

All Through the House
by
Amie Denman

Chapter One

Dozens of fictional characters had perished on the stage twenty-five feet below Maggie's trembling body. Romeo and Juliet, The Wicked Witch, and even Tony from West Side Story. Death was part of life in the theater.

"No way am I dying over this," Maggie said, her voice quivering. "Come here, cat."

Stretched full length on the metal catwalk suspended above the State Theater's historic stage, Maggie inched toward the gray cat that had won the hearts of the theater staff—until he'd made his way up to the catwalk and taken up yowling from that precipitous height. However he'd gotten up there, he couldn't or wouldn't get back down. And he wasn't suffering in silence. The plaintive howls echoed throughout the theater and set everyone on edge, especially with the packed schedule coming in with the holiday season. And Maggie had heard quite enough from the cat and everyone else.

"There's a school group coming in, Shakespeare," Maggie said, trying to coax the fluffy cat closer with a feather duster and a length of red velvet ribbon she'd taken from her costume shop. "If you sit up here and bellow, that's the only thing the kids will remember from their third-grade local history field trip."

The cat cocked an ear and crept closer. "That's how kids operate," Maggie said in a singsong voice. "They remember all the things you wish they didn't and few of the ones you want them to." Noting that she had the cat's interest, Maggie went on. "Just this morning, my daughter Faith found a spider behind the toilet. That's the kind of glamorous life I lead. And that's probably what she'll think about all day instead of the sweet goodbye kiss from her grandma Gigi who may not be around much longer to make her favorite pasta and tell her stories about being an actress."

Shakespeare let out a yowl which ended on a yawn and then he reached out a paw to touch the velvet ribbon. His eyes drooped and he yawned again.

"I'm sorry I'm boring you with my life story," Maggie said. "But you can play a part in the theater, too. You can either be the adorable stage cat curled up in the front row, or you can be a ghostly voice echoing throughout the theater and scaring the children who will never want to see a live production in their lives because of your hideous caterwauling causing a deep-seated childhood fear that theaters are haunted by ghost cats."

Shakespeare crept closer and grabbed the ribbon between his paws. Maggie froze in place and debated whether she should seize the cat and run for the steep metal staircase or persuade the cat to follow the moving ribbon as she slowly backed up. They'd waited three days already, hoping Shakespeare would find his way down without human assistance. The stage crew had tried grabbing the cat, but he'd evaded them. Carl, the theater's gray-haired maintenance man, had sacrificed a frozen fish he'd caught the previous summer in an attempt to lure the cat.

Nothing had worked.

Despite the way her stomach twisted at the thought of heights, Maggie had appointed herself rescuer, choosing to save the stranded animal and also salvage the incoming field trip. If the state theater had a future, it was with the next generations, especially with the old guard—people her grandmother's age—moving toward the great stage in the sky.

As she pondered her move, Shakespeare strolled past her, snatched the ribbon in his teeth, and trotted toward the steep stairs that ended in a ladder. She was afraid to look down, but she hoped there was someone on the stage or in the wings. It was early, though.

“Cat on the move,” she yelled. “Can anybody get ready to catch him if he falls off the ladder and—”

Maggie heard an *oof* and risked a glance down. The sight of the stage far below made her breath catch in her chest, but through the metal bars of the catwalk, she saw a dark-haired man below. Even from a height that made her hands damp, she could see that the man was a stranger and he wore a very expensive suit.

It was also clear that he’d been in the right place at the right time and had caught a large gray cat. Was he a dad chaperoning the school group that wasn’t due for at least an hour? Perhaps Carl or her assistant April had let the man into the theater.

“You can put him down before he covers you in fur,” Maggie called down to him. Certainly the man could have figured that out for himself, but Maggie didn’t want to take chances. “I have a lint roller in the costume shop if you need one,” she added, knowing from experience with Shakespeare that the finely suited man was definitely going to need one.

As she inched along the catwalk, clinging with both hands, Maggie saw the stranger put down the cat and then cast his glance up to her.

“What are you doing up there?” he asked.

