

## 8. A New Thief In Town

I HAD NEVER THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS A THIEF.

I guessed I could be considered one if garden-raiding were a crime. But, since every kid who had ever lived had probably helped themselves to a handful of peas, a carrot, or an apple at one time or another, I didn't see how snitching veggies from a neighbour counted.

Why in heavens I decided to get light-fingered at the Met, our local department store, I couldn't guess. But something made me do it. Maybe it was because it was so tempting and so easy. Maybe it was because I wanted to get even with God for taking Gramp, doing something bad in return. Or maybe the Devil just made me do it.

Only a bit of snow had fallen over the past week, and the day was clear and cold. Unfortunately, dressing up nice in the winter usually meant being chilly, but thanks to corduroy pants and my new Convoy coat, I was able to find a middle ground. It was Saturday, and so I made my way to where Mom worked at the ladies' wear store, a few shops beyond the corner post office, the Dominion Café and the Metropolitan Department Store. I was picking her up to go for lunch, like I did every Saturday. We would either meet at her work, or I would find her already at the Dominion. Mr. Chan, the owner, would usually save the corner booth in front of the window for us.

Mom was waiting for me inside the door of her store. She was wearing a white blouse,

light brown button-up sweater, and dark brown skirt, with not a wrinkle in anything. The brown colours highlighted her hazel eyes and brown hair. The Pageboy hairstyle that was her trademark didn't have a strand out of place, and her bright red lipstick was drawn like an artist had painted it. A gold necklace, a gold ring and a golden watch set off her look. Small and curvy, my mom was always beautiful. I helped her on with her coat, and we walked the couple of doors down to the café.

"Hello, Bernice." Mr. Chan greeted my mother as we entered the restaurant. Being Chinese, his English wasn't so good, and it kind of came out, "*Ha-whoa, Berniss.*"

"And *howa* you, Buddy?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Chan. Thanks," I answered.

"*You boaff wan the you-shell?*" He smiled at us, showing his stained teeth. I guessed he was also a smoker. Knowing what we wanted by heart, he never had a pencil or an order book when he waited on us.

"You always guess right," answered Mom, smiling back at him.

My mother ate lunch at the Dominion almost every day—except Wednesdays, when she would be off work at noon, and Sundays, when she didn't work at all.

"I be *wight* back," the kind old man said, as he went off to fill our order.

Our usual was always a toasted chopped olive sandwich with butter, mayonnaise and chopped lettuce for Mom—at least on Saturdays. For me, it was always a hamburger with sweet green relish. The relish wasn't as good as Mom made every fall, but the cook at the Dominion did something to the bun by roasting or toasting or frying it—on both sides—that made my mouth water. We both drank big Cokes from the soda fountain.

Mom and I never said a lot during our Saturday lunches. Since Gramp had died, she had tried a few times to talk about how I was doing, and whether I was feeling better as time went by. I got good at switching the topic when she tried that.

Her usual question was, "So how is school going, Buddy?"

"Fine," was all I offered in return.

Another question I could expect was, "You're getting along with Miss Ruby okay now?"

"Yep," I said, getting that subject out of the way.

"Riel and Mokey haven't been around all week. Is everything okay between you boys?" She looked me square in the eyes when she asked this, and her asking was like a bolt of lightning out of the blue. Zap!

Did she have spies following me around? Had she hired a private eye to keep tabs on me?

Mr. Chan showed up with our drinks, and hurried away.

I wondered how Mom could know the guys weren't talking to me. I sure knew. They hadn't even looked at me since Monday, when Riel had threatened to punch my lights out.

I tried cornering him in the cloakroom, hoping to explain things, but he wouldn't listen to any of it.

I looked up at Mom. "Why would you ask that?" I said, with probably a bit too much surprise in my voice.

"No special reason," she came back. "I'm just making small talk. Your reaction suggests that maybe things aren't okay."

"There's no problem," I said, too quickly. "Let's just drop it!"

