

THE THIEF OF YOUTH

by Judy Clemens

"Bull!" Turtle roared. His neck stretched out of his shirt and retreated under his collar.

I smiled and spread out my cards. "Three queens."

Walter's chair scraped as he pushed it back from the table. "Us old guys might as well give up. Christy's beatin' our pants off." He grimaced and stalked out to the kitchen.

Brillo squinted at me, the whites of his eyes glowing under cocoa-colored lids. "You cheatin'?"

"Moi?" I splayed my fingers over my heart. "Cheating is *not* one of my vices."

The microwave beeped and Walter peeked out from the kitchen. "Christy doesn't cheat. She's just smarter than the rest of us."

"Bull!" Turtle yelled again. "We're twice as old as her!"

Brillo stuck a finger in his ear. "Goddammit, Turtle, I may be old, but I ain't deaf."

Turtle opened his mouth again, but the doorbell saved us.

"Thank God for small mercies," Walter muttered. He walked back into the living room with a steaming mug, a tea bag string hanging over the side.

I rose and headed toward the door. "Somebody stoke the fire, will you? My toes are numb."

Brillo grumbled but went to do my bidding, knees cracking. "If you'd find us a job, we could get out of this Victorian monstrosity for a few hours."

"Tell it to my dear departed dad. Anyway, I don't see anything keeping you from drumming up business. Have you checked out that new development across the river?"

"Low three hundreds and up," Walter said. "But I'm guessing they all have brand new alarm systems."

"Alarm systems?" Turtle shrieked. "Piece of cake!"

I peered through the stained glass in the front door. My neighbor stood on the porch, hugging her arms to herself. I opened the door. "Hi, Rosalyn. What brings you out in the cold?"

"Hello, Christy." Snowflakes from her walk over had decorated her hair and left spots of wetness on her face. "Can I...can I come in?"

I opened the door wider. "Of course."

She dropped her arms to her sides, and her shoulders relaxed. "Oh, thank you. And thank you, Mr....uh...Turtle."

Turtle took her coat and scarf. Fortunately, he refrained from opening his mouth; Rosalyn seemed nervous enough to skitter away at the drop of a lockpick. She sat on the edge of the chair I offered.

"Tea?" Walter asked her.

"That sounds wonderful. Herbal, if you have it."

"Wife won't let me drink any other kind."

"And she's here watching, is she?" Brillo asked.

Walter leveled a flat-eyed look at him before heading to the kitchen. Brillo chuckled to himself.

"What can I do for you?" I asked Rosalyn.

She let out an "oh" that sounded almost like a sob.

I sat forward. "Rosalyn, what's wrong?"

Walter came back in and handed her a cup. She gazed into the tea and blew on it. "It's Peter. I'm having trouble with him. He's never been a problem before." She wouldn't meet my eyes. "I was hoping to get some of your... professional expertise."

Brillo stiffened. "Profess--"

I put up a hand to shush him. He liked to sputter, but Rosalyn knew exactly what she was talking about. And who we were. I gestured for her to continue.

"Peter's been...hanging around with a new girl. Carmen. She's...oh, how can I describe her?" She bit her lip.

"Sneaky?"

"Sneaky," I said. "In what way?"

"I don't know how to explain it. I always have this feeling whenever she's around. Like she's laughing at me. She's just...she's not a nice girl."

"We don't do teen-age romances," Brillo said.

I glared at him. "Will you shut up?"

He pouted.

"There's more, isn't there?" I asked Rosalyn.

She nodded. "He's coming home with things that aren't his. Things he couldn't afford. Things I can't buy him."

"Like what?"

"iPods, Game Boys, cell phones. A new stereo for his car. Clothes, even. Expensive tennis shoes. He seems to think I won't notice. Ever since his father passed away last year, he acts like...well, like he doesn't see me. Like I'm not there." Her eyes welled up, and I put my hand over hers.

Walter took a sip of tea. "How can we help?"

Rosalyn imitated him and lifted her cup to her lips, calming noticeably.

