Chapter 1

“Harriet, they’re finally here!” Melody Merriweather declared, hurrying as best she could toward the front of the shop despite the rather large box she was balancing.

Harriet paused in her diligent arranging of the candy sticks in the wall of jars behind the counter to glance over her shoulder. When she saw the box, she turned fully.

“You’ll never guess!” Melody set her delivery on the far end of the counter and reached for a pair of scissors, slicing through the packing string and peeling open the flaps of the package. From a nest of cedar wood chips, she lifted out a smaller box, thin and mint green with a swirling chocolate font. Inside, wrapped in crisp tissue paper, lay a beautiful lavender silk scarf with tiny white polka dots. Melody drew in a breath. They were even more beautiful than she had hoped.

“Oh, my!” Harriet whispered. “Who’s that for? Your mother?”

“No!” Melody laughed. “We’re going to sell them!”

Harriet’s brow furrowed. “Sell them?” She glanced at the floor-to-ceiling shelves of the Merc, neatly stocked with dry goods. “Here?”

“Yes! Why not?” Melody hurriedly dug out more boxes, brushing off stray wood chips, and began stacking them haphazardly on the counter. They were just what the dusty old Merriweather Mercantile needed! A certain flair of . . . well, of something more refined. And, truth be told, she was tired of selling sacks of flour and fishing poles and cans of soup. She wanted to sell something fun!

It had been barely a month since Melody had been called home from Mundelein, her lovely college in Chicago, to take over the running of her family’s general store. Upon hearing the news of her father’s heart attack, Melody had rushed back . . . only to find that Pops wasn’t *quite* on death’s door, as her mother’s exaggerated letter had implied, and that, worse, they were expecting Melody to take over the dreadful Merc, at least until Pops recovered. She had protested fiercely, saying that it should be Freddy, her older brother, who should have to abandon *his* expensive school and take over, but Pops had just tut-tutted the suggestion, as if it were ludicrous. Next, she tried insisting that she knew nothing about running a shop, but this, too, had fallen on deaf ears. In the end, it was Pops, lying prostrate in his hospital bed, who had convinced her to at least try.

Melody reached for another box inside the parcel, this one bigger. Carefully, she opened it and pulled out a lovely velvet cloche hat.

“Hats, too?” Harriet’s eyes grew wide.

“Yes, *and* gloves,” Melody said, rifling through the wood chips in search of glove boxes. Finding one, she opened it to reveal a pair of pink leather calfskin gloves. “Here, feel these,” she urged Harriet as she herself rubbed the gloves. “They’re as soft as butter!”

Harriet did as she was bid and let out a little gasp. “They must cost a fortune!”

Melody laughed again. She had discovered them in the Barnum’s Supply catalog, which sat forlornly on her father’s desk in his makeshift office, and had promptly ordered them without a second thought. They had indeed cost a pretty penny, but Melody was sure the ladies of Merriweather would appreciate something other than the sensible, serviceable line of clothing supplied by Montague’s down the street. And, she had reasoned excitedly, maybe if they sold well, she might actually make a profit, enough to spruce up the Merc a bit, as it was, to her eyes, anyway, looking a bit shabby. Her father might even *thank* her for the idea when he returned and saw how well they were selling.

“Here, try them on!” she said to Harriet.

“Oh, no! I . . . I couldn’t.”

“Yes, you can! Here.” Melody planted the cream cloche on top of the girl’s pretty chestnut curls and then took the lavender scarf and wrapped it stylishly around her neck. Harriet reluctantly pulled on the gloves.

“You look gorgeous!” Melody declared, adjusting the scarf slightly. How she missed dressing up for dates to see the latest film at the Biograph or to go dancing at the Aragon in Chicago. Merriweather, by contrast, had little to compare. Sure, they had the opera house and the Avalon, but none of the big names ever came here, and there certainly were no dance halls.

