



UNRIVALED

a novel

SIRI MITCHELL



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SEPTEMBER 1910
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Soon, soon, soon. My thoughts kept tempo with the horses' hooves. It was all I could do not to stare as the carriage passed the sites of my beloved St. Louis: the brown brick Cave Ballroom; the tall Morgens Brothers Building with its deep bay windows; Ford Motor Company. And all the shoe and boot stores lining the district. If I looked out the other side of the carriage, I knew I would see the St. Louis Club.

An advertisement for Royal Taffy candy caught my attention. *Give the Queen of Your Heart a Royal Gift.* The brazen red of its oblong wrapper was echoed in the border of the poster. It was the third of its kind that I had seen on our journey down Olive Street. I wondered how many more of them had been put up around the city. And I wondered, too, why I hadn't seen any for my father's candy, Fancy Crunch.

The carriage lurched to a stop again. My, but there were

so many more automobiles on the streets than there had been when I'd left for Europe. And it had only been a little over a year! Such a bother they were.

And it was so hot! I'd forgotten about Missouri's humidity. Though it had been made in the new open style, my white silk collar was sticking to my neck, and I suspected my Denmark blue blouse-waist was already damp at the back. I shifted forward on the seat as the streetcars and automobiles sailed past us, reminding me of all the ships I had seen on the Mediterranean.

Awnings shaded shop windows while men and women hurried up and down the street. I noted how tall all the buildings were. Pride bloomed in my breast: Even Europe with all her splendors had nothing to rival my native city.

I had worried that I would find my home too dull and provincial, that it would be diminished by the grandeur of all the things I had seen and the places I had visited on the Continent. To the contrary! Dear, sweet home. I wanted to embrace it all, every piece of it. There were dozens of things I couldn't wait to do. And there were a hundred things I wanted to tell of: eating linzer torte in Austria; viewing glaciers in Switzerland; drinking coffee at the cafés in Italy.

Soon, soon, soon.

I'd voyaged halfway around the world, but this last journey from Union Station to my house was interminable.

Glancing down at the newspaper I'd twisted between my hands, I determined to at least look as if I were patiently waiting. It was a discarded copy of the *Chicago Tribune* someone had left on the train. A headline in bold type declared *Suspect in South Side Murder Arrested*. The article went on to explain beneath: *A twenty-two-year-old member of one of the South Side's notorious athletic clubs was arrested for the murder of Micky Callahan*. How gruesome! My eyes strayed from the

article to the face of the hardened criminal, which stared back at me with beady eyes. It was enough to make me shudder. I hoped they kept him in that jail for a very long time! I folded it up and laid my hands atop it.

Seated on the bench across from me, my aunt and uncle exchanged a glance. I'd grown used to such glances on the Continent. But more than that, I had grown used to their exchange of tender gestures. I could only hope that I would someday find myself in a marriage as loving as theirs.

Four blocks more.

Three blocks more.

Oh!—there it was. The gracefully curving, columned gate that guarded Vandeventer Place from the world outside it. I knew every twist of the metal flowers that scrolled up the ironwork. The carriage left off its jarring bounce as it glided onto the smooth granite flagstones that lined the threshold of the gate. My heart thrilled to hear the splash of the fountain beyond, and tears pricked my eyes at the sight of the statue that topped it. Leda and her swan. And—look! Old Mr. Carleton was still sitting in that same wicker chair on his porch, supervising the pruning of his roses. I could not help but grin and wave my handkerchief at him.

“Perhaps you should settle yourself more fully on the seat, my dear.” Though her words were corrective, my aunt smiled as she said them. She had often helped to guide my behavior while we were in Europe. But she was right. Perhaps I should sit back. I wouldn't want Father and Mother to think that my manners had suffered in Europe while I was gone.

I could not wait to see them!

Though . . . the thought of my father brought with it a pang of guilt. I'd been allowed to accompany my aunt and uncle on their tour in the hopes that it would turn me into a lady. A lady

didn't succumb to enthusiasms, and she didn't go about waving handkerchiefs, and most of all, she did not join her father in his business.

Not even when the best and happiest parts of her childhood had been spent with him by a stove, as they created new candies, anticipating the glorious success of his efforts.

How long we'd been waiting for that success.

