

THE RACING HEART

BY

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CLICK TO OPEN

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Chapter 1

Le Mans

Sarthe, France

1:05 p.m. Saturday

Cameras clicked and flashes popped like strobe lights as the supermodel struck a pose in the arms of a debonair racecar driver. In the background, engines revved and crowds thronged. It was the perfect image to evoke the electric anticipation and the glamour of Le Mans, the most fabled road race of them all, and tomorrow morning, Tygre's picture would be displayed in papers throughout Europe and North America. Voyeuristic men and curious women across both continents would search the Web for pictures of her in that ash-gray Nomex jumpsuit with the front zipper lowered to barely cover her firm breasts.

The flame-resistant coveralls were regulation wear at the Le Mans pit lane and, to the delight of Tygre's admirers, they hugged her every curve.

The high-heeled leather boots, wide crocodile belt and dark La Dolce Vita sunglasses resting atop her head were the perfect punctuation. Not many could pull off such a fashion feat, but Tygre had managed to turn her mandatory pit crew gear into a European Vogue cover look.

Still, no one could have guessed what lay beneath the surface of that cover girl image. Her body was warm and vibrant, but a closer look would show her smile was strained, her gaze distant, her heart drained.

"Tygre! Over here! Please!" one of the paparazzi shouted. She turned away from the exploding flashbulbs, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man of her dreams, even as another man, the man who now inspired her nightmares, held her in a tight embrace. Once the scent of Khalil Karim had washed over Tygre pleasingly, but now it was the odor of nausea and dread.

She stole a glance at the famous Le Mans Rolex clock. As the official timekeeper for more than half a century of Le Mans races, the iconic clock had overseen many spectacular wins and ego-breaking defeats. But Tygre's job, her involuntary mission at this year's race, was even more critical than that of the Rolex. She couldn't help notice the irony of her connection to the old timepiece.

Her every move was to be timed with precision. Her very life, and the lives of others, depended on it.

Tygre felt all eyes focused in her direction. That was nothing new. For as long as she could recall, she had drawn gazes, gawks and stares from men and women in all walks of life. Her appearance destined her for supermodel status, which came calling at a young age.

But, while her beauty blessed her with financial freedom, it cursed her with maddening constraints. The balancing act between the perils of fame and sustaining a modicum of anonymity started early on. But that was nothing compared to the pain she was experiencing now. A few short weeks ago, her life had been her own. And now, impossibly, it no longer was.

Special Agent Doug Martin, of the Miami Division of the FBI, had made it abundantly clear. Without her participation, he warned, the potential loss of life and devastation would be severe.

"We have an urgent matter to discuss with you," Martin said as he presented his FBI credentials at that first meeting with Tygre in Miami less than a month before.

"What is this all about?" Tygre asked, shaking his hand.

"We understand you know Khalil Karim intimately," Agent Martin said.

Martin had caught Tygre coming from a photo shoot in South Beach. She was holding a chilled bottle of Perrier water. Her manicured toes were lightly dusted with sand and her sun-tinted shoulders glistened with scented oil.

By contrast, Agent Martin was pale-skinned and stiff, dressed in plain-vanilla attire. His khaki Dockers barely reached the tips of his shoes. His lanky body shadowed Tygre, blocking the looming noon sun as they walked into an ocean-side café.

"You don't spend much time in the sun, do you, Agent Martin?" Tygre smiled nervously as the middle-aged FBI Agent pulled out a chair for her.

"I've been temporarily re-assigned to FBI HQ. It's been pretty chilly in Washington these past few weeks, ma'am," he said, as he set a file folder on the table and took the seat opposite Tygre. "You know a little bit about D.C., don't you, Ms. Topolska?" He opened the folder to reveal a black-and-white photo of an attractive Arab man.

"Tell me about your relationship with Abdul Khalil Muhammad Abu Karim." Agent Martin said without taking his eyes off of Tygre.

Tygre glanced at the picture, then back at Agent Martin. "I'm not sure what you're interested in knowing."

"Are you aware that he's a suspected terrorist?" Agent Martin asked in a low monotone.

"I had no idea." Tygre said, "I honestly don't know him that well.

But I'm not sure I believe you."

