

Chapter One

When he was nine, and his mother had her first deadly dance with cancer, he became a thief. At the time, he didn't see it as a choice, an adventure, a thrill—though he would consider his career all of those things in later years. Young Harry Booth equated stealing with surviving.

They had to eat and pay the mortgage and the doctors and buy the medicine even if his mother was too sick to work. She did her best, she always did her best, pushing herself even as her hair fell out in clumps and the weight melted off her already thin frame.

The little company she'd started with her sister, his crazy aunt Mags, couldn't keep up with the cost of cancer, the sheer magnitude of the dollar signs needed to deal with what invaded his mother's body. His mother was the backbone of Sparkle Sisters Cleaning Service, and even with him pitching in on weekends, they lost clients.

Lose clients, lose income. Lose income and you had to find money to pay the mortgage on the cozy two-bedroom house on Chicago's West Side.

Maybe it wasn't much of a house, but it was theirs—and the bank's. His mom hadn't missed a stupid payment until she got sick. But banks didn't much care about that once you started falling behind.

Everybody wanted their money, and they added more money onto it if you didn't pay up on time. If you had a credit card, you could buy stuff like medicine and shoes—his feet kept growing—but then all that made more bills and more late fees and interest and stuff until he heard his mother crying at night when she thought he slept.

He knew Mags helped. She worked really hard to keep clients, and she paid some of the bills or late fees with her own money. But it just wasn't enough.

At nine, he learned the word *foreclosure* meant you could be out on the street. And the word *repossessed* meant people could come take your car.

So at nine, he learned the hard way that playing by the rules as his mother had didn't mean much to the suits and ties and briefcases.

He knew how to pick pockets. His crazy aunt Mags had spent a couple of years on the carny circuit and learned a few tricks. She'd taught him as kind of a game.

He was good at it, damn good at it, and put that talent to use. The right and wrong his mom had so carefully taught him didn't mean much either when she was puking in the bathroom after her chemo, or tying a scarf around her bald head to drag herself off to clean somebody's fancy lakefront house.

He didn't blame the people in the fancy lakefront houses, or in the slick penthouses or shiny office buildings. They'd just had better luck than his mom.

He rode the trains, wandered the streets, picked his marks. He had a good eye for them. The careless tourists, the guy who'd had one too many belts at happy hour, the woman too busy texting to mind her purse.

He didn't look like a thief, the slim, young boy just shy of a growth spurt, with a mop of wavy brown hair, heavy-lidded deep blue eyes that could radiate innocence.

He could flash a charming smile or slow-walk a shy one. He might cover that mop of hair one day in a backward Cubs fielder's cap (his dork look) or tame the mop into what he thought of as the private school slick-down.

During the period his mother was too sick to know what was going on, the mortgage got paid—Mags didn't ask; he didn't tell—the lights stayed on. And he had enough to pore through the secondhand stores for what he thought of as wardrobe.

An old school blazer, dress pants, a faded Bears sweatshirt. He sewed pouches and pockets inside a secondhand—maybe thirdhand—winter coat.

And he bought his first set of lock picks.

He kept his grades up. He had a bright, thirsty mind, studied, did his homework, and stayed out of trouble. He considered starting a business himself—charging for doing assignments for others. But Harry understood most kids were blabbermouths.

Instead he practiced with his lock picks, and used the computer in the library to research security and alarm systems.

Then she got better. Though still pale and thin, she got stronger. The doctors called it remission.

That became his favorite word.

For the next three years, life hit normal. He still picked pockets. He shoplifted—very carefully. Nothing too expensive, nothing identifiable. He'd worked out a nice arrangement with a pawnshop on the South Side.

They had a mountain of bills to carve through—and the money he made tutoring fellow students didn't carve enough.

Besides, he had a taste for it now.

His mother and Mags built up their business again, and for three years in the summers, Harry cleaned and scrubbed and cased houses and businesses.

A young man with an eye on the future.

