



LOVE IN
A NOVEL
DISGUISE

CAROL COX



1

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
DECEMBER 1881

O happy dagger! This is thy sheath.” Ellie Moore gripped her hands together as she mouthed the well-known line from the last act of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The words floated out into the dark chasm beyond the edge of the footlights, and an expectant hush filled the theater, followed by a collective gasp at the moment she plunged her fists toward her abdomen and threw her head back with an agonized grimace.

“There rust, and let me die.” Ellie let her head fall to one side and held her pose, silent as the grave, while the Capulets and Montagues reconciled, and the prince delivered the final line.

Not until the roar of applause swept through the auditorium of Chicago’s Orpheum Theater did she stir again, ready for the curtain call. Ellie waited for the proper moment, then swept one foot behind her and sank into a low curtsey, spreading her arms wide. Her right hand brushed against the back of the red velvet curtain that screened her from the stage.

“Here now. Don’t you dare set that curtain to moving.”

Startled by the abrupt hiss behind her, Ellie jerked her head around and met the fierce gaze of Harold Stiller, the theater manager.

At the same moment, the actors began to file off the stage. Roland Lockwood, the troupe’s Montague, bumped against Ellie’s outstretched hand. Arms flailing wildly, Ellie floundered to regain her balance, but to no avail. With a muffled thump, she plopped into an ungainly heap on the wooden floor.

Burt Ragland, one of the stagehands, pushed past, his lip curled in obvious disdain. “That wouldn’t have happened if you spent your time tending to your own job instead of pretending you’re some kind of star.”

Ellie scrambled to her feet, brushing dust from the hem of her skirt and trying to ignore the snickers from the other stagehands who’d gathered nearby.

“At least I intend to make something of myself,” she snapped. “You’ll be stuck here long after I’m gone.” She lifted her chin when she heard the grunts of indignation from the group. *Ha! That rocked them back on their heels, all right. And good riddance.*

Noting the cleaner area on the floor that marked the spot where she’d made her undignified landing, Ellie swiped at the back of her skirt. “I’ll think of you all, languishing here in this dusty hole, when I’m sipping tea in London.”

Outright guffaws met her statement. Ellie gave up on trying to swat the dust from her backside, finding it too difficult to twist herself into a pretzel shape and maintain her haughty air at the same time.

Let them say what they wanted. It didn’t matter anymore. Before the night was over, she would be gone from their midst

and on her way to England. There, in the homeland of the Bard himself, she should find many who would appreciate her acting skills, gleaned from years of observation in the theater. Finally people would look past her drab exterior and see the raw talent that lay beneath. All she needed was a chance—just one! Then she would show them all.

While the other actors dispersed to their dressing rooms, one of the crew opened the house curtain one last time, so Magdalena Cole, Queen of the American Stage, could address the audience.

Her voice filtered back into the wings. “Thank you all for being here. Every performance is special to me, but tonight has a significance all its own.”

Ellie glared at Burt and the others while Magdalena continued with the pretty speech she and Ellie had worked out the night before.

“This marks my last performance in your fair city, and not only in Chicago, but in this great land of ours.” Magdalena paused to let the murmur of surprise die down before she went on. “Tonight I leave for New York, there to board a ship that will carry me away to share my art with the audiences of Europe.”

“Don’t make out that you’re any better than us,” Burt growled. “The only reason you get to go is because you’re that woman’s toady.”

Ellie sucked in her breath. “That’s *personal wardrobe mistress*—thank you very much.”

“Good night, my friends, and God bless you, each and every one.” Magdalena glided off the stage to thunderous applause, carrying a bouquet of deep red roses in the crook of one arm. She thrust the flowers at Ellie as she walked by. “Put these in water,” she ordered, then gave a quick laugh.

“What am I thinking? I won’t be here tomorrow to enjoy them, so it doesn’t matter what you do with them. Throw them away, if you want.” She continued down the hallway without breaking stride.

Burt snorted. “Sounds more like *personal dogsbody* to me.”

Ellie tossed the bouquet into a nearby trash barrel and followed in Magdalena’s wake, not deigning to give Burt the satisfaction of a reply. She closed the dressing room door, shutting out the post-show flurry.

“Hurry.” Magdalena’s eyes shone like a child’s on Christmas morning. “We haven’t time to waste.” She spun around so Ellie could unfasten the hooks on the back of her costume. “Arturo will be here any moment. Is everything packed?” Magdalena slipped out of the Juliet gown with practiced ease.

“It’s all ready.” Ellie draped the costume over the back of a nearby chair and reached for Magdalena’s new traveling outfit. She slid the stylish dress over the actress’s head and upraised arms and fastened the row of jet-black buttons that ran from neck to hem. Then she stood back to study the effect.

“Well?” Magdalena pivoted slowly. Even in their present rush, she could find time to pause for an accolade.

Ellie reached out to adjust the rounded collar, then nodded. “It’s perfect. That cobalt blue matches your eyes exactly. Your couturier outdid himself this time.”

“And well he should have. I paid dearly for those new gowns. Even though I’m planning to acquire a whole new wardrobe once we reach London, I could hardly begin my grand European tour dressed like a second-rate bit player, could I? First impressions are so important.”

Ellie folded the Juliet gown with care and placed it on top

of the other clothing in the costume hamper. She lowered the lid, pressed it down with both hands, and then finally sat on it in order to fasten the latches.

“There now, we’re all set. Your new dresses are in the two large trunks, along with your other personal effects. Costumes, wigs, and makeup are here in the hamper. We’re ready to leave as soon as Mr. Benelli arrives.”

Magdalena cleared her throat. “Ellie, there’s something I—” A knock at the door cut her off. She leaned back against the dressing table and struck a pose, then nodded at Ellie. “It must be Arturo. Let him in.”

Ellie opened the door to find a small contingent of theater workers gathered there. Harold Stiller stood in front of the group.

