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# HEATHER GRAHAM



## A VERY KREWE KIND OF VALENTINE'S DAY

"Graham is the queen of romantic suspense, and her latest is proof that she deserves the title."

-- "RT Book Reviews on Flawless"

*A Very Krewe Kind of Valentine's Day*

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Valentine's Day approaches quickly, and Angela and Jackson are ready to spend it at home with their children when they're called out to Deadwood, South Dakota. The widow of an old friend of Adam Harrison is under investigation—the body of a man who had disappeared is found in her car. It turns out that he has been dead some time—the same amount of time since the death of her husband.

The two had been friends, and with no other suspects on the horizon, Fiona Larkins is all that the police have.

There is a mysterious child in the mix, one who gave Fiona candy in the parking lot right before disappearing as careening cars crashed wildly into one another—and the body appeared in hers.

With video and the help of the mysterious child and her more mysterious friend, the two just might find the truth in time to celebrate the day with the love—and strangely bestow it on others as well.

HEATHER GRAHAM

A VERY KREWE  
KIND OF  
VALENTINE'S  
DAY

Prologue

Valentine's Day.

Bah, humbug.

Not the right sentiment, but Fiona Larkins was tired of trying to smile as she maneuvered her way through masked-but-giggling couples in the drug store as they looked at the row upon row of Valentine's chocolates, stuffed toys, cards, candy and more.

Really, what difference did it make if she smiled behind a mask? Ah, well—a lot. People smiled with their eyes, Reggie had once assured her. She felt a real and bitter-sweet smile tug at her lips.

Reggie.

Always a romantic!

*And gone almost eight months now. And it was almost Valentine's Day and it was going to be the first she'd have without Reggie in decades.*

Time to be pragmatic, get in line, pay for her items, and get home, and off the streets.

She imagined that even in a pandemic, the jewelry stores were going crazy. People would be telling themselves they'd be fine in the restaurants and casinos; they'd be laughing and hugging, and . . . it would be painful. She wasn't resentful; she just missed Reggie.

She had finished her purchases and neared her car when she felt a tug on her sweater. Looking down, she saw a girl of about nine or ten.

The little girl gave Fiona a sweet and beautiful smile.

"For you!" she said. "Because you're a beautiful, sweet lady, and you need to know you're loved from near and far!"

She produced a red-heart box of candy and thrust it into Fiona's arms.

"Thank you!" Fiona said. She'd always loved kids and this one was adorable. She had bright green eyes and brown ringlets and that smile . . .

Still, where had the kid come from? And the candy?

"But, sweetheart, I—" she began.

"Oh, it's paid for, I promise!" the little girl said. She smiled and lowered her voice and was suddenly intense, "You need to go. Go, go, go, now!"

Then she stepped back, smiled sweetly again and headed through the rows of parked cars.

As she disappeared, Fiona cried out with worry. "Hey, stop!" Two cars were coming through the lot speeding in a ridiculous manner to get to an empty spot.

She heard the screech of tires and a terrible smashing sound and then the rip of metal against metal.

She thought the kid might have gotten caught between the cars, and she raced toward the site of the wreck. In her hurry, she slammed into a tall man who steadied her and held her back.

"Hey, little lady, where are you going?" he asked.

She was so anxious she barely looked at him. He was big, heavily muscled, and had a grisly, unshaven face—with facial hair twisting out of his mask. He wore a hat and had light eyes and . . .

She had to get by him!

"There's a kid out there, let me go!"

Fiona could be fierce. She slammed a foot down on his. He yelped in pain, his hold on her easing. She pushed past him.

Others were also racing toward the cars. It was chaos.

She thought to dial 911.

Cops had been in the vicinity. Even as the masked crowd forgot all about social distancing and moved in—all trying to be helpful and tripping over one another instead. Still, the police quickly brought

it all under control, getting the crowd back, checking on the drivers who argued about who hit who, and who was at fault.

Fiona could have left; should have left.

But she couldn't find the kid, and she wanted to make sure the little girl was okay.

She went from officer to officer seeking the child, but no one had seen her. Each officer vowed if they found an unescorted child, they would take the necessary steps to find her parents and see that she was safe.

At last Fiona returned to her own car.

That was when she found the body of the man, dead, she thought for some time, and yet . . .

There he was. Bloodied and gray and broken and smelling of death.

#### Jackson

"The Romans were totally bonkers!" Corby said.

Jackson Crow, driving home from the zoo with his wife and kids, glanced quickly over at his son through the rearview mirror.

"Bonkers, huh?" he asked.

"Want to clarify?" Angela asked, swinging around from the passenger's seat to look at her son.

"Kwazee!" the baby said, lifting her hands in her car seat and smiling.

"Valentine's Day!" Corby said.

"Oh?" Jackson asked, glancing quickly over at Angela.

"He's top of his class in reading!" Angela said. "Tell us about the Romans being bonkers," she encouraged.



Corby looked up from his book they had just purchased at the gift shop. He'd bought one on the animals that were at the zoo as well; but with Valentine's Day coming up and his parents about to depart, he'd been fascinated by the one on the approaching holiday.