But now I'd been to Europe. I'd seen her delights. And I had also tasted of her many sweets. In doing so, my resolve to join him in the business had only hardened, and I'd concocted a plan. I was going to share with him all that I had discovered. I'd collected labels from candy boxes and wrappers to paste into my scrapbook to show him. And I'd saved some samples for him as well. Perhaps that's what I would do first: Let him taste my treasures. And then I'd talk to him about adding a new line of candies to City Confectionery's offerings: Premium European Sweets. "How many new candies do you think Father created while I was gone?"

"Well . . ." My aunt's glance veered away from mine and a frown tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I don't know . . . but . . . Lucy, dear? There's something I think you should know." She looked again at my uncle.

There it was at the end of the street: my own dear house. The one Grandfather had built, with its gabled roofline and porticoed entry. It took all the strength I had to restrain myself from leaping out and dashing up the steps.

"Lucy!"

I wrenched my shoulders back and put up a hand to adjust my new straw picture hat. I felt the mound of white ostrich feathers atop it sway as I looked down and folded my gloved hands once more atop my lap. "Yes, Auntie?"

"There's something that . . . well . . ."

My uncle cleared his throat. "Something's happened to your father."



That last block took an eternity to travel. The coachman must have helped me down from the carriage because all of a sudden I was inside, back in my own front hall, and I was being enfolded in my mother's arms. "Papa—?"

"He's resting."

"Can I see him?"

"Not right now. Let him sleep. Perhaps tomorrow . . ."

I could see the old, familiar hallstand and smell the yeasty scent of Mrs. Hughes' dinner rolls. But I could neither hear my father's quick steps, nor was I enveloped by the warmth of his embrace. Though my palms had been sweating in my new kid gloves just a moment before, my hands were now as chill as ice. I gathered my skirt and put a foot to the front stair. "I would only look in on him. He wouldn't hear me; I wouldn't wake him."

My aunt put an arm to my shoulders and drew me away with her to the parlor. "Be assured your father's making progress. His condition is stable."

Why wasn't anyone doing anything? How could they be so calm? "But—what happened?"

"He had an attack. Of the heart."

I slipped from my aunt and accepted my mother's embrace once again. She ducked beneath the brim of my hat and kissed my cheek. "He hasn't grown any worse. And we must remember: It's only been three months."

Three months! But that meant . . . I thought back to where I had been in June. I'd been sketching the Bernese Alps and floating in a boat on Lake Thun in Switzerland. "Someone should have told me!"

Mother adjusted my hat. "We didn't want to worry you. And besides, there's nothing you could have done."

Aunt Margaret patted my arm and then took me by the hand and drew me further into the room.

I gasped in astonishment. It had been redone. Gone were the gleaming molasses-brown woodwork and the cherry-red wallpaper. The trim was now creamy white and the walls . . . they were the most peculiar shade of light green. It looked so . . . plain. And pale. "Why did you paint it?"

Mother blinked and glanced around the room. "I find it rather pretty. And painted trim doesn't have to be polished. It's saved so much time I was able to dismiss one of the maids."

She'd dismissed one of the maids? "Who?"

My aunt had continued speaking. "And don't you remember, Lucy? Just then we were in Interlaken. We would have had to go back into France and try to book passage. It would have been much too tedious to attempt."

They hadn't told me because it would have been an inconvenience?

She gave my arm a squeeze. "It would have spoiled the trip for you. It would have diverted your energies for no good purpose."

Spoiled the trip? Diverted my energies? For no good purpose? "I am not a child!" I blinked back the tears that had begun to blur my vision at the edges. "I am not a child, and I would have appreciated knowing."

"Come, now." Mother pulled me to the divan, and we sat upon it, springs protesting, as Mrs. Hughes came in with a tea tray. My mother poured, handing cups to my aunt and uncle and then to me. After she poured her own cup, she left it on the saucer. "Tell me about your trip. I've been longing to hear. Tell me everything."

My mother might have intended the words to be encourag-

ing, but they belied the anxiety in her eyes. I couldn't reconcile the mother I'd left behind with the woman who sat before me, with the gray that had spread like a stain through her hair or the disheveled apron she wore over her shirtwaist and skirt. She looked embattled, weary, and worn.

Aunt Margaret and Uncle Fred sat in matching armchairs across from us. Everyone was looking at me, as if they couldn't wait to hear what I would say, but all of the excitement and the joy of the trip had gone. How could I have toured countless art museums? How could I have laughed at the antics of the guignol puppets in the Tuileries Gardens? How could I have enjoyed myself at all when Papa's heart had failed him?

