



A Mother of a Mother's Day/Heather Graham

A Mother of a Mother's Day

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Mother's Day!

Lacey Bainbridge knows that her husband's children love her, and she loves them.

But . . .

Could the ghost of their beloved biological mom be after her, angry that she will be with the kids for her first 'mother's' day?

But Annie was supposed to have been great!

Still, something demonic seems to be going on in the house where Annie died, her young life stolen by a cruel and remorseless murderer.

And now . . .

Steven Bainbridge is desperate. There's nothing else he can do but call on his friends, Angela and Jackson Crow of the elite "Krewe of Hunters" unit of the FBI.

He needs help. Fast. Because Mother's Day is almost upon them. And while he can't believe that his beloved first wife would return to hurt anyone, something is happening . . .

Something that threatens that to be deadly.

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Prologue

Lacey Bainbridge looked up from the report she'd been studying, startled.

The slender glass vase on her desk holding a single rose had suddenly jingled against the wood again.

Again. Yes, again, as had happened before and before and before . . .

She gave herself a serious mental shake, moaning aloud. She was tired, that was it, tired and seeing and hearing things. All kinds of things.

And, of course, none of them ever happened until Steven and the kids had gone for the day. Weird. So weird!

She wondered what a psychiatrist would say about her fears. She was married to a psychologist, but she was afraid to say too much to him! Ah, never work where you sleep, so she had been told.

Maybe it was just the date that was suddenly turning her paranoid.

It wasn't the anniversary of Annie's death. No. It was Mother's Day.

Mother's Day. A beautiful holiday that celebrated . . . moms! Except that she wasn't a mom. She was a stepmom, and, yes, Mother's Day was coming up and she had to admit, she was worried.

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Steve's first wife, Annie, had been gone now for almost eight years. She and Steve had been a couple for three years before they had married ten months ago. She had gotten to know the children and she and Steve had even asked for their blessing before their marriage. She thought she had done everything right—or as right as anyone could do under such circumstances.

But maybe there were some circumstances you just couldn't get over. Annie Bainbridge had been murdered. Assaulted just out in the backyard when she'd been hanging some clothing outside on the line rather than using the dryer. She'd been found on the kitchen floor, a tablecloth lain over her body like a sheet—a red tablecloth, the same shade as the blood that had pooled around her body.

Thankfully, it had been Steve who had discovered her before four-year-old Dylan and Cassandra, just two at the time, had walked in. But, of course, as they had grown older, the children heard about the horror that had befallen their mother. And even if they had been too young to remember much of what had followed, such a thing having happened had to have an everlasting effect on the kids.

It didn't help that Annie's killer had never been caught.

The kids were great. Lacey had come to adore them as she might her own, but while she didn't want them traumatized, she also wanted them to remember Annie who had been, by all accounts, an amazing and loving person. The kids had taken part in the wedding; Dylan, now twelve, had been his ring bearer. Cassandra, now ten, had been Lacey's flower girl.

But still . . .

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Mother's Day.

Was it going to be ridiculously difficult for the kids? Now that they had a stepmother, did they want to celebrate, did they want to forget . . .

"Stop!" she told herself aloud.

But it suddenly seemed that the flower vase was trembling again!

Impatiently, she rose, unable to stop her thoughts.

She'd gone with Steve and the kids for the last few years to visit Annie's gravesite on Mother's Day. She had held their hands, arranged flowers with them. Remembered the life of a beautiful young woman, cruelly cut too short.

"Okay, idiot, you shouldn't have married the man and taken on the kids if you couldn't handle it!" she told herself aloud, walking into the kitchen. Maybe coffee would help. No, a full bottle of whiskey wouldn't help, other than to knock her out cold. She was just going through something . . .

Pouring coffee into her cup, she looked out into the backyard. She almost dropped her cup. It looked like someone had been there, a fleeing dark shadow disappearing around the hedge and the side of the house.

"Okay, you are crazy!" she told herself. So much for the joys of being able to work from home! In her old office, she'd have been surrounded by people, but since the pandemic had taught the world that many people could work even more efficiently from home, she had chosen this course. Great! She was here when the kids came home, she could start dinners, work late, work any hours . . .

And drive herself crazy with shadows in the yard and vases moving on her desk.

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Then she heard the thud!

Something heavy fell against the door from the garage into the house.

That was it. Something, someone, was out to get her.

Annie? Was it Annie, haunting her, trying to make sure she knew the children were hers and that Mother's Day or not, Lacey would never be their real mother!

She had to get out of the house!

She just couldn't be in it alone anymore.

Grabbing her purse and her keys she hurried to the front door. She reached for the bolt to slide it open so that she could leave.

It seemed to slide for her!

She stepped out, terrified, looking around, certain that someone—or *something*—was coming for her.

She was all right! There was a team of road workers out on the street. If she could just get to her car and out of the drive . . .