I sat back. "I assume you want us to find out where these things are coming from."

"If you could I'd be so grateful. I don't want him to go to jail. I didn't raise Peter to steal things." She flushed. "I mean, I don't want him... Oh, goodness."

I smiled. "We know what you mean. And we sympathize."

"We do?" Brillo said.

"Of course. It just so happens my father *did* raise me to steal things. But that doesn't mean I want other people—"

"Kids!" Turtle bellowed.

"—going into the business. Rosalyn, tell us what you know about where Peter goes, what he does."

Her teacup rattled on the saucer when she set it down, and she clenched her hands in her lap. "He's always with this Carmen girl anymore. He doesn't go anywhere without her. They do the usual things, I suppose, if he's telling

me the truth. Bowling, hanging out at the mall, seeing lots of movies—"

"Ah ha," I said.

Walter nodded.

"What?" Rosalyn said. "What did I say?"

I looked around at my gang of thieves. "What do you guys say we check out the cinema sometime soon?"

Rosalyn left a few minutes later, promising to tell us the next time Peter said he was going to the movies. We got the call on Friday, in the midst of making plans to hit the new development in the next county.

At six-thirty the four of us sat in my Taurus, motor running to keep our fingers and toes from freezing up, and studied the small-town movie theater. One screen, with the same flick running weeks on end.

"Do we have to actually watch the movie?" Walter asked. "My wife's dragged me to it way too many times."

Brillo snickered. "Peter must like it, too, he's come so often the past few weeks."

I unhooked my seatbelt and contemplated the lights in the parking lot and around the building. "I don't think Peter would risk the back door. That row of houses is too close. People would notice someone coming and going out the fire exit."

"So we watch the front?" Walter asked.

I turned toward the back seat. "Turtle and I do. You and Brillo go inside."

Walter sighed deeply.

"If you have a better idea," I said, "I'm all ears. It's just Peter knows me, and Turtle can't whisper to save his life."

"Hey," Turtle shouted.

I studied the cars around us. "Not too many people here tonight, even though it's Friday. Shouldn't be too hard to keep an eye on the kids."

"And there they are," Brillo said.

A red Grand Am pulled into a parking spot just down the row, and Peter climbed out of the driver's seat. His slight frame was covered all in black, from his boots to his leather jacket. I wondered if the coat was one of his newly acquired items.

"Oh, Peter," I said.

Brillo glanced at me. "What?"

"He's always been such a nice kid. Polite. Neat. Mowed the yard after Dad died till I moved in. Then his own father died."

Walter grunted. "I see a bigger problem right there."

Carmen oozed out of the Grand Am, her trim young figure highlighted by her curve-hugging ensemble. Like Peter, she was dressed in black, her red gloves the only spot of color. Her handbag looked to be Louis Vuitton, and her clothes, from what I could tell, hailed from Urban Outfitters.

"Oooh, she's a bad girl," Brillo said.

"And you can tell just by looking at her," I said.

Brillo snorted. "Sure I can. Look at the way her hips move when she walks. Don't no good girls walk like that."

I smacked his arm. "Sexist."

"Hey. I calls 'em likes I sees 'em."

"Anyway," I said, "it looks like you two better get a move on."

Walter sighed again, but got out of the car. Brillo squinted at me. "Remember I *am* the driver. Don't you get no ideas."

I shoved him toward the door. "Will you just go?"

An hour later Peter and Carmen exited the theater, beelining it toward their car. Brillo and Walter were nowhere to be seen.

"Where are they?" Turtle screeched.

I clapped a hand over my ear. "They'll be here. Relax, will you?"

The theater door opened and Brillo stepped out. He loped toward us.

"Might want to hurry a bit," I muttered under my breath. Peter's car was already running, its reverse lights on.

Brillo reached our car just as the Grand Am headed toward the exit. He jumped into the Taurus and gunned it to the front of the theater. Walter clambered into the back seat. The door wasn't even shut before Brillo raced to the

corner, ignoring the red light and making the turn, keeping Peter's car in view.