I took a sip of tea, then set the cup back down on its saucer. "I don't—I'm not quite sure . . . where to start . . ."

My aunt put her own teacup down and smiled, brow lifted, the way she had done when I had ordered squid in a restaurant in Athens. I hadn't known it would come with all those legs and tiny tentacles attached. "Perhaps I can begin and give you a chance to collect your thoughts."

Yes. That's what I needed. A chance to collect my thoughts.

She told Mother about Munich and Florence. And about the new mountain railway up the Jungfrau. And then they talked about when exactly she and Uncle would continue their journey on to their own home in Denver.

Aunt broke off suddenly and smiled at me. "You must be feeling tired, my dear, but why don't you tell your mother about our visit to the dressmaker's in Paris."

My mother.

Suddenly the whole trip seemed so misguided, so cruel. How had my mother felt when Father had his heart attack, knowing I was halfway across the world, traipsing around in blissful ignorance? What right had I had to enjoy myself while she was

here, facing my father's illness alone? "I'm sorry. I think—I'm going to need just one more moment." I rose and left the room. It took all my effort not to run from it. I went upstairs, one step at a time, never once breaking my pace.

In my room, I took off my hat. Not being able to find my hatpin holder, I pushed the pins back into the brim. I drew off my gloves, one at a time, folding them up just like the glover in Florence had shown me. And then I threw myself upon my bed and wept like the child I had just about managed to convince myself I no longer was.



“Charlie Clarke!” I could hear the jail guard banging his billy club against the bars of cell doors as he walked down the long hall. His footsteps echoed as they struck the floor.

I fisted my hand around a bar. “Here. I’m right here.” Least I was last time I checked: sitting in a cell on the South Side of Chicago. I wished I could say it wasn’t a familiar place.

The footsteps came to a halt as the guard peered through the bars at me. He fished a key from his pocket and fumbled with the lock. “You’re wanted.”

I already knew that. It’s why I’d been arrested. I’d been wanted for Micky Callahan’s murder, which is something I had taken no part in. But the cops didn’t care. I belonged to the same athletic club as Manny White, who *had* taken part in it, who had planned it even, and that was good enough for them. I knew they wouldn’t be able to prove I’d done it and eventually Manny would get me out. I just hadn’t figured it would be this soon.

I pulled my suspenders up over my shoulders and put my derby on. Taking up my coat, I pulled my rubber collar from the pocket and buttoned it into place.

The cop swung the door open and beat against it with his club. "You coming? Or would you rather stay?"

"I'm coming." Manny was particular as to grooming. It wouldn't do to show up with my collar undone. My shoes could use a shine, but hopefully he'd understand. After all, I'd done him a favor. I'd let myself get caught so he could escape.

I whistled "Bill Bailey" as I followed the cop. But my good cheer withered the moment the guard opened the door at the end of the hall. That's when I saw Honest Andy.

His enormous frame was folded into one of those wobbly jailhouse chairs, and he was staring across the long, scarred wooden table at me. He sent a glance beyond me to the guard. "I'll take care of him now, Gordy."

The guard nodded and left. I had half a mind to chase him down and beg him to put me back in the cell, but I was twenty-two and long past the age for begging. A flash of my dimpled smile usually got me what I wanted. That, or a well-placed fist.

Honest Andy gestured toward the chair that sat empty across the table from him.

"I'll stand."

"Suit yourself."

He was twenty years older than I was, but he was a good ten inches taller too. And he was built like a prizefighter. Which was what he'd been before he'd found religion. Now he talked softly and carried a big billy stick around with him as he walked the streets. Honest Andy was the one cop that Manny White couldn't buy.

He looked at me with eyes that seemed to peer down into my soul. "Care to tell me what happened?"

“No.” Manny had gone with some of the boys to Micky Callahan’s. They’d taken him out into an alley and beat on him, and then Manny jumped on him with his spiked boots. That’s when I’d come upon them. I’d been making my rounds, minding my own business, putting up advertisement posters for a prizefight when I’d cut through that alley. There was nothing I wanted to tell Honest Andy about a man who had died so terribly. It made me sick to even think about it. Sicker still to think I’d grown up with Micky.