“Trying not to die,” she said. Maggie made it to the ladderlike steps and dried her hands on her pants before gripping the railings and then striking out tentatively with one foot. “Is my foot on the step? I’m afraid to look.”

“Yes,” the man said.

Maggie swung her other leg down and steeled herself for the descent. She had to give the stranger credit. He kept his place below her as if he was willing to catch her as he had the cat.

“Don’t worry,” Maggie said.

“I..wasn’t,” the man said.

“I won’t fall,” she continued, more for herself than the stranger.

The man below didn’t comment as Maggie backed down the ladder and she wondered if he’d left the stage. When her foot struck something solid instead of another rung, the stranger broke his silence.

“You’re on the floor,” he said. Maybe it was her own relief, but Maggie was pretty certain she heard a tinge of relief in his voice, too. Did he care if she joined the list of famous death scenes on that stage, or was he just glad she wasn’t going to fall on him as Shakespeare had?

Maggie dusted off her hands. The cat yowling she and the other theater employees had endured for several days had fallen blissfully silent. Once again, she could hear the faint creak of the boards beneath her feet, a murmur of voices from the green room and rehearsal spaces, and distant sounds of the historic theater waking up on a Monday morning.

“Is he your cat?” the man asked.

“He’s everyone’s cat. He moved into the theater about a month ago and he’s chosen to live here even though April’s allergic to cats.”

“April?”

“My assistant in the costume shop. She loves cats but can’t be around them because they just get her all sneezy and weepy.”

“I see,” the man said.

“Anyway, we’re sort of glad Shakespeare has moved in because he’s certainly put on weight in the last month which means he’s probably solving our mouse problem.”

Was she talking too much? It was the curse of growing up in a theatrical family, even though she had no interest in stepping foot on stage. Her life was behind the scenes creating costumes on her dressmaker’s dummy that were, themselves, stars of the show, if she did say so herself. Hadn’t the local paper said her *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* costumes from the previous July had been just like a dream?

Fabric—yards of it from the gossamer to the heavy tapestries, along with ribbon, trim, buttons and bustles—never let her down. She could shape them any way she wanted and create something incredible with her own two hands. Only her beautiful daughter Faith rivaled the pride she felt in the elegant gowns and elaborate stage costumes she’d been making for over ten years.

“You have a mouse problem?” the man asked, drawing her attention back to the fact that she was chatting up a stranger onstage. His suit was well-made. A fine navy blue, clearly tailored to fit him. The white shirt underneath had a high thread count with buttons that shone with a mellow gleam that bespoke their quality. There was nothing worse than cheap buttons on a nice piece of clothing, in her opinion. And his tie. One hundred percent silk. She could tell that without even touching it.

Not that she was considering touching a perfect stranger. She glanced up at his face. He really was perfect in appearance. If he wasn’t a stage actor, he certainly should be. Even film. His strong jaw and dark eyes would shine in a closeup.

She shrugged in answer to his question, reminding herself that she was the costume lady and not the welcoming committee or a desperate woman throwing herself at attractive strangers. “It’s an old building. Don’t all old buildings have chinks in the armor that let in some uninvited guests?”

“I don’t—” he began.

“Not that we’re infested or anything,” Maggie added hastily. If the guy was there with a traveling group, she certainly didn’t want to discourage him from coming back again. The theater needed every shred of its income to keep going. And it had to keep going. Where would she be without her work? The traveling shows, the local shows on a continual cycle, the dance groups, the Shoreline Symphony—all of those combined kept the theater’s doors open, even if they didn’t fund some necessities like new lighting in the parking lot and luxuries like a restoration of the two massive chandeliers.

“That’s good to hear,” the man said.

“I’m Maggie. Maggie Canterbury. Chief costume designer and seamstress for The Shoreline State Theater.”

“I’m Alex,” he said.

Maggie waited, her head turned as if to hear the rest of the sentence that should be coming. Generally, introducing oneself and adding description inspired the other party to do the same, Maggie thought. Alex *who* and *why* was he standing on the stage of her beloved theater in his beautiful, tailored suit?

