



**Forged with  
Flames:**

**Faith and Love  
During the Peshtigo Fire**

**Jayne Caelan**

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by Jayne Caelan

For those who perished in the Peshtigo Fire and those who lived through it. May none of you be forgotten.

Thank you to those who made this book possible:

To Tina, Danny, Steve, Pat, and Marilyn, and others in between, for putting me on and directing me in this journey with God.

To Cathy and Mom for your first reads.

To Hunter and Tori for your encouragement and (needed) badgering.

To Jay for our own love story.

To God for everything.

\*\*\*

*She tried to ignore the way her fingers trembled as she pulled the thread through the fabric. The silk taffeta dress was the favorite of the three she owned, and she didn't want to make a mistake with the panel she was adding inside the skirt.*

*It was such a smart idea on her part. She couldn't wait to surprise Sean with it in the morning.*

*How he could sleep, she didn't know. She was too excited to even close her eyes. Tomorrow they would have a grand adventure, he promised her that. They would take the train and see other cities. She wondered how anything could look different than Chicago, but he promised her that every place looked different than Chicago. She wouldn't know. She had never been outside of the city, not in all of her sixteen years.*

*Sean was good to her though. He loved her. He told her that. She loved him too, except when he hit her. But he promised that would stop now. He bought her new hair combs to prove it, his first gift to her ever. She brought her hand to her hair to feel them, one tucked on each side of her head. They would look so pretty with her favorite dress.*

*Tying off the thread, she lifted the dress to admire her handiwork. She could feel the difference in weight but was sure no one would see anything out of the ordinary. That was important. Traveling with as much money as Sean had brought home would make them a target for thieves. She had heard her mother talk once about the trick to hiding valuables; now she would surprise Sean with it. He might tell her she was clever for hiding the money inside her dress to keep it safe. He might even be impressed enough to finally ask her to become his wife.*

*Mrs. Sean McKenna.*

*She smiled at the thought.*

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## Chapter One

### August 30, 1871

Callie McKenna didn't know she was being watched.

She sipped from a cup of water while standing at her bedroom window. The night air was thick and still, making the boardinghouse feel empty despite the dozen or so people sleeping in the rooms below. In a few hours the faintest tinge of color would appear in the eastern sky and the town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin, would stir to life. It was Callie's favorite time, when the town started humming with quiet activity, but before her guests descended on the dining room and the day began in earnest.

Until then, there was only the full, clear moon to keep her company.

Callie wished it were covered with clouds.

With no rain in more than six weeks, small fires had become a common occurrence in the forests surrounding Peshtigo. Everyone was concerned and even the animals seemed on edge. Just the week prior, a deer had come from the woods and taken up residence down the road from the boardinghouse at Levi Hale's place. No one remembered ever seeing anything like it, and some speculated it was a sign of things to come. They all prayed for the soaking rain the dry timber and cracked creek beds needed.

Movement in the corner of the yard startled Callie until she recognized the hobbled gait of the man below. She rapped on the glass and watched Grady Beauchamp raise his head in reaction. Spotting her, he lifted his hand in greeting. She did the same in return.

Grady was a farm hand of sorts, someone Callie's aunt had taken in years earlier. They didn't know much

about his past except that he had been a slave. Aunt Bridgette took him in like she always did with strays, and he seemed content to care for the animals, help with the small amount of crops they grew, and perform odd jobs whenever needed. He was as strong and solid as a bull but with a face full of soft features, avowing his gentle, quiet way.

Callie knew her aunt was behind Grady's random appearances at the boardinghouse, a way for the older woman to check on her only niece. She told Callie more than once that Grady's help gave her peace of mind. The fact that most of the "help" came during odd hours never bothered Grady or Aunt Bridgette, and as much as Callie resented being checked on, she had found Grady's presence reassuring during the long, dry summer.

She watched Grady from the window a few minutes longer, guessing he was stacking kindling for the small outdoor cookhouse she used in the summer. He always seemed to know what chore or repair was needed even though Callie never said a word. She would hire help but not ask for it. When Callie decided to run the boardinghouse after her father died, it was with the determination that she would do it herself. That meant most of the work fell on her shoulders, but also that the decisions were hers and no one else's.