There wasn't a snowball's chance in heck that I would share with my mother the problems I had with Riel and Dorothy.

"Touchy, touchy," she said. "I guess I've hit a sore spot. But I won't pry. You can tell me about it if and whenever you want."

"There's nothing to tell," I said, then clammed up.

Luckily, Mr. Chan came back with our food.

"I *bwing* you pie *wight* away, Buddy."

"Thanks, Mr. Chan." Banana cream pie was always my dessert on Saturdays.

I wolfed down my hamburger, and Mom let me know a couple of times that I was eating too fast. When my pie finally arrived, it was gone in a flash as well.

"What's your rush, Buddy?" Mom asked. "I'd swear you weren't happy to spend time with me today."

The truth was, I wasn't. Her question about Riel and Mokey bugged me. I didn't want her asking about it again.

"I'm going skating this afternoon," I lied. "But we have to clean the ice first."

"Well, if you're in that much of a hurry, you'd better just get on with it," she offered. "Maybe you'll be in a more talkative mood next week. I'll see you at home later."

"Ya, okay," I said. "I'll take off then. Bye."

I didn't usually stay at the café after I finished my pie anyway. Mom would hang around to have a cigarette, and I hated the smell, so I'd make for the door before she lit up. This time it was more like I bolted for the door.

With time to kill I found myself at the Met. I had planned to buy comics at Cliff's Smoke Shop, across the street and a couple of doors down from where Mom worked. But for some reason, I took a left turn, and spotting the latest toboggans and skates and other winter stuff in the department store window, I decided to pop in.

Other than curiosity, I had no real reason to go inside, except that I wanted to stay out of sight before later picking out my comic books for the month. The first Saturday of the month was my day for buying my monthly ration of five comics, which cost a dime

each. I had told Mom I was going skating first, though, which I wasn't, so I didn't want her to catch me in a lie. I knew Riel and Mokey would probably be at the school rink, and I didn't feel like getting into another argument with them—or maybe even a fight with Riel. My guts were in a knot just thinking about how that might happen.

There weren't many customers in the two-storey store. A few men wandered about in the basement, where you could buy furniture, stoves, wringer-washing machines, and that kind of stuff. A couple of ladies fussed over towels on the second floor, where sheets, toasters and plates were sold. The adult and kids' clothing sections on the main level were empty. Some kids were drooling over the toys that were laid out behind the books, which were also on the main floor and easily seen through the big front windows.

I browsed through an oversized adventure book, first, wondering if there was anything on the man who had climbed Mount Everest a few months earlier, a guy named Edmund Hillary. I couldn't see anything. I thumbed through a few other books, then wandered into the toy section. The kids who'd been there had taken off.

The only clerk on the main floor was now waiting on a family near the back of the store. I guessed the other couple of sales people who usually worked on that floor were out to lunch.

Amongst the scads of toys, an Indian rubber ball drew my attention. Pure white and about the same size as a baseball, when I tossed it down onto the store's linoleum floor it rocketed back into my hand. Instead of bouncing it a second time, I stuffed it into the right pocket of my Convoy coat. I was flabbergasted at how easy it was to steal.

Right away my heart started pounding, and I could feel the heat of a blush rising up my throat. I looked to where the clerk was still waiting on the family. No one was paying any attention to me.

Before I knew it, I had popped a deck of cards into my other pocket. On the back side of the deck, black Lab puppies were doing different fun things. Gramp had loved black Labs and always wanted one as a hunting dog—but Nan put the kybosh on the idea. Last, for good measure, I slipped a package of Jacks into the same pocket I had stuffed the cards.

Guilt or fear, I wasn't sure which, told me I had to scram before I dared to light-finger something else, something a lot more valuable that couldn't easily fit into my pocket. I cringed as I pictured myself tucking a big box under my coat and making a run for it.

I had to work at walking slowly out of the store, like I was doing nothing out of the ordinary. I knew I had to take my time, and make it look really natural. I counted to myself: one, left foot forward; two, right foot forward; three, left again.