"Well," he said, "you know how it's all flowers and candy and cards and people all lovey-dovey now? According to my book, it came from a couple of Roman things. First, there was a pagan ceremony in the middle of February. And it was weird! Priests sacrificed goats and maybe a dog or two, skinned them and made lashes out of the skins, dipped it all in the blood—and then they beat women with the bloody-wet lashes!"

Jackson grimaced.

"That's eleven-year-old reading material?" he asked Angela.

"Hey! He's advanced," Angela said, giving him a weak smile in return.

"Your mother never would have stood for it," Jackson assured Corby.

"Oh, no! They wanted to be hit. That meant they could have babies! They all got lovey-dovey for the next few days, and they soaked the ground with blood, too. Yuck!"

"That is part of the history," Angela murmured. Of course, she knew he was paraphrasing what he was reading.

"The pagan ceremony Lupercalia," Jackson said quietly. "But—he's eleven!"

"Then!" Corby said. "They believe there were at least three men named Valentine or Valentino who died cruelly, executed for their beliefs, and they were canonized by the pope or popes of the time. And then it was all combined—a way to get rid of the paganism—and gradually through history, the holiday became one that just meant flowers and candy and being lovey-dovey. Way back in the middle ages, they started making paper cards to give to one another. But guess when it all got really big?"

"When Americans got in on it?" Jackson said dryly. "Good old capitalism helps any holiday along."

"You bet!" Corby said. "In the early twentieth century, American greeting card companies started in with beautiful and extravagant cards and . . . there's nothing like some good commercialism to make for a good holiday, huh?"

"So true," Jackson agreed.

"Kwazee!" Victoria Sophia repeated. She was a year and a half now. Certainly not speaking in real and comprehensible sentences yet, but she did love to embrace words.

Angela turned around to look at Corby. "I'm sorry dad and I have to go out on assignment, Corby. We should be with you guys on holidays."

"Mother," Corby said. He seldom called Angela mother—it was usually Mom. "I'm proud people need you even on holidays. And the baby and I both love Mary—not more than you, of course—but we do fine with her. And it's not like Christmas or my birthday. It's a weird kissy-face kind of holiday. You should go off together. Well, I mean it would be neat, I guess, if you were just going off together. But I know it's work . . . and Valentine's Day came from a bunch of weird old animal sacrifices . . . ugh! Wow! Lovey-dovey day from killing goats—and maybe a dog or two. Anyway, dad—"

"Have no fear. I'm not killing goats. And your mother is a trained agent. She'd get me good if I came after her with a bloody animal pelt," Jackson said.

He and Angela grinned at each other quickly. Then he winced. They'd just gotten the call from Adam that morning asking them to go out as a favor. It wasn't really a Krewe case, but since Adam Harrison had founded the Krewe—and they both respected him for all he did and loved him as a human being—they were always more than happy to help him.

Corby laughed.

"Hey, really, it's cool, not to worry. I'm going to be doing video time with friends on Valentine's. We have a whole at-home-hot-chocolate-party thing going on. And the baby and Mary and I will Face Time with you!"

Jackson marveled at their adopted son. Corby had managed to travel his way through numerous foster homes and a tough first decade of life—and still came out of it all as a sweet, bright, kid able to hold his own against bullies and be kind to those who needed kindness.

He was also the perfect child for Krewe agents.

He, too, had the ability to see the dead.

Something he brought up now.

“So, whose ghost is causing all the crazy?” he asked.

“At this time, we don't know about a ghost,” Jackson said.

“Another friend of Adam's is in trouble. Well, the wife of an old friend,” Angela explained.

“And you're going where?” Corby asked.

“Deadwood,” Angela said.

“Dead wood—they have haunted trees?” Corby asked.

“Deadwood is a—”

“City, yeah, I know. Just teasing!” Corby said.

Angela glanced quickly over at Jackson. He grinned in return. Then he explained, “Adam had a friend named Reginald Larkins. Reginald was, according to Adam, an extremely fine man. He worked with Adam raising funds for children's hospitals. They both especially admired St. Jude's and Shriner's hospitals. Reginald had been a tech wizard. He and his wife had no children of their own, but they loved kids.”

“I like Reginald already,” Corby said.

“Well, we don't know that . . . he stayed,” Angela said. “We just know his wife is in trouble.”

“I'll bet you see him. I'll bet he'll help her. So?”

"A man who had disappeared a year ago was found dead in her car," Angela explained. Corby was too young for this kind of thing, but he knew what they did on the job—and knew they were called out for justice for the living and the dead.

"Oh. But she didn't kill him?" Corby said. "Not Reginald's wife. Well, not unless he was hurting a child—she might go after someone if they were hurting a child! But no, she didn't do it. Why do they think she did it?"

"Well, she's under investigation because it was her car," Jackson said. He glanced at Angela. He knew while they were often honest with him, there was only so much they wanted to say.

Jackson glanced quickly back at Corby. His son was nodding thoughtfully. "You better get us home fast. I'll bet you Mary is already there, waiting. And we'll be fine."