Then when the mountain of debt had been whittled down to a hill, when the worry lifted from his mom's eyes, cancer came back for another dance.

Two days after his twelfth birthday, Harry broke into his first house. The terror he'd felt that he'd get caught, dragged off to prison, and the trauma of it would join hands with cancer and kill his mother evaporated the moment he stood inside the quiet dark.

In later years, when he looked back, he understood that that was the moment he found his purpose. Maybe it wasn't a good purpose, one acceptable in polite society, but it was his.

He stood, a tall boy now after that longed-for growth spurt, staring out the wide windows at the moonlight spearing across the lake. Everything smelled of roses and lemons and freedom.

Only he knew he stood here. He could touch anything he wanted, take what he wanted.

He understood the market for the electronics, for the silver, for the jewelry—though the good jewelry would be locked up. He hadn't yet figured out how to crack a safe. But he would, he promised himself that.

He didn't have time or the ability now to haul away all the shiny things.

He wanted to just stand there, just bask, but pushed himself to work.

Most people, he'd learned, don't think anything about gossiping in front of the help. Especially if that help is a twelve-year-old scrubbing the kitchen floor while you and your neighbor plan some charity event over coffee in the dining room.

So, keeping his head down, his ears open, and his hands busy, Harry learned about the client's neighbor's husband's stamp collection.

She laughed about it.

"It's become an obsession since he inherited his uncle's collection last year. Can you believe he just spent five thousand on one of those things?"

"On a stamp?"

"That doesn't count the temperature and humidity controls he's had put into his home office where he keeps them. He used to joke about his uncle's hobby, now he's all in. He's haunting auctions and online sites, added his own albums. Now it's an investment, and that's all fine. I mean, what do I care if he has a bunch of silly stamps in his desk? But he's looking up auctions and dealers in Rome so he can check them out when we go next month."

"Let him buy his stamps," the client advised. "You go buy shoes."

Harry filed it all away and decided the universe sent him a big, bright sign when the friend talked about hauling boxes for the event to her car.

He approached the dining room, all innocence. "Sorry, Ms. Kelper, I'm done in the kitchen. Um, did you need some help carrying something?"

"Actually—Alva, this is Harry. Harry, Ms. Finkle could use some help from a strong back."

He flashed his grin, flexed a biceps. "I can give you a hand before I go up and help my aunt finish upstairs."

So he walked with Ms. Finkle to the big, beautiful house next door with its big, beautiful views of the lake.

And got a firsthand look at the alarm system when they went inside. No dog, he noted, always a plus.

"Um, are you moving, Ms. Finkle?"

"What?" She shot him a glance as they crossed the wide foyer. "Oh, the boxes. No, we're holding a charity event, a silent auction. I'm in charge of collecting the items."

"That's really nice of you."

"We have to do what we can for the less fortunate."

I hear that, Harry thought, noting the open floor plan, the turn to the left. And the double glass doors—closed—with a manly office space behind them.

He carried out boxes, stowed them in the back of a shiny white Mercedes SUV.

And though he wanted it—could've used it—he refused the offer of a five-dollar tip.

"It's for charity," he said. "But thanks."

He went back to work, spent the rest of a sunny summer morning with his hands in hot, soapy water.

He and Mags took the train back to his house in silence because today was chemo day, and Mags spent the ride meditating and holding one of her magic stones to stir up healthy vibes. Or something.

Then with his mother in her candy-pink headscarf, they rode to the hospital for the best day and worst day.

Best because the nurse—Harry liked the nurse better than the doctor—said his mom was getting better. Worst because the treatment would make her sick.

"He sat with her, reading out loud from what they called their C-Day book. She kept her eyes closed while the machine pumped the medicine into her, but he could make her smile, even laugh a little when he changed voices for different characters.

“You’re the best, Harry.”

She murmured it while Mags sat cross-legged on the floor at her feet. Imagining, she’d told them, bright white light blasting the cancer.

As always on the best/worst day, Mags made some sort of dinner she claimed had healing properties and smelled almost worse than it tasted.

