

A WAGER
with the
MATCHMAKER

A SHANAHAN MATCH
Book 3

Jody Hedlund

"Jody Hedlund's novels are a joy to read."

—ELIZABETH CAMDEN, RITA and Christy Award-winning author



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1

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

JUNE 1849

*S*he had no work and no place to live. Again. Alannah Darragh rubbed the rag vigorously over the grand piano that took up the center of the parlor. It didn't need dusting or polishing. The dark reddish wood was already so shiny she could see her reflection in it. But she had to stay busy, or worry would rise and strangle her.

Mrs. Christy's humming filtered into the parlor from the front hallway where she was boxing up the final items that would be shipped to New Orleans. The housekeeper didn't have a care in the world since she hadn't been dismissed. She'd been asked to stay and maintain the home while the O'Briens were gone—however long that might be, perhaps months. The coachman, Mr. Dunlop, was also staying.

Mrs. Christy expected that Captain O'Brien would keep his wife out of St. Louis and away from the fearsome cholera until it was no longer a threat. Maybe Mrs. O'Brien would

even reside in New Orleans until after her wee babe was born in the autumn.

Whatever the case, the O'Briens no longer needed an extra domestic servant, not when the future was so uncertain.

Alannah paused and pressed a hand to her throat, as if that could somehow ward off the tightening and the feeling of suffocating. A breeze floated in through the open side window, fluttering the loose strands of her pale hair that weren't tucked under her maid's cap. For early June, the warmth of summer had already descended, turning the O'Briens' home into a sweltering oven.

'Twas only in the early morn—like now—or late in the night that the air was tolerable and more like that of her native Tralee in County Kerry.

She closed her eyes and envisioned the rugged rocky coastline, the warm sand on the beach squishing between her toes, the salty ocean breeze caressing her face, the rhythmic waves crashing onto the shore.

Heat stung behind her eyes. Ach, if only she'd never come to America . . . maybe then her younger brother would still be living. Maybe she'd still be with her cousin Hugh, who'd been her closest friend. Maybe she would have eventually been hired as an editor at the newspaper with him.

But there was no sense in crying now, so there wasn't. What was done was done.

She opened her eyes to the beauty of the parlor with the all-new furniture, elegant in the upholstered cream color that contrasted the cherry wood. The damask draperies were a pretty pale blue Mrs. Christy had said matched Alannah's eyes. With exquisite lantern globes, pure silver candleholders, and vases of freshly cut flowers, the parlor was lovely—

just as lovely as all the other rooms Mrs. O'Brien had recently redecorated.

To be sure, it was the nicest home Alannah had ever stepped foot in. 'Twas a shame the job hadn't lasted more than six weeks.

Of course, Mrs. O'Brien was a kind lady and had told Alannah she could stay as long as she needed until she could secure other employment. Mrs. Christy had assured her of the same.

But after just one day since the captain and Mrs. O'Brien had left, there was already nothing to do.

Besides, Alannah couldn't live on charity. She'd had to do that enough over the past couple of years before leaving Ireland, and she loathed the prospect of being beholden to anyone ever again.

The simple fact was, she had to find another job right away, preferably one as a domestic. Then she'd have a new place to live and plenty to keep her busy.

But how could she even begin to go about finding a position? She had no connections, no friends, no relatives—other than Torin. Even though she'd told her older brother yesterday of her need for another job, he wasn't a miracle worker.

With a sigh, Alannah moved from the piano to the cream-colored mantel above the fireplace. She dusted a lovely silver-framed painting of a steamboat on the river before she moved to the ornate clock.

At a firm knocking at the front door, she stilled, her rag growing idle. Who would be calling now that the O'Briens had left the city?

Her pulse ticked a faster beat in time with the mantel

clock. After two months since the incident with Shaw Farrell, surely she didn't need to be afraid of being captured.

Regardless, she sidled next to the bay window overlooking the front of the house. She peeked past the drapery but couldn't see the stoop at the top of the entry stairs. Only the short-trimmed grass of the front yard was visible and the gravel drive leading to the carriage house and stable at the back of the property.