Instead of answering, he plucked a piece of cat fur off his sleeve and set it free. It danced under the stage lights for a moment and then drifted off on a current of November air that had probably made its way in through an open door. Maggie shivered, but it was just the drafty old theater, nothing more.

She wasn’t disconcerted by a man just because he was a stranger and wearing a suit that cost as much as the new tires she’d promised herself she’d get before the snow flew. Maggie

made a mental note to scrape the cash from the bottom of her checking account. She couldn't drive her daughter and grandmother around in an Ohio winter on bald tires. They counted on her.

"What else do I need to know about this place?" he asked.

He still hadn't explained what he was doing there. Maybe she should alert someone. The theater's business manager, Earl Johns, should be in his office. He was technically the manager in absence of the owner who they never saw, and Earl trusted the theater's staff. The theater sort of ran itself thanks to longstanding devoted people like Maggie, Carl, April, and others.

"Nothing much," she said. "The usual theater stuff."

"What is the usual theater stuff?" he asked.

"Don't you know?"

"Pretend I don't," he said.

Maggie looked him over, trying to decide if he was serious. He looked serious, but it could just be the bespoke suit and the stage lighting. Anyone would look serious under those circumstances. She was certain she didn't, though. Not in her red velvet pants, felt clogs she'd sewn sequins onto, and hoodie from a Broadway play. She didn't have to dress in fine clothing to be taken seriously because people knew her work. What was Alex's work? Perhaps he was more a theater patron and financial backer than an actor or director.

"Of course we have the ghost," she said. "A hideously disfigured one from a stage accident fifty years ago. He refuses to leave the building and show his face in the light."

"Really?" Alex asked.

Maggie laughed. "No. I stole that from a famous story."

"Oh," Alex said. He rocked back on his heels. "No ghosts then."

"I didn't say we didn't have ghosts."

That got his attention. Maggie was only half-lying. It was an old building that had seen a lot of passion come and go. "Any old building contains the spirit of things past," she said. And the State Theater had a long past. Her grandmother had piles of scrapbooks and her friend Dahlia maintained and contributed to an archive of photographs. It was the theater's history, but it was Maggie's family history, too.

"And cats and chinks in the armor?" Alex asked.

"Especially those. But the State Theater is basically your typical community theater with an amazing pool of local talent, incredible costume shop, and a way above average pit orchestra thanks to the local symphony."

"Good to know," he said.

Maggie waited for him to ask specific questions, but she didn't have all morning. Carl needed a morning coffee to warm up his aging bones, and there was a production of *West Side Story* the coming weekend that was costume intensive.

"Well, Alex," she said. "I'm sure you must have important things to do, so I'll just be on my way to my costume shop."

"Should we put the ladder up so no one tries to get back up on the catwalk without...authorization?"

Maggie smiled. "Cat's don't care about permission."

A grin creased Alex's face for the first time, and even in the dim light of the backstage entrance, Maggie could see that he was dangerous in a *handsome stranger who might tempt her to give away far more than she should* kind of way. She'd already done that once. It was possible to claim naivete and innocence the first time, but if she ever fell for an actor again, she'd have only herself to blame.

Still, it was nice of him to spare a thought for safety.

"I'll push it up," she said, "especially since we have a school group coming for a tour."

Before she could grab the ladder and slide it up out of easy reach, Alex stepped forward and did it. For a guy who claimed to know nothing about theater, he knew how to move the catwalk ladder and lock it in place over his head.

"Thank you—" Maggie began.

"Magdalena Canterbury, are you within these walls?" a dramatic voice echoed down the hallway.

"Magdalena," Alex said as if he was processing her full name.

"Maggie, unless you're mad at me or very theatrical." Maggie grinned. "My assistant tried to warn me over the phone that something was up, and I guess I should have listened, but I was busy."

"Magdalena." The eerie voice seemed to bounce off the walls of the backstage area.

"That's not a ghost, is it?" Alex asked.

"That is Zelda who is the stage manager and has the final say in...well, I guess everything."

"Is her name really Zelda?"

Maggie laughed. "I dare you to ask her that."

