

**A Necessary Ingredient**  
**By Art Taylor**

I am not a detective—not a real one, as you’ll see—and I didn’t set out to write a detective story here.

But sometimes you end up in a place you didn’t intend to go. Sometimes what you discover is different from what you expected to find.

#

For the past few years, I’ve rented a second-floor office in a downtown desperately committed to revitalizing itself. My office is upstairs from an ice cream parlor that’s been around for decades. Next door stands an old movie theater rehabbed for party rental but rarely rented. Down the block are a pair of consignment shops trying to look like antique stores, a barber shop with an old-school rotating pole, and a tea shoppe that opened two years ago—the latter with two p’s on the sign but never much business inside. Re-gentrification even at a loss is the case with a lot of small Eastern North Carolina towns, I imagine.

From my vantage point, the glass on my door reads:

Amprose Thornton

Private Detective

Outside that door, a wood box holds business cards—and brochures listing the kinds of cases I won't accept. No matrimonial work, for example, and nothing involving child custody. No skip tracing or bail bonds work. No insurance fraud. No corporate espionage. Nothing involving labor relations. Nothing that requires me to spend my days at the mall searching for shoplifters.

In fact, with so many things ruled out, not much is left I *will* handle, and that's by design. Maybe if a murder investigation comes along... but the chances there are slim, and the correspondence course I took to get my license hardly equipped me to investigate crimes like that.

The bad news is that I make no money. The good news: it doesn't matter. I rent the office solely to get my father off my back.

"It's important for a man to have a job, a purpose," he told me more than once in the years after I graduated college. "A reason to get up in the morning and put in an honest day's work and then bring home a paycheck to show for it."

By that point, my father himself had transcended the business of business and simply reaped the profits, his own desk cleared of everything but the morning paper and an afternoon cocktail, and the money flowing his way while other people's desks grew cluttered and burdened.

He liked to see other people busy—and other people specifically included me.

But my father's success had become my lifestyle. Trust fund baby, thanks to his industriousness and my mother's finagling—my late mother. Gentleman's C's through high school and college—undoubtedly helped along by donations to school coffers. Too many of those bright college years still a haze of bourbon and pot and afternoons spent reading

piles of pulp fiction while the business and economic textbooks slid further and further to the side—while the nagging and indignation grew and then grew exponentially the older I got.

“Son,” he’d said one day, snapping his suspenders like the punctuation to a pronouncement, “you need to find something you love to do and do it.”

The thing I could’ve asked: What if my passion might not bring home a paycheck?

Today, even with the rent on my workspace, there’s still enough stipend left to keep filling the bookshelves lining two walls of that office—classic detective stories, pulp crime novels, some of them collector’s editions. I spend my days reading and rereading them, watching the sunlight travel from one side of the office to the other, watching a door that stays mostly closed. But it’s a door at least, an office, a business, and isn’t that what my father wanted?

#

My first case arrived late summer a year or so after I’d opened shop. Despite the windows shut tight against the mounting heat, the sounds outside still seeped through: children playing in the greenway that runs through the center of downtown (in off-sync stereo with the squeals from the ice cream parlor downstairs), the occasional toot of a horn at the intersection, lately an occasional helicopter passing overhead. Military maneuvers, the paper had said. The sunlight had travelled halfway across the floor and then begun to fade. The radio droned softly, election updates again— the governorship teetering over business interests and concerns about the economy, the incumbent embattled, the challenger an up-and-comer with rising poll numbers. My father talked heatedly about withholding his own endorsement until he saw which way the wind blew, but I’d tuned him

out and tuned out the newscast then—focused instead on my eighth or ninth reading of *Trouble Is My Business*.

That's when my own trouble walked in.

That line sounds like your traditional hard-boiled story, I know, but she wasn't tall and leggy with flowing blonde locks and an overabundance of cleavage nicely framed for my viewing pleasure. She was short and trim with a boyish haircut. She wore an off-white oxford and scuffed jeans. And instead of some swirl of perfume, she smelled like garlic.

"I'm Esmé," she said, offering me her hand. She had a firm grip, confident instead of dainty, but her nails were bitten to the quick. In addition to garlic, there was cumin too and maybe cinnamon, and I don't know what else.

"Esmé," I repeated. "Like the new restaurant down the street?"

"We're one and the same."

Esmé's Bistro had opened up two months before, and I'd caught whiffs of those same scents in the air walking back and forth to my car.

"Have you been in?" she asked, taking her seat as I moved to my side of the desk.

"Not yet."

"And there's part of my problem."

"Business troubles?"

"Sort of." She nibbled lightly at her lower lip. It wasn't unattractive.

I was already placing bets about it. Someone on the waitstaff mishandling the tips or culling credit cards numbers. Something to do with immigration and visas, undocumented workers huddling back in the kitchen. Or maybe there was a customer who'd gotten too

friendly. Stalking—another crime I steered clear of, some flipside of matrimonial work. I was already angling for an exit.

“What do you know about...tonkas?” she asked.

There in the pause before the word, she’d looked at me—green eyes intently focused my way, like she was waiting for my reaction, not just watching but watching *for* something, and she’d needed the pause to prepare for it. Her eyes didn’t leave mine, even after I’d shrugged and answered.

“I played with them as a kid. A dump truck, a front-loader, something like that.” I took a deep breath. “But I need to tell you upfront: I don’t handle child custody cases”—a reminder to myself to revise the brochure outside.

Another pause, more watching, before she shook her head. Her disappointment was palpable.

“I’m not talking about toys,” she said. “I’m talking about the tonka bean. It’s a spice, a very powerful one.” Another glance, another bit of watchfulness.

Again, I could offer nothing but bewilderment.

“I’m not a grocery store either,” I said.