Mary was the aunt of Axel Tiger, one of their Krewe agents. Her home was South Florida, but she spent at least half the year in Northern Virginia, happy to be near her nephew, and equally happy to find herself needed at the Crow household.

"She'll make you all kinds of chocolate delicacies, I'll bet," Angela said. "Probably better than my attempts."

Corby laughed. "I was not about to say that!"

"Hey, it's okay," Angela assured him.

They had reached home. And as Corby had said, Mary was waiting. So were the dogs.

Jackson reflected on their life—and their family. One of the dogs was flesh and blood. One of them was not. But he was a happy ghost dog, a good companion to the living dog, and he had once proved himself to be invaluable when they were working on a case. When it was over, he just decided he was moving in with them.

Hard to say no to a ghost dog.

But they had taken longer at the zoo than they had intended; and while the plane they would take belonged to their unit of the agency, they kept to schedules. They snuggled and hugged the baby who thankfully loved Mary, and then they snuggled and hugged Corby. They thanked Mary for her timely arrival and then headed out of the house.

It wasn't until they were on the plane that Angela opened her computer to go over the details of the case.

"Okay, so. William Darcy disappeared from Deadwood just as the pandemic was starting. He was fifty-six, not married, no children. He worked in a packaging plant and no one noticed he was missing until he failed to return to work when his two weeks of vacation were over. He lived and worked in Rapid City but was apparently a frequent visitor to Deadwood. He'd stay at whatever hotel was offering him the best deal in gambling money."

She grimaced over at Jackson.

"There's not much we have on the victim. He was apparently a loner."

"Is there any record of him having scored a big win?" Jackson asked.

She shrugged. "I'd be a happy gambler with it. He won a jackpot for five thousand and change. He was staying at the Don Diego on Main Street. Adam has us booked there," Angela said.

He was looking at his own notes. "I'm looking at Fiona Larkins. She and Reggie married when they were in college. They were apparently devoted to one another. Reggie was just a few years older, but he died of a heart attack just last year. According to Adam, Fiona and Reggie had to say goodbye to one another through an iPad. All those years together . . . and goodbye through an iPad. It's heartbreaking."

"He didn't have the virus."

"No, but the hospital couldn't allow visitors at the time."

Angela nodded and looked out the window. "So hard for so many!" she said softly.

Jackson nodded. "Reggie made big money, but Fiona taught until two years ago when she chose to leave before retirement. That didn't matter—they were financially fine. They have a home about a mile away from Main Street and the center of Deadwood." He grimaced at her. "Too bad we're on a case. I'm fond of Deadwood."

"So, you've been before?"

He nodded. "I have. From there, you can travel out to see Mt. Rushmore. You can visit the graves of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok at Mt. Moriah Cemetery, and there are fantastic museums, Native Art and western expansion history. The town was founded when gold was found in the southern Black Hills."

"Wild Wicked West!" Angela murmured.

"They do have some fine restaurants. Maybe we'll have a wickedly wild Valentine's dinner!"

She grinned. "Maybe. Back to Fiona. Why would the widow of a man we know to have been a generous philanthropist kill a visiting gambler? And how was he killed?"

"Medical Examiner's report is interesting. The body is heavily decayed. He believes the cause of death was a heart attack."

"Then maybe . . . he just died."

"And pulled himself up to sit in Fiona Larkins' car?" Jackson asked.

"But still—"

"Adam said the detective on the case is investigating it as a probable homicide—and that puts Fiona on the line. According to Adam she's still mourning her husband; and with no children, friends, or close relatives, I guess she's feeling frantic."

Angela smiled, lifting the cup of coffee she was drinking to him. "So. We will do all we can to help solve a murder that might not have been a murder."

"Why her car?" Jackson said softly.

"And how did whoever do it get a rotting corpse into a car in a drug store parking lot?" Angela asked.

"I spoke with Detective Briggs briefly."

"And?"

"Those are the questions he's asking. There was chaos there before the body was discovered. Two cars sped for one parking space and ripped into each other. Of course, anyone near was first trying to make sure the drivers and passengers were all right; and then I guess many turned into rubbernecks, watching the drivers fight with each other."

"Was that all a decoy, do you think?"

"Hard to say. Detective Briggs said he couldn't find a connection between either of the drivers and the victim."

"Well? Any connection between Fiona Larkins and the victim?" Angela asked.

"No. But—"

"But?"

"There was a connection between the victim and Reggie Larkins," Jackson.

"Who is dead!"

"Yes, but that's why they're taking double looks at Fiona."

"What was the connection?"

"The two men liked to gamble together when William Darcy was in town."

"Oh."

"And there's one other thing," Jackson told her thoughtfully, studying the notes on his tablet.

"What's that?"

"A missing girl. Well, missing to Fiona. She said she would have been gone before the crash, except she was stopped by a little girl who wanted to give her a box of candy."

"Okay, who was the little girl?"

"No idea," Jackson said. "According to Fiona, she disappeared into the rows of parked cars.