Most days that was a fine thing. Callie knew she preferred her independence over answering to anyone. But on nights when she had trouble sleeping, which had been many of late, the weight of all she was responsible for set her mind spinning.

Callie pulled her long braid over her shoulder and tugged at the collar of her nightgown, annoyed with the fresh layer of sweat that had formed on her skin. Grady had gone into the barn, where she knew he would visit with her horse, Britches, for at least the next half hour. She turned her head to look at the thick hedgerow that arced behind the

rest of the property, separating McKenna House from the creek beyond – a creek that still had water.

Leaving the window, Callie padded across the room and set her cup on the nightstand. The relief that would allow her to sleep was only a short walk in the dark away.

A minute later she was maneuvering the narrow path through the hedgerow she had taken hundreds of times, knowing she could do it with her eyes closed if she wanted. She had dared herself to do exactly that years earlier, keeping at it every night for more than a week until she made it all the way to the creek. That was when she discovered reciting the Twenty-Third Psalm calmed her fears. She no longer needed to say the words as she walked the path as an adult but was grateful nonetheless for the moonlight to illuminate her way.

Stepping out from the trees, Callie eased her way down the embankment to the water. Meandering this way and that until it reached the Peshtigo River to the east, the creek was good for hooking pan fish and floating toy boats, but not much else. The exception was the bend it took behind the boardinghouse. There an underwater drop off created a secluded swimming hole, one that Callie had been allowed to explore only on the hottest of days when her father was alive. She could barely touch the bottom with the tips of her toes back then. Now the water level was so low that it stopped at her waist. It was enough for a respite from the hot, stagnant night though, which was what Callie wanted.

Slipping off her nightgown and hanging it on a nearby branch, she stepped into the water and welcomed its coolness as she walked into what felt like her own private cove. Trailing her hands behind her, she spun slowly, tracing the outline of her rotation with her fingers. Splashing water up her arms and onto her shoulders, she sighed with relief as her body temperature dropped to a comfortable level for the first time in days. There was no

sound save the lapping of the water at the muddy bank and the slow croaking of frogs in the distance. A whisper of moonlight cast a soft outline around the treetops that rose to touch a blanket of stars. She let the moment of relief wash over her, savoring every second until deciding it was time to return. Moving to shore and wiping the water from her arms, she slipped her thin gown over her head, pulling at it where the fabric stuck to her wet skin.

That was when the hairs on the back of her neck start to tingle.

Overcome by the sensation that she was being watched, Callie turned cautiously to study the trees along the water's edge. Unable to discern anything in the shadows, she decided not to wait to see if what was there was human or animal. She made her way to the boardinghouse at a quick pace, doing all she could to suppress the urge to run while the words from the Twenty-Third Psalm passed over her lips.

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Tanner Slade let out his breath after she had gone.

He had been watching the boardinghouse all night from the hedgerow, hoping to spot the person he and his partner were there to retrieve. He knew the dark-skinned man was no threat even though his appearance in the middle of the night was peculiar, but the young woman who left her third-floor window and appeared outside, barefoot and in a sleeping gown, piqued his curiosity. He was sure she was on her way to a midnight rendezvous when she disappeared into the thicket. Tanner followed, hand to the revolver on his hip, convinced she was leading him to the man he was there to find.

He nearly stumbled over his own feet when he came through the brush and spotted her spinning in the water. He looked away, but not before the image of her silhouetted in the moonlight was seared into his mind. It took all of his

willpower to keep his eyes averted as she stepped from the water and dressed, and he ground his heels into the dirt to keep from pursuing her again after she left.

“Damn,” he growled. “This just got complicated.”

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The uneasy sensation Callie felt after her moonlit dip was all but forgotten in the morning as the clamoring activity in the dining room was at its peak and guests crowded in for the daily breakfast McKenna House was known for. Chairs scraped across the floor. Silverware clinked. Voices rose and fell in animated conversation. Even those who typically kept to themselves were drawn into the east-facing room with its bright morning sunlight. With it came the aroma of hotcakes, fried potatoes, sausage and coffee – the ultimate allure.

The door connecting dining room and kitchen waggled as Callie marched in and out with platters heaped with food. Mornings were the busiest time of day at the boardinghouse – a controlled chaos that Callie had become an expert in orchestrating.

“Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson,” she greeted, her green eyes bright and inviting as she added to the feast before the couple.

“Did you sleep well, Mr. Olson?” she asked, smiling at the balding, bulbous man across the table. He offered a partial wave, fork in hand, never taking his eyes off his plate.

Making her way around the table, Callie chatted with each guest as they filled their plates. Most were older men who came to Peshtigo on business or were passing through to other parts of Wisconsin. Some, like Mr. Wilson, traveled with their wives.

In the years since Callie had taken over the boardinghouse, it had become more of an inn than a place boarders called home for months at a stretch. Part of the

change was due to the town of Peshtigo's growth. The prospering Peshtigo Company had built its own boardinghouse to accommodate its increasing ranks of millworkers and their families. The lumber and railroad workers stayed in camps in the forests west and northwest of town — an area known locally as the Sugar Bush for the groves of sugar maples that grew amid the pines.

Part of the change from boardinghouse to inn, though, was Callie's own doing. Whereas her father had rented to anyone at any time, the lumberjacks, railway crews, and farmhands — while generous with their money when in town — could be troublesome, especially after drinking. Callie chose to cater to affluent clientele who were less likely to cause trouble.

It helped set McKenna House apart from the Forest House, the Hotel de France, J.W. Gould's Peshtigo House hotel, and other establishments in town. With hearty meals, finer furnishings, and private rooms with guaranteed fresh linens, Callie had established a reputation for quality, finding guests were willing to pay accordingly. She was dedicated to their comfort and happiness in return, knowing it was in keeping with Biblical teachings, but also that it was key to operating a business that ensured independence for her and her aunt.

Occasionally there would be children in the house, which Callie loved. She always had a piece of candy or a cookie to give them, whispering it was their reward for being well behaved. Looking around the room though, Callie realized it had been weeks since she and Emily weren't the youngest in the house. At twenty-two, Emily Henriksen was a year older than Callie and three inches taller, but with wide cornflower eyes and a fluttery manner that made her seem younger. The daughter of Scandinavian immigrants, she had come to town looking to help support her family. Although accident prone, she was sweet, sincere, and a hard worker. Callie paid her more than the

going wage, encouraging Emily to save for herself while having enough to send to her parents.

Noticing an empty sausage platter in the middle of the table, Callie reached to retrieve it when she heard a shatter and a shriek in the kitchen. She hurried toward the sound only to catch the edge of the heavy wooden door with her forehead as Emily came rushing out. Callie stumbled backward, tripping over her heels and falling against Mr. Olson's chair, knocking him forward and sending half-chewed eggs and sausages spraying across the table. Coffee cups spilled, and chairs tipped as everyone scrambled out of the way.

"Oh! Oh, my goodness! I'm sorry! I'm sorry," Emily wailed, bursting into tears.

"Gracious, are you okay?" Mrs. Wilson asked, her voice full of concern.

Callie struggled to regain her footing. Her face reddened with embarrassment. Emily sobbed even louder.

"Here, sit," someone said, pushing Callie sideways into a chair.

"No, she needs to lie down," Mrs. Wilson insisted, grabbing Callie's hand and pulling her toward the parlor.

Wanting to calm everyone, Callie suppressed a wave of nausea instead as hands and voices and bodies crowded around her. Her knees gave way as her skull began to throb and she dropped back into the chair.

"The first thing you should do is stop the bleeding," a lone voice of reason broke through the commotion.

The group silenced and parted to find its source, discovering two strangers standing in the parlor. Everyone froze, startled to see them. Heaving a frustrated sigh, the younger of the men retrieved a handkerchief from inside his jacket and stepped forward. He pressed the handkerchief to Callie's forehead to stanch the blood seeping from her hairline.

Callie blinked up at the man, the bright sunlight behind him shading his features. His touch was gentle as he brushed back a wayward strand of her crimson hair that had slipped out of place. His dark eyebrows, straight as arrows, furrowed as he studied her injury.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room as the guests stared at Callie and the stranger. The second man sliced through it with a clap of his hands, drawing all attention to him.

“We’ll take care of this, folks,” he said through his thick mustache. “Let’s give her some space and get you out to start your day.”

