



# The Night Thief

BARBARA FRADKIN

A CEDRIC O'TOOLE MYSTERY

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BARBARA FRADKIN



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**Summary:** Cedric O'Toole, an unlikely sleuth, sets out to discover who has been stealing from his farm. (RL 3.2)

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*This book is dedicated to all the teachers,  
social workers and community workers  
who hold the welfare and happiness of  
children close to their hearts.*

# One

It was supposed to be a perfect October night. The moon was huge and the sky so clear I could see all the way across the field to the woods.

But after less than an hour, I was freezing to death. My toes had gone numb. My back ached and I couldn't feel the tip of my nose. Good move, O'Toole, I grumbled to myself as I eased my stiff fingers from the shotgun. You couldn't wear a warmer jacket?

I was lying in wait for the night thief. For more than three weeks now, I'd been

trying to stop him from raiding my vegetable patch. My usual scarecrows and whirligigs had been useless. So first I'd welded together a tall fence using every piece of metal I could spare. Bits of car hoods and washing machines, rusty pipes and chicken wire. It wasn't pretty, but I thought it would do the trick.

It didn't. The next night he dug up a whole row of baby carrots and snapped a prize ear of Peaches and Cream corn off its stalk. So I put chicken wire over the whole garden. A foot-long zucchini disappeared. I'd never seen anything like it. I share this backcountry piece of scrub my mother called a farm with lots of wildlife. I don't mind a rabbit stealing a carrot or two, or a deer nibbling the buds off my flowers. But this beast, whatever it was, had to be feeding a whole village!

I don't ask for much. I know the locals laugh at my organic garden, my milk goat

and my fields of rusted junk. But I like to invent things. You never know when that three-wheeled ATV might make me a million dollars. In the meantime, I get by with handyman jobs and my vegetables, which my aunt Penny sells at her corner grocery store in the village. This night thief was seriously messing with my livelihood.

So next I got out my welding torch again and surrounded the whole garden with homemade humane traps. I caught a groundhog and a skunk, but the rest of the bait, along with half a dozen more ears of corn, was gone.

My dog was no help either. Chevy is a border collie mix who barks if a leaf blows across the yard. Usually she sleeps on my bed, but for three nights I tied her out by the vegetable patch. I figured her barking would chase off anything. The first night she did bark, but by the time I ran downstairs and out to the back field,

she was wagging her tail and there was nothing in sight.

After that she didn't even bark. Even when my best crop of cherry tomatoes went missing. A chill ran through me. What *was* this thing? What kind of creature could get through my fence, steal the bait from my traps and hypnotize my dog?

That's when I oiled up my mother's shotgun. I hate guns. Hate the sight of blood, to tell the truth, ever since I was nineteen and had to identify my mother's body in what was left of her car. But now I wasn't just angry. I was spooked.

I didn't plan to kill it. I can't shoot a tin can off a stump at three feet. But I did plan to scare it off into someone else's vegetable patch. Now, as I crouched behind the shed with my fingers growing numb, I wondered if it had outsmarted me again.

Just half an hour longer, I told myself. The dry cornstalks stood like stiff sentries



in the moonlight. An owl hooted. A coyote yipped. Then a dark shape came out of the trees. Hunched and formless, it floated across the field. I stared at it, hardly daring to breathe. A bear cub?

Behind me a twig cracked, and I gasped. Spun around, waving my gun. Nothing. I turned back just in time to see the dark shape melt back into the woods.

Damn!

I waited until the moon slid low in the sky and the shadows grew long. But the creature never came back. The next night I wore my parka and hid behind a tall stand of goldenrod near the woods. The wind was up, blowing clouds across the moon. The grass rippled and danced, making it hard to see. As I waited, my mind drifted. A hairy werewolf was sneaking across my land, slipping the latch on my back door and coming up my stairs...

I awoke with a jolt. Sat up to see a black creature moving through my garden, bending, reaching, scooping. I almost shouted aloud. Hunched low in the grass, I raced closer. Its shape was half hidden by the corn. Too skinny for a bear but too big for a raccoon. I watched as it unwound the wire at the corner of my fence, slipped out through the hole and turned back to reattach the fence.

