

Calico Spy

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UNDERCOVER LADIES | BOOK THREE



MARGARET BROWNLEY

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*The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble;
and he knoweth them that trust in him.*

NAHUM 1:7

Chapter 1

Calico, Kansas

1880

Katie Madison tied the black satin ribbon at her neckline and frowned. The lopsided bow wouldn't do. She yanked the ribbon loose and tried again. Today she was all thumbs, and everything that could go wrong, did. Already she'd broken a shoelace, snagged a stocking, and torn the hem of her dress.

Just as she finished tying the bow for the third time the bedroom door flew open and her roommate's brunette head popped inside. "Katie! Hurry or you'll be late."

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

Mary-Lou's green eyes narrowed, and her Southern drawl grew more pronounced. "Pickens has a burr in his saddle. Said if you don't hurry he'll have your head!"

Katie's stomach knotted. She was already in trouble with the restaurant manager. "I'll be there in a minute."

"A minute might be too late." The door slammed shut, and Mary-Lou's footsteps echoed down the hall as she yelled for the other Harvey girls to make haste. "Y'all better hurry now, you hear?"

Katie whirled about for one last look in the mirror and hardly recognized the image reflected back. The black dress with its high collar, starched white apron, and black shoes and stockings made her look more like a nun than one of Pinkerton's most successful female detectives.

Even her unruly red hair had been forced to conform to Fred

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Harvey's strict regulations. Parted in the middle, it was pulled back in a knot and fashioned with the mandatory net. The rigid hairdo did nothing for her, appearance-wise. All it did was make her eyes look too big and her freckles stand out like brown polka dots.

Wrinkling her nose, she turned away from the mirror. It was a good thing she'd chosen to be a detective as she had neither the looks nor housekeeping skills needed for landing a husband.

Not that she was complaining; two Harvey girls had been found dead, and it was her job to find the killer. The assignment of a lifetime had landed in her lap.

Working undercover was never easy, but so far this particular disguise was proving to be the hardest one yet, even harder than last year's job as a circus performer. At least here she didn't have to hobnob with lions, and for that she was grateful. All she had to deal with now was a possibly deranged killer.

Pausing at the door, she checked that her leg holster and gun were secured beneath her skirt. The pocket seams had been ripped open for easy retrieval. Hand on the doorknob, she braced herself with a quick prayer. God knows, she needed all the help she could get.

Leaving the room, she raced along the hall and sped down the stairs. Just as she reached the bottom tread the heel of her shoe caught on the runner. Arms and legs flailing, she hit the floor face-down, and the wind whooshed out of her like juice from a squashed tomato.

Momentarily stunned, she didn't move. Not till noticing the polished black shoes planted in front of her did she gather her wits. Looking up, she groaned.

The manager, Mr. Pickens, glared down at her, hands on his waist. A large, imposing man, he looked about to pop the buttons on his overworked vest. Judging by his red face and quivering mustache, his patience was equally tested.

"Miss Madison. You're late!"

Her mouth fell open. Was that all he cared about? No concern

for her welfare? No thought that she had injured herself?

“Well, are you going to lie there all night?”

“No, sir.” She scrambled to her feet and smoothed her apron.

His eyebrows dipped into a V. “Shoulders straight, head back, and for the love of Henry, smile! I want to see some choppers.” He spread his thin lips to demonstrate but did a better impersonation of a growling dog than a friendly waitress. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “Choppers.”

“Tonight you’re the drink girl. Do you think you can handle that?”

Plastering a smile on her face, she nodded. How hard could it be to pour tea?

He gave her a dubious look that did nothing for her self-confidence. “We’ll soon see. Follow me.”

He led her to the formal dining room where tables were already set for the supper crowd. The room was decorated in shades of brown and tan. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the railroad tracks. Beyond, fields of tall grass and wildflowers spread a colorful counterpane beneath a copper sky.

The restaurant was shorthanded, and she had been handed a uniform the moment she stepped off the morning train. After that she’d hardly had time to catch her breath. So many rules and regulations to remember. No notepads or pencils were allowed. That meant she was expected to memorize the menu. She was also instructed to radiate good cheer to even the most difficult of patrons.

