



The Sheik and the Bought Bride (Desert Rogues series)

By Susan Mallery



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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery has entertained millions of readers with her witty and emotional stories about women. Publishers Weekly calls Susan's prose "luscious and provocative," and Booklist says "Novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling." Susan lives in Seattle with her husband and her tiny but intrepid toy poodle. Visit her at www.SusanMallery.com.

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When Victoria McCallan woke to find five armed and burly palace guards standing around her bed, she had a feeling this might not turn out to be her best day.

She was more curious than concerned about the intrusion, mostly because she hadn't done anything wrong. Well, unless she counted the extra brownie she'd had at lunch, not that anyone but her would care about her skirts getting tighter. So this had to be a mistake.

Careful to keep the sheet pulled to her shoulders, she sat up and turned on the lamp on the nightstand, then blinked in the sudden brightness.

Yup, burly guards, in uniform. She frowned as she noticed their hands seemed to be hovering by their side arms. *That* couldn't be good.

She cleared her throat and looked at the guy with the most ribbons on his jacket. "Are you sure you have the right room?" she asked.

"Victoria McCallan?"

Damn. Curiosity and concern flowed away, leaving a good dose of fear in their place.

Not that she would let the guards know. She'd always been good at acting as if everything was perfect, even as her world crumbled around her.

She raised her chin and did her best to speak without letting them see she was shaking. "That's right. How can I help you?"

"Prince Kateb would like to see you right away."

"Prince Kateb?"

She'd met him, of course. As personal assistant to Prince Nadim, she knew all the members of the royal family. Kateb rarely came into town, preferring to live in the desert. Much to the annoyance of his father.

"What does he want with me?"

"That is not for me to say. If you'll come with us?"

The guard might be asking a question, but she had a feeling she wasn't going to be allowed to say no.

"Of course. If you'll just give me a moment and some privacy to get dressed, I'll—"

"That won't be necessary," the guard told her. He tossed her the robe from the foot of the bed, then motioned for the other guards to turn around.

Victoria blinked at him. "I'm not meeting the prince in my robe."

The head guard's steely gaze told her that she just might have that one wrong.

What was going on? she wondered, as she pulled on the silk robe and then scrambled to her feet. She jerked the fabric closed and fastened the tie before slipping into her matching, lavender marabou slippers.

"This is crazy," she muttered, as much to herself as to him. "I haven't done anything wrong."

She was a good assistant, who kept track of Prince Nadim's appointments and made sure his office ran smoothly. She didn't have parties in her room or run off with the royal silver. Her passport was up-to-date, she was friendly with the other palace employees and she paid her taxes. What on earth would cause Prince Kateb, whom she barely knew, to send guards to her room? There weren't any—

She came to a stop. The head guard motioned for her to keep walking, which she did, but she wasn't paying attention to where they were going. She'd figured out the problem—and it was a big one.

A month ago, in a moment of weakness, she'd e-mailed her father. She knew better, knew that getting in touch with him would be a huge mistake. Once he'd answered, it had been too late to change her mind. He'd been delighted to discover she was living in the royal palace in El Deharia and had quickly flown out for a visit.

The man had always been nothing but trouble, she thought grimly as she was taken into an elevator and the basement button pushed. Palaces didn't actually have basements...they had dungeons. She knew enough about El Deharian history to know that nothing good ever happened in the dungeon.

The doors opened onto a long corridor. But this wasn't just any corridor. The walls were stone, and there were actual torches in iron holders, although the light came from wired fixtures on the ceiling. The place was cool and the air had a heaviness that spoke of centuries gone by and of fear.

Victoria shivered slightly and wished she'd brought a blanket to wrap around herself as well as her robe. Her high-heeled, feather-covered slippers clicked loudly on the worn stone floor. She kept her gaze firmly on the guard in front of her. His back was much safer than anything else she might see. She was terrified that ancient whips and torture devices could lie behind closed doors. She braced herself for the sound of screams and hoped if she heard any, they wouldn't be her own.

Anxiety caused her throat to tighten and made it difficult to breathe. Her father had done something bad. She was sure of it. The only question was how bad and how would the consequences affect her... again.