“You think so?” Harriet turned her head this way and that, a faint smile creeping across her face.

“Yes, of course you do!” Melody plopped an elbow on the counter and rested her chin in her hand as she studied the girl. Harriet, while not college material, was really very sweet. At eighteen, she was only two years and eleven months younger than Melody herself, more Bunny’s age. However, Melody had already decided that Harriet was infinitely more mature than her spoiled little sister.

“Tell you what!” Melody declared. “I’ll let you borrow one for your next date.” She flashed one of her mischievous grins, which never failed to elicit admiration amongst her court of friends back at Mundelein.

Harriet’s cheeks flushed as she pulled off the hat. “I don’t have a beau. If that’s what you mean.”

“Don’t have a beau? You must be joking! Why not?” Melody studied her again. Harriet was not what one would call a beauty, but she was lovely in an innocent sort of way. Despite the freckles that dotted her nose and cheeks, she might even be considered rather attractive. Her eyes were a very pretty shade of green, and her nose, Melody decided, was perfect. Best of all was her sweet smile, which was accented by two dimples when she laughed. Melody was *sure* she could find her a suitor; after all, hadn’t that been her specialty back at Mundelein? Matchmaking? She had, in fact, developed a bit of a reputation in that department.

“I could help you, if you’d let me,” Melody suggested pleasantly, picking up stray wood chips and pitching them into the box.

“Help me? With what?” Harriet looked genuinely confused.

“Help you to fall in love, of course!”

Harriet’s blush deepened. “Oh, but I—”

“What in God’s name is all this?” came a shrill voice from the back of the shop.

Melody’s neck stiffened. “It’s a batch of new products, Mrs. Haufbrau,” Melody said crisply, while Harriet hurriedly removed the scarf and gloves and set them carefully on the counter.

Mrs. Haufbrau arched one eyebrow as she picked up one of the gloves, only to toss it aside, its buttery softness apparently not having the desired effect. “New products? For who? Rockefeller?”

Melody inhaled sharply. Mrs. Haufbrau was another staff member she had inherited—one who was not, unfortunately, as pleasant as young Harriet, nor as malleable. Indeed, Mrs. Haufbrau was anything but. Likewise, she was positively ancient, way older than Melody’s mother, and several degrees sterner, which was saying much. Why her father had hired Mrs. Haufbrau all those years ago was a mystery to Melody, though maybe it had actually been her grandfather who had hired the old crone when he had started this behemoth back in the 1800s.

“Some people in town might like to have a change of style, Mrs. Haufbrau,” Melody retorted as she began piling the boxes back into the original package.

“Is that so?” The older woman crossed her arms stiffly while Harriet mysteriously bent to look for some unnamed item on the shelves below the counter. “Which farmer’s wife do you think is looking for a change of style with a Depression on? But you probably wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Melody bit the inside of her cheek. Of course she was aware of the Depression! Hadn’t they had to let their gardener go? And the kitchen girl who used to come on Saturdays to help Helenka? What was her name? Sadie?

“These might be fine for Chicago people,” Mrs. Haufbrau went on, “but not people here. This ain’t high society, you know!”

“God forbid I’d suggest that Merriweather, Wisconsin, is high society, Mrs. Haufbrau. But we could all use a little color, don’t you think?” She looked pointedly at Mrs. Haufbrau’s boring gray dress. That was all she ever wore—gray or black, as if in eternal mourning.

“With scarves made out of silk and calfskin gloves?” Mrs. Haufbrau scoffed. “Does your father know?”

“No, he does not, Mrs. Haufbrau,” Melody replied. “And I’d kindly ask that you not to go blabbing to him with your tattletales of the shop. He’s very ill, you know, and he doesn’t need you pestering him.”

