

Red Flash

Kiva Wolfe

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Dedication

To Wynne and what from our dreams can come...

To Joseph, for your loving support
and unyielding faith...

Você sempre estará em meu coração.

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Você tornou isto possível.

red♦flash –*n* **1** a sudden burst, brief display of red **2** a term that refers to a gemstone's fire color, often as a result of heat treatments employed after the 1960s to enhance clarity and color **3** a reflected color specific to *zoisite*, common term *tanzanite*, resulting from heat treatment to enhance its purplish-blue hue and eradicate a brown impurity **4** an extraordinary quality of red...

Prologue



*Upper Trombetás Valley, Brasil
Novembro 9, 2003*

Early morning sunrays, golden and crimson, lanced the triple canopy and slashed the solitude of the jungle's dark understory.

The moment Emilio Veiga sniffed smoke from a hidden campfire, worry further creased his grizzled, ebony face. Rubbing his days-old beard, he stared into the tangled vegetation.

Deep down, he felt there had to be two, maybe three men working together, stalking him. While his predators showed exceptional skill, up to this point they no longer seemed to care if he knew of their existence. They were close, fifty, maybe seventy yards, and they undoubtedly knew of the precious commodity he found in the shallow arroyo. Slim tailings of what he was certain would prove to be a rich kimberlitic pipe. Possibly the most unusual diamond deposit in all of Brasil, if not the whole world.

Veiga jiggled his canteen and drank the dribble of water. With a last look around, he stuffed a few dried rations into his pockets and adjusted his backpack. Using the meager glint of light in the east to navigate, he left camp and moved like a ghost through a half a mile of maze-like brush.

Fatigue and extreme humidity were eating at his pace.

He paused a moment to wipe the beading sweat on his gullied brow and listened just long enough to separate the sounds that surrounded him.

He heard them—human footsteps for sure—one set to his right and the other to his left. The bounce and endurance of stride indicated young, physically capable men. No sense dwelling on the fact now that he should have stayed closer to the river, rather than making camp in the basin where he was so visible.

He grunted.

These men could overtake him at any time. The extra speed he would pick up at the river's edge seemed futile, yet it was his only hope.

Zigzagging through the undergrowth, he heard water splashing over rocks at the falls. When he caught the smell of the musty riverbank, he thought he just might make it. Just then, he was ripped by a searing pain mid-thigh, as a high-powered rifle bullet ruthlessly tore through the back of his leg and exploded out the front. The force of impact spun him full around, plunging him down the precipitous slope, where he smashed his head on a jagged rock. Blood gushed down his forehead into his eyes, clouding his vision with a curtain of red.

His assailants' whispers grew louder as they probed the underbrush, looking for him. No longer able to feel his legs, Veiga shivered with thoughts of impending doom, until his thinking blurred and instinct took over. He struggled mightily with his hands to conceal himself with leaves and earth, and with help from the thick foliage, he barely eluded them. Groping for the knapsack ripped from his shoulder in the fall, he tugged at it with his shaking fingers. Veiga freed it from a gnarled root, and drew it toward him.

There was a chatter from above.

Veiga batted his lids to clear his eyes. Looking skyward, he smiled at the little *chachalaca* that had made her nest on a lower branch of a great mahogany.

His feeble grip slackened with his last gasp of air. The open pack slid further downslope, and its contents bounced and rolled down the embankment.

With a splash, a large red stone vanished into the river.

One



Denver, Colorado
Friday, November 21

Sërg Stanovic entered his home office shortly after 10 a.m. Within an hour, he had written all necessary correspondence and returned phone calls. With time to spare, he opened the wall safe and counted out money onto his massive teakwood desk. Soon, sixteen of the world's most exquisite paraibas would be his. Aware the region's prized neon blue veins had played out years ago, the forty-three year old purveyor of fine colored gemstones did not know by what means these impossibly rare tourmalines became available. The whole deal was possible because he had a world-renowned cutter in his employ. With Sërg's lavish generosity and concern for his family, Vingh would keep quiet, of that he was certain. Most upsetting to Sërg was using a different go-between, instead of the Russians handling the whole deal. Then again, it made his latest scheme easier. The Russians had no idea a wealthy client was willing to pay him ten times the amount he was fronting. It was well worth the risk of smuggling the gems through Customs, although he disliked dealing directly with the Brazilians.