“It wouldn’t matter if you were.” Her eyes finally turned away from me. “The FDA outlawed tonkas back in the ’50s. They’re considered toxic. The coumarin in them, it can cause liver damage.”

“So you’re not looking for them,” I said. “You’re trying to steer clear of them. Poisoning? Someone’s slipping these beans into your kitchen?”

“No, no, not at all.” She rolled her eyes—the stupidity of it all, that was the message, maybe my own stupidity. “The ban is ridiculous, given how much you’d need to *consume* to

risk *any* effect. And you only need a little of it to...to open up a dish.” She moved forward in the chair, holding her hands out as if she had a bean in her palm. “When you shave the tonka, it releases these...powerful aromas. Vanilla and cherry and a whiff of cinnamon maybe, with a complexity to it all, and the taste carries those same layers and more. Caramel and honey flavors too, and.... I don’t think I’m doing it justice.” She moved her hands to her face. Her cheeks had flushed. “Magic, that’s the better word. It’s like a drug almost, that smell, that taste. Standing above it as you shave the bean can be intoxicating, overpowering. *Empowering* really.”

Vanilla, cinnamon, honey...most of the flavors she mentioned seemed fairly ordinary. But the way she was saying them and the expression on her face were anything but. She seemed transported herself simply talking about it.

“I’m still not sure what you need me for,” I told her.

“My restaurant is new, and I want it to be a success, and more than a success, a....” When she leaned in, I caught a glimpse of her breasts. I couldn’t help it. And thinking about that now, maybe this moment marked another turn toward this becoming a real detective story. “Someone here in the county is growing them,” she went on, barely a whisper. “I’ve heard it—from a reliable source—and I want some for myself. I want in.”

#

From Esmé’s description and from some quick work on Google, powering up my laptop while she sat there, I gathered a few quick facts about the tonka. It’s grown mostly in Central and South America—Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil primarily. It looks less like a bean than a long raisin or a thin prune—dried, wrinkly—and the inside has the look and

texture of chocolate. Even a shallow cut into the bean would release those aromas she described as intoxicating.

“French chefs have a name for it,” Esmé told me. “*La fièvre tonka*. Tonka fever.” It sounded like a disease she’d be glad to catch—the breathless way she said the words—and the way she navigated that French accent suddenly left me a little breathless too.

“You’re French yourself?” I asked.

She smiled, shrugged. “Somewhere up the family tree maybe.”

“And your restaurant. French too?”

Another shrug, but the smile had faded. “Eclectic, let’s say. If it’s not barbecue in a town like this, does the marketing matter?”

“You’re not from here, then?”

“I was a sous chef in Raleigh”—she named a restaurant everyone knows—“then got lured down here to open a place of my own. Inexpensive taxes, the promise of a supportive community. Opportunities—that what I was told.”

Seemed like none of that had panned out.

The FDA had indeed outlawed the bean in 1954, like she said, and there had been cases where the government had stepped in to enforce the ban—“significant fines, negative attention,” Esmé explained. “The kinds of risks any beginning restaurateur would be loath to take.”

Despite that ban, I found some for sale online as we sat there.

“Some of those are meant for luck, as talismans,” she explained. “Dried and shellacked. You can’t cook with them.”

I squinted at the screen. “The description here says ‘can be used in desserts and stews,’” I said. It also mentioned “used in spells” beneath it, but she didn’t let me get that far.

“Most suppliers will refuse to ship to the United States anyway. And if they did ship, chances are it would be tracked.”

I clicked the button to place the order anyway.

“Cancel it, please,” she said, suddenly jittery.

“Why? Couldn’t hurt to see what happens.”

“I’ve talked with you. I can’t risk the association here, not officially, not where it can be documented.”

“You make it sound like the FDA is watching now.”

“You can’t know that they’re not!” She leaned forward again, her hands clasped like she was begging—her fear as palpable as her desperation before. “You’ve read how the government tracks our emails. What if the FDA raided me? My business means everything— it’s all I’ve got!”

“OK, OK,” I said, clicking to cancel—but the screen froze. I’d need to handle it later. “You mentioned a reliable source. Someone here in town? So you already have a connection with the grower....”

“That’s a dead end for me. The *supplier* in the case”—she put a stress on the word *supplier*—“showed me a few beans, but the price for more was too high. I need”—she seemed flustered—“I need someone closer to the source.”

If some of her descriptions of the tonka had made it sound like a drug, this last part surely did. I conjured images of dealers on the playground, handing out samples, hooking

clientele, driving hard bargains afterwards. Her desperation wasn't quite like an addict's, but it was driven by the same need. I could see it in her eyes—that deep green there, soulful and needy.

“I'll do what I can,” I said with more assurance than I felt. Whatever nerves she wrangled with, I caught them too, for my own reasons—the first client I'd ever accepted. “I'll need to get you to, uh, pay a retainer. Then there might be daily expenses. And....” I pretended that it was all routine, but I had no paperwork on hand. I promised to get it to her soon. “The retainer can serve as a contract for now.”

She pulled a checkbook from her purse, glanced at the register with hesitation, then wrote out the amount. I'd caught a glimpse of her balance—barely a couple of hundred more than I'd requested. I decided I wouldn't cash the check immediately, maybe not at all.

At the door, she turned again to face me—a similar pose to when she'd walked into the room. I was struck by how my image of her had changed in our short time together. The same off-white oxford, the same jeans, the same boyish haircut and sharply bitten nails. But now she seemed cosmopolitan somehow, mysterious, seductive even.

She pointed to my name on the glass. “Thornton,” she said. “You're related to Ben Thornton?”

“My father,” I said. “You know him?”

“My landlord,” she said. “At the restaurant—or rather he's connected somehow to the company I rent from. I didn't know it myself until he became a customer too.”

Other people's desks cluttered and burdened, like I said, and the money simply flowing my father's way.