Andy chewed on his mustache as he looked me over. Then he folded his hands atop the table. “You’re a fine boy, Charlie—”

“I’m not a boy anymore, Andy.”

“You’re better than this.”

“I am what I am.” I’d only joined the club because I had to. In order to do business on the South Side, you did whatever it took. If that meant paying a commission to Manny for the poster orders I took, then I figured it was just the cost of doing business. At least it guaranteed that what had happened to Micky wouldn’t happen to me.

“Your past is not as important as your future. Did you know that? Can’t change anything about what you’ve been, but you can change who you’ll become.”

I’d heard him say that before. Many times. Too many times. So many times that it set my teeth on edge to hear it.

“Did you know that God—”

“I can’t imagine God would want much to do with somebody like me.”

“Ah!” A gleam came into his eyes as he leaned forward. “But that’s where you’d be wrong. Even with all the things you’ve done, you’re just as worthy of His love as—”

“If all you came here for was to preach me a sermon, I’d rather go back and sit in that cell.”

He sighed. "Fine. But I need to tell you that your mother's worried about you."

He had to bring her up, hadn't he? "I do fine by her. I've never heard her complain."

"It's not that she doesn't appreciate what you've provided."

"I've kept a roof over her head, haven't I?" That's all I'd ever wanted to do. And I'd done it for all of us: my sisters, my mother, and me.

"I think it's more the how of it that pains her."

"Do you just want to rub my nose in it, Andy? Is that why you came?"

"I came because I'm tired of all of this. You don't belong here. So . . . I've signed for you. They've made me your ward."

What! "I'm long past the age of needing a ward." And I hardly needed *him* to vouch for me.

"Consider me a sort of interested party in your whereabouts, then."

"They're releasing me to you?"

"They are."

"Don't I have any say in it?" I couldn't imagine anything worse than being indebted to Andy.

"Sure. You can stay right here and break your mother's heart. Is that what you'd rather do?"

"No." My mother's heart had already been broken. Over and over again. Trust him to find my soft spot and then beat on it.

"Then if you'll agree to my conditions, I'll get you out."

"What conditions?"

He smiled. Then he clapped his cap on his head and stood. "The ones I'm going to tell you about after they release you. If we hurry, we can make it home to your place and join your mother for dinner. We'll talk about them there."



I couldn't say that home wasn't better than jail. But I could complain about the company. We'd been doing just fine, my mother and I, until Andy had set his cap for her. It might not have been so bad if she hadn't shared his feelings. She'd been tired and faded until Andy had happened along, and then she'd bloomed like a flower to his sun.

I had nothing against the man . . . except his habit of being in places where he didn't belong. And his other habit of making a note of things he shouldn't have.

"It's like this." He took my mother's hand in his as we sat together at the table.

She sent a glance his way as a blush colored her cheeks.

"I've become rather fond of your mother, son."

Son. I didn't like the sound of that. I'd gotten used to not having a father around, and I didn't see the point in getting one now. But it seemed my mother had become rather fond of Andy as well. In the interest of keeping peace—and staying out of jail—I put on my best smile. "I suppose I don't have to worry about your intentions."

"I'll tell you nothing but the truth: They're the most honorable kind."

I would have expected nothing less from him. He was one of Chicago's finest and most bothersome cops. Always ready to inquire about your business and never failing to interrupt anything he found that wasn't part of his.

"But there's something we want to talk to you about."

We?

Mother was nibbling at her lip.

The policeman cleared his throat.

I hoped he wasn't going to say what I thought he was. I can't say I hadn't been expecting him to propose marriage,

but I wasn't very happy about it. And that fact only made me more unhappy. But if my mother's happiness depended upon my blessing, then I would do everything I could to seem pleased. I smiled again, putting my dimples into it. "If you're asking can you marry her, you'll hear no objections from me." No one's idea of happy would have included us living on the slippery edge of poverty in a house that threatened to fall in on our heads. I'd had bigger plans—and dreams enough for all of us. Especially for me. But it took money to make something of yourself in the world, and money was the one thing we'd never had.

Mother blushed fiercely, but then she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "God bless you, Charlie. I hope he does. But that's not what we wanted to talk about."

Honest Andy cleared his throat again. "You know that I'm a policeman, son."

"Yes." Everyone knew he was a policeman, and I was tormented about it unmercifully every blessed day.

"I'm thinking that might make things a bit complicated."