Tygre forced a smile as Agent Martin watched her carefully. She noticed his gaze following the movement of her hands as she placed the starched white napkin on her lap. Trying to read her, she supposed.

"Weren't you aware of the Khalil Karim Islamic Foundation and Academy outside of Washington, D.C.?"

Agent Martin pushed the photo closer to Tygre. He watched her eyes as they scanned Khalil's image once again. The black-and-white headshot didn't do justice to Khalil's dark olive complexion and espresso hair. His piercing brown eyes had once charmed her into an evening of passion. Tygre's eyelids lowered involuntarily as she recalled his scent.

"I know he has a foundation," Tygre said, quickly shaking off the memory of her intimate moments with Khalil. "Everything seemed perfectly legitimate to me. Khalil is a very religious man. He isn't a terrorist."

"Are you sure about that?" Agent Martin asked. He followed Tygre's fingers as she brushed her hair back behind her ear.

"Yes, of course. He told me so."

"He told you he's not a terrorist?"

"I mean...he told me because I asked him...if he was."

"So you had your suspicions about him?"

"No!" Tygre blurted out louder than she meant to. "Look, you're taking all my words the wrong way. I don't know anything about him being a terrorist. And I don't have anything to do with his foundation."

"So you weren't aware that the foundation is a cover for terrorist activities?" Agent Martin asked.

"Absolutely not!" She took a sip of her mineral water.

"And you aren't conspiring in a suspected terrorist plot against President Harrington and his family?"

"His family?" Tygre was sure Agent Martin could see her face flush.

"Isn't that why you're dating the President's son?"

"No!" Tygre protested. She set her glass back with shaking hands. A few droplets of water splattered onto the photo of Khalil. "I wasn't...infiltrating..." Tygre's voice shook. "I'm in love with him."

She lowered her voice to a near whisper. "What makes this any of your business?"

"The Bureau finds it...intriguing...that you jumped from the bed of a suspected terrorist into the bed of the only son of the President of the United States." Agent Martin stated calmly. "We'd like to know how that came to happen."

"It wasn't like that!" Tygre explained. "Khalil means absolutely nothing to me. He was a fling...a stupid mistake. It is different with Brad."

"Different?"

"I love Brad..., " Tygre broke off, surprised at her own words. She'd never said such a thing to a stranger. "I care about him very much."

"You seem a bit unsure," Agent Martin said.

"I simply don't appreciate being grilled on my personal life," Tygre said, trying to gather herself. She flashed back quickly to the first time she'd seen Brad Harrington at a White House gala dinner. He stood out distinctly from the rest of the young politicians in the room.

His dark blond hair was wavy and sun-streaked, the perfect frame for his tanned face. His high cheekbones and strong jaw were impressive, but his pale blue-green eyes, soothing and yet exciting, were what had initially lured her to him. The gentle strength and conviction behind those eyes made Tygre come undone.

"I won't listen to any more of this! This is ridiculous!" She stood quickly and took one step away from the table but Martin put up a hand to stop her.

"If you care about Brad Harrington, you should probably sit down, Ms. Topolska," he said flatly. He indicated the folder in front of him. "There's a lot more to this story."

Tygre paused. Something about the agent's manner chilled her. She returned to her seat and took another sip of water.

"You should know that the FBI is investigating you as a possible co-conspirator in Khalil Karim's suspected terrorist activities."

Tygre felt her mouth open in shock. "Co-conspirator?" her voice quivered. "That's preposterous! Look, I really don't know what Khalil Karim is all about. I spent one night with him. I don't have any contact with him anymore."

Martin studied her closely, "There is another matter, Miss Topolska. You are facing possible charges by the SEC for alleged insider trading in connection with information you obtained from Sir Ari Beafetter, the owner of La Dolce Vita. Does that name ring a bell with you?"

Tygre could only imagine the look of dismay on her own face. Yes, she vividly recalled the day her boss and mentor, Sir Ari, gave her a stock tip that doubled her original million dollar contract. And she had willingly taken it. The fear that lingered in her expression was clearly not lost on Martin.

"Are you still under contract to Beafetter? Do you own shares in CRG?" Martin continued.

"What are you getting at?" Tygre's halting voice was barely audible as she began to consider her limited course of action, "Just what are you asking me to do?"