By one o'clock, he finished counting the money and packaged it as instructed, and at a quarter past, Sërg was cursing at the four

walls in Serbian because the courier was late. As he angrily paced back and forth and around his desk, a small area in the dark oak floor beneath a Nepalese rug creaked under his weight. He was about to place a phone call and have the courier tracked down when he heard his housekeeper's familiar tap on the door.

Sërg muted the TV's recap of the business news. "Enter," he commanded, as he eased back into his Italian leather chair.

Ayssa shyly stepped into the room and said, "El Señor Stanovic, usted tiene una vista."

"Get him in here," he said.

She showed a dark complexioned man into the study, and as soon as she shut the door, Sërg growled, "Where the fuck have you been?"

The Brazilian opened his mouth to speak.

Sërg cut him off. "Shut up and listen." He allowed himself a moment to temper his anger. "Pay your people, without delay, and bring the product back to me this afternoon, not to the warehouse as previously arranged. Do you understand?"

The man nodded and replied, "Sim."

Sërg tossed the courier the package. "All right...now go. I expect you back here by three, and don't keep me waiting again."

The twenty-two year old Latino lingered a moment to admire the lavish surroundings. Just as the Serbian got a phone call, he slipped the parcel into an inside pocket. Outside, he stopped to chat with the chubby boy, whom he had passed by moments before on the front steps tinkering with a bike. Smiling, he crouched as he stared at the boy.

From Montview Boulevard, Dominick Stanovic turned into the driveway of the carriage house and glanced at his watch. After his usual afternoon jog with his Irish setter, Zoa, he would just have time for a quick workout and shower before dinner.

Located on the northeast side of the family home, with convenient street access, the carriage house embodied the involved essence of Victorian and 20th Century construction. Like the main residence, its brownstone exterior, exquisitely framed by a gabled roof, was typical of the stately manors throughout Denver's lavish

Capitol Hill.

Dominick climbed out of his new black Jaguar XK—a gift from Sërg commemorating his second year as buyer for the family’s gemstone brokerage—and went through his customary pre-run stretch. Without thinking, he stripped to the running shorts he wore under his trousers, laid his clothes on the car hood, and slipped into his jogging shoes. Such was his daily routine that he could not recall when he last wore a pair of men’s briefs.

Slinging his pants over a shoulder, he grabbed his brown cashmere jacket and suede loafers and bounded around the corner to the front entrance that bore one of the district’s celebrated plaques. Historic Denver placed the carriage house on their register of homes and buildings in the 1980s, after the previous owner, a nouveau riche architect from Finland, gave in to demands to preserve the exterior by demolishing a newer front porch. Sërg caused a brief and genteel ruckus when he added a turreted glass conservatory to the south side, just after purchasing the estate for the family. Dominick enjoyed the privacy bestowed upon the sunroom’s rear entrance and hot tub by a semi-circle of crab trees that conveniently shielded female visitors from his mother’s invasive scrutiny.

As he inserted his key into the lock, he felt someone watching him. Dominick turned to see the renter of the lower level apartment in the converted Colonial style mansion across the way retrieving her mail. He had not formally met his new neighbor, but found it curious that the forty-something blonde seemed to be outdoors whenever he was. On this day, she wore a dark pair of Bermuda shorts that drew attention to her uninteresting legs. He heard from Bob, his neighbor to the east, that she was a famous European chef, or was it a caterer? With the exception of his mother and the family’s current housekeeper, he had yet to bump into a woman who was into food preparation. Not that he had any interest in cooking. *Thank God for take-out.*

On a whim, he smiled and waved. Instead of waving back, she hurried inside her apartment.

To behold the twenty-six year old former triathlete was, for most women, to know the heartache of desire. A latter-day Adonis, he wore casual, loose-fitting clothes—trendy styles—that

would not hinder his graceful, yet determined gait. His hair, short for convenience, was the color of weathered sandstone. Long lashes framed tawny eyes that twinkled with flecks of gold. With his unassuming and uneven smile, sturdy cleft chin, and dimpled cheeks, women who knew him marveled that he was single.

Baffled by what just happened Dominick shrugged it off. He opened the front door, to the greeting of his dog Zoa holding her leash in her teeth.

“What’s this?” he asked, and playfully tugged on the leather strap. “Does my baby want to run with Daddy?”

Wagging her tail, Zoa barked her approval and bolted out the door. Dominick anxiously tossed his clothing aside in the inner vestibule, grabbed the leash, and gave chase. He caught up with her moments later and glanced around to be sure no one was looking as she squatted to pee on Bob’s lawn. That done, man and best friend headed out for their afternoon adventure.