear I even caught a smile as Roni reached to grasp at his finger.

“Go and contact Sajid’s security staff,” Omar asked quietly. “Find out where he and Alima are in the hospital and let him know we’re here and would love to see them if they’re ready for visitors.”

A few minutes later, there was a soft knock at the door, and Sajid was standing there looking happier than I ever thought would have thought possible for the moody prince. In his arms, Sajid held a wriggling bundle of baby boy who seemed less than pleased at being so far from his mother already.

From the doorway Sajid gave me a kind smile that surprised me. I watched happily as the two brothers introduced their newborn sons to each other, speaking quietly and

happily as they congratulated one another.

“His name is Jarah,” Sajid said. “My first son.”

“He is perfect, Sajid,” replied Omar. “Simply perfect.”

For a moment, it felt like all the succession bickering had never happened. They were just two brothers sharing a beautiful day together, the stresses of ruling Al-Thakri relegated to mere background noise.

FOURTEEN

Adventure was what I had always wanted in my life, and already I was learning that there might not be a bigger one than raising twins.

We left the hospital the day after I gave birth, after the doctors gave me and the boys a clean bill of health and were satisfied that both of them were eating well. As if they could sense their mother's exhaustion, they slept most of the day, apart from when they were eating or being bathed and changed. Both of the boys were napping peacefully in their carriers—Zamir in Omar's arms, Roni in my lap as I sat in the wheelchair—when we finally left the hospital. Rafiq, along with other members of the security team, had been on a mad scramble all night, gathering duplicates of all the supplies we had bought before we knew of Zamir's existence. Omar even had the palace staff prepare the nursery before we got home, so that everything would be perfect for the arrival of two babies.

We said a quick and loving goodbye to Sajid and Alima in their hospital room before we left. Alima's doctors had insisted she stay an extra day, since she had had such a complicated pregnancy, just to make sure everything looked good for her and little Jarah. She looked glowing and beautiful as she waved at us from her bed.

We had a little trouble getting the carriers buckled into the town car, and something told me these cars weren't exactly made for people transporting infants. Eventually we got them safe and secure, and Omar and I climbed in after. Rafiq took the Rolls Royce back to the palace, while Ahmed drove us in the royal car, its tinted windows keeping the babies shaded from the sun.

My body was still completely thrashed from giving birth, and so I allowed Omar to wheel me back to our bedroom using the palace wheelchair. It was a happy surprise to see a doubling of all the baby furniture in the corner of the room that we had designated the nursery. Rafiq had done an excellent job getting exactly the same crib, changing table, and other necessities for Zamir to be completely comfortable.

For the first time, Omar and I were alone with our sons. We lifted them each out of their carriers and held them close on our chests as they stubbornly slept, and we cried. For a while, we sat in the rocking chairs in the nursery, our fingers intertwined with each other's and a sleeping son on each of our shoulders.

I knew in that moment that I could never leave this behind. The thought of never feeling the beautiful, warm weight of my sons sleeping in my arms again was unbearable.

And yet the anxiety of what to do about my future didn't leave me. There was still so much about the palace life that I didn't want to deal with. I would never be my full, free self again. I would always have to travel with a bodyguard in order to keep me safe from people who would try to hurt Omar by hurting me. My sons would have to be protected, too, and wouldn't know a normal life like I had known. They would have their father to commiserate with on that point, but it still seemed unfair.

And what happened when someone else came up to challenge the throne? What happened when my sons came of age, and Zamir decided that he, like Sajid, was upset at his brother simply for being born first? Roni would be king once Omar was no longer on the throne, that was certain. But I never wanted either of my sons to feel inadequate.

I found that I suddenly understood Mirah so much better than I had before. Her pain became my pain. She had had to bury her husband, and watch her sons claw at each other's throats over the scraps he left behind. Was that what the future held for Zamir

and Roni? Was there anything I could do to stop it?

I would be a royal housewife and mother. Sure, there were plenty of perks to the job, but I had spent my whole life working to be a doctor, living through hunger, exhaustion and trauma just to chase my passion. Practicing medicine would be impossible if I were the queen. What time was not spent on raising the boys would have to be dedicated to the myriad royal duties that fell on the lady of the house, and while they weren't necessarily as important as Omar's, they were still important enough that I wouldn't be able to abstain from them. That went double because I was a foreign woman. The citizens of this country would rightly be upset if a foreign queen turned her nose up at their traditions while she was in power, and I would never want to do anything to upset Omar's homeland. He loved this country, and it was his dream to rule as it was mine to save lives.