I stopped smiling. "Complicated for you. Is that what you mean?"

"And for you as well."

I looked from my mother toward him as I considered his reply. I hadn't thought about it from that direction before, but I supposed it could. Andy couldn't be bought. And if he couldn't be bought, he might eventually suffer the consequences. If I were ever placed in a situation where I was asked to betray him . . . I looked over at my mother.

She looked me straight in the eye, something she usually avoided whenever I, or anyone else, brought up my membership in the club. "I'm grateful for all you've done for me, Charlie. I can't tell you I haven't appreciated the money you bring home,

the way you looked after your sisters, or the way you've kept this house in repair. But I think it's time now to consider . . ."

"Let's be honest, son. You need to find some different friends."

As a condition of my club membership, Manny had asked me to do a little business for him on the side. I was supposed to keep his old friends happy and help him make new ones. I was good at making friends. I was also good at collecting and delivering money. And spending a night or two in jail in order to keep the others out of it. No matter what most people thought, I had nothing to do with guns or breaking kneecaps. Manny had other people for that. "So . . . what are you asking me to do?" I wasn't in the habit of kidding myself. I knew I only had two talents: my easy manner and my winning smile. I didn't have any other skills. Besides poker. I also had an ear for ragtime, and I wasn't too shabby on the dance floor either. Which helped me make friends, which in turn helped with advertisement sales and with Manny's money collection and delivery.

"We're asking you to consider a different kind of work." Mother clutched Andy's hand. "I want you to make something of yourself, Charlie."

"Something respectable." Honest Andy leveled a look at me that let me know he'd seen more than I thought he had. "That's one of my conditions."

"You want me to . . . do what? Be . . . an office clerk?" I secretly envied all those honest men I regularly mocked. Those who sat in a chair for nine hours and then went home to supper with a clear conscience. I'd never found a way to be proud of Manny's methods of doing business. Personal opinion and public confession were two different things, though. I didn't thank either my mother or Andy for making me feel like some two-penny thug.

"I've taken the liberty of writing to your father, and it seems he has a position for you."

“You—wait—what?” My father? My father, who left us all when I was seven? My father, who walked away from his wife and all of his children? Who’d not only abandoned my mother but then let her suffer the shame of divorcing him as well?

He was a man who had dragged us from city to city, determined to make a success of whatever fool thing he happened to be selling at the time. We may not have had any bread or any milk when I was a boy, but we’d had shoelaces and watch fobs and bottles of hair tonic by the dozens.

I’d wanted to drop school, but Mother wouldn’t hear of it. She made sure I stayed . . . and I made sure that I left the school yard after class let out just as quickly as I could. I sold newspapers for a few years as a newsie, then I became a delivery boy for a printer. I had worked my way up to taking orders for advertising and pasting posters across the South Side for the customers.

My mother’s lips hardened. “Your father’s offered you a position.”

“Doing what? Selling pen wipes?”

“He’s done well for himself. He owns a company now. A whole factory.”

A company? He owned a whole company while we were still holding on to every penny we could find? “Good for him.”

Andy squeezed her hand. “And we want you to take him up on his offer. That’s the other of my conditions.”

“Where is it? Here?”

“It’s in St. Louis.” The blush had faded from Mother’s cheeks, and her blue eyes looked worn and sad again.

Andy leaned back in his chair. “It’s an opportunity I think you should take.”

Of course he’d think that. Then he could have my mother to himself. “Is it . . . in his factory?”

My mother shrugged. "It's a position. A respectable one . . . and you were always your father's son."

I'd spent my life hating my father, but I couldn't deny that my brown eyes and dark hair had nothing to do with her soft, blond beauty.

"You have a gift, Charlie. A rare and special gift. You move people; they respond to you. You can talk them into anything. But you should be using your gift to help others, not to harm them."

"I've never hurt anyone." Some of the others had done things that would make me ashamed to set foot in a church, but I never had. Not that I had time to waste sitting around in church pews.

"But have you ever helped anyone? Besides me? Anyone that was worth helping?"

There weren't a lot of choices on the South Side. I doubted I would ever be offered anything more respectable than the job my father was proposing. Even if it was factory work. "If I'm going to be working, at least I can do it honestly. Is that what you're after?"

She just watched me, eyes fastened on my face.

I shrugged, trying to not to care too much that they wanted to be rid of me. "Might as well give it a try. How bad could it be?"