She’d burn incense, hang crystals, and chant and talk about spirit guides or whatever.

But as crazy as she was, she always stayed the night on chemo day, sleeping on an air mattress on the floor beside her sister’s bed.

And if she knew how often Harry snuck out of the house, she never spoke of it. If she wondered where he came up with an extra hundred dollars, she never asked.

Now he stood in the Finkles’ lakefront house in the breathless quiet. He moved through it soundlessly, though there was no one to hear if he’d stomped his way to those double glass doors.

Inside the office he breathed in the air that smelled vaguely of smoke and cherries. Cigars, Harry decided as he spotted the humidor on the wide, ornate desk.

Curious, he lifted the lid, sniffed. He lifted out a cigar, mimed taking a few important puffs. For the hell of it—he was twelve, after all—he put it into his backpack.

Then he sat in the high-backed leather chair the color of port wine, swiveled back and forth, scowled as he imagined a rich man might when conducting a meeting.

“You’re all fired!” He jabbed a finger in the air, snorted out a laugh.

Then got down to business.

He’d come prepared to deal with a locked drawer, but apparently Finkle considered his home too secure to bother.

Harry found the albums—four in all—and using his penlight, began to go through them.

He wouldn’t take them all. It didn’t seem fair, plus, it would take too long to move them. But in the past three weeks, he’d done a load of research on stamps.

Finkle had mounted his on black, acid-free paper, used the glassine sleeves to protect them. He had the tongs, but Harry wouldn’t risk those. Without practice and skill, he could tear or damage a stamp and lower the value.

Most sleeves had four stamps across and six down. He chose one from the first album and carefully transferred it to the binder he’d brought with him.

One from each album seemed right, so he replaced the first album, opened the second. He took his time with it, and since Finkle had a handy spreadsheet in each album listing the stamps and values, he didn’t even have to work very hard.

He’d just chosen the sleeve from the final album when lights flashed on against the other side of the glass.

With his heart banging into his throat, he closed the desk drawer on the final album, grabbed the last sleeve, and took it with him on his slide under the desk.

Somebody was in the house. Somebody besides him.

Another thief. A grown-up. Three grown-ups. With guns.

They stormed into his mind, three men, dressed in black, packing heat. Maybe they didn’t want the stamps. Maybe they didn’t even know about them.

Sure they did, and they would come in. They’d find him and shoot him in the head and bury him in a shallow grave.

He tried to make himself smaller, imagined himself invisible. And thought of his mother getting sicker and sicker with worry.

He had to get out, get past them somehow, or find a better place to hide. He started to count to three. On three, he'd crawl out from under the desk.

The blast of music had him jolting so he rapped his head on the underside of the desk hard enough to see stars.

Inside his spinning head he said every forbidden word he knew. Twice.

The second round he directed at himself for stupidity.

Thieves didn't turn on the damn lights, and didn't blast out music.

Somebody was in the house, okay, but not a ring of thieves with guns who'd shoot him in the head.

Carefully—especially careful since his hands still trembled a little—he put the sleeve into the binder, closed it into his backpack.

He combat-crawled out from under the desk and, with an eye on the glass doors, away from the light. Along the journey he spotted a guy—older than he was but not old—in boxer shorts.

In the kitchen, pouring what looked like wine from a bottle into a couple of glasses. He'd nearly made it to the shadows when the girl danced into view.

In her underwear. In that lacy bra thing and that thong deal—like in the Victoria's Secret catalogue that his friend Will's mom got in the mail, and he and Will and some of the guys pored over whenever they could.

Bright red against her skin, and her butt was right there. Just right there. And her breasts were all up there over the top of the bra, sort of jiggling while she shook her shoulders and rocked her hips.

They'd see him if they looked toward the doors, but he couldn't move. He was twelve and male, and the instant woody locked him in place.

She had black hair, long, long black hair she lifted up, then let fall again as she grabbed the wineglass. Drinking, she danced toward the guy. He was dancing, too, but was nothing but a blur to Harry's eyes.