I made it out onto the street and felt the rush of cold air hit my face. It brought unbelievable relief. If having a red face signalled to others that a thief was among them,

everyone would soon be pointing directly at me. Not everyone was, but there were two: Randy Forrester and Lyle Jones. They were standing by the curb with stupid grins on their faces.

Before any of us could say anything, my mother's voice interrupted. "Buddy, what are you still doing uptown? I thought you were going skating."

I had to think fast. "I was just talking with these guys for a bit," I said. "Then I was heading over to Cliff's to grab my comics. I forgot today was my day to do that."

Perhaps because of my red face, Mom started grilling me, "Since when have you ever forgotten which day you buy your comic books? Is something wrong?"

"No, Mom. I'll be out of here in a minute." I wanted desperately for her to clear the deck.

"Hello, boys," she said, half-turning toward the two goons. Neither of them replied. Mom gave Randy and Lyle the once-over, and then looked back at me. "Well, get on with it then. I don't want you hanging around uptown."

"I just told you, Mom, I'm going," I said.

I brushed past the two lunkheads and started across the street. Mom walked away up the sidewalk, turning into the ladies' wear store. The two creeps followed me.

Halfway across the snow-packed road, Randy's voice came like a hard tap on the shoulder. "Hold on, sport. We need to talk to you."

I had a long, sorry history with Randy and Lyle. My first ever fight was with them. Well, with Randy anyway. Lyle would have added his knuckles to the punching if I hadn't got in a couple of licks at Randy first and then run like the blazes.

Both were a grade above me. Both were older and bigger. At almost a half-a-head taller, a dozen pounds heavier, and two or three years older, Randy was the nastier of the two. He had flunked twice, and nobody figured he'd finish grade seven. Mean, dirty and foul-mouthed, he had greasy brown hair that always stuck out of his toque. There were stains over most of his tan parka. I looked back as his beady, dark brown eyes took me in.

Lyle was Randy's henchman, a term I had learned from the movies. He would do anything Randy told him to. Like Riel, he was Métis and had black hair and dark skin to prove it. As tall as Randy, but skinny, he was between me and Randy in age and had also flunked at least one grade. Everyone thought that if Randy quit school, so would Lyle. He copied Randy in everything, including being dirty and stinking as bad as his hero.

Neither of them could stay out of trouble. The Mounties had visited both of their parents about a bunch of bad things they had done. Somehow they had managed to keep out of jail, or reform school. Their sessions with Army almost followed a schedule. The joke was that whenever Army felt he was getting rusty from not swinging his thresher-

belt strap in a while, he'd find a reason to practice on Randy and Lyle. They had no trouble giving him a reason.

I kept on walking and almost made it into the Smoke Shop when Randy's voice floated over my shoulder. "What's the rush, Buddy? Got somethin' to hide?"

That last question stopped me, as an icy coldness all of a sudden pumped through me. I didn't want to spend time with these guys, and wasn't keen to even walk across the tracks with them around, especially without Riel to help me if they decided to try anything. I sure didn't want to chitchat with them in the middle of the busiest street in town with my pockets full of stolen loot. Something told me I should pay attention to them, so I stopped and turned.

"Waddya want?" I asked.

"Oh, I bet you could figure that out for yourself." Randy smirked and looked at Lyle. "How about you hand over the ball you just lifted—along with the two other things you dropped into the other pocket? Let's see what you snagged."

They must have seen me clear as day through the front window of the store. It was just my luck that the two creeps I hated most had been passing by at exactly the time of my first shoplift ever. Suddenly, it was as if I had been dropped into a deep, dark well. It was bad enough my life was already upside down, thanks to Riel's weird idea about my stealing his girlfriend. Now I had joined the ranks of thieves. I was being held up by two thugs, who would likely turn me over to the Mounties, if only to earn themselves a few Brownie points. I had to find a way out of the pickle I had gotten myself into.

"What are you talking about?" I said, trying to bluff my way out.