Her chances of lasting through the night didn’t look promising, and that was a worry. The investigation depended on her keeping her job as a waitress. No one at the restaurant knew her legal name or real purpose for being there. As far as anyone knew, she was simply a farm girl who traveled all the way from Madison, Wisconsin, looking for adventure and a better life.

Pickens quickly pointed out the silver coffee urns and teapots.

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He stared at her with buttonhole eyes. “You do know the cup code, right?”

“Uh.” There was a code for cups?

“Cup in the saucer means coffee.” He demonstrated as he spoke. “A flipped cup *against* the saucer is for iced tea. A cup *next* to the saucer—milk. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir, next to the saucer.”

“As for hot tea,” he continued, and her heart sank. “The cup will be flipped *upon* the saucer.” He then explained how to tell if the customer wanted black, green, or orange pekoe tea by the direction of the cup handle. “Any questions?”

She had plenty, but he didn’t look in any mood to answer them, so she shook her head no.

Satisfied that she had donned the proper attitude or at least a Harvey-worthy smile, he turned. Giving three quick claps, he called the workers front and center. “All right, ladies, take your stations!”

“Don’t be nervous,” her roommate, Mary-Lou, said as they strode side by side to the back of the room.

Easier said than done. Katie stopped to stare at the cups on the table. She’d come face-to-face with some of the most ornery outlaws in the country, and she wasn’t about to let a china cup intimidate her. On second thought, maybe just a little. Did the cup handle facing right mean green tea or pekoe?

Already her cheeks ached from smiling, but that was the least of it. Her collar itched, and the stiff starched apron felt like a plate of armor.

As if to guess her rising dismay, Mary-Lou said, “You’ll like it here once you get used to it. You just have to work fast, be polite, and smile.”

“Nothing to it,” Katie muttered. She only hoped she had enough energy left at the end of the workday for sleuthing.

A loud gong announced the imminent arrival of the five-twenty-five. Windows rattled, and the crystals on the chandelier did a crazy

dance as the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe train rumbled into the station. With a blare of the whistle, it came to a clanging stop in front of the restaurant.

Moments later, the door flew open and travelers filed into the dining room like a trail of weary ants. Only thirty minutes was allowed for meals before the train took off again. The Harvey House restaurants took pride in the fact that no one had ever been late boarding a train because of inept service.

Katie planted a smile on her face and a prayer in her heart. *God, please don't let me be the one to break that record.*

Chapter 2

Sheriff Branch Whitman looked up just as the door to his office flew open. A cultured but no less commanding voice shot inside. “Sheriff! I need a word with you!”

Branch lifted his feet off the desk and planted his well-worn boots squarely on the floor. He recognized his fastidiously dressed visitor at once, though they’d never been formally introduced.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Harvey?”

The renowned restaurateur stabbed the floor with his gold-tipped cane. He was somewhere in his midthirties, but his meticulous dark suit and Vandyke beard made him appear older.

“You dare to ask a question like that!” Harvey pushed the door shut and gazed at Branch with sharp, watchful eyes. “You know as well as I that someone is killing off Harvey girls.” His British accent grew more pronounced with each word. Even his bow tie seemed to quiver with emotion. “And what, may I ask, are you doing about it?”

Branch slanted his head toward the chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat and—”

“I don’t want a seat. I want to know what has been done to find the killer!”

Branch indicated the stack of files in front of him with a wave of his hand. “I can assure you that I’m doing everything in my power—”

“Balderdash!”

Harvey’s impatience was no worse than Branch’s own. The killings had turned into one of the most puzzling crimes he’d ever

worked on. Despite weeks of investigation, he still didn't have a single suspect. Given the nature of the town, that was odd.

If a youth took a fancy to a pretty girl, or a married man so much as thought about straying, the locals knew about it. Somehow folks even knew that a young one was on the way before the expectant mother. Yet two young women had been murdered, and no one saw or heard a thing.

"I can assure you," he said, "that the person or persons responsible will be brought to justice."

