

## LOVE'S A THIEF

Stacey Keith

### CHAPTER 1

Wedged in the back of a coat closet at the Tattershall Museum of Art, Callie Maguire slowed her breathing. And waited.

From the security room outside the closet door, she heard the guard creak back in his chair. Twin thuds told her he'd propped his feet by the console.

*Good.* The sedative was taking effect. One tablet, dropped into his coffee while he paced away to use the restroom. Should it have been two? He was the size of a scrawny teenager — no way she could risk two.

Narrow and deep, the closet smelled of wet coats and someone's meatball sandwich. The odor made Callie queasy. But that always happened on a heist, when electrified nerves and surging adrenaline burned like lighter fluid in her stomach.

Crouched behind a nylon windbreaker, Callie strained to listen. She knew a second guard, a bald porker she called Walleye, kept watch over the janitorial crew downstairs. Walleye's voice, pure Boston, crackled now over the security monitor, relating a coarse joke to the cleaning people. Their uneasy chuckles sounded forced. Immigrants, probably, whose green cards wouldn't suffer close scrutiny. Toiling all day and into the night for a few measly dollars. Callie's heart went out to them. Stealing was much more profitable.

And for her a necessity.

With a thoroughness borne of experience, Callie ticked off the items on a utility belt that snugged her hips: a case of picks, a pair of Israeli military night-vision goggles, a glasscutter, and her Swiss army knife, modified to her particular specifications by a one-eyed German toolmaker. Each item dangled far enough apart not to rattle. She rarely needed them all, but with Callie, preparedness was a religion. On her first bank gig, five years ago, she'd loaded all her gear into one pocket. The noise alerted a sharp-eared security guard who'd fired and nearly blown her head off with his .38.

Now she knew better. Instead of jeans, Callie wore a close-fitting jumpsuit. Instead of piling her black hair in some college-casual topknot, she tucked it under a ski mask. The mask itched and made her face sweat, but these days even one shed hair of DNA evidence could damn her to a lifetime of dish duty at a federal facility.

Her eyes, adjusted now to the darkness, made out two leather jackets and a tan raincoat in addition to the windbreaker. She imagined Walleye straining the seams of the brown leather as he bellied up to the burger bar. The skinny guard outside the closet would probably claim the Colombo raincoat, seeing himself as a clever PI biding his time until a real case came along. Tonight he'd get his chance. And the other two garments, did they belong to the man mopping the floors, the woman polishing Plexiglas dividers?

Soft wheezy snores told Callie her drug had claimed its mark. She eased open the closet door. This was the most nerve-racking moment of a heist. The moment when only her wits and cunning kept her two steps ahead of the cops, out of jail, off the coroner's slab.

Not daring to breathe, she crept to the chair and peeked at its occupant. Chest bearing a brass nametag that said "Bill Watson". Thin fingers lightly gripping his belt. Broken capillaries russeting a mushroom nose. A drinker, Callie realized as she swung her gaze to the security console. She hoped to God the sedative, plus the alcohol, wouldn't kill him.

Thanks to the pin-hole camera she'd hidden near the light socket above the console, Callie knew the access code for switching off the motion sensors. It had taken her three days of monitoring the camera's video feed at home before she'd spotted Walleye typing the code. With a steady hand she keyed the numbers in, holding her breath until the computer beeped its confirmation.

Of course she still had those two pesky video cameras to contend with in the southeast wing, but weeks of careful mapping told her which one needed disarming. Pushing her brother, Ryan, through the museum in his wheelchair had been a brilliant method for observing them. Ryan's idea, of course.

"Cripples are scary," he'd told her with a wink. "People won't look us in the eye. Take me with you and I swear you're as good as invisible."

He'd been right. Ryan usually was. As a precaution, however, Callie had sported a blonde wig and a floppy hat. Tinted contacts masked the color of her eyes. Their true color, tawny, was shades lighter than her skin. A full-blooded Comanche grandmother had bequeathed her the permanent tan. The origin of her eyes remained a mystery.

Fifteen screens glowed on the security console. Keeping Bill in her peripheral vision, Callie tapped a command on the computer keys. The surgical gloves she wore made typing awkward, but...Bingo. *Callie Maguire, you clever dog.* Third screen from the left, a view of the southeast wing flickered and held. A statue of Eros as a young man loomed in the foreground, Psyche clutching his knees in bronze perpetuity. What a foolish woman, Callie thought, scanning the console for Walleye and the cleaning crew. There wasn't a man living, besides Ryan, who was worth getting dragged in the dirt for — not for a minute, let alone forever.

Another computer command and the bottom screen revealed Walleye holding court in a basement kitchen. A soda machine gleamed behind him. He sat, paunchy and pontificating, watching the workers.

