



THE SHEIKH'S
PREGNANT BRIDE

Jessica Gilmore

 Cherish

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Аннотация

Sheikh, Husband, Father! Idris Delacour never expected to be king of Dalmaya, but his cousin's sudden death changes all that. And that's not all—there's a royal baby on the way, too! Being a surrogate mom should've given Saskia Harper and her little brother Jack a new start. Only, for her unborn child to inherit the throne she must now marry the new king—the man whose kisses she's never forgotten. Saskia wants to trust Idris—but can she ever find a way into her sheikh's guarded heart?

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A king's life wasn't his—he knew that all too well. His own needs, his own desires, his own likes would always be second to duty.

And Idris saw his duty all too clearly. All of it.

His mind raced as he ruthlessly ousted all emotions from his mind, concentrating on the cold, hard facts, looking for the path ahead. First, it was clearly in the baby's best interests to have a mother's care right from birth. Secondly, he—Idris—was the legal heir, whether he liked it or not. But, thirdly, at the same time the unborn baby was the rightful heir. Fourthly, he was said baby's guardian.

The pieces began to fall into place one by one.

What had the lawyer said? That if a man was married to the mother when a child was born then he was automatically that child's legal father, regardless of actual paternity?

He looked over at the other man. 'Let me get this straight. If I marry Sayeda Saskia then the baby will be my child, my heir,

both in law and in the eyes of the world?'

The lawyer's answer was drowned out by Saskia's indignant voice.

'There is no way I would marry you, Idris Delacour, not if you were the last man alive!'

But Idris saw the lawyer's nod and knew what he had to do. For Fayaz, for the country, for the baby.

He had to marry Saskia Harper.

The Sheikh's Pregnant Bride

Jessica Gilmore



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A former au pair, bookseller, marketing manager and seafront trader, JESSICA GILMORE now works for an environmental charity in York, England. Married with one daughter, one fluffy dog and two dog-loathing cats, she spends her time avoiding housework and can usually be found with her nose in a book. Jessica writes emotional romance with a hint of humour, a splash of sunshine and a great deal of delicious food—and equally delicious heroes!

To Rufus.

All these years I thought I was a cat person—turns out I'm all about the canine. Thank you for letting me talk plots through

at you, for all those head-clearing walks and for keeping me company through long hours at my keyboard. xxx

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CHAPTER ONE

HE'D SAID HE'D be there in twelve hours, but in the end it was barely eight hours after he'd received the earth-shattering phone call when Idris Delacour strode into the cool, dark Council Chamber, his eyes still shielded against the harsh sun that had greeted him at the airport despite the still early hour. Grimly he stood by the empty seat at the end of the long table and, taking off his sunglasses, regarded the four sombre men who had stood at his entrance. They were all dressed in the customary long white robes and headdresses worn by traditionalists in Dalmaya and Idris's dark trousers and grey shirt looked both drab and shockingly modern by contrast.

He nodded at the men and waited until they took their seats before seating himself in the ornately carved wooden chair. He was aware of every curve, every bump in the ancient seat. A seat that should never have been his. A seat he was all too willing to relinquish. He cleared his throat. 'Salam.'

They repeated the greeting back to him, the words barely uttered before he continued, 'There can be no mistake?'

'None, Your Highness.'

He flinched at the title but there was more pressing business than his own unwanted and tenuous claim to the Dalmayan throne. 'They are both dead?'

'The King and Her Majesty, yes.'

'Terrorism?' Idris already knew the answers. He had asked the same question during the shock call that had shaken the entire chateau just eight hours before and had been extensively briefed

and updated both whilst travelling to the airport and again once on the private jet that had awaited him there.

‘We’ll have to investigate further obviously,’ the grey-faced man to his right answered. Idris recognised him as Sheikh Ibrahim Al Kouri, Dalmaya’s Head of Security. ‘But it doesn’t seem so. It looks like it was simply a tragic accident.’

Simply? Such an odd way to describe the annihilation of an entire family. The better half of Idris’s own family. ‘And what? The car simply ran off the road?’

The General shook his head. ‘The King and his wife were returning from a day’s excursion and I believe His Majesty may have challenged the guards in the accompanying car to a race.’ He paused. ‘It would not have been the first time.’

Of course not. Fayaz loved to compete, always wanting to prove he was a winner in his own right, not just because of the privilege of his birth.

Sheikh Ibrahim continued in the same monotone voice, shock seemed to have flattened all his usual military pomp. ‘The road was flat and empty and should have been quite safe but it would seem that either His Majesty or the other driver lost control of the wheel and crashed into the other car with a loss of all lives. We have experts on the scene and should have more information for you imminently.’ He looked down at his notes. ‘Four of my agents were in the crash.’

Idris pinched the top of his nose, the words spinning around in his head. He could see the scene so clearly: Fayaz laughing

as the open-topped four-wheel drives wove in and out of each other's path on the wide, sand-covered road, encouraged by the screams of Maya, his wife and Queen. At what point had those screams become real—or had it all been over too fast for any of the party to be aware of how the game would end? He hoped so. He hoped they were laughing right until the end; it would be how he remembered them. Happy and so full of life it hurt.

'I'm sorry. Please pass on my condolences to your agents' families and take care of any outstanding pension and compensation arrangements.'

The General nodded and Idris turned to the man on his left, Minister of the Interior and his own great-uncle. 'What happens next?'

Sheikh Malik Al Osman pushed his tablet to one side. His eyes were heavy, his shoulders slumped as if he couldn't bear the burden that had fallen upon him. 'We've kept news of the accident under wraps while we made sure of no hostile involvement, but now you're here we'll brief state media and Parliament. The funerals will take place this evening and the official mourning period will commence then.'

Idris nodded. 'And then?'

Sheikh Ibrahim jumped in. 'Your Majesty. You know the terms of your grandfather's will. His Highness Sheikh Fayaz Al Osman and his line inherited the throne of Dalmaya, but if he died without issue then the kingdom passes to you and your line.'

Of course Idris knew this. Technically he had always been

aware he was Fayaz's legal heir. He remembered the shock—a shock mingled with the warmth of acceptance—when his grandfather's will had been made public, cementing him firmly into the family. But the prospect of actually becoming King had been so far away he had never considered he would actually be called to do so. Fayaz had already been married at the time of their grandfather's death and his wife was young and healthy. There was no reason to believe they wouldn't soon have many children of their own to take precedence over Idris.

Besides, despite his grandfather's decree, Idris knew how unorthodox his claim was. 'My claim to the throne is through my mother. No King has ever inherited through the maternal line before.' Not only that but his mother's name was a byword for scandal in Dalmaya and, possibly even more unconventionally, his father was French—would the people of this proud kingdom accept the son of such a pair as their ruler?

The point was moot. His vineyard, chateau and his wine export business were all the kingdom Idris needed. He was fond of Dalmaya but he had no intention of living and ruling there. He didn't belong.

'Your grandfather's will...' the General repeated, but from the corner of his eye Idris saw a speculative look pass over his great-uncle's face and turned back to him.