“We’ve come to say good-bye.” He pushed past Ellie and walked over to Magdalena, who abandoned her dramatic stance the moment she recognized her visitors. “On behalf of all of us at the Orpheum, I want to wish you a safe journey to England and a dazzling career in the theaters of Europe. We will always treasure the memory that we, in some small measure, played a part in your success.”

Magdalena’s lips tightened, then curved into an expression that would look like gracious acknowledgment to anyone who didn’t know her as well as Ellie did. It was obvious to her that the actress had no intention of giving credit for her success to anyone but herself while she stood on the threshold of her greatest triumph.

Their triumph, Ellie corrected herself. How many times had she heard Magdalena say she didn’t know what she would do without Ellie’s help?

“Thank you for coming to say farewell.” Magdalena’s tone held a note of dismissal, but Stiller didn’t take the hint. He

leaned against the chair as if settling in for a long conversation, ignoring the glitter in the actress's eyes that would have warned a more observant person of a pending eruption likely to rival that of Mount Vesuvius.

Ellie moved between them, ready to intervene, but was interrupted by a commotion at the door.

"Magdalena, my darling." A stout man in a cashmere overcoat swept through the doorway, followed by three workmen. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting, *cara mia*. I had to brave the snow and ice to find the draymen and bring them inside." Arturo Benelli, the famed impresario who would be orchestrating the next step in Magdalena's career, took her hand and kissed it reverently. Then he straightened and clasped her fingers in his. "Your performance tonight was glorious, *magnifico!* Are you ready to take Europe by storm?"

A girlish laugh—the one she'd used when she played Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*—gurgled from Magdalena's lips. "More ready than you can imagine, Arturo."

"Ah, *perfetto*. Our train awaits." Benelli lifted Magdalena's cloak from its hook and draped it around her shoulders, then wheeled around and snapped his fingers.

The workmen stepped forward, and their leader asked, "Which of these things do we take?"

Ellie cleared her throat. "Those two large trunks and that wicker hamper belong to Miss Cole." She pointed to each item in turn. "The smaller trunk over there is mine." She indicated the battered case that held her own belongings.

Benelli arched one eyebrow and turned to Magdalena. "You haven't told her?"

Magdalena swung around to face Ellie, all trace of Hero gone. She cleared her throat, and Ellie felt her stomach constrict.

“We’ve had some wonderful years together, haven’t we?” Magdalena murmured with a sweet smile.

Ellie nodded dumbly, knowing in her heart that something dreadful was about to happen but unable to fathom what it might be.

“You’ve served me well as I’ve risen in my profession, but now my career is taking a new turn. Arturo has come into my life, ready to lead me to even greater heights. And new opportunities often require us to make some changes.” The actress’s eyes welled with tears, as they did whenever she wanted to show heartfelt emotion.

“Enough.” Benelli’s eyes, so adoring when he gazed at Magdalena, held no warmth when he turned to look at Ellie. “What Magdalena is trying to say is that I have promised her the very best of everything on her tour of the great theaters—including the finest wardrobe designers and makeup artists Europe can offer. In short, everything provided for her will be of the highest quality, par excellence—meaning she won’t need you.”

Ellie’s mouth dropped open.

Benelli snapped his fingers again, this time at the man lifting Ellie’s small trunk. “Put that down. It won’t be going.”

“But . . .” Ellie shifted her gaze back to Magdalena, looking for some sign that his words had all been a cruel joke. But the actress’s face held no hint of teasing, only impatience, and perhaps a trace of guilt.

“But I’m the one who takes care of you. Who else knows the way you like things done? Your favorite hairstyles, the way you want your pillow fluffed. And what about—” Ellie’s voice quavered, and she choked back a sob. She couldn’t break down and disgrace herself—not here, in front of an audience of sneering co-workers.

She drew a deep breath, cleared her throat, and tried again. “You can’t be serious. You *need* me.” This time the words came out with more assurance. Ellie lifted her chin and stared straight at Magdalena, willing her to refute Benelli’s outrageous statement and vindicate Ellie before them all.

Instead, the actress turned to her left and placed her hand in the crook of Benelli’s arm. “Let’s be on our way.” She smiled up at him, excitement shimmering in her eyes. “Europe awaits!”

Together, they exited the dressing room and turned left, toward the stage door. The draymen followed, bearing Magdalena’s heavy trunks and the costume hamper.

Ellie shouldered her way through the knot of people lingering near the doorway and stood in the hall, watching Magdalena go. *This must be a nightmare.* It had to be.

“Wait. I’ve changed my mind.” Magdalena stopped half-way down the hall and turned back.

Ellie’s heart soared, and joyful tears pricked at her eyes. She should have known Magdalena couldn’t go through with it. She took a step forward, ready to forgive.

Magdalena pointed to the man carrying the enormous costume hamper. “Take that back. I’ve no need for those things anymore.” She raised her voice a notch and called back to Ellie. “Why don’t you keep them? They can serve as a lovely memento of our time together.”

The drayman returned and set the hamper in front of Ellie, then trailed along at the end of the retinue.

In the distance, Ellie heard the stage door close, signaling Magdalena’s final exit from the Orpheum . . . and her life.

A half-suppressed snigger pulled her attention back to the grinning stagehands. Even Stiller wore a lopsided smile.

Ellie drew herself up and glared at them all. “Don’t you have work to do?”

Burt Ragland leaned against the doorjamb. “We do. But you don’t.” The smug look on his face made Ellie want to rip his hair out.

“Of course I do.”

“And what would that be?” Burt asked. “Pourin’ yourself a cup of tea so’s you can pretend you’re living it up in London? Looks to me like the reason for all your snootiness just walked out the door.”

Ellie bent to grip the handle at one end of the hamper and tugged it back into the dressing room, bumping Burt out of the way as she passed. “Nonsense. I have years of experience as the personal assistant to one of the leading actresses of our day. I’ll have no trouble securing another job. And now, I’ll thank you all to go about your business and leave me to tend to mine.” She moved to close the door, but Stiller blocked her way.

