

# RUTH RENDELL

ABRIDGED BESTSELLER

## THE THIEF and Other Stories

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Для широкого круга изучающих английский язык.

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# THE THIEF

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## *Chapter 1*

Polly started stealing things at the age of eight. This is how it had begun. It was the middle of summer. Polly and her mother came to her mother's sister to have tea in the garden. Her aunt had two children, James and Lizzie, who were about Polly's age. The day was warm and sunny. The table for tea was laid under a big apple tree. There was a blow-up pool with water not far from the table. James, Lizzie and Polly played in the water. Polly got carried away with the game and splashed water over her mother and Auntie Pauline. And then she grasped Lizzie and held her head under the water. Her mother told her to stop that at once, but Polly didn't obey her, so her mother told her again.

"Stop, Polly. You're spoiling the game for the others!"

Polly obeyed her and was calm for a while, then started splashing again, with both hands. Then Auntie Pauline got up and asked her to go into the house.

"I've got something I want to show you," she said to her.

Polly thought she was going to get a present. So she stopped splashing, got out of the water, dried herself on a towel and went into the house with Auntie Pauline. Once before, Auntie Pauline had given her the thing she had shown her. But this time something different happened. When they were inside, her aunt closed the door, put her over her knee and smacked her hard, ten sharp blows across her bottom. After that Auntie Pauline returned to the others in the garden.

Polly was left alone. She cried. She hated her aunt. She would have liked to kill her. And suddenly an idea of revenge occurred to her. As she walked slowly through the rooms of the house, she saw a desk on which an open book lay. Auntie Pauline was reading that book. The book was from the Public

Library. Polly took it. She put it in her mother's bag which was in the hallway. If the book was missing Auntie Pauline would have to pay for it...

On the way back home, sitting at the rear in the car, Polly took the book out of her mother's bag and hid it in the big pocket of her jacket. She decided to destroy it. She couldn't burn it in the house. She decided to cut the book into a hundred small pieces in her bedroom while her father was working in his garden shed and her mother was cooking dinner.

Aunt Pauline asked everyone, her husband and Lizzie and James and the cleaning lady who came once a week, about the missing book. No one knew where the book had gone.

"You haven't seen it, have you, Polly?" her mother asked.

Polly looked her right in the eyes. "Oh, no, Mummy, of course I haven't."

She was a good liar. And now she became a good thief, too.

In her class at school there was a girl called Abigail Robinson. Polly knew that Abby disliked her very much. She was the only person in the class who didn't like her. And Polly thought it was more than that. Abby didn't hate her, she despised her. She looked at Polly as people look at dirt in the street. Abby never spoke to Polly.

Once Polly asked her, "What's wrong with me, I'd like to know?"

Abby didn't say anything.

Then Polly said, "My mother says you don't know what polite behaviour is."

Her mother didn't even know Abby Robinson and that she didn't speak to Polly.

This time Abby spoke to Polly. She said, "I suppose that's a lie. Another lie. You're always lying. That's why I don't want to know you."

Abby had a beautiful watch, gold with a bright green face and gold hands. She treasured it and was proud of it. Abby usually left it on a shelf in the changing room when they had swimming class. One day, when everyone else had gone into the pool, Polly stayed behind, took Abby's watch, put it in her school blazer pocket and put the blazer in her locker.

After the class Abby couldn't find her watch. Everybody started looking for it. Polly didn't join them. She went home.

At home she went into her father's tool shed and smashed the watch with a hammer. After that she went out into the street and dropped the pieces of the smashed watch down the drain.

The head teacher asked everyone at school about the missing watch. She asked Polly too as the rest of her class. Polly put on her honest face and looked sincerely into the head teacher's eyes.

"I never saw it, Mrs Wilson," she said. "I haven't touched it."

And at the same time there was a little cut on her hand made by a piece of the broken watch glass.

