



RUBY ROBBERIES

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~ Prologue ~

If red is the color of love, then Balamani Kumar's portrait, *Woman at Sunset* was the pinnacle of the emotion, and it was about to be stolen. It was a portrait of a woman sitting on a rock bench looking out over the ocean at sunset, and it was a mosaic made entirely of rubies.

Lightning flashed against the moonless night, illuminating the entire city of New Delhi. It was midnight but the brilliance of the storm gave an eerie glow to the buildings, like a bulb that comes on suddenly then fades away.

If you were to peer out your window to watch the display of nature's fury, the only movement you would see would be an occasional dog running fast towards home or maybe a lone man trying to dodge the lightning and fighting to keep his umbrella from folding up on him. But if you were to look closely at the walls of the New Delhi Museum, you would have seen a dark figure scaling the building.

The outline moved slowly up the granite face, reaching up with jerky movements, like a spider climbing its web. Dangling behind the thief was a rope, swaying with the movement of the climber urging him higher and higher toward the top. Once the figure reached the top of the parapet, he swung his legs over and disappeared. He then reappeared and gave the rope a tug, signaling someone below. The rope went taut and began to rise slowly, dragging at its end a canvas duffle bag, swinging ever so slightly as it ascended to join its owner.

Once the bag reached the top, it was released from its constraints and then the rope was thrown lifeless back to the

ground. A second figure began to climb the rope using a pulley-like object to propel him upward. His ascent was quicker and less strained as he covered the three floors in less than thirty seconds. A flash of lightning illuminated both figures as one helped the other over the parapet and then both disappeared into the darkness.

Click, click, click. The sound of taps on a marble floor came from the shoes of a guard making his rounds inside the museum. He was bored and needed to move around to fight off the desire to make himself at home on the plush divan accenting a small display of Indian handmade home furnishings. He had taken advantage of its comforts once but had been severely reprimanded for not walking his patrol. Boy, he could use some sleep.

He had worked for the museum for almost two years. There had never been a robbery of any kind, nor even a threat of a theft. In fact the only excitement he had ever experienced was when a young boy had mistakenly crossed over the threshold between the viewing area and the portraits. A tremendous alarm had gone off, calling every guard in the museum to respond to the area. The noise was so loud that the boy collapsed to the floor and began to cry uncontrollably.

It took his mother and several guards to calm the boy down enough to find out what happened. When he finally told them what he had done, the head guard took his hand and walked him up to the portrait and explained why the alarm had sounded. The boy listened and nodded his head in quiet affirmation.

When the guard had finished, the young boy smiled and

promised never to do it again, and the guard shook his hand and gave the boy a small piece of chocolate to assure him all had been forgiven. That was the only excitement that had happened in many, many years.

A sparkle of light attracted his eye to the marble floor in front of him. There was a pool of water gathering on the floor. "Great," he thought, "that's all I need. I hate having to be a janitor and guard." Reaching for his radio to report the problem, he looked up towards the high vaulted windows searching for the source of the leak.

Thwupp!!

The guard grabbed his neck and fell straight to the floor, his face bouncing off the white marble, splattering it with his blood. Now he could sleep, and he would never know about the biggest excitement that would ever happen at the museum.

Two ropes dropped from the ceiling in silence, and two hooded figures slowly rappelled to the floor below. Removing the rope from his harness, one figure ran to the guard's lifeless body and dragged him over to the divan. He hid the body behind the couch, keeping it from being seen by prying eyes. He took the radio and switched the knob to the off position, just in case there was a GPS chip in the device for location purposes.

The second figure moved along the wall keeping to the shadows only stopping and standing perfectly still when there was a flash of lightning. The bolts of nature's fury pierced the high glass ceiling illuminating the great hall of portraits. In between flashes he moved with precision, but the storm's intensity slowed his movements as flash after flash captured

the hall in deft actions. He was soon joined by his comrade in front of *The Woman at Sunset* after an endless moment.

