

LORI WICK

THE
Hawk
AND
THE *Jewel*



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One

DARHABAR

MAY 3, 1844

THE EMIR'S WARD PEEKED OUT OF THE SHADOWY DOORWAY into the empty courtyard beyond. The way seemed clear, but she knew well that looks could be deceiving. When she was certain that all would be safe, Shani crossed on silent feet.

The guards, standing unnoticed in their respective places, let her pass. She'd been sneaking across the outer courtyard since before her fifth year. Even though they were supposed to stop her, they never did—for Shani was their ruler's favorite. Nevertheless, before she reached the emir's chambers, her actions had been reported.



Ahmad Khan, ruler of Darhabar, dismissed the young slave girl attending him with only a brief move of his head. Ali, his chief advisor, had appeared in the entryway of his private chambers. There was a need to speak privately. The two men, long-time friends, settled themselves comfortably on the pillows and spoke in low tones.

"She will be here momentarily," Ali told his sovereign ruler.

"I understand she came across the courtyard."

"That is why I'm here," Ali went on. "It's a sign that she's feeling restless again. She will no doubt wish to speak of England."

Ahmad nodded thoughtfully. Nearly 13 years ago, a child and her mother had been brought to the palace. The child, whom they guessed to be past her second birthday, was clinging to the mother who, after nearly drowning, was on the brink of death.

Ahmad could see that she was a beautiful woman. Even in her injured state that was obvious. He would have kept her for himself, if she had survived. Within days of her death the father had come looking for them, but by then Ahmad was so taken with the beautiful child that he had lied about ever seeing her.

The grieving husband was taken to his wife's body. Katherine Gallagher was beautifully prepared, wrapped in cloth that had been dipped in rich spices. Without delay she was taken aboard her husband's vessel, and without the slightest twinge of guilt the emir had gone to the tower and watched them sail away.

From that point, discreet inquiries were made in England as to the child's home and the rest of her family. But before word returned to the palace, Ahmad had named her Shani. Her name meant "wondrous," and indeed she was wondrous in his eyes. She had a head full of chestnut-colored curls and violet eyes. Never had he seen eyes of such a color.

She was the delight of his world as she grew. There was never a day that she was not allowed entrance into his chambers. If one of his wives or concubines had joined him for the night, Shani was kept away, but if he was in the palace, she was allowed to seek him out. He was closer to her than all but two other members of his entire household: his chief advisor, Ali, and his favorite wife, Indira.

Indira had never given him a daughter. She had blessed him with five healthy sons, the oldest of whom was the heir to the throne, but never a girl. Shani became Indira's girl as well as his own. Indira loved her as her own child, and there was never a jealous moment between them. This could not be said of Ahmad's other wives, concubines, and children. However, no harm ever befell Shani since the entire palace kept her in their eye. Her status as his favorite brought much protection; it also brought her privileges she should not have had.

"She will be here shortly, my prince," Ali said, reverting to the name he'd called the emir through the years his father had been on the throne.

Ahmad nodded decisively. "Stay within hearing this day. If you are right, and she does want to talk of her home, we will take it as a sign. You know what to do."

Ali stood and bowed low. He slipped behind a semitransparent screen just as Shani's presence was announced.



"I think, little one, that your mind is not on our game today."

Shani lay back against the pillows and stared broodingly at the chessboard. "I was in the tower yesterday," she admitted softly, since it was strictly forbidden.

"And at the stables the day before that, and in the courtyard today," Ahmad added dryly. "Somehow I do not think your mind is on your sins."

Shani shook her head in agreement, but then she leaned forward, her youth showing in the clear, guileless depths of her eyes. "There was an English ship in the harbor. I couldn't see very well, but there appeared to be two women on board. They wore long dresses and scarves on their heads, but their faces were bare."

Ahmad's heart sank, although his face gave nothing away. He'd expected as much, but his suspicions didn't make what was about to commence easier. He had thought through the next few years carefully, and knew what must be done. Over Shani's shoulder, he watched Ali rise and move silently from the chamber.

"And you wish," Ahmad once again gave the girl his full attention, "that you could be on board the ship too."

"Oh, please, Poppy," she used her baby name for him. "I promise to stay out of the courtyard and the stables for an entire moon."

Ahmad shook his head indulgently. "We shall see."

It was the closest he'd ever come to agreeing, and Shani threw her arms around his neck. His other children never approached him without permission, but he had always allowed spontaneity with his Shani.

Shani was no better an opponent after hearing the good news; if anything, she was more preoccupied than before. So when another ten minutes passed, and she asked to be excused, Ahmad granted her wish without hesitation.

Ali entered the chamber a moment later, watching his master's face for emotion. At first glance Ahmad's look was guarded, but upon closer inspection, grief showed within his eyes.

"Have you taken care of the matter, Ali?"

"I have."

"So now we wait," Ahmad said, and his eyes filled with pain. Ali, upon seeing that pain, sensed his ruler's need to be alone.