"So how'd they do it?" I asked.

"Same old, same old," Walter said. "Lady in front of them set her coat and purse on the seat beside her. During the big crying scene she didn't notice anybody taking out her wallet. Took the credit card, put the billfold back. Gotta say she was smooth."

"She?"

"It was the girl all the way. She picked the target, the seat, the whole shebang. Poor Petey's just along for the ride."

"And the loot!" Turtle screamed.

"Shit!" Brillo said, jerking the steering wheel. "You trying to make me ditch the car?"

"You know," I said to Brillo. "You ought to start wearing earplugs."

"So where are they going?" Walter said. "Circuit City?"

"Uh-uh." I pointed. "Best Buy."

The Grand Am pulled into the parking lot and slid into a space. We found another one close by.

"How we doing this?" Brillo said.

I turned to Walter. "Think they noticed you in the theater?"

He frowned. "What? You think I'm an ingénue?"

"Ha!" Turtle bellowed.

"No, I don't think that. I'm sure you kept your distance. So why don't you go in, follow them around. You're less noticeable in this town than Brillo."

"You mean 'cause I'm this lovely midnight color?" Brillo said.

"Exactly."

Walter un-did his seatbelt. "And you want me to do what?"

"See what they buy. What the name on the card is, if you can."

"What about me?" Turtle cried. "I haven't done anything yet."

"'Cept bust my eardrum," Brillo grumbled.

I smiled at Turtle. "Your job's later."

"I'm outta here," said Walter. He slipped his gloves on and eased out of the car.

Brillo's fingers tapped out the rhythm to something in his head while we waited. Turtle stewed in the back. I hoped we could change Peter's ways. I doubted we could change Carmen's.

In about a half hour Peter and Carmen left the store, pushing a well-burdened shopping cart.

"Can you see what they have?" I asked.

"TV!" Turtle howled.

Brillo grunted. "Huge-ass one."

I squinted. "And other smaller stuff. Guess we'll have to find out from Walter."

Peter and Carmen were still trying to fit the television into their trunk when Walter sauntered past them. He dropped into our back seat.

"Plasma TV, a stack of DVDs - I can list them if you want - couple of Game Boys, an iPod. Brand new color printer for a Macintosh. Huge load. Cost Ms. Betty Springer - the name on the card - a few thousand bucks."

Brillo whistled. "Ain't a bad haul for a movie gig."

"Salesperson seem suspicious?" I asked.

Walter shrugged. "Looked at Carmen a bit, but Peter's real innocuous looking, even in the black clothes, and he charmed her. Teenager, anyway. Not going to question one of her own."

"So now where to?" Brillo asked.

"Let's follow them," I said. "See if they hit another store."

"Doubt it," Walter said. "Too close to the end of the movie. Betty Springer could be looking in her wallet any minute and see her card's not there."

"You're right. But let's tail them to be sure."

We followed them straight back to Rosalyn's house and continued on to my place, where we parked in the garage before getting out. Inside, I grabbed my night vision goggles and watched as Peter and Carmen lugged everything in Rosalyn's front door.

I shook my head. "Poor Rosalyn."

"Yeah," Brillo said. "She's gonna downright have a cow this time."

"She'll be happy tomorrow!" Turtle bawled.

Brillo frowned. "So now we just freakin' wait?"

"And play cards," I said.

"And drink tea," Walter said.

At one-o'clock I shook Turtle's shoulder. Walter's herbal tea had of course done nothing to help with staying awake.

Brillo was crashed in my guest room, and Walter sat at the kitchen table balancing his checkbook, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. The two of them had returned ten minutes before in Turtle's truck, after following Carmen's Integra to her house. She hadn't taken any of the illegally acquired goods.

Now, I clamped a hand over Turtle's mouth and whispered, "Time to go."

"Hmmpfh?"

"It's our turn."

I was decked out in all black, as Peter and Carmen had been, except my face would soon be covered, as well. Turtle pulled on his night gear and we crept out of the house.