I'm not sure if I can stress enough the point I've made about not actually being a private investigator.

The private detective is a myth—at least how many people picture the job. These days it's mostly background checks of one kind or another or maybe insurance fraud—usually handled in-house by the businesses themselves. On the domestic front, anyone trying to prove a partner's infidelity hardly needs a detective, what with cheap hidden cameras and recording devices or a quick search of a smartphone or a computer's browser history.

I had regularly steered potential clients in those directions, toward online resources or the webpage for Radio Shack or sometimes to local law enforcement. A friend of mine from high school, Randall Norton, was a police officer now, and I often passed along his card. Randy told me I'd have made a killing on commissions if any money had ever changed hands.

But here law enforcement couldn't help, since the tonka was illegal. Passing Esmé along wasn't an option. And I couldn't admit that I'd never taken a case before—couldn't turn her away, could I?

Maybe I simply didn't want to.

#

After some more research online, I visited several produce stands the next morning. More than one mystery had the solution hidden in plain sight, right?

About a block and a half from my office, a white tent was usually popped up in front of an abandoned gas station. I'd stopped by before.

Weeds broke through the concrete, and table legs leaned into holes, barely balancing baskets of apples and peaches, small containers of figs, several piles of muscadine grapes. Another table was bunched with greens—signs for *Collard* and *Mustard* and *Kale*. The nearest things to the tonka's shape were some gray butterbeans.

April, the woman who ran the stand, was cutting peaches into a paper plate labeled *Samples, Take One*. I did.

"I've got a recipe that calls for this specific bean," I told her. "I've tried the grocery store, but you know how that is...."

Play to a source's importance, that was key.

April wiped the knife on her apron.

"You got a new girlfriend?"

"How's that?"

"All you ever buy is salad and fruit." A smirk teased one corner of her mouth. "Who's the lucky girl? Or are you the lucky one?"

"We'll wait and see how the recipe turns out."

"Never heard of tonkas, but we've got plenty of beans." Before I could interrupt her, she was working through the list: those butter beans, limas, green beans, pole beans.

"Maybe you could substitute. That's what I always do, but a lot's out of season already."

"No, I really need this one." I pulled out a picture I'd printed from the internet.

"Looks like a coffee bean almost," she said.

"It's more of a seed really, what I understand."

She handed me the printout. "I don't do much with seeds, but that big market out on 70 does."

By the time I'd reached that one, the sun had risen high and the heat with it. This structure was elaborate—a wood frame and big plywood signs handwritten in green, orange, and red paint. *Boiled Peanuts* and *Home Made Pies* and *Cantaloupe* and *Water Melon*. I'd stopped there before.

"Bean seeds," the farmer running it said with a curt nod, and he walked me toward a carousel of small manila packets, hand-labeled in purple ink: Blue Lake, Kentucky Wonder, State Half Runner, Yard Long Giant. I peeked into a couple on the off chance that one might hold what I needed.

"It's a specialty seed," I said. "Grown mostly in tropical climates."

A helicopter passed overhead, low enough and loud enough that I started to repeat myself, but he'd heard.

"Tropical?" he said. "You think this heat wave is gonna last long enough to grow a *tropical* plant?" He must have been sweltering in all that denim, but he didn't seem to have broken a sweat.

"Well," I said. "I wasn't really thinking about how to grow it."

"Sunlight," he said. "Heat and lots of it, months of it. And moisture probably, depending."

I stared at several piles of tomatoes on the table beside us. One pile sat under a sign that said *Heirloom*. The other said *Hothouse*.

"Would a greenhouse do it?"

He sent me to my next stop, a more professional operation with an aluminum sales area fronting a network of long greenhouses. The man who helped me there wore a thin red tie and jeans that looked like they'd been pressed with an iron.

“Tropicals?” he said. “Sure, right this way.” A side door led into one of the greenhouses—hotter and muggier than outside. But when we got to our destination, the tables were all flowers: ferns and philodendrons, African violets, bromeliads, orchids, something called a bird of paradise.

“It would be more of a tree than a plant,” I told him, looking at my notes. “A cumaru tree, it’s called.”

“Not one I’ve heard of,” he said. “But if it’s a big enough tree, you’d need more height than we have here”—pointing at the glass roof only a few feet above our heads.

All in all, a waste of time—proof maybe that I was better off not taking cases.

#

I could’ve picked up the telephone and called Esmé to update her on my progress—lack of progress—but I decided to stop by the restaurant that night instead. I hadn’t been in, after all. It might help to get the lay of the land. That’s what I told myself.

Business was indeed slow. I bypassed the hostess—a disinterested teen I vaguely recognized, daughter of some somebody in town—and took a stool at a small bar that dominated half the restaurant: mirrors and sleek mahogany, the counter itself curved into a loose L-shape, only one couple there, hovering over a half-bottle of wine. The dining area was crisp white tablecloths and tall candles, high-backed chairs, dark plank floors. Three tables had diners, and their voices echoed hollow in the space. A couple of them I recognized, and we exchanged brief waves. Friends of the family, friends of my father—the country club set, their days as idle as mine but dodging the judgment.

An open kitchen stretched two-thirds of the back of the restaurant, Esmé on the other side of a stainless steel counter, busy chopping something. I glanced at the cocktail

menu—leather bound, labeled *Speakeasy Classics*—ordered an Old Fashioned with Booker’s, and then watched Esmé for a while, hoping she would notice me and come out to speak, but she was intent on her work. *Focused*, I thought. *Driven*. It helped drive my own goals. I was going to find her those beans.

I took out my notebook and revisited what I’d learned back in the office about the growing season for the cumaru tree, why they would struggle to survive, much less thrive, in North Carolina’s climate. It would indeed take a greenhouse—and given the trees’ height, one several stories tall. How would you hide that? Was it worth building a greenhouse like that—and then hiding it—for a handful of seeds?