Mrs. Christy ceased her humming and opened the front door. "May I help you?"

"Oh, aye." The response belonged to a young man, a voice Alannah didn't recognize. "I'd like to speak to Alannah."

Alannah froze, and her heart switched to double time. Someone was here to see her? Why? Had Shaw Farrell finally discovered her whereabouts?

The notorious gang leader couldn't have. She'd been so careful to stay hidden, to remain invisible, to never go anywhere.

Maybe someone in the Farrell gang had spotted her leaving St. Louis two weeks ago during the fire, when scores of people had fled to the countryside and away from the inferno. Even though it had been night and she'd been in the carriage with Mrs. Christy and Mrs. O'Brien, 'twas still possible she'd been seen.

Or maybe one of Shaw's men had glimpsed her returning to St. Louis a couple of days after the devastation. She'd ridden back in the same carriage, again with Mrs. Christy and Mrs. O'Brien. It had been daylight then, and she'd stayed as far from the carriage windows as possible.

"Alannah is working at the moment." Mrs. Christy's tone turned firm in an obvious attempt to send the visitor on his

way. 'Twas kind of Mrs. Christy to be looking out for her. Alannah had never shared the details that had forced her into hiding. But Mrs. Christy was a right sharp woman, so she was, and had likely drawn her own conclusions.

Panic began to make a trail through Alannah. Her gaze darted around the room. Was there a place she could hide? In a closet? Behind a piece of furniture?

The sofa was too close to the wall, the piano was too out in the open, the chairs in front of the fireplace wouldn't provide enough cover.

"I only need to speak with her for a few minutes," the man persisted, his voice calm and kindly.

Shaw had been calm and kindly enough during their first encounter too. She'd only been in St. Louis a week back in March, had no employment, had nothing to do, and had wanted to explore—even though Torin had warned against going out of the tenement.

But the apartment and the entire tenement where he'd arranged for her to stay had been crowded and dirty and falling apart. She should have been grateful for a place at all when others were living in shacks in alleys or sleeping in hallways or even setting up tents along the river.

She'd tried to stay inside, tried to be content with her corner spot and one of her books. But her Tralee blood had pulsed with the need to see the sky and the river and anything that would remind her of home.

During her exploring, she hadn't been able to view the sky through the permanent haze of coal smoke. The river-front had been crowded with steamboats, and the Mississippi River had been muddy. So she'd walked the two miles to the glass factory where Torin worked. There the city was

less crowded, trees and grass and flowers grew in abundance, and she could see the sky clearly.

She hadn't heeded Torin's pleas not to come again. Instead, she'd walked the distance every afternoon, having located a park where she could read and pretend she was back in Ireland just for a short while. Then when the glass factory whistle signaled the end of the workday, she waited for Torin outside the factory, and he accompanied her back to her tenement.

It wasn't until the end of the week of her routine that Shaw approached her, once at the park and then while she waited outside the factory the following day. Both times he'd made it clear he thought she was beautiful and was interested in her. And both times she'd tried to make it clear that she wasn't interested in return.

When Shaw had stopped her again the next week, she'd ignored him, but he wasn't the type of man to tolerate that. "Hey, beautiful." He'd sauntered toward where she stood near the entrance of the glass factory. "It's your lucky day."

She pretended to keep reading. But when he stopped just inches from where she'd perched on the steps, she was left with no choice but to acknowledge him. He had a boxy head with light brown hair and was clean-shaven with a thin scar above his lips. As he peered down at her, his eyes were filled with only one thing—lust. She'd seen it enough to know.

"Sorry, mister. I don't believe in luck."

"Well you will now." He chortled, and several of his big, burly friends laughed. "Lots of women want me and would marry me. But I'm gonna let you have the honor."

Indignation stiffened her spine. She'd had proposals of marriage before, but none quite like this. "No, thank you—"

He reached for her, and his massive hand circled her upper arm. Before she knew what was happening, he jerked her to her feet and pressed his mouth to hers.