It was a habit with Polly to steal things from people who had upset her. She did it quite a lot. But she thought of it as of "taking", not stealing. She continued doing it even when she grew up and had a boyfriend called Tom. He was a student and he wasn't rich. He loved music and his CD Walkman. It seemed to Polly that he loved his Walkman much more than he loved her. She knew she was right when after they had been together for a year he told her he wanted to split up with her.

"I can't stand your lying all the time," he said. "You lie about everything without any need. It seems you cannot tell the truth about the simplest things. Somehow it's easier for you to lie, so you do it non stop."

"I don't," she said. "I don't. Tell me just one lie I've told."

"You said Paul didn't telephoned while I was out but I know he did. He told me himself. That's one. You said you didn't have a drink with Alex Swain last night but I know you did. John saw you. They say that even a liar must tell more truths than lies but you tell more lies than truths."

He said he'd be leaving the next day. While he was in the shower, Polly took his round blue and silver Walkman and ran down the stairs and out into the street. Their house was at a crossroads with traffic lights. The traffic was heavy at that time of morning, big lorries were waiting for the green light. As soon as the traffic light turned green, Polly threw the Walkman into the road, under the huge wheels of a heavy truck.

Tom knew he had left his Walkman somewhere in the room and he looked everywhere for it. When he asked Polly if she had seen it, she looked him straight in the eye and said she hadn't. Tom said he didn't believe her.

“Believe what you like,” she said. “I haven’t seen your stupid old Walkman. You must have left it somewhere.”

The next day Tom walked out on Polly. But before he left, he told her he had seen the broken blue and silver pieces in the road.

Soon after Tom had left her Polly started seeing Alex Swain. They fell in love with each other and decided to live together. Unlike her other boyfriends Alex was a grown-up man, he was five years older than she. He had a house of his own and a car and a good job. Apart from that, he was very good-looking. Alex was also a kind and caring man, and, most important, he was an honest man. He firmly believed in the good of truth-telling. He often said people shouldn’t ever tell lies, even the kind of lies people tell in order not to go somewhere they don’t want to go. He hated any kind of lie. He said you shouldn’t lie even when you want to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. He was sure that people should learn to speak firmly and with kindness, and then there’ll be no need to lie.

With him Polly’s life changed. At least, she thought her life had changed. Alex trusted her. He never doubted her words. He was sure that she always told him the truth. He believed everything she said. And because she loved him she found that it was easy to be truthful with him.

She felt that he was making her a better person, or so she said to herself. She believed that she could change because she was still young, and she felt lucky she had met Alex while she was young. Another good thing that happened to her was that because of Alex she learned not to hate people. There was no sense in hate, he said. And living with him she learned to forget if somebody had hurt or upset her feelings. She no longer took other people’s things and broke them. If they were unkind to her or let her down in some way, she didn’t hate them as she once would have done. All that was in the past. She was a different person now.

“I’ve never known you so happy, Polly,” her mother said. “Being with Alex must be doing you good.”

And her friend Louise said, “I thought he was a bit too righteous but now I don’t think so. I see how good he is to you. I see he’s making you happy.”

## *Chapter 2*

Polly and Alex were at the airport. She was flying to New York and he was seeing her off. Three people ahead of them in the queue at the check-in there was a man in a black suit and a chicken yellow shirt. At his foot on the floor there was a small bright orange suitcase, with a black and orange strap. No passenger in the queue had a suitcase like it.

“He won’t lose it,” Alex said. “No one will pick that up by mistake.”

Polly laughed and said she would get tired of such suitcase very soon if it were hers. The queue moved very slowly. Alex had a lot of things to do at work, so Polly said there was no need for him to wait till she passed through all the procedures.

“You may as well go. I’ll be back on Friday,” she said.

“I just thought I’d like to see you safely off. But if you’re really sure, I do have things to do.”