'What do you think, Sheikh Malik?' Hope twisted in his chest, mingling with the fatigue and grief already consuming him. He knew how hard his grandfather had worked to keep the

kingdom safe, to modernise it, to introduce universal healthcare and education. He couldn't just walk away from that legacy, not if there was no other option. But the Al Osman family was extensive. Surely there must be someone qualified and near enough the ruling branch for Idris to be able to hand over the crown with a clear conscience?

His uncle looked directly at Idris. 'His Excellency is of course correct and if Fayaz died without any issue you are by law the next King. But there is the baby...'

Idris blinked. He'd seen Maya just a few months ago and she hadn't mentioned any pregnancy. Besides, Fayaz would have told him straight away if he had had a child. Wouldn't he? 'The baby?' The rest of the table looked as confused as he felt. 'What baby?'

* * *

Saskia stretched and stared out at the enticing view. The sky was so bright and blue it almost hurt, the colour mirrored in the infinity pool just outside the folding glass doors and in the still sea beyond that. Another beautiful day in paradise, and if she could just drag herself off the insanely comfortable sofa and brave the intense heat for the ten seconds it took to step outside the air-conditioned villa and plunge into the pool then she would definitely have a swim. After all, the pool was the only place she was truly comfortable any more, her weight buoyed by the water, her bulk less ungainly.

Her hands strayed down to the tight bump as she caressed it. Just six weeks to go. Not that she was exactly looking forward to

what awaited her at the end of that six weeks despite her daily private pregnancy yoga lessons, her doula, personal midwife and the deluxe delivery suite already pre-booked and awaiting her arrival. Nothing but the best to ease the birth of the new Crown Prince or Princess of Dalmaya.

Stretching again, Saskia winced as her back twinged. Even with the best care possible, pregnancy was the most uncomfortable experience she had ever been through. Don't be so spoiled, she told herself firmly, heaving herself to her feet and padding towards the doors. She was safe, ultra-healthily fed, looked after and, more importantly, so was Jack. Once the baby was safely delivered and in the loving arms of his or her parents then she and her little brother could get back to their lives. Only this time she would be able to afford to give Jack the kind of childhood he deserved. And she would finally catch a break.

Right. Saskia heaved herself off the sofa and took an unsteady step and then another, regaining her balance as she did so. Balance. She missed that, along with being able to see her toes and not swiping things off tables with her belly when she turned around. A swim and then she would settle down and tackle the essay she had been putting off. She might have the money to go back to university thanks to Fayaz and Maya, but if she could just get the first year completed long distance then she would have more money for a house—and for Jack.

Shucking off the loose cotton robe she wore over the frankly vast maternity swimsuit, Saskia opened the door, almost

recoiling from the scalding temperature that hit her the second she stepped out. She hurried as best she could to the pool and cautiously sat herself down by the side, near the wide steps that led down into its blissfully cool depths. Sitting on the floor without needing a forklift to help her back up, that was another simple pleasure she was looking forward to.

‘Sorry, little one,’ she murmured, her hand slipping back to her belly. ‘I do appreciate what a good baby you’ve been to look after for Maya but I think we’re both getting a little uncomfortable here. Besides, you must be looking forward to meeting your mummy and daddy, hmm? I know they can’t wait to meet you.’

That was an understatement. Fayaz and Maya were determined to be there for every step of the pregnancy. They had recorded stories for Saskia to play for the baby daily so that their voices would be instantly familiar when it was born and Maya had been as regular a visitor as she could manage. ‘Not long now,’ Saskia continued as she slid her aching legs into the deliciously cool water. ‘Mummy comes to live with us next week so she can spend every moment with you until she can take you home. Won’t that be lovely?’

Sharing this huge, luxurious villa would be very different from the old days, gossiping in the college student kitchen, but Saskia was still looking forward to some heart-to-hearts with her old friend and to some adult company. Fayaz and Maya hadn’t wanted anyone to know that Saskia was carrying their baby and so she had been confined to the villa since her arrival

in Dalmaya nearly seven months ago. No matter how luxurious it might be, a place she wasn't allowed to leave couldn't help but feel like a prison. A self-imposed prison, sure; Saskia had known every single term and condition before she'd signed the surrogacy agreement, but a prison nonetheless.

She lowered herself into the water, a shiver of delight trembling through her as the cold enveloped her uncomfortably warm skin, and kicked off. She had been warned not to overexert herself and consciously made herself swim slow, considered lengths, concentrating on her breathing and the style of each stroke. Excited as she was to start her new life, there were some things about her prison she would miss. There were unlikely to be any infinity pools in her future, and in London grey skies were far more probable than this never-ending blue. Saskia turned onto her back and floated, eyes shut against the bright sun.

She didn't know how long she stayed there, an ungainly mermaid basking in the sunshine, but a prickling at her neck and a sense of unease penetrated through her sun-induced haze. Saskia opened her eyes slowly, lowering her body until she was treading water upright, her hair slicked back. Whatever, whoever it was that disturbed her was behind her, at the head of the pool. Slowly she turned, awareness of her vulnerability rippling through her. She stopped. Shock hitting her hard.

'Idris?'

It couldn't be. Maya had promised her he was in France and swore she would never reveal to him that Saskia had carried her

baby. No one outside Maya and Fayaz's immediate family was supposed to know the baby had been born to a surrogate at all.

But of course Idris was their family.

Her toes found the bottom of the pool and Saskia anchored herself as she stared at the tall man regarding her inscrutably. He looked exactly the same as he had done seven years ago. No, there were a few small changes. He was more put together, less earnest than the young man she had once been so besotted with. It wasn't just the well-cut, if slightly crumpled suit, the expensively tousled haircut or the dark shadow grazing his cheeks and chin. It was the confidence in the way he carried himself, a self-assuredness that, for all his pretence, the younger Idris hadn't yet achieved. The harsh lines around his mouth were new and looked to be forged by fatigue and grief and the dark brown eyes were dull—at first anyway.

Saskia stood tall, wishing she weren't in a tight swimsuit and stuck in a swimming pool looking up at him like a suppliant, as recognition dawned and Idris's gaze kindled, his eyebrows snapping together.

'Saskia? What on earth are you doing here?' She'd forgotten the impact his voice had always had on her, low, almost gravelly, his French accent more of a hint than a full-on reminder of his heritage.

'Taking a swim.' Thank goodness her voice didn't waver. 'The question is, Idris, what you are doing here. This is private property and I don't recall inviting you in.' Petty but the words

felt good. A small revenge for the way he had treated her all those years ago.

‘I’m here to see the surr...’ He stopped mid-sentence, his gaze dropping to her stomach, and incredulity stole over his face. ‘You? You’re the surrogate?’

Saskia raised her chin. ‘I don’t see how that’s any of your business. I’m not supposed to be experiencing any stress so please leave and let me get on with my swim.’

He glared. ‘Gladly. Only I need to speak to you. It’s important.’
‘Okay. Make it brief.’

‘No, not out here. You need to be sat down. Dressed.’ His gaze swept down her, impersonal, as if he had never seen her body before. Never touched her. Saskia’s cheeks burned but she remained upright, head held high.

‘You don’t give the orders round here, Idris. You ask. Nicely.’

His gaze smouldered but he bit back whatever cutting retort sprang to his lips. ‘Please,’ he ground out. ‘Saskia, this is important. Believe me, I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t.’