The guard led her to an open door, then motioned for her to go inside. She squared her shoulders, sucked in a breath she hoped wouldn't be her last and stepped into the room.

Surprisingly, the space wasn't all that scary. It was larger than she would have expected with tapestries on the wall. A carved gaming table sat in the middle and there were a half dozen or so chairs that—

Her gaze returned to the gaming table covered with playing cards, then scanned the area until she found her father standing in a corner, obviously trying to look casual.

One look at Dean McCallan told her the truth. Her charming, handsome, gambler of a father had broken his promise to never play cards again.

He was pale under his tan. His too-long blond hair no longer looked stylish. He'd gone from successful man of the world to frightened failure in the space of an evening.

"What did you do?" she asked, not caring there were other people in the room. She had to know how bad things were going to get.

"Nothing, Vi. You need to believe me." He held up both hands, as if to show his innocence. "It was a friendly game of poker."

"You weren't supposed to be playing cards. You said you were in recovery. That you hadn't played in three years."

Dean flashed her his famous smile, the one that had always made her mother weak at the knees. It triggered the opposite reaction in Victoria. She knew to brace herself because bad times were coming.

"The prince offered me a game. It would have been rude to say no."

Right. Because it couldn't be Dean's fault, she thought bitterly. There was no way her charming father would ever think to say, "Hey, Your Royal Highness, thanks for the invite but I'm not a good bet. Actually I'm too good a bet. Show me a deck of cards and I'll happily lose myself in any game. I'll also take the rent money, the food money and any savings my wife might have scraped together."

Victoria shook off the past. Her mother had died nearly ten years ago, mostly from the broken heart caused by loving Dean McCallan. She hadn't seen her father since the funeral and now she was sorry she'd ever gotten in touch with him.

"How much?" she asked knowing she would have to clean out her savings and very possibly her I.R.A. to make this right.

Dean glanced at the guards, then gave her a friendly smile. "It's not exactly about the money, Vi."

Her stomach knotted as cold fear swept through her. "Tell me you didn't cheat," she whispered, knowing if he had, it would have pushed him past saving.

There were footsteps in the corridor. Victoria turned and saw Prince Kateb sweep into the room.

She might be wearing four-inch heels, but he was still considerably taller. His eyes were dark, as was his hair, and there was a vicious scar along one cheek. The end of it just kissed the corner of his mouth, pulling it down and making him seem as if he were contemptuous of everything. Of course, that might not be the scar.

He wore dark trousers and a white shirt. Practically casual clothes, but on him they appeared regal somehow. Without the scar, he would have been handsome. With it, he was a child's nightmare come to life. Victoria had to consciously keep from shivering in his presence.

"This is your father?" Kateb said, staring at Victoria.

"Yes."

"You invited him to visit you?"

She thought about saying she was sorry. That she hadn't seen her father in years, and he'd sworn he'd changed. She'd been stupid enough to believe him.

"Yes."

Kateb's dark gaze seemed to see through to her soul. She pulled her robe more tightly around her body, wishing the fabric was something more substantial than silk. Why couldn't she have a chenille robe like normal people? And sweats. She should be wearing sweats instead of a short nightie with cute matching panties. Not that Kateb would care about her fashion sense.

"He cheated at cards," Kateb said.

Victoria wasn't even surprised. She didn't bother looking at her father. He would say or do anything to try to make the situation better. The truth would only be a happy accident.

She raised her chin. "I apologize, sir," she said. "I assume you'll be deporting him immediately. Is it possible for me to reimburse you for the money he tried to take?"

Kateb took a step closer. "Deportation isn't enough punishment for his crime, Ms. McCallan. He has dishonored me and by doing so has dishonored the royal family of El Deharia."

"Wh-what does that mean?" Dean asked, his voice shaking. "Vi, you can't let them hurt me."

Victoria ignored him. Her mind raced. Hiring a lawyer wasn't a quick option. She would have to find one willing to take her father's case. And as it was against the royal family, that could be a trick. There was always the American embassy, but they tended to frown on U.S. citizens breaking local laws. Especially when breaking those laws insulted princes of friendly countries.