There was only the girl.

She reached a hand up her back, unsnapped the bra. When it fell, every ounce of blood in Harry's body throbbed to his groin.

He'd never seen an actual girl's actual breasts. And they were amazing.

They swayed and they bounced in uncanny time with the music.

He had his first stunning orgasm to Fall Out Boy's "Dance, Dance."

He feared his eyes rolled clear out of his head. He feared his heart stopped. Then he just wanted to lie there on the gleaming hardwood floor for the rest of his natural life.

But now the guy was all over the girl, and the girl was all over the guy. They were doing stuff, lots of stuff, and he was peeling off the thong thing.

And Jesus, she was all the way naked. He could hear her making sex noises over the music.

Then they were on the floor and they were doing it. It! Right there, with the girl on top.

He wanted to watch, more than just about anything. But the thief inside the boy knew now was the time to get the hell out. Get out while they were too busy doing it to notice.

He eased the door open, belly-crawled through it, then used his foot to nudge it closed behind him.

The girl was practically singing now: *Terry, oh God, Terry!*

Harry went from belly to crab walk, breathed deep, then ran for the door. He heard her scream of ecstasy as he slipped outside.

He used the hike to the train to relive every moment.

He fenced the stamps for twelve thousand dollars. He knew he'd have gotten more if he knew more. And if he wasn't a kid.

But twelve thousand equaled a fortune. And was too much to keep hidden in his room.

He had to go to his crazy aunt Mags.

He waited until they were alone. His mom insisted on helping, but she was only up to light cleaning work on one house a day, and on Thursdays, they had two.

He helped Mags strip the linens from the single guy's slick, party-time apartment. An all-day rain lashed at the windows as they worked. Mags used the client's stereo system to play some sort of New Agey crap.

She wore a T-shirt she'd tie-dyed in purple and green and the hair she'd recently colored a kind of deep maroon bundled under a green kerchief. She had dangling stones at her ears and a rose quartz crystal—for love and harmony—on a chain around her neck.

"I want to open a bank account."

He glanced over as she bundled sheets into the hamper. Her eyes were blue like his and his mom's, but a lighter shade, and dreamier.

"Why's that, pal?"

"Because."

"Uh-huh."

She unfolded the contour sheet, and together they snapped it, then started to fit it on the bed.

Harry knew she could leave it just like that. To the "Uh-huh" that stretched into forever.

"I'm almost thirteen, and I've saved up some money, so I want to have a bank account."

"If all of that were true instead of part of it, you'd be talking to your mom and not me about it."

"I don't want to bother her."

"Uh-huh."

They repeated the process on the top sheet.

"I need an adult to go with me, probably sign stuff."

"How much money?"

If she went with him, she'd find out anyway, so he looked her straight in the eye.

"Almost fifteen thousand."

She stared hard back at him. The tiny blue stone on the side of her nose glinted.

"Are you going to tell me where you got that kind of money?"

"I've been tutoring and doing odd jobs, and cleaning houses. It's not like I spend much of anything."

She turned away to get the duvet, black as midnight, soft as a cloud. And said, "Uh-huh."

"It's my money, and it can pay off some of the bills, and some of the mortgage. We're getting all that past-due crap again, and a guy came to the door—a collection agency guy. She said I had to go to my room, but I heard enough."

She nodded as they floated the duvet onto the bed, then started casing the pillows.

"You're a good son, Harry, and you're not going to Dana with this because she wouldn't go for it. Too many questions, but I've got a few before we come to an agreement."

"Okay."

"Did you kill or hurt anybody to get the money?"

"No." Genuine shock radiated. "Man!"

She arranged pillows just so on the bed. "Are you dealing drugs—even pot, Harry?"

He happened to know Mags smoked pot when she could get it, but that wasn't the point. "No."

She gave him a long look with those dreamy eyes. "Are you selling yourself, honey? Sex?"

His jaw didn't actually hit the floor, but it felt like it. "Jesus! No. That's just—no."