The choice was impossible. Either I stayed to be with Omar and my sons, and raise my family in the palace, or I left to return, alone, to the trenches of medicine and resume the adventure I had been on before.

Every minute that I wasn't attending to my sons, the thoughts ate at me. I was grateful for the distraction of Omar's impending coronation, only a week after the boys' birth. As soon as news traveled that my twins had been born before Alima gave birth, it was clear to all that there was no more fight to be had for the throne. It belonged to Omar, as it rightly should have all along.

The citizens of Al-Thakri seemed grateful that the succession issue had finally been solved. Newspapers and TV reports showed throngs of celebrating people all over the land, excited both to have a new king to crown, and at having new royal babies to fuss over. Omar brought in a professional photographer to take portraits of the boys to share with the country. Omar and I insisted we remain out of them for the time being; neither of us wanted the focus to be on us. We wanted to celebrate Roni and Zamir with the rest of the country.

The coronation was set for Friday evening, and included a grand dinner beforehand. The palace would be hosting the crème-de-la-crème of Al-Thakrian society, as well as a slew of diplomats, rulers and dignitaries, who would come to pay their respects to the royal family in anticipation of long years working together to establish prosperity and peace. Al-Thakri was both prosperous and peaceful, and Omar's father had been a well-respected ruler. The world was excited and hopeful for his oldest son to take up the throne in his stead.

Dinner was to be a private affair, only for the royal family, before all the chaos and pageantry began. Omar asked the kitchen to make up a fine dinner and pulled his most aged and expensive wines from the palace cellar. He even brought in dessert chefs from France to assist his kitchen staff with creating something extraordinary.

While Omar sweated over the coronation preparations, I did my best to prepare our handsome, wiggly sons for their first public appearances. Mirah was all too happy to help me bathe them and get them dressed in tiny versions of the traditional, flowing white garb Omar would be wearing as he ascended to the throne. They looked like adorable little sheikhs themselves by the time we were done, drifting off to sleep in a double stroller.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for all this," I confessed to Mirah as I watched them sleep.

"What, motherhood?" she said with a gentle smile. "None of us are ready when it happens."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for the coronation, either. At least I can find solid advice from people on how to be a mother, but on how to be a makeshift queen? Even the internet was quiet on that one."

Mirah's laugh was light and lilting. She put a thin arm around my shoulder. "But women are naturally queens. You already have that inside of you; you only have to

release it.”

“Really?”

“Really,” she nodded. “How else do you think we are able to go through the pain and torment of birthing children—even two, in your case—and be upright and back to ourselves the next day? Out working, or leading, or taking care of others? We have power in us, Carrie. You don’t need to be worried. And even if you are, I’m here to help you.”

I smiled at her, but must have looked more tight-lipped and worried than I intended. Her eyes looked sad. “Omar has told me you miss your old life being a doctor out in the world.”

I sighed, feeling a mix of shame and relief that Mirah knew about my conundrum. Things never seemed as bad when they weren’t pent up inside like a secret. “I do miss it.” I glanced down at my sleeping sons. “But I would probably miss this even worse. I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you love my son?”

“Of co

urse,” I said. “And I love our sons.”

“Then things will work themselves out,” she assured me. “And you will be together, whatever happens.”

Tears stung my eyes. “What makes you so sure?”

“That is the point of love: to make sure we end up where we are supposed to be.”

FIFTEEN

Mirah's words rang in my head long after we parted to our separate rooms to prepare for the coronation. As my sons slept, Zaynab helped me get into the dress I had gotten for the occasion. I was in no place to go out shopping, so my wonderful assistant had gone into town for me and let me window shop via video chat on her smartphone. Together, we had found a flowing red dress that matched the ruby earrings Omar had given me on our first date. Zaynab had given the shop all my measurements, and the dress had been delivered a few days later in a beautiful box filled with tissue paper.

Zaynab had her own new dress on; floor-length, in a dark blue color with white lace accents that looked like a smattering of stars in the night sky. She would be helping me to take care of the boys during the coronation ceremony, and she was excited to be attending something so historical and beautiful.