"You gonna play dumb?" asked Randy sarcastically. "We should drag your butt back into the Met, or better yet, haul you into your mommy's store and let her customers see you dig whatever you stole out of your pockets."

They had me. As hard as I tried, I couldn't quickly come up with a way out. I definitely couldn't run, not with evidence of my crime burning holes in my pockets. I thought it best to go along with the two jerks, for at least a while.

"You might as well hand the loot over," Lyle demanded. "Any way you look at it, whatever you stole is gonna be ours."

I felt my chin collapse to my chest as I gave in and pulled off my mitts, tucking them into the armpit of my coat. I reached into my pockets to pull out the Indian rubber ball, the deck of cards and the Jacks. Randy took the stolen booty from me.

"Pretty lousy haul. You shoulda bin able to pick up somethin' better than this crap," Randy said.

As he stared down at his prizes, I could see him thinking. I knew I was in trouble when his head popped up and a wicked grin crossed his face.

“You’re headin’ to get comics, you told your mom, right?” he asked, not waiting for an answer. “Then maybe you should pinch a couple for us.”

“I’m not stealing for you!” I thought the anger I put into my voice made it clear.

Within minutes, though, I was doing exactly that.

I entered Cliff’s Smoke Shop with the orders from the two thugs ringing in my ears. As Gramp used to say, I had added “insult to injury.” I couldn’t bring myself to think of what he would say about the new life of crime his grandson was now leading.

I had offered instead to give Randy and Lyle all the comics I was planning to buy, or the money, but they didn’t want that. They said I still had to eat up the fifty cents I had brought by picking out my own five comic books, and then I had to get theirs.

Once a month Mom and Nan allowed me to splurge, letting me have money from the savings jar they kept hidden for me. I figured I had almost thirty dollars in it, and I wanted most of that money to go toward buying Gramp’s shotgun back from Uncle Dan. Any snowfalls that would come along would give me enough work to replace my comic book money, as well as add to my savings.

Inside the shop, I didn’t even bother to look at the new 3D comics at the front of the shelf. These were more expensive, and, given what was going on, I wasn’t the least bit interested in browsing through them. My blackmailers insisted that in addition to the new *Superman*, *Batman*, *Archie*, *Rocky Lane*, and *Air Boy* comics that I planned to buy, I was supposed to lift copies of *Superman* and *Batman* for them. All those, and a whole bunch more, were just waiting to be hoisted out of their spots or circular wire racks.

Cliff Bromley, who ran the store, was about the same age as Gramp had been. He looked older, though, because of his full head of white hair and his moustache that kind of drooled down each side of his upper lip. Along with his potbelly, if he had let his moustache grow into a beard, he’d have made a great Santa. He and his wife grew big green apples in their backyard on our side of the tracks. Our families knew each other well.

Cliff stood behind the glass counter filled with cigarettes, tins of tobacco, cigarette rollers, matches, lighters, pipes and pipe cleaners, and other stuff that smokers used. Players, Lucky Strike and Black Cat #7s took up the most space in the cigarette section on wall shelves behind him. Across the aisle from the counter were more shelves, these filled with magazines and stacks of newspapers from all sorts of different places.

A couple of customers were browsing through magazines, while Cliff waited on two more at the cash register. There was nobody behind me looking at the gift card section

that took up that wall—even though Valentine’s Day was just over a week away. That left me alone near the rear of the store, in front of the racks and shelves of comic books. If I had the nerve to carry it out, and didn’t do something stupid to give myself away, my plan was simple enough.

I tried to be smooth, but I couldn’t help being all thumbs and reckless. Eventually, I managed to slip a second copy of *Batman* inside the first one I took down, and then did the same thing with *Superman*. I snugged each one tightly into the comic I had slipped it inside of. Being somewhat hidden behind the comic rack helped me to do the dirty deed. Finally finished what I had to do, I stacked all the books into one pile and took that up to the counter.

“Picked up your usual ration of readin’ material, Buddy?” asked Cliff. He always seemed to laugh out his words, and never let any of us kids call him Mr. Bromley.

