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Thief & Son

BY LORI TOPPEL

She's cutting her son's fingernails. She's very careful not to snip a piece of skin.

Eric, her son, says, I can do it myself.

I like to do it.

As you wish, he says with his chin up.

She glances at him; his nose is slightly crooked and it makes him look older than he is. Carly is thirty this year and her son eleven. His father died in the same hit and run accident that has crippled Eric. She snuffles and Eric says, Don't get sick again. Take the vitamin C.

It doesn't help.

It does. You'd be surprised how much. Your skepticism is irritating, Mother, very.

Forgive me, she says sheepishly, acting out. She rises, claps her hands and says, The dogwoods are in bloom finally.

I saw. He turns over, with effort, on his bed. His room is well lit by afternoon sun. He refuses to go in a wheelchair. So he more often than not eats at home and stays at home. He plays with his computer and reads news magazines. When he goes out he rides an electric Porsche his mother found for him at FAO Schwartz in Palm Beach. She bought that after pawning in South Miami a diamond watch belonging to Mrs. Christopher, her most recent client, who favors Ralph Lauren.

The thief. A svelte, gracious dancer, who wiggled her way through small openings after cutting glass panes from windows, never cutting her skin or tearing her lycra tights and body suits. She wouldn't think of drawing her own blood. She worked by day as a saleswoman in Grant's, an upscale department store, in the prestigious section—she was a personal shopper at Grant's—the Club, to be exact. She got to know her clients rather well. She knew their taste and how they liked

their coffee. She knew whether they were comforted by small talk or silence. Mrs. Ormond, for example, always wanted the classic look, and once boasted of finding antique silverware in England last summer, while she drank two glasses of iced tea. She was careless. She had left, twice, her car keys behind after shopping for over an hour with the thief. She was, to put it kindly, forgetful.

The thief's name was Carly Clemmons. On occasion she danced as a belly dancer at the Tikka Room in Fort Lauderdale. Only on occasion when Minnie, the regular belly dancer, wasn't feeling well or, to be truthful, when she had a hangover. Carly considered herself a sympathetic thief and smirked whenever she made headlines. *He Strikes 20th Street! He Knows When You Are Sleeping!* She had little respect for newspapers.

Mrs. Christopher returns on a Tuesday with her daughter, Crystal.

Crystal Christopher, Carly says to the young girl, an alliterative name.

A silly name, the young girl replies. She's impatient, upset. She doesn't want to be there in the bright lilac room with its pink and lilac flowered couch, with its three mirrors and too-dark-purple carpeted platform, on which alterations can be made.

Don't be impolite, Mrs. Christopher says to her daughter. Now, Carly, she needs school clothes. You know, casual. Do you think Polo?

Let me bring in the newest arrivals and we'll eliminate. I'll get a sense of your taste.

I don't like lace or dots, the girl says, exasperated, and I hate DKNY.

Fine, that's a start, Carly says, and as she flits out the door she overhears the mother telling the daughter how attractive Carly is. Carly puts herself together.

Mrs. Christopher's bedroom was not at all together the evening Carly was there. The bed was unmade, men's clothes were strewn all over the bathroom floor, and dirty glasses were sitting on the dresser. The diamond watch was lying on the night table. At first Carly wasn't sure it was real, but she felt it had to be as she lifted it up. The diamonds were tiny yet perfect. The watch was heavy, true gold. She slipped it in her pocket, found thirty dollars near the bathroom sink, dug into the back of a shoe closet and found a half-ounce of marijuana, and finally, as a bonus, slipped a Baccarat crystal turtle in her bag, a backpack that fit as

snugly against her back as her outfit. Working at Grant's had its perks—thirty percent off all items.

Mrs. Christopher had mentioned she liked the opera. Carly had checked the schedule. The night of *La Traviata* the Christophers were home. Carly drove up, checked that out, and left. The night of *La Bohème* they were out. Mr. or Mrs. Christopher (had to be) had forgotten to put the alarm on. Even if it had been on, Carly would have got in and out before the police arrived. She was a mouse, really, a rodent. She could scoot. In and out of guarded communities, through high hedges, over ornamental fences across sour canals.

That night she had to scale a concrete wall, which she did as a true mountain climber might, with a rope and a pick. (She was an avid aerobics student and could do ten miles on the gym bicycle.) The rope and pick she hid in the rafters of her garage. She sometimes burned her tools and gloves in the fireplace, just for her own sense of security, but the streak of cold evenings had left Southern Florida, and so she was doing that less often. She didn't want to bring attention to their well-cared-for brick home in Old Floresta, the historical part of town.