"First, you'll have to end your relationship with Brad Harrington. You've become a liability to the President's son...and to the entire Harrington family."

"You can't be serious," she said. "Brad and I love each other! We are going to Le Mans together!"

"Your plans have changed, Miss Topolska. You are going to get yourself invited to Le Mans by Khalil Karim."

"You must be out of your mind."

Martin smiled and tapped the folder in front of him. "Perhaps you'd rather go to prison?"

Tygre stared. Something told her that the FBI agent was not bluffing. No one else could possibly have known about that stock tip.

"Well then...we need you in Le Mans, France," Agent Martin continued. "Both Khalil Karim and Brad Harrington are competing in the race, and your attendance is critical. You can agree to cooperate with us now, or I'll bring you in front of a grand jury, Miss Topolska. I would suggest you make it easy on yourself."

"Le Mans?" Tygre's eyes widened.

Agent Martin reached across the table and slipped Tygre his card. "You'll need to come to the local office tomorrow morning. Here's the address. Your flight to Le Mans has already been booked. I'll go over the details then."

"But I've got a shoot scheduled..." Tygre protested.

"Tomorrow morning 9:00 a.m., Ms. Topolska." Agent Martin stood and leaned in close. "And please do not speak to anyone about this conversation."

Tygre stared back at Martin evenly. "Who would believe me if I did?" she said.

Agent Martin moved away from the table. "I'll see you at 9 a.m."

Chapter 2

Le Mans

1:30 p.m. Saturday

As the cameras continued to flash and the paparazzi jostled for position, Tygre let her gaze wander over the animated scene struggling to calm herself, trying to put herself in the place of all those other people, there just to watch a race, just to enjoy the magnificence of the scene. Glistening in the bright afternoon sun, 55 cars of different classes, including prototypes, sat jewel-like in their pits as crew technicians buzzed eagerly around them. Preparations were well underway for the beginning of the 24 Hours of Le Mans, commonly known as the Grand Prix of Endurance.

The throng of spectators was as thick and bustling as a Fifth Avenue lunch hour crowd—more than 250,000 of them scurrying to find the best spots for a glimpse of the forever-changing landscape of the race along the 13.63 kilometer track.

Access to pit lane where she stood was strictly limited to members of the racing teams and the press. Tygre was neither of those, but she had an all-access pass on the arm of Abdul Khalil Muhammad Abu Karim. Not by choice, certainly, but because she was Tygre.

She had been born Theresa Topolska in Warsaw, Poland, twenty-four years ago, but it was not long before her father, Adam, coined the nickname that reflected her true nature: Everything she did was marked by an added tempo—she ate quickly, walked rapidly, zipped through chores with relentless energy, and coupled her actions with an insatiable curiosity almost impossible to satisfy.

Her father found all this charming, but then he had always been endeared by actions her mother rarely found so pleasing. He often referred to Tygre's premature birth as her "backstage debut," as it occurred during an intermission of *Hamlet*. Tygre's mother, Helena, was not so amused. It had been a notable occasion for the Warsaw socialite, but the early arrival of her child dampened an otherwise delightful evening at the theater.

Because the delivery happened at such a high-profile event, it was carried by all the papers of note the following morning. But, Helena soon realized she would not receive this kind of attention for very long. As the years passed, her daughter's beauty surpassed her own. The moment a person caught a glimpse of Tygre's crystal blue eyes, they were immediately captivated.

Had anyone bothered to look deeper through those windows of Tygre's soul, they would have discovered a profoundly thoughtful and sharp-witted young woman. But most people couldn't get past those extraordinary eyes.

Just pray that Khalil Karim, the man to whose arm she now clung could not read the truth behind her eyes, Tygre thought, as the roar of powerful engines grew about her. If he had any idea of the agony she had endured to bring herself to this moment, it would surely mean catastrophe.

"Khalil, it's Tygre. I've broken up with Brad Harrington." Tygre choked back tears as she spoke from Miami under the watchful glare of Agent Martin.

"Why am I not surprised?" Khalil snorted, reeling in delight. "What happened?"

