



## Bodyguard...to Bridegroom? (Harlequin Romance Large Print)

By Nikki Logan

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Her brooding bodyguard...

Christmas has always been the loneliest time of year for heiress Sera Blaise so, after a PR disaster, escaping to a desert paradise seems like the perfect solution! Until she meets her brooding bodyguard, Brad Kruger, whose delicious presence is far more distracting than reassuring!

Brad learned a long time ago to listen to his head and never to his heart, but watching Sera come alive in the magic of the desert makes him question his one golden rule. Will this bodyguard vow to love, honor and protect?

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Nikki Logan lives amongst a string of wetlands in Australia with her partner and a menagerie of animals. Her stories are full of romance in descriptive, natural environments. She believes the richness and danger of wild places perfectly mirror the passion and risk of falling in love. Nikki authored her first romance on a sabbatical from work. Determined to be published by forty, her first book hit shelves in February 2010, her fortieth year, and she hasn't looked back since.

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It took Brad Kruger all of three seconds to sift through the faces in the crowd of passengers disembarking from the pointy end of the flight from London and identify the one he needed. First, he filtered out anyone with a Y chromosome, then the women over forty or under eighteen, then the impeccably dressed locals returning to the pricey desert emirate of Umm Khoreem. That left only three priority passengers that could be his client and only one of them had her long hair out and flowing gloriously over bare shoulders.

There she was...codename 'Aspirin'—for the headache he was going to have for the next month.

*Of all the gin joints in all the towns...*

Brad glanced along the long row of immigration staff in their pristine robes and watched as Seraphina Blaise was subtly corralled to the entrance of a long, winding and empty queue that casually eased her away from the one filled with locals and towards a counter with double the staff. As she negotiated the maze of retractable belts, she seemed oblivious to the fact she'd just been selected for special immigration attention.

She might have left a British Christmas all rugged up, but somewhere over the Baltic she'd pared back into something more suited to a desert one—except that apparently she'd dressed for the heat rather than for the culture.

'Here we go...' Brad muttered under his breath, pushing off the ornately carved pillar he'd been leaning against and triangulating a course to bring him as close as possible to the official who'd flagged her.

Her inadequate dress had probably caught Immigration's attention, but it was her arrest record that would likely *keep it*. Umm Khoreem issued visas on arrival for those who were just visiting. No visa, no entry; and people had been refused entry into the security-conscious state on much less than bad fashion choices and a fresh conviction.

A carefully blank official took her passport as Brad drew closer on the Umm Khoreem side of the immigration barrier, asked a few questions, frowned at her answers, and spent the next few minutes reading various pages on his touch screen while the leggy brunette shuffled awkwardly before him. She glanced around to pass the time, and Brad saw the moment she finally registered that she'd ended up in a queue for one while everyone else was being whisked through further along.

Her rounded eyes swung back to the official.

*Yep. Just you, love...*

Her whole body changed then. She lost the casual lightness with which she'd practically bounced along the switchback lanes, her bare shoulders sagged and her spine ratcheted straight. Remembering her last run-in with authorities perhaps.

Brad caught the eye of one of the other immigration staff, who took his time sauntering over but bowed his cloaked head and listened as Brad briskly murmured his name, credentials and purpose. The man nodded and returned to his post, then picked up the telephone. At the next aisle, the first immigration officer answered, flicking his eyes up to his colleague and then over to where Brad now stood before returning his gaze to the woman in front of him. The official barely acknowledged him, but barely was all he needed.

Whatever happened from now he'd just insinuated himself within the process.

And he could do a much better job from within than from without.

The official requested her bags and a customs officer set about a professional but laborious inspection more designed to buy them time to run a series of immigration checks than to fulfil any particular fascination with the contents of her designer luggage. When the computer had spat back everything they needed, the men stepped out from behind their barrier and gestured for her to follow them. Her feet remained fixed to the spot and she glanced around for someone—anyone—to come to her aid. No one did. After a moment, the larger of the two men returned the few paces to her side and gestured, not unkindly, towards the interview room.

Perhaps it was the 'please' that Brad saw on his lips in English that got her feet moving. Or perhaps it was the intractable hand at her back that stopped short of actually touching her. Either way the official achieved his aim, and Seraphina Blaise took the first careful steps behind one official while the second flanked her from behind. Just before they left the arrivals area, the man to the rear glanced his way and jerked his head just once in permission.