Callie wanted to glance at the guests as they filed out, to smile at them with reassurance that everything was under control, but she couldn’t look away from the stranger whose tall and tapered frame towered above her. It wasn’t until he crouched next to her chair and peeled back the handkerchief that she could study him up close.

His bronzed features would not have been more perfect if they had been sculpted in marble, she mused. Tan and chiseled, his strong square jawline was punctuated by a cleft in his chin. His skin was smooth, freshly shaven, and she inhaled the mingled scent of soap and leather that lingered around him. His dark hair lay neatly against the nape of his neck.

As Callie’s eyes trailed back to his, she was startled to realize he was watching her. She felt her face flush with embarrassment for being caught looking at him in such a way but couldn’t pull herself from his warm chestnut eyes. They smoldered with flecks of black and gold, adding depth and dimension that made her want to gaze into them for hours.

Something indescribable passed in that moment that left Callie wondering if the air had evaporated from the room. It was a sensation unlike any she ever experienced, and she feared she would either lose consciousness from

the sudden lightheadedness or give in to the surprising urge to slip her fingers around her rescuer's neck and pull his mouth toward hers.

Emily's stuttered sob broke the spell as she continued to cry for the accident she was sure was entirely her fault. The older, mustached man took Emily by the shoulder and moved her into the parlor.

"Thank you for your assistance, sir," Callie murmured to the handsome stranger at her side, feeling in control of her faculties once again.

Her fingers brushed his to hold the handkerchief on her own. She started to rise. The man sprang up first, cupping her elbow as she stood. She stepped to the side, attempting to break whatever spell she was under by putting distance between them.

"You'll want to keep pressure on that," the man said. "The cut is small, but head wounds bleed a lot. You might end up with a bruise and a welt, too."

"Thank you," Callie said, counting each sharp throb that erupted under the handkerchief. "Now, is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, we were just going building to building to see if anyone needed assistance," the man said. "Looks like our work here is done."

It wasn't until he smiled that Callie realized he was teasing.

"Oh," Callie said, as embarrassed for not catching his joke as she was for dwelling on the way his long, lopsided grin and the glint of humor in his eyes made him all the more attractive.

*What's the matter with you? she chided herself. Stop acting like a schoolgirl.*

The man looked from Callie to Emily and back again, as if unsure whom to address.

"We're here to rent a room. Two of them, actually."

“We were told to ask for Miss McKenna,” the mustached man added, looking expectedly between the two women.

“I am Callie McKenna,” Callie said, extending her free hand to the mustached man. He introduced himself as Thomas Mulgrew.

“And this is my associate, Tanner Slade,” he said by way of introduction.

Callie shook his hand, too, thanking him again for his assistance and assuring them both that meals at McKenna House usually ran more smoothly.

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Tanner hardly heard the red-haired beauty as their hands pressed against each other in the pretense of formality. Instead he could only repeat to himself the same thought he had voiced the night before.

*This just got complicated.*

There had been no mistaking her as the same woman he followed to the creek, but Tanner had held out hope until that moment that she was a hired girl rather than the boardinghouse owner. He found her even more beautiful in the daylight.

“We’re friends of your brother’s,” he heard Mulgrew say.

The expression on Callie’s face dropped like a stone. Snatching her hand from Tanner’s, she took a step back and stiffened her spine.

“I would recommend the Hotel de France, then. Perhaps even Forest House. I’m sure they would be much more to your liking,” she said.

She sounded pleasant and even smiled as she said the words, but Tanner could tell it was forced. His life as well as Mulgrew’s relied on detecting subtle differences in a person’s demeanor, and the message Callie sent was clear: the men were no longer welcome. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“So, there are no rooms available here?” Tanner asked.

“No, there are!” Emily interjected, nodding enthusiastically. “Remember, Callie, Mr. Davies and Mr. Francis left yesterday? We have exactly two rooms open.”

The young woman smiled for the first time, relief shining from her earnest, tear-stained face.

Callie didn't miss a beat.

“Yes, exactly two rooms open. But, you see,” she continued, a look of concern furrowing her brow, “Sean hasn't been home in years and I'm sure won't be any time soon. So there really is no reason for you to feel obligated to stay here. The other establishments are closer to the center of town and I'm sure will be much more suited to your needs.”