She raced for the automobile. Made it. And drove away.

No matter how much she loved Steve and the kids, how could she ever go back?

Chapter 1

“Hey.”

Angela Hawkins Crow looked up at the doorway to her office. Jackson was standing there.

“Hey,” she replied. She smiled curiously. He looked a little hesitant and Jackson seldom seemed hesitant. He was the SAC, or Special Agent in Charge, of their *special* unit of the FBI, referred to as the Krewe of Hunters since their first case took place in New Orleans and from there, they'd grown into a large and important unit that even had an offshoot, 'Blackbird,' working cases in Europe. As always, he was an impressive figure, tall, broad-shouldered, with a truly striking face with the strong cheekbones of his Native American heritage along with light eyes that gave away his mom's European heritage.

He seldom just stood in her doorway. He was head of their unit; he was also her husband, a partner in all aspects of life. And for them, it worked.

He walked into the office at last, taking one of the two chairs that faced her and her desk.

“What's going on?” she asked.

“I've had a strange call, nothing official,” he said. “All right, so, we have some agents in the field, and we were both supposed to be taking Sunday off. The entire McFadden crew intended to be here or on call Sunday. Corby and Victoria had a special little party planned for you.”

She frowned.

“Mother's Day,” he reminded her.

“Oh, right,” Angela said. She knew it, of course, and she’d intended to spend the day with the children. But, sometimes . . . in her capacity as Jackson’s second-in-charge, she took on more than she should, but she was good. Wherever their agents might be in the states and now in Europe, they knew they could call her, that through the years she had learned how to command a team of techs and use her own expertise to come up with information they might desperately need. Sometimes she still went into the field, but she knew how important her work was in the office as well.

Jackson leaned forward. “All right, I got a call from Steven Bainbridge,” he told her. Again, for a minute, she was blank. And then she remembered that Dr. Steven Bainbridge was a psychologist they’d worked with on occasion—and a diver with whom they’d once enjoyed vacation days when they’d wound up at the same hotel as him and his wife in Key West, Florida, at the same time.

“Has something happened that I don’t know about?” Angela asked. “I mean, I know about his past, but what happened to his first wife was long before we knew him and that was handled by the police down in Fredericksburg.”

“Well, apparently, Lacey is having an extremely difficult time suddenly. She, uh, thinks that Annie has come back to haunt her and wants her out of the house.”

“What?” Angela asked, surprised. “They’ve been together for years now. The kids love Lacey.”

“They do. Lacey is amazing with them while still honoring the memory of their birth mother. But she left the house and won’t go back. Steve says that she believes Annie is

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sneaking around the house. This is the first year she and Steve have been married, and Lacey is legally a stepmother. Anyway . . . can you head out there.”

Angela glanced at her computer again. Agents were in the field in France, not to mention across the country. Then again, they had a great team of tech experts, and she might be thinking of herself as more important than she was.

She nodded.

“Sure. And you’re going to—”

“I already called Mary Tiger. She’ll stay with the kids tonight. And we have a day before Mother’s Day, so, with any luck . . .”

“We’ll solve the situation before Mother’s Day? You know, I’m okay if we’re not able to make a big deal out of it.”

He smiled at her. “You will be. But it matters to the kids.”

“Right. Of course. Okay, I’ll be down there in about ninety minutes, but . . .” She paused, frowning. “Jackson, we’ve been at this for years and years. We’ve worked with dozens of agents with our special or unique talents—or curses. Jackson, I can’t believe that the ghost of Annie Bainbridge would be coming back to hurt someone she didn’t even know, someone who is, from everything we heard and saw, doing nothing but trying to make life good for those kids!”

“I don’t believe it either,” Jackson said.

“And Steve is a psychologist—”

“Who has dropped everything when we’ve asked for help, when our own agents who have studied psychology and psychiatry are out in the field,” he said.

“Right. Okay, maybe I can convince Lacey that everything is all right,” Angela said. “I mean, nothing has really happened, right?” Angela asked.

“No, but Steve said he looked around the house and the yard. And he thinks someone has been in the yard.”

“Does he think his deceased first wife is haunting him?” Angela asked.

“He doesn’t know what to think. Anyway, I can leave here as soon as Bruce McFadden gets back, and I’ll meet you down there. But if you could go right away—”

“Of course. I’m on my way,” Angela assured him.

She rose, collected the “go bag” that was always ready beneath her desk and her briefcase and then her Glock—top drawer of her desk.

“Just in case I need to shoot a ghost,” she said lightly.

“Just in case it’s not a ghost is always a scenario in our lives,” he said dryly.

They headed out of her office together. At the doorway, Jackson paused, his hands on her shoulder. “Thank you. This is a good guy who has helped us.”

“Of course!” she told him. “Lacey and Steve are lovely. I just don’t . . . I’m hoping we can do something, but if this is all in her mind . . .”