Fiona went after her, frightened for her when she saw the cars."

"So, a kid was sent out to lure her away from her car?"

"Either that or a kid just wanted to give her candy. That again leads to—why?" He reached across the table that was set between the rows of chairs facing one another, business style, and smiled.

"I'm thinking to grab a few hours sleep. But you know, Valentine's Day is coming, and it would nice and warm and comfortable—"

"You just want to sleep on my shoulder," Angela said dryly.

"Well, that too."

Laughing, she joined him. They wouldn't arrive until night. They'd be met by Detective Briggs and brought out to their hotel, and he'd see they would have a rental car by morning. He'd fill them in the best he could.

They were lucky they could land at a small private airfield closer to Deadwood than the bigger airports.

Briggs was there to meet them. He was a man of about forty; and like Jackson, he appeared to be of mixed Native American and old European descent. He was both serious and pleasant.

In the car as he drove them, he repeated much of what Jackson had known already; but it was good to hear it all again.

"I'm one of the few men on the force who didn't know Fiona Larkins before this event," he told them. "That's one of the reasons I've been assigned the case. No preconceived beliefs—but she's impressive. She's fifty-two and looks fifty-two, but she's beautiful in it with soft silver-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a gentle way about her. I just don't believe she had anything to do with the death of



William Darcy. She had been in the store, and she was seen leaving and going to her car. She didn't have any—um . . .”

Briggs paused to grimace.

“Dead guy stuff on her. And that was one nasty corpse. That's the thing, the body was preserved and still rotting. Rotting enough inwardly that the medical examiner can't be sure there were no poisons or stimulants that might have caused a heart attack. If it wasn't murder, someone was . . . sick. Holding on to a corpse. The whole thing is bizarre. But my assignment is to find out just how William Darcy died and where the hell he's been since he died.”

“What is the medical examiner's estimate on time of death?”

“Six to eight months ago. In fact, he quite likely died right about the same time Reggie Larkins died, and . . . well, hell, none of it makes any sense. Then you bring the mystery of Fiona insisting there had been a little girl in the parking lot. So, can't say I'm sorry you're here.”

“We're not officially invited,” Angela began. “I know Adam spoke with you and we're extremely grateful—”

“Oh, yes, you are invited. I'm inviting you right now. Okay, truthfully, my chief is more than happy to have fed help on this, too. Why not? It's crazy—bring in the guys known for crazy, right?”

Angela glanced at Jackson.

They shortly reached Main Street, and Jackson smiled as he watched Angela's wonder. Deadwood had suffered some major fires, but the street truly gave the appearance of the Old West.

“I could drive you further—” Briggs said.

“This is perfect. We have little rolling bags. The hotel is just ahead,” Jackson said.

Briggs left them. The pandemic was on, and it was late. There were people on the street, but it wasn't particularly busy.

Most were wearing masks and social distancing.

Angela was staring at everything.

"Old saloons! It's as if we walked into . . ."

"The Gunfight at the OK corral?" he asked. "Nah, that's Arizona."

She made a face at him. He indicated a door to their left up on an old-style western wooden sidewalk.

She entered through the swinging doors and dead-stopped. Jackson had to smile.

They were greeted by row upon row of slot machines.

"Oh, Jackson, we're in the wrong place," Angela said.

"No, the check-in is on the second floor," he told her. "This is Deadwood, Angela. A gold-rush town come to life—as a kind of gold-rush town."

She rolled her eyes at him and pointed to the elevator.

"I think you had more of my shoulder than I did of yours. Let's get some sleep."

He grinned and followed her through the rows of machines. The room was electric, and this was where William Darcy had last stayed.

Tomorrow they'd be starting with the questions.

Tonight . . .

He hurried after her, smiling as he joined her in the elevator.

"Doesn't it just make you feel electric? On fire?"

She gave him a stern look, but then started laughing.

"Well, it is almost Valentine's Day . . . but don't think about killing any goats on the way up!"

"I think you can trust me on that one," he assured her. He shrugged. "I don't see any goats anywhere."

She rolled her eyes still smiling.

Their jobs could be rough. Heart-wrenching sometimes. Tense at others; downright deadly upon occasion.

They knew to hold tight to the good things in life.

Tonight was going to be a good night.

### Angela

Angela hadn't known Jackson had been in Deadwood before, but she had been aware he loved South Dakota. He loved the wide-open spaces, and he'd often sat at night spinning tales about the old wild west for Corby. He also felt a keen connection with the Lakota people, having grown up between two worlds himself.

She knew she would like to see more of the area herself—once they were able to investigate what had happened.

What had caused the death of William Darcy.

But it was still strange to wake up and come downstairs to the sounds of buzzers and bells. Maybe it wasn't so strange. After all, it was most often the norm in Vegas. She had to admit she hadn't known anything about Deadwood, South Dakota.

But they did need to be downstairs.

They had an appointment with Charles Pinter, the manager of the hotel and casino where William Darcy had last been seen.

They met with him in his office. Thankfully, a closed door there ended the clanging sound of the machines.