Omar was incredibly busy, so busy that we couldn't meet up to spend time together before dinner. With Zaynab by my side, I wheeled the stroller down the palace hallway towards the dining hall. The sun was setting, and the light was gorgeous and golden, the garden alive with the sound of birds. We had to stop every few feet, because the security guards all wanted to get a chance to coo at the babies and get their first glimpse of the future leader of Al-Thakri. It was almost too adorable to bear, watching these huge hulking men crumble into smiles and baby talk.

We were only waiting a moment in the dining room before Omar arrived. He rushed over to me with a beaming smile and took me in his arms. He kissed me deeply, unconcerned with the small audience of security in the room. "How are you feeling, my love? How are the boys?"

“Tired but ready for this feast; your sons are about the same,” I joked, gesturing to their sleeping forms in the stroller. They were good eaters and it wouldn’t be long until one or both of them were up and wanting a meal from the pre-pumped bottles Zaynab had waiting.

Omar’s smile grew, and he separated from my embrace to kneel in front of the strollers and delicately stroke each of the babies’ cheeks. He stared at them like he still didn’t believe they were real.

“They are already more handsome than me,” he laughed. “We’re going to have quite the line of eager ladies at the palace gates.”

“Oh, Lord,” I replied with a hand on my forehead. “I’m still feeling labor pains; can we please keep the talk about them being teenagers to a minimum?”

Omar chuckled and stood to kiss me again. “Are you recovering well? Is there anything you need? I’m sorry I’ve been so absent the last few days. I had no idea how much work this coronation business required.”

“Don’t worry about it, honey.” I patted a palm on his chest lovingly. “You have a country to run; of course you’re going to be busy and absent sometimes. We’re doing just fine. I have everything I need to hand—except you, that is.”

I meant it as a light-hearted joke, but Omar sighed deeply, his brow furrowing. “All I want is to spend time with you and my sons.”

I ran a hand over his face gently. “We’re right here, Omar.”

It didn’t seem to satisfy him, but as he leaned in to kiss me again, we were interrupted by a royal attendant barging into the dining hall to announce that Sajid and his family had arrived.

Omar closed his eyes and took another deep breath, clearly annoyed. “Thank you,” he told the attendant in an even voice. He opened his eyes to look at me, their dark colors heavy with worry. “I’m going to send someone to fetch my mother. Will you greet Sajid and Alima for me?”

“Of course.” I kissed him.

He embraced me once more and left the room. Sajid and his family entered a few moments later, beaming happily as Alima carried their new son in her arms. He was awake but not fussy, staring in blurry-eyed wonder at all the fresh colors and sights in the room.

Sajid was polite but stiff when he greeted me, while Alima was nothing but warmth and sunshine, kissing me on both cheeks and showing off her beautiful baby. He already had Sajid’s full head of thick, dark hair, and darker skin than my sons. He was truly gorgeous and I told Alima so. His three older sisters gathered around him like little nannies, fussing with his socks, rubbing gently at the soft hair on his head. They already loved him to pieces.

Omar and Mirah came to the dining room soon after, and Mirah was overwhelmed at the sight before her.

“My whole family, all six of my grandchildren... Six!” she cried happily, clapping her hands together. “Three boys, three girls. What more could a woman ask for?”

“It warms my heart to see you so happy, mother,” said Omar as he put an arm around her. “You’ve endured so much this past year or so.”

“And now I’m ready to endure more happiness than any person has a right to have,” she agreed, nodding with a teary smile. She insisted on sitting at the end of the table with her granddaughters and Zaynab, who was keeping an eye on all three baby boys

as they slept away in their strollers and the portable cradle Sajid's attendant had brought for his son. She was clearly very happy to be getting on with her life outside of royal duties.

Throughout the dinner, Sajid seemed in happier spirits than I had ever seen him, and I thought it must be due to his newborn son. After all, Omar was the same. But as the night progressed, it became clear that it was something else. Once the kitchen staff had cleaned up the dishes from the main course, he decided the time was right to reveal it.

Sajid cleared his throat and wiped his mouth with a napkin. Then he slowly pulled a piece of folded paper from the inside of his robes where it had been tucked. He opened it to reveal a language I couldn't read, but which looked like an official document of some kind; I recognized the royal seal of Al-Thakri prominently displayed at the top.

Omar's face went dark. "What is this?" he demanded.

Sajid's good mood fell quickly like a hammer. He slapped the paper on the table and rudely shoved it across towards Omar and me on the other side. Omar gave me a concerned look and snatched the papers up. There was a portion highlighted almost a third of the way down.