“Well, we’ll find out, right?”

She nodded. He held her close for a minute, kissed her briefly. They were, after all, in the office.

Then he let her go and Angela hurried on down to the parking garage. With any luck, the traffic wouldn’t be bad yet and she could get down to Fredericksburg in an hour or so—the drive was less than sixty miles, in Northern Virginia and the D.C. area . . .

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Well, who knew?

She thought about Steve and Lacey and their kids as she drove. They'd all been together in Key West, taking their kids together to the Hemingway House, the beach, the museums, and more. Sharing a pair of highly recommended babysitters so that the four of them could do a night dive.

The kids were adorable. They had seemed to love Lacey.

They were all so . . . normal.

And she couldn't begin to imagine that Annie might have suddenly returned as a spirit, one meaning harm to Lacey . . .

But then again, Lacey hadn't seemed at all like a crazy person, one prone to paranoia or irrational fear.

They were good people.

She could only hope they could help them.

Chapter 2

Jackson's phone rang again before he'd even regained his chair in his office.

It was Steve.

"I'm sorry; I'm so sorry to bother you again, but—" Steve began.

"Steve, it's all right. I'm caught up here for about another hour or so, but Angela is already on her way. She should reach your place in about an hour. Okay, sorry, forgot our never-ending traffic. An hour and a half, though, tops, I think," Jackson told his friend.

"She's heading to the house?" Steve asked.

"That's where I told her to go," Jackson said. "I thought—"

"Lacey left last night. I went home, of course. The kids came home from school, and I didn't even know what to tell them. I lied. Something I don't do often. I told them Lacey had to go on a short trip for work and Jackson . . ."

His voice trailed. "What is it, Steve?"

"Strange life," Steve murmured. "Lacey never met Annie, but she heard about her, of course. And she's a wonderful human being—she never wants to hurt the kids, but she wants them to love her while remembering that biological mother loved them, too. And it should be good, Jackson. We aren't one of those messed up families where someone cheated before a new marriage or . . . I mean, it should be good. I adored Annie. I was heartbroken when she died and to this day . . ."

His voice trailed again. Jackson knew why.

They'd never found Annie's killer. The man who had apparently caught her in the back yard and dragged her back inside, assaulted her . . . and killed her, leaving her on the kitchen floor.

It might have been better, Jackson thought, if Steve had sold the house and moved. But apparently, the property had been in his family for generations; it was a home that had been built in the early eighteen-hundreds and meticulously maintained, updated, and cared for through the years. It sat on an acre of land, with a wealth of trees to the sides and rear of the property with an area that had been turned into lawn with a little playground as well just beyond the back door and porch.

"Steve, I'm so sorry about what happened and so sorry that the killer may never be found," Jackson told him. "But what if you kept the property, rented it, and moved elsewhere? That could—"

"Jackson, she doesn't think it's the house that's out to get her—she thinks that Annie hates her being with me, taking over her children. I'm a psychologist, for God's sake, and I haven't been able to get her to understand that Annie would say thank you to her! That's the way Annie was. But she says things are happening, things are moving, and she even saw a shadow in the back, slipping around the house—"

"Steve, someone might have been in your yard."

"I tried that. Didn't help."

"Well, at any rate, I'll give Angela a call and tell her to meet you wherever you'd like, or meet Lacey wherever she's staying—"

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“I’ll call Lacey, tell her Angela is coming, and find out where she’d like to meet her,” Steve said. “Then I’ll get back to you.”

“Great. Just let me know.”

Jackson ended the call and dialed Angela. She assured him she was just getting out of their immediate area, and he had time to give her a call and let her know exactly where she should be going.

When he hung up, he stared at his computer.

And then he decided to bring up old files.

Annie Nelson Bainbridge had been murdered over eight years ago; the case had gone cold—though it had never been hot.

But it had never been closed.

He looked at the pictures of the crime scene and his soul seemed to ache for Steven Bainbridge—and his children. But at least the children had been young when it had happened; so young that they had been kept from the true horror of what had happened.

He read through the police files. Naturally, Steven had been the first one questioned, but at the time of her death, he had been giving a speech in front of several hundred people.

Next, anyone he was working with in any capacity had been questioned. Neighbors had been questioned, but their home was so far from others, no one would have seen anyone in the back, but there could have been a car parked on the road that didn’t belong, someone might have gone by on a scooter or cycle, but no one in the near vicinity had seen anything at all.

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The phone rang again. He picked it up.

Steve, as he had expected.

“Okay, here’s the odd part. Lacey wants to meet Angela at the house. She believes that if Annie is trying to tell her to get away, Angela will be able to help.

“Fine. I’ll tell Angela to meet her there. It’s just that, Steven, from everything that we know about Annie, if her soul remains, the last thing she’d be doing is torturing a woman who was caring for her children in such a respectful manner.”

