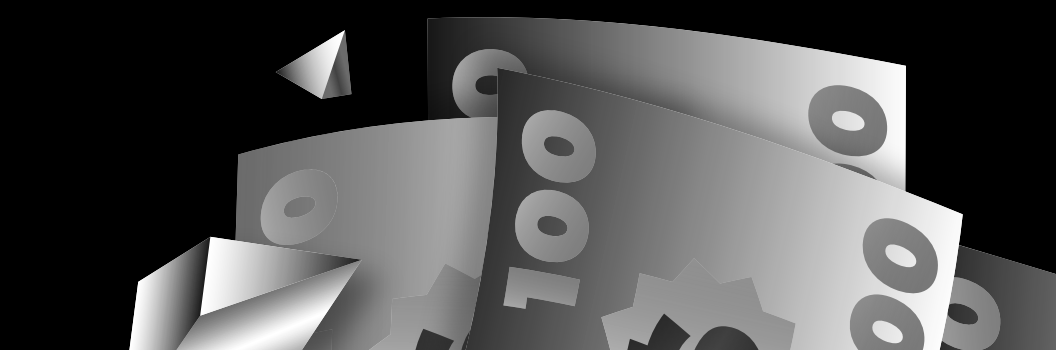




**JUDE WATSON**

# STI





# NING

IT TAKES A CROOK TO CATCH A CROOK

SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

Copyright © 2016 by Jude Watson

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-0-545-86346-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1      16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23  
First edition, September 2016

Book design by Nina Goffi

# BEFORE

## BLOOD RED STAR

Best place to hide? In plain sight. Every thief knows that.

It was broad daylight, but the thief wore a disguise: a uniform. In a rented estate for billionaires, nobody notices the help.

The grand redbrick mansion was nestled in the rolling green hills of Virginia, where the meadows were sweet, the mists were gentle, and the power brokers of Washington, DC, were only an hour away, waiting to be bribed. Exactly why billionaires all over the world flocked here.

The thick gray carpet reduced footsteps to whispers. The thief moved quickly down the corridors and fit the key into the lock, then pushed open the door to the library.

Sunlight streamed in through double-height windows and cast squares of rich gold on the carpet. Outside, roses tumbled, impossibly lush, their thick heads almost too heavy for their stalks. Even the bees appeared fat and prosperous, lumbering from bloom to bloom and occasionally blundering against the window with a dull thwack.

Safecracking was not at the top of the thief's skill set. But this job was worth the risk. If there were three wheels in the wheel pack, cobalt plates, and relockers, it would take too much time. The thief would have to resort to a drill and a borescope. Doable, but there would be noise.

The safe was behind a painting. Such a cliché. The thief flipped back the heavy, gilded frame.

It was amusing that people thought safes were, well, *safe*, when any safe was vulnerable to the right thief with tools and enough time. When it came to safes, the enemy was not the lock, not the steel, not the combination — only time.

The house staff ran on a strict schedule. The landscape workers would be moving to the flower gardens next. The thief had twelve minutes.

Opening the safe took ten.

A carved box sat alone in the safe. An aroma rose from the wood — something familiar, sweet and spicy, like a Christmas cookie. The thief reached in and opened the box, only to find another. Then another. With mounting exasperation, three more times the thief opened a slightly smaller box, stacking them and pushing them aside until the seventh box remained.

Gloved fingers itching with anticipation, the thief raised the lid.

The thief's breath caught. Three perfect star sapphires of a shade somewhere close to heaven. For a moment, maybe a trick of the light, the crystal star that flashed in the deep blue was bloodred.

The thief scooped them into a palm. Felt their unusual coldness.

Light dimmed as though a transparent veil had dropped between this room and the world. All air and sun sucked out of the space, replaced by an oily darkness. Like a frozen midnight river and no air to breathe . . .

The thief felt something — a shove? — as some . . . *thing* seemed to brush by.

Cold fear paralyzed bone and muscle.

The thief stood, frozen, and saw a sudden steaming at the window, as if someone had breathed against it.

Then an image of two hands appeared against the glass, a spreading imprint of palms and fingers.

As if someone were desperate to get out.

*Get out get out get out.*

Panic rushed through the thief. The jewels fell onto the carpet, knocking against one another.

And then the handprints faded, light flooded back in, and the thief could breathe again.

Outside? Just sunshine and air and grass and roses.

Heart slamming, the thief pushed away what had just happened, chalked it up to nerves and no breakfast, and fumbled for the stones.

Steady hands now trembled as they stacked the empty boxes inside one another. The safe door closed, the tumblers clicking, locked once again.

Out the door again, closing it quietly. Moving swiftly, reassured by solid wood, plaster walls, an air conditioner's hum. Normal things. Not thinking about the dead weight in a pocket, about the imprint of two palms on foggy glass.

The door. The thief had forgotten to lock the door.

Well. Somebody else's problem.

The thief's partner came down the hallway on schedule.

*All okay?*

*Slight change of plan. You stash the loot.*

*That's not the plan.*

*That's why it's called change.*

The thief handed over the stones and was gone.

The disappearance of one of the workers would be noted.

Likewise the fact that a locked door was now open. Questions would be asked. But the thief's partner would have to deal. The thief had never felt nerves like this before. Hands that trembled, knees like water, legs that shook.

The thief hurried across the lawn, grateful for sunshine, and feeling that something dark and evil had been left behind.