Mrs. Haufbrau looked as if she had been struck. “I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Oh, I think you do.” It was obvious from Mrs. Haufbrau’s muttered comments and loud sighs whenever Melody made a mistake—which was frequently, she had to admit—that the woman thought herself infinitely more suited to the job of manager. Indeed, Melody detected more than a little resentment coming from Mrs. Haufbrau that *she* had not been asked by Louis Merriweather to take over in the current crisis, and Melody was beginning to suspect the woman of running to the hospital with the Merc’s account books in hand. “And, anyway, my father isn’t here right now. *I* am.”

“Oh, yes. We all know *that*,” Mrs. Haufbrau snipped. “Loud and clear.”

Melody fumed. She wished she could simply dismiss Mrs. Haufbrau, but she knew it would be a mistake. For one thing, her father would have a fit.

The shop bell tinkled, then, which blessedly broke the tension. However, when Melody observed whom it was who had entered—Imogene Kaufmann—she half-wondered if continuing to spar with Mrs. Haufbrau would be more agreeable.

“Hello, Imogene,” Melody said tightly as the timorous, middle-aged woman crept toward the counter with a box of her own. Imogene Kaufmann was a spinster who lived in the small apartment above the Merc with her very old and very deaf widowed mother. There was a time, several years ago, when Imogene had worked in the shop, but she had eventually been forced to quit when old Mrs. Kaufmann began wandering the streets of Merriweather, sometimes in her nightgown. It was probably a good thing, however, that Imogene had given up the Merc, as Mums was convinced that she was a secret kleptomaniac.

“Whole boxes of Hershey bars just gone!” Mums used to complain back when she herself had routinely taken shifts at the Merc. No matter how much Pops would explain away this and other thefts, Mums wasn’t having it. There seemed to be some deeper animosity between the women that Melody had never understood.

“Oh, hello, Melody!” Imogene’s small ferret eyes did not initially meet Melody’s but instead darted furtively between Mrs. Haufbrau and Harriet. “Don’t you look nice?” she squeaked, finally peering at Melody now. Imogene was probably only forty, but the corners of her eyes were chiseled with deep wrinkles, and a thick white streak of hair ran down the middle of her head, as if she were a skunk. “But, then, you always look nice, don’t you?”

She cleared her throat and looked as though she was attempting to stand up straight, but her grossly rounded shoulders would not obey. “I’ve often commented to Mother how well you look. How fresh. Fresh like a daisy, I always say. How fortunate for you. And for your family. How *is* your family? Are they well? How is your poor father? I hope he is well. You must be glad to be home, glad to be out of Chicago. I’ve often said to Mother, I don’t know how poor Melody had the courage to leave home. I simply can’t imagine it, and yet there *are* times when I have thought it might be nice to have a holiday. I’ve said as much to Mother, but she doesn’t fancy it. No, she doesn’t fancy it. Still, we can always hope, can’t we? But we are so very glad you are home safe. We did say ever so many prayers, Mother and I. So, you see, prayer does work. Sometimes, I must admit, my faith wavers, but seeing you, standing here before me looking so well certainly does prove the power of prayer and I’m quite encouraged. Quite encouraged by you, Melody. I remember when you were just a little girl. So sweet, running around here. I would often tell Mother all about your antics. Your father doted on you. Still doted on you even when you were gone. He would tell us all about your adventures, and I would tell Mother. Why, just the other day—”

“Can I help you with something, Imogene?” Melody interrupted, her patience flagging. “Something I can get for you?”

“Get for me?” Imogene seemed puzzled. “Oh, no! No, I don’t need a thing. No, see, I’ve made these soaps.” She shuffled the box in her arms to open the lid. “Just out of lye and a bit of aromatics. But they work real good. Different scents, you see." She picked one up and sniffed it. “This one’s peppermint.” She held it up to Melody, who felt she had no choice but to smell it. There was a *faint* aroma of mint. Imogene reached for more. “There’s rosemary, and lavender, and rose, and bergamot, and”—she sniffed one deeply—“I think this one is just plain.” She dropped it back in the box and looked eagerly at Melody.