Brad moved immediately.

Two was bad enough, now there were three. As dark and neutral as the other officials but this one wasn't in the traditional robe and headdress of his people. He looked more like a dark-suited chauffeur. Or a CIA agent. Or a chauffeur for the CIA.

All three men stood on the other side of the soundproof glass of her containment room talking *about* her but not *to* her. The immaculately dressed officials listened attentively—one of them even smiled, which had to be a good sign except that he followed it up with a firm and distinctly suspicious glare in her direction. The chauffeur talked some more, his hands gesticulating wildly.

'Is there a problem?' she asked aloud, with more confidence than she felt, counting on the soundproofing being one-way. Only the chauffeur bothered to look up for the briefest glance before his attention returned to the airport officials and their intense conversation.

This wasn't her first run-in with authorities, but it was her first in such a conservative country where everything was done so differently from Britain. Still, the basic rule applied here as it did everywhere in life.

*Show no fear.*

*But do it politely.*

'Perhaps we could please begin?' she called out carefully, as though the only part of this bothering her were the delay. 'I have a service waiting to collect me.'

She threw in a winning smile for good measure. Hopefully, it would temper the *thump-thump* of her heart clearly audible in her voice. But the smile was wasted as the rapid, under-their-breath discussion continued without her. Then the largest of the officials shook the chauffeur's hand and crossed to the table where her documents lay spread out. He flipped her passport open and stamped it with the visa, then initialled it and passed it to him.

She jumped as the glass between the spaces suddenly snapped to opaque, then again a moment later, when the door to her half of the room was flung open and the chauffeur stood there, her bag in one fist and her documentation clenched in the other.

'Welcome to Umm Khoreem,' he said, with no other explanation or apology, wedging the door open.

He might have shared the same tan skin and dark hair as the other officials, but his accent wasn't Arabic. She stared at him, her feet still nailed to the floor as he spelled it out in clearer terms.

'You are free to leave.'

'That's it?' Her passion for natural justice started to bubble. 'Why was I detained in the first place?'

She had a fairly good idea—those few hours in a disguised medical research lab north of London were going to shadow her forever—but she just wanted to hear him say it. Plus, she wanted to narrow down his accent. But he wasn't in the chatty mood, it seemed; he slid his sunglasses on, turned and walked away from her with her suitcase. And her passport.

She hurried after him. 'Can I please have my—?'

'Keep walking, Ms Blaise,' he gritted, nodding towards the distant glass exit. 'You're not legally in the country until we get past that door up ahead.'

His tortured vowels gave her an answer—Australian—and the way he practically barked at her made her reassess him as airport security or some kind of translator. The other officials might have been obstructing her entrance but they were nothing but painfully and professionally courteous. He might have facilitated her release but he was curt and grumpy.

So, if he wasn't airport staff then who was he? Why should she follow a random stranger down some long dark corridor?

Though she had little choice as he marched off with all her worldly goods.

'Sorry, what just happened?' she puffed, hurrying up beside him as he strode along the passageway. Other than, clearly, she was almost refused an entry visa. 'Why did they let me go, just like that?'

He didn't deign to do more than angle his head slightly back as he answered. He certainly didn't stop or even slow. 'They had little option when the ruling Sheikh vouched for you.'

Her feet stumbled to a halt. 'You're a sheikh?'

His laugh ricocheted off the polished walls of the corridor. 'Do I look like a sheikh?'

How would she know? Maybe they were all neat-bearded, square-jawed types. 'Then how—?'

'Sheikh Bakhsh Shakoor is my employer. I therefore spoke on his behalf.'

Oh, everything was starting to make more sense now. 'And why exactly does Sheikh Whatsit care what happens to me?'

Or even know about it, come to think of it? It all happened so quickly. One minute she was happily arriving, the next she was unhappily interned.

'You are a long-stay guest in his most prestigious resort. He would not be pleased to hear you had been detained on a technicality.'

