

Your Special Preview of
Callie of the White Sand

Prologue

Callie bolted awake, suddenly aware that something in the house had changed. It was quiet, almost eerily so. Then someone downstairs began coughing loudly. She let out the breath she had been holding. Clearly it was just her asthmatic older brother getting his nightly drink of water.

She tried to relax and allow sleep back into her mind, but the five-year-old sensed something else was wrong. Jamie was still coughing and it sounded like someone else was too.

There were two bedrooms in the converted attic of their one-hundred-year-old house. She and her three-year-old sister, Libby, shared the northern attic bedroom and her brothers, Jamie and Timothy, seven and nine, shared the southern bedroom. Their parents slept in a bedroom downstairs, at the rear of the house.

The house was a wonder, a maze of steep staircases to the attic and basement and charming, high-ceilinged rooms surrounding a large, central kitchen. It was completed on the outside by a wraparound porch with spindled railing and a proud, steep roofline. The eaves made the attic walls slanted, giving their rooms a cozy feel. Their parents dreamed of someday restoring the historic house to its original glory.

Callie loved it as much as they did. She spent many nights in her room, sitting at their wide, multi-paned bedroom window, reveling in the silk-padded window seat, dressed up in her grandmother's old clothes, and pretending that it was the "olden days" and the house was brand new and she was its lady.

Now, though, she thought the normal yellow cast by her moon-shaped nightlight looked eerily orange. The air tasted of the time Timothy had made her try to eat his dirty sock. Thinking of it made her sick to her stomach. Perhaps she needed a drink of water too.

Careful not to disturb Libby, she slipped from her bed, her calico nightgown sweeping the floor. She padded to the closed door and swung it open. A sea of white fog greeted her, curling around her ankles, obscuring the oak floors beneath it. The floor felt hot, which was odd, because normally the cold of the wooden floors compelled her to fairly sail across them, seeking the braided rug at the top of the stairs.

It was with a deep breath and the coughing that ensued, that Callie realized what the white fog was. It was smoke! Mrs. Stokes had talked about house fires in their Kindergarten class. They had talked about what to do if they had one in their own home. Was that what was happening here?

Callie could hear her sister begin to cough in the room behind her. She closed the door so that the smoke wouldn't continue to choke Libby. Stifling her own coughs, with tears beginning to stream down her face, Callie tried hard to conquer the sudden fear that was overcoming her with every step. She needed to save her brothers and her sister. She summoned all of the bravery a five-year-old possessed.

Callie ran the remaining fifteen steps to her brothers' room. She wasted a minute with knocking and then she realized that they might be asleep and that she needed to rouse them more forcefully. She flung open the door. Through the thick haze of smoke, she could see that Jamie's bed was empty. It must have been his coughing that she'd heard downstairs.

Timothy was asleep, but coughing that same irritated cough that she felt torturing her throat.

He was groggy as she roused him. She shook him and then finally, yelled at him that he needed to come with her. There was a fire!

Timothy awoke fully at the mention of fire and his instincts as Callie's older brother took over. He led her quickly back to her room and scooped up tiny Libby in his own arms. He took them both past the hallway bathroom to the top of the staircase.

What greeted them there was the most horrific scene that Callie would ever recall. The stairs were afire, the flames licking at the low, shag carpet and sending more blackened smoke their way. The house had begun to groan under the duress of fire and it was clear that their way out was completely impassable. Timothy quickly reversed his path to the girls' bedroom. He called for Callie, but she stood, mesmerized by the crawling purple and red flames. They seemed to whisper to her. What were they saying?

A sudden blast of hot air through the staircase blew her black hair off her shoulders and startled Callie into running back to her room.

Timothy was working on the window. An unfortunate byproduct of living in an old house was that the window casings had many layers of paint. They had never opened the bedroom window and now it was apparent that the reason they hadn't was that it was painted shut. Timothy was using the full capacity of his nine-year-old brain when he threw Callie's wooden stool through it, intent on bringing fresh air to their suffering lungs and on finding a way to escape.

His only mistake had been choosing the girls' room as their escape route. The wraparound porch roof extended around the Southern and Western sides of the house. The boys had a clear view of the roofline below them and they had often pondered whether they could get out of the house this way.

Timothy realized his mistake, and cleared away the cloth he'd put under the door so that they could all run back across the hallway to the other room. He opened the door to a blast of heat. The fire had spread to the upstairs hallway. There would be no way across now.

He and Callie quickly closed the door to the fire, which was now roaring menacingly closer to their location. They replaced the bedclothes under the door and, with Libby in tow, took themselves over to the window seat, where they commenced to screaming out the window and taking in gulps of fresh air.

The nearest neighbors, though, were more than half a block away. Their nice big house had come with an expansive lawn and a border of beautiful poplar trees blocking the wind from the North. They couldn't be seen or heard from where they were.

Callie prayed that their parents would be able to rescue them. Why hadn't they ever gotten a ladder to get out of their room, like their teacher had talked about?