I felt like a weasel for what I was doing, and I could feel a red flush creeping up my neck again. “Gotta make sure I know what Batman’s up to,” I answered.

I slid my two quarters across the glass counter, as Cliff rolled the comics into a bundle, tied a string around the lot, and handed the thick tube across to me.

“See you in a few weeks,” Cliff said. “Say hello to Shorty for me.” Like most every adult on our side of the tracks, Mr. Bromley was hoping Nan was doing okay without Gramp.

“I will. Thanks.” I probably hustled a little too quickly out the door.

Randy and Lyle were waiting for me just before the railroad tracks, halfway down the block. I had made it safely out of the Smoke Shop, and I hustled in their direction.

Suddenly, the expressions on their faces changed from smugness to bug-eyed fear. They turned and beat it down the street around the corner like bats out of hell. A heavy hand thumped down on my shoulder and spun me around.

“Buddy, you didn’t really think I’d fall for such an old trick, didja?” Cliff’s eyebrows were scrunched so low that they almost caused his eyes to disappear. His mouth was just a straight line and he wasn’t laughing this time.

He took the roll of comics from under my arm, broke the string with a quick yank and pulled out the two extra *Batman* and *Superman* from their hiding places. With the five I had paid for in his one hand, and the two stolen ones in the other, he looked down at me and shook his head.

“I don’t understand, Buddy.” He seemed really hurt. “You’ve been comin’ into my shop with your granddad—God bless his soul—since I had to bend over the counter to see you. Never in a million years would I have thought you would steal from me. Your grandfather would roll over in his grave if he knew what you were up to. Shame on you, Buddy Williams!”

Standing there in the middle of the sidewalk, in front of businesses with customers inside the stores, I felt dirty. Anybody walking down the sidewalk might wonder what was going on between me and Cliff Bromley. Worse yet, I worried Mom might look through the windows of the ladies' wear store and see her son being questioned strangely by a family friend. That feeling brought me close to crying.

"I'm really sorry, Cliff. Uh, Mr. Bromley..." I stuttered, working hard to keep tears out of my voice. "It wasn't my idea. I didn't want to do it. Randy Forrester made me." I looked over my shoulder but, of course, my accomplices were long gone.

Mr. Bromley—not Cliff anymore—took some time to think. "So that's why those little buggers ran off so fast when they saw me coming up behind you." He shook his head slowly.

"Okay, follow me back to the shop. I'm freezin' my butt off standing here." With one hand holding the comics, he wrapped his cardigan sweater tightly around him, and headed back inside his store. He obviously wasn't worried about me making a run for it.

Inside the shop he gestured for me to wait for my punishment by the door to the back storeroom. He then served a customer that had been waiting for him to get back, fortunately not someone I knew.

Against the wall, I stood as still as a board, my coat still done up, my mitts on, and my toque pulled down over my ears. I was so hot that I figured I might faint. My long underwear, which I had put on because I thought I actually might go skating, was clinging to every sweaty nook and cranny of my body.

It was a good five minutes before Cliff—Mr. Bromley—left the counter and came to stand in front of me. "First of all, Buddy, I'm not giving you back your comic books or your money. Consider it a fine. Let's just say forfeiting the profits of the crime is what happens when you steal from people."

"I understand, sir." I hoped that if I showed him respect by calling him sir, he might not call the Mounties. Mostly I hoped he wouldn't tell Mom.

"It's more than the comics or the money, young man." He went on, "You disrespected me and have abused our friendship. For that, there has to be a bigger penalty."

Oh no, I thought. This is where he calls the police and probably my mother.

"Since I've never had any trouble with you before, and because I saw the weasels who put you up to this run away, here's what's going to happen." Then he laid down his law. "You are banned from my store. You are not to come into my shop until the end of the last day of school in June. It's either that way, or I give the local constabulary a phone call."

