

SAMPLE



his
Inherited
PRINCESS

empi baryeh



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CHAPTER ONE

“I’m sorry, My Lady, but your husband...Prince Majid didn’t make it.”

Something is wrong with that sentence.

Princess India Saene couldn’t figure out what, though. Her muddled thoughts made it difficult to piece anything together.

The wedding. It was the last thing she remembered. Her marriage to Majid marked the beginning of an alliance between her kingdom, Bagumi, and the Sahelian kingdom of Sudar. She’d only met her husband a month before their wedding, and although they weren’t a love match, he’d been the perfect host, and she’d believed they could eventually grow to love each other.

“Where is he?” she asked.

Her tongue felt like a piece of parchment paper in her mouth, dry and tasteless...weighty. She barely managed to slit open her equally heavy eyelids before the bright lights above forced her to shut them again.

“Erm...”

Hesitation. She frowned, but before she could ask why, her mind produced another

memory: she and Majid in a car—on their way to their honeymoon.

What did the woman mean by Prince Majid didn't make it? Was she alone at their honeymoon? Why would he not come with her? His coronation, scheduled for next week, gave them barely five days for this trip. Why would he miss even a day?

Perhaps something to do with his father, King Rafael, who had announced his abdication for medical reasons not too long ago. From the little she knew of Majid, she couldn't think of anything else that would cause him to abandon her without prior notice. A year ago, her father had suffered a mild heart attack, which had sparked debate about him handing over to her eldest brother. Luckily, he'd bounced back and had been cleared by the doctors to resume work full-time.

She'd understand if a situation with King Rafael had caused Majid to cut their honeymoon short. Or had he informed her, and she couldn't remember? Frustration mounted as her mind simply refused to yield to her demands for recollection.

“When is he returning?”

“My Lady, I don’t have the authority to respond to that.”

“What do you mean?”

She pried her eyes open again, blinking. Her mind drifted off as her surroundings became clearer. White ceiling, stark white walls, a constant beeping sound...*and that smell*. A woman’s face came into focus; she wore a mask of concern.

Recognition poured into India’s mind. “Salma?”

Her Sudari personal assistant smiled, relief taking over her features. “You recognised me. Thank God. They said you might not, which would be a bad sign.”

“Where are we?”

“We’re at the hospital.”

“Hospital?” The beeping sound fit with this explanation, but why would she be in a hospital and not on her honeymoon? “When is Majid returning?”

At the look of discomfort on Salma’s face, threads of worry wound tight around India’s chest.

“Salma, would you please give me a moment with my wife?” a male voice spoke before she could express her concerns.

The voice vibrated through her, putting a kick in her chest and a sense of calm in her heart. Strange, she’d never realised how deep Majid’s voice was. She remembered it as a gentle tenor, but he’d just spoken in a tone more bass than tenor, issuing words with the smoothness of a warm knife cutting through butter.

“Of course, Your Royal Highness,” Salma said, curtsying.

India tried sitting up, and a sharp pain zinged through her head and body, causing her to wince and lie back down.

“No, My Lady,” a third person said. A female who spoke with gentleness, belying an unmistakable authority in her delivery. “You mustn’t move.”

“How are you?”

Her husband’s deep voice washed over her.

Yes, she could definitely grow to fall in love with that voice. He sounded so close. She turned slowly, meeting his dark brown stare.

Confusion made her blink. Twice. The face staring back at her wasn't Majid's.

"Omar?"

The deep, smooth-as-butter voice belonged to Omar?

The brothers had similar eyes but bore little resemblance beyond that. Majid carried his lean, six-foot frame with the grace of an athlete, whereas Omar stood at about five-eleven, his muscular body honed to perfection. Both had undergone military training, which probably explained their extremely fit physiques, but Omar oozed sexual charisma and a certain feral attractiveness that probably had countless women falling at his feet.

Even she had experienced a moment of breathlessness when she'd met him briefly a month ago, but she'd known better than to put any stock in such a fleeting sensation, especially since their first meeting had also marked her betrothal to his brother.

Yet, for some inexplicable reason, her mind retrieved images of their first encounter. She and her father had been led into the room where King Rafael and Majid had been waiting. Soon after the introductions, a knock had

sounded, and Omar had entered. His gaze had captured hers, and for several seconds, she'd forgotten to breathe. The same thing had happened only moments after when they'd been introduced and he'd taken her hand.

