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Stealing Phoenix



Joss Stirling

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my god-daughter, Rachel Pearson

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With thanks to . . .



The boy seemed the perfect target. He stood at the back of a group taking the tour of the London Olympic stadium, attention on the construction vehicles beetling up the huge ramp to the athletes' entrance, not on the thief watching him. The building was nearly finished and to my mind resembled a giant soup plate stuck in a wire salad shaker on a green tablecloth. All that was left to do was the last-minute landscaping and put in place the final touches before the world arrived for the games. Others from the Community worked on the site and had taught me where to get in past the tight security. I'd been in a couple of times before because tourists like these students made easy pickings. I had plenty of time to scope out my victim and not many people around to mess up my approach. If I got a good haul I could relax for the rest of the day, head off for my favourite haunt of the local library, and not have to worry about the repercussions of coming home empty-handed.

Crouching behind a parked JCB loader, I studied my target. It had to be the one I was meant to hit: no one else was tall enough and he fitted the photo I'd been shown. With jet black hair, tanned skin, confident stance, he looked as if he wouldn't

miss a mobile phone or wallet. Probably had insurance or parents to step in and make up the loss immediately. That made me feel better, because stealing stuff wasn't something I did by choice; it was a means of survival. I couldn't see his face full on, but he had the distracted air of someone whose thoughts were often elsewhere, feet shifting about, not looking where the others did as the guide pointed out the features of the Olympic Park. I guessed that was good news as dreamers made excellent marks, reacting too slowly to a snatch. He was wearing knee-length khaki shorts and a T-shirt with 'Wrickenridge White Water Rafting' running across his broad shoulders. He looked like he worked out so I'd have to get this right. I probably wouldn't be able to outrun him if he chased after me. I retied the shoelaces on my ratty pair of Keds, hoping they'd hold out.

So where were his valuables? Shifting slightly, I saw that he had a backpack slung over one shoulder. Had to be in there.

I edged out from my hiding place, hoping I blended in to the group with my cut-off jeans and tank top—my best and newest clothes which I had nicked from Top Shop the week before. One of the downsides of my ability is that, to make a successful strike, I have to be close to the group I'm working on. That was always the riskiest part. I had prepared by bringing a canvas bag I'd taken from a boutique in Covent Garden, the kind foreign visitors buy as a souvenir with 'London Calling' scrawled on it in arty graffiti. I was fairly confident I could pass myself off as rich visitor like them if they took the scruffy shoes as a deliberate fashion statement, but I wasn't sure I could pull off looking intelligent enough to belong to their party. According to my source, they had come in from London University and were attending a conference on Environmental Science or some such geeky stuff. I'd barely been to school, educating myself in informal lessons from others in

the Community and what I'd read on my own in libraries, so I couldn't speak Science Student if anyone challenged me.

Pulling my hair out of its elastic band, I brushed a couple of long, dark strands forward to flop over my face, the better to hide me from the CCTV camera on the wall ten metres away. I sidled up to two girls standing a metre or so from my target. They were dressed in shorts and tanks like me, though from the pallor of the blonde one's skin she had spent way more time indoors this summer than I had. The other had three piercings in her ear, which I hoped made my five a bit less noticeable. They gave me a sideways look then a cautious smile.

'Hi, sorry I'm late,' I whispered. I had been briefed that none of them knew each other well, having only arrived for their conference the night before. 'Have I missed anything good?'

The one with the earrings grinned at me. 'If you like wildflower meadows. They've seeded the place with weeds, at least that's what my granddaddy would call them.' She had a southern American accent, dripping with sugar and magnolia. Her hair was braided in tight cornrows that made me think 'ouch' just looking at them.

The fair-haired one bent close. 'Don't listen to her. It's fascinating,' she also had an accent—Scandinavian maybe. 'They're using a light polymer-based membrane for the roof. I played about with the formula for that in the lab last semester: it will be interesting to see how well it holds up.'

'Oh yeah, like that's really . . . um . . . cool.' I was intimidated by them already: they were clearly geniuses and still managed to look good.

The guide beckoned the group forward and we walked up the ramp into the stadium itself. Despite my reasons for being there, I couldn't help feeling the thrill of treading in the same path as the Olympic torch. Not that I'd ever have

the chance of being there for the real thing; my dreams of following any kind of sport had never got off the starting blocks. Unless, that was, the Olympic Committee decided to go wild and introduce a medal for thieves—then I might stand a chance. I knew the exhilaration of making a successful steal, the elegant sweep-in and clean get-away; surely that took as much skill as running in circles round some dumb track? Yeah, I was a gold medalist in my discipline.