Noticing a few guests lingering at the edge of the parlor, listening to the conversation, Tanner wagered they were the reason for Callie's feigned concern and veiled attempt at declining their patronage. He took advantage of it.

“I could not imagine there being a more perfect establishment for us to stay than this!” he boomed, raising his arms in a grand gesture to accentuate his point. “We'll take those rooms!”

## Chapter Two

“Never sleeping,” the men said in unison, raising their glasses to each other with their standard toast, a tradition of sorts.

Tanner downed his drink with a few large gulps. Mulgrew sipped at his. They needed to clear the dust from their throats after hours sweeping the area for any sign of Sean McKenna. The dingy saloon they chose wasn't a place either man would normally frequent, but it was a necessary selection given the duty they were charged with completing.

It had been two days since they officially arrived in Peshtigo, half a week if one counted the days they had spent moving unnoticed in and around town. It was their standard operating procedure: slip into an area and pick up the person they were assigned to apprehend or find an unsuspecting family member or friend to lead them to the person. If luck wasn't on their side, which was appearing to be the case in Peshtigo, they would wait it out.

Neither Tanner nor Mulgrew could recall the last time that happened. Their typical leads were solid, their work wrapped up quickly. This was different, and both men were resigned to the near certainty that they were in for a wait neither of them wanted.

Sean had not come home to Peshtigo, he hadn't been through the area in some time, and if his sister's reaction was any indication, he wouldn't be welcome should he appear. While disappointing, it was not surprising. A man would need to be exceptionally stupid or exceedingly arrogant to commit the type of crime Sean was suspected of and expect to hide in anonymity in his hometown.

Tanner didn't know whether he had been sent to Peshtigo for voicing that opinion to his superiors or for his assertion within earshot of the city's newspapermen that the murder Sean was accused of had been a favor to the good people of Chicago. Either way, his superiors were far from pleased. Jonathan Lawrence Hughes may have had secret ties to corrupt union bosses and the city's emerging organized crime syndicate, but as far as the masses knew, he was a respected figure in Chicago's financial district with connections to top local politicians and elite businessmen. That a large sum of his clients' money had disappeared when he was killed meant a lot of people – upstanding and not – were searching for the murdering thief.

So, while their colleagues were dispatched to cities such as Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and Columbus, Tanner and Mulgrew were dismissed to the least likely place the suspect should turn up: a Wisconsin lumber outpost with an odd sounding name nearly three hundred miles north of Chicago. Tanner added it to the growing list of reasons for his disenchantment with his job of late, and it didn't help his mood that Mulgrew was being punished along with him. If Tanner regretted saying anything to contradict his superiors, it was only because it had taken his partner away from the wife and sons he adored for what was looking to be an extended period of time.

“Evelyn's not going to be too happy about this,” Tanner commented to Mulgrew.

The mention of his wife's name softened Mulgrew's eyes.

“She'll never give any indication of it,” he said, taking a pull of his drink.

It was true. Tanner had never known Evelyn Mulgrew to complain. She cared for her husband, home, and three young sons with a steady hand, taking every inconvenience that came with her husband's job in stride.

“I should be so lucky someday,” Tanner complimented.

“Aye, you should,” Mulgrew said, folding his arms on the table and leaning in toward Tanner. “With a certain redhead perhaps.”

Tanner scoffed at the remark. Callie’s begrudging treatment of them from the moment they said they were her brother’s friends made it clear that they were unwelcome. What was it about their supposed association with him, contrived as it was, that struck such a nerve with her?

He shared the thought with Mulgrew. What he kept to himself was to wonder how much of the tawny haired beauty was hidden below the surface. She presented a prim and proper front, that of a young woman who was steady and respected and to be taken seriously, yet she liked to slip off in the middle of the night to swim naked.

That image of Callie in the water, her wet shoulders glistening in the reflected moonlight, was something else he kept to himself. It had taunted him ever since, but he had yet to tell Mulgrew about it, feeling it was something meant to stay private.

Tanner shook his head to clear his thoughts, grateful they had made progress elsewhere with their work. They had found Callie and Sean’s aunt, Bridgette Flannery, miles from town at the McKenna farm, where they received a warm welcome that never wavered when they claimed to know her nephew. If anything, she had taken an even greater interest, insisting the men sit for fresh pie and tea.