Before Branch took over as sheriff three years ago, Calico was, by all accounts, the roughest, toughest, and wildest place in all of Kansas, rivaled only by Dodge City. But he'd single-handedly changed all that, and it was now a right decent town—or was before the two recent murders.

Harvey's eyes glittered. "It's been six weeks since Priscilla's death." Priscilla was the first woman to die. Less than three weeks later, the girl named Ginger was found dead in an alleyway.

"These things take time."

Harvey straightened a WANTED poster on the wall with the tip of his cane. The man was as fastidious with his surroundings as he was in dress and speech. No doubt he took issue with the stack of folders and papers strewn haphazardly across Branch's desk.

"Too much time if you ask me. So what have you got so far?"

"Right now, nothing." Branch's jaw clenched. He suspected the killer was a Harvey employee, but he wasn't ready to reveal that information. Not yet. He couldn't take the chance of word getting out that the crime was an inside job.

"This is no less than what I expected from local authorities." Harvey leaned on his cane, and his eyes hardened. "That's why I hired the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. Your services will no longer be needed."

Branch glared at him. Services? Harvey acted like he was firing one of his employees. "What happens in this town is my

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responsibility, and any outsiders—”

“Will report to me!” Harvey snapped his mouth shut and leaned over his cane as if to challenge Branch to disagree.

“Now wait just a minute.”

Harvey’s expression darkened. “No, *you* wait. We’ve wasted enough time and now a second girl is dead.”

“And I will find her killer—both their killers.” He didn’t know Priscilla all that well, but Ginger was his favorite waitress. She’d often brought his evening meal to the office if she knew he was working late. Since he refused to adhere to Harvey’s unreasonable regulations—particularly the *no coat, no service* rule in the main dining room—she did him no small favor.

“I’ll have something to report to you soon.” He sounded more certain than he felt. Each day that passed made finding the killer that much more difficult. Trails grew cold. Clues were lost. Memories faded. Even more worrisome was the possibility that the killer would strike again.

“Not soon enough.” Harvey swung his cane under one arm and pulled his watch out of his vest pocket. “I’m sure the detective has arrived by now. If not on the morning or noon train, then on the five-twenty-five.” He flipped the case open with his thumb. “I trust you’ll give him your full cooperation.”

Branch stiffened. Over his dead body. “Now see here—” The last thing he needed was some inept detective running loose in his town. Last time the Pinkerton operatives were involved in one of his cases they let the bad guys escape and almost got him killed. And look at the mess they made with the James gang. They could deny it all they wanted, but everyone knew the Pinkertons blew up the outlaws’ house, killing Frank and Jesse’s young half brother. No surprise there. The Pinkertons were known for their bullying tactics and underhanded methods, none of which Branch would tolerate.

Harvey replaced his watch and tipped his bowler. “Have a good day, Sheriff.” He left with less fanfare than when he arrived.

Branch pounded his fist on the desk. “Dash it all!” The town was his responsibility—no one else’s. The very thought of an undercover detective sneaking around like a mole in the ground set his teeth on edge.

Came in on today’s train, did he? If the Pink was like most other passengers, he’d appreciate a good meal. Was probably at the Harvey House restaurant chowing down at that very moment. That was as good a place as any to intercept him. He pulled out his watch. He’d have to hurry if he wanted to reach the restaurant before the train left the station.

Decision made, he shot to his feet and plucked his Stetson off the wall.

One thing was certain. The man better enjoy his meal because if Branch had his way, the detective would be back on that train before he could say cock robin.

Chapter 3

The woman glared at Katie. “You gave my son hot coffee!” The notch on her front tooth pegged her as a seamstress who bit off thread rather than cutting it with scissors.

Katie looked down at the pudgy face of a two-year-old and whisked his cup away. “Oops, sorry.”

“I ordered *iced* tea,” the man Katie pegged as a banjo player grouched. She guessed his profession based on the callus on the side of his right thumb. “You gave me *hot* tea.”

“Milk? You gave me milk?” This from a gray-haired woman who stared at her cup with the same look of horror one might regard a rattler. Hands and neck dripping with jewels, she acted like a rich widow used to having servants answer her every whim.