“Not so fast. This dressing room is no longer your domain, not that it was ever *yours* to begin with. Now that Miss Cole is gone . . .” Even though he didn’t finish the sentence, his grim demeanor left no doubt as to his meaning.



2

PICKFORD, ARIZONA TERRITORY
DECEMBER 1881

Moonlight cast distorted shadows across the silent landscape near the Constitution Mine. Steven Pierce edged along the south wall of the board-and-batten office building, stepping gingerly so as not to advertise his presence.

Ducking into a pool of shadow, Steven paused to listen for any sign that his approach was being watched. Satisfied that he'd made the trip from his own digs unobserved, he ghosted his way to the door and slipped inside.

Four fellow mine owners looked up at his entrance, their grim expressions barely visible in the feeble glow of a single lantern. A blanket hung over the lone window, cutting out the light from the moon.

Steven made his way, more by feel than by sight, to one of the wooden ladder-back chairs set in a rough circle in the center of the plank floor. "Any word yet?" he asked the others.

Tom Sullivan, owner of the Constitution, shook his head. "Not yet. We're still waiting for Ezra."

Steven closed his eyes for a few moments and let them adjust to the darkness. A quick glance around the room told him the others weren't in the mood for conversation, so he folded his arms, settled back in his chair, and waited.

The silence dragged on, stretching his nerves to the breaking point. He tried to make the time pass more quickly by studying his companions. Tom Sullivan, Brady Andrews, Alfred Clay, and Gilbert Owens—all of them older than Steven by a decade or more. Did their years of experience give them greater perspective, and more patience as a result?

A sudden scraping outside brought everyone to the edge of their seats. Steven smothered a quick grin at this evidence that the others were every bit as jumpy as he. The door swung open, and the group let out a collective sigh of relief when Ezra Winslow, owner of the Jubilee, entered the room. A blast of night air swirled in with him and set the lantern flame dancing.

“Bar the door,” Tom ordered.

Ezra complied, then rubbed his hands together. “It’s as cold as the North Pole out there.”

Steven bit back another smile at the general murmur of agreement. The night air might seem cold to men who had spent years in the arid Southwest, but compared to the near-arctic chill he’d grown used to at Princeton University, southern Arizona’s winter temperatures felt more balmy than frigid.

Ezra took the chair next to Steven’s and sat in silence.

Brady Andrews and Alfred Clay exchanged glances, and then Alfred leaned forward. “Well? Don’t keep us in suspense. Did they make it through this time?”

Ezra shook his head. “Nope.” The single word dropped from his lips like a chunk of ore tossed into a mining car.

“What!” Gilbert Owens of the Blue Jacket Mine sprang to his feet and loomed over Ezra. “Don’t sit there like a clam, man. Open your mouth and tell us what happened.”

Ezra wiped his hand across his mouth, then waved Gilbert back to his seat. “I ain’t tryin’ to hold anything back. I’m just so bumfuzzled myself, I can barely make heads or tails of it.”

Brady pulled a silver flask from his pocket and held it out to Ezra, who accepted it with a grateful nod and took a swig before handing it back.

“Okay, here’s what happened. Like we agreed, I was riding half a mile behind Huddleston, off to the side of the road, where I wasn’t likely to be spotted. When Huddleston started out in his wagon, he looked for all the world like he was just makin’ one of his regular trips to Tucson for supplies. There was nothing to let anyone know we’d loaded the silver onto his wagon and covered it up with a pile of feedbags.”

He cast a longing look at the flask, but Brady shook his head. “You’ve had enough to help you get the story out. Keep talking.”

“We were going through that rolling area a few miles this side of Benson, and I lost sight of Huddleston and his team behind one of the hills. Then I heard shootin’. My first thought was Apaches, so I spurred my horse and headed for the fray. When I topped the hill, I saw Huddleston lying on the ground and a group of riders makin’ tracks in the other direction.”

Tom’s face grew stern. “Did they kill him?”

“No, but it wasn’t for lack of tryin’. He’d lost a fair amount of blood, so I loaded him onto the wagon and took him on into Benson. The doc there says he ought to pull through, if infection doesn’t set in. I waited around long enough to hear that, then hightailed it back here.”

“And the silver?” Gilbert asked.

“Gone. Every last bit. As fast as they moved off, they must have split it between them so they could travel light.”

Alfred slammed his fist against the arm of his chair.

Gilbert moaned and buried his face in his hands.

Brady uncapped his flask.

Steven felt as though he’d just stepped off a cliff into thin air. He clenched his fists and struggled to keep his face impassive. He’d sunk every bit of his capital into his mining venture, against his father’s strongly worded advice. And now it appeared his father’s dire predictions of failure were about to be fulfilled. After a series of robberies, sending the silver out of Pickford camouflaged in a rancher’s wagon had been the group’s last resort. If they didn’t figure out how to stop the rash of thefts—and soon—he would be done for.

“Now what?” Gilbert’s question pulled Steven’s attention back to the moment at hand.

Alfred shot to his feet so quickly his chair toppled over. He paced the narrow room, pounding his fist into his palm with every step. “What else is there? When we sent the silver out on the stage, they held it up. When we hired extra men and shipped it in our own wagons, they picked off our guards. And now this.”

“It’s a terrible state of affairs.” Tom looked as though he’d aged ten years since Ezra’s pronouncement. “How are they doing it? How could anyone possibly have guessed the silver was in Huddleston’s wagon?”

“They didn’t guess. They *knew!*” Alfred’s voice rose to a roar. “How’s the word getting out? That’s what I want to know. Who’s giving us away?”

“I don’t know, boys, but I think we’ve hit a dead end.” Ezra slumped in his chair, the picture of defeat. “If we could call in the law, this would be a good time to do it.”