She was so taken aback that she stood frozen in place for a moment while his lips plied against hers. She felt nothing in response, not even an ounce of attraction.

At a roar, from the corner of her eyes she could see Torin exiting the factory. He was shouting curses and careening toward Shaw. His blue eyes that matched Alannah's radiated with murder, his face was flushed with rage, and he already had both of his knives out.

With a strength she'd had to cultivate over the years, she wrenched herself free, raised a hand, and slapped Shaw across his cheek.

Shaw was no longer paying attention to her, however. Instead, he unsheathed a knife of his own, along with a revolver.

"No!" she screamed, grabbing on to Shaw's arm.

He shoved her, and she stumbled away, far enough to see that the factory owner, Kiernan Shanahan, had exited and was glowering almost as much as Torin.

Several of Torin's friends and fellow factory workers latched on to his body and held him back. At the same time, Shaw's bodyguards jerked him backward too.

"You owe me," Shaw shouted, as he wrestled to free himself from those restraining him.

"I paid off my debts," Torin called.

"No one ever walks away from the Farrell gang," Shaw's

expression turned lethal. “Not unless they pay the right price.”

Torin had joined the Farrell gang when he’d first arrived in St. Louis last summer because Shaw had promised him employment, steady food, and safe housing. In a place so far away from home and family, Torin had been hungry and sick and vulnerable. He’d needed friends, and Shaw and his gang had made him feel wanted.

Too late he’d realized the Farrells were involved in crimes and illegal activities that had nothing to do with making a better life for anyone but themselves. Torin’s conscience hadn’t allowed him to be a part of their crimes any longer. Finally, he’d broken away from the Farrells and joined the Saints Alley gang instead.

He’d known that severing his connection with the Farrells would put him in danger—maybe eventually cost him his life—but he’d been willing to sacrifice to live more honorably.

“There is no right price.” Torin spat the words at Shaw.

“Oh, there’s always a right price.” Shaw cocked his head at Alannah. “I want to marry your sister. That’s the only payment I’ll accept.”

“No!” Torin thundered.

Shaw’s lips had curled up into a grin. “Give her to me, or you’re a dead man.”

Torin had spewed more curses as Shaw and his men left. Once they were gone, Torin had asked his boss for help in hiding Alannah. Much to their surprise, Kiernan had made arrangements for her to work as a maid for his sister Enya, Mrs. O’Brien. Alannah had come to the O’Briens the next day, and she’d been in hiding there ever since.

She wanted no part of Shaw's plan, not only because she wanted to protect herself but because if she fell into Shaw's clutches, it would kill Torin.

With her heart pounding out a fresh urgency, she studied the parlor again, her gaze snagging upon the draperies. Could she hide within the folds? They were thick enough that if anyone glanced into the room—and didn't look too closely—she might be able to remain undetected.

Another breeze rushed in the window and fluttered the elegant material.

The window. Maybe she ought to sneak out the side window. Then she could race around the back and hide in the carriage house. Mr. Dunlop would surely do his best to keep her safe.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Christy said, "but I cannot allow Alannah to be away from her duties for even a moment."

Alannah started across the room toward the window. The kindly housekeeper was buying her time, and Alannah couldn't squander it.

"Her brother sent me."

Alannah halted midstride beside the piano. If Torin had sent this fellow, he'd be safe. Maybe he'd even relay news of another employment opportunity.

"I'm Bellamy McKenna. My da is Oscar McKenna, the matchmaker."

Bellamy McKenna? She hadn't met him before, but she'd heard about him through Mrs. O'Brien. As the next in line to take over for his da's matchmaker role, Bellamy had recently started forming matches. He'd brought together Captain and Mrs. O'Brien's earlier in the year. Alannah had never seen a couple as in love as those two.

Apparently, Bellamy had also found a lovely match for Mrs. O'Brien's older sister, Finola, and Riley Rafferty. Soon Bellamy would be tasked—if he wasn't already—with finding Kiernan a match. Not that Kiernan needed a matchmaker. His auburn hair and dark blue eyes were fetching, to be sure. With his chiseled features, brawny build, and the dimple in his chin . . .