"Brad is just not what I had thought," she said. "I need someone more sophisticated...and worldly...like you." Tygre's heart ached as she lied to Khalil on the order of the FBI. "If your invitation still stands, I would like to join you at Le Mans." Tygre's voice quivered but Khalil seemed not to notice.

"By all means, Tygre. I'm thrilled you came to your senses. Never say never to me again."

Tygre cringed as she vividly recalled that conversation. Her words had been agonizing to utter, each a betrayal to her beloved Brad.

But she had had no choice but to comply.

Today at Le Mans, she watched with detachment as Khalil Karim met the cameras with a look of smooth confidence. Of course, he had plenty to be boastful about. Not only was he an immensely wealthy Saudi and the owner of Karim Racing, a company that prepared, maintained and raced high-performance LMP1 diesel prototype cars, he was escorting the most stunning woman at Le Mans. No one could deny that the handsome dark-featured Arab and his magnificent blue-eyed blond made a striking couple.

As for the race itself, The 24 Hours of Le Mans had been dominated by Europeans until recent years, when Brad Harrington, the son of the American President, had developed into a serious competitor. And now, the very first presence of a Muslim owned and financed team stirred a new interest and curiosity. It was an opportunity for the Muslim world to shine in a new arena, a fact not lost on Malik Youssaf, Khalil's co-driver, friend and general factotum. He was nervous and disheveled in sharp contrast to Khalil's debonair appearance, and he was clearly disinterested in the spectacle surrounding the fashionable couple in the pit area.

"Khalil, get rid of her. It's time to get ready," Malik snapped. He handed Khalil a balaclava and a pair of fireproof gloves.

Khalil ignored his cohort's warning, keeping his focus on Tygre.

"If you try, you can be quite charming my dear," Khalil whispered in her ear. His clipped British inflection was cultivated by years of affluence and an Oxford University education.

Tygre forced a smile for the cameras.

"Your smile becomes you. You should wear it more often." Khalil's tan face broke into a grin. He leaned in to kiss Tygre good-bye, and the cameras flashed wildly. He barely managed to brush her cheek with his eager lips, as Tygre turned her face quickly and untangled herself from his arms, signaling to all that the paparazzi session was over.

"I must run, so until later..." Khalil called after Tygre as she darted off and quickly disappeared in the immense crowds forming outside pit lane.

Malik scoffed at the sight of his disappointed friend. "What does he expect?" he muttered, watching Khalil nod nervously to the relentless paparazzi.

"Now...I am ready, my friend." Khalil turned to Malik and gently tapped his shoulder. "I can take care of myself, so don't worry about me."

Malik Youssaf had grown up alongside Khalil, spending many years enjoying the spoils of his employer's vast fortune. And he had earned every bit of it. Nobody had been more loyal to Khalil. Malik had spent years in the Saudi desert attending to Khalil's every whim, fulfilling his countless commands. He was not about to be derailed by a woman, a blue-eyed Christian at that. Malik could barely tolerate seeing Khalil be made a fool of by this tart. How could he allow such a frivolous distraction in the middle of what should be their most important and – please Allah – glorious day?

"You must be mad to bring her here. If something goes wrong..." Malik muttered.

"Relax, nothing will go wrong. It is a lucky break for us that she severed her ties with Harrington and came here to be with me." Khalil stated unfazed. "Her beauty is an ideal distraction."

"I don't trust her. The reward had better be worth the risk," Malik warned.

The race announcer's voice interrupted their exchange, resounding through the artfully deployed speaker system: "*Last year's winners, the New Deal two-car team, are back to defend their title!*"

The New Deal's No. 1 car set the fastest qualifying time and a new Le Mans record at 3m 22.888s, a full 1.2 seconds faster than the second qualifier and 1.5 seconds faster than last year's pole time!"

Tygre stopped short amid the bustling crowds. Those two little words – "New Deal" – broke her gait and left her standing frozen in place. She looked up at the loud speaker as the crowds bumped into her motionless body.

"Watch it, gorgeous!" someone warned, barely capturing her attention.

"Sorry," she whispered back, keeping her focus on the announcer's silky voice.