Pinter was attractively dressed in what one might consider western formal wear of a tailored shirt, buckskin jacket and vest, and boots. He started to shake hands with them, remembered distancing and stepped back, and they all smiled. "Take a seat, please. I'll tell you what I can."

They sat.

"Mr. Darcy won a decent sum of money right before he disappeared," Jackson said. "I know there are cameras all over a casino. And I'm sure Detective Briggs had you bring it up. But we're wondering if we might be able to see it, too."

"Of course. Thankfully, we keep our video footage from each night well over a year." He shrugged. "In a way, we like to be the wild, wild west. We have some mask mandates out here, and we have some where it's the choice of the establishment. Can you imagine these days? Masked men and women walking up to cashiers and tellers and asking for money? But we're being safe here; masks are a must and we started early—way back soon after the pandemic began. You can offend some people—but having to shut down costs a whole lot more. So, you'll be seeing footage of a whole lot of people in masks."

"We'll take anything we can get," Jackson said, smiling grimly.

"Briggs is a good man, you know," Pinter told them.

"He definitely seems to be," Angela agreed. She smiled sweetly. "He would be welcome with our Krewe. We are all in for help from any other law enforcement agency when it might help get the answers we need."

Pinter gave her a weak smile. "Right. Well, we have a screening room down next to our security offices. We'll do it now. Does that work for you?"

"Great," Jackson said.

They moved down the hall to the viewing room. The screen was large; Angela figured that allowed for casino security to see any little slight of hand.

Charles Pinter spoke to one of his techs asking him to go back to the night William Darcy had won his money.

The footage ran. They saw William Darcy, a man in his fifties, silver haired, with an affable smile and medium build, walk through the casino and stop at a game.

It wasn't a poker game, 21, roulette, or even craps.

He stopped at a slot machine.

The footage was good. Angela could see the machine clearly. There was a choice first to play it as a 1 cent, five cent, ten cent, or quarter game.

Darcy went with five cents.

Then little forest creatures filled the screen, the wolf proving to be wild.

Darcy played for several minutes. He didn't seem to be paying a great deal of attention to his slot game, rather he kept looking around the room. He wasn't, in fact, paying any attention when five wolves filled the screen, and the buzzers and bells began to go off, announcing he had won the major jackpot.

In fact, as casino personnel came to take his I.D. and pay him, he was distracted and still looking around. He smiled and thanked those around him who congratulated him. But he remained distracted, anxious by the time the paperwork on his winnings had been completed.

And when it was done, he stood quickly, and it was almost as if he was forcing himself to try to behave normally, to tip and thank the personnel.

As he walked out, she noted players around him returning to their games. Some people were coming into the casino, some people were going out. Many wore hats—hats and masks. It wasn't easy to identify people.

But Angela clutched Jackson's arm. She couldn't see a face; she couldn't see much. Just the back of a man. A big man.

He might have just been leaving the casino.

Or he might have been following William Darcy out.

Jackson

Briggs arrived while they were watching the last of the video.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Angela might have seen something," Jackson said. "Tall man, at least six-three, and heavy-set, a guy with big shoulders, following Darcy out. Mean anything to you?"

Briggs shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. We don't have anything. Except William Darcy and Reginald Larkins did know one another, and Darcy's body was found in Fiona's car."

"And Darcy, by the medical examiner's estimate, died at or around the same time as Reginald Larkins. You haven't arrested Fiona Larkins, but you are considering her a person of interest," Angela said.

"She's all we've got. But if you're ready, I thought I'd take you out to see her now," Briggs told them.

"Absolutely," Angela assured him.

They left the casino. Jackson smiled, watching Angela as she took in Main Street, Deadwood, by day.

"We have great entertainment here, even in the middle of a pandemic. We have a group called 'Deadwood Live.' They do shootouts—and they even recreate the 'aces and eights' hand that got old Wild Bill Hickok shot. Now, of course, the good guys as well as the bandits in our other shows are in masks!" Detective Briggs explained.

"Hopefully, we'll see something here," Jackson murmured.

They walked down the street and around until they reached Briggs' unmarked car. Jackson insisted Angela sit in front. The landscape was beautiful and varied as they drove, sweeping green hills touched by patches of lowland that was almost desert, rocks and boulders, and flatland.

"It is beautiful," Angela murmured.

Briggs pointed to a rise in the Black Hills. "Where I was born," he said. "Lakota land."

"Nice," she told him.

Fiona's home was nestled in a natural valley surrounded by rich trees and foliage. Two German shepherds were at the gate barking, but stopping to whine and wag their tails when they saw Briggs.

He had obviously been out here before.

He talked into a call box and the gates swung open. They drove in and parked and were greeted at the door by a friendly housekeeper in her mid-fifties.

The home was large, decorated in comfortable western design with a massive brick fireplace, soft leather sofas, and paintings on the wall of Crazy Horse and other renowned Native Americans.

Fiona came down the rugged wooden stairway from the second floor. She was an attractive woman with light eyes and neatly trimmed blond hair that swung around her face. She was dressed casually in leggings and a sweatshirt and stepped forward to greet them, then remembered social distancing and stepped back—and waved.