"You should know what it is, since you're the man who presumes to be our future king," sniped Sajid.

"Presumes?" countered Omar. "Brother, you've just handed me the constitution of Al-Thakri, so you know well that I am not presuming anything. The throne is mine. Both the constitution and mother's decree have been satisfied by the birth of my sons. How much longer are you going to try and raise the ghost of this issue?"

The room filled with thick tension that seemingly even the security guards felt, shifting uncomfortably in their polished shoes.

Next to Sajid, Alima was silent, eyes downcast. But Sajid only rose to his feet, slamming his fist on the table. “You are wrong, Omar. The throne will not be yours, and the constitution proves it. The law specifically states that any sheikh ascending to the throne must have produce one male heir.”

Omar rolled his eyes. “Have I not introduced you to my two sons?” He sarcastically gestured towards the strollers.

“Yes, your two sons. Two. The constitution says that the sheikh ascending must have one son, in the singular. That means the throne is mine. Dr. Green gave you twins, and blessings upon you for that as a father, but for Al-Thakri, it means you cannot be king. The throne should be mine.”

At the end of the table, Mirah shook her head, thoroughly exhausted with the bickering. Unlike before, however, she said nothing to interrupt it.

Omar was red with rage, his eyes darker and angrier than I had ever seen them. His breathing quickened, chest rising and falling as he absorbed his brother’s words.

He was quiet for a long time—long enough that even Sajid started to grow uncomfortable with the silence.

Finally, Omar stood up from his chair, throwing his napkin down on the table.

“I’ve had just about enough of this,” said Omar in a voice that was both dark and quiet, yet somehow loud enough to echo off the walls. “Ever since we lost Father, you’ve become consumed with vying

for power, Sajid. Consumed, like you are cursed. It has been painful to watch and even more painful to endure. All our lives, Father trained me—trained both of us—for the roles we would one day take on. And his grave wasn't even cold before you tried to do everything you could to upend that training, and upend father's wishes... the wishes of Al-Thakri."

Sajid stared at his brother in shock, like a deer caught in headlights. This was not the fight he expected from Omar, and he hadn't finished.

"I thought with the birth of our sons that this had finally been put to rest, and that we could sit back and become a family once more. I thought we would raise our sons together, like we were raised." His voice grew angry and he gestured wildly. "That they could be brothers and take care of each other as I took care of you. But I was wrong, wasn't I? If this is you, Sajid, if this is how low you are willing to stoop to gain something that was never yours in the first place, then you know what? You can have it. You have poisoned everything about this I ever loved. I no longer want it."

It took a moment for everyone in the room to realize the weight of Omar's words. At the end of the table, Mirah stood up slowly, her face shocked. Sajid straightened, his fists falling away, while the girls looked at each other curiously, waiting for someone to explain what had just happened.

"What are you saying?" Sajid said slowly.

"My son, think about what you're doing!" cried Mirah. "Think of the country!"

"I am thinking, mother. I'm thinking clearly for perhaps the first time since father died," Omar replied evenly. He turned to Sajid with a stone expression. "If the throne means so much to you that you're willing to cut your family at every turn in order to achieve it, then take the throne, Sajid. Tonight will not be my coronation; it will be my abdication. You can finally have what you really want."

“You are mocking me,” said Sajid, his face suspicious.

“No,” replied Omar, shaking his head. “I’m done with games. I’m done with trying to best you or convince you that what you’re doing is foolish. Instead, I am going to heed the wise words of our father and realize that I have no control over fate. Fate is presenting me with a choice today. I can either stay here and spend my days trying to run a country that will always have problems to solve, protecting my throne from my power-hungry brother who will most likely challenge everything I try to do, while watching my sons grow up at a distance. Or, I can do what my heart really desires.”

Omar looked down at me—completely surprised and without words to respond—and put a gentle hand on my cheek. “I could leave here with Carrie and my sons, and go explore the world as we both want. I can teach Roni and Zamir what the world really looks like, and let them decide for themselves where they want to be within it. I can spend my hours loving my family and making them happy.”

Tears filled my eyes as I listened to Omar speak. My heart felt like it was ready to burst in my chest. All my sleepless nights worrying about what I was going to do when the babies were born, and I never once imagined an outcome like this.

“I choose the latter,” declared Omar. “I love Carrie and my sons more than some petty title, more than this royal legacy that only we will ever remember. I don’t want a part of this anymore. I’m tired of fighting you, Sajid. The throne is yours—on one condition.”