"... That's correct ... three-time Le Mans winner, Brad Harrington, is the favorite to win this year's race! His team just won the American Le Mans Series team championship. Harrington's two brand-new, highly anticipated diesel prototypes were built entirely in the U.S. He has been quoted as saying that 'America's auto industry, with its low sulfur diesel fuel, has fallen behind the European diesel car markets and is losing its competitive edge.' That explains Harrington's personal racing quest to develop new diesel car technology."

"The William Bradford Harrington, II?" a girl in the tiniest mini dress cooed to her girlfriend as they passed by Tygre.

"Oooh," her friend chimed in, "Mr. Le Mans! I hear he's even better looking in person..."

Tygre watched the girls saunter past. *If they only knew how wonderful Brad really is,* she thought. *Two sluts like that could never turn his head.* She closed her eyes and pictured his body and his hypnotic gaze, hoping desperately to find him standing in front of her when she opened her eyes again. But her hope was in vain.

During her last phone conversation with Brad from New York, she had wanted to tell him the truth about her mission, but of course she couldn't. The reality of the situation was maddening. She had dreaded making the call, but she had no choice.

Tygre's hands trembled as she picked up the phone and dialed the international exchange. Brad was already in Le Mans preparing for the race and awaiting her arrival.

"Brad, can you hear me? It's Tygre. I need to talk to you."

"Sweetheart, I've missed you," Brad answered. "It's great to hear your voice. What time are you arriving?"

"Brad, I have something to tell you. Please listen to what I have to say. This is not easy." Tygre's voice cracked.

"What's the matter, darling? Are you okay?"

"Brad...I can't see you again."

There was silence on the line.

"Brad?"

"I'm here."

"I'm sorry to hurt you, but...I have to move on. I can't see you any more."

"I don't understand. Did something happen, Tygre?" he finally asked in a near whisper. "Was it something I did?"

"No, Brad. It's nothing like that."

Brad was quiet for a moment before letting out a long sigh. "Darling, please come to France so we can talk about this."

Tygre inhaled deeply hoping to find courage. "I will be there at Le Mans, Brad, but I'll be with someone else."

Tygre was surprised by how quickly she had said it.

"Tygre, what the hell is going on? What are you talking about? What has happened since I last saw you?"

Tygre couldn't find the right words. She sat silently, pressing the phone against her ear as her head began to throb.

"What do you mean you're coming to Le Mans with someone else? Who? Tell me...who is it? What's gotten into you?"

"I'm sorry, Brad. I am so sorry. But there's no other way. Please accept it," Tygre shot back desperately trying not to break down.

"Who is it, Tygre?" Brad persisted. "You owe me that much."

"It's Khalil Karim." Tygre felt her stomach turn as she uttered the name.

"Khalil Karim? I can't believe it – you and Khalil?"

"It's just that..."

"What are you doing with him? Why are you doing this to me...to us?"

Brad waited for an answer but was met with silence on the line. Tygre was holding the phone outstretched to keep him from hearing her muffled sobs. Finally, he conceded.

"Good-bye, Tygre."

She wished she could answer.

"Good-bye, Tygre." His last words echoed in her head now as she stood amid the excited crowd at Le Mans. Eyes closed, she tormented herself replaying that final moment, Brad's final good-bye ringing through her thoughts. When she could no longer stand it, Tygre opened her eyes.

She thought at first they were playing a cruel trick on her, but she looked again, and the image before her became clear. It was one of New Deal's prototype cars slowly moving forward as the crowd parted. And Brad was behind the wheel. Tygre inched forward.

As Brad's car passed, he and Tygre locked gazes for only a second. Tygre trembled as his pale eyes met hers with pain and confusion. She wanted to reach out to him, but she couldn't. If only she could explain to Brad what she had to do. His life was in danger, and the only way Tygre could protect him was to hurt him. Her heart ached as she watched Brad drive away. *I love you, Brad. I wish I could tell you the truth, and one day I will.*

From his vantage point a few paces away, Malik pulled the visor of his cap down over his eyes and scoffed at what he had just witnessed. *Severed ties with Brad Harrington?* Malik muttered to himself. *It doesn't look that way to me.* He watched intently as Tygre gazed after car No. 1 with the longing eyes of a love-struck schoolgirl. *If only Khalil could see this!* He flipped open his cell phone, dialed a number and began cursing loudly in Arabic. "*Inta majood?*"