Brady took a swig from his flask. "We all know that's a bad idea. I don't trust Marshal Bascomb any farther than I could throw him. I guess we could contact Sheriff Behan over in Tombstone, or maybe the Earps."

Alfred snorted. "That'd be like asking the fox to guard the henhouse."

"Nobody's actually proven they were involved in any stage robberies," Gilbert countered. "So far, it's all been a lot of talk."

"That's an awful lot of smoke if there isn't any fire," Ezra grumbled. "I ain't willin' to trust any of that lot."

"Then where does that leave us?" Tom's gaze measured each of the mine owners in turn. "Are you saying we're all done for?"

"Not me," Steven said with a sudden rush of conviction. "I'm not ready to roll over and die yet." He looked around, willing the others to join him in making a stand.

No one jumped up to lend support. Driven by the defeat he saw in their faces, Steven breathed a silent prayer and pressed his point home. "Let's look at this logically. Tom and Alfred are on the right track. How do these thieves know what we're doing? Where are they getting their information? Those are the questions that need answering."

Alfred slapped his hat against his thigh, and a cloud of dust motes spiraled in the lamplight. "That's what I've been askin' myself for weeks. We've got a rat in our midst, and when I find out who's been giving us away, I know exactly what I'm going to do. There's only one way to deal with a rat."

Brady rocked his chair back on its rear legs and pursed his lips. "I'm all for finding out who's leaking information and then plugging up the hole. I want to keep the Lucky Lucy working just as much as the rest of you want your mines to

make a profit. But how do we keep these coyotes from stealing us blind?”

“I agree.” Tom got to his feet and ran his fingers through his silvery hair. “We can’t keep making shipments, only to have them stolen right out from under our noses. Why don’t we stockpile it in one of the unused drifts in my mine until we can ferret out who’s behind all this and it’s safe to try again?”

“That makes sense,” Brady said.

After a short pause, Steven nodded in agreement, and then Ezra, but Alfred and Gilbert did not.

“I think it’s best we each take care of our own stockpiling. But I need to get a shipment through soon,” Gilbert said. “It isn’t just myself I’m concerned about. I have a dozen men, some with families, depending on me for their pay, so we can’t take too long to break this open. I’m just a few steps away from going belly up.”

“You aren’t the only one,” Steven reminded him. “All of us are in the same boat.”

“But what can we do?” Brady leaned forward, thumping the front legs of his chair against the wooden floor. “This is the craziest situation I ever heard of. We can’t find a way to protect the silver ourselves, and we can’t trust the law to do it for us. What else is there?”

Silence settled over the group as the men looked at each other in the dim light.

Alfred shrugged his coat higher on his shoulders and stomped to the door. “We’re wasting our time here. If I knew who to shoot, I’d take ’em out before the night’s over, but that’s just it—we *don’t* know. What I do know is I can’t go on like this. I’ve had an offer from a fellow back east.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked down at the floor. “I’ve been holding him off up to now, because

the Busted Shovel's worth ten times what he's willing to pay. But if hanging on means losing my shirt, I'm ready to call it quits. At least I'll have enough to grubstake me so I can start over again someplace else."

"Wait a minute." Gilbert's voice stopped Alfred with his hand on the door latch. "What about the Pinkertons?"

The name of the famous detective agency lit a spark of hope in Steven. From the flicker of interest that rippled around the room, he could see it affected the others the same way.

Ezra stared at Gilbert as though he'd suggested asking for help from the president of the United States. "You think they'd send someone clear out here?"

"Why not?" Brady countered. "They've made a name for themselves tracking down train robbers and the like."

The reminder fanned Steven's spark of hope into a blaze. "That's right. They have quite a reputation to uphold. If they take this case on, they'll dig like a terrier going after a nest of rats. If anyone can put a stop to this thievery, they're the ones."

Alfred stepped away from the door, his expression doubtful. "They'd want to be paid, too. Have you thought about what it would cost?"

Gilbert snorted. "It couldn't be more than we've already lost to these bandits."

"What do you think?" Steven asked. "We'll split the cost. Are we all in agreement?"

Gilbert nodded first, then Brady. After a moment's pause, Tom and Ezra murmured assent.

Steven glanced toward the door. "What about you, Alfred?"

The sullen man narrowed his eyes, then shrugged. "I think we'll find ourselves throwin' good money after bad, but I'll go along with it—for a time at least."

Tom rubbed his hands together. "So how do we go about getting in touch with them? Should we send a wire?"

"No," Brady objected. "There's too many ears listening in up and down the line. We can't afford to show our hand, not when this is our last chance. We need to play this one close to the vest."

"A letter, then," Gilbert suggested. "Who's going to write it? We need to make it real convincing."

Ezra grinned and shook his head. "I'm no good at puttin' words to paper. I'll pass."

Brady pointed across the circle. "Steven, you're the college man. You do it."

Steven glanced at the other members of the group and saw no dissent. "All right. I'd be glad to, if Tom will let me borrow a pen and some paper. What do we want to say?"

Thirty minutes later, he handed around a draft ready for the assembled miners to read.

"Looks good to me." Gilbert picked up the pen and signed his name with a flourish. "Who's next?"

One by one, the others added their names to the letter. Ezra stood back and admired his signature on the page. "This is a pretty impressive moment, fellows. Makes me think of those boys who lined up to sign the Declaration of Independence."

"Just be glad it isn't a temperance pledge." Brady chuckled as he wrote his name below Ezra's.

Tom put his hand on Steven's shoulder. "Make sure you don't let anyone else see this. We don't want word to spread around town."

Steven folded the sheet of paper with care and tucked it into his coat pocket. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Patting his coat to indicate the letter was secure, he headed back to his horse, feeling the first glimmer of optimism he'd

experienced since the rash of thefts began. If only this plan would work. He could picture it now—the Pinkertons swooping into town, ferreting out the gang of thieves, and setting him and the others back on the road to prosperity.