"When his dishonesty was discovered," Kateb continued, staring into Victoria's eyes as if to impress the seriousness of the situation upon her, "he didn't have the money to cover his debts."

Why would he bother, she thought bitterly. Dean had never been a fan of being responsible.

"As I said, sir, I'll cover his debts."

Kateb seemed unimpressed. "He offered something else, instead."

Victoria didn't understand. "What could my father possibly have that would be of interest to you? Whatever he's been telling you, he's not a rich man. Please. Let me pay the money he owes you. I have it in the Central

Bank. I can get the account number right now and you can confirm I'm—"

"He offered you."

The room began to spin, and Victoria put out a hand to steady herself. She felt the cool, smooth stone of the wall and wished she could sink into it.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

Kateb shrugged. "When I confronted your father with his cheating, he begged me to be merciful. He offered me money, which I'm sure he did not have. When that didn't work, he said he had a beautiful daughter here in the palace who would do anything to save him. He said I could have you for as long as I wished."

Victoria straightened, then turned to stare at Dean. Her father sagged a little.

"Honey," he began, "I didn't have a choice."

"You always have a choice," she said coldly. "You could have not played cards."

The sense of betrayal was familiar, as was the disappointing realization that Dean wasn't like other fathers. Nothing mattered more than the thrill of gambling. No matter how often he promised or went to meetings or said all the right things, in the end, the cards won.

She forced herself to stand tall and face the prince. "What happens now?"

"Your father goes to prison. It will be up to the judge to determine the sentence. Eight or ten years should suffice."

"Dear God, no!" Dean McCallan sank onto the stone floor and covered his face with his hands.

He looked broken and defeated. She wanted to believe he finally understood that his actions had consequences, that he'd learned his lesson, that he would change. But she knew better. He was probably incapable of being different. It was time to turn her back on him.

Except she'd made a promise ten years ago. As her mother lay dying, she had made Victoria swear she would protect Dean, no matter what—at any cost. And Victoria had agreed—because her mother had always been there for her, had always loved her and supported her. Dean had been her only weakness and wasn't everyone allowed a single mistake?

"Punish me instead," she said, turning back to Kateb. "Let him go and take me."

Dean scrambled to his feet. "Victoria," he said, sounding hopeful, "you'd do that for me?"

"No. I'd do it for Mom." She stared at the prince. "Put me in jail. I'm a McCallan as well. The shame and dishonor is as much mine."

"I have no desire to imprison you," Kateb said, wishing he were back in the desert, where life was simple and rules enforced without thought. Had Dean McCallan been caught cheating out there, someone would have cut off his hand... or his head. There would not be endless discussion of the problem and various solutions.

Send a woman to prison for her father's crimes? Impossible. Not even this woman who was nothing but a waste of space.

He knew Victoria McCallan—at least as much as was necessary to understand her character. She was pretty enough, in an obvious way, with impressive curves and blond hair. She worked for Prince Nadim as his assistant and had spent the past two years trying to get Nadim to notice her. She wanted to marry a prince. She cared nothing for Nadim, not that he could blame her for that. Nadim had the emotional depth of a grain of sand and the personality of gray paint. Still, Victoria had pursued him. Not that he had noticed.

Nadim's recent engagement to a woman of the king's choosing had shattered her plans. Kateb was sure that Victoria would soon be leaving their country in search of other potential rich husbands. In the meantime, there was the problem of what to do with her father.

He looked at the head guard. "Take him away."

Victoria sucked in her breath, then grabbed Kateb's arm. He ignored his body's reaction to her touch. She was female, he was male—it meant nothing more than that.

"No. You can't." She stared at him. "Please. I'll do anything."

He shook off her hand and her claim. "You exceed your position and try my patience."

"He's my father."

Kateb looked between her and the other man. He would have sworn Victoria had nothing but contempt for her father, so why this display of emotion? Why would she care? Unless the situation with Dean wasn't the main point at all. Did she see this moment as an opportunity? Was one prince as good as another?

Users Review

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