

Lily Dodge

lilydodge@gmail.com

Writing Sample: 2.3k words

Genre: Sheikh Romance

DAYNA

Dayna watched from the grimy taxi window as the streets of Bajirakh blurred by. Yellow buildings with white-tiled archways reminded her of postcards she'd seen from far off places, and she had to remind herself that she was actually here, right now, not watching a movie or flipping through someone else's travel photos. Aside from a class trip to Toronto when she was in high school, Dayna had never been outside the United States before.

But here she was, passport stamped and bags packed, whizzing through the capital city of Bajirakh at the mercy of a taxi driver she certainly hoped was taking her to the right place. All she could do was take in the incredible sights while they made their way to the center of town and the massive palace where she was supposed to pick up some emeralds that had belonged to a distant cousin of hers.

Dayna always knew she had family in Bajirakh, and her mother kept up with a few Baji traditions around the holidays, but she'd never thought too much about it otherwise. Then, after her grandfather's death, paperwork emerged that showed the family in possession of rare, valuable emeralds that were being stored in one of the safes under the protection of the Baji palace and their royal family. According to her grandfather's will, someone from the family needed to go collect them in person, and since Dayna was between jobs at the moment, she'd been volunteered for the journey.

It had taken some time to arrange the trip, as her uncles worked out exactly where the emeralds were being stored and who they needed to contact in order to retrieve them, but finally, she was here. Dayna was glued to the view outside. Kids wearing baggy soccer jerseys kicked a dusty ball around at the edge of one street, and a man with an overloaded bicycle cart stopped to sell them some fried treats.

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They looked delicious. Dayna was starving after her long trip. Plus, they were passing an open air shopping market, where brightly colored fabric scarves caught her eye and made her want to hop out and go shopping.

Reminding herself of her mission, Dayna sighed and told herself not to get distracted. She needed to get to the palace first and complete her mission. Then she could wander around the city, eat the local food and shop to her heart's content.

Finally, the taxi driver dropped her off in front of the palace, a spectacular building which she'd learned was not only the home of the royal family, but also the political and economic center of the city. The first area was open to the public, with sharply uniformed guards standing at their posts and a bustling collection of teller booths that reminded her more of a bank or a hotel lobby than a palace.

Despite this first impression, it was impossible to miss the opulence of the Baji palace. Marble columns rose up to the ceiling, which was domed and decorated intricately with inlaid mosaics in rich jewel tones. Everyone inside was dressed gorgeously, even the employees in their garnet red uniforms, and Dayna felt slightly underdressed in her travel clothes.

Oh well. She wasn't here to strike some billion dollar deal or impress a prince. Tugging her wheeled suitcase behind her over the smooth stone floors, Dayna got in line, waiting for her turn at one of the windows. Soon, a woman wearing a turquoise hijab and silver eyeshadow called Dayna over.

"Welcome to the Baji Palace!" The woman smiled brightly at Dayna. "How can I help you today?"

"Hi, my name is Dayna Hammon, and I'm here about a safety deposit in my family's name."

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“What family name is that?”

“Jabbouri,” Dayna said confidently. Her mother had insisted that she memorize the exact pronunciation before she left, and she’d reviewed all the paperwork with her uncles. “I believe it’s box seven three four.”

“Let me just look that up for you,” the woman said, and tapped on her keyboard. Dayna noticed that her nails were the same turquoise color as her hijab. “One moment, please.” The woman smiled at Dayna again, though it seemed a bit less genuine than her first smile. “For a withdrawal like this, I need to speak with a security officer. Please wait here.”

“Okay.” The woman left. Dayna shifted from one foot to the other, trying not to look like a lost, nervous foreigner. This was probably standard operating procedure. She took a moment to drink in the sights of the palace - lush plants in heavy terra cotta pots, delicate gold latticework taking the place of plain security grates, the smell of jasmine blossoms blowing in on the warm dry breeze.

The woman in the turquoise hijab did not return. Instead, two uniformed security officers with guns strapped to their hips approached Dayna. “Please come with us, ma’am.”

Dayna followed them, figuring they must be her escort to a more heavily guarded area where the safes were kept. Instead, they led her down a carpeted hallway and into a small room. There were no windows, and the walls were plain beige. In the center sat a wooden desk with one chair on each side.

“Please sit down,” one of the guards said. Dayna did so, tugging her bag behind her, but the guard reached his hand out toward the handle. “Allow me to take that for you.”

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Loath to part with her luggage but not sure what else to do, Dayna handed it over. He wheeled it out of the room and closed the door, leaving Dayna sitting while the second guard stood, silent and straight-shouldered, against the far wall.

A few moments of silence passed, then Dayna asked “Is someone going to bring me my safety deposit box?”

The guard said nothing. Dayna tried not to fidget.

After what felt like ages, but which may have just been a few minutes, the door opened again. But it wasn't another guard in the crisp, green and gold uniform like the one Dayna had been studiously ignoring. This man was wearing a suit, dark charcoal grey with subtle pinstripes, and his hair was longer than the standard military cut all the guards had.

And he was positively gorgeous, Dayna noticed as he sat down across from her. Olive brown skin with powerful dark eyes and the strongest jawline she'd ever seen.

She was instantly distracted, however, when she saw what he held. It was not a safety deposit box or a velvet pouch of emeralds. It was a plain blue folder. *Her* plain blue folder. The exact one her mother had carefully placed all her paperwork in before sending her off to Bajirakh.

“Hello, Miss Jabbouri,” the man said.

“Hey! That's mine - you went through my stuff!” Dayna reached for the folder, but the man stopped her with one heavy hand on her wrist.

