



Lost to the Desert Warrior (The Private Lives of Public Playboys Book 3)

By Sarah Morgan

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Raz demands one thing in return for the safe haven Layla is seeking—this brooding desert king wants to make her his queen! Her freedom might be secured, but now her heart is at risk, for soon she's lost to the scorching heat of their marriage bed. However, it will take more than fire to thaw her guarded husband....

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Editorial Review

Review

'Morgan's masterful romance engages all senses with a narrative that transports readers to a magical world. Her words paint brilliant desert sand-scapes that will awe, and her love scenes will scorch like the hot desert sun.' 4.5* Top Pick RT Book Reviews

'I adore Sarah Morgan's voice...' Smexy Books

'a very enjoyable twist to a desert romance.' The Good, The Bad, and The Unread

About the Author

USA Today bestselling author Sarah Morgan writes lively, sexy contemporary stories for Harlequin. Romantic Times has described her as 'a magician with words' and nominated her books for their Reviewer's Choice Awards and their 'Top Pick' slot. Sarah has twice won the prestigious RITA® Award from the Romance Writers of America, in 2012 and 2013. She lives near London with her family. Find out more at sararahmorgan.com

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'Shh, don't make a sound.' Layla slammed her hand over her sister's mouth. 'I can hear them coming. They mustn't find us.'

She wished she'd had time to find a better hiding place. Behind the long velvet curtains in her father's private rooms hardly seemed like an obvious place for concealment, and yet she knew in some ways this was the safest place. No one would think to look for the princesses here. They were never allowed in his bedroom. Not even today, on the day of his death.

But Layla had wanted to see for herself that the man who'd called himself her father lay cold and still in his bed and wasn't about to leap up and commit some other sin against her or her sister. She'd stood there, hidden by the curtain, and heard him seal her fate with his dying breath. His last words hadn't expressed regret for a life misspent. There had been no demand to see his daughters, nor even a request to pass on a loving message to make up for years of cold neglect. No apology for all the grievous wrongs. Just one last wrong—one that would seal her fate forever.

'Hassan must marry Layla. It is the only way the people will accept him as ruler of Tazkhan.'

Hearing footsteps, Layla kept her hand pressed over her younger sister's mouth. Her forehead brushed the curtains and she could smell the dust. The dark was disorientating and she held herself rigid, waiting for the curtains to be flung back, afraid that the slightest movement would give them away.

From behind the protection of rich, heavy velvet she heard several people enter the room.

'We have searched the palace. They are nowhere to be found.'

'They cannot just have vanished.' The voice was harsh and instantly recognisable. It was Hassan, her father's

cousin, and if his last wishes were carried out, soon to be her bridegroom. Sixty years old and more power-hungry even than her father.

In a moment of horrifying clarity Layla saw her future and it was blacker than the inside of the curtain. She stared into darkness, feeling her sister's breath warm her hand, afraid to breathe herself in case she gave them both away.

'We will find them, Hassan.'

'In a few hours you'll be addressing me as Your Excellency,' Hassan snapped. 'And you'd better find them. Try the library. The older one is always there. As for the younger one—she has far too much to say for herself. We're flying her to America, where she will be out of sight and out of mind. The people will soon forget her. My marriage to the eldest will take place before dawn. Fortunately she is the quiet one. She has nothing to say for herself and is unlikely to object.'

He didn't even know her name, Layla thought numbly, let alone her view on the world. She was 'the eldest'. 'The quiet one'. She doubted he knew or cared what she looked like. He certainly didn't care what she wanted. But then neither had her father. The only person who cared about her was currently shivering in her grasp.

Her young sister. Her friend. Her *family*.

The news that they were planning to send Yasmin to America intensified the horror of the situation. Of everything that was happening, losing her sister would be the worst.

'Why rush into the marriage?'

Hassan's companion echoed Layla's thoughts.

'Because we both know that as soon as *he* finds out about the old Sheikh's death he will come.'

He will come.

Layla knew immediately who 'he' was. And she also knew Hassan was afraid. So afraid he couldn't bring himself to speak the name of his enemy. The formidable reputation of the desert warrior and rightful ruler of the wild desert country of Tazkhan frightened Hassan so badly it was now forbidden to speak his name within the walled city. The irony was that by banning all mention of the true heir to the sheikdom he had increased his status to that of hero in the minds of the people.

In a small moment of personal rebellion, Layla *thought* the name.

Raz Al Zahki.