With an effort, he forced himself to tamp down his excitement. They had only taken the first step toward calling in the Pinkertons. They might still have a long road to travel before the problem was resolved . . . assuming everything went according to plan. But Steven knew better than to count on everything going smoothly. He'd learned long ago that things could go wrong even in the best of times.



3

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
JANUARY 1882

It was the worst of times. Ellie bent her head and leaned into the bone-chilling wind that blasted along the Chicago streets like a train roaring through a tunnel. She forged ahead, trying to shake off the disappointment of another fruitless interview.

No one, it seemed, wanted to hire a former wardrobe mistress as a secretary or office worker. Her trial stint as a clerk at Marshall Field and Company had lasted only a day—less, actually. Somehow she had managed to alienate four regular customers before her shift was half over. From the way the department manager ranted at her, she must have set some sort of record.

Perhaps she ought to give in and look for a position as a lady's maid. That certainly wasn't what she had expected to be doing at the start of the new year. Only a few weeks ago she'd been dreaming of leisurely walks along the Seine and strolling the sun-drenched streets of Rome, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Her career in the theater, the only life she'd ever known, had come to an untimely end. Harold Stiller and the other workers at the Orpheum had seen to that. The world of the theater was a tight-knit community, one small enough that negative word got around quickly, especially when aided by a few strategically placed whispers.

Turning at the next corner, Ellie pulled the edges of her cloak more tightly around her and trudged onward. She had to find some means of earning a living, and soon. Her meager savings would be depleted in a matter of days, and then what? She had nothing to sell to raise more funds, unless she could find someone to buy the cast-off wardrobe Magdalena left behind. Even so, Ellie doubted those items would bring in enough to last her more than a few weeks, at best.

Only half a mile to go before she got back to her rented room. Ellie eyed the leaden sky and hoped the snow it promised would hold off until she could reach shelter. The street, normally teeming with pedestrians, was empty save for herself and two men walking ahead of her.

She plodded on for another block, then two. The men stopped, obstructing the sidewalk. Ellie skirted around them, careful not to step off the curb into the slushy buildup left by the previous day's storm.

"I tell you," the taller of the pair said as she passed, "if we don't find another woman to send along, we're sunk."

Ellie's steps slowed, and she stopped a few paces beyond the men, making a show of adjusting the ties on her cloak. Darting a glance behind her, she saw the shorter man shake his head.

"It's a tough spot, all right, but where are we going to find another female operative? All the others already have assignments."

The tall man flexed his right elbow and winced. “So what options do we have? Refuse to take on the job? The boss wants to use women, and I don’t want to be the one to tell him no.”

His companion stamped his feet and tugged the collar of his coat farther up around his neck. “I’m not going to risk sending a woman out to Arizona on her own, no matter what he says. To be honest, I’m not sure that’s any place for women—no matter how many of them there are. Using female operatives in this case is a bad idea.”

“Then let’s get in out of the cold, and *you* can tell him.”

“Not me. Last time I locked horns with the man, it took hours to sort things out, and I have tickets to the new play opening tonight at the Orpheum.”

Without further discussion, the pair brushed past Ellie without a second glance. She followed them toward a building farther down the block and tried to sort out what she’d just overheard.

Arizona! Who wouldn’t jump at the chance of leaving Chicago’s bleak winter behind for the promise of open skies and bright sunshine? If a job awaited in a warmer clime, she would be willing to tackle it, no matter how menial it might be.

Ellie hurried to the doorway the men had entered, pausing when she noted the sign painted on the window: *Pinkerton National Detective Agency*.

Detectives! Her spirits rose even more. Maybe she would have her grand adventure, after all.

She stepped back a moment to straighten her cloak and pat her windblown hair into place, gauging her chances of winning the job.

Granted, she had no investigative training, but what she had learned through her eavesdropping made it obvious that experienced investigators were in short supply. A job as—what

had the man called it?—an operative would surely call for intelligence and courage. Fine, she had those in abundance. And after years spent in the theater, her skills at observation had been honed to a fine edge. Surely that gave her plenty to offer. Squaring her shoulders, she marched into the building.

She spotted the men on the far side of the large, open room, but a heavy oak desk blocked access to them. The gimlet-eyed secretary manning the desk looked up when Ellie entered. “May I help you?”

“I’m here to apply for the job.” She projected her voice as she’d seen Magdalena do so many times. Sure enough, both men jerked their heads around at her statement.

“What did you say, young lady?” The taller man, slender and with a shock of gray hair, approached the secretary’s desk.

“I overheard you talking in the street. It’s a happy circumstance for us both.” Ellie put as much confidence as she could into the words. She lifted her chin and looked him straight in the eye, trying to appear intelligent and courageous.

He looked her up and down, then stuck out his hand. “I’m James Fleming. Why don’t you come back here so we can talk privately?”

Ellie followed him, not missing the secretary’s audible sniff when she passed the desk. She put the implied slight out of her mind. It didn’t matter whether the secretary approved or not. She wasn’t the one doing the hiring.

“This is Ambrose Gates,” Mr. Fleming said, beckoning to his partner. Fleming led them down a hallway to an office in the rear and pulled out a wooden chair for Ellie before seating himself behind the cluttered desk. Gates set another chair beside the desk, where he had a clear view of Ellie.

Fleming gave her an appraising stare. “You’ve certainly managed to catch our notice, Miss . . .”

“Moore. Elizabeth Moore,” Ellie supplied. “As I said, I overheard your conversation outside. It seems you’re in need of a woman to fill a position, and I’m here to take you up on it.”

Gates gave a muffled cough and wiped one hand across his mouth. With a quick glance at Fleming, he said, “That’s a very enterprising attitude, Miss Moore. We admire your spirit, but you don’t have any idea what this job entails.”

Ellie sat up straighter. “Not the particulars, perhaps, but I read the sign on the window, and everybody knows what the Pinkertons do. You’re the greatest detectives in the world.”