By the time Katie straightened out the drinks, she was ready to call it a night, though none of the other girls seemed so inclined. Instead they darted around tables like lively balls in a game of bagatelle.

To outward appearances the smooth flow of dishes, which came and went with nary a spoken word, seemed like magic. In actuality, it was all part of a carefully orchestrated plan.

The train porter had taken travelers’ food orders at the last stop and telegraphed the restaurant. This allowed cooks to prepare meals in advance. Supper was seventy-five cents and after each passenger paid, he or she was directed to the table where soup or salad waited.

While the diners worked on the first course, Katie followed Mary-Lou into the kitchen to refill her coffeepot.

Praying that the night would soon end, she spread her mouth in what she hoped would pass as a smile. A Harvey girl must never look dowdy, frowzy, or tired, even if her feet were killing her or her thoughts less than charitable.

On the way back to the dining room she bumped into the dark-haired waitress named Tully. “Why you. . .” Tully snapped her mouth shut and threw her shoulders back in an attempt to regain a positive, upbeat appearance. She might have succeeded had it not been for the Long Island (Rhode Island?) hen on her tray drowning in coffee.

“You’ll pay for this,” she muttered under her breath. With a smile that was more lethal than friendly, she did a dainty pirouette and returned the drowning hen to the kitchen.

Katie stiffened at the sound of her name. She turned and found Mr. Pickens practically breathing down her throat.

“Miss Madison! A word with you. Now!”



After Pickens finished chastising her for working too slow, Katie straightened out the beverage mess and returned an empty teapot to the counter in back of the room.

The ten-minute warning for boarding the train had sounded, but time had never passed more slowly. Katie wasn’t certain she could hold out for another minute, let alone ten.

Tully whispered something to her roommate. Tully was tall and willowy with skin as smooth as honey. Katie envied the woman’s ability to look graceful in the rigid uniform, while she felt awkward and out of place. But then, that was how she’d always felt, even back home.

The shadow of growing up in a family of beautiful women seemed to follow her wherever she went. Her four sisters all took after their mother in looks and had landed successful and well-respected husbands. Katie had the unenviable distinction of being both the black sheep of the family *and* the ugly duckling.

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Tully's voice brought her out of her reverie. "Why not let the new girl do it?"

"Do what?" Katie asked, keeping her tone neutral. Alienating the others would only make her investigation more difficult.

Tully pointed to the tall, lean man who had just walked into the dining room. Katie guessed from the badge on his vest that it was Sheriff Whitman. That was a surprise. Everything she heard about the man indicated he was an old crank, set in his ways and unwilling to listen to reason or work with Pinkerton detectives.

In contrast, this man was somewhere in his early to midthirties and didn't look like any crank she'd ever met. He wasn't bad to look at, either. Not bad at all.

"No one is allowed to eat in the dining room without wearing a coat," Tully explained. "You need to escort him over to the coatrack to borrow one."

"Even the sheriff is required to wear one?" Katie asked. She knew that such rules applied to the hoity-toity restaurants in some of the large cities, but here in Kansas?

"Harvey rules," Tully said with a smile that seemed a tad too sweet for Katie's peace of mind.

"I'll see what I can do."

"You better," Tully said, "if you want to keep your job." It sounded like a warning.

Katie set her mouth in a determined smile and threaded her way through the dining room toward the sheriff. She was an expert in putting men in jail. How hard could it be to put a man in a coat?

Chapter 4

Branch scanned the crowded dining room. No sign of Harvey. Good. The last thing he wanted was another encounter with the Englishman.

He was here for one purpose and one purpose alone: to pick out the Pinkerton detective in time to escort him onto the train before it took off again.

Three possible suspects immediately caught his attention. One was a young man in a checkered coat with the eager look of a detective on his first case. Another was an older man whose interest in the attractive waitresses was probably personal but could just as easily be professional. A third man was doing a bad job of pretending to read a newspaper. Instead, his gaze kept darting around the room as if he was either looking for someone or suspected that someone might be looking for him.