"Welcome! Adam sent you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Larkins," Angela said. "We're with the unit Adam founded. And Detective Briggs has been helping us."

"A good man," Fiona applauded, nodding and smiling. "Will you have a seat? May I get you anything?"

"We're fine, thank you, but we'd love to talk. To hear everything about the day when the body of William Darcy was found in your car," Jackson said.

She indicated two of the leather sofas that faced each other. "Please. I had just gone to the drugstore. I bought a few things and headed for my car, but before I could leave, those two cars collided, and everyone was running everywhere."

"So, you went to see the accident?" Jackson asked. "Before that, had you been in your car before leaving the store?"

"No, no, I didn't get a chance to get to the car. The little girl was there."

"Little girl?" Briggs asked.

Fiona winced. "Sweet child, and she has to be all right. I mean, we would have heard. She must have been there with her parents. She gave me a box of chocolates, just telling me I was a sweet lady and loved from near and far."

"No child was hurt in or around the accident in the drug store parking lot," Briggs assured her. "But you never mentioned the little girl before."

"She was a sweet child, just giving an older woman who looked sad a box of chocolates. I must have been wearing a sign above my head that said 'widow, no Valentine's for her.' I don't know. But I can promise you that child didn't put a heavy corpse in my car!"

"Okay, but still, I asked you tell me everything," Briggs said.

"It's okay! Really," Angela said gently. "You made your purchases, you came out of the store, but you stopped to talk to the child, and then the crash occurred. And in the time when everyone was running around because of the accident and you returned to your car, someone put that corpse in it."

Fiona nodded dismally. "Yes," she said softly.

"Did you see anyone else?" Angela pressed gently.

"I mean, I saw a ton of people in the parking lot—"

"Did anyone else interact with you?" Jackson asked.



"No. Wait! Well, I ran right into a big fellow. He tried to block my way. But I was so frightened for the girl, I shoved past him."

"A big man?" Angela asked. "How big?"

"Six-three, maybe. But big! Broad shoulders," she said. Fiona looked at them all. "Does that mean anything?"

"Maybe. A big man followed William Darcy out of the casino," Angela said. "Can you describe him?"

"Um—big? Grizzly! He had gray facial hair peeking out of his mask. I'd say he was . . . fortyish? I wasn't paying attention. I was worried about the girl and—oh!"

"Oh?" Angela said.

Fiona was looking away and didn't seem to see her.

"Fiona?" Angela persisted.

"The kid—she gave me the candy. Then she stepped forward and told me to get out of there! And stepped back and smiled as if she'd never said it. But—I promise you the kid couldn't have put the body there!"

"You knew William Darcy," Jackson reminded her.

"Reggie knew him. But yes, I'd met him a few times. He was a nice enough fellow. But" she paused again, remembering, and wincing. "I wouldn't have recognized him!" she said.

"Didn't you think it was strange he disappeared the same time as your husband died?" Jackson asked.

"My husband died here, in this house," she said. "He had a heart attack, and the paramedics were fast and wonderful . . . but it was too late. He—he wasn't with William Darcy that day. Of course, he knew William was in town. They had seen each other the day before. But . . ."

Her voice trailed and she frowned again.

"Reggie had intended to meet with William. He was going to show him how to play craps."

Jackson glanced at Angela; she was looking at him.

"Well, I think we need to find and question this big man," Jackson said. He stood. Briggs and Angela did the same.

Angela hesitated. She took a step closer to Fiona.

"Fiona, please, if you think of anything else, no matter how small or unrelated or inconsequential, please call us!" She handed Fiona a business card.

"I . . . I will," Fiona promised.

Briggs had a strange feeling about the new information. He paused before heading out, "Mrs. Larkins, I know your husband was a very respected man; you're both highly regarded by everyone at the station. Are you safe out here?"

"She's safe. I see to it!"

They turned to see the housekeeper was standing quietly near the door.

Fiona managed a smile. "Nell is more than my housekeeper; we've been friends for ages and ages. And we are careful. No one else comes in here. We have the gate and an alarm system."

"And a pair of rifles, and we know how to use them," Nell said.

"That's good—just don't get jumpy and trigger happy and shoot the mailman," Briggs said.

Nell opened the door. Angela was the first one out, saying "Thank you!" as she left. When Jackson stepped out behind her, he saw she was looking out over the yard. She stepped back suddenly, looking past Briggs who had followed them out, and speaking to Nell. "May I wander the yard for just a minute? It's beautiful—I haven't seen this area before."

"Of course, you're welcome."

Briggs obviously had no interest in looking at the landscape; he knew this area like the back of his hand, Jackson was certain.

"I'll be in the car," he said.

And Jackson really had no idea of what Angela was doing.

But he followed her as she walked around the house. She was hurrying through a grove of trees, and then she stopped.

And he saw why.

There was a child there, a little girl of about nine or ten. She looked as if she was going to run—and do so right through a tree.

"Please!" Angela begged. "We need your help!"

