

Excerpt from Haunted Hearts

By Kimberly Dean

A yawn caught Callie unexpectedly as she pulled a mug out of the cupboard. Yup, a cup of cocoa and then bed. It had been a long day, and she needed to get an early start tomorrow. Tonight had given her plenty of inspiration for her column, and she wanted to get the ideas written down while they were still fresh in her mind.

She opened the refrigerator door.

And groaned. "Not again."

There was barely enough milk left for breakfast. She sighed in disappointment and bumped the refrigerator door shut with her hip. It was time for yet another trip to the grocery store. With all the physical energy she'd been exerting, her appetite had kicked into high gear. She was practically eating herself out of house and home. Half the time, she didn't even remember eating the food.

She put the mug back into the cupboard. She might as well just go to bed. Maybe another blanket would help fight the chill running through her bones.

"Phantom fever," she said, her lips quirking.

As exciting as the football game had been, she could feel her adrenaline waning. She hurried through her nightly routine in the bathroom, alternatively shivering and yawning. She was grateful when she closed her bedroom door and felt actual warmth coming from the heating vents. Ernie's cousin had yet to figure out the cause of the cold spots around the house, but it always felt comfortable in here. Quickly, she changed into her pajamas and slid under the covers.

"Ahh."

That was the thing about painting. It used muscles a person had forgotten she had. Climbing onto the roof of the porch today certainly hadn't helped, but she'd wanted the blue trim around the porthole window of the attic to be as fresh as the shutters.

Just remembering that treacherous climb had her pulling the covers to her chin.

She'd gotten the oddest sensation up there. Almost as if she were being watched again... Only this time, it had felt different.

"No doubt by Laurie Hughes, waiting to see me break my neck," she muttered. She rolled onto her side. She liked David, but his mother was a real piece of work.

Click.

The sound cracked through the darkness like a gunshot.

Callie sat bolt upright in bed and reached blindly for the lamp. In her haste, she nearly knocked it over. When she finally found the switch, the light made stars dance in front of her eyes. Anxiously, she looked through the red blotches until she could focus on the door across the room.

It was locked.

Locked.

This time, there was no doubt. The latch had turned... by itself. She could see it from where she sat.

“No way,” she whispered. Her adrenaline kicked back into gear, and her heart thudded.

Determinedly, she pushed back the covers. Her bare feet padded a quick rhythm across the hardwood floor. She hit the wall switch, and the overhead light flooded the room.

The lock was a deadbolt—odd for a bedroom—but it was firmly set. She wrapped her fingers over the thumbturn, but it wouldn’t move. “Oh, come on.”

She’d oiled that thing *specifically* so this wouldn’t happen again.

“I did not just trap myself in my own bedroom.” Wouldn’t that just be the talk of the town? She could practically hear everyone laughing down at Mamie’s about the dimwitted big-city girl.

She wiped her hand on her pajamas and tried again. No luck.

She’d heard of locks freezing up, but not like this. It had been fine two minutes ago, and it wasn’t like she’d slammed the door shut or anything. She frowned as she looked more closely at the lock. It wasn’t old like the rest of the house. In fact, the finish on it gleamed. One of the more recent tenants had to have installed it. Frustration set in, and she grabbed the knob with both hands. “Don’t do this to me. Damn it!”

She slapped her palm against the door. She had tools, but they were upstairs in the room she’d decided to make her office. She turned to look around the room. There had to be something she could use to get herself out of here.

She’d only taken one step away from the door, though, when the handle began rattling.

Callie pivoted like a top. Her heart slammed into her throat, and she jumped backward, coming up hard against the dresser. A scream built in the middle of her chest, but it lodged there when another sound came rolling down the hallway. Thin and high. Otherworldly.

What in God’s name was *that*?

The sound grew in strength and seemed to resonate in the walls. She stumbled further away, but stopped in her tracks when she heard footsteps. Loud, heavy footsteps, right outside her bedroom door.

Somebody or something was in her house!

“Oh no, help me.”

She dove for her phone on the nightstand and dialed 911. Scooting away until her back was pressed firmly against the far wall, she stared at the door, praying now that the lock would hold.

“Nine-one-one. Please state the nature of your emergency.”

“Someone is in my house,” she said hoarsely. “They’re trying to get into my bedroom!”

“What is your address, ma’am?”

“Twelve fifty-five Highland. In Shadow Valley.” She didn’t know how the emergency system worked in small towns like this. How far away was help?

“Do you know this person?”

“No! Someone must have broken in.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes. Please send someone fast. I don’t know what to do.”

“If you can, lock the bedroom door. Barricade it in some way.”

The laugh that left Callie’s throat was a bit hysterical. She had the locking part down.

“Ma’am?”

She gripped the phone like a lifeline, but her thoughts scattered. Could she move the dresser? Not without pulling out all the drawers first. What did she have that she could use to protect herself? Her tennis racket? It was still packed in one of the boxes in her living room. Sweat broke out on her forehead until she noticed the lamp sitting right beside her. It was heavy. She ripped the cord out of the wall and curled her fingers around its base.