None of it made any sense.

Then I started thinking of what else might need a lot of light and heat to grow. And what someone might want to keep hidden—and from bigger guns than the FDA.

Slowly, it began to make more sense.

The door opened as I finished my notes, and my father’s voice preceded him into the room. “Evening, Melissa,” he said to the girl at the hostess stand, and “My usual spot”—which turned out to be the bar.

He didn’t greet me at first but called out hearty hellos to those same folks in the dining area who’d waved my way before, stepping over to glad-hand one of the men. As he perched himself on the barstool beside me, he called out “Manhattan” to the bartender, but then stopped him as he reached for the Maker’s. “On second thought, let your boss lady make it when she’s free”—gesturing toward that open kitchen and Esmé within. “She knows what I’d like.”

His voice boomed and carried, and I thought I saw Esmé glance out at us, then quickly glance away.

I caught myself, same as some other times, wanting to ask my father what self-respecting Southerner would drink a Manhattan. But instead I gave him a curt “Dad” as he adjusted himself on the stool.

“Son,” he said. An awkward moment passed. Between his teeth, he clenched an unlit cigar, which he took out and propped between two fingers. Then he returned it to his mouth. “Buy you a drink?” Before I could gesture toward my Old Fashioned, he saw it himself. “But guess I’ve already bought you that one. Almost forgot that your tab’s still my tab these days.”

“I’m working,” I said.

“One of us tosses that word around without knowing what it means.”

“I am working,” I said. “Actually doing work. I have a case.”

“Let me guess. Someone at the library misshelved a book and they need help locating it. Or maybe the neighbor lost her cat. You always liked cats, didn’t you?” He leaned over toward me, whispered, “Or maybe it’s another kind of pussy you’re tailing? Some cheating woman, and the husband hiring you to dig the dirt?”

“I don’t take matrimonial cases.”

He leaned back on his stool, stared at me as if I were a stranger he was trying to recognize. “Son, do you have any idea how real people speak?” He tapped his finger against the counter. “I’d be glad to know you were getting even a *look* at the fairer sex. Always thought you needed too much encouragement in that direction.”

Esmé walked up to the counter, wiping her hand on the apron she was wearing.

“Evening, little lady,” my father said. “Have you met the sire of my loins here? Heir to the fortune?”

He was overloud again. Esmé blushed, maybe both us did. My father didn’t seem to notice and didn’t wait for either of us to answer before ordering his Manhattan again.

Despite asking for “the boss lady” in particular, he critiqued each step of her drink-making: moving her up a higher shelf in her choice of bourbon, questioning if those were the best bitters she had, cautioning her not to bruise the vermouth.

Fine liquor was his only vice, my father used to say, and then fine women too, after my mother died and he found himself on the hunt again. She’d been the buffer between us for years. Both of us missed her.

I didn’t like to think of my father dating, but if his treatment of Esmé offered any indication of how he treated women, it didn’t seem like an issue.

Esmé set the cocktail on the counter before him. “Compliments of the house.”

“No, ma’am,” he said, pulling out his money clip and sliding a twenty from it. “It’s good business to pay for what you get.”

For some reason, that made Esmé blush too. She seemed prone to it.

#

My father is not a fat man, though I realize I may have implied that somehow: the cigars, those suspenders, his booming voice. He’s not a fat man, no, but he’s a big man, and he fills whatever room he’s in.

Sometimes there’s not much space left for anyone else.

My father gave the Manhattan a curt taste then told Esmé she’d only slightly missed the mark. He asked about the business, asked about the night’s specials, protested that he’d

already eaten when she offered a menu, suggested she add more pork dishes—“think about what people want to eat, not what you want them to eat.” He complained about a small placard on one of the bar shelves, advertising for the challenger in the governor’s race—“wear your affiliations on your sleeve, you’ll alienate half your clientele.” He talked about me too, that phrase “heir to the fortune” again and then some blunt comments about bigger questions of inheritance, about the traits that are passed down or *should* be passed down and then something about recessive genes—“or is it *regressive*? I can never remember.”

I’m not sure exactly what I said or how I fumbled through the conversation, what Esmé may have said or done or looked like through it all, except that she appeared truly beautiful to me now in a haunted, melancholy way and I suddenly felt like I should stand up for her or for myself—and then felt equally foolish for thinking that.

“Spends his days reading,” my father was saying. “Walls of bookshelves, packed tight, up in his office.”

“They’re reference books,” I said. “Think of lawyers, their libraries.”

“Want to practice law, you should’ve gone to law school.” My father swigged the rest of his cocktail. “Want to play at law or whatever you’re doing....” He waved the empty glass toward Esmé, gesturing for another.

“Reading isn’t a bad thing, knowledge,” said Esmé, but she was watching me like she had the first day, with suspicion beneath it now. Any authority I had with her was quickly slipping away.

That was the way the conversation went. Before long, I left—putting off my update to Esmé. After all, I didn’t have much to report anyway.

I called my friend Randy the next morning and asked to meet—away from the police station.

“Another referral?” he asked.

“A consultation,” I said. “I need some insider perspective.”

He was free after lunch. We planned to meet downstairs early afternoon.

As I hung up, my office door opened, and Esmé stepped in. She wore a skirt this morning—her legs tan and taut, I couldn’t help but notice. She had a basket under her arm.

“Croissants,” she said. “Fresh out of the oven. Have you had breakfast?”

I pointed to the coffee cup on my desk—still half full. “I have more in the pot and another mug.”

Another blush. “I brought a French press,” she said. She pulled that out of the basket along with a couple of jars of jelly, knives, napkins—cloth ones. The cups she poured were dainty but the scent was robust.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked.

“We didn’t get the chance to talk last night.” She cut open a croissant. “Grape or strawberry?”