Melody smiled wanly, wondering what on earth Imogene was after. “Yes, they’re nice, Imogene,” she said politely, deciding that Imogene must have finally cracked under the pressure of caring for her mother, locked up all day in the upstairs apartment.

“Well, what do you think?” Imogene asked hesitantly, carefully closing the lid.

“About what?”

“Well, I was thinking you might like to . . . well, to sell them. If you’d like. If you think they’d sell. They probably won’t. But they might. You never know, do you?” She chuckled nervously. “I used to tell Mother that all the time when I worked here before. ‘You’d never guess what I sold today, Mother!’ I used to say. ‘A card of buttons! An oil can!’ Remember when the Merc sold oil cans, Melody? Or maybe that was before your time . . . Or seven mousetraps! I *did* sell seven mousetraps in one day. Did you know that, Melody? Sold them all to Ned Werner. Came in with a rat problem in his barn. I told him that our traps weren’t nearly big enough for rats, that he should stop in at Rhombergs’s for some poison, but, no, he took the seven mousetraps instead. Don’t know whatever happened. He’s dead now, so I can’t ask him. But maybe his son, Del, would know. I must remember to ask him next I see him. Goes to show, though, doesn’t it?”

Melody bit her lip, trying to think of what to say. While they did have a somewhat pleasant aroma, the soaps were horribly misshapen, not perfect ovals like the bars of Kirks or Lux they carried. She was sure no one would even give them a second look, much less buy them. “Well, I . . . I don’t think we need any more soaps, Imogene. We already sell several different types. And I’m not sure we have the shelf space.”

“*I* think you should take them.” Mrs. Haufbrau sniffed, having irritatingly observed the whole exchange. “Can’t hurt, can it? And people like homemade stuff. Honest, down-to-earth stuff.” By the way she emphasized each word, Melody was sure she was mocking her imported new products, which made her all the more determined to reject Imogene’s soaps.

“I don’t think so, Imogene.”

“Oh, but Melody, please!” Imogene urged in a rare form of pleading. “You can have half the sale price. Or more than half. Or whatever you think. I just need . . . we just need a little extra money, and I thought that maybe . . . maybe this might be a way.”

Melody squeezed her eyes shut. As much as she wanted to thwart Mrs. Haufbrau, she couldn’t bear to refuse this poor woman, who, despite her eccentricities, as well as Mums’s dislike, had always been kind to Melody as a little girl. Likewise, she knew deep down what her father would do if he were here. “Oh, alright, Imogene. I’ll put them out, but I can’t promise they’ll sell.”

“Oh, Melody! Bless you! I can’t wait to tell Mother! She’ll be pleased as punch, she will be! Oh! I’m going to tell her now!” She hurried toward the door, the box still under her arm. “Oh!” she exclaimed, suddenly realizing she was carrying away the product. “How silly of me!” She scurried back to the counter. “Here you are. I must go now!” She practically ran out of the shop, then, as if afraid Melody might change her mind.

Melody rubbed the back of her neck and then picked up the box, making a point of *not* looking in Mrs. Haufbrau’s direction. “I’ll go see where I can put these,” she said.

“*I* can find a place,” Mrs. Haufbrau offered.

“No, *I* will, Mrs. Haufbrau,” Melody declared before making her way toward the back of the shop, near the meet counter, where the cleaning products were displayed. Melody studied the shelves filled with shampoos and soaps and even whisk brushes and mops, noting that this area of the shop could definitely use tidying, but she didn’t have time for that right now. She was eager to find places up front for her silk scarves and pretty hats. What was she to do with a box of ugly soaps? Finally, she bent and pushed some disinfectant on the bottom shelf to the side. It was not the most advantageous placement, she knew, but no one was going to buy them anyway.

“That’s not the best place for those,” Cal called from behind the meat counter.