Still in a state of suspicious disbelief, Sajid folded his arms and snorted. “Yes, and what is that? A failsafe that you should be able to return and reclaim it whenever you decide you’re done being a globetrotter?”

“No,” argued Omar. “The condition is that you meet with the royal advisors and amend the constitution so that this mockery will never happen again. Amend the

constitution to include heirs of either gender. Had we had such an amendment, you would have taken the throne anyway, and none of this infighting would have happened. That a woman can act as queen regent and raise royal heirs, but not rule herself, is a stain on our country and will cause us nothing but problems. Fix it, Sajid. That is my condition.”

I was so proud of Omar in that moment, it took everything to hold back my tears. At the end of the table, Mirah put her hands over her mouth, her face overwhelmed with joyful emotion.

Sajid hesitated, silent a moment, as if he were trying to figure out if this was a trap of some kind. Finally, he nodded. “Fine. I agree with you. Our country would do well to fix this succession issue. It will bring peace to the royal family.”

Omar nodded at his brother. “Good. Then the throne is yours. I suggest you begin your rule now by announcing to the press and waiting audience that there will be a major announcement at tonight’s coronation.”

Sajid went to argue with him, but realized Omar was right. He started to smile as he realized that this unexpected turn of events was actually happening.

He left the room to attend to the duties, and at the end of the table, Jarah began to cry. Alima, still in shock, got up to attend to her son.

Omar sat down next to me, meeting my surprised expression with one of love and warmth.

“Honey,” I whispered. “Is this really what you want? You’ve worked your whole life to prepare for being on the throne... Are you really just going to give it up?”

He nodded and brushed a stray hair from my face. “I want to be happy, Carrie. Ruling

has made me nothing but miserable, and I've barely started doing it. I would have been doing it right up until the day I died, just like father. No being voted out, like in your country; no returning to some normal life one day. Our lives would have been chaos, and not the kind an adventure-lover like you enjoys."

I grinned at him, even as tears streamed down my face. "I can't believe this is happening. I was so scared that I was going to have to choose between you and my life... I couldn't imagine leaving our sons." I turned to check on them, and saw Mirah singing sweetly to them, awake and content in the stroller.

"You don't," he said. "You don't have to worry about anything anymore. I have money enough that we never have to come home. Our sons will see the world and be better men than I ever could be."

"I'm not sure that's possible."

He smiled and kissed me sweetly. "And if we like a place enough, we could settle down there for a while. I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding a local hospital to lend your skills to if you want, and I have plenty of friends who I would love to guilt into donating money to underfunded operations. We can make a real difference wherever we go."

It was all too perfect. I threw my arms around Omar's neck and he held me tight against him. I closed my eyes and inhaled his beautiful scent. "I love you so much, Omar. Thank you."

"Thank you, my love," he whispered back. "Thank you for my sons. And thank you for helping me see the truth. I'll spend the rest of my life repaying you for both."

SIXTEEN

Despite fantasies of us whisking out into the world that very night, Omar was not about to abandon the complex task of handing over power to his younger brother. His abdication shocked the nation, and pictures of him were plastered on newspapers and TV channels around the world. The people of Al-Thakri had been overjoyed at the news of the twins' birth, and even more ready to accept Omar as their new king. There was a mingled sense of mourning and excitement when he went up to the podium and announced that the coronation ceremony would continue, only with his brother acceding to power instead.

Sajid, who had been hurriedly dressed in the traditional garb of the ascending king, looked beaming and proud as he participated in the ancient ceremony. I stood next to Omar, each of us holding one of our sons, as we watched his brother take the throne that was never his. Alima was sobbing with happiness, and the girls were thrilled with all the attention they were suddenly getting as the royal daughters. It wouldn't be too long before Alima would have to start vetting suitors for them, and I didn't envy her the task. It was another complication of power that Omar had saved us from; I would never have to break the hearts of my sons by telling them the person they loved wouldn't be accepted by the kingdom. They were free to be whoever they grew up to be.

Mirah was shocked, but there was also some sort of light and happiness in her expression, something that felt like it was a long time coming. Maybe this was something she had always dreamed for herself; Omar's father giving up power to spend more time with her and their sons. She never confided in me that that's what it was, but I could see it on her face as she helped us pack.