"Good. Color me relieved. You're such a good-looking boy. Prime bait for some, so I worried a little there. You think I don't know you sneak out at night?" She carted over the shams.

"I was hoping you had a girl, or met up with some of your friends for fun." Studying him, she toyed with her crystal. "Whatever you're doing, you're doing it for your mom. I love her as much as you do."

"I know."

"I don't know why the universe put this shadow on her, and I'm not a fan of money bringing the light. But it does, for her, seeing as she worries too much about the bills."

Stepping back, Mags eyed the landscape of the bed before nodding approval.

"You don't want a regular bank account. You want a brokerage account. Money makes money, that's the sad state of it."

Mags had some weirdo ideas for sure, but Harry also knew she was nobody's fool. So he listened, he considered.

"A brokerage account?"

"Are you planning on . . . saving more?"

"Yeah. It's not just the bills. The last time the guy fixed the furnace he said it couldn't be fixed again, and we'd need a new one this winter for sure."

"Brokerage account. I dated somebody who does that kind of work. Too straightlaced for it to go anywhere, but he'll set us up."

She crossed to him, laid her hands on his cheeks. "You're a good son and a smart boy." She patted those cheeks. "Keep it up."

They heard about the Finkle Stamp Robbery when Ms. Kelper watered her deck plants. He felt Mags's cool sidelong gaze on him as she washed the glass deck doors and he polished the stainless steel appliances.

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Mags said. "Were they valuable?"

"Apparently, but what's worse is their son Terry was supposed to be taking summer courses in college, but blew that off and partied for a week while they were away. In their

house. I had to tell Alva I saw the lights, heard the music, the cars. So it was probably one of his friends, or a friend of a friend—you know how those college parties go—who took them.”

A sign, Harry thought as he made the Sub-Zero fridge gleam.

Like Mags would say, the universe shined a light.

And his mother got better.

* * *

When he was sixteen, Harry fell in love with a doe-eyed blonde named Nita. She supercharged his dreams and made him float down the hallways at school. He tutored her in Spanish—no charge—helped her with her algebra homework.

They went to movies, or for pizza, sometimes solo, sometimes with Will and his girl du jour. He asked her to prom; she said yes.

He cut back on his work—the cleaning and the lifting locks—to spend more time with her. After all, they’d gotten the new furnace, paid down the medical bills, stayed current on the rest.

He kept his hand in, of course, cleaning with his mother and Mags on Saturday afternoons. He averaged two B&Es a month, and added to his account.

They still had bills to pay, after all. And college was around the corner.

His mother liked Nita, loved having his friends hang out at the house watching DVDs or playing video games. His junior year of high school would always be one of his fondest memories.

For prom he pooled money with Will and sprang for a limo. He bought a pink rosebud wrist corsage and rented a tux.

When he stepped out of his bedroom, Dana pressed her hands to her face. “Oh, oh! Just look at you. Mags, it’s Booth, Harry Booth. No martinis tonight, son of mine. Shaken or stirred.”

“Scout’s honor.” He held up two fingers, then crossed them to make her laugh.

“Pictures!” She grabbed her phone, but Mags snatched it from her.

“You go stand with that handsome boy of yours. God, Dana, he looks just like you.”

“Love of my life,” Dana murmured as she tipped her head to his shoulder.

He wrapped both arms around her, pulled her closer. “Best mom in the history of moms.”

She turned, brushed a hand at his hair. “You got so tall. My baby’s all grown up, Mags, and on his way to the junior prom. Come on, we need one of you and Harry.”

Dana and Mags switched places. Mags rose to her toes as if to kiss Harry’s cheek. She whispered, “I slipped condoms into your right jacket pocket. Hell of a lot better safe than sorry.”

That night, after the magic of the prom, during the after-party at Will’s, Harry took Nita’s virginity, and she his, on the cool tile floor of the guest bath.

He began his last high school summer as happy as he’d ever been.

Before summer ended, cancer came back for one last dance.