Alex kissed her and she watched as he walked back to the exit. He looked back twice, waving. Then she turned and saw that the man in black and yellow had reached the check-in desk and put his orange case on the conveyor. His name in large black letters was on an orange label: Trevor Lant. Polly looked at the suitcase and thought that one good thing for a bag of that bright colour was that the owner would see it as soon as it appeared on the conveyor at the arrival zone. There wouldn’t be any confusing someone else’s black suitcase with your own. The owner of the orange suitcase had been given his boarding pass and was on his way towards the gate with his small but still orange shoulder bag. Waiting for her turn at the check-in desk, Polly forgot him.

But she saw him again in the seating area at the gate. It was impossible not to notice him there, because Trevor Lant had taken over four of the chairs in the seating area. There were many people waiting for the flight, and they all wanted to sit down. Lant had spread his things out to cover those four chairs, the small orange shoulder bag, two newspapers, a magazine, his suit jacket, a book and a slice of cake in plastic wrap. Polly entered the seating area at the moment when a woman went up to Lant and asked him if he would mind moving his things so that she and her elderly mother could sit down.

“Yes, I would mind.” Lant stared at her. “First come, first served. You should have got here sooner if you wanted a seat.”

The woman went red in the face. She had got embarrassed and walked away. Then an old man asked him to remove his things without any success, then a woman with a high-pitched voice.

“What’s with you people?” said Lant. “Didn’t you hear me the first time? I’m not moving my things.”

The atmosphere became heated. Someone fetched a woman from the desk where she was looking at boarding passes.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to move your stuff, sir,” she said. “There’s a lady here who can’t stand for long. Now come along, I’m sure you don’t want any trouble.”

“Yes, I do,” Lant said. “I am not against of a bit of trouble. Trouble would liven things up a bit. I’m getting bored out of my head in this hole. Try it, move my stuff, and you’ll see what trouble is.”

Polly didn’t stay to see the outcome. She walked away to one of the large windows and stood there gazing at the airfield and the aircrafts. One of them in half an hour would start taking them all to New York. From the seating area loud voices were heard, a crowd had gathered and men in uniform had joined in. Polly began to think that the man in the black suit would not be allowed to stay in the seating area. But at that moment the flight was called and boarding began. Trevor Lant stood up, put on his jacket, threw on his orange shoulder bag and slowly, one after another, picked up his newspapers, his book, his piece of cake, and joined the queue.

Polly had a business class ticket. She thought she wouldn’t see him during the flight because it seemed to her that she had seen an economy class ticket in Lant’s hand. But a passenger may be upgraded to a higher class and it seemed this had been done for Lant. He had been given the seat beside Polly’s and would be sitting next to her for the long seven hours of the flight.

Polly didn’t like the situation, but nothing could be done about it. At first Lant said not a word. He just settled in his seat, gave his jacket to a member of the crew, put his book and papers into the pocket in front of him and put his orange bag on the floor. Then he fastened his seatbelt, lay back and closed

his eyes. In appearance he was quite good-looking. He was about thirty-five years old. He had dark hair and blue eyes, his teeth were white and even. His skin was very pale and his lips thin. Most people would call him attractive but he was so very rude. *I hope he won't be rude to me*, she thought. *I hate that.*

Polly turned her head to the window. In ten minutes the plane took off. She had a book and the crossword puzzle in the paper with her. A trolley came round and she took a glass of wine, then another. Alex didn't like when she drank too much but Alex wasn't here. She read the paper. There was a story about Komodo dragon, a giant lizard, with a photo. It was the stuff of nightmares.

Lant was sleeping. Polly was handed a menu and one for the man next to her. Lunch came quickly after that and the rattle of her table woke Lant. He sat up with a jerk and nearly hit the tray the stewardess was handing her.

"You might have told me lunch was coming," he said to Polly in a sharp tone. "You should have woken me up."

The stewardess looked at her and gave a little smile. She thought Polly and Lant were partners. That was how it sounded. Polly didn't return the smile and didn't reply to Lant. He said to her, "I'm Trevor. What's your name?"

"Polly," she said.

She had pasta for her main course and he had chicken curry. Polly was hungry and had eaten most of hers when Lant set down his knife and fork and said, "How's your food, Polly? Vile, isn't it?"