She held his gaze, searching for answers within its darkness, fear uncoiling down her spine. Something was very, very wrong here. Why wasn’t Idris in France? Where was Maya? Saskia nodded, slowly. ‘Give me fifteen minutes. Everything takes a little longer right now.’

* * *

For the last couple of months Saskia had lived either in yoga pants or sheer voluminous kaftans, which made her look as if she

were about to act as a sail in an am-dram version of *The Tempest* but, crucially, were cool and comfortable. Neither seemed right just now, instinct warning her that she needed more armour than casual, comfortable clothes would provide.

Luckily Maya had provided her with a designer pregnancy wardrobe fit for a princess. Saskia had pointed out that, confined to the villa as she was, she wouldn't have the opportunity to wear a tenth of the clothes but Maya had waved off her objections. 'You can keep them all and use them when you have your own baby, Sas,' she'd said. Saskia hadn't had the heart to tell her that having a baby of her own didn't figure anywhere in her plans, sensing Maya was buying her the wardrobe she herself wished she could have owned. So Saskia had accepted each gift with a smile and tried not to think about where on earth she would store several wardrobes full of unworn maternity clothes when she finally returned home.

She selected a pair of white cropped linen trousers and teamed them with a nude pink vest top, which gathered in a knot just below her breasts, the material flowing nicely over her bump. Many redheads eschewed pink, even as pale a shade as this, but Saskia loved the colour. She pulled her still-wet hair back into a loose plait and slipped her feet into a pair of flat sandals. She was ready.

Idris was here.

The enormity of what was happening hit her anew and Saskia reached out to the ornately carved bedpost for support. What on

earth had brought him back to her after seven years? It was clear that he hadn't expected to see her; he'd looked just as thrown by the recognition as she had been.

Her lips tightened. She was a different person now. Strong, independent. A survivor. Just because Idris's kisses used to make her forget who she was didn't mean he had any power over her now. She had this situation in hand. She had to.

Summoning a confidence that wasn't quite real, yet not entirely fake, Saskia left her suite and slowly descended the villa's majestic staircase. The stairway led to the large central hallway from which all the other ground-floor rooms were situated. All marble and dark polished wood, it was lined with two impossibly long, armless couches. Idris lounged on the right-hand couch, seemingly completely at ease as he scrolled impatiently through his tablet. He didn't even raise his gaze to watch her as she walked carefully down the marble stairs.

One of the many occasional tables that were scattered around the villa had been brought to his side and a jug of coffee sat there along with a half-full cup. The aroma floated tantalisingly towards Saskia. Coffee was one of the many prohibited food and drinks she had agreed not to touch until three months after the baby was born and her duties had ended. Many she barely touched anyway—she didn't have the budget for shellfish, brie or wine—but coffee was her lifeline and she missed it every day; mint tea just didn't have the same effect.

As the thought flitted across her mind Hamid, the houseboy,

pulled up a second table and placed a cup of the herbal beverage upon it. Suppressing a longing sigh, Saskia smiled her thanks. She made no move to sit, nor did she have any intention of standing in front of Idris and waiting for him to notice her. Instead she picked up the cup and walked away into her favourite sitting area, the smallest of the living rooms with stunning views of the pool and the sea beyond. She curled up on the couch, picked up a book and waited for Idris to come to her.

She didn't have to wait long. A smothered exclamation was followed by short sharp footsteps. 'Tiens, there you are. Why didn't you let me know you were ready?'

Saskia hadn't taken in a word on the page but she still made a show of finishing her sentence before half closing the book and looking up with a mild smile. 'You looked busy. Take a seat, Idris, and let me know how I can help you.' There, she had established that this was her home and she was the one in charge.

To her surprise Idris didn't react with impatience or irritation. He sat down on the chair at right angles to her and leaned forwards before jumping up and striding across the room, his face set and eyes clouded. The premonition Saskia had felt in the pool returned, fear icy on her skin.

'What is it, Idris? Why are you here?'

He turned and the grief on his face clawed at her heart. 'There was an accident. Fayaz...' He stopped and swallowed.

'What kind of accident?'

'A car accident.'

‘He will always drive too fast. Such a boy racer.’ If she could keep chatting, keep the conversation light and inconsequential then she wouldn’t have to hear the rest. Because of course there was more. Idris wouldn’t have flown over from France for a minor injury. Nor would he have come here to tell her—to tell the unknown surrogate—in person.

‘Saskia.’ She could only sit paralysed while he walked back towards her, each deliberate, slow step echoing around her brain. He sat next to her, so familiar and yet a stranger and, to her increasing dread, took her hand in his. Once the simple touch of his hand would leave her incoherent and unable to think about anything but him, but right now she couldn’t feel anything. All she could do was wait for the words she knew were coming.

‘Saskia, the accident, it was a bad one. Fayaz didn’t make it. Nobody did.’

Nobody? Her free hand crept down to her belly, whether to reassure the baby or herself she didn’t know. ‘Maya?’ Her throat was so swollen she could barely croak the word out, but she knew that he heard her when his grip on her hand intensified.

‘I’m sorry, Saskia. She was with him.’

She didn’t move, didn’t react, couldn’t react, couldn’t process anything he was saying. Fayaz and Maya. Such a golden couple; beautiful, wealthy, powerful sure but also caring and loving, and they had known their share of tragedy. Years of IVF and three miscarriages had left Maya utterly bereft—which was why she had come to Saskia.

Saskia's hand stilled on her belly. She pulled her other hand out of Idris's clasp and turned to him. 'The baby? What happens to their baby?'

CHAPTER TWO

IDRIS STARED UNSEEINGLY out at the sea. He needed to get back to Jayah. The funerals would be taking place in just a few hours' time and there were a hundred and one things demanding Idris's attention, but his business at the villa wasn't done. Not nearly. Saskia's question echoed round and round his mind. What happened to the baby? Orphaned before birth. His cousin's baby and, morally, the rightful heir.

But the burning question remained unanswered: was it the legal heir? Idris had no idea; which was why he was still kicking his heels at the villa, awaiting both the lawyer who had drawn up the surrogacy agreement and his great-uncle so that he could get their advice. Advice he was praying tied in with his own plans, because if the baby could inherit and if his great-uncle was prepared to take on the Regency until it was of age then Idris could return to France as soon as the mourning period was over.

He pushed away the guilt clenching his chest. Fayaz would have understood why he couldn't stay; he knew how alone Idris always felt in Dalmaya. How out of place. Set apart by his accent, his French upbringing. Tainted by the dishonour his mother had brought on her family, not just by her elopement but by her subsequent lifestyle. Fayaz knew how duty already ruled his life, knew how hard Idris had worked to restore the chateau, the

vineyards, to make the Delacour name mean something again. He wouldn't expect Idris to put all that aside for a country that had never quite acknowledged him. Would he?

The all too familiar burden of heavy expectations descended onto his shoulders. Fayaz might not have expected Idris to put everything aside, but he would have known that it was almost impossible for Idris to turn away.

Almost...