Fleming planted his elbows on his desk and tented his fingers. “And what makes you think you’d be qualified for this line of work?”

“Well . . . to begin with, I’m a woman.” Ellie hoped her little quip would lighten the mood, but neither man so much as cracked a smile. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I’m resourceful, for one thing. I’m able to think on my feet. And I’m very observant.”

Gates nodded. “I’d have to agree. You obviously have a talent for eavesdropping.”

Ellie felt her smile begin to slip and anchored it firmly in place. “Isn’t that an asset for a Pinkerton agent?”

One corner of Fleming’s mouth twitched. “That may be true, but there are other considerations, as well. In different circumstances we might be able to consider you, but not this time, I’m afraid.”

Ellie had watched enough auditions to know when a rejection was imminent. Her stomach roiled. They couldn’t turn her down flat. “But you said you need someone to fill this position, and I’m willing to go to Arizona, or wherever you want to send me. I’ll grant you I have no experience, but

how many trained women detectives do you expect to show up at your door?"

Gates leaned forward, and his expression softened. "I'm sorry. It's nothing personal. You simply don't have the look we need."

Ellie pressed her lips together. So it wasn't only the theater that insisted on casting beauties in leading roles. "I see. I'm not glamorous enough for the part."

Fleming folded his arms. "That isn't the case at all. Mr. Pinkerton has determined that we should send a two-woman team, one younger and one middle-aged. We already have the younger woman. What we're looking for now is an older woman, someone who could pose as her aunt, a well-to-do widow." He smiled as he spread his hands wide and rose to his feet. "Obviously, that leaves you out." He ushered Ellie to the front of the building and bid her good day.

Outside, the sky had darkened, and snow swirled along the sidewalk, creating a bleak setting that matched Ellie's mood perfectly. She wasn't good enough to accompany Magdalena to Europe. She wasn't good enough for any job opening she could find. Was she good enough for anything?

She shivered and set off again, hoping to reach her room before daylight faded completely. Tears spilled, and she dashed them away before they froze on her cheeks.

She'd been so close. Both Fleming and Gates had been impressed by her spunk, even though they hadn't admitted it. And while she didn't know the first thing about questioning suspects or gathering evidence, the roles they discussed sounded like playing a part in a play. It would have been fun to have that connection between the life she knew so well and that of an operative.

And to relocate to a place that was warm. Ellie raised her

hand to wipe away another spate of tears. Here she was, perfectly fit and ready to go, and the detectives themselves said they were in dire need of help. Why couldn't they have adjusted the role to fit her?

Her stomach rumbled, and she pressed her hand against it, trying to think how she would assuage her hunger once she got home. Playing detective in Arizona would have been an adventure, but she had more pressing reasons for wanting the job—things like being able to afford a roof over her head. And food, she thought, when her stomach protested again.

One more block to go, and she would be home. Music spilled out of one of the nearby saloons, and Ellie crossed to the opposite side of the street. A clatter of feet caught her attention, and Ellie looked up to see a young woman about her age staggering across the road. The girl's threadbare cape evidently did little to ward off the cold, for the fingers that clutched it tight around her neck were blue, as was the skin around her brightly painted lips. While Ellie watched, the other girl made her way into the saloon.

Ellie shuddered, from more than the cold this time. What drove anyone to a life as one of Chicago's scarlet women? Being reduced to selling one's body surely required circumstances of extreme desperation. Being destitute, perhaps, or left alone in the world without family or friends to help.

Circumstances very like her own, in fact. Ellie's steps faltered. Would she find herself faced with the same decision that other women made? And what would her choice be, if it came to that?

She would starve first.

And that might very well be her only option, she realized, when she got back to her room and counted the money she had left. If she held on to every penny, she would have enough

to pay for another week's rent. But that wouldn't allow for buying any food.

The choice between starvation and degradation might be closer than she thought.

She slumped onto the edge of her narrow bed and buried her face in her hands. There had to be some way to bring in money without dishonoring herself. Once again, she thought of selling some of Magdalena's cast-off clothing. A seamstress might be willing to pay for a dress that was already completed and only needed fitting to a customer. It might garner only a pittance, but a pittance could be enough to make all the difference in keeping body and soul together.

She flung herself on her knees beside the costume hamper and sent up a quick prayer. If God was listening, maybe He'd feel sorry enough for her to grant this one request.

Ellie fumbled with the latches and threw back the hamper lid. Lifting the Juliet gown from the top, she set it aside on the bed. A period piece, it wouldn't be of value to anyone outside the theater. She dug farther down into the pile of clothing and theatrical accoutrements and pulled out the dark gray dress Magdalena had worn in a recent production.

Ellie held it up, wishing the room's solitary oil lamp offered better light. Yes, it would do. With its simple lines, a dressmaker would find it easy to make slight alterations and add some trim to make it a truly elegant creation.

Encouraged, she reached into the trunk again and drew her hand back with a squeal when her fingers encountered something that felt like fur. Ellie picked up one of her boots and used it to push away the clothes surrounding the unnerving object, then let out a relieved laugh when she realized it wasn't some sort of vermin after all, but one of Magdalena's wigs.

She picked up the wig and shook it gently, watching the

gray strands settle into place. The memory of Magdalena's pique at playing an older woman brought a chuckle, but the reviews of her performance had been stellar.

As Ellie bent to lay the wig on the bed beside the Juliet gown, a thought seized her, and her hand froze. With her heart racing, she lifted the wig again and held it above the dark gray dress. Together, they brought to mind a respectable older woman. One who might be a widow, judging from the somber color of the dress. One perfectly suited for a woman accompanying her young niece to Arizona.

Ellie rummaged through the costume hamper again, scattering its contents hither and yon until she found the thing she sought: the makeup case she had used to help transform Magdalena into a wide variety of characters.