“Miss Jabbouri, please. Control yourself.”

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Dayna did not appreciate being spoken to like a disobedient child, but she pulled her hand back and settled it in her lap, still staring at the folder that he'd obviously taken from her suitcase.

"My name isn't Jabbouri. That's a family name on my mother's side." Dayna was about to tell him her real name, then realized perhaps it might be smarter not to volunteer personal information until she figured out what was going on.

"My mistake," the man said. "What is your name, then?"

"First, tell me what's going on," Dayna demanded. "Who are you? And when can I see my emeralds?"

The man laughed in a way that definitely did not put Dayna at ease. "I'm afraid I can only answer one of those questions. My name is Ishaq Hashim, and I am the second born prince of Bajirakh."

Dayna felt her eyes widen and her mouth fall open in shock. Then she remembered something her mother had told her once, when discussing the Baji royal family. The second born prince was traditionally in charge of the country's military, handling threats and maintaining security.

Was she in some kind of trouble?

"I'm just here about some family heirlooms," she managed to say, pointing with a shaky hand toward the folder still in front of Ishaq. "I'm from America."

Ishaq laughed again, that low chuckle that told Dayna she was definitely not in on the joke. "Unfortunately, that's why I can't answer your second question. You asked about *your* emeralds, but I'm afraid the jewels in question are not yours, and are in fact the stolen property of the Baji people, stewarded by the royal family."

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All the blood drained from Dayna's face. After her grandfather died, she'd heard all about these treasures that belonged to her great uncle and his sons. No one said anything about them being stolen, let alone from the royal family.

"I - I didn't know."

Ishaq smiled coolly at her. "That remains to be seen," he said. "Until we determine exactly what your relationship is to these jewels and their theft, you'll need to remain here, at the palace, under my supervision."

ISHAQ

"Sir, we've just received an alert that someone has arrived and requested access to safe seven three four."

Ishaq looked up from his desk to see one of his most trusted security officers, Kadir, standing in his doorway. They'd gone through military training together, and when Ishaq took command of the Baji forces, he'd known exactly who he wanted by his side.

Lately, Kadir was tasked with keeping an eye on a very sensitive situation. Decades before Ishaq was even born, some incredibly valuable royal jewels were stolen, and no one ever knew where they ended up. But a few months ago, he'd flagged some strange communications coming through the palace's security operations.

It seemed that some members of an American family had located the emeralds and were attempting to claim them. Immediately, Ishaq had taken action, preparing fake documents that indicated the emeralds were being held in the royal palace's safes. His officers were ordered to let him know immediately if anyone arrived asking about them, and to detain the individual as

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quickly as possible. A note was added to the file for the fictional security deposit box so that any employee who was asked about it would notify the guards right away.

Now, it seemed their trap had been sprung. Ishaq stood from his desk, grinning victoriously at Kadir. "Let's get this guy."

When Ishaq stepped into the back room where the suspected jewel trafficker was being held, he expected to find some bald headed, sunglass wearing, broad chested American mercenary. Instead, he was greeted by the sight of a lovely young woman, her chestnut hair pulled back in a loose ponytail and her green eyes sparkling with curiosity as she took him in.

His men had searched the woman's luggage and passed on to him a folder of documents, most of which he recognized as forgeries provided as part of his plan. Her name was Jabbouri, they'd told him, or at least that was the name they registered as the owner of the safety deposit box.

But, as it turned out, that wasn't her name. To get her real name, he'd had to leave her alone again and order his men to return to her bags, locating a passport and other American identification that read Dayna Hammond.

"You think she's a spy?" Kadir asked, peering over Ishaq's shoulder as he rifled through her wallet.

Ishaq wasn't sure. He'd be a fool if he let a pretty face and an American last name throw him off the trail of a thief his family had been hunting for generations. At the same time, she seemed genuine in her confusion.

"I need some time to figure her out," Ishaq said, handing Kadir the handful of documentation and Dayna's wallet.

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“Should we move her downstairs?” Kadir asked. “You can go speak with her at your leisure.”

“No.” Ishaq considered the situation for a bit. Initially, the plan was to detain the individual in one of the holding cells at the palace while they investigated, but it felt wrong to lock up a person who could just as easily be an innocent young woman.

Plus, he wouldn't be able to speak openly with her if she was stuck in a bare room like a prisoner. If she was involved with the jewel theft, he needed her to relax and open up with him; and if she wasn't, then he needed to be hospitable enough to justify keeping her here long enough to figure that out. “I'll take it from here. Have staff prepare a guest suite in the royal wing, with appropriate security.”

“Are you sure?” Kadir narrowed his eyes in thoughtful suspicion, a look Ishaq had seen countless times on his friend. Trust did not come easily to Kadir, which was one of the things that made him such an excellent general.

“Yes.” Spy or not, Ishaq was sure that he could handle one American woman. He'd always had a gift for charm, and in fact many of his instructors at the Baji military academy said he'd make a good diplomat. But it was his destiny to take over as the head of Baji's army, and he preferred a life at home among his people than constant travel anyway.

“Alright.” Kadir gave him a curt nod and turned to carry out Ishaq's instructions.

Ishaq returned to the small office room, where Dayna hadn't moved since he left her. She took him in, again with those captivating green eyes, this time full of fear, anger, and a bit of defiance.

“I'm an American citizen,” she said. “You can't just -”

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“Of course,” Ishaq interrupted, flashing her a wide smile. “I’m terribly sorry for all this. Please, allow me to make it up to you.” He held his hand out, inviting her to leave her seat and come with him. “Can I treat you to lunch in the palace courtyard?”