At the back of his mind another question burned white hot. What was Saskia Harper doing here? Why on earth was she acting as Maya's surrogate? The guilt pulsed harder. He'd spent the last seven years doing his best not to think about Saskia, but occasionally he would see a flash of auburn hair, hear an imperious English accent and his heart would stutter to a stop, a tiny part of him hoping it might be her.

He hadn't expected to be so numb with grief when he did finally see her again that he had barely registered the shock of her presence.

The doctor's footsteps echoed through the hallway and Idris turned to the doorway, impatient for some answers. The midwife who worked full time at the villa had taken one look at Saskia and hustled her straight to bed, insisting that she be seen immediately by a doctor. The guilt pulsed again. Fayaz would expect him to do his best for his child and for its mother. 'How is she?'

The doctor took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. 'As well as can be expected, Your Highness. A severe shock at any stage of

pregnancy should be avoided if possible, but she's strong, healthy and has had the best possible care throughout. However, as a precaution, I've suggested bed rest for the rest of today and that she take it as easy as possible for the next few days. It's out of the question for her to attend the funerals, of course. She shouldn't be travelling.'

The funerals. Idris clenched his jaw and refused to acknowledge the grief beating down on him. There was no time, not now. 'Of course.'

'I'm leaving Nurse Wilson in charge. She has my personal number if there are any concerns. I'll come out straight away but I don't foresee any problems. Try and keep Sayeda Saskia calm, and make sure she eats something.' The doctor paused. 'I'm very sorry for your loss, Your Highness. Your cousin was a good man and Queen Maya deserved the happiness this baby would have brought her. I'll be back in the morning.'

Idris spent the next couple of hours sending emergency emails. Just because it felt as if he were standing in the eye of a storm, unable to move while events whirled around him, didn't mean he could neglect his own concerns. He closed his eyes briefly, picturing the weathered grey stone, the chateau turrets, the acres of slowly ripening vines. He'd made his home, made his mark at Chateau Delacour, knew every inch of soil, every man, woman and child in its environs. Last night he'd gone to bed expecting to wake up to another spring day, making sure he put some time aside to join the workers in the field as they carefully hoed and

weeded the precious vines. What was the point of living in the glorious French countryside if he spent all his life in an office? Instead he'd awoken to a panicked call and his life had come to an abrupt halt. The vineyard felt like a lifetime, not a continent away.

He knew his managers could take charge of the vineyard and his export business until he returned and he made sure they had all the relevant authorisation to do so, warning them that he would likely be difficult to get hold of and so they should contact him only in an emergency. He stopped as he typed a reassuring message promising them he would be back as soon as possible—he just hoped he was telling them the truth. Meanwhile a flood of panicked emails flooded in from the various ministries all needing guidance. He told each one to carry on as usual, promising an announcement on the succession imminently. He hoped he was telling them the truth as well. It was a long, testing couple of hours and he was relieved to hear the car pull up heralding the advisors he needed.

‘Assalamu alaikum, this way, please.’ Idris gestured to the stairs. On the midwife’s advice he had decided to hold the meeting in Saskia’s rooms—the doctor had said she was to be kept quiet but she clearly had a stake in the subject under discussion and Idris sensed it would be far more stressful for her if she was left out.

The houseboy led them up the staircase and indicated the door leading to Saskia’s apartments. Idris paused, the reality of

the situation hitting him anew. Fayaz was gone—and Saskia was here. Here in Dalmaya. Not quite his territory but close enough to discombobulate him with her unexpected presence.

Her bedroom was huge, the outside wall made entirely of glass, doors leading out to a large terrace filled with plants and shaded seats overlooking the sea. The room was decorated in soothing shades of blue and cream; a gigantic bed with ornately carved wooden bedposts sat on a platform at one end of the room, a seating area grouped at the other. Two doors were slightly ajar, and Idris could see they led into a dressing area and a bathroom. Refreshments had been placed onto the coffee table and Saskia was already lying on one of the three couches arranged around it. She smiled wanly at the lawyer as he greeted her and extended her hand to Idris's great-uncle.

'Please excuse me for not getting up but I have been ordered not to move.'

'No apologies needed.' The elderly man bowed over her hand. 'Sheikh Malik Al Osman. It's an honour to meet you, Sheikha Saskia.'

Idris started at the honorary title, nodding curtly at Saskia and taking the seat farthest away from her. A quick glance showed him how pale she was under her tan, the pain in her eyes reflecting the pain he saw in the mirror. He ruthlessly pressed on; there was far more at stake here than personal feelings. 'I don't have much time,' he said, opening proceedings briskly. 'So let's get going. Can somebody explain just what is going on here and

why nobody knows anything about this baby?’

The lawyer nodded, setting his briefcase on the table and taking out a sheaf of papers. ‘I acted for Their Majesties in this matter so maybe I should start. You have to understand, Sheikh Idris, that legally surrogacy and adoption are still grey areas here in Dalmaya. Historically if a woman couldn’t conceive she would simply raise a family member’s child as her own—either a sister’s or cousin’s or a fellow wife’s child, and that child would be considered hers. Plus any child she bears during marriage is legally her husband’s regardless of actual biological fatherhood; that goes for any child she raises for someone else too.’

Idris frowned. ‘So all Maya had to do was call herself the baby’s mother and the baby became hers and Fayaz’s without any need to adopt it legally?’

‘Traditionally that’s all that they had to do. Of course, by using a surrogate they had ensured the baby was Fayaz’s biological child anyway, but because Sayeda Saskia is a British citizen, and to make sure there was no confusion in the future, they were planning to adopt the baby in the British courts as well.’

‘So why the secrecy? You said it yourself, raising someone else’s child is culturally acceptable and the baby is Fayaz’s biologically, so there should be no quibbling over inheritance.’

‘Your grandfather’s reforms and his subsequent decision to take just one wife, a stance followed by his son and grandson, hasn’t been popular amongst traditionalists, partly because it has greatly reduced the number of potential heirs in the Al Osman

senior branch. Your grandfather had just two children and his only son died while Fayaz was still a child. If it was known that the Queen couldn't conceive there would have been great pressure on Fayaz to take a second wife.'

'Maya felt like such a failure,' Saskia said, staring down at her hands. 'She put herself through hell. IVF after IVF, three terrible miscarriages. She knew how important it was that Fayaz had an heir...she knew that you didn't want...' She came to a halt, flashing one quick glance over at him. He'd forgotten just how disconcerting her green eyes were, no hint of hazel or blue diluting them.

'How many people know about this?'

'I have known from the start. Fayaz discussed it with me before they went down the surrogacy route,' Sheikh Malik said. 'As head of the junior branch of the family he wanted to make sure I had no objections, that there would be no repercussions later on. The staff here know, any lawyers involved in the adoption and surrogacy agreement and certain medical staff here and in the UK. They all signed binding non-disclosure agreements, of course. The heads of the Privy Council are now aware after this morning's meeting, but they can all be relied on to keep quiet, if it's for the good of the country. But do we want to keep it quiet? If Fayaz has a son and heir then surely we need to let people know.'

'Or a daughter,' Saskia said quietly, her hands back on her stomach. Idris could hardly drag his eyes away from her slim, long fingers as they stroked the bump; the gesture seemed

automatic, maybe as much comfort for mother as for child. But Saskia was only the mother until birth... Idris watched her hands in their rhythmic pattern. No child should be born motherless. Even his own beautiful, selfish, careless mother had been around sometimes for kisses and bedtime stories. Occasionally even two nights in a row.