She smiled, then put a hand to her mouth as tears sprung from her eyes. "Thank you."



I woke to the soft, gentle hand of my mother stroking my hair. I moved my arm from my eyes and turned so that I could see her. "Is he going to be all right?"

She stopped stroking for a moment. "I don't know. No one really knows."

"Why did it happen?"

She took her hand from my head and pressed it to her throat.

I sat up. "Mother?"

She sighed and shook her head. "It was the candy foolishness. He has so much talent. He could have used it to accomplish so much. He could have made . . . ointments. Or face creams. Or even pastries. Why couldn't he have gone into the bakery business?"

In spite of my mother's fondest wishes to the contrary, my father couldn't have done anything other than make candy. He wasn't suited for anything else. Royal Taffy, his ultimate triumph, had been his whole life . . . until the company and the right

to produce the candy had been taken from him. Though he'd started a new confectionery and created new candies, he'd never quite been able to match the success of Royal Taffy.

Mother reached out a hand and stopped my fingers from picking at the stitches on my *matelassé* cover.

"Standard started a new advertising promotion for Royal Taffy. You know how he flies into those rages."

I knew.

"The doctor says his heart just can't handle it anymore. He wants your father to make some changes."

"What changes?"

She didn't reply.

"Mother?"

She looked over at me. "We've been advised to sell the business."

"But—he can't!" How could my father sell the company? And what would he do without it?

She grasped my hand. "The most important thing for his recovery is that he stay calm. He can't do that if he's in the confectionery kitchen experimenting with candies, or if he's trying to figure out how to out-advertise Royal Taffy."

"But—"

"There's nothing to worry about. I've been speaking with a lawyer."

"A lawyer!" City Confectionery wasn't a company; it was our life. And even if our Fancy Crunch couldn't outsell Royal Taffy, there was always hope that one day Papa could create a candy that would. I didn't understand how he could just let it all go. As I looked at Mama, a suspicion crept over me. She no longer seemed so old and tired. She looked devious and conniving. "You haven't told him, have you!"

She looked at me with such great disappointment that I almost blushed. "There's really no need. If he knew—"

"If he knew, he would never let you! It's not your company, it's his."

As she stood, her lips compressed into a thin, straight line. "It might as well be mine. It was my own father's money that started the company, and it's this house I grew up in that's borne the brunt of all your father's schemes." I watched her look sadly about the room and realized that half of my bedroom suite was gone. The pitcher and basin that used to sit on my washstand were now perched on my dresser. And the large French beveled mirror that had once hung above them was nowhere to be seen. My eyes began to register other changes as I peered through the afternoon light that had filtered in through the lace curtains. "My rug!" And my silk upholstered chair.

Her shoulders dipped. "I sold it."

"But—!"

"And it's not just this house, Lucy. It's my—my *own* dreams that have been sacrificed to those candies, along with his. If I'd known just how far he would go in his pigheadedness . . ."

"Some people call his pigheadedness passion."

"Not those with any business sense."

I couldn't blame her. Not really. She wasn't a Kendall; she was a Clary. She didn't understand candy like my father and I did. At least that's what Papa had always whispered to me through the sugar-scented steam that lifted from our copper pots. She'd come from a family of bankers and merchants. So when Papa had fought with his accounts clerk over raising the price of Royal Taffy and when he'd insisted on treating his workers like family, my mother had told him he was being a fool. She'd urged him to leave the candy business altogether and go into another profession; I suspected she'd been hoping he would join her father at the bank.

Mother had always wanted Papa to be something other than what he was, Papa had always wanted more than what he'd had,

and I'd always wanted to be something I never could. I didn't want to be a daughter. I wanted to be a partner in the business.

I wanted to make candy in the confectionery alongside my father. But my mother insisted that the kitchen was no place for a lady, and my father forbid me even to enter the confectionery's doors once I'd graduated from high school. "*Child's play is well and good for children, but candy making is a serious business,*" he'd become quite fond of saying.

None of us had gotten what we'd wanted. The Kendall family, it seemed, was doomed to failure. "Is there a buyer?"

"I have one in mind. And I hope to conclude the sale well before Christmas."