“Surprise me,” I said, then: “I’ve got a lead, just need to see where it takes me.”

She’d chosen strawberry, and the knife paused briefly against the croissant—enough so I caught it. “I thought when you came by last night—”

“I’m working on it,” I said. “But no, no tonkas yet.” I held my hands out, palms up. She examined them, like there might actually have been a bean sitting there. Her shoulders sunk. Her whole body seemed to deflate.

“Maybe I should pay the price,” she said, almost to herself.

“Is there a rush? It’s been a day, hardly that. Have some faith”— trying not to think about how my father had undermined me the night before. Reminding myself to have faith too.

She nodded—unconvincingly—then handed me the croissant.

“So tell me,” I asked her, “have you always wanted to be a chef?”

“Since I was a girl,” she said, carefully opening a croissant for herself. Something about her words and the movement and her smile gave me a glimpse of that child she was talking about: simple and unguarded, pure excitement, a contrast to those hard-bitten nails. “I used to burrow into the cabinets of my mother’s kitchen, pulling out pots and pans, banging them around, pretending I was making something. When I was old enough, five or so, my mother gave me a chance to cook for real—or that’s the way I remember it. I’m sure she helped more than I knew. She was a great cook herself, taught me everything I know. Cooking school was...perfecting some of what she’d taught me. Trying to perfect it. Understanding it in a different way.”

“Sounds like you were born for it,” I said. I held up the croissant. “Delicious.”

She took a bite of her own. A dab of jelly clung to the corner of her mouth before she licked it away. “My mother said I had a special talent—a gift for it. And I wanted to be special, to feel like I was destined for something, you know? But destiny...you have to work at it. You make your own destiny, that’s what I’ve learned.”

“You and my father would get along well,” I said.

It was a casual comment really. I didn’t expect Esmé to bristle at the comparison. That unrestrained smile closed up quickly, her lips tightening.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked.

“Your father,” she said. “He didn’t seem very... kind...to you. Last night.”

I waved my hand. “I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t get used to things like that.”

“Not much choice where family is concerned.”

That same watchfulness from the first day. “I hope that’s not the case.” And then the smile again, but forced now—a purposeful attempt to lighten the mood. “Your turn,” she said. “Something about yourself. What’s been your most interesting case as a detective?”

I took a bite of my croissant to cover up the pause, buy myself time, then gave her a slimmed-down version of the plot of “Red Wind”—a set of pearls connecting a woman to her one true love, a blackmailer who stole the pearls and demanded payment or else he’d tell the woman’s husband about the other man, and then the detective in the middle (me, as I was telling it) trying to get those pearls back.

“But when the pearls turned up,” I said. “You know, she was probably going to protect them better, get them insured, whatever. But here’s the kicker—they weren’t real. That one true love of hers had given her cheap fakes. So I couldn’t deliver them back, couldn’t deliver that news, could I? So I pretended that the blackmailer had sold the real ones, had planned to sell fakes back to her—and I got a fake pair myself, clearly fake so she wouldn’t recognize them as her own, and said that I’d done my best. She didn’t get the pearls back, but she got to keep the memories. You see?”

It was a favorite case, even if not my own.

I’d earned back a real smile from Esmé, some genuine warmth behind it. “Who would’ve imagined there was so much intrigue in a town this size?”

“Who would’ve imagined there was a South American tree growing here,” I said, “with an outlawed bean, a *magic* bean?”

She held up the last bite of her croissant, angling it like she wanted to toast, though it took me a few seconds to catch on. I tipped the corner of my own croissant toward hers, felt some real connection as the edges touched.

#

It was a day of eating indulgently. I met Randy that afternoon at the ice cream parlor downstairs. He bought Rocky Road, I had vanilla. Ms. Florence, who’s run the place since both of us were kids, offered Randy his cone on the house, but I insisted on paying for both.

“If buying me a cone is a good exchange,” Randy said on our way out, dodging a family hurrying in, “then it must not be very valuable, this information you’re looking for.”

“You saying you’re open to bribery?”

“If I was, it might take more than ice cream.”

“Would you have rather met for a bourbon?”

“Still on duty,” he said.

I don’t think he would’ve minded, but I did. More privacy out in the open than side-by-side with whoever might have shown up at a bar, even that early in the day. Plus, given the heat, the ice cream wasn’t unwelcome.

“So what’re you buying here with your single scoop?”

“What you know—off-the-record—about some criminal activity that might intersect with a case I’m working.”

“Criminal activity?” he said. “Intersect?”

“Intersect at best,” I said. “Unrelated ultimately—directly I mean.”

He waited a second, took another lick of the cone, nodded toward a park bench set off from the few small crowds on the green. Three kids took turns chasing one another with water guns. Two women sat with a stroller at another bench. Further down the green stood a table covered with political signs—these promoting the governor and a second term.

Where we sat was far enough away from all of them. No one could hear us.

“Who’s growing marijuana in the county these days?” I asked once we were settled.

Randy laughed. “You looking for a buy? Missing those high school days of ours?”

“Not for me,” I said. “And not small stuff, not some set-up in a closet. I meant a big plot.” Big enough for a tree? The tropical plants covering for the growth underneath? I was still feeling my way.

He whistled, held up the cone. “You should’ve made it a double scoop.” I waited. “If I knew about someone with a large-scale marijuana operation here, wouldn’t I have already arrested them? Kind of my job these days.”

“Could be something you know about,” I said, “but you’re not acting on it yet. Could be you’re waiting for the right time to deal with it.”

“A lot of could be’s. What’s leading you that way?”

“I don’t think the helicopters that have been passing by are on military maneuvers.”

The kids with the water guns rushed past us, squealing and shooting. Randy called after them to watch their aim, shifted his elbow.