Of course there had been the many weeks he had barely seen her at all.

‘The problem is—’ The lawyer’s voice recalled Idris’s attention back to the matter at hand. He tore his gaze away from Saskia and concentrated on the papers spread out over the coffee table. ‘A baby’s paternity in this country is proven only in two ways. Either the father claims the child as his, which is what Fayaz intended...’

‘What about the surrogacy agreement?’ Saskia asked. ‘Doesn’t that prove Fayaz was going to claim the baby?’

The lawyer shook his head. ‘Surrogacy isn’t recognised here. The only way Fayaz could posthumously be recognised as the father would be if you had been married to him.’

Idris’s heart stopped for one long, painful second as he processed the words. There was no way out. If Fayaz couldn’t legally be proven as the father, if the child wasn’t legitimised, then it couldn’t inherit. Which meant the Kingship fell heavily onto Idris’s own shoulders. A burden he had never asked for and certainly never wanted. He glanced out of the window at the relentless blue and his chest ached as he recalled the myriad colours of the French late spring: greens and lavender and red.

‘In that case who does it belong to?’ Saskia’s voice cut into his thoughts. ‘Isn’t that the most important thing we need to decide? Who is going to raise this baby? Time isn’t on our side.’

Idris stared at her. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean,’ she said, emphasising every word, ‘its parents have died. It’s due in six weeks and it needs a family regardless of whether it can inherit the throne or not. Could another branch of the family adopt it? Would that be what Fayaz would want? Do we know? I mean, that surrogacy agreement covered everything down to what vitamins I should take pre-and post-pregnancy. I can’t believe Fayaz didn’t have a contingency plan if something like this should happen.’

The lawyer nodded. ‘He had named a guardian for the baby.’

‘Who?’ Saskia and Idris spoke together.

The lawyer’s gaze shifted to Idris. ‘His cousin, Sheikh Idris Delacour.’

‘Moi?’

‘Him?’ Again the two of them were in unison. Idris looked over at Saskia. He’d spent the last seven years doing his best to forget about her. How could he raise a child that was half hers? A child who would remind him of its mother every second of every day?

How could he raise a child at all? His mother said all he cared about was the vineyard, about work, and for once she had a point.

‘Let me see that.’ He held out his hand for the sheaf of papers and scanned them quickly. Even through the dense

legalese Fayaz's intentions were clear. If anything happened to Fayaz, then Idris was to be guardian to any children until their twenty-first birthday. Idris swallowed. Fayaz was just like their grandfather, intent on making sure Idris was part of the family even if he was French by birth and name. But Fayaz couldn't have meant to make him responsible for a motherless newborn; he knew nothing about children—and by the incredulous look on Saskia's face she was thinking exactly the same thing.

He turned his concentration back to the papers, flicking through them until he reached the surrogacy contract. Saskia was right, it was thorough, covering everything from diet to exercise to location, stating she was to travel to Dalmaya as soon as the pregnancy was confirmed and stay until three months after the birth in order to provide nutrition for the baby. It took every bit of self-possession he had not to look up at that, not to look over at her full, ripe breasts. He took a deep breath and continued to read.

All her medical bills paid, of course, accommodation, clothes and food provided throughout the timespan of the agreement, school fees paid—school fees for who? His eyebrows flew up in unspoken query, only to lower as he read the allowance made to her every week. Bound to the villa, every need catered for, she was going to be pocketing a nice profit by the end of the contract. He turned the page and stopped, rereading the words again before tossing the contract contemptuously onto the table as he glared at Saskia.

‘You’re being paid for this?’ It took everything he had not to spit the words out. His cousin and his glowing wife, desperate for a baby. How hard must it have been for Maya to watch Saskia do so easily what she couldn’t, knowing that the baby was just a way for the surrogate mother to make money?

Saskia flushed. ‘That is none of your business.’

‘I think you’ll find it is very much my business,’ he reminded her silkily and her colour heightened. ‘I don’t know why I’m surprised. You always did like to play games. But this isn’t a game, Saskia. This was Fayaz and Maya’s life!’

Her colour was still high but her eyes flashed as she shifted. ‘Maya came to me, asked me to do this. I didn’t play games or negotiate on payment. I took what was offered, yes, why wouldn’t I? I have given this baby over a year of my life. Restricted my diet, my liberty, taken fertility drugs, undergone invasive procedure after invasive procedure to give this baby the best possible start in life. So don’t throw the fact I’m to be paid in my face as if it makes me some kind of whore. Of course I was happy to help Maya, but I was in no position to give her a year of my life for love alone.’

‘It’s not a payment as such, that’s illegal under British law and the baby was conceived in the UK,’ the lawyer interjected quickly. ‘It’s compensation for Miss Harper’s loss of income and freedom. The compensation is to be paid at the end of the contract if every condition has been adhered to and if Sayeda Saskia ensures that she prioritises the baby’s well-being until it

reaches the age of three months.’

Taking a deep breath to quell his anger, Idris turned to his great-uncle. ‘I know what my grandfather’s will says, but surely my name, my heritage precludes me from taking the throne? Isn’t there anyone more qualified in another branch of the family? Your branch?’

Sheikh Malik shook his head. ‘Not without tremendous upheaval and turmoil, Idris. The kind of turmoil your grandfather spent his life trying to ensure the country would never go through again. Yes, your father is French but more importantly you’re the grandson of the Great Reformer. I don’t think the people will reject you. Your name doesn’t matter but if it worries you it’s easy enough to change it to Delacour Al Osman.’ He paused, leaning forward, his gaze intent on Idris. ‘I can’t force you to accept the throne, but, Idris, I can and will beg you to. For your grandfather’s sake, for your cousin’s sake, for your country.’

A great weariness descended on Idris. His destiny was as clear as it was unwanted. He’d never appreciated his life properly before, the old chateau lovingly restored piece by piece, the vineyards, finally back in profit, and making wines he was proud to put his name to, the family coffers filling again despite his parents’ best efforts. It was hard work involving long hours but it was satisfying and he was in control. Best of all it was quiet. No drama, no press, no obligations beyond those of the people who worked for him. How could he swap that for life in the spotlight, an entire country reliant on his success? For a child who wasn’t

his?

How could he not? His parents showed him all too well the consequences of living for nothing but self. Thanks to them he had grown up always worrying how the next bill would be paid, where they would be living next, even what they would be eating that night. Thankfully he had been able to escape to his grandfathers, to the two men who had never met but would have liked and respected each other, if their paths had ever crossed. The men who had taught him that duty and honour and responsibility weren't burdens but the measure of a man.

Sometimes he envied his mother, her carefree waltz through life, her refusal to be bound by convention. But such a path was selfish, had consequences for all those around.

A King's life wasn't his, he knew that all too well. His own needs, his own desires, his own likes always second to duty. And Idris saw his duty all too clearly. All of it.

His mind raced as he ruthlessly ousted all emotions from his mind, concentrating on the cold, hard facts, looking for the path ahead. First, it was clearly in the baby's best interests to have a mother's care right from birth. Second, he, Idris, was the legal heir, whether he liked it or not. But, third, at the same time the unborn baby was the rightful heir. Fourth, he was said baby's guardian. The pieces began to fall into place one by one.