She pushed aside the thoughts, focusing on her present need for answers. What was Omar doing here? Had Majid sent him?

"Is she in a lot of pain, Doctor?" Omar asked, his gaze directed at someone on the other side of the bed.

"She shouldn't be in unbearable pain, Your Royal Highness. In fact, we've reduced the dosage of her pain medication."

"Why are they calling you Your Royal Highness?"

As she'd been made to understand, there were three formal styles used in addressing members of the royal family in Sudar. 'Majesty' for the king, 'Royal Highness' for the Queen and the heir apparent, and 'Highness' for everyone else.

"Wh—where's Majid?"

Her voice grated against her dry throat. Worry snaked up her spine. Something was wrong. She felt it in her bones.

Omar looked at her, and she found herself trapped in his gaze.

“How much do you remember?”

She frowned. “Remember?”

As if his rich voice had unlocked a door, it came to her all at once. She and Majid had been in the car, discussing the protocols to be observed for his coronation. Funny, since he’d apparently already broken one rule by travelling in the same car with her. She remembered the relief with which she’d latched on to the topic, glad to take her mind off how they’d approach their first night as husband and wife.

Then...

Bang!

It sounded like a gunshot or maybe a canon. The car careened to the left. Everything happened so fast. The driver swore, maintaining an iron grip on the steering wheel, but the car kept speeding.

“Watch out!” Majid yelled.

Screeching tires, then another *bang!* Something had hit them. She only remembered seeing headlights at the window before they were airborne. The car may have flipped over

before crashing to the ground. Then, everything went black.

She shut her eyes as if it would somehow turn off the faucet of memories. Warmth engulfed her, and she realised Omar had taken her hand as he sat on the bed.

“You and Majid had an accident,” he said softly.

“How’s he?”

Dread clutched her gut, telling her she knew the answer. *Prince Majid didn’t make it.*

“Majid fought bravely, but eventually succumbed to his injuries.”

“No,” she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

For several seconds, she hoped this was a nightmare. She’d wake up and find Majid lying by her side, and they’d laugh about this weird dream. Because if this wasn’t happening in her head, then it meant Majid had died; she was a widow. What did it mean for the alliance between their two nations?

Her mind was in no position to process matters of such enormity. She refocused on what Omar had said.

One word stuck in her mind.

“Eventually? How long have I been here?”

“Two weeks,” he answered. “Since you’re awake now, you’ll be coming home soon.”

Coming home. Why did that sound off? She frowned as something else occurred.

“You called me your wife.”

He stared at her for a long moment as though trying to decide whether to answer.

“In accordance with our tradition, I inherited my brother’s widow.”

“What?” She looked beyond him at Salma who nodded. “How could we be married if I’ve been here the past two weeks?”

“We observed the obligatory ten days of mourning, but after that, nothing stopped us from performing the widow inheritance rites.”

Her heart pounded, fuelled by fury. “You can’t marry me without my consent.”

“I’m afraid the alliance between our kingdoms supersedes your consent. Or mine, for that matter. The only party who needed to be consulted was your king.”

“My father agreed to this? Does he even know I’m in the hospital?”

He nodded. “Your parents and your brother, Azikiwe, arrived here the day after the accident. King Ibrahim returned for the

marriage ceremony, and I've kept your family updated on your progress."

She shook her head, unable to wrap her mind around his words. Had her father truly been a part of this?

"Sire," the other female, whom India deduced from the lab coat and stethoscope was the doctor, interrupted. "She needs rest."

Omar nodded, although his gaze remained on India.

He leaned in. Panic stole into her. Did he mean to kiss her? She couldn't allow him to do that as if any of what he'd said was okay with her. She'd committed herself to his brother, not to him. She willed herself to speak, or turn away, but his musky scent surrounded her, engulfed her senses, and her voice caught in her throat.

She held her breath as his lips touched her temple. A flame ignited from the spot, expanding over her as hot threads of pleasure and confusion, and for a moment, she forgot the pain in her body.

Pulling back, he stood. "Rest now, *ya jameel*. We'll talk soon."