As she spoke, the dogs ran up. They obviously knew the child. They wagged their tails.

The little girl petted the dogs.

She shook her head.

Angela stepped forward, falling to one knee, and speaking softly, "Please, please, who are you? All we want to do is help you, and we desperately need your help."

Tears stung the child's eyes. "I'm caught now. You'll—you'll give me back!"

"Give you back to whom?" Angela asked.

The girl looked at Jackson over Angela's head, suspicious.

"I'm with her," he said quickly.

Angela said, "Honey, I'm with the federal government, and we're trying to make sure Mrs. Larkins doesn't pay for something she didn't do! If you can help us in any way, we'd be so grateful. And if anyone is hurting you, we can make sure they don't!"

"Oh, he doesn't beat me. My stepfather . . . he's just evil and he . . . he made me give Mrs. Larkins that box of chocolate because he was doing something, and he wanted her distracted. See, my mom died of cancer, but she was married to him. He . . . he makes me get money, beg in the street, and he locks me in a room . . . or he did. I hid behind the back seat in the cop car when everything was going

on, and it was the cop car that drove Mrs. Larkins home because the forensic people needed her car. And I slipped out and I've been hiding here. The dogs are wonderful. They cuddle with me at night."

Angela glanced back at Jackson. He stepped forward and came down on a knee, too.

"You knew your stepfather was going to do something wrong?"

"I—I didn't know what. But Reggie warned me to tell Fiona to get away!"

"Reggie?"

The girl looked away and swallowed and tears ran down her cheeks. "No one would believe me. Mr. Larkins. He was such a good man. He and Mr. Darcy were going to file with an attorney to get me away from my stepfather. But then Mr. Larkins had a heart attack, and Mr. Darcy . . . disappeared. But now I think my stepfather killed them both. But . . ."

Her voice trailed. As it did, Jackson looked up.

The ghost of a man stood behind the child, gently smoothing down her hair.

"Clifton Denning is the man's name," the ghost said. "William Darcy and I were working at a fundraiser with giveaways for kids when we met him and Abby here," he continued. "We saw the way he treated her and were investigating him. I think he was watching us at the casino the day before I died—and William disappeared—and died. I don't know what he might have used, but I think he caused the heart attacks. Because we both did die of heart attacks. I saw William briefly before he went on. But I don't know how we'd ever prove it."

Abby looked up at him. "They see you, too," she said with wonder.

"Grown-ups, who never lost their belief," Reggie's ghost said. "Me," he went on to explain to Jackson and Angela, "I'm waiting. When Fiona's time comes, we'll find our way together."

Abby looked at Jackson and Angela and repeated, "You see Reggie, too! So, now you can just go and tell people Clifton is a monster!"

"Oh, sweetie, trust me, no one would believe us either. We have to find something real and tangible in the physical world," Angela said.

"But," Jackson assured her, "we now know where to start."

"And we should get going before Briggs looks for us," Angela said. "But first—"

"Gotcha," Jackson said. "Reggie, if it's all right?"

"You bet," Reggie said. "Please."

They walked Abby to the back door of the Larkins' house.

Nell was waiting. Fiona quickly came up behind her.

"We can't talk long," Jackson said quickly. "This little one needs you. She may have solved the case for us if we can use what she's given us. This isn't legal, but if she's found here, say she was in your yard and you were just trying to find out where she belonged. And you fed her and cared for her."

"We've got it!" Fiona and Nell said together.

Jackson and Angela left Abby in the arms of the loving women and went around to the front.

Briggs was playing a phone game.

He didn't say anything.

Angela pretended to have found a note on her phone.

"Ah ha!" she said.

Briggs lifted a brow and glanced toward her quickly.

"We have several programs . . . anyway, I fed information to our tech team. We may be looking at a man named Clifton Denning."

"Denning!" Briggs said with surprise.

"You know him?" Jackson asked. He hoped the man hadn't played the part of a pillar of the community.

He hadn't.

Briggs had a tense look about him. "Absolute piece of . . . well, you know what. He's been around when all kinds of petty robberies have gone down. And when he was taken in once, he claimed police brutality against my buddy—who had just tried to keep him from slamming his head against the car." He glanced at Angela and smiled. "I'll be happy to pick him up." He frowned. "But, of course, you'll be happy to do the questioning since you seem to know something."

"I don't know if we can get him for murder, but I believe we can get him for laws dealing with the possession of corpses. And then," Angela said, "for child neglect, possibly abuse."

Briggs frowned.

But he didn't speak.

Sitting in back, Jackson thought about the questioning they'd do, how to twist what they knew and couldn't know, and make Denning think they knew even more than they did.

#### Angela

Denning was a big man. And as he sat at the table in the interrogation room, he was not shackled down.

He was just there for questioning.

She and Jackson sat across from him. Jackson had wanted her to do most of the talking. She was still glad he was there. She could hold her own, but Jackson was Denning's height or more and honed to steel from the fitness routine he kept.

It was just good.