What had the lawyer said? That if a man was married to the mother when a child was born then he was automatically that child's legal father regardless of actual paternity? He looked over

at the other man. ‘Let me get this straight. If I marry Sayeda Saskia then the baby will be my child, my heir, in both law and in the eyes of the world.’

The lawyer’s words were drowned out by Saskia’s indignant, ‘There is no way I am marrying you, Idris Delacour, not if you were the last man alive!’ But Idris saw the nod and he knew what he had to do. For Fayaz, for the country, for the baby. He had to marry the only woman he had ever come close to loving. The woman he had walked away from. He had to marry Saskia Harper.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS ALL very well being told not to allow herself to become agitated but how was Saskia supposed to stay calm when Idris dropped a bombshell more explosive than she could possibly have imagined, and then calmly wrapped up the meeting and disappeared as if she had meekly fallen into line with his insane plans? Marry Idris? The man who had ripped her heart and self-esteem to shreds and then stomped on them without mercy? The man who had let her down at the lowest point in her life?

‘Sorry, baby,’ Saskia told it that sleepless night. ‘I know it’s scary now that Maya isn’t here to look after you, but marrying Idris isn’t the best thing for either of us. I’m not ready to be a mother yet, and you deserve more than that. He’s going to be King. He can give you everything you need.’

But he couldn’t give the baby a mother who would love it

unconditionally—and she knew that was the only thing Maya would ask of her. Saskia’s eyes filled and she hurriedly blinked back the tears, trying to focus on her indignation instead. The only positive thing to come out of this whole mess was that her anger with Idris helped her to manage the shock of losing Maya and Fayaz. She was so busy thinking of one hundred ways to tell him that she would rather marry Jabba the Hutt than him that the grief had released some of its painful grip from her chest—although she did keep reaching for her phone ready to text Maya with a planned, clever comeback, only for the grief to descend again with all its painful intensity when she remembered she would never be able to text her again.

Not that she had had an opportunity to test even one of her scathing put-downs on Idris yet. Twenty-four hours had passed with no word from him and she had no way to contact him. Saskia stared out of the window. Of course, he had been a little busy burying his cousin and closest friend. She choked back a sob, the lump back in her throat. She wished she had had the opportunity to say goodbye too. No, that wasn’t true. She wished more than anything that she could have handed her newborn baby over to Maya and seen the moment her friend fell in love with her much-wanted child.

Yes, she had agreed to be a surrogate for the money, she had never pretended her motives were anything more altruistic, but she had also wanted to be the one to make her friend’s dreams come true. At least Maya had died knowing she would soon be

a mother. Saskia twisted her hands together. Would Maya have wanted Saskia to raise her baby for her? She knew how much Saskia had sacrificed already raising Jack; surely she wouldn't have expected her to sacrifice more?

'His Highness Sheikh Idris Delacour Al Osman,' the houseboy announced and Saskia jumped. She hadn't even heard the car pull up, too absorbed in her thoughts. She turned, glad she had dressed ready for his return whenever it might be, in a severely cut grey linen shift dress, her hair coiled in a businesslike knot on the top of her head.

She sat upright in her chair—no more reclining, no more weakness—and folded her ankles and hands. Poised, collected and ready to do battle. But the cold words she had prepared faded as soon as Idris entered the room. He was grey with fatigue, shadows pronounced under his eyes and the grief lines cut deep. She held out her hand with no more thought than the need to comfort someone suffering as she suffered, only to drop it as he walked straight past it as if it weren't there. She leaned back and regarded him, doing her best to hide her humiliation and anger. How dared he treat her like that when he was the one who had let her down at the most vulnerable moment in her life? She should be the one shunning him.

Idris stood, back to her, staring out of the windows. Saskia regarded him for a few moments before turning to the houseboy and requesting some tea and refreshments. She sat back, displaying a composure she was a long way from feeling,

and waited. Several long minutes passed before he spoke, the tea served and the houseboy dismissed, Saskia not moving or speaking, refusing to be the one to break first. Finally Idris shifted, although he still didn't face her.

'I've discussed our marriage with the heads of the Privy Council. They agree a big royal wedding is not in the country's best interests right now. We're still in the mourning period and your condition will give rise to the kind of speculation it's best to avoid. However, time is clearly not on our side so the consensus is for a quiet wedding here as soon as possible. The lawyer is drawing up the paperwork right now and we are thinking the day after tomorrow for the ceremony. In accordance with Dalmayan law it is simply the signing of a contract. Traditionally the elder of your house would negotiate the contract for you, but my grandfather decreed that women now act for themselves. As time and secrecy are of the essence the lawyer who drew up the surrogacy will advise you and I suggest you go over the contract with him before the ceremony.'

Saskia listened to every crazy word, her mind busily coming up with—and discarding—several considered responses pointing out exactly why this was such a bad idea but in the end she settled for a simple 'No.'

Idris turned slowly. 'No?'

'No. No to the wedding. No to marriage. No to spending any more time with you than I have to.'

His mouth compressed. 'Believe me, Saskia, if there was

another way...’

‘You don’t need me. You’re the baby’s guardian regardless of whether I marry you or not. Marry someone else. Someone you can bear to be in the same room with.’

‘This isn’t about you and me. This is about what’s right.’

‘Oh, don’t be so sanctimonious. The last thing Fayaz or Maya would want is for us of all people to be trapped into marriage with each other. Not for us and not for the baby.’

‘And the baby’s right to inherit?’

‘If you adopt it...’

‘You heard the lawyer. Formal adoption is still an unknown process in Dalmaya.’

‘Well, then marry someone else and adopt the baby quietly, like Maya intended to.’

‘You want me to woo and marry someone in less than six weeks?’

‘You’re about to be King. The kingdom must be full of women desperate to fall at your feet and into your arms.’ Funny to think she was one of those women once—and she hadn’t needed a title, just one of his rare smiles.

‘There can be no ambiguity about the baby’s heritage. No, Saskia, this is the best way. The only way.’

‘Then you are in trouble because I am not going to marry you.’ She clasped her hands to stop them shaking and waited, heart hammering.

There’s nothing he can do, she told herself. Dalmaya is a

civilised country. He's not going to drag you to the altar by your hair.

She stared straight at Idris, defiant but a little confused by the look on his face. He didn't look angry or upset, he looked amused, bordering on smug. Her throat dried.

'You signed a contract.'

'To have a baby.'

'Non, you agreed to a lot more than that. You agreed to do whatever is in the baby's best interests until he or she is three months old and, if required to in extremis, to come to its aid in later life.'

Saskia blinked. 'Yes, but that's because Fayaz and Maya wanted me to express milk for the baby for the first three months so I need to stay here for those three months and adhere to the right diet. That's all that the in the best interests part means.'

'That's not what it says,' he said softly, gaze still intent on hers. 'You did read the contract before signing it, didn't you?'