*What the hell?*

I ducked lower as the creature, cradling its armload of loot, scurried past and headed back toward the trees. I kept fifty feet between us as I followed it. In the forest, even the weak moonlight disappeared. The figure became a shadow that moved quickly in and out of the trees. It was like it could see in the dark. I couldn't. I tripped over roots and cracked my head on branches. Before long, the shadow was gone.

The next day after work, I put Chevy on a leash and set off into the forest. Everything I know about tracking comes from watching bad Westerns on TV. But Chevy knows even less. So I was surprised when she began to wag her tail and pulled ahead in the direction the night thief had taken. Fallen leaves swished under our feet, making so much noise I figured any creature from here to the county line would be long gone.

Chevy led me deep into the forest. This was all part of my back woodlot, an untamed jungle of boulders and fallen trees. As a kid I had loved to play here, bored by my mother's endless Elvis records and TV soap operas. Imagining I was Robin Hood, I had built a cave in the roots of an old maple that hung over a cliff. Chevy headed straight there. As we got closer, I saw the ground in front was trampled. A pine bough blocked the entrance to the cave.

I froze. Terrified of what lurked inside the cave. Wishing I had brought my gun.

But Chevy knocked aside the branch and barged straight in, her tail wagging. Inside, she raced around snuffling the ground. I crouched in the middle, bewildered. The cave was empty, but the dirt floor was covered by an old horse blanket from my barn.

Outside, I searched for clues. There was a circle of ashes in the clearing and an old microwave full of my vegetables down by the stream. Astonishment shot through me.

“Wow, old girl!” I said. “We have squatters. Can you figure out where they’ve run off to?”

I led her in a big circle around the camp, hoping she’d pick up the trail. She doubled back and forth, confused. That’s when all those years of watching Westerns with my mother came in handy. Chevy’s not a fan of water, so I had to drag her across the

stream. But sure enough, on the other side she took off with her nose to the ground and her tail in the air. My night thief must have watched the same Westerns. How to lose the sheriff on your tail.

Forests change all the time. Trees fall, others grow, shadows deepen. But I'd fought many make-believe battles in these woods, and I knew every bluff and rock. I jogged as fast as Chevy could pull me. The afternoon sun was sinking fast. It was almost gone before I caught my first glimpse of movement ahead. A flash of gray against the red leaves. Maybe a deer or a coyote. But maybe not. I picked up my pace. I'm not a big guy, but luckily I'd been hauling cement bags on a construction site all summer. Between that and my gardening, I'd packed on some muscle. I was breathing hard, but I was gaining. Another flash of gray, scrambling up the hillside.

I let Chevy go and she raced ahead, her tail wagging. She bounced in circles around the figure as it tried to run.

“Stop!” I shouted. “I won’t hurt you!”

The figure dived into the bushes. I ran forward, rounded the bush and nearly fell over a small boy huddled behind a rock. Chevy was licking his face.

The kid looked like he’d been dragged out of a coal bin. His hair was one long tangle, and he nearly disappeared inside the dirty old parka that used to hang in my back barn. Eyes as blue as a winter sky glared out at me from the dirt.

I squatted down in front of him. “Who are you?”

The boy blinked. Shrank away.

“I’m not going to hurt you. This is my farm. Where do you live?”

Still no answer. Just a little frown. I patted Chevy. “This is Chevy, and she

likes you. My name is Rick—Cedric Elvis O'Toole."

Cedric was my mother's idea of class, and Elvis was her one and only true love. But the name has got me a lot of laughs over the years, so I hoped I'd get at least a smile from the boy. No such luck. He just hugged Chevy to him. "Are you hungry?" I asked, pretending to search my pockets. "I've got soup back at the farm. And cheese and eggs."

The kid stole a peek over his shoulder. Like he was looking for something and didn't want me to know. But he didn't say a word.

"I'm going to call you Robin," I said. "After Robin Hood. I used to pretend this was Sherwood Forest when I was your age. What? About eight?"

The boy rose to the bait. "Ten," he shot back.

So he could talk after all. I stood up and held out my hand. “Okay, Robin. Let’s go get you some soup. And I have a better jacket than that too.”

Robin stood up. He didn’t take my hand, but when I signaled to Chevy, at least he followed along.