“Caught in the crossfire?” I asked him.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “By them or by you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“The helicopters,” he said. “Not ours—not that we could afford helicopters, not with our budget—and not military either, you’re right there. But government somehow.”

“So what are they doing?”

“Above my pay grade,” he said quickly, some bitterness laced under the words, then took a bite of his cone. After a moment, he tossed the cone to the ground in front of us.

“What’s the fine for littering, officer?” I asked.

“Birds will eat it,” he said. “Or ants. Tastes like cardboard anyway.”

Already his ice cream was puddling. I took a bite of my own cone. It tasted fine.

“The helicopters,” I said again. “They’re looking for marijuana, right? Hidden greenhouses? Something like that?” But he wasn’t having any of it.

“Back early this summer, end of the school year, prom night,” he said, “the chief stationed several cruisers on the roads leading away from the high school. He wanted to be all zero tolerance, hard as nails, catch the kids drinking and driving, pull ’em over, run ’em in.” He let out a long, low breath.

“Happy senior year, yeah?” I said.

“Exactly. And I didn’t want to do it, not ruin some kid’s graduation. I thought about letting them ride, whoever I saw. But then that wasn’t good either—some drunk kid getting into an accident, killing somebody, himself, a whole carload of kids. You know where I’m coming from?”

I did, but I didn’t. I knew what it meant, couldn’t see how it connected. “So you pulled them in.”

“And drove them home,” he said. “Got hell for it the day after from the chief. And you know what I told him?”

I shook my head.

“I told him, when’s the last time you had us stake out the roads up and down from the country club on a Saturday night?”

What he was telling me, it made sense and it didn’t. The helicopters were like the police staking out prom? when they should’ve been staking out someone else? I told him as much.

“They’re not looking for *anything*,” he said. “Not as far as I can tell. That’s the funny thing. I asked and was told I shouldn’t ask, and then I asked again anyway.”

He stood up, gave me a sad smile.

“Me, my hands are tied.” He squinted, like seeing something in me he hadn’t seen before. “But maybe you can get further with it, given your position and all.”

It wasn’t lost on me here, a classic detective fiction set-up—the detective able to work outside the law, able to find what the authorities couldn’t find.

“You want a lead,” he said, “maybe talk to Harley.”

Which proved part of my point: that Randy knowing something didn’t mean he would act on it.

#

Detecting, no doubt about it, was a complicated business. Randy wouldn’t give me any more information—didn’t have any, he said—nothing specific about the helicopters, nothing about marijuana, nothing that might lead me closer to the heat at the core of the case, the literal heat, the kind that might grow not only marijuana but the tonka. That was all I cared about, even if that bean and Esmé herself were quickly getting lost under other troubles.

Harley went to high school with Randy and me, and he'd been the go-to source for weed. It had been years since I smoked pot—I'd grown up some, no matter what my father might think—and years since I'd seen Harley. But out of sight and out of mind didn't mean out of business.

Dust swirled as I pulled up the dirt road toward Harley's trailer. When I knocked on the front door, I heard shuffling inside. He looked like I'd woken him up. Maybe I had.

"Well, well," he said. "Here come old times rolling up to the door."

We shook hands, exchanged hellos. Harley sank down into a La-Z-Boy and motioned me toward a plaid couch, frayed at the arms—a cat, I felt sure. I hadn't seen one, but I caught a whiff of litter box mixed against the pot smell that had seeped into the couch and the walls and into Harley himself.

I mentioned that Randy had sent me his way, explained what had brought me out.

Harley nodded like he knew something. "Old times rolling up, and now looking to roll something himself." Then his loose smile morphed into puzzlement. "But you don't need me to roll a joint for you, do you?"

"Looking for some information," I said. "I wanted to ask about your supply channels."

He stiffened at that, pulled himself onto the front edge of the recliner.

"You cutting in on my business?"

"I'm not interested in your business," I said. "I mean, I am, but—"

"I'm not going to be strong-armed. I've been doing this too long to be treated like that. You push me, I'll go over your head. Don't think I won't."

He was all but bouncing in his chair, spittle clotting at the corners of his mouth. A cat did appear then, skittering out from under the couch, darting through the kitchen and deeper into the trailer.

“Harley,” I said, trying to bring him back to reality. “Listen to me. I’m not buying, and I don’t want to sell either. That’s not why I’m—”

“You? *Selling?*” he said. “Hell, no, I know you better than that. Keep up appearances, that’s you in a nutshell, even back in high school. And like you’d ever need the money. But then behind the scenes, when wasn’t nobody looking—different story, yeah? And now you want to slide right into the middle here and....”

Already he was pulling me up, pushing me out of the house—more threats, his anger deepening. Classic paranoia, I thought, and I tried to tell him that, but he wasn’t listening. He slammed the door behind me, curses still pushing through the trailer’s thin walls.

Back in the car, I felt stunned. Why had Randy sent me out this way? Had he known how Harley would react? Surely he couldn’t have anticipated what happened.

Harley peeked out from around the curtains, yanked them closed.

One of the helicopters passed, not directly overhead but not far away, and Harley peered out again, then gave me the finger.

I sat for a while, thinking.

Maybe it wasn’t paranoia, I decided. Maybe Harley had reason to be spooked. None of it was clear yet, where I was headed, but as I watched the chopper, I began to wonder where it went.

#

I was stuck to two-lane roads winding awkwardly through the farms outside of town, while the helicopter went where it wanted to. But over a couple of hours, watching the horizons, watching the skies, I got sense of its flight paths, its area of surveillance.

I rode back into town and got to the courthouse a good 45 minutes before it closed. The office for the registrar of deeds was in the basement, a large windowless room with linoleum floors. The clerk was a girl I'd known from school, as it turned out, a few years older—Sheri was her name. I'd had a crush on her years before. She was married with two kids now, had a plumpness about her.