'Of course, and my lawyer took me through every clause...'
She halted. That clause was written exactly the way Idris had phrased it. They didn't know what would happen, her lawyer had explained. What if the baby needed a blood transfusion and she, not Fayaz, was the right match? Or, later on, a kidney, unlikely as that might be? Even a donor sibling? The three months post birth she was glad to agree to; it was an opportunity to recover from pregnancy and birth in comfort and peace. The statistical chance of the in extremis clause being invoked had been low enough

for her not to be concerned—compensation would be offered commensurate with whatever was needed and, besides, of course she would want to help if it was within her power to do so. ‘It doesn’t mean what you’re implying.’

‘Oh?’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘The baby doesn’t need a mother for its first three months? Being orphaned before birth isn’t in extremis enough? Tell me, Saskia, what have you been doing since the last time I saw you? Apart from dropping out from university?’

Her hands curled into tight fists. How could he be so dismissive? Act as if they hadn’t once been, if not in love, so very close to falling off that cliff? Maybe it had just been her, so besotted she hadn’t noticed how little he felt for her. But for all his faults, for all his arrogance, she had never known Idris Delacour be deliberately cruel. Even that last time...she hadn’t actually managed to tell him about her father’s death when he sent her away.

Surely Maya and Fayaz had filled him in on what had happened to her, told him about her father? She’d assumed so. But if he hadn’t known she was their choice of surrogate, hadn’t known she was in Dalmaya, then maybe not. Thinking about it, they had always been very careful not to discuss Idris with her beyond mentioning that he had achieved his dream of renovating the chateau and the vineyards. Her pulse began to race as she took in his politely contemptuous expression. He couldn’t know, not about her father’s death, not about Jack. After all, she hadn’t

even known of Jack's existence when they were together.

She lifted her chin. 'This and that.' If he didn't know about Jack then she wasn't going to enlighten him. The less he knew about her life, her circumstances, the better. The less ammunition he would have.

'No husband? Fiancé? Significant other? Career? I thought not. I'm offering you it all on a plate, Saskia, a family, a home, a position that comes with all the luxuries and money a girl like you needs to get by.'

She wouldn't cry. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction of even a chin wobble. 'You know nothing about a girl like me.'

'Non? Well, I suppose I have the rest of my life to find out.'

'The answer is still no. You can sue me, Idris. See what people think about the King of Dalmaya suing a woman into becoming his wife. I can take that kind of humiliation, can you?'

His eyes were hard and flat. That shot had gone home. He'd always been abominably proud. 'I don't need to sue you, Saskia. If you don't marry me and legitimise the baby then the lawyer agrees you have broken the in extremis clause and the first three months agreement. We won't owe you a red cent. You'll leave here not a penny the richer for your year and a bit's hard work.' His eyes flicked contemptuously to the side table laden with little pastries and fruits.

The world stilled and stopped. No money? No money meant no house, no university, no way of clawing herself out of the exhausting cycle she had found herself repeating over and over

for the last seven years. No money meant a return to long hours and mind-numbing work, to low wages and choosing between food and heating. To damp flats. No money meant no security for Jack... She couldn't breathe, the lump in her throat outsized only by the heavy stone in her chest. She couldn't do it all again. She couldn't...

Somehow, she had no idea how, she managed to take in a breath, only her whitened knuckles giving away her inner turmoil. She could do it. She'd done it before. She would have no choice but to pick herself up once again.

But not without a fight. 'I'll talk to my lawyer.'

'You do that,' he said affably. 'I can afford to fight this all the way. Can you say the same, Saskia? Daddy must be keeping you short if you've resorted to surrogacy and you've been off the party circuit for a while. Will any of your boyfriends pick up the tab?'

The casual, contemptuous mention of her father was like a physical blow but she didn't waver, keeping her voice low and cold. 'Don't you worry about me.'

'You'll be a single mother as well. That's not the kind of accessory men look for in their dates.'

Her gaze snapped up to meet his. There was no humour in his dark eyes, just a searing contempt. 'What do you mean?'

He shrugged. 'The lawyer was quite clear. Under Dalmayan law there's no way of proving that the child is Fayaz's. I don't have any obligation to take in a child of unknown origin.'

'The agreement. His DNA...' But she remembered the

lawyer's words as clearly as Idris did.

'Inadmissible.'

'Not in the UK.'

'Saskia, we're not in the UK.'

'You'd turn your back on your cousin's child?'

'This country is going through enough right now. I wasn't born here or brought up here. My first language is French, my surname is French. My mother ran away surrounded by the biggest scandal of the last century. That's the legacy I inherit. I need to be seen as committed to Dalmaya. The last thing I need is a motherless baby who isn't mine muddling up the succession. Now, I'm willing to marry you, legitimise the baby and make it my heir. But it's all or nothing, Saskia. Pick wisely.'

Go to hell.

The words were so tempting but she reined them in while she desperately searched for a way out, a way to reach him. Her earlier thought ran through her brain like a track on repeat, reminding her that the Idris she had known before wasn't cruel. Single-minded, yes. Definitely ambitious. But not cruel. Not until the last time she'd seen him.

But that man, that man who had turned his back on her, he was capable of turning his back on the baby too, she was almost sure. Almost...it was a slim word to hang her hopes on to. Could she risk it?

If he was in earnest then she wouldn't just be returning to the UK penniless, she'd be returning with a baby. A baby would

make finding a job, a place to live so very, very much harder...

And of course there was Jack. She'd promised him a better life. Could she drag him back to an even more difficult childhood than the one he'd left? He'd never complained before but he'd never known another way before.

'Saskia!' A voice broke through her thoughts and she looked up. Was it that time already? She'd meant to keep Jack well away from Idris but it was too late. Her brother raced through the marble hallway, dropping his bag in the middle of the room as he kicked off his shoes. His au pair followed, picking up his discarded belongings as she went. How quickly he'd adjusted to the heat and the space and the staff. How could she take him back to an inadequately heated one-bedroom flat?

He skidded to a halt by her chair. Ignoring Idris's raised brow, she held out her arms for the cuddle her brother still greeted her with. 'Jack, how was your day, tiger?'

'Good. I scored three goals during playtime.'

'Three goals, huh? Good to see you're learning something in that fancy school of yours. Jack, I want you to meet someone. This is Idris. I used to...' She faltered. 'We knew each other when I was younger. He is Fayaz's cousin.'

Jack turned, a little shyly, but stuck out his hand. 'Pleased to meet you.'

Idris threw her a startled glance as he shook Jack's hand. 'Pleased to meet you too, Jack. Are you over visiting Saskia?' But his keen eyes were scanning Jack and Saskia knew he had

noted the school uniform, the au pair, the houseboy standing to one side with a tray filled with milk and cookies. All the signs that Jack was a permanent member of the household.

‘No.’ Jack sounded surprised. ‘I live here.’

‘You live here?’ His brows had snapped together and he was looking at Jack assessingly.

‘Jack is my brother and I am his guardian,’ Saskia interjected smoothly. ‘Jack, go and have your milk and cookies in the kitchen, okay? Then I think Husain has offered to give you a swimming lesson.’

‘Really? Cool!’ And he was gone in a blur of elbows and calves.

‘He lives with you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where’s his mother?’

She shrugged. ‘I’m not quite sure. She was in Brazil last I heard but she doesn’t keep in contact.’