“Should Sean show up, we would like to surprise him,” they had told her. “Could you help us with that?”

They had equal success with the Northwestern Railroad supervisor, who had been only too happy to accept the large roll of cash they presented.

“And all I do is tell anyone askin’ that yer engineers for the next part of the line expansion?” he had asked,

disbelief giving way to excitement as he grabbed the money and licked his thumb to count each bill.

With those meetings behind them for the day, Tanner leaned back in his chair, signaled for another drink, and surveyed the establishment. It was early evening and the room was filling fast with men eager for alcohol, card playing, and the company of the women who kept rooms on the second floor for customers interested in more than conversation.

“What’s on your mind, Slade? A certain redhead?” Mulgrew asked, unable to resist a second friendly jab after yet another woman sashayed past with a wink and smile for his younger partner, only to have her overtures ignored.

Tanner said nothing but tapped his boot in time to the music coming from the piano, his way of letting Mulgrew know he was ignoring the question.

Mulgrew sat back dejectedly and took another slow sip from his glass, disappointed he couldn’t goad his partner into the conversation. “Maybe I should stick close to her while you trail the aunt,” he offered in one last effort at a reaction.

“Not a bad idea,” Tanner muttered, knowing his words weren’t heard over the din of the room.

Then something caught his eye.

Glancing at Mulgrew, Tanner tipped his forehead toward the far corner of the room. The older man rolled a look in that direction. Men stood along the long bar. Others sat with women in their laps. A few groups gathered around large tables, cards in hand.

Two men, though, were pacing near one of the card games. One was tall and whip thin, the other stockier with a large jaw and protruding forehead. Judging by the way their eyes kept darting to one player in particular, they were either waiting for a move to be made or to make a move themselves. When one of the more well-endowed women sidled up to the taller of the men and he nudged her off

without so much as a glance, Tanner and Mulgrew slid from their chairs.

Taking separate paths through the now-crowded room, Mulgrew went to the end of the bar and leaned against it. Tanner moved to the corner of the room and zeroed in on a woman who was hovering nearby but not paying attention to the game.

“Who’s winning?” Tanner leaned in and whispered in her ear, dodging the big black feather jutting from her bright blue hat.

The woman perked up when she stopped chewing her fingernail and looked at him.

“I think I might be,” she said, hooking her arm through Tanner’s and smiling to reveal a missing tooth.

Tanner asked for her name and made small talk while keeping the two men in his periphery. They stopped pacing, but the shorter of the two couldn’t stand still. He would watch the card players, glance at his partner, then look back to the players. When he glanced again, and the taller man gave one small nod, Tanner sprang into action.

“Excuse me,” he said to the woman, moving her out of the way.

As the shorter man slid a pistol from inside his vest and made his move, Tanner stepped between him and the card players, throwing his forearm into the man’s throat and sweeping his legs out from under him.

Mulgrew was in action at the same instant, pressing the point of his gun against the taller man’s ribs. “Don’t try it, son,” he said low and evenly.

The bartender came over to investigate. Standing on his toes and peering between shoulders, he eyed Tanner and the man on the floor before looking up to the second-floor balcony and waving an arm. People parted as a thick behemoth lumbered down the stairs, glaring at Tanner the entire way. The woman with the black feather squeezed past and whispered in the bartender’s ear. Nodding, he

pointed to the man on the floor, then shoved his thumb toward the door.

“That one, too,” Tanner told the guard as he peeled the shorter man from the floor.

“Looks alike you earn some free drinks,” the bartender said to Tanner and Mulgrew, smiling and wiping his hands on his apron.

## Chapter Three

Callie knew she didn't have time to reach the gun she kept in the closet.

Grabbing the lamp off the table in the second-floor hallway instead, she ran to the edge of the landing and stopped at the top of the stairs. She had no idea who would be coming in so early in the morning. It wasn't unheard of for someone to wander through the wrong door as they stumbled home from one of Peshtigo's numerous saloons, but Callie knew she needed to be prepared if it was something worse.

Tightening her grip on the lamp's heavy marble base, she lowered herself from one step to the next, careful not to make a sound. Whoever was coming in was making great effort to be equally quiet, turning to muffle the latch with his hand as he closed the door. Seeing the man's hulking outline in the pre-dawn light made Callie's racing heart thump in her ears. She fought the urge to run the way she came, knowing a house full of sleeping guests were entrusting their safety to her.

