

TOBACCO FIELD BOY

MARTA SPROUT

BIG CITY DEVELOPER Charlie Bender fidgeted in the back of his sleek limo, scared out of his mind that something was going to take away this deal of a lifetime. He'd had his eyes on a prime piece of real estate that promised him more wealthy than he'd ever dared imagine.

Over the last few months he'd been chasing this dream. Now all the pieces had finally come together – the land, the financing, and the blueprint for the biggest mall in all of Pennsylvania.

As his driver sped toward the meeting with his realtor the green hills of the Amish countryside rolled by. It was always striking to him how old-time cultures still slowly wheeled their way down the paved roads of a world that had long ago left such things behind. The Amish traveled in simple black buggies pulled by faithful horses.

As Charlie passed one of the covered carriages driven by a man with a full beard and simple black hat, the clippity-clop sounds of the horse's hooves on the asphalt faded behind the hum of his German-engineered vehicle.

When they crossed a small bridge over a creek, Charlie caught his breath. There it was. The land just waiting to become his shopping Mecca. All that was left to do was sign the paperwork – and, of course, hand over a certified check. On the surface it appeared as little more than an old abandoned farmhouse surrounded by tobacco fields nearly ready for harvest, but to him it was the golden key – the pinnacle of his career.

Charlie imagined his sliver-haired likeness on the cover of *Forbes* magazine and what he'd say in the interview with a reporter hanging on his words of wisdom. "Market insight and timing. That is what it's all about. Find out what people want and give it to them." That's what he'd say.

Today he was one step closer to making that dream a reality. It was a fine September morning when he pulled up to the old house on Sycamore Street. Charlie expected to march through the process of acquiring this land just like he'd done hundreds of times before with other purchases, provided nothing went wrong. What could be more simple? There were always risks such as the discovery of a lien against the property or some rare bug that could tangle him up with environmentalists for years, but it never occurred to him that someone other than himself still cared about the last fields in the area that weren't owned by the Amish.

His driver parked behind the Realtor's car. When Charlie stepped out of the vehicle it was as if he'd stepped back in time. The rural road was still gravel, there were no sidewalks nor curbs – only the land, a scattering of outbuildings, and one huge red barn.

Frank Hopper, his real estate agent, was waiting for him on the front porch. “Charlie, good to see you.” The men shook hands. “Mind if we stay out here? The dust in there gets my allergies going something fierce. Besides, I have to make a phone call before we get started.”

“No problem. While you're doing that, I'll take another look around,” said Charlie.

Charlie Bender took his notebook and strolled around the side of the house to the back, being careful to sidestep a puddle to keep the mud from splattering on his Italian leather shoes and tailored trousers. He rolled up his finely pressed sleeves as he stood on a grassy ridge overlooking the fields. Maybe it was the sunlight or that fresh green smell of country air, he wasn't sure, but he breathed it in deeply before marching into the fields to scout out the elevations and size up any obstacles.

He could see it all before him now. The old tractor, the enormous rusted up truck on the side of field, and the patchwork of crops would be gone. In their place would blossom a shoppers' paradise. The mall would go over there where the fancy architecture and signage would lure eager customers; the parking lots and garages would be on the side leading to the access roads. Charlie paced off his steps one by one and stopped to marvel at the broad shiny green leaves lined up in long neat rows. He'd never seen tobacco in plant form before. Unlike the fuzzy grey-green leaves of the ornamental Nicotiana in his sister's garden, these leaves were bigger than he'd expected and they were broad, glossy, and so vibrantly green. As he was about to return to his meeting with Frank a movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention.

Between the long rows he saw a boy and his dog standing right there in the middle of his field – well, soon to be his. “Hey, son, what are you doing here?” he asked.

The boy didn't respond, so Charlie called out to the kid with the unruly dark hair once again. This time without blinking or uttering a word, the boy simply walked away and climbed into the dilapidated truck with the dog tucked under one arm. When Charlie tried to catch up with him and looked inside the cab no one was there, not even the dog. He'd heard the old door creek and yet the cab was empty. Even the dust on the seats was undisturbed.

TOBACCO FIELD BOY is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locales, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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