‘Your father?’

‘Dead. Look, Jack is none of your business so let’s...’

If the news of her father’s death surprised him he hid it well. ‘If your brother lives with you then he is very much my business. When we are married...’

‘You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said, have you? I am not marrying you, Idris. Not in two days’ time, not ever.’ But although her words and tone were defiant despair flowed through her. There was no happy ending here. Her dreams of returning to

England in just a few months ready to restart her degree and with enough money to buy a small house somewhere within commuting distance of London had turned into a nightmare. Either she returned back to the same hardship Maya had rescued her from—only this time with a baby in tow—or she stayed and married Idris. There would be no money worries if she chose the latter. But there would be no hope of escape either.

Idris reached into his pocket and pulled out a small card, which he handed to her. Numbly she took it, barely glancing at the plain black type on the crisp white background. ‘My number. If you change your mind call me tomorrow. If not then I will organise a plane to take you and your brother back to London as soon as possible. The choice is yours.’

And then he was gone. Saskia put the card down, her hands trembling so much she wasn’t sure she would ever be able to make them stop. She wasn’t going to give in. Never.

* * *

Tucking Jack in wasn’t easy; she couldn’t bend over the bed any more. Instead Saskia had to perch on the side of the bed while she read to him. Saskia could forget her worries for a short while as she read the story of a boy wizard and his adventures out loud, doing all the voices as instructed.

‘At least I never had to sleep under the stairs,’ Jack said as she closed the book and laid it on the bedside table.

‘Not up to now,’ Saskia agreed.

‘When we go home, will you have a bedroom too?’ Jack had

always thought it most unfair that he had had a room of his own while Saskia had slept on a sofa bed in the flat's all-purpose living and dining room. But it had been an impossible conundrum. The temping agency she had worked for supplied offices around London's West End. The wages were very good for a temp job but to get into work for just before nine, to pay as little as possible on transport and to ensure she could fit in with the childminder's hours, Saskia had had to live as close to central London as she could afford. Which had meant compromising on space. The exorbitantly expensive, tiny new-build flat would have been bijou for one person; for a family of two, one of whom was an active growing boy, it was oppressively small. It had, however, been home but she had given up her rental agreement when she'd left England. Who knew where the two of them would end up?

The three of them...unless Idris was bluffing. But the coldness in his eyes had given her no hope of that.

Thank goodness Maya had insisted that she be paid an allowance—and thank goodness there had never been anything to spend it on. With some careful budgeting—and she was an expert at that—she could keep herself, Jack and the baby for six months. Where she was going to keep them was a whole other matter. London was out of the question financially. But London was all she knew, except for nine months spent in Oxford a lifetime ago.

‘A bedroom of my own? I hope so.’

‘And will we have a garden? With a footie goal and a

basketball hoop and space for me to ride a bike?" He was drowsy now. This was the way he always fell asleep, talking about all the things they would have once their stay in Dalmaya was over. He wasn't greedy, he didn't want video games and gadgets, just space to run around and play. Saskia brushed the hair back from his forehead, her heart aching. He deserved to be able to play.

'That's the plan.'

'I wish we could have a pool like we have here. Dan's dad said he would teach us to ride and to sail, but I won't be here much longer.' Dan was his best friend and Jack had spent a lot of time at his house, although due to the secrecy surrounding the surrogacy he had never invited any of his friends to the villa. Another thing she had promised him: a home open to anyone he wanted. 'Can I learn to ride horses and to sail when we get home?'

'I'm not sure about that. It depends where we end up.'

'I'll miss the sun. And the sea. And the sand. I like it here. I wish we could stay...' And he was gone. Saskia didn't move, continuing to stroke his hair, watching his face, mobile even in sleep.

Funny to remember how resentful she'd been when she'd realised there was no one else to care for him, that along with the shame and the debts and the mess her father had bequeathed her, there was a toddler who needed clothing and feeding and taking care of. If she hadn't taken him in her life would have taken a very different turn; she would probably have taken her degree, got a job. She wouldn't have lived the gilded life she had enjoyed

before her father's suicide; those circles had closed to her as soon as his embezzlement had been discovered. But she would have found something approximating her original plans of a career in the media, a shared flat in Notting Hill, parties at the weekend, skiing in winter and beaches in summer.

Instead she had spent her days filing, answering phones, typing up reports, eating her packed lunch on a bench in a city square, shopping in sales and charity shops. No holidays anywhere, weekends spent exploring London's abundance of free museums and city parks. She knew every exhibit in the Natural History Museum, every room, every sign.

She couldn't remember when resentment had turned to acceptance and then to love. Couldn't remember the day she'd looked at Jack and seen not a burden, but a gift. The day she had started to be grateful for what she had, not what she had lost.

Hauling herself to her feet, Saskia adjusted Jack's covers. He looked so well; no longer pale and over the winter he'd escaped the hacking cough he usually caught in the damp London cold. The dry desert air agreed with him; he'd grown inches, filled out a little, and he loved the international school he now attended. He was going to find it hard to adjust going back, especially when the promised new home didn't materialise and she was preoccupied with a newborn baby.

Saskia went straight to her room, opening the sliding doors and stepping out onto her terrace. The moon was bright and round, its reflection on the sea offering her a path to who knew

where. If only she could get into one of the boats moored on the wooden pier and follow its enticing, silvery road. She leant on the balcony and breathed in, enjoying the faint sea breeze that cooled the warm, desert night.

She had agreed to become a surrogate to give Jack a better life. But, damn him, Idris was right. As soon as the baby had been implanted in her womb she had taken on an obligation to put him or her first as long as they were dependent on her. She had worked so hard not to get too attached to the baby, to remember she wasn't its mother, merely its caretaker, but of course she loved it. It was half her. She felt it move, hiccup, knew when it was sleeping and when it was restless.

Didn't the baby deserve a better life too? The life it was supposed to have? It was supposed to be the Prince or Princess of Dalmaya. To grow up surrounded by the sea and the desert, to be loved and cosseted and so very much wanted. And that life was still within her power to bequeath.

Jack could learn to sail and ride, stay at the school he liked so much, keep growing stronger and healthier.

And she? She could endure...

Slowly Saskia reached into her pocket and pulled out the white card with Idris's name and number on it. She stared at it, her mouth dry and her hands numb. Married to Idris. No university, no home of her own, instead a life with a man who despised her. Who she despised.

A life that would provide for the two children in her care.

She had told herself that she had a choice but, really, she had no choice at all. Fumbling, she reached for her phone and, blinking back the tears, dialled.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE YEAR SASKIA turned eight she was a bridesmaid for her friend's elder sister. The wedding was held in the village church and afterwards the whole congregation had walked in a joyful procession along the narrow lane to Saskia's house, where her father had allowed a marquee to be erected in the old manor house's extensive gardens. It was a perfect wedding and small Saskia, starry eyed, vowed that one day she would have one just like it. Of course the manor house had been sold to pay off her father's creditors and she had given up on romantic dreams a long time ago. Still, she had never imagined that she would get married while heavily pregnant to a man who disliked her and although she had no desire for white lace or ivory organza the calf-length, long-sleeved black dress screamed funeral rather than wedding—which seemed fitting enough.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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