Melody let out a sigh. She wasn’t sure she had the strength to argue with Cal, too, especially since nearly every interaction with him seemed to end, if not exactly in an argument, then at least in a bit of a huff.

When she first met Cal Fraiser on the day she took the shop’s helm, she had admittedly been struck by his thick dark hair—a lock of which seemed to perpetually hang over one eye— and his angled jaw, the stubble upon which grew darker as the hours ticked along, she had since keenly observed. He had immediately called up a vision of Heathcliff, which had caused a delicious little shiver to travel down her spine, but all intriguing imaginings were immediately dashed by his apparent contempt of her. She had introduced herself, politely holding out her hand and batting her eyes just a little, but he had merely glanced at her, frowned, and went on wrapping a beef roast.

Cal’s uncle, Lyle, was the Merc’s real butcher, but he had recently been laid up with first an amputated toe and now a case of dropsy. Distraught at the thought of letting the Merc down, he had persuaded his nephew Cal to come down from Dodgeville and take his place until he could get better. Cal, to his credit, had so far demonstrated to be a good stand-in, as he was quite skilled with a knife, but it was clear he was only here out of duty to his uncle, as he was unhelpful in every way other than the prompt cutting and wrapping of chops and sausages for the customers. Calling him “surly” would be generous.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. He *was* somewhat conversational with the customers, and he was kind to Harriet and respectful to Mrs. Haufbrau, but with Melody he seemed not exactly critical, but certainly aloof.

“I’ll find a better place later,” Melody said now as she approached the meat counter. “I can’t be bothered right now.”

Cal shrugged and went on slicing the lamb loin laid out on the butcher’s block.

Typical. “You know, between you and Mrs. Haufbrau, I’m always seem to be doing something wrong. I’ve a mind to stay home and eat bonbons while you two run the shop!”

Cal tilted his head slightly and raised an eyebrow. “You shouldn’t let her get to you,” he said after a few moments and then tossed his hair back with a quick backward nod. “That’s what she wants.” He stared at her with those mysterious dark eyes, and for a second, she thought he was going to smile, so she preempted it with one of her own. But he *didn’t* smile; he went back to slicing.

“Why, Cal Fraiser,” she said lightly, “are you offering me advice? I didn’t think you cared.”

He went on slicing. “Just pointing out the obvious.”

“Well, she makes my blood boil!” Melody exclaimed, deciding that the moment between them, if there *had* been a moment, was gone. “How dare she tell me that the scarves and hats I bought won’t sell! She hasn’t even seen them all.”

“She’s right, though. They aren’t going to sell.” He wiped his hands on the blood-streaked towel hanging from his apron belt. “You’ve been away too long.”

Melody gritted her teeth. *Away too long?*  Was this to be her life now? Receiving lectures from the likes of Mrs. Haufbrau and Cal Fraiser, not to mention the occasional one from Mums? Just a few months ago she had been studying the Romantics—Shelley and Wordsworth and Byron! And now she had to worry about the price of boots or their inventory of candy bars or the . . . the disapproval of this . . . this *person*, who clearly believed himself superior to her. The unfairness of it nearly killed her.

“How’s Lyle?” she asked sweetly. “Feeling better?”

“You mean, when is he coming back?” Cal put his hands on his hips. “Soon, I hope.” He stared at her. “When are *you* going back to Chicago?”

Melody drew in a sharp breath. “Not soon enough,” she retorted and tried to march as regally as she could back to the front of the shop.

At least she had Harriet, Melody comforted herself as she took her place behind the counter, glancing at the young girl innocently straightening shelves. Yes, Melody decided, tightening her apron, Harriet was the only decent one among them, and she resolved there and then that she would reward her new friend by making her her protégée. Harriet would be well placed, romantically, that is, Melody vowed, before she returned to Chicago—hopefully in time for Mundelein’s Winter Ball in January. It would be her triumph, and she would leave the awful Cal and Mrs. Haufbrau to stew in their own Merriweather juices.