Crouched behind the bushes at the side of the yard, we tucked our hands under our arms to stay warm while we checked out Rosalyn's place.

"Motion sensor light there," I said, pointing with my chin. "But I don't think she has an alarm system. I didn't ask her, because I didn't want to tip her off we'd be doing this."

"I'll know in a minute," Turtle said, quietly for him. He sneaked away.

Three cold minutes later he was back. "Don't see anything." His teeth shined in the dark. "You'd think living next to a professional thief she'd at least pretend she had some kind of security."

I shook my head. "She knows we don't rip off our own town. Besides, she and Dad were on the best of terms."

"So shall we?" Turtle said. "Looks like the back door will be the best for entry. I'll check out the car while you're inside."

We eased our way around, avoiding the sensor lights, and soon I had picked my way into the house, Turtle standing watch outside. I stopped for a moment to let my eyes adjust and to make sure I wasn't tracking snow onto the carpet. Rosalyn's stovetop nightlight was on, casting the kitchen into dim shadows, but the only other light came from glowing red numbers on the microwave.

I pulled out my pen light and flicked it on.

A tour of the first floor rooms showed just what any house might have: boom box on the kitchen counter, twenty-four inch TV in the living room, VCR.

When I got to Rosalyn's door, I left it closed. No reason to disturb her - I was sure Peter hadn't stashed anything in there.

The upstairs didn't have much. Another closed door, which I assumed was Peter's, a guest room - empty of any technology whatsoever except an alarm clock - and a bathroom.

I stood outside Peter's door and listened. Nothing. I tried the door handle, and it turned easily. Hiding the pen light against my hip, I stepped into the room. Peter was entirely hidden under blankets, except for a shock of hair sticking out the top. His breathing was steady and deep, so I pulled out the penlight and scanned the room.

There wasn't space for the big television here. Just the twin bed, a dresser, and a desk. I found only small items, and began placing them in the hallway.

The iPod, a laptop computer, the new color printer, and a short stack of CD-Roms. In his closet were several pairs of new sneakers - Nikes - three leather jackets, and some Harley-Davidson boots. Probably the shoes he'd been wearing that night. There were some gold chains on top of his dresser, along with a pair of diamond stud earrings, and I unearthed some Tommy Hilfiger jeans and Nike sweatshirts in his dresser.

Satisfied I'd cleaned him out, I stepped back into the hallway and eased the door shut. I had strapped a cloth bag around my waist, and now I reached under my shirt to take it

out. It took me three minutes to carefully fill it with the booty.

Downstairs again, I heaved the bag outside, where Turtle was busy dismantling the stereo in Peter's Grand Am. I pointed to my chest and then down toward the basement. He nodded and bent back over the console.

I hit pay dirt in the basement. Good lord. The huge flat screen TV, a DVD/VCR combo, surround sound, a couple of MP3 players, stacks and stacks of CDs, DVDs, videos. A couple of leather recliners, some more sneakers, and a mess of earphones.

I pulled out my cell phone and called my house, letting the phone ring once before hanging up.

By the time Walter and Brillo arrived I'd unlocked the tornado door at the far end of the basement, propped it open, and set a box of DVDs outside. The guys followed me down and started on the heavy stuff, lugging it up and out, and loading it onto Turtle's truck.

Twenty minutes later the basement looked naked. We'd even taken the cables and extension cords. I almost felt bad for it.

I locked the door from the inside and made my way back upstairs and through the kitchen. Standing still for just a moment, I heard only nighttime sounds: the refrigerator humming, the furnace blowing air, a clock ticking in the living room. It was rather peaceful.

The door shut silently behind me. My bag of loot had already disappeared, so I took off for home, using the shortcut through the bushes. The guys were already gone.

I was working out to an exercise video the next afternoon when the doorbell rang. I grabbed my towel and opened the door.

"Hello, Peter," I said. "Carmen."

"Where is it?" Carmen's breath flew toward me in an icy cloud.