A criminal charge wasn't exactly nothing. That was why she'd declared it on her immigration form. Transparency and accountability and all that. But she was spending a fortune on her month at the Sheikh's desert resort and being booted out of his country bound in red tape would obviously be an expensive outcome for the resort. And since he probably also owned the airport.

'He has no idea what you just did, does he?' she guessed.

'The Sheikh does not have time for trivialities.'

*Way to make a girl feel special...* 'So, you just got creative?'

His lips pressed closer together as he lifted her suitcase as though it were empty of designer contents and pushed it ahead of them through the official exit into the Umm Khoreem side of the airport.

To freedom.

Kind of.

'I gave them a few assurances,' he went on. 'Nothing that should put a crimp in your sunbaking plans.'

Yep, he probably did think she'd come to bask under Umm Khoreem's toasty winter sun. Rather than for the sanctuary—from life and from her least favourite time of year.

'What kind of assurances?'

The pace he set across the polished stone of the airport terminal was almost hard to match, though it was fantastic to be moving her limbs again after nine hours on a crowded plane. She hurried after him as he wove in and out of the thick stream of passengers like a rally pro.

'While you are within the fenced bounds of Al Saqr resort, you are a guest of the Sheikh,' he said, back to her, 'and his protection extends to you. Under those conditions they were happy to overlook your recent...crime...and grant you entry into Umm Khoreem.'

'You make it sound like I was caught robbing a bank,' she huffed.

'You'd be surprised how much I know about you, Ms Blaise.'

She glanced up at him and tried to guess how serious he was about that. There wasn't much to know. Her criminal record was empty of anything but a shiny new conviction for trespass. For defending those who could not defend themselves.

On balance, that was a pretty good trade-off.

'Wow. Someone is a little judgey...'

It was all there in the frost in his tone and the grind of his jaw, but getting into a fight was not how she'd imagined starting her month-long exile. Then again, neither was being detained, and—once again—she reminded herself how foreign this culture was from her own.

'The resort's boundaries are massive,' he said. 'As long as you remain within them, you'll be fine.'

Being managed irked her as much as it always did. 'And what is to stop me from just taking my bag and disappearing into the glass and chrome of Kafr Falaj?'

She could see the tallest of the capital's buildings from here.

His locomotive surge across the terminal came to an abrupt halt, and she almost crashed into him. Impenetrable black glass swung her way.

'I am.'

Even without being able to see his eyes, she believed him. Her long legs might get her some distance in the short term but his hard build said he would easily best her on endurance. Plus she'd never been any good at running in sand.

'I gave them my own word, too,' he went on.

'So, now I'm beholden to the Sheikh's chauffeur as much as the Sheikh himself?' she tested.

Coral lips thinned between the neatly trimmed beard and moustache. 'I am not a chauffeur, Ms Blaise. I'm part of the royal protection detail.'

Was she supposed to be impressed that his title had the word 'royal' in it? Well, *snap, buddy*, she was celebrity royalty, and it had never done her any particular favours. Quite the opposite, really.

'Which makes me *your* protection detail for the next month,' he added blandly.

Immediately she regretted everything about the past fifteen minutes. It wasn't this guy's fault that she'd been dumb enough to be taken in by people she'd thought she could trust—a *man* she'd wanted to trust—or that it had all happened right before Christmas, a season she struggled with at the best of times. A forty-minute drive was one thing; the thought of spending the next *four weeks* butting heads with someone over baggage that wasn't rightfully his did not appeal. She'd come out here to lie low—and to do the right thing by her father—not to stir up the locals.

But she was more proficient in nurturing chasms than bridging them.

'Gosh, you drew the short straw,' she joked. 'Babysitting *me* for an entire month.'

She'd meant that to be self-deprecating, but she saw the word 'babysit' hit him as surely as the word 'chauffeur' had. His jaw clamped that tiny bit harder.

'On the contrary,' he gritted. 'I drew anything but a short straw. You'll understand when you see where I get to spend the next four weeks.'

She might be known for her questionable decision-making now and again but even she knew to back away from the edge, sometimes. And the stiff way that this man held his body told her that this was definitely one of those times. But retreating didn't mean she had to scramble, so she took her time setting off as he headed for the airport's exit and she swanned after him with as much grace as she could muster, even as the glass doors slid wide and the warm desert air slapped her full in the face.

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