

Chapter 1

The Pickpocket

The floorboards creaked. The noise cracked in the silence between my father's wheezing snores. I froze on all fours, in full view of Dad's mountainous form, my panic rising. Other kids might learn how to knit, or hunt, or cook, whether by family tradition or necessity; at 11, I learned to steal from my father, and I was damn good at it.

The worn oak slats groaned, but didn't wake him fully. He moved, restless, before his alcoholic gurgle resumed. My stomach tightened. Covered in blankets against the chill of a Buffalo winter, he was a like a great hibernating bear and, for the moment, was sleeping like one. When I could breathe again, I crawled towards his sharp-creased suit pants hanging on the end of the bed. One pocket held bills folded into his money clip – the objects of my desire.

He had stumbled in the door as usual at 3 am and I heard him lumber up the seventeen stairs to my parents' bedroom. My mother sometimes slept elsewhere when he came in especially late and that was the case on this particular night. She had her choice of rooms. There were plenty in the Victorian pile my parents had bought in 1964, four years before, for 22 dollars down and a handshake. The house on Anderson Place was our escape from the low-income housing projects where we'd languished despite Dad's management position at the American Red Cross.

The house had seven bedrooms, two in the attic and five bedrooms on the second floor. A former rooming house, the home was in solid shape when we moved in. That didn't last. My mother used to say my university-educated father didn't know what end of a hammer to pick up. If something broke, he wouldn't know how to fix it and he was too cheap to pay anyone else. With six active children living in the house, the structure soon showed signs of wear and tear. A

hole gaped in the hallway wall from an errant elbow. Paint peeled outside. Plaster crumbled, and light fixtures drooped. Dad's drinking meant that he cared less and less.

Worse, though, was how Mom worried about the bills. Money was unavailable for even small things. Dad kept an iron grip on his paycheck and doled out money reluctantly. Mom had to plead with him for what little he gave her.

That's where I came in.

If Dad wouldn't give Mom the money she needed, I would simply steal it.

So I found myself on all fours, creeping around my parents' bedroom, measuring the pace of my father's heavy breathing. I reached the end of the antique sleigh bed and, ever so gently, lifted his pants from the footboard and lowered them to the floor. I felt around for the money clip and pulled it out. \$48 – more than usual. Here is where judgment came in. I had to take just enough to help mom, but not so much that he would notice the money was missing. Fourteen dollars seemed reasonable. I counted out the bills, then hesitated, barely breathing, feeling the weight of the coins in his pocket. Surely he wouldn't miss some of those. I counted out two dollars in coin, hung the pants up and dropped in the money clip and coins.

Perhaps my hands were sweaty. Surely I wasn't as practiced at stealing loose change. But half the nickels, dimes and pennies missed the pocket and scattered across the floor, filling the silence between snores. It sounded like a load of gravel hitting the back of a pickup truck. Dad woke up instantly. "What the hell?" he snarled. Unable to see, he fumbled for his glasses, then reached for his pants. I scuttled out the door as quietly as I could. I slipped into my room a few feet away, diving under the covers of my bed. I lay paralyzed, eyes clamped shut, my heart hammering in my chest as Dad came roaring down the hall.

“Who stole my money?” he shouted. He slammed open the door to my room. I pretended to wake up, confused. “Huh?” I said. He ran down the hall looking in every bedroom, opening and slamming doors, awakening my confused siblings.

My mother was downstairs. She shouted up from the front hallway. “Jaysus, Casey, what on Earth is the matter?”

“Someone stole my money!” he bellowed. He stamped down the stairs to face my mother in the hallway. I crept out to watch the confrontation. Peering between the bannisters beside the stairs, I had a clear view of the front hall, 18 feet below. She looked apprehensive, then she stiffened. She got angry, too.

“*We re* stealing your money? Fat chance. You must have spent more than you realized on your girlfriend last night,” she said. “Tell me, did you two enjoy dinner? Where did you go this time, Casey? Was the lobster up to your high standards?” Mom spat out. Each stared at the other. The silence between them stretched out like a snake, long, menacing and poisonous.

“ I don’t have to take this crap,” my father muttered. He grabbed his coat and walked out, slamming the door so hard the whole house rattled.

I crept downstairs and stood beside my mother. We both watched my father start his work vehicle, a new 1968 white Ford station wagon emblazoned with red crosses. He impatiently brushed off the new fallen snow from the windshield. He got in the driver’s seat and roared off, the car looking like an ambulance speeding toward an emergency. In silence, I handed her the bills and the coins. She took the money, still staring out the window. She said nothing, but her hands shook.