“Ma’am? Are you there?”

“Shhhh!” Callie hissed. She was listening for the footsteps. Where were they? She couldn’t hear them. Where had they gone?

And that hair-raising noise—*where was it?*

“Stay on the line, ma’am. Just stay calm.”

Calm? Was the woman high?

“Is there anyone else there with you?” the dispatcher asked.

“I’m alone.”

“We have officers on the way.”

Knowing that didn’t help. “I won’t be able to let them in,” Callie said in a rush. “I’m locked in my room.”

“I’ve made the officers aware of that. Just stay where you are.”

But she didn’t *like* where she was.

Her grip on the lamp became slippery. What was she going to do if somebody came through that door? She was staring at it so hard that her eyes were going dry. What if they burst through, and she dropped the lamp? What if—

A tap sounded on the windowpane behind her.

She screamed. Whirling around, she lifted the lamp up high.

“Callie, open up. It’s Chief Landry.”

Landry! She dropped the lamp onto the table with a clatter, and the phone bounced on the bed as she dove for the window. She pulled back the curtains, lifted the shade, and found herself face to face with him.

“Oh, thank God!”

“The latch,” he said, pointing at it.

He’d used her ladder. Bless him. Quickly, she undid the lock. The window stuck when she tried to pull it up, but her adrenaline surged. She gave a hard yank, and the window screeched although it only lifted a few inches.

“That’s good enough,” he said. He squeezed his fingers through the opening and forced the window open wide enough for him to climb inside.

Callie had never been so happy to see anyone in her life. Without thinking, she lunged at him.

“I’m locked in,” she babbled as she grabbed his shoulders with both hands. “The lock turned, and when I went over to open it, it wouldn’t move. I tried everything I could think of, but I couldn’t get out. But then it started shaking *on its own*.”

“Callie, breathe.” Landry dipped his head so he could look into her eyes. “Are you all right?”

“No! There’s someone in my house! They tried to get in my room!”

His look turned hard as he glanced at the door.

She dropped her voice to a stage whisper. “There were footsteps, but then this other noise came down the hall. I didn’t know what to do. *I don’t know what it was.*”

“You did exactly the right thing. You called me.” The muscles in his arms were tense, but his gaze gentled when he looked at her. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“Yes,” she said. That was an excellent idea.

His gaze ran down her form. Her pajamas weren’t sexy, just a Red Sox T-shirt and shorts, but she wasn’t wearing a bra. And her legs were bare.

“Here,” he said, plucking her robe off the foot of the bed. “Put this on.”

He slipped the robe over her shoulders and shoved the slippers he found on the floor at her, all while placing himself between her and the locked door.

“Did you hear anything after the noise?” he asked. “Any doors slamming? Which way did the footsteps go?”

Callie fumbled her slipper. He thought the intruder might still be there.

“Toward the kitchen,” she whispered. “I think.”

She suddenly realized how cold she was. The temperature in the room was freezing, and opening the window certainly hadn’t helped. She jammed the slipper onto her foot. All she wanted to do was take one more step toward her rescuer and absorb all the heat she felt surrounding him, but he was in full cop mode.

“We’re going out the window,” he said.

She nodded. Window. He was full of good ideas tonight.

“You first,” he said.

She cinched her robe tight and turned, but froze mid-step. It was jet black outside. Not even the moon was out. Shadow Valley was steeped in darkness.

“I’ll be right behind you,” he said, nudging the small of her back.

He’d better be. Taking a steadying breath, Callie crawled out the window. She gripped the ladder tightly as Landry held onto her arm and searched blindly for a metal rung with her foot. When she found it, it was so cold that her foot nearly cramped. She forced herself to make her way down the ladder. Wet grass clung to her legs when she touched the ground, and she shuddered.

Landry was close behind her. She stepped away to give him room, but the moment he was beside her, she reached out for him. Screw cop mode; he was big and tough, and she was scared. Her hand tangled in a strap of his bulletproof vest, and she held tight.

“Chief.”

Callie spun around and stepped back. She collided against Landry's chest, and his hand automatically settled at her waist.

"It's just Officer Raikins," he said.

The flashlight pointed at them dipped, and a skinny, red-haired policeman approached them. "The front and back doors are secure," the man announced. "Locked."

Callie felt Landry's look turn on her.

"I want you to wait in my truck," he said.

"But..." She really didn't want to be alone.

"Now." He reached into his pocket and handed her the keys. With one hand planted firmly on the small of her back, he escorted her to the big black 4X4 he'd left on the street. "Lock the doors. If you see anything or anyone, lay on the horn. If somebody approaches you other than me or Officer Raikins, drive straight to the police station."

"Chief—" she said weakly.

"I'll be back as soon as I can."