She gave the stranger a little half wave. Would she see him again? Why was he here? He wasn't forthcoming with that information, and she was too busy to play cat and mouse with him all morning. Whatever he was looking for, he'd have to figure it out on his own. Maybe she should have told him there was a fiercely protective theater ghost who didn't take to strangers.

Maggie turned toward the sound of Zelda's voice. It wouldn't be hard to find her. The theater, while capacious, was not one of the behemoths of Broadway. The sound of Zelda's voice was coming from the basement and Maggie followed it straight to her workshop.

"Good Monday morning," she announced as if she was just arriving fresh from a vacation and hadn't received one warning phone call and several loud summons that echoed through the halls.

"This is not good," Zelda said, a lock of her artificially orange hair flopping down over her forehead with the force of her movement. "We have a serious problem with the costume changes a certain somebody here—" she cut a look at April who cowered behind a commercial sewing machine, "Says she can't possibly do even though I made it clear the show would be ruined, utterly ruined, otherwise."

"*West Side Story*?" Maggie asked.

"Of course. The Jets and the Sharks. Their costumes were to be all black on one side and all white on the other."

Maggie didn't know if Zelda was really from some middle European country as her accent, which came and went depending on her mood, suggested. She'd never been brave enough to ask Zelda directly. But Zelda had been there as long as Maggie could remember, and she always got her way. Maggie never argued with her, and their relationship ran smoothly as a result.

Except for this time. For once, Maggie had conspired with the show's director instead of Zelda, the theater's overall stage director. The director was young and enthusiastic, and Maggie hadn't wanted to quash his creativity, and she wasn't going to sell him out. But now she was about to pay the price.

“I didn’t make them black and white because I thought black and white would imply that one side was good and the other bad, and we all know that’s not the case.”

Maggie didn’t mention that April had agreed and they’d even researched the show online and found other productions matching their creative vision for the show. There was no reason for everyone to suffer. She could take the blame.

“So you’ve made them green and blue,” Zelda said. “Green and blue,” she repeated as if Maggie should see why that was an affront to the sacred world of the theater.

Maggie’s thoughts went to the man in the tailored suit who wore a green silk tie with his navy-blue suit. They were lovely together. Whoever he was, he’d been a treat for her eyes first thing in the morning of what was, apparently, going to be a difficult day.

“I’m sorry, Zelda,” Maggie said. “I guess I just—”

“Not enough contrast,” Zelda announced. “Contrast is what the show is all about.”

Maggie had thought *West Side Story* might have something to do with love and loyalty and following one’s heart, but she was in no position to argue.

“They can be blue and red,” Zelda said. “That way you only have to remake half of them.”

She glanced over at April who was clearly mouthing the word, “Sorry.”

“Blue and red,” Maggie said, nodding. “I have bolts of red fabric already ordered in for the Christmas show, so we can start with those and reorder if we have to.”

Zelda put her hands on Maggie’s cheeks. “Magdalena, you never fail me.”

Maggie tried to smile, but she couldn’t because large cold hands were pressed to the sides of her face. Fortunately, Zelda had other things on her mind, and she swept from the room without requiring a response.

“Oh, my God,” April said.

“It’s Monday and dress rehearsal is Thursday. We can remake all the green dresses in red, and hey, who knows, maybe we can use those green dresses that the Jet girls were going to wear in the Christmas show. They swirl and sparkle and they’re green. Can’t go wrong. Right?”

“Your optimism is either catching or lethal, not sure which right now,” April said. “And thanks for not telling Zelda that I was in on this decision, although you didn’t have to take all the responsibility on yourself.”

Maggie smiled at her assistant. “I’m ultimately responsible, not you. And Zelda can’t fire me because she’s afraid of my grandmother.”

“Everyone loves Grandma Gigi,” April said.

“Yes, but she’s been around here so long she knows where all the bodies are buried,” Maggie said.

“Figure of speech, right?”

“Of course,” Maggie said. “Now I’m taking Carl a coffee and a doughnut if I can find one, and I’ll be back here in ten minutes. I’ll stay every evening this week if I need to because this was my fault.”

“Only partly your fault,” April said begrudgingly, but she smiled at Maggie from beneath her furrowed brow. “But you could bring me a doughnut, too.”