A prince who lived like a Bedouin among the people who loved him. A man of the desert with steely determination, strength and patience, who played a waiting game. Right now he was out there somewhere, his exact whereabouts a secret known only to those closest to him. The secrecy surrounding him increased tensions in the Citadel of Tazkhan.

Footsteps echoed on the stone floor of the bedroom.

As the door closed behind them Yasmin pulled away, gasping for air. 'I thought you were going to suffocate me.'

'I thought you were going to scream.'

'I've never screamed in my life. I'm not that pathetic.' But her sister looked shaken and Layla took her hand and held it firmly as she peeped around the heavy velvet curtain. 'They've gone. We're safe.'

'Safe? Layla, that wrinkled, overweight monster is going to marry you before dawn and he's going to send me away to America, miles from home and miles from *you*.'

Layla heard the break in her sister's voice and tightened her grip on her hand. 'No, he won't. I'm not going to allow him to take you away.'

'How can you stop it? I don't care what happens, but I want us to stay together. It's been the two of us for so long I can't imagine any other life. I need you to stop me opening my mouth when I should close it and you need me to stop you living your life in a book.'

Her sister's voice was soaked with despair and Layla felt crushed by the weight of responsibility.

She felt small and powerless as she stood alone against the brutal force of Hassan's limitless ambition.

'I promise we won't be separated.'

'How can you promise that?'

'I don't know yet. But I'm thinking...'

'Well, think fast, because in a few hours I'll be on a plane to America and you'll be in Hassan's bed.'

'Yasmin!' Shocked, Layla gaped at her sister, who shrugged defiantly.

'It's true.'

'What do you know about being in a man's bed?'

'Nowhere near as much as I'd like. I suppose that might be one of the advantages of being banished to America.'

Despite their circumstances, a dimple flickered at the corner of Yasmin's mouth and Layla felt a lump in her throat. No matter how dire the circumstances, her sister always managed to find a reason to smile. She'd brought laughter to places without humour and light into the dark.

'I can't lose you.' She couldn't even bear to think of that option. 'I *won't* lose you.'

Yasmin peered cautiously across the room. 'Is our father really dead?'

'Yes.' Layla tried to find some emotion inside herself but all she felt was numb. 'Are you sad?'

'Why would I be sad? This is only the fifth time I've ever seen him in person and I don't think this one counts so that's only four times. He made our lives hell and he's still making it hell even though he's dead.' Yasmin's unusual blue eyes darkened with fury. 'Do you know what I wish? I wish Raz Al Zahki would ride into the city on that terrifying black stallion of his and finish off Hassan. I'd cheer. In fact I'd be so grateful I'd marry him myself and give him a hundred babies just to make sure his line is safe.'

Layla tried not to look at the figure on the bed. Even dead, she didn't want to see him. 'He wouldn't want to marry you. You are the daughter of the man responsible for the death of his father and his beautiful wife. He hates us, and I cannot blame him for that.' She hated herself too, for sharing the blood of a man with so little humanity. For sharing in his shame.

'He should marry you. Then no one would be able to challenge him and Hassan would be finished.'

The idea was so outrageous, so typical of Yasmin, Layla's instinct was to dismiss it instantly and preach caution as she always did. But how was caution going to help them when her marriage was only hours away?

Her mind picked at the idea gingerly. 'Yasmin—'

'It is said he loved his wife so deeply that when she died he made a vow never to love again.' Yasmin spoke in an awed whisper. 'Have you ever heard anything so romantic?'

Layla's courage evaporated along with the idea. *She couldn't do it.* 'It's not romantic. It's tragic. It was a terrible thing.'

'But to be loved that much by a man as strong and honourable as him—I want that one day.'

Yasmin stared into the distance and Layla gave her a shake.

'Stop dreaming.' The whole thing was alien to her. The only love she knew was her love for her sister. She'd never felt anything remotely romantic when she'd looked at a man. And nothing she'd read on the subject had led her to believe that would change in the future. She was far too practical a person, and it was the practical side that drove her now. 'If they take you to America I'll never see you again. I'm not going to let that happen.'

'How can you stop it? Hassan is at his most dangerous when he's afraid and he's terrified of Raz Al Zahki. He won't even allow his name to be spoken in the city. But everyone *does* speak it, of course. Especially the women. I've been listening.'

'You've been to the *souk* again? Do you have no sense of danger?'

Yasmin ignored her and her voice was an awed whisper. 'They say his heart is frozen into ice and only the right woman can melt it. It's a bit like the legend of the Sword in the Stone you read me when I was little.'

