



THE CANDY MAFIA

LAVIE TIDHAR

Illustrated by Daniel Duncan

Chapter

1

The sun was bright through my office window in the backyard of our house. I had a desk and two chairs (one for visitors), a bookcase, and a cabinet—everything a private detective’s office needs. I also had a box of chocolates in my desk drawer, half-empty or half-full, depending. It was a gift from a grateful client. Like all sweets in the city, it was illegal, but I didn’t think anyone would check.

I’d just dipped my hand into the drawer, furtively attempting to select a particular chocolate, trying to feel by touch alone whether it was caramel or marzipan, when there was a knock on the door.

I shut the drawer in a hurry and almost caught my hand in it.

I sat up and tried to look busy and competent, like a good private detective should. It'd been a month since school ended for the summer and I'd last had a case. That particular job had brought me up against a notorious bully, Sweetcakes Ratchet, and her gang, the Sweetie Pies, and she'd held a grudge ever since. The truth was I was out of pocket money again, I was behind on my luck, my hat was older than I was, and I needed a job even worse than I needed a caramel fudge.

"Come in!" I said.

The door opened and he came in. He had jug ears and red hair and freckles around his nose, and a mouth with too many teeth in it. He was chewing gum openly, like it wasn't illegal. I stared at him. He looked like trouble.

"You're Nelle Faulkner?" he said. "The detective?"

"Depends who's asking," I said. He looked like he was made of cookie dough, rough and unformed. He was about my age, twelve, maybe a little older.

He smiled disarmingly, with all those teeth.

"Your teeth will rot if you keep chewing that gum," I said.

"What are you, my mother?"

I let his attitude fly. It was nothing to me.

"Who are you?" I said.

"I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself."

He wasn't sorry at all. He kept chewing, like his life depended on it.

"I'm Eddie. Eddie de Menthe."

I sat up a little straighter. I knew who he was now.

"You're the candy smuggler?" I said. I'd heard his name, down the corridors at school. They said he ran half the illegal candy racket in the city. They said if you ever needed a marshmallow or a chocolate button, all you had to do was go see Eddie de Menthe and his gang of candy bootleggers. The bootleggers sold candy under the grown-ups' noses. I didn't know where it came from, and I didn't really care.

"Nah," he said. "It's nothing like that, honest. I'm just a kid."

He didn't look innocent. He looked as wrong as caramel popcorn, and that's about as wrong as you can get.

"So?" I said.



He shrugged like it didn't concern him. "People gotta have candy," he said. "I just help 'em out."

I kind of liked him. He didn't make excuses for himself. But he was trouble and I knew it, and he knew that I knew.

"So how can I help you, Mr. de Menthe?" I said.

"Eddie, please."

"If you insist."

"I need a private investigator. A gumshoe." He smiled. Took out a packet of gum and offered it to me. "Want some?"

"No."

"Ain't a crime," he said.

"Actually, it is."

He chewed and smiled like he didn't care, which I guess he didn't.

"So how can I help you?" I said.

"It's complicated."

"If it's illegal—"

"No, no," he said. "It's nothing like that. I've got...people for that."

They said he had every other kid in the city working for him, smuggling in candy and then selling it on. I couldn't imagine what he wanted with me and I told him so.

"Someone stole something of mine," he said. "I need it back."

"Well," I said reasonably. "What did they steal?"

For the first time he looked nervous. "This is just between us, right?" he said.

"We private detectives," I said solemnly, "are like priests or doctors. Whatever you say stays in this room."

"It's not really a room, though, is it?" he said. "It's a garden shed."

"It's my office."

"But it's a shed," he said. "In your mom's garden. I can see her out the window, weeding the roses."

"Look, buddy," I said, becoming irritated. "You came to *me*. I didn't come to *you*. Where's *your* office, some disused school playground?"

"Actually..."

I should have known.

"The one on Malloy Road? Closed down for renovations six months ago?" I said.

"You've never been?" He smirked. "When you go, just make sure you don't lose your marbles."

"What *are* you talking about?"

He kept the smirk on. "You'll see."

I sighed. I sat back and stretched my legs under the desk. I thought about candy. I thought how in other cities they could just buy it in a shop, and we couldn't—not anymore. I thought of how good it tasted, and how, just because you make something illegal, doesn't mean it goes away.

"You're avoiding my question," I said.

"Which was?"

"What did you lose?"

"I didn't lose it, I told you. It got stolen."