Alannah stifled a dreamy sigh. He was the most perfectly handsome man she'd ever laid her eyes on, so he was.

In addition, he was kind and fair and decent. He paid his employees well, and he also took an interest in them beyond just their work for him. When one of the men feared he'd lose his apartment and his family would be homeless, Kiernan had found him a place in one of the Shanahan tenements. When another fellow had been sliced by glass at the factory and required stitches, Kiernan had paid the doctor's fee.

When Torin had needed help, Kiernan hadn't hesitated. He'd not only found her the maid position, but he'd stopped by on occasion to check on her. Even the night of the fire a couple of weeks ago when he'd raced into the neighborhood to see how his sister was faring, he sought her out and made sure she was safe.

Kiernan Shanahan would make some lucky lass a good husband. And Bellamy's job of finding that lucky lass would be easy.

"I know who you are, Bellamy McKenna," Mrs. Christy said, her tone still unyielding. "If you give me your message, I'll pass it along to Alannah."

Alannah straightened and resituated her lacy maid's cap.

There was no harm in meeting with Bellamy for a few moments, especially if he had news from Torin.

She crossed to the door, her leather half boots tapping a hard rhythm, even against the plush rug. She exited into the entryway painted a fresh bright cream and that contained more of the same pretty blue accents as the parlor.

Bellamy, standing in the doorway and holding his tweed flat cap, shifted his attention to her. With swarthy skin, dark hair, and dark brown eyes, he was much more good-looking than she'd pictured. Even attired in simple, worn garb—wool trousers, white shirt, with a vest and coat—he had an enigmatic and charming aura about him.

“Top of the morn to you, Alannah.” He was taking her in too—not lustfully but in a more calculated way, as if he was intending to find a match for her, which was a silly notion altogether.

Torin wouldn't do that without asking her first, would he? For that matter, how did Bellamy know she was Alannah and not some other maid?

Mrs. Christy's sweetly rounded face was wreathed with concern. Twenty if not thirty years older than Alannah, the housekeeper had wispy, grayish hair in a loose topknot and brown aging spots on her cheeks and nose. She wore the same style of dark frock and white apron as Alannah, with a similar starched white collar and cuffs.

She planted her hands on her ample hips and frowned at Bellamy. “I'm doing my best to send the fellow on his way.”

“'Tis alright, Mrs. Christy.” Alannah gave the woman what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “I'll meet with him.”

Bellamy didn't wait for Mrs. Christy to agree. He stepped into the hallway and closed the front door behind him.

"You're sure?" Mrs. Christy raised her brows, clearly not understanding why Alannah would visit with a fellow after the past weeks of shunning all interactions.

"Rightly so." At least as sure as she could be.

"Shall I stay?"

"I'll only visit a wee minute." Alannah said it as much for Bellamy as Mrs. Christy.

He didn't respond as he watched the exchange. Instead, he leaned back against the door and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

Mrs. Christy began to walk toward the rear of the house, leaving the trunks open with the remaining items beside them still needing to be packed. As she reached the dining room door, she paused and lifted her brows again at Alannah to ask if everything was okay.

Alannah gave her a quick nod, hoping to convey reassurance.

Once the housekeeper's footsteps faded into the dining room, Alannah tucked her hands into her apron pockets. Her fingers brushed against the hard cover of a small book, a collection of short stories by Edgar Allan Poe.

She traced the embossed lettering along the spine and waited for Bellamy to say something.

He studied her as if he was trying to see right into her mind. He couldn't do that, could he?

She plunged her hands deeper into her pockets to keep them from trembling. "You said you had a message for me from Torin?"

"No, not a message."

“Then whyever did Torin send you? Surely not to set up a match for me.” A scoffing laugh slipped out.

Something glimmered in Bellamy’s eyes. “Oh aye, your brother came to me secretly last night and is wanting to marry you off.”