It seemed like hours, though it really was only minutes before the three of them began to succumb to smoke inhalation. The open window only seemed to attract more smoke from below and their little lungs couldn't take the onslaught.

Callie felt consciousness slipping away, which was merciful, because the floor on which they sat was burning through also. Her perch at the edge of the window seat became an opening into the fire's abyss, but she was barely conscious of the slow singing of her arm and torso. She let out an unconscious sigh of pain as the right side of her face became unbearably hot.

She saw a light in the distance. Could it be a fireman coming finally to rescue all of them? She tried to move toward the light, but it seemed more rapidly to be moving toward her. She reached for it.

Then she was snatched away, cruelly, the cold air of the fall night hitting her seared skin, creating a fog of pain like she'd never felt. Glove-shod hands handled her small body lightly, but quickly. She was put into an ambulance. There were now lights everywhere. Was she alive?

She slipped into the arms of oblivion as the ambulance crew tried fervently to save her fire-ravaged little soul. They would have their work cut out for them, for Callie's battle was only just beginning.

*T*he arsonist had watched as the flames licked the curtains inside the window. The propane torch did its job nicely in lighting the front door and doorframe. Then he noticed the kitchen window, open just a crack. Still, he was pretty sure by the peeling paint and absence of vehicles outside the house, that the home was empty. He threw the blowtorch inside the open window. 'That's enough for now,' he thought. 'Time to become an observer.'

He looked around again for signs of occupancy. No family car out front. No bicycles leaning against the front porch railing. No barbecue on the porch. Still, there was a garage out back and he'd had no luck getting in. He had thought about torching the garage. Flames were flames and he got a rush no matter what, but he had

taken one look at the stately, ancient Victorian on a Sunday drive weeks ago and, since, he had longed to see it encased in an inferno, flames licking the gingerbread trim, defining each carved rail on the wraparound porch. He had imagined it would be gorgeous—the hottest parts of the flame glowing fuschia and indigo, warming even his frigid core, if only for a few precious moments.

So he went for the house. He got back to the truck. Everything was just as he had left it in the cab. Time to go for a drive, find the fire station, wait for the call to come and watch the volunteer firefighters rush about. Time to follow them, at a safe and sure distance.

The Victorian was just as he had imagined it, every careful detail of the porch alight as the flames licked across it. Lattice lit in a criss-cross pattern, the edges glowing orange as fuel met fire. He let the blaze dance in his eyes from the seat of the truck, then he nonchalantly made his way among horrified neighbors. People gathered around fires like bees to honey. He found he could always blend among spectators. Only these people weren't exclaiming over the terrific beauty of a wasted, abandoned structure. They were talking about the 'Jones' family. Somebody lived here. It was then that the screams registered in his buzz-addled brain. It sounded like children. It sounded as if they were dying. He blanched.

He'd made a mistake.

Chapter One

Jamie and Timothy often came to her at night, all full of mischief, their eyes dancing with tales of train robbery and bounty hunting, like they'd seen on Dad's western TV shows. They had big plans when they grew up and they would most definitely be the bad guys, because outlaws seemed to have the most fun.

Timothy, though, being the oldest would inevitably reason that they were unlikely to find a train to rob nowadays. The commercial railway didn't really carry rich people much. If people had money, they traveled by private airplane. And if Timothy, Jamie, and Callie bounty-hunted, they would essentially be chasing themselves, since they wanted to be outlaws.

There wasn't time for big plans in the wee hours of the night anyway. They would have to settle for a smaller brand of tomfoolery. What if they booby-trapped the stairway so that Mom's heart would get to thumping good when she came to get them up in the morning? That could be accomplished. Jamie, Timothy, and Callie put their heads together while Libby slept. No sense waking the baby.

They had the whole thing rigged so that when Mom stepped on the fifth step, the fishing line that they poised just an inch above the tread would initiate a chain reaction that would ultimately bring her face to face with Callie's sock monkey. Only the monkey wasn't wearing his usual face. For good measure, Jamie put his vampire mask over the monkey's head. That ought to give her a good, first-thing-in-the-morning rush!

The boys' room was slightly closer to the staircase than the girls', so they decided to wait out the morning in the hallway outside the boys' door. They would doze, but just for while, until nearer to the target time. They wouldn't want to miss the expression on Mom's face.

Callie thought she could hold out until morning, watching her brothers sleep, keeping her eyes open so that she could be the hero and wake them up when she heard the customary toilet flush that signaled her mother's early rise. But, her eyes would sink, despite her every attempt to prop them open. And her brothers would vanish again, just as they had seventeen years before in a haze of smoke and pain.

Callie woke up in her hut, the mosquito netting swaying in the early morning breeze, the tangy, salty air assailing her nostrils, the fresh morning sun beckoning her to her daily ritual—an early walk on the white-sand beach. She felt as she always did when she lost sight of her peaceful, sleeping brothers—bereft, and tired, always so tired, as if she really stayed up rigging the staircase.