She began to recite Psalm Twenty-Three in her mind as she reached the final stair. *The Lord is my shepherd...*

The man's back was to her, and Callie tried to find confidence knowing she still had the advantage of surprise. She raised the lamp above her head. Her hands trembled. Her knees began to shake. Then the board beneath her creaked.

Sailing through the air before she could take a breath, Callie found herself pinned against the door, one large hand pressed firmly over her mouth while the other held her wrists above her head. She still clutched the lamp.

“Shhhh,” the man urged in the dark. “You’ll wake everyone.”

Callie shut her eyes and bit down hard, pinching flesh between her teeth.

“Ouch! Dang, Miss McKenna, it’s me,” a familiar voice growled while yanking his hand away.

Callie’s eyes flew open.

“Mr. Slade? Are you crazy? I could have hurt you!”

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Tanner snorted. He’d been ambushed by men three times Callie’s size and made it through without a scratch. He’d been shot and stabbed, cut, bruised and battered, yet the wisp of a woman was worried about hurting him. The idea amused him.

“If this is how you greet all your guests, it’s not my sanity you should be questioning,” he retorted.

“It’s exactly how they deserve to be treated if they sneak in during the middle of the night, reeking of the saloon,” she said, sniffing loudly for emphasis.

Heat radiated between them as Tanner continued to hold her against the door. Feeling her warm ragged breath on his throat and her racing heartbeat against his chest, he realized he liked getting a rise out of Callie McKenna almost as much as he enjoyed the feel of her body against his. He was just grateful he realized it was her while she was still in midair. One second later and he could have seriously hurt her.

Tanner wished the morning sun would break the horizon so he could read the expression in Callie’s luminous juniper eyes. He wondered, with her usual composure gone, which emotions were registering on her face. Fear? Anger? Anticipation? Did she still look as poised as the image she so carefully maintained, or had she morphed into the fiery-haired seductress who had taken up residence in the recesses of his mind?

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“Not that the rest of my guests would do such a thing,” Callie said when the silence stretched too long without Tanner responding. She wished he could see her face. There would be no mistaking her disapproval and anger.

She knew she should have never agreed to rent rooms to the handsome stranger or his associate. Regardless of being respectably employed and sent to oversee railroad expansion through the region, as they explained to the other guests the night before, they were friends of her brother. That association far outweighed the rest.

Callie hadn’t seen Sean in five years, since before their father died. It was good riddance as far as she was concerned. Now that Tanner had verified her suspicion that, like her brother, he was less than upstanding, she felt within her right to tell him to find another place to stay.

Only the words wouldn’t come. Try as she might, Callie couldn’t say what was on her mind. Her body seemed to override all rationale, paralyzing her ability to speak while fixating on his closeness. His breath brushed across her forehead as they stood inches apart in the dark, the broad expanse of his chest skimming her chin.

“You’ll never find a husband with this kind of hospitality, either,” he said, baiting her further.

“Then it’s a good thing I never intend on marrying,” she sassed in return.

“In that case remind me to show you the right way to defend yourself with one of these sometime,” he said gruffly, plucking the lamp from her fingers as he released his grasp on her wrists.

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Leaving Callie against the wall and heading up the stairs, Tanner slid the lamp back on the table and ambled toward

his room. Waiting until he was out of her line of sight, he sniffed his shoulder. Callie was right. He reeked from the saloon.

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Callie slid to the floor and looked heavenward to summon control. As much as she wanted to blame her shaking hands and weak knees on fear turned to anger, she knew they came from having Tanner Slade under her roof.

Her mind had been out of control since the moment he entered the boardinghouse, and she could no longer blame the flush of heat she felt when he was around nor the tingling of her skin to the knock she had taken to her head. In the two days since they met, Callie's stomach fluttered with anticipation at breakfast, at supper, and when she was walking past his room – whenever there was the chance of seeing him. She was keenly aware of every movement she made in his presence, knowing she had never been so preoccupied with any guest – or any man – in her life.

Hearing Emily moving in the kitchen, Callie forced herself to stand.

“Enough of this,” she chided herself. “He will not be a distraction.”

She hoped she could make herself listen.