In her battered state, her heart had no defence against his allure or the endearment—*my beautiful*—uttered with the ease of a man used to having women fall at his feet. She found the strength to look away, shamed to discover her response to him hadn't been as fleeting as she'd convinced herself.

"Can I have a private word with you, Doctor?" Omar said.

"Certainly, Sire."

India shut her eyes against Omar's retreating figure, the gesture releasing unshed tears. In the solace of her mind's eye, she sought to reject his declaration, reject him.

However, her mind veered off course, focusing on the heat from his kiss. Guilt slammed into her. Majid's kiss at their wedding had been sweet, but it hadn't packed the kind of heat Omar's lips had aroused.

What could it mean? She'd never been given to ephemeral emotions. Love and passion didn't have a place in marriages of alliance.

Her reaction to the kiss had to be nothing more than a result of her jumbled emotions, because falling for Omar had to be all kinds of wrong.

Several hours later, Prince Omar El Dansuri sat at the expansive mahogany desk that had become his following his brother's demise. Their father, King Rafael, had unofficially stepped down a few weeks ago owing to failing health, and Majid was to have succeeded him. The stipulation of marriage before ascension to the throne had led to the speedy conclusion of the treaty between Sudar and Bagumi, as well as the marriage between Majid and India barely a month after their first meeting.

His brother should have been the one sitting at this desk right now, carrying the weight of a troubled nation on his shoulders. Without preamble, fate had thrust this responsibility on him; a position he wouldn't have been eligible for just half a century ago when ascension to the throne had required full Sudari bloodlines. His mother had been the daughter of a paramount chief from Northern Ghana, but her royal lineage didn't matter to the purists, nor did the fact that he'd never met her. His mother had died in childbirth, and he'd been raised by Queen Azmera, Majid's biological mother, as her own.

The same purists now stood against many of his reforms aimed at turning the kingdom's economy around—in particular, his campaign for Sudar to join the African Union and allow foreign diplomatic missions in. There were also many who agreed with his thinking, but the traditionalists believed opening up Sudar would affect the culture and traditions negatively.

A big proponent of this theory was his own uncle Sheikh Latif, Emir of the semi-autonomous state of Umm Jafar, who was next in line until Omar produced an heir. Although Uncle Latif had shown unwavering support for King Rafael, and even for Majid, he didn't misuse any opportunity to comment about what he would do differently if he were king.

Omar, on the other hand, had never desired the throne of Sudar with all its encumbrances, never coveted anything due his brother as the heir.

Until he'd set eyes on India Saene.

He remembered it clearly—walking into this very room. They'd been sitting on the comfortable sofas where the king received his guests; his father and brother on one, and King

Ibrahim Saene of Bagumi and his daughter, India, on the other.

The moment he'd entered, his gaze had collided with hers, and for five whole seconds, everything in him had stilled. He'd only been released from her ensnaring eyes when his father had spoken, introducing her as Majid's fiancée. A sharp jolt had rocked his chest, a stab of jealousy, for the first time, for something belonging to his brother.

He'd torn his eyes away, making a mental note to stay as far away from her as possible, because even with the knowledge of her being his future sister-in-law, he'd still been too aware of her almond-shaped eyes, her succulent-looking lips, and the rise and fall of her breasts.

He wished he could have dismissed it as a passing fancy, or a result of a self-imposed celibacy, but three months without action didn't quite qualify as abstinence. He'd gone longer without sex and hadn't reacted in such a primal way to the first female he'd set eyes on.

His awareness of her had grown when she'd spoken about protecting children and creating equal opportunities for women in the

sub-region, especially where old mind-sets still existed. She'd been eloquent, her voice echoing with intelligence and passion. For one unguarded moment, his mind had led him on an excursion of forbidden thoughts, and he'd wondered if she exhibited similar passion in other areas.

Now, she was his.

Her look of disbelief when he'd given her the news of their marriage had haunted him all afternoon. Though she hadn't said it, he sensed she meant to fight against their union. He had a feeling, too, that he knew why. She'd been willing to sacrifice her happiness to the marriage alliance when she'd been somewhat a part of the process.

This time, actions had been taken without her knowledge, and while their two fathers were within their rights for going ahead with the inheritance rights, his crash course on India Saene told him she wouldn't see it that way. She would most certainly fight him on this the moment she could get out of the hospital bed.