By "local constabulary" I knew he meant the R.C.M.P., so I quickly came back with the only thing I could think to say, "I understand, sir." As soon as I said it, I realized that

I'd have to buy my Valentine's Day cards somewhere else. I'd maybe even have to make my own. I didn't know why I thought of that. Only after did I figure out I would also have to go without my monthly reading material for a long, long time.

Those things didn't seem all that big of a deal, but what Mr. Bromley said next was. "If you don't cross my doorway, and if I don't hear of you getting into any more trouble—you know I *will* find out if you do—then it won't be necessary for me to tell your mother or grandmother about this. They've got enough on their plates right now. You understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Bromley." It seemed I now knew only very few words when I spoke.

"I see your beautiful mother going to and from work every day—right across the street." He pointed to her store. "It wouldn't take any effort at all for me to call out to her. You see what I mean, Buddy?"

"Yes, sir. You have my promise that this will never happen again." I hoped he believed me, because I sure believed myself.

"One more thing before I kick you out the door," he said. "Choose better friends! Those two little buggers you were with haven't seen the inside of this shop for over a year. I don't tolerate thieves."

"I understand, Mr. Bromley. I'm really sorry." I had already decided not to explain to Randy and Lyle what had happened. I wouldn't give them the time of day from then on.

"You better remember what an exceptional man your granddad was, and let his good name be your guide from now on. Don't be tarnishing his memory by becoming a thief," he said. "Now get your butt out of here."

"I won't be stupid again, Mr. Bromley. I promise," I said, as I headed for the door, looking back to add, "Thanks a bunch for not telling my mom."

I crossed the street before heading towards the tracks, in case Randy and Lyle might be lying in wait at the end of the block. I would be happy not to see them. Ever.

It was a hike of only a few minutes to get from uptown to my place, but on this trip, I took awhile to stand looking up and down the tracks that went on forever. I thought about how I could maybe just run away, and wondered if I could do what Jimmy Stewart's character in *The Greatest Show On Earth* had done. He had turned his back on his trouble and joined the circus. Maybe I could become a clown, too. It wouldn't be a red one, though. Maybe it wouldn't be a big deal to hop on a freight train as it chugged out of town.

By the time I made it home, I had given up on the running away idea. Fortunately, Nan was too busy to ask me a bunch of questions about whatever was on her mind. I went up to Mom's bedroom with a stack of old comics and tried to forget what had happened.

It didn't work out that easily.

When Mom came home from work, I heard her ask Nan where I was, and a minute later she had cornered me in her room upstairs.

It turned out that not only had the clerk from the Met seen me shoplift stuff, but she knew exactly what I had stolen. An hour after I left the store, she had gone next door to Mom's shop and given her a bill for what I had lifted, telling Mom that I wasn't welcome in the Met anymore. I thought at the rate I was going, I might have to leave town soon, especially if no one would let me into their stores anymore.

Mom was embarrassed when the lady presented her the bill, and was really, really angry with me for what I had done. She made me pay her back the \$2.07 she had to give the clerk, and I was forbidden from going uptown for a month. She told me she couldn't stand the idea of people knowing she had a thief for a son. It was the first time I ever felt she was ashamed of me.

I was ashamed of myself. I couldn't shop in the Met, perhaps forever. I couldn't buy any comics at the Smoke Shop for months. I couldn't join Mom for lunch on Saturdays for a while either. And maybe worst of all, I couldn't go to the movies for a whole month.

I didn't understand why I had done what I had done. I didn't need to steal any of the things I had taken. The best thing that could come out of all that had happened was that Mr. Bromley wouldn't be telling Mom about the second half of my crime spree that day—I hoped.

I thought back to how Gramp always said that baseball imitated life. He used to say that "Three strikes, and you're out" was a good way to learn life lessons. I now knew what he meant.

I had been caught three times trying to steal: by the two creeps, Forrester and Jones; by Mr. Bromley, a family friend who was once mine, too; and, by the store clerk from the Met. Those were my three strikes, all in one day. One thing I knew for sure: I was out of the stealing game for good.