I looked toward the window. I'd longed for my room as we'd traveled about Europe like gypsies. I'd missed the familiar squeak of my bedsprings and the passion flowers that twined across my papered walls. The comforting smells of lemon soap . . . and even the slight odor of camphor, left over from my grandfather's time when he had used the room just down the hall. But now that I was here, I could hardly bear it. "Do we have to sell?"

"Since your father got sick, the company's been losing money. I thought we could manage until he got well, but . . . I don't know what else to do now. Your father isn't able to do much of anything anymore."

The image of the Royal Taffy advertisement unfurled, like a medieval battle standard, in my mind. Mother was right: If Father had been able, he wouldn't have let those posters sit unanswered. He would have pasted one of his own up beside them. "I could manage things."

"Lucy, no!" She seemed as shocked as Papa had been when I told him I had planned on joining him in the confectionery kitchen following graduation.

"I can." As I said it, my heart thrilled to the challenge. It

was the chance I'd been looking for! I could prove to Papa that he was wrong. That, given the opportunity, a girl could be a help to a business rather than a hindrance. "I brought back so many candies from Europe. If you give me a few weeks, I'm sure I can come up with something divine! Something no one has ever tasted before."

"Your father would never—"

"What he doesn't know won't worry him. And what if I succeed?" I *would* succeed. All I needed was a chance.

"No."

"Please!"

"No. I won't discuss this further. And in any case, I came up here to tell you something." She took an envelope from my dresser top and presented it to me with a flourish. "You've been named the Queen of the Veiled Prophet Ball!"

How could she think of balls at a time like this?

"It wouldn't do for a member of the court to take part in commerce. It's your debutante year, Lucy." She grimaced. "It's actually a year behind your debutante year. The rest of your friends have come out already, and most of them have married. Perhaps this has been fated all along, your coming out into society at a time when your father and I need you. A good marriage would help us all."

Marriage? I hadn't realized I had recoiled from her until she sought my hand and said, "I'm only trying to think of your future."

"And I'm trying to think of all of our futures. If you would just let me—"

"The business needs to be sold." She spoke the words slowly as if I hadn't understood them the first time.

"I can't believe you'd just give it up without—without even trying to save it! That's not what Father would want."

“Your father has done exactly as he wants for years now, and all it’s given him is a heart attack. Isn’t it about time we tried something else? Found some other way to manage?”

I pushed from my bed and stalked to the door. “I’m going to tell him. I’m going to tell him exactly what it is you’re trying to do.”

Something flashed in her eyes. Fear? Guilt? “Don’t.”

“If you give me a chance to save the company, if you give me time to create a new candy, then I won’t.”

She gave me a long, steady look, then seemed to deflate before my eyes. “Fine. I’ll give you one month. But promise me one thing: You *must* take part in the Veiled Prophet Ball. And you have to put your heart into it, Lucy. It’s an opportunity you can’t afford to miss.”

I thought it over for a moment before nodding. If I could come up with a new candy, then the ball would be the perfect place to introduce it. Standard Candy Manufacturing would never be able to top that. “I wouldn’t think of missing it.”



The next morning I was permitted to see my father.

He was awake when my mother ushered me through the door, though the curtains were still drawn against the day.

“Lucy. My Sugar Plum.” His skin was ashen, his eyes were sunken. Even his voice seemed somehow diminished. I had been alarmed when I had been told of his heart problems. Now I was truly frightened.

“Papa.” I had come home, hoping to mend the rift I’d made between us. Hoping to prove to him my worth. Now I was afraid even to touch him, for fear of causing more harm.

He reached an arm out toward me. “You’ve come home. At last.”

I'd never seen him in his nightshirt before. It made him seem . . . different. Weakened. Less. "I have." I stood at his bedside, hands clasped in front of me.

"Sit down. Stay awhile. Did you bring me any candy?"

Mother helped him to a sitting position, plumped his pillows, and then eased him back onto them. "No candy. Doctor's orders."

"Have you ever considered that just one little piece might give me the strength I need to recover? You can't make a Fancy without the crunch." He tried to smile at me.

Mother pulled a handkerchief from her cuff and dabbed at the sweat that had broken out upon his forehead. "It's not worth getting upset about."

"There's got to be something worth getting upset about. Something more than the lukewarm soup and dry bread you keep forcing me eat."

Mother smoothed his hair back from his forehead and left the room. But not before giving me a stern glance of warning.

"She refuses to let me eat butter either. Or cream." He winced for a moment, and then his features relaxed. "Tell me about your travels."