'Oh, Yasmin, grow up! A man's heart cannot be frozen into ice unless he finds himself lost in Antarctica with insufficient equipment. A heart is responsible for pumping blood around the body. It cannot be "frozen" or "broken".' Exasperated, Layla wondered how two sisters could be so different. Their experience was the same, except that Layla had protected Yasmin from the worst of her father's actions. 'This isn't legend, this is *real*. Stop romanticising everything.'

'They think he will come.' This time there was an undertone of excitement in her sister's voice. 'He has been playing a waiting game while our father and Hassan plotted. With our father dead, he has to have a plan for taking up his rightful place as Sheikh. Hassan is terrified. The council is terrified. They have extra guards on the doors at night. They've sent patrols into the desert, although goodness knows why because everyone knows Raz Al Zahki knows the desert better than anyone. No one is sleeping because they're afraid he might enter the Citadel at night and murder them in their beds. Frankly, I wish he'd just get on with it. If I bumped into him in the dark I'd show him the way.'

Layla covered her sister's lips with her fingers. 'You need to be careful what you say.'

'Why? What else can they do to me? They're splitting us up! I'm going to America and you're going to marry Hassan. How much worse can it get?'

'I'm not marrying Hassan.' Layla made her decision. 'I'm not going to let that happen.'

'How can you stop it? Hassan can only be the next ruler if he marries you. That's a pretty powerful motivation.'

'Then he mustn't marry me.'

Yasmin looked at her with pity. 'He is going to make you.'

'If he can't find me, he can't make me.' Not daring to give too much thought to what she was about to do, Layla sprinted to her father's dressing room and removed a couple of robes. She thrust one at her sister. 'Put this on. Cover your hair and as much of your face as you can. Wait here for me behind the curtain until I come and fetch you. I need to get something from the library before we leave.'

'The library? How can you think of books right now?'

'Because a book can be many things—a friend, an escape, a teacher—' Layla broke off and hoped her sister didn't notice her high colour. 'Never mind. The important thing is that we're going away from here. It will be like the game of Hide we played as children.' She caught her sister's horrified glance and wished she hadn't used that reference. Both of them knew what that game had really meant. She changed the subject quickly. 'Those horses you love so much—can you actually ride one if you have to?' 'Of course!'

Her sister's hesitation was so brief Layla told herself she'd imagined it.

'And I've read extensively on the theory of riding and the history of the Arabian horse, so between us I'm sure we'll be fine.' She hoped she sounded more convincing than she felt. 'We'll take the back route to the stables and ride into the desert from there.'

'The desert? Why are we riding into the desert?'

Layla felt her mouth move even though her brain was telling her this was a terrible idea. 'We're going to find Raz Al Zahki.'

The wind blew across the desert, bringing with it whispers of the Sheikh's death.

Raz Al Zahki stood at the edge of the camp and stared into the darkness of the night. 'Is it truth or rumour?'

'Truth.' Salem stood next to him, shoulder to shoulder. 'It's been confirmed by more than one source.'

'Then it is time.' Raz had learned long before to keep his feelings buried, and he kept them buried now, but he felt the familiar ache of tension across his shoulders. 'We leave for the city tonight.'

Abdul, his advisor and long-time friend stepped forward. 'There is something else, Your Highness. As you predicted, Hassan plans to marry the eldest princess in a matter of hours. Preparations for the wedding are already underway.'

'Before her father's body is even cold?' Raz gave a cynical laugh. 'Her grief clearly overwhelms her.'

'Hassan must be at least forty years older than her,' Salem murmured. 'One wonders what she gains from the match.'

'There is no mystery there. She continues to live in a palace and enjoy benefits that should never have been hers to begin with.' Raz stared at the horizon. 'She is the daughter of the most ruthless man who ever ruled Tazkhan. Don't waste your sympathy.'

'If Hassan marries the girl it will be harder for you to challenge the succession legally.'

'Which is why I intend to make sure the wedding does not take place.'

Abdul shot him a startled look. 'So you intend to go ahead with your plan? Even though what you're suggesting is—'

'The only option available.' Raz cut him off, hearing the hardness in his own tone. It was the same hardness that ran right through him. Once, he'd been capable of warmth, but that part of him had died along with the woman he'd loved. 'We have considered every other option, and—' He broke off as he heard a commotion in the darkness and then lifted a hand as his bodyguards emerged silently to flank him.

They were men who had followed him for fifteen years, since the brutal slaying of his father. Men who would die for him.

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