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Part of me felt guilty that Mirah's grandsons wouldn't be as close to her now, but with Sajid's family moving into the main palace, I knew she would be kept busy helping to raise Jarah and the girls. We promised that we would return often to visit as the boys grew up; plus, with technology nowadays, she didn't have to miss a moment, and I told her to expect dozens of videos and photos. She asked for hundreds.

We chose our first destination together: South America. Omar had never been, and I had only visited Brazil, on a short conference trip during med school.

The day before we were to leave for our new life, as the sun was setting, I found him in the greenery of the royal garden. He was cooing at the birds in their gilded aviary, his shoulders heavy, his eyes a little sad.

When I approached, he looked up and smiled. "Remember the pink dress you wore out here on our first date?" he said. "I love that dress. You should wear it tomorrow."

"I think I will," I replied, leaning in to kiss him. I rubbed my palm on his back. "Are you okay? I know it must be hard for you to leave here."

Omar nodded. "It is hard. It's hard to accept that something so ugly would be the cause of me finally chasing my deepest wants. I'm still very sad about Sajid's behavior."

"I know. I know he hurt you. But people seem to think he's going to make a competent ruler; that's something, isn't it?"

“He will make a fine king,” replied Omar. “Sajid is an intelligent and hard-working man. He has always thrived off the responsibility, the rushing about, the chaos. It’s why he has successfully launched so many different projects and companies over his career. Kingship will be good to him, and as long as he can remember to keep his heart open, he will be good to Al-Thakri.”

I put my head on Omar’s shoulder. “You have a legacy here too, you know. Because of you, Al-Thakri will have its first queen in thousands of years. You’ve granted great power to his eldest daughter, and who knows what amazing things she will do for her country?”

Omar gave me a small smile. “Do you really think that?”

“Yes, I do!” I assured him. “No matter what Sajid does now, it will be because of you in the end. You made room for him, and in turn, for change in Al-Thakri. You have saved Sajid’s children from going through the very same torment you’re going through right now. They won’t have to fight each other because the succession will be clear as crystal.”

“Thank you, my love. You always know how to lift my spirits when they’re down.”

“Your other great legacy will, of course, be the wonderful sons you’re going to raise with me,” I smiled. “I can’t wait to see what our boys grow up to be like. Maybe one of them will want to be a doctor. Maybe one of them will save the world.”

Omar laughed and pulled me by the waist against his body. I wrapped my arms around his neck and he kissed me deeply. “Whatever they become, they will have a treasure of a mother to love them and teach them how to be extraordinary men. They are already blessed with that.”

“And I’m blessed with you,” I said, nuzzling into his face. “I can’t imagine my life without you and the boys. When I was pregnant, I often thought about where I would

be if I hadn't accepted your job offer." I shook my head as if I could shake out the unattractive thoughts. "I would be in a much different, much worse place."

"Come now, you love being in worse places, that's where all the patients are," he winked.

I gave him a playful slap on the chest. "You know what I mean! I wouldn't have this beautiful future that you've given me. Omar, I never imagined I could meet a man like you, or find love like this. I never imagined I'd be a mother, never mind the mother of twins."

"I should have mentioned they run in the family," he snickered.

"Well, I know that now. And I'm glad for it. I can't imagine life without either of them."

"Will you still be saying that when we're chasing their furious toddler legs around the beaches of Thailand? Or dealing with their tears because they sneaked a bite of our African-spiced food?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I think I will. Probably even more so. I dreamed so long about having children and being able to show them the world. I never thought it would come true."

Omar leaned his head down on mine and kissed me again. "It's true, my love."

"And I know from experience that nothing will ever fully take away the pain of being away from your home," I told him. "But that just means we have to visit more often, since we'll have the money to do it. This won't be the last time you walk in this garden, Omar. And your sons will know and love it, too, just like you did."

"I would love that," admitted Omar. "And when will we be taking them back to

Ohio?”

“Oh, as soon as possible,” I told him. “My mother’s chomping at the bit, and I can’t wait for my old high school friends to meet my handsome, royal husband and our gorgeous sons. In fact, maybe we should swing by there on the way to South America.”

Omar chuckled and hugged me tightly. Together, we walked through the gardens of the palace, taking our time to smell the tropical flowers and listen to the birds call as we passed. The sun was setting behind the sandstone palace walls, and on Omar’s reign as Sheikh, but it was only just rising on our lives together.

I couldn’t wait for this new day to start.

The End