Normally, his default position to the marriage would have been resistance; a self-professed non-conformist, he'd always gotten a

kick from doing the unexpected—a characteristic that had earned him the moniker Royal Pain, but even that had been like a badge of honour to his young self.

The trouble-making Omar had disappeared the day Majid died, fundamentally altering his priorities and killing his inert need for owning the shock factor.

Even if this weren't the case, he couldn't pretend he didn't desire India. Now that she was his, he didn't plan on letting her go. He just needed to figure out how to win her heart before it was too late.

Taking a deep breath, he returned his attention to the dossier in front of him and his head of security, sitting across from him, a man in his forties who looked ten years younger and could still take down a twenty-year-old without batting an eyelid.

"Are you sure about this, Khaya?" he asked. "It wasn't an accident?"

"Yes, Sire, I'm sure," General Khaya said. "The collision appears to be an accident. Wrong place, wrong time. However, the car's tires were definitely tampered with to orchestrate the blowout."

Omar swore as anger ballooned inside him, along with a side order of guilt. He shouldn't have put stock in the semblance of peace that had reigned for the past eight months since neutralising the royal family's biggest opposition. Unlike Majid whose mistrust of people had become second nature, Omar still believed in the general good of people.

During his time in the army, he'd seen the best and worst of humanity. Instead of becoming disillusioned like some of his colleagues, he'd instead chosen the path of hope.

After his tour of duty, he'd spent years abroad, managing the kingdom's global business interests and amassing considerable wealth for The Crown. During this time, he'd learned the value of diplomacy. Human beings may not be inherently good, but most would choose to be good with enough incentive. Or so he'd thought.

The result? The enemies of the throne had succeeded in laying their hands on the heir of Sudar. He should have been more vigilant, knowing his brother had been busy finalising the details of the alliance as well as the

wedding. He'd see to it all responsible were brought to justice if it was the last thing he did.

"What do we know about the people behind it?" he asked, his deathly calm voice belying the rage roiling in his chest.

"Not a lot, Sire," came the less than satisfactory response. "When we captured the Nassiru gang a year ago, we had reason to believe the threat had been neutralised. We've been monitoring their activities."

"Find every last one of their allies," Omar said. "After they taste my brand of justice, they'll desire death, but I won't be so merciful."

"Your Royal Highness, this wasn't the Nassiru gang. Whatever survived our raid won't have the resources to pull off something like this. It was too seamless."

Omar sensed hesitation in Khaya's answer.

"What are you not telling me?"

"Sire, I believe whoever did this had help."

"What about the driver of the other vehicle?"

"Still in a coma, and it doesn't look good. He wasn't wearing a seatbelt, so we have to assume it was unrelated, or he intended to commit suicide. We don't know whether his

motivation was of a personal or religious nature.”

He swore. His father had spent a great deal of resources to create opportunities for the youth of Sudar precisely to keep them from wandering into the hands of people with extremist agendas. Was this evidence of failure? Or just an outlier who’d fallen through the cracks?

“We ran his prints through our database, but it yielded no results. None of our allies have been able to identify him.”

“Any other suspects?”

“No, Sire.”

“Find me one,” Omar barked. “Until you do, I’ll need daily updates on your investigation.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“I also want a list of everyone who had access to the car that day.”

“Of course, Sire.”

“If there’s nothing else, you may go. Please inform Waheed I’ll be driving myself to the hospital today.”

“Sire?” Khaya said, drawing Omar’s attention. “May I ask what arrangements are in

place for after Her Royal Highness is discharged from the hospital?”

“She comes home.” He raised his brows. “What is it, Khaya?”

“The would-be queen may want to go home to Bagumi and seek the support of her family.”

Omar shook his head. “I can’t guarantee her safety if I let her leave my protection, so unless I’m able to travel with her, she’s going to stay here in Sudar.”

Khaya nodded, seemingly satisfied with the response. “A wise decision, Sire.”

With that, the head of security bowed and exited the room.

Alone again, Omar pondered Khaya’s question, wondering if he should have probed further. When it came to India, it seemed his mind didn’t function as well as it usually did, while other parts of his anatomy operated on overdrive.

He checked the time on his phone. *Five o’clock*. Time to wrap up at the office and head over to visit her at the hospital.

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