She held the case on her lap and closed her eyes, taking stock of the things she had at hand and envisioning the task ahead. Satisfied, she nodded and got to her feet, ready to begin.

If Magdalena could play an older woman, so could she.

A decorative graphic in the top left corner consisting of light gray, swirling lines and leaf-like shapes that curve downwards and to the right.

4

God hath given you one face and you make yourself another.”

The line from *Hamlet* brought a grin to Ellie’s face, and she immediately toned it down to a more sedate smile. A quick glance in a storefront plate-glass window reassured her of what her mirror had told her earlier—not only had she created a new face, but she’d done a good job of it, too.

Would it be good enough?

Ellie pushed open the heavy door of the Pinkerton Agency, wincing slightly as the pebble she’d placed in her boot pressed into her heel. Heeding the reminder to alter her gait, she limped toward the oak desk.

The same secretary she’d faced the day before glanced up. “May I help you?”

Ellie pressed her gloved hands together and rounded her shoulders even more. “I . . . I . . .” She put a hand to her throat, pretending to adjust the rows of ruching at her neckline. After all the time she’d spent hovering in the wings, she never thought stage fright would overwhelm her. On the other hand, a quavering voice suited her new character.

She cleared her throat and forced herself to go on. "I'd like to speak with Mr. Fleming. Is he in?"

The other woman studied Ellie briefly, then nodded. "I'll see if he's available. Your name, please?"

"Mrs. Oliver Stewart." With a shy smile, she added, "Lavinia."

"And your visit is in reference to . . . ?"

Ellie pulled a lace-edged handkerchief from her left sleeve and dabbed at her cheek. "It's of a rather personal nature, I'm afraid."

The secretary bobbed her head. "Of course. I'll ask him if he can see you now." She disappeared down a hallway.

Ellie drew in a ragged breath and used the moment of respite to gather her courage. One hurdle had been cleared—the secretary showed no sign of recognition. Now the real test was about to begin.

A moment later, the secretary returned and ushered Ellie back to the same office she'd visited the day before.

Mr. Fleming rose from his chair and rounded the desk to greet her. "Come in, madam." He had replaced the wooden chair Ellie used earlier with a more comfortable padded one. "Please be seated."

He waited until Ellie settled herself, which took several moments. The cloth strips she'd wrapped around her legs to help mimic the stiff joints of an older woman worked admirably—almost too well. When she finally arranged herself, Fleming returned to his chair on the other side of the desk and gave her an encouraging smile. "Now, Mrs. Stewart, how can I help you?"

"Actually, I believe it is I who may be able to help you."

Two quick blinks gave the only indication of Fleming's surprise. "Indeed? Go on."

“My late husband, God rest his soul, made a number of investments that returned even more than he hoped.”

Fleming picked up a pencil and made a quick note on the pad before him.

“As a result, I find myself with the resources to embark on a little adventure.”

“Mm-hm.” Fleming nodded and began twirling the pencil between his fingers.

Ellie sensed she might be losing her audience. Dropping the background story, she leaned forward and rapped the desk with her knuckles. “I intend to visit the West, Mr. Fleming! Its vast expanse has always called to me like a siren song, and now I have the means to fulfill my dream.”

She studied his reaction and decided to play a trump card. Covering her mouth with her handkerchief, she gave a delicate cough. “Besides, my doctor says the dry climate should prove beneficial to my health.”

Fleming set the pencil aside. “Yes, I see. But, my dear woman, while I sympathize with your aspirations to travel, and I offer my hopes for your health’s improvement, I don’t quite grasp the reason for your visit. What does all this have to do with the Pinkerton Agency?”

Ellie brushed a strand of gray hair away from her forehead and put on her—or rather, Lavinia’s—most beguiling expression. “It is my understanding that you need someone to assist you in an investigation. In Arizona, I believe?”

Fleming’s jaw tightened. “How do you come by this information?”

Ellie folded her hands in her lap and peered at him over her gold-rimmed spectacles. “A good operative is able to pick up information in an unobtrusive way.”

Fleming’s face held the same look of bewilderment Ellie

had seen on Roland Lockwood's the night a fledgling actor went up on his lines in the first act of *The Tempest*, thrusting Lockwood into a scene much later in the play. "Madam, are you telling me you are a detective?"

"In the short time we have been talking, I've deduced that the need for a suitable operative has been weighing on you heavily." Glancing at his right arm, Ellie added, "And the bursitis in your right elbow has been acting up lately."

Fleming gaped at her in silence, then shoved his chair back with a clatter and hurried to the door. Leaning out into the hallway, he shouted, "Gates! Come here for a moment!"

When the shorter man arrived, Fleming indicated Ellie with a nod of his head. "This is Mrs. Stewart. She appeared in my office a few minutes ago with a most unusual proposition. She's interested in working with us on that Arizona matter."

"Indeed." Gates stroked his chin as he eyed Ellie from head to toe. "I have to admit she fits the type we're looking for." His eyes narrowed. "Who sent her to us?"

"I have no idea. She said she heard we were looking for someone and thought she might be able to help."

Tired of being talked about as though she weren't even in the room, Ellie cleared her throat to remind them of her presence.

Ignoring her attempt, Gates walked around her chair, inspecting Ellie as though she were nothing more than a mannequin on display. When he completed his circuit, he took a wide stance directly in front of her. "May I be frank, Mrs. Stewart?"

"Please do." Ellie's heart pounded so hard she could barely squeeze out the words.

"You look the part, and you seem like a very nice lady, but

appearances aren't everything. This job requires a certain degree of toughness, and you seem far too delicate to—”

Enough. Ellie sprang to her feet. Alerted by his odd look at her sudden display of sprightliness, she pulled herself into character and glared at Gates through her spectacles. “I think you place entirely too much stock in appearances.”

He clamped his mouth shut and glowered at her.

Seeing her last opportunity for survival ready to slip away, Ellie drew upon every ounce of resolve she possessed and addressed both men. “What you need is someone with the inner resources to gather the information you’re after. Am I right?”