"They were nice."

He raised a brow. "Nice? You went halfway around the world, and the only thing you have to say is that it was nice?"

I felt my lips curl into a smile. I hadn't realized until then that I'd been holding my breath. "It was so . . . amazing. So different. And there were so many things to do and to see."

I told him about the ballrooms of Vienna and the cathedrals of France. I described how it felt to stand on the Jungfrau and see the world spread out at my feet. I told him about eating mussels and eels and snails.

"And they were all so delicious! But they were nothing compared to all the sweets. It seemed there were at least a dozen

confectionaries in every village. I can't count the number of candies I tasted. In Florence, there was even a—"

A raspy snore lifted from the bed.

"Papa?" I could see now that he had fallen asleep, chin resting on his chest.

I rearranged the blanket, pushed his head back onto the pillows, and left him to his dreams. Then I went down the hall to my room and unpacked all my candy treasures, plucking one of my favorites, a Salzburg *Mozartkugel*, from the pile. I peeled away the foil wrapper and bit into it, admiring the multitude of layers hidden beneath the dark chocolate coating. How had they managed to make it so perfectly round? My tongue separated and identified the flavors: pistachio, marzipan, and chocolate. My mouth exulted in the contrasting textures. Creamy and crunchy, chewy with just the right amount of graininess. I sighed as the last of it melted away and wondered if there would ever be anyone to share candy with again.

I reached into the trunk and brought out the gifts I'd collected. The lace tablecloth for Mother. A Bavarian pipe for Papa. And an assortment of embroidered pillow tops and lace doilies for my girlfriends. Really, I ought to transfer them to my hope chest and store them properly, wrapping them in paper instead of my underclothes.

I asked a maid to bring up some old newspapers, and then I wandered downstairs, looking for Mother. I found her in the sitting room she used as an office, talking to my aunt. They looked up as I entered. "I'd like to go see Annie Farrell. I bought something for her on the trip."

Aunt Margaret excused herself. "I'll go see what your uncle is doing."

"Annie Farrell . . . ?" Mother's brow creased. "Oh! Annie Wagner. She married while you were gone."

"She . . . what? But whom? Whom did she marry?"

"Roy Wagner."

"Who is Roy Wagner? I don't think I—"

"He's a third cousin. On her mother's side, from Kansas City. They moved there last spring."

I gave a quick gasp. "Away? From here?"

"Well, of course! His business wasn't here. It was out there."

Annie was gone? I'd never gotten the chance to say good-bye. "Is there . . . anyone else? Who got married?"

"Oh my, yes! Harriett Marcus did. And Julia Shaw." She paused as if debating with herself about something. When she spoke, it was in a whisper. "Julia . . . eloped."

The horror! I groped for the chair and sat in it, feeling rather disoriented. Annie and Julia had been my closest friends. They'd married—eloped, even!—and I hadn't known it. "Did anyone *not* get married?" Wasn't there anyone who was still like me?

"Cora Taylor went away to college. To Vassar . . . or was it Swarthmore? I can never keep them straight. And Stella Lawrence went off to the Orient to be a missionary, if you can believe it. I don't know what's gotten into young girls these days."

Suddenly, St. Louis felt dismal and friendless.

The maid presented herself and passed me the stack of newspapers I'd asked for. That dreadful murderer glared out at me from the top page. I turned it over so I wouldn't have to look at him.

"I'm sure Harriett Marcus would be happy to see you, although she's Harriett Patterson now. She's at-home for calls on Tuesday afternoons."

I didn't want to call on her, I wanted to *see* her. To go up to her room and dance while we listened to phonograph records. I didn't want to sit in some strange parlor and talk about . . . whatever married people talked about. "Whom did she marry?"

“She married Archie Patterson.” Mother said it with a bend to her brow as if daring me to disapprove.

I’d never liked Archie Patterson. And now Harriett was living with him in some new house, taking calls on Tuesdays, and . . . sitting with him at church on Sundays! All of my girlfriends were gone.

“But Winnie Compton is still here. And she’s not married.” Mother reached across the table and patted my hand. “We can post your gift to Annie in Kansas City. I’m sure she’d love to hear from you.”

She’d probably forgotten all about me . . . the same way I’d forgotten about her. I thought I’d returned to a city that was just the same, but everything had changed while I was gone.