Branch was just about to mosey over to the newspaper guy when he spotted a young woman barreling toward him like a missionary targeting a possible convert. Since he didn't recognize her, she had to be new. So they sent a greenhorn to do the job, did they? *This should be interesting.*

She greeted him with a smile—and no Harvey girl smile was prettier. Hers was as wide as the Kansas prairie. But something about her didn't add up. Even as she tried to conform he sensed her resistance, sensed her sizing him up like a general planning an attack.

“Sheriff.” She was a wee bit of a thing, barely reaching his

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shoulders. Never had so much feminine charm been packed into such a small package. Her big blue eyes almost seemed too large for her delicate features. A thin veil of freckles bridged her nicely shaped nose. The dazzling red hair didn't seem to belong in the rigid knot at the back of her head. Instead, it looked like it should fall down her back as free as the wind.

The smooth, graceful movements of her slender hips seemed to challenge the rigid confines of the black-and-white uniform. Yep, she was a looker all right. Not the conventional type by any means, but that's what made her stand out from the others. Where did Harvey find these girls?

He held his hat in his hand and nodded politely. "Howdy, ma'am," he drawled. "Guess you're new 'round here." Must have been hired to take Ginger's place, but he didn't want to say as much.

She nodded. "My name's Miss Madison." She lifted her voice to be heard over the buzz of chatter and clank of dishes. "Miss Katie Madison."

"Mighty pleased to meet you, Miss Madison. Sheriff Whitman here, but my friends just call me plain ol' Sheriff."

"And your enemies, Sheriff? What do they call you?"

"There're some things I'd rather not say in the company of a lady such as yourself."

Something like annoyance crossed her face, though he couldn't imagine what he'd said to offend her.

"If you'll step over to that rack, I'll help you pick out a dinner coat." Her calm, casual voice seemed at odds with her sharp-eyed regard.

"Don't have much use for dinner coats," he said. "Same for neck chokers." Why any man would submit to wearing a tie was beyond his comprehension.

Her smile faded, and she glanced over her shoulder where the other three Harvey girls watched, along with their boss, Pickens.

She turned back to him, and he could see the wheels spinning in

that pretty head of hers. “What a pity,” she said. “A handsome man like you.”

“The other girls tried flattery, too. It didn’t work for them, either.”

She lowered her head and glanced up at him through a fringe of lush lashes. Eleven. She had eleven tiny sun dots on her nose. Startled to find himself counting freckles, of all things, he drew his gaze to her pretty eyes, which looked blue as the wildflowers that grew alongside the railroad tracks. Chiding himself for being so easily distracted, he glanced at the newspaper guy.

“If you’ll excuse me, ma’am—”

“I really need this job,” she said. “And if I don’t get you into one of those coats I could be fired.”

Something in her voice made him hesitate. “That seems a bit drastic. Far as I know, none of the other girls lost their jobs because of me.”

“I’m afraid I’m not in my boss’s good graces at the moment.” Her cheeks grew a pretty rose color. “I messed up the drink orders something awful and drowned a Rhode Island hen.”

“You did that?” he said, feigning shock.

Her brow furrowed. “It might have been a Long Island hen.”

“That’s even worse,” he said lightly, hoping to tease another one of her brilliant smiles from her.

She hesitated a moment as if trying to decide if he was joking. “So, please. Will you help me?”

He was so caught up with the hen business—or maybe it was the intriguing way her eyes flashed as she talked—that he momentarily forgot what she wanted him to do.

“So will you?” she pleaded when he failed to respond. “Wear a coat?”

“Oh, that.” Opposed to wearing a dinner coat on general principle, he grimaced at the thought.

Unfortunately, he was also opposed to turning his back on damsels in distress. The look of dismay on her face meant the job was

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important to her. No surprise there. Until Harvey and his restaurants came along, few legitimate jobs existed for women, especially in this town. The work was hard and expectations high, but the job allowed a woman to earn a fair living and still stay in God's good graces.

He followed her worried glance to the back of the room. Pickens was no friend of his, which meant cultivating one in Miss Madison might not be such a bad idea. Especially since his investigation into the Harvey girl murders was going to the dogs faster than a flock of fleas.

"What do I get if I put on one of them there straitjackets?"