She liked *La Bohème*. She liked that the robbery had taken place the same evening as that opera. As she peeled off her black leather gloves and tucked them in a plastic bag that would return to its place on her closet shelf alongside other winter clothing, she thought of the lights at the opera. Once, in New York City, she had gone to see *The Barber of Seville*, and after the second act, three-quarters of the audience left, permitting Carly to relax in a vast space, watching the singers, feeling for them. They sang as if the auditorium were full, singing perhaps with more fervor as if to say, This is for those who have stamina. There she sat, listening, enraptured, laughing at times. Afterward, she perched herself on the rim of the fountain outside the center and thought of her husband. She would never get over his death; she would never remarry. She was now, especially now, too independent.

Eric turns to the south wall and says, I don't like this wallpaper anymore, do you?

Not really, Carly says, remembering when he loved it. He could walk then—he was five. He was enamored of cars, trucks, cranes, as most boys are, but he liked to watch mechanics at the gas stations and car races with his father on the weekends. Now he hated all that. Now

he probably found that the motif on the wallpaper pained him. He says, Get me a moving ladder, Mom, and I'll paint my room.

You can't possibly, what if you fall or—

I can do it. I'll be careful. Please, just get me a ladder with a seat at the top, they make them, a ladder on wheels. When you're home, you can help me, if you like.

I'll see, she says. She's too frightened and hopes he'll never bring the subject up again. He sits on his bed, staring at the ceiling.

Blue, or black? he asks and then breaks out into a lovable laughter.

So her husband smoked too much pot, that's true, and he joked perhaps too much, but, in truth, she felt he was her, as they say, "soul-mate," and with her mate gone, her soul ruptured, she wanted only to hold onto the threads of life that she could tie up in some semblance of a knot.

At work she waits for Mrs. Green and drinks a cappuccino. Mrs. Green slowly enters, dragging behind her a suitcase. Mrs. Green has recommended many clients to Carly, Mrs. Torrent among them. Very stunning woman with feline eyes and elegant taste.

These, Mrs. Green says, are my old clothes. What do you suggest I do with them? Do you know someone who wants them? I'd rather give them to a face I know than some ghost at a thrift shop.

I'll find a home for them, Carly says. She doesn't know where, but . . .

I need some evening clothes, Mrs. Green sighs. I noticed the new line of Saint John's dresses outside. They intrigue me.

Very good. I'll be right back. Black coffee?

No coffee today, hon, I'm nervous to my stomach. Andy's having his bar mitzvah tomorrow. A glass of water, please.

So her husband was slightly lazy, but at night when she was in bed and he slipped in beside her and put his hand on her stomach as if to say this center of you belongs to me she rose, as if in an inverted whirlpool, rising and once she had become pregnant and he put his hand on her growing stomach the whirlpool grew taller and she knew they were together for no better reason than just to gather strength together.

She finds a halter dress, black. She finds a long-sleeved navy dress with a cut-out back, she finds a pants outfit, studded with sequins. She finds

a green and blue silk dress with a jacket. She chooses a pair of shoes. She selects, in case, two handbags. She hurries into the bathroom for a second and prays in a stall.

She asks for Eric to be happy. She asks for that always. So Eric is lazy, too, and sad, and, what can she do but help him be comfortable?

Eric sits at the dining room table. You look tired, he says to his mother.

She nods and takes a little spoonful of almost raw hamburger meat off her plate and eats. Mrs. Green was in today, she says, for two and a half hours. She told me how her son is dating an older woman, how it's such an embarrassment. Her son's thirteen.

How much older? Eric asks.

The girl's seventeen. She's scared he's going to end up in jail.

She'll end up in jail. Older, he says, exhaling. I like a girl, Mom. Did you know that? Her name's Wendy.

Really? Does she know you like her? Carly's delighted to hear this and she tries her best to control her glee. She eats the rest of her hamburger.

I wouldn't dream of letting her know. Why would she choose me? I can't even take walks with her.

Well, you can if you—

I can't. I can roll with her, Mom, roll. I'm sure you're tired of my pitying myself. I certainly am.

Why can't you just be a young boy like any other young boy for a few hours and see how—

But I'm not like any young boy, Mom.

Stop, she says. I know. Just stop. You're a pretty boy, though, and you're smart and that's more than others have.

I'd like to live with you forever, he says. If you don't die first from some horrendous bacteria in raw meat.

In the cold den of Mrs. Torrent's house, there are two cats curled up against one another. Carly thinks they're remarkable, statuesque, and as she approaches she hears the plangent engines in their throats, beckoning to her. She reaches down and pets one. It moves its head. As she turns, she notices a car stopping outside—Mr. or Mrs. Torrent—and she squirrels out the back window through which she entered, hiding.