I opened the door wider. "You can come in."

She pushed past me into the house, her head twisting from side to side as she checked out my TV, my stereo. Peter followed quietly, anxiety clouding his face.

I stepped in front of Carmen and stopped my video. "Not the most up-to-date hardware, I'm afraid."

"But..."

"What did you expect, Carmen? A plasma TV?"

She flushed. "You had no right—"

I smiled again, and she stopped, shaking her head and pinching her lips together. A glance at Peter alerted me that he might soon cry, so I sat on the sofa and crossed my legs, dabbing my forehead with my towel. "I spoke with Betty Springer today."

Carmen sneered. "Yeah? So?"

"I interrupted her in the middle of feeding breakfast to her three kids. All under the age of four. Seems her husband died last year."

Peter swayed and grabbed the back of a chair.

"Sound familiar?" I asked him quietly. "Except she's got a dilemma. If she goes to work she has to put her kids in daycare, sucking up all her take-home, or she can be a full-time mom and collect what welfare is available. Which isn't all that much."

"Oh, come on," Carmen said. "She was at a movie!"

I kept my eyes on Peter. "Yeah. With tickets she won from a radio station. It was the first time she'd been out since last year."

Peter faced the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. I didn't let up.

"So, Carmen, did you know all that when you swiped Betty's wallet? Did you care the woman had two dollars to last till next week? Somehow I don't think Ms. Springer needed a flat-screen TV and an iPod. I'm sure her kids would enjoy the Game Boys at some point, but they're still a little young. And they'd rather eat."

"Who are you to lecture us?" Carmen spat. "You steal from people all the time."

"We're not talking about me. But if we were, we'd discuss how I check out my marks. I make sure they can handle a little loss, that their insurance will be more than adequate. But back to you two."

Peter made a noise in his throat, but didn't say anything.

Carmen jabbed a finger at me. "Where's my stuff?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. But I suspect you have a fancy Coach bag in the car. Or is it the Louis Vuitton? And those are some expensive 7 jeans you're wearing."

"How can you not know where everything is? You're the one—"

"Who took it? Sure. But I don't need it. Betty does. In fact, she was very appreciative of the four grand and change I handed to her this morning."

The teenagers gawked at me.

I grinned. "My fence is very generous. Anyway, turns out Betty's credit card will cover the unauthorized purchases, so she ends up way ahead. Thanks to you."

I stood up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my workout."

"We're not finished with you," Carmen said. "We'll be back. Let's go, Peter."

Peter stood still, his face stony.

"Are you coming or not?" Carmen waited, hands on hips.

Peter turned his head away from her, and her mouth opened slightly. "Fine," she said. "Stay here with the neighborhood crook." She stomped to the door before looking at me again. "And you can exercise all you want. You'll never be seventeen again." She slammed the door behind her.

I sat and watched the tips of Peter's ears turn white, then red. He finally spoke.

"I'm sorry, Christy. I never wanted to...I didn't think about the other people."

"It's hard to, when someone like Carmen's got you."

He pushed on his temples with his fingers.

"Go on home, Peter," I said. "You and your mom have some talking to do."

He gave a half-laugh. "What does my mom know?"

"She knows she loves you." I paused. "And she misses your father, too."

He closed his eyes.

"She also doesn't want you going to prison."

He looked at me. "But you do this all the time."

"I'm a professional, Peter. You should be a professional at something else. Something that will make you proud."

He looked around my living room, at its ordinary furnishings and lack of high-end technology.

I followed his gaze. "You have lots of choices that would get you expensive toys. Legitimately, without some girl pushing you in the wrong direction. My job doesn't offer the kind of profit you want. I make a living. Pay my bills. That's about it."

He stood for a moment, his eyes searching mine, before walking out the door.

I watched through a side window as he trudged through the snow to his house. Carmen's car was gone. Peter hesitated at his front door, looking back up toward my place, and found me in the window. I raised my hand, then let it fall to my side.

Peter straightened his shoulders, and went inside.