She helped me find the names I needed—people and corporations both. Then I went back to my office, picked up the mail—a Ross Macdonald I'd ordered—and started up the laptop.

A couple of hours later, my research revealed no connections between the names I'd written down and what I thought was going on here—what I felt I knew, based on Randy's comments about the country club and Harley's accusations about me putting myself in the middle.

No connection at all.

But I did find a connection between the farmland the helicopters were monitoring and some real estate closer at hand.

All of which—I admit this with some pride—was exactly what I'd anticipated.

#

That night, I returned to Esmé's.

I arrived later than I had before, giving the dinner crowd, such as it was, longer to finish up—a single table still eating, a foursome in the back corner. My father was already at the bar, Manhattan in hand—likely not his first. Esmé stood back in that open kitchen.

I eased onto the barstool beside my father, ordered another Booker's Old Fashioned. The bartender rapped the counter with his knuckle, turned to make the drink.

"You're becoming a regular here," my father said, not looking my way but at the row of liquor bottles along the wall.

"Came for you, actually," I said.

"That's unexpected."

"I had a few questions about business."

He did glance my way then. "Very unexpected."

"I've always had an interest, sometimes more than others." The bartender set down my Old Fashioned. "Hear you're moving into agriculture these days."

My father sipped his Manhattan. While I waited for him to talk, I took a sip of my own. It was sweeter than I expected. Or maybe that was the moment seeping over.

"I've always kept a diverse portfolio of interests," he said. "Good business all around."

"Investments in that direction going well?"

"Better than some." He gave me a pointed glance. I wasn't an investment that was going well.

I let it slide—both the remark and the look. "So no worries about those helicopters?"

The mirror behind the bar was obscured behind the rows of liquor bottles and the placard for that gubernatorial challenger, but from what I glimpsed, my father may have actually smiled.

“Is this the case you’ve been working on?” He crossed his arms. “You’re wasting your time. Here’s the thing about business, son. By the time you reach my age, my position, you not only know how to make a deal, but you know how to be discreet about it.”

“Hide it?” I asked.

“Semantics,” he said. “And then there are the deals that aren’t recorded at all. Those are sometimes the strongest. Power isn’t always on paper.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d risk dirtying your hands—man of your integrity.”

“Who said I was dirtying my hands?”

“Marijuana?” I whispered it. The bartender was drying some glasses at the other end of the bar—still close enough to hear. I glanced over my shoulder. The foursome in the back corner had broken up and was heading out. The waitress cleared their table. “Remember the way you used to talk about it when I was a teenager?”

My father didn’t tone down his own voice. “As much money as I’ve been funneling to you over the years, I figured I could at least make some of it back from your kind at the other end.”

“The helicopters,” I said again. “Those can’t be good business, can they?”

“A political dispute, that’s all.”

I thought of the governor’s campaign heating up—the embattled incumbent, the ambitious challenger, the business vote, the power that wasn’t on paper.

“The governor is extorting your endorsement.”

“The words you choose, son.” He tsk-tsked me like I was a toddler. “We businessmen are key to his support. We’re in negotiations, that’s all.”

“Everything’s negotiable, huh?”

“Always.”

Esmé was wiping her hands on a towel, looking our way—heading our way, it seemed clear.

“OK then,” I said. “Let’s you and me negotiate.”

This time it was definitely a smile. I couldn’t see it in the mirror, but I could feel it. Or maybe it wasn’t meant for me at all, but for Esmé who was indeed rounding the bar.

Fine liquor and fine women—those were the things that drove this.

“The tonkas,” I said as she came up. Her eyes widened, a cautious smile there too.

“That’s the case I’ve been working on, the case I’ve *solved*.”

“*Solved*?” my father said. “This little lady has known where to find them all along.”

“But she couldn’t get them,” I said. “That’s why she needed me.”

“A moment please,” Esmé said, shifted from one foot to another. That hint of a smile had faded. “Why don’t you take off the rest of the night?” she told the bartender.

“You sure?” he asked, but he was already laying down his bar rag.

“And tell Maria she can go too.” The waitress I’d seen, I assumed.

While he gathered his things, Esmé looked at me in silence—from me to my father and back—with that same watchfulness she’d brought to my office the first day. That was her whole point, I think—watching us and waiting.

When the help had left, I pointed to the leather-bound cocktail menu: *Speakeasy Classics*. “This is the connection, right? And that?” Pointing to the Manhattan.

“It wasn’t the drink,” Esmé said. “That was only the start.”

My father sighed.

“You reach a point in your life when it’s all about enjoying the day,” he said. He picked up his drink, stared into it. “This is the perfect cocktail—or nearest to perfection. I’ve got time on my hands. I wanted to see if I could indeed perfect it.”

“Abbott’s bitters,” I said. “Made with the tonka.”

Outlawed in the U.S. in the ’50s along with the bean itself, I’d found. I remembered my father chiding Esmé about the bitters she used the first night I stopped in, if those were the best she had—rubbing it in, playing his hand.

“A necessary ingredient,” he said. “The original Manhattan, way it should be, until some neb in Washington mucked it up. I found a recipe for them, figured how hard would it be to make a batch of those bitters myself? Hell, I probably could’ve found an antique bottle easier, paid a pretty penny for it maybe, but the money didn’t matter. It’s a point of pride to make something for yourself.” He looked at Esmé. “Turns out I can’t cook. But then someone came to town who could—or at least I thought she could.”

I turned toward Esmé. “You open your business, advertising speakeasy cocktails, and he comes in with a proposal.”

“He brought in a quarter pound of the tonkas.” Her voice cracked. “A plastic bag, as if it was nothing. He laid it on the counter here, and the recipe beside it. He said that it should be enough, if I’d be willing to make it. And I could have, I *would* have.” She was knitting her fingers together, clasping and unclasping them. “But infusion, the aging—it takes time.”