Too sad, too spent to cry, again, for Jamie and Timothy and Libby and their parents, Callie moved silently

through her morning routine. She sliced papaya, bought from the market the day before, appreciating the luscious fruit as it satiated her hunger and reminded her how very far she was away from the real world. She poured a glass of bottled water and washed down her morning toothpaste and her medication.

After a mild painkiller took effect, she stretched away the stiffness that the scars bound into the surface of her skin.

She stepped to the doorway and took in the beauty of the sunlit beach and the cerulean blue water that slipped quietly to and fro on the shore. She traveled barefoot on the silky white sand, feeling its morning coolness in contrast to the tropical sun. Since she was on the leeward side of the island, she could walk a short distance to a point where the beach was gated off outside the shipbuilders' marina. The rest of the walk was open to her enjoyment. The white-crowned pigeons kept her company. Other than that, she had complete solitude.

Callie came to Belize six months ago. She came as a volunteer for the home health clinic run by the country's only hospital. It was a bid to end her isolation in the States, to venture out among new people who didn't know about her past or about her scars. She had worked in home health care in the Seattle area for a time after finishing high school; but inevitably, the people she worked with would figure out who she was and what she had done.

Belize City would afford her obscurity, she thought. She didn't need to work and she could have just quit working altogether, but Callie had spent most of her life between the ages of five and fifteen completely left to her own devices. She wanted to be around people, and the idea of working with poverty-stricken elders and children in the remote country of Belize appealed to her sense of charity.

Callie didn't quite anticipate the animosity most traditional Belizeans felt for young, attractive American women. She was ogled regularly by the men and repeatedly rejected by the women because their society believed American women were promiscuous and untrustworthy.

The other home-health aides at the clinic refused to befriend her with her pale skin and dignified manner. They were suspicious of her and her intentions. The doctor overseeing the clinic thought Callie interesting, indeed. He was the first to discover her scars. Callie was careful to wear long, full, loose clothing to stay cool and to protect the scars on her arm and torso, which weren't entirely surgically corrected. They needed to be kept from the sunlight.

In her third week at the clinic, the doctor found her in the storage area consolidating medications from free samples that had been shipped. She was opening small bottles of diabetes medication and pouring them into a larger bottle, which would last a month for each patient. He came behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders, his groin planted firmly against her buttocks.

"You can let the nurses do that work, Callie. I can think of more important things for you to do."

She'd closed her eyes and remained silent, trying to will him away from her before the others noticed his attention.

"Beautiful Callie. I need to go to the Madison Hotel to meet a visiting colleague. Won't you join me? I'm sure he would be impressed by you."

"I told Ismelda that I would finish up this shipment so we could get rid of some of the bigger boxes. They're cluttering the storage room." Still, she did not face him, but tried in vain to step away from the heat of his arousal. He stank of sour rum and body odor. The bile rose in her throat.

"I just sent Ismelda to check blood pressures at the Mission. She won't be back before the end of the day."

"I'm sure, Doctor, that she would know if I neglected the duties she assigned me for the day."

"I'll talk to her," he assured her, his breath brushing her ear as he lowered his hands from her shoulders and ran them up and down her arms.

Callie cringed even now, as her skin crawled, remembering the shame of that day. She kept her steps steady as she flushed again with mortification that the middle-aged doctor, upon feeling the uneven skin on her arm, turned her quickly and ripped open her gauzy blouse. What she recognized in his eyes as filthy arousal changed immediately to horror and then to regret. As Callie watched the emotions assail his face, she reacted quickly by pulling her blouse shut with one hand and slapping him with the other.

Callie never went back to the clinic, but she had no family in the States anymore. She wasn't ready to go

home, wherever that was. The Belizean Cayes offered her solitude while she figured out what she was going to do. She chartered a boat to Caye Caulker, a remote island with low-key tourism and private, friendly natives; and she rented a bungalow on the beach. The island natives may have gossiped about the white girl, but they all kept a polite distance. As long as she followed their carefully laid rules about island conservation, she was welcome.

Her short retreat extended to a month-long stay and now she wasn't sure she would ever go back to the States again. She took to journaling and going for short swims and walks when she felt restless. People had caused Callie nothing but trouble and she wasn't sure she had been so smart to feel that she needed to be among them.

She was anchorless, shifting through life like a buoy without a chain. Callie was intelligent and creative, but her attention span had been altered by her traumatic childhood and surgeries too numerous to count. She dreamed of a job that could finally channel her artistic energies. She didn't so much want to be alone, but to surround herself with intimate friends who knew about her past, but didn't judge her by it. Did she want love, romance? Well, who didn't want to be loved?

Callie pondered her solitude once again, her feet kicking up sand, her eyes on the clouds of an approaching tropical storm, when her lack of attention sent her sprawling into the arms of a man who had laid himself on the windward side of a tuft of sand and grass. Callie's beach had been invaded and her distraction had just gotten the best of her.