She laughed, a musical sound that was as infectious as it was pleasant to hear. "A *straitjacket* will earn you a second helping of pie."

He grinned. "Well, ma'am, I don't suppose I can turn down an offer like that."

Relief flickered across her face. "I don't suppose you can," she said. "Follow me and I'll set you up."

With a rueful glance at the three suspected Pink detectives, he followed her.

She led him over to a rack where a dozen or so coats hung. Quickly riffling through them, she settled on a black frock coat that would have been right at home at a funeral, preferably on the guest of honor.

She met his gaze with a look of apology. "I'm afraid this is the closest we have to your size."

She held the coat up for him with a beseeching smile. As much as he wanted to, he didn't have it in him to deny her request. Swallowing his protests, he turned and slipped his arms through the sleeves. The coat barely fit his wide shoulders and stuck out over his holstered guns.

She covered her mouth and her eyes rounded in dismay as she watched him try to button it. The sleeves hit him at least six inches above the wrists.

"I can see why you're opposed to wearing a coat."

"Straitjacket," he said. "Let's hope I don't need to make a quick draw." He could hardly move his arms, let alone reach for his guns.

Her eyes softened as she studied him, allowing a glimpse into their very depths. "Thank you for helping me." He had a feeling she wanted to say more. But after a quick glance around, she fell silent.

He lowered his head next to hers, and a sweet lilac fragrance filled his head. "Perhaps you can do me a favor," he said, his voice low. "I'm looking for a man. Don't know his name. Don't know what he looks like. All I know is that he's a stranger in town."

"As you can see, Sheriff, we have a whole room full of strangers," she said.

"Yes, but this one plans to hang around."

"I see." She tilted her head to the side. "I'm new myself, but I'll ask the other girls if they know of any recent arrivals."

"Appreciate that, ma'am."

A blast of the train whistle created a flurry of activity. Passengers grabbed their few belongings and rose from their seats, chair legs scraping the wooden floor. The throng of diners streamed outside, some holding small children by the hand. Soon the buzz of excited voices faded behind the closed door, and only Branch and the restaurant workers remained.

He peered out the window and watched as all three men pegged as possible Pinkerton detectives boarded the train.

Blast it. That could mean only one thing. The detective had arrived earlier and was already checked in at the hotel.

He whirled about and practically bumped into Miss Madison. "Sorry, I have to go," he said, wiggling out of the coat like a moth from a cocoon.

"But your pie—"

"Another time." He really wanted to stick around if for no other reason than to get to know the pretty waitress better, which struck him as odd. Since his wife's death he hadn't really noticed other

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women. Work, church, and parenting his seven-year-old son took up all his time, and that was how he wanted it. Opening up his heart meant having to accept the possibility of loss again, and that he could never do. Once was enough.

More than enough.

He shoved the coat into her hands and, with a doff of his hat, quickly left the restaurant.

Chapter 5

That night after the Harvey House was closed for business, Katie ate a late supper with the other three Harvey girls. They sat at a long wooden table set aside for employees just off the kitchen. Tully and Mary-Lou were all atwitter over the restaurant owner's unexpected visit earlier that day.

Dubbed Transcontinental Fred, Mr. Harvey had single-handedly made rail travel more bearable by providing fine food and good service for weary Kansas travelers. Rumor had it that he planned to build his train station restaurants all the way to California.

"He's so handsome," the girl named Abigail exclaimed with a sigh. "And so tall."

"He's also terribly married," Tully said.

"Yes, but don't you just love the way he speaks?" Mary-Lou imitated his English accent which, given her Southern lilt, was no easy task: "How dare you call them waitresses. I won't have it. They're Harvey girls."

That brought a round of laughter from the others.

Katie's interest in the man was strictly out of curiosity. Most of the renowned people she'd had occasion to meet were bank robbers, counterfeiters, or con artists, not legitimate businessmen like Mr. Harvey. So that alone made him a novelty.

After the evening meal had been cleared away, the stations left spotless, and the tables set for breakfast, the Harvey girls clambered upstairs to their rooms.

Never had Katie known such luxurious surroundings. Her job