Gates clasped his hands behind his back and glanced at his partner.

Fleming took in a quick breath. “My enthusiasm may have been a bit precipitous. I’m afraid my associate has a point. It’s obvious you have an interest in the job, and quite possibly the will to get it done. However . . .” He paused, as if hoping Ellie would take the hint and spare him having to explain her dismissal in painfully blunt terms. When she remained silent, he shot a look of appeal at Gates.

“What Mr. Fleming is trying to say is, this enterprise requires a high degree of stamina. You may have the will to get the job done, but will and stamina are not the same thing.”

He was going to say no. Ellie racked her brain for some compelling argument, but all she could come up with was, “Did you enjoy your evening at the theater last night, Mr. Gates?”

Gates’s mouth snapped shut like a trap, then fell open again. “Wh-what did you say?”

“I’m sure Roland Lockwood gave his usual brilliant performance, but what did you think of the new female lead? Did she measure up to Magdalena Cole’s standard?” Ellie

tilted her head and smiled up at him, though her legs were trembling so hard she could barely stand.

Gates shook his head as if trying to decide whether her questions were intended to distract him or merely the ramblings of an aging woman. “Whether or not you saw me at the theater last night is of no importance, madam. And it’s hardly germane to the issue at hand. What matters here is—”

“—whether or not I possess the skills needed for this assignment. For your information, I was nowhere near the Orpheum last night.”

“Then how could you possibly know . . .” Gates looked at Fleming, who smiled and shrugged.

“She knew about my bursitis, as well.”

The two fell silent. Finally Gates drew in a slow breath and murmured, “She really is exactly what we’ve been looking for.”

Spotting a chink in their armor, Ellie forged ahead. “Let me get this straight, gentlemen. You want someone who looks like me and possesses my intuitive ability but has the strength and stamina of a much younger woman. Is that correct?”

Fleming and Gates exchanged glances. Gates had the grace to look mildly embarrassed when he spoke. “I suppose it sounds unreasonable, but that’s what the job demands.”

“So what you’re looking for is a robust young woman with an older woman’s exterior. Just how likely do you think you are to find that combination?”

Gates smothered a smile. “I have to admit, it does sound rather ludicrous when you put it that way.”

“Then it seems to me you’ve created quite a predicament for yourselves. Tell me one thing: have you interviewed any other candidates besides me and the young woman you spoke to yesterday?”

Fleming straightened as though someone had shoved a ramrod down the back of his suit coat. His face brightened. "So she's the one who told you about the position."

"In a manner of speaking." Ellie rose and pulled her shoulders back into her usual upright posture. With a theatrical flourish, she took off her spectacles and removed the wax plumpers she'd placed between her cheeks and her gums. Speaking in her normal tone, she said, "Gentlemen, that young woman and I are one and the same."

Fleming and Gates froze in place, like actors in a tableau.

"Good heavens!" Fleming raised a pair of pince-nez to his eyes and peered at her closely.

Gates reached out as if to touch Ellie's padded waist, then snatched his arm back against his side. His Adam's apple bobbed against the knot in his narrow bow tie. "I've been in the field a good many years, but I never would have believed this if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

Fleming tugged at Gates's sleeve, and the two men edged toward the far end of the office, where they began conversing in hushed tones.

Gates stared up at Fleming. "You aren't seriously recommending we hire her?"

"Think about it. If she can fool us . . ."

"Even so, she's untrained, untested. Using her could prove to be a complete disaster."

"Or a stroke of genius." Fleming looked at Ellie over Gates's shoulder. "After seeing that transformation, I'm inclined to believe the latter."

"Hoodwinking us for a matter of minutes is a far cry from carrying out a long-term masquerade."

"Granted, but remember, we wouldn't be sending her out there on her own."

Gates responded with a grunt.

Fleming sighed, and they moved back toward the desk, where Ellie stood, barely able to breathe.

Fleming gestured toward her chair. "Please sit down, Mrs. . . . Miss . . . What *is* your name, anyway?"

Ellie unlocked her knees and lowered herself onto the padded seat as quickly as her cloth-wrapped limbs would permit. "My name is Elizabeth Moore, as I told you yesterday." She allowed a smile to play across her lips.

A deep furrow ran from between Gates's eyebrows to his hairline. "Young woman, this isn't a game."

"No, it isn't." Ellie snapped back to attention, chiding herself for her lapse when her goal hadn't yet been reached. "You need the help, and I need the work. So what is your answer, gentlemen?"

Gates eyed her steadily. "Are you a believer, Miss Moore?"

The question caught Ellie off guard. "A believer in . . . ?"

"Are you a follower of Christ?"

Ellie's mind whirled. What reason did he have for asking such a question? She had no way of knowing, but judging from his searching gaze, getting the job—or not—might hinge on her response. Lifting her chin, she forced herself to look him in the eye. "Of course."

It wasn't a lie—not really. She had believed . . . at one time. And she did own a Bible, handed down from her grandmother. She'd even read some of the underlined verses. Surely that counted for something.

Ellie's heart sank when she saw a flicker of concern darken Gates's face.

"In that case, you need to be aware that the job of an undercover operative, by its very nature, involves deception. As a believer, you may find that hard to live with."

“That won’t be a problem.” The glib reply brought a sharp glance from Gates, so Ellie hastened to add, “I mean, I’ll approach it strictly as playing a role. Lavinia Stewart will be the one doing the deceiving, not I.”

Gates turned away and rubbed the back of his neck. “If you want my opinion, it’s a bad idea. We’re crazy if we go ahead with this.”

Fleming nodded slowly. “I see your point. I agree that we may be crazy if we do . . . but I’m certain that we’re fools if we don’t. I’m willing to take full responsibility if Pinkerton has any misgivings.”

A broad smile spread across his face, and he held out his hand. “Welcome aboard, Miss Moore.”