"Mr. Denning, we have you on video following William Darcy out of the casino on the day he disappeared. And then months later, when he reappears as a rotting corpse in a car, we have video of you from the drug store," she told him.

"What the hell does any of that mean?" he asked.

She smiled. "We also have video of you watching Mr. Reginald Larkins with William Darcy on the day Reginald Larkins died and William Darcy disappeared. We are going through more video, because one of the bar tenders believed you slipped something into their drinks."

"They died of heart attacks!"

"Abrin," Angela said sweetly.

"What the—?"

"There are several substances you might have used. Cyanide, tetrodotxin—"

"I'd confess now," Jackson said. "The medical examiner has now found the proof in both men, and the casino security is going to find the video of you in the restaurant with your little bottle dropping tiny amounts into their orders. You will go up on first degree murder for both men, and with any luck, this is a hardcore state and—"

"I didn't mean to kill them!" he said, sitting back, stunned. "No, wait. I didn't kill them. You're full of it. You can't find—"

"No," Jackson said flatly. "It's hard to find—not impossible to find. We were going to give you a chance. Get the D.A. in here and . . . well, South Dakota does still have the death penalty."

Jackson didn't know if they had him or not.

Not until he heard a voice behind him and realized they might have a hitchhiking ghost.

Reginald Larkins was in the room.

"You did it!" he said. "I don't wish death on any man. Nor do I wish that poor child stuck in your care any longer. You will go to jail for life." He leaned on the table and blew in the man's face, ruffling his hair with an icy blast.

Clifton Denning didn't see or hear Reggie Larkins. But he felt something.

Angela leaned low against the table.

"I'd confess. The murders will haunt you the rest of your life," she said softly. "He's here, you know. Reggie is here. But if you tell the truth . . . he won't bother you again. And then, of course, not to mention evidence."

Clifton Denning was a big man who suddenly looked small. He sank into the seat and said emotionlessly, "Get the D.A. They had everything. They were going to report me for using the girl. I had to use the girl. She was my money. People give kids money. But . . . "

He paused and seemed to shrink still further. "Just get him the hell away from me!" he begged.

Angela smiled and looked at the ghost of Reggie Larkins.

She stood and Jackson joined her. It was time to turn this all over to Briggs and the local law.

And time to make another trip out to see Fiona.

Briggs, of course, was amazed and grateful, not at all resentful. He said he'd be more than happy to work with them in the future.

Jackson and Angela used the rental car Briggs had procured for them to drive out to see Fiona again. By then, they had already contacted child services. And it seemed it was going to be fine if the child was in the care of Fiona Larkins and fine if she wanted to file to be a foster parent or even adopt the child.

There would be paperwork, and they'd have to take Abby that night for processing, but everything should work out well.

Fiona was stunned and saddened—and thrilled.

"Reggie. He was an amazing man. I hate to see that little girl go even for tonight, but with all this electronic stuff you can do these days, all the papers are filled out and I can get her tomorrow. For Valentine's Day!" She was quiet a minute. "Reggie! He managed to get me the most amazing gift, even from beyond!" Fiona told them.



When they left the Larkins' house, Fiona and Nell were on the sofa together sobbing with happy tears.

Angela couldn't have been happier.

"You look as gleeful as the Cheshire cat," he told her.

She smiled at him and reached for his hand.

"I am. I mean, as always, I'm deeply saddened that men were murdered. But there's going to be justice, and Fiona will have a little girl!"

"And I promise you," Jackson said, "with those two raising her along with a ghost like Reggie, that little girl will grow up to be one tough cookie. She won't be letting anyone beat her with animal pelts."

She was quiet a minute. "I know how much you love this place. And I'd love to see the museums and the Crazy Horse statue and Mount Rushmore, but . . ."

"You want to come back when we can bring the kids."

"Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. And it's about romance and . . . love. And I'd love to be with you—and our kids!" she told him.

He smiled, and she knew he agreed.

They were on the jet home by seven the next morning. Jackson insisted on making coffee and serving her.

And she insisted on making dinner when they got home, surprising the kids and Mary, bearing with them what edibles and toys they could find at the airport.

And they had an amazing Valentine's Day.

At the end, they said goodnight to Mary, put the baby to bed, and then Corby. He was sleepy and happy, but as they started to leave his room, he warned, "Dad, don't go trying to hit mom with any animal pelts now!"

"Ooh, trust me," Jackson said laughing. "I'm far too scared."

They heard their son laughing as they linked hands and walked down the hall and retired alone.

They showered and played and teased in the water, and then laughed and teased and made love, skin still damp, but drying quickly.

And yet, lying beside him, Angela knew they both knew something, and knew it well.

Love wasn't just about romance, candy, or cards.

It was, perhaps, showing on a special day that love was beautiful and appreciated.

But it was also something that extended to children and parents and family and special friends, something that was deserved by everyone, something that was deserved and needed by the entire human family.

And she whispered, "Happy Valentine's Day, my love."

And he returned the words. "Happy Valentine's Day. And thank you for the Valentine's Day you have made of my life."

She smiled.

For a tough guy, he talked the good talk!