As the cheerful female guide waved her parasol to encourage us to follow her, we entered into the great oval space of the stadium. Wow. I'd never got this far before on my other excursions on to the site. I could hear in my head the echoes of the cheering crowd. Rows and rows of empty seats filled with shadows of their occupants-to-be. I hadn't realized the future held ghosts as well as the past, but I could sense them clearly. The energy rippled through time even to this quiet Wednesday morning in July.

Reminding myself to keep focused on the job, I eased my way nearer to the boy. I could now see him in profile: he had the kind of face you saw in girls' magazines next to some model as gorgeous as him. He had got the whole deal in the genetic department: chiselled nose, casual-cut ink-black hair that looked good no matter how rumpled it was, dark brows, cheek bones to die for; I couldn't see his eyes because he was wearing shades but I would bet they were huge and a soulful chocolate brown—oh yeah, he was too good to be true and I hated him for it.

I caught myself before I glowered at him, surprised by my response to the guy. Why was I reacting that way? I didn't normally feel anything for my victims, apart from a twinge of guilt that I'd singled them out. I always tried to find people who wouldn't notice the loss that much, a bit like Robin Hood. I enjoyed outwitting my rich targets, but I didn't want

to think anyone really suffered from what I did. The Sheriff of Nottingham had his ill-gotten taxes; these days people had insurance from big multi-nationals, and they were the ones who really ripped off the poor. It wasn't as if I were like them, robbing widows and orphans, was it? They got compensation eventually. At least that was what I told myself as I planned how to pick his pocket. This job was a bit different as I was acting under orders; it was fairly rare for me to be asked to steal from a particular mark, but I was relieved the target looked like the sort to be insured up to the eyebrows. Neither he nor I had chosen this so it wasn't rational to turn against him. He'd done nothing to earn it but stand there, looking so sorted, clean and kind of centred whereas I was such a hopeless mess.

The guide wittered on about how the seating had been constructed to be removable. As if I cared about Olympic legacy; I was never convinced I'd see next month, let alone ten years away. A plane rumbled overhead on the Heathrow flight path scarring the summer sky with its white trail. As the boy looked up, I made my move.

Reach for their mental patterns . . .

They were whirring away like so many beautiful kaleidoscopes, ever shifting. Then . . .

I stopped time.

Well, not exactly, but that's what it feels like to be on the receiving end of my power. What I really do is freeze perceptions so that no one notices time passing—that's why I need small groups in enclosed spaces. Other people might just notice if a bunch of people suddenly went into Madame Tussaud mode. It's a bit like the sensation of passing out under anaesthetic and then jolting awake again, or so I've been told when I've tried my ability out on others in the Community—that's my sort-of-home, though often it felt more like a zoo.

All of us are Savants in the Community: people with extra sensory perceptions and powers. Savants exist because every now and then a human is born with a gift, a special dimension to their brain that allows them to do what others can only dream of doing. There are some of us who can move stuff with their minds—telekinesis; I've met a few who can tell if you are using thought-speak, or telepathy; and there's one person who can mess with your head and force you do his will. The ways the Savant power develop are many and varied, but no one else has a gift exactly like mine. I preferred it like that; it made me feel special.

The little group of ten students and their guide all stopped in their tracks, the Scandinavian girl with her hand half-way through her hair, an Asian boy mid-sneeze—the 'aah' never reaching the 'choo'.

Go me: I can even stop the common cold.

I quickly rifled through my target's backpack and struck gold: he had an iPad and an iPhone. That was brilliant news as both are easy to conceal and have a high resale value, almost as much as the original shop-bought items. I felt the familiar rush of victory and had to resist the temptation of taking a picture with the phone of them all standing there, eighteen-year-olds caught playing Musical Statues. Experience told me that I would pay for indulging my winner's celebration with a crashing headache if I held them for more than twenty or thirty seconds. Stuffing the goods in my canvas tote, I settled the backpack on his shoulders exactly how it had been—I'm good at the details. But now I was standing so close, almost embracing him, and I could see his eyes down the side of his glasses. My heart stopped when I caught sight of his expression. It wasn't the dull glazed look my victims usually wore; he was somehow aware of what was happening, fury burning in his eyes.