A flash of lightning hit the portrait and the red light danced off their faces and black camouflage. They froze momentarily, entranced by the beauty of the spectacle. A thousand shades of red leaped and rose across their bodies and they marveled at the sight. The beauty of the mosaic was breathtaking. Without benefit of the lightning, the average viewer would never have been able to see just how exquisite the piece was, and the two men were struck with awe from it's brilliance.

They recovered quickly as the light faded away. One of the men slowly moved a small blue light across the canvas and made note of where the laser triggers were that protected their prize. The other reached into the bag and removed a long black tri-pod. The device had small wheels on its three legs that would allow the piece to move in any direction. He unfolded the contraption and attached two mirrors to each side of the arms of the stand. These weren't just any mirrors. The design resembled a soccer ball with mini octagonal reflectors. He adjusted all of the mini-mirrors to match the pattern of the laser lights guarding their prey.

With small movements, he moved it forward and caught each light at just the right angle. No alarms sounded, they felt home free.

Their hands began to work fast, cutting the canvas free from the frame, careful to move the blade of their utility knives around the outside stones. When they were finished cutting, the whole mosaic lay out in their hands as a solid plate. Another lightning flash and the red star display caught their attention

again. They would have loved to sit and watch each flash of light dance across the piece, designing another kaleidoscope of color, but they couldn't wait any longer. They placed it carefully in a flat black case and zipped up the sides. One man helped the other strap it onto his back and then they moved away quickly.

Another flash of light and the two figures were at their ropes, strapping themselves into the harnesses for their ascent to the roof. One of the men reached into his pocket, pulling out a remote control and pushing the top button. A small motor began to hum, and the men rose into the air reaching the ceiling joists quickly. One thief began rolling up the cords, while the other released the hoist from its magnetic embrace and stored it in his pack. There was another flash of light, and they were gone.

Four other museums were also robbed that night, but not in New Delhi. There was the Museum du Paris, the Gem Museum of Thailand, and The Royal Museum of Natural History in London and the Natural Gems Museum in Los Angeles, California. All of them were hit at approximately the same time of night. The casualties were three guards killed, two injured and over fifty-nine million dollars in stolen rubies.

The only museum that was not successfully robbed was the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., resulting in the capture of two men. They gave up after a comical but quick chase through the halls and displays of the museum. They tried to evade capture by moving through doorways at breakneck speed and more than once they bounced off display cases as they hurled into the next room. They darted between

several very old and very valuable Dodge automobiles and ducked behind tanks in the World at War displays. But they were finally taken into custody by the museum officials and handed over to the D.C. Police Department.

The two were loaded into a black and white patrol car headed towards the city jail where a willing and waiting detective was looking forward to having his picture splashed across the newspapers and all of the media hype that went with it. Overnight he would become an unexpected star of the D.C. Police force, but he never got the chance.

The patrol car never made it to the city jail. The officer driving was contacted by an Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and diverted to a small alley between two buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue. There they were transferred to an unmarked car and taken quickly and quietly into Virginia, to the famous but small city of Langley, Virginia.

The car stopped at a run down looking building on the east side of the city. Two men emerged from the building and helped the two would be thieves out of the car and into the hovel. The location was secure, and there they would be interrogated for hours by a small group known only to a select few in the Intelligence Community; The Gem Team.

~ Chapter 1 ~

The phone woke me up at two o'clock in the morning, and I was not at all happy about it. I had been up late every night for almost a month tracking down leads, searching for the man we in the team affectionately called Hard Core or HC for short. Over the course of many months the team had accumulated a myriad of facts about HC. He didn't let anyone actually see his face. He was ruthless when it came to dealing with subordinates and peers. He was obsessed with wealth and earthly power. He sought to obtain more and more at any cost.

I tried to roll over and answer the phone, but my legs wouldn't move. They were asleep from the knees down because something heavy was lying across them. I rose into a sitting position and looked towards the foot of the bed. It was Shelton, my twenty-two pound Maine Coon cat.

"Shelton? Move buddy I need to get to the phone," I said. I know you think it's silly talking to a cat, but I promise, he understands every word I say to him. He might act like he doesn't, but he understands. Right now he could care less what I wanted. He was comfortable and annoyed at the ringing of the phone.

"Shelton?" I said louder, "MOVE!"