Callie frowned. Porker he might be, but Walleye was the one who worried her. She'd seen him move quicker than a cat, and she'd seen the mean curl of his lips as he watched a young mother struggle with diaper bag, purse, packages and toddler, never once offering a hand. If Walleye ever caught sight of the intruder, he'd shoot first and to hell with asking questions.

Traveling fast, Callie navigated the hall outside Security Control, detecting a whiff of cheap aftershave. An ugly fluorescent light hung like an ice cube tray from the ceiling. Callie scooted across grimy linoleum to pause and to listen before braving the wider hallway beyond. She flew down the stairs, but on the first floor landing took a few steady breaths before opening the door.

On high alert she entered the southeast wing, eyes riveted on the security camera. Appended to her belt was a frequency jammer, no bigger than a car remote. She pointed it, clicking once. The camera's glowing red eye guttered and died.

She pressed the timer on her watch. Two minutes, thirty seconds to steal the painting and make her getaway. Had she disarmed the camera from the security room, she would have had less than that before the alarms started wailing.

Silently, she slipped past the statues, bronze and marble and wood, thinking that all museums, whether in Chicago or Curacao, were the same. Each took on an eerie life after hours, as though the paintings and sculpture muttered to one another in some ghostly language too soft for human ears. And the hundred arms reaching heavenward looked like pleas for freedom. As a girl visiting museums on field trips, Callie had believed that real people lay imprisoned in the statues. Not that museums abounded in Vidalia, Georgia, home of the world's biggest onion. No, a school bus had taken them the hundred miles into Savannah, and by the time they got there, all thirty kids had reduced their teacher to screaming hysterics.

Except Callie, whose heart was beating double-time at the sheer beauty of all that precious art.

Then, as now, it was thrilling to stand in the presence of greatness. She spotted the painting, Gauguin's *Le Rêve des Innocents*. The intimacy of seeing it in secrecy made it all the more awe-inspiring. Gauguin's expressive colors, his thick, flat style — which Ryan had captured so well in the forgery she carried — made the masterpiece appear hallucinatory, fragmented, like specks of sunlight shifting beneath a wind-riffled tree.

From a quiver-shaped case on her back, Callie coaxed out Ryan's copy. She propped it, furred, on the floor. A quick glance around confirmed she was alone. Still, she felt a premonition of dread. It dampened her skin beneath the ski mask and prickled her armpits with sweat. Shoving fear aside, she concentrated on her work.

Unlike newer museums, the Tattershall hadn't bothered to install alarms on every piece. It relied on a sophisticated grid of motion detectors to do the job. It made getting the painting down that much easier, although Callie staggered, grunting, beneath its weight.

Deftly, she pulled the Gauguin from its gilded display border before slicing it clear of the stretch frame, close to the staples, careful not to nick the painting itself. Then she snatched up the forgery. With a flurry of stapling she finished the job. In the beginning, hours of practice in her apartment had given her confidence, but for months pinched and lacerated fingers had been her only reward. Callie girl, she told herself, here's the payoff.

Now if only she could stop sweating and breathe easy. Callie centered the picture on the wall. How long before a sharp-eyed art critic noticed the theft? Long enough to get the true Gauguin into the capable hands of Jean-Paul, her fence?

And why tonight, of all nights, must she fall prey to nerves?

True, heisting the Gauguin was her biggest score, and her biggest risk, to date. But why this mysterious pain clutching her heart? Again, her eyes swept the southeast wing and re-checked the camera. No red light burning to betray her.

Rolling up the Gauguin, she secured it in the quiver, a fitting homage to her Native American heritage. And less bulky than a backpack.

Callie allowed herself one last look around before stopping to reactivate the camera. The forged Gauguin, a depiction of a sleeping native woman and her child, seemed oddly at variance with her own jangled nerves. But without sophisticated analysis, no one would probably guess *Le Rêve* was a fake. Ryan was a master forger.

Once Jean-Paul turned over the true masterpiece to some pretentious American expatriot trying to pass himself off as an English gentleman, Callie would walk away with a cool quarter million. More than enough to send Ryan to that exclusive spinal injury doctor in Europe.

With every heist she'd felt certain they'd found the right specialist, the right treatment, to make Ryan walk again. Fifty thousand for one surgery. Seventy-five thousand for another. A whopping hundred thousand for rehabilitation that failed to live up to its promises. But this European doctor was reported to work miracles with electrode therapy.

And she could see in Ryan's eyes that he was giving up hope. This time it had to work.

Callie darted up the stairs, rounded a corner, and froze.

On the landing above her, scrubbing his palm in his eye, stood the security guard, Bill. Callie's throat tightened as if a hangman's noose had slipped around it.

\*

**Stacey Keith's novel, *Love's A Thief*, won a nomination for the Golden Heart by Romance Writers of America. Chapter I is published here by permission of the author.**