Mr. Torrent enters. She hears the front door slam. He seems to head for the kitchen and then for the den, loudly greeting the cats. He sounds drunk. He retires. She hears the bedroom door slam. She's certain he

hasn't touched the alarm. She waits to see if Mrs. Torrent comes home. They have no children, she knows. (Blake is as barren as a desert, Carly, and it pains him terribly. I'm still in love with Blake, Carly, not many women my age can say that about their husband.)

Carly reenters the den, one of the cats having moved to a top shelf, and she takes all the pieces of silver she sees in the den. Each piece is as cold as the room. She finds the thermostat and turns up the temperature. Then she leaves, bidding the cats good-bye.

She finds her car where she left it and drives home slowly. The Torrents live near the water in a townhouse and there's no guard. She stops by the beach, parks, locks all her doors and changes into a simple dress.

She feels charged, or even high, and drives a few times around her block, until her heart returns to a slower rhythm.

Before entering her house, she puts the silver pieces in a box in the garage. She'll drive to the Hispanic section of Miami tomorrow and pawn them—she'll give several pieces to her sister in Miami, too. No questions ever asked by her sister.

As she is about to close the garage, she sees Eric at the window, watching her. She waves. She tells herself to keep moving but feels stiff and caught.

He's never up this late.

She climbs the stairs, checks her dress, considers it passable for a night of dancing, and goes to her son. As she walks in, she says, What a night!

Many men?

No, just a late night.

You weren't there, Mom, I called.

What's wrong?

I'm fine. I just felt like calling you.

Well, you know how they are at the club. They don't always —

You weren't there.

She sits on the fake leopard-skin chair in his room, something her husband had bought, and says, You're right.

Where were you?

She has never lied to him. About to lie, she clears her throat. But then she says, I was at Mrs. Torrent's house.

Your client? Why?

I was taking her silver. I was stealing her silver.

He watches her. He waits. He looks tiny in the desk chair in which

he has managed to place himself. His arms are so muscular for a boy his age. They look inappropriately taut, a boxer's arms. But he is so pretty with his off-centered nose and promising blue eyes; and she wishes he would suddenly fall into a sweet sleep.

He remains transfixed. She says, I'm a thief.

Not the one they're writing about?

She nods her head.

He lowers his. The cars on the wallpaper seem to be spinning, she feels, and she rises and approaches her son, saying, I'm sorry. I can't lie to you.

He says, You'll get caught one day.

I'll never get caught. I'm a rat. Rats are fast and sly.

You're a woman who works in a department store and steals from her clients. They'll figure it out. Why would you do something they can catch you at?

She doesn't answer. He's right, of course. She sits on his bed and begins to cry.

Then he says, I'm tired. (But he may as well have said, You'll have to stop, that's all.)

She wipes her eyes with a tissue from his night table—so many things are on his table, a cup of water, a pitcher of water, an unopened box of crackers, a pen and pad, a whistle, two straws, a remote control—and she lifts him up from the chair into his bed.

He never seems heavy to her. He seems to be her weight. She bends down and kisses him on the forehead. She says, I don't forgive easily, do you?

I do, Mom, he says.

And she walks out, perspiring, exhausted, wanting a glass of Scotch, which she doesn't get.

She takes a bath.

Saturday evening Eric is at one of the front tables eating a bowl of fried chicken wings, a house specialty. It's seven-thirty and the show has just begun. His mother is the third dancer to come out. She wears a long grass skirt and a bright multi-colored Band-Aid top. She moves without restraint as if her body were liquid and all she needs to do is shake it up.

She sees her son, immobile, attentive. She sees her manager sit next to him, tell him something, and she dances harder, sliding across the stage between the movements of the other women. This job is like

playing basketball to her. It clears her mind—she sees no one out there but her son. Her mind is free.

A fire dancer leaps out onto the stage. She hates this part, when she can smell the fuel of the torches, as the dancer throws the torch up and down, through his legs, over his shoulders. She loses focus, the only time during the show when she does, the smell intensifying as the dancer gets close to her and then skips away. Drums are beating in the background. The audience is more tranquil than ever.

The smell is the smell of her husband burning and her son trapped yet not long enough for the fire to eat him up. How could one have disintegrated and the other remain fleshy and lovely yet without spirit? The smell is there to cauterize her mind, just when it's about to reach its plateau of peace, of forgetfulness.

The flame-thrower exits. She breathes the smoky frills of the fire and then the air is clear again. The odor of greasy fried chicken reappears like a missing coin. She bends down, then, like a serpent, bends back—a human bridge—and then she rises and stands. The act is over.

She bows. All the women on stage are bowing, too, yet she bows with relief and steps an inch ahead of everyone else, allowing herself to extend the moment of finality.