With a grunt from me and a hiss from him, I was able to move him far enough to slide out from underneath to get to the side of the bed. I picked up the phone. "Hello and this better be real important; my cat just scratched the heck out of my legs," I said.

“I told you, you should have that monster de-clawed,” came the voice.

“That wouldn’t help, he likes to bite more than scratch. It’s his favorite pastime,” I retorted, trying to work the cobwebs out of my brain so I could figure out who was on the other end of the line.

“Doesn’t everyone like to bite?” said the sultry voice.

When I heard that sexy voice, I recognized it immediately. It belonged to Kay Daniels, a woman who had smitten my heart, but so far, I had been too much of a coward to tell her. She stood about five foot eight with fiery red hair and green eyes. The hair was a huge weakness of mine. I loved a woman with red hair. The eyes were just a tremendous bonus.

She had joined the Gem Team almost fourteen months ago and had proven to be a wonderful asset in more ways than one. She was smart, intelligent and sometimes funny, but she was always professional, except at this moment, and I wasn’t complaining about it.

The lilt in her voice brought a smile to my face, even though I was still half asleep. “Good morning,” I said in my best syrupy voice, “what a nice sound to wake up to. I wouldn’t mind being woken up like that every morning.”

“Boz!” she said, “This is an unsecured line. Hush!”

“Yes ma’am,” I replied, trying my best to sound like a schoolboy who had just been reprimanded by his teacher, “but you started it. What’s up?”

“Get dressed and catch the first flight out of Midway. We need you at Langley,” she commanded.

“Now?” I complained looking at the clock, “Kay, it’s two in the morning, can’t I have at least three more hours?”

“No you can’t Boz. We’ve got some people you need to talk to and we’re not sure if this can wait until the morning,” she said.

“Oh, Kay,” I said trying to use my best ‘I am too sleepy to get moving right now voice.’ “Please let me sleep a little bit longer.”

“No,” came the short reply.

“But Kay,” I said trying another tact, “it will take me two hours to get a flight at this time of the morning. Let’s just let this lie until daylight, and then I promise I will be there as quick as my two little arms can flap.”

“No, Boz,” she said getting angry.

“Alright. Alright,” I said giving in a little, “I’ll get on the horn and make a reservation for a flight, but it could take me at least three hours to set it up and get packed.”

“Boz, I’ve got you booked on a three o’clock flight out of Midway on Eastwest Airlines, Gate A-18,” said another voice on the line.

“Reggie?” I questioned.

“Yeah boss, it’s Reggie.”

“Didn’t your mama ever tell you that eavesdropping on private conversations is illegal?” I said.

“Actually she did Boz, but I never did listen to my mother much. She was too square and besides someone has to keep an eye on you two,” he replied.

“First of all, Reggie, I like your mom. She’s a great lady and a real saint for putting up with you all these years and

secondly, you and I need to have a serious talk about spreading rumors and gossip without foundation,” I responded.

“Foundation? Are you kidding me? Kay’s expense report alone for wireless calls to your place is foundation enough for me!”

“Boys will you two stop! Reggie, get off the line and let me talk to Boz,” she commanded.

“All right Kay, but don’t you guys chat too much, he needs to get moving,” Reggie said.

“Reggie!” she said.

“Alright, alright, don’t yell in my ear, I’m going. See you in a few hours boss,” and I heard a click on the line.

“Boz, get out of bed, get your clothes on and get to the airport. Two men tried to rob the Smithsonian last night,” she said.

“Are they nuts? The Smithsonian? It would take an army to break into that place. Fort Knox wished they had security like the Institute. And besides, wouldn’t that be under the jurisdiction of the FBI or Homeland Security or the NSA?” I said getting out of bed and walking towards my closet.

“Well they may be nuts and normally the guys from the Hoover Building would handle this, but these two may be working for Hard Core,” came the reply.

I started moving faster now, pulling clothes off the hanger and throwing them onto the bed. A few pairs of pants landed on top of Shelton, and he let out a growl that would have scared a German shepherd. “How do you know?” I asked.

“Well for starters...” then there was a pause, “...are you getting dressed?” she questioned.