"What?" I yelled, startling him. He was really beginning to irritate me. "*What* did you have stolen?"

"It's a teddy, OK?" he said. I drew myself up and looked at him across the table. His eyes were soft and a little sad.

“A teddy?” I said incredulously. Was he joking? He was at least twelve and a *half*.

“A teddy bear. It’s an old teddy bear. All right? That’s all.”

I let the silence linger. He looked uncomfortable, then raised his head and glared at me defiantly.

I said, “Does it have a *name*?”

“Just Teddy.”

“That’s original.”

“It’s not mine. It’s...it belongs to a friend.”

“Sure, a friend.”

“A *friend*,” he said firmly. “And I need it back. It’s important.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m sorry for your loss and all that, but couldn’t you just, I don’t know, get another one?”

“Did you ever have a teddy?” he said. I squirmed a little uncomfortably and he saw. “Still got it, right?”

“Her name’s Delphina,” I said. “Del Bear.” I didn’t know why I told him that. My dad had bought her for me, when I was small. Before he died.

“I need it back,” Eddie de Menthe said.

I stared at him hard. He was one of the most feared candy bootleggers in the whole city, and he was coming to me about a lost teddy bear? Was he serious?

I stared at his face. He did look serious.

No, I thought. It was something worse—he looked *worried*.

“Fine,” I said, reaching a decision. I took out my pen and my notepad. “Can you describe it?” I said.

Eddie said, “He’s old. He has brown fur that’s been washed too many times so it looks like a dirty gray. He’s missing his left eye and there’s a patched hole in his chest that looks like a bullet wound that’s been sewn shut. He’s missing part of his right ear. He’s got a cute, black button nose. He has an original label, too faded now to read, but if you could read it, it would say, ‘Farnsworth’.”

I went still at that name. Eddie watched me closely.

Everyone knew the name. It was etched on the gates of the shuttered factory up on the hill, and on nearly every bar of chocolate that was sold in the city before candy became illegal.

It’d been three long years since Mayor Thornton brought in

the great Prohibition Act, banning chocolate and sweets from our city. I was only nine then but I remembered it. We all did. And it was three years since they had closed the factory and Mr. Farnsworth had disappeared.

It was getting harder and harder to imagine a world where you could eat chocolate whenever you wanted, in public, or just go to a store and buy it.

Back then the whole city had smelled of it. It was a smell that rose all over the city, for rich and poor alike, rising day and night from the Farnsworth factory. The smell of chocolate. It was everywhere. It was in our clothes and in our hair and in the warmth of our pillows when we went to sleep at night. I still remembered. It had been my father's smell.

He had worked in the factory and the chocolate was on his skin and under his nails and in his hair. The smell had clung to him, no matter how much he washed, no matter what cologne he used.

It was a part of him.

Now the city just smelled of flowers and trees, of baking bread and coffee and car exhaust fumes and sweat, like any other city.

But it used to smell like a fairy tale.

It used to smell *wonderful*.

I cleared my throat. "What else can you tell me?"

"I can tell you it's important I get it back."

"I charge fifty cents a day plus expenses," I said.

He shrugged, like money was nothing to him, which perhaps it wasn't.

"I need that teddy back," he said.

Gradually I got the rest of the details out of him. He kept the teddy bear in his "office" in the abandoned old schoolyard on Malloy, where kids came for bootleg chocolate and a game of marbles. He thought maybe one of his rivals could have stolen it, but didn't say why he thought that. I had the impression there was rather a lot he wasn't telling me. He said his main rival was a kid called Waffles, who lived up on the hill. I'd never heard of him before. Other than that, he didn't know. But I could see that he was worried.

"I'll make some inquiries," I said at last. "And I'll have to look over your turf too."

“I already told them to expect you,” he said.

“All right.”

We stared at each other across the desk in silence. Eddie de Menthe was a big boy. He could look after himself. And yet, still, at just that moment, he looked a little lost himself.

“I’ll find it,” I said.

“Good.” He looked relieved. He stood up to go. At the door he turned back to me.

“Thanks, Nelle.” He turned to the door.

“Hey,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Why me?”

For just a moment he smiled, and his face softened.

“We used to dig in the sandbox together,” he said.

I looked at him, puzzled. “I don’t remember that at all,” I said.

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged. “See you, Nelle.”

“See you, Eddie.”

When he left I remained seated. My mother had gone into the house and Eddie sneaked out through the back gate without being seen. He was good at that.

The sun streamed in through the window.

And I thought about chocolate.