This time she had to say something, though she was annoyed that he treated her like a doormat kind of wife. "Mine wasn't bad."

"You tell them that and the standard will never get better. It will just go down. I don't know what's with you people. You put up with second-class everything. Have you no taste? Don't you care?"

Before she could reply, he was saying the same thing to the stewardess who came to take their plates. She was to tell the cook, if there was a cook, repeat his very words and come back and tell him she had done so. The stewardess said she would and Polly asked her if she would bring her another glass of wine. Lant's next words annoyed her more.

“It’s not good to drink alcohol on flights. These glasses are very big and you’re quite a small woman.”

She wanted to say she needed it because she had to sit next to him but she never said things like that. She wasn’t very brave. If she was rude to him she was afraid he would insult her, make some remark about her looks or her clothes and that would hurt. He was looking over her shoulder at the photo of the giant lizard.

“I was talking to you,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

“Here’s your poison coming now. Make it last. You don’t want to stagger off the plane when we get there.”

The stewardess began to tell him that the chief steward had apologised. They were sorry the food hadn’t been to his liking. Would he accept a glass of dessert wine?

“I don’t drink,” he said. “Give it to her. She can drink any amount.”

That was too much for Polly. She told herself, *You will regret it if you don’t answer now*, and said, “Are you always so rude? I don’t want to talk to you. Why can’t you leave me alone?”

Her hands were shaking and he could see. He laughed. “Poor little Polly. Was Daddy horrid then?”

She blushed. It always happened. She could never match someone else’s rudeness. Her hands would shake, she would blush and say words a child might use. She had other ways of dealing with it but it was not possible now. His next words surprised her.

“You know what they say. If a man’s rude to a woman it’s because he finds her attractive.”

“Do they?” She had never heard anyone say it.

“You are very attractive. Have dinner with me tonight?”

She hated the idea. He would call her a poor little thing and tell her to stop drinking? Well, she could try to be rude, even if she blushed and her hands shook.

“I’d prefer to have dinner with the Komodo dragon,” she said very loudly.

Now he got angry. His face went red and white. She turned away and looked out of the window, seeing nothing. A voice said, “Would you like coffee?” She turned round and nodded,

and passed the cup from her tray. He had coffee too. They didn't speak and stared in front of them, each with a cup of coffee.

Because she was going straight to a meeting with friends as soon as they got to New York, she was wearing a pale cream trouser suit. The airline's paper napkin was across her knees. She put milk into her coffee, stirred it. He said, "Watch this". She turned her head. He lifted his cup and poured coffee across her knee.

It was hot and Polly screamed. The stewardess came running. "He poured coffee over me," she cried. "He poured it over me on purpose. He's mad."

The stewardess looked from one to the other. "I'm sure he didn't mean..."

"Of course I didn't," Lant said. "Of course not. I'm so sorry, Polly. I can't tell you how sorry I am. What can I do? Can I pay for cleaning it?"

She said nothing. She was afraid that if she spoke she would start to cry. The stewardess sponged her trousers but the stain remained. Polly felt awful. She would have no time to change her clothes before meeting with her friends. Could they give her a different seat? The chief steward said he was sorry but there were no empty seats.

She went back to sit next to Lant. Her leg hurt where the hot coffee had touched the skin. She put the airline's blanket over her knees to cover the stain. Tears were running out of her eyes. She closed them and turned her face into the back of the seat. He was sleeping and his breathing sounded to her like laughter.

*You are not a child, she told herself. Stop crying, don't let him see. I hate him, a voice inside her said, I hate him. I would like to kill him.* She thought of other people she had hated like this, her Auntie Pauline, a girl at school, a boyfriend who had left her. She had had revenge on them. Revenge wasn't possible with Trevor Lant. Her tears dried now, she was quieter, telling herself, *You will never see him again after we land. Never again.*

She dozed. She woke up when she heard the captain's voice, saying they were beginning their landing to New York. Lant was still asleep.