“Six months,” my father said. “That’s what she told me, and in the meantime, she wanted more beans for herself. And I told her sure I had them, told her they were growing like wildflowers, how many did she want?”

“He never let me touch even the first batch,” she said. “As soon as I asked about additional ones, he pulled the bag away from me.”

“Simple supply and demand,” he said.

I turned toward Esmé. “You told me in the office that the price was too high. What was the price?” I knew the answer already. Another of those blushes confirmed it.

“I wanted conversation,” my father said. “Friendly companionship, that’s all.”

“It wasn’t companionship that you wanted,” Esmé said, barely a whisper.

“A fine drink goes better with a fine woman.”

“He threatened to pull the lease,” she told me.

“I merely reminded her that whether her restaurant succeeded or not, the rent was due on the first of the month,” he said. “*Every* month. For two years.”

“A lease that’s not in your name,” I said, “though it is in the same name as the land those helicopters have been keeping under surveillance. So what? You claim it when it’s convenient, don’t when it’s not? And meanwhile, use it for whatever leverage you can? There’s a difference between a date and a deal, Dad.”

My father leaned back and smiled, reached up and gave his suspenders a satisfied pluck.

“Don’t you forget, son,” he said. “The little lady here used you for leverage too. Shake you up, shake me down—isn’t that right, honey? And then shake some seeds out of it all for herself.”

“I wasn’t using him,” Esmé said. “But I thought if anyone could reason with you, could *influence* you to—”

“Influence is the definition of leverage,” my father said.

“Stop it, both of you,” I said. “However we got here, here’s where we’re at.” I faced my father head on. “The marijuana isn’t the case I was hired for, and what’s going on between you and the governor, that’s between you—for now. But I’ll go to the local police with it and to the press—I’ll bring it all down on you, the FDA too—if you don’t give Esmé access to your *other* agricultural interests—those cumaru trees you’re growing.”

“A coo-ma-what?” he asked. This time it was genuine perplexity—on his part and Esmé’s too, but different in each case, a difference maybe neither of us had expected.

“It’s the tree that grows the tonka bean,” I said. “Tropical trees, in your greenhouses.”

“Growing like wildflowers,” Esmé added. “That’s what you told me.”

My father snorted—the perplexity shifting toward something else: comprehension, confidence, pleasure.

“You ever heard of a figure of speech,” he said. “Grow a tree? Why the hell would I do that? Nah, I ordered the seeds online, get as many as I want. And whatever this one kept telling me”—a thumb toward Esmé—“there’s nobody from the FDA been breaking down my door to get them either. And what the hell would I care if they did?”

He drank down the rest of his Manhattan, used two fingers to slide the glass to the other edge of the bar.

“Deal’s off between us, missy,” he said, “and that leverage you two are working on, it doesn’t mean a...a hill of beans.” He laughed, sharply, then stepped down off the barstool.

At the door, he turned back briefly toward us. “You two are made for each other, you know that? She lives in as much of a fantasy world as you do. Waiting for magic beans to save this business, same as you sitting and reading while the world passes you by. Rent’s still due same as usual, first of the month.”

After he’d left, Esmé and I were alone. I thought about the things I could say to her. That I was sorry for the way my father acted. Sorry I couldn’t get the beans she wanted. Sorry there weren’t any beans at all—not like she’d thought.

I wanted to tell her I was there for her still. But she spoke first.

“If you do it right, it all comes together in the end,” she said. “That’s what my mother told me. She was talking about cooking. The ingredients, the steps—the magic there at the end. And it wasn’t simply the meal itself that you created but something else for yourself. Pride maybe, or peace, or.... But you have to do it right, and this business....” She waved a hand at the empty restaurant. “I don’t have enough money to pay the rent next month.”

“You think getting the beans would have made the difference? would’ve saved you?”

“Everything could’ve been different,” she said, talking almost to herself now. “I didn’t have to know that he ordered them online. I could’ve denied it if the FDA *did* come in. And maybe they’d have been what I’d needed, if I’d handled all this better.”

“Would you have slept with him to get them?” I asked.

I didn’t need the answer there, either. She’d already mentioned in my office her temptation to pay the price. And then there was the crisp elegance of the bar where I sat and the dining room behind me, the bottom line on that check register I’d glimpsed when she hired me, the look on her face now—that same blush, deeper than ever.

*You build your future, I could've said. You build your destiny. But even then sometimes you end up somewhere you never intended to go.*

I pulled from my pocket the check she'd written, unfolded it and left it on the bar beside what was left of my Old Fashioned. She didn't stop me as I headed out the door, didn't say a word.

For better or worse, I'd closed the case.

#

The next morning, Randy called to ask what I'd found out. I don't think he ever knew it was my father at the end of that search—only country club types in general, class and power and something he couldn't reach and thought I could, not because of my position as a detective but because of who I was, the class I was born in.

My turn to play coy with him. No, I hadn't found what I was looking for. And that was true. The marijuana hadn't been my case at all.

That afternoon, the tonka seeds arrived—the ones I'd ordered myself. I'd forgotten to cancel them.

Esmé said they would likely be shellacked—good luck charms of some kind instead of usable ingredients—but when I cut into one of the beans, the fragrance filled my office. Vanilla and honey and caramel and cinnamon and something joyous about it, exactly like she'd described it.

I bought a can of clear varnish and sprayed the rest of the beans, packaged them up with the invoice and added a note that she'd been right after all, probably the same kinds of beans my father had dangled before her—letting her know they wouldn't have worked, wouldn't have been worth it.

I'd mail the package, since I didn't plan on stopping by again.

And then I got back to business myself—the Ross Macdonald collection that had arrived the day before. *Strangers in Town*. I'd been waiting for it, and it for me.