They had never—in so many words, plain, simple, and honest—explained to Steve exactly what made the agents in the Krewe of Hunters unique. They were always called out for the cult cases that came up, when someone suspected malevolent witchcraft or other crimes associated with living men practicing evil, but Jackson knew that Steven Bainbridge thought that the agents *believed* that they could sense or feel the dead and that such things helped them in their work.

“Could she have come back?” Steven whispered.

“Steven,” Jackson said carefully, “Annie would never come back to hurt anyone, we both know that. Here is what worries me—that someone might be stalking your property, perhaps even trying to create a problem. Are you having any trouble—”

“No, no, no. I’m not working with anyone even remotely dangerous,” Steven swore. “I just . . . well, I know that I’m being disruptive and borrowing on friendship when you might be busy, but I need your help. For my own sanity. Thank you.”

“Are you heading out to the house, too?” Jackson asked him.

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“Soon. I have the kids sitting in front of an ice cream shop. Then I’m going to drop them off at my parents and then head over.”

“Great. We should show up at about the same time,” Jackson told him.

He ended the call and stared at the reports he’d drawn up on his computer again.

The words gave him nothing. But as he stared at the screen, there was a tap at his door.

Bruce McFadden had arrived.

Jackson turned off his computer, explained his mission, and headed on out.

Maybe, just maybe, something from all that he had read would strike his mind as he drove.

Nothing new did, but . . .

A very real and living human being had killed Annie Bainbridge.

And that person was still out there.

Chapter 3

The old Bainbridge estate was striking.

On the outskirts of the city, it was on a road that offered forests between other such large homes and estates, a boarding school, a large outlet center, and several charming little parks.

Finally arriving, Angela turned in the long curving driveway to the front of the house. It was a two-story dwelling with an attic and basement, she knew, mentally drawing a picture of the inside of the place in her mind. The porch was wooden with great, handsome pillars; the front door led into a 'mudroom,' or little area for coats, galoshes, umbrellas, or whatever, and from there, the double doors led to a massive parlor, furnished with antique pieces from the 1800s. A mahogany staircase curled up to the second floor and the five bedrooms to be found there, one now an office and another a play room. Despite the fine and artistic nod to history to be found in the large parlor, it gave way to a large dining room, and kitchen, across from which was an amazing and well-stocked library and another office, the one that Lacey used. But while those rooms were all near and rather professional looking, there was also a family room—and the family room wasn't at all pristine. It was filled with fun things for children and adults. Doll houses, hobby horses, video games—and a great entertainment center for music and shows for adults.

As she sat in the car staring at the house, the front door opened. Lacey Bainbridge stood there, looking anxious. She stepped out to the porch, greeting Angela with a huge hug as she arrived.

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"I . . . I almost waited for you to get here. I was afraid to come in, but . . . well, seriously, wanted to make sure that you didn't trip in a pool of juice or something. Steve isn't great about making sure the kids don't make a mess!" she told Angela.

Angela laughed softly. "I guess he managed okay last night?"

Lacey nodded. She was a slim, attractive brunette with huge brown eyes, polite, courteous, kind—a rather perfect human being. They hadn't gotten to know Lacey as well as they did Steve since he had been in the office many times, but in the vacation weeks they'd spent together, Angela had seen Lacey's kindness to strangers on the street as well as to all their children and others, her simple courtesy in moving for those handicapped in any way, and other such examples of simple human decency.

"I stayed at the hotel in Fredericksburg last night; I decided to do so a bit late and I didn't want him alarming the kids, so . . . Angela! I just don't know what I'm going to do. Steven started telling me that screw family tradition, we'd sell the house, but it isn't the house! I mean things are happening here. It wasn't just that one day. The little flower thing on my desk kept moving, but then I saw her shadow in the yard . . . I know it sounds crazy, but Steve told me that you all deal with crazy, but I think . . . I think she doesn't want me here! I think Annie doesn't want me in her house with her children, with Steve!"

"Lacey, I didn't know Annie either," Angela said. "But I know about her, and I know people who knew her. She would never want you gone."

"I . . . I don't know. I can't . . . I can't live like this!" Lacey moaned.

"I'm going to go through the house and see if . . ."

See if her ghost is here?

She couldn't say that aloud. It was agreed among the Krewe of Hunters unit; they didn't tell the truth. To anyone other than their immediate circle.

"I'm going to see if anything is up, if it appears that anyone is trying to break in or rob the place, okay?" Angela asked.

Lacey shivered.

"You don't need to come with me. Stay right here by the door," Angela said.

Lacey nodded. "My office is over there—"

"Right through the library. I know," Angela assured her.

She smiled and left Lacey standing by the door, heading into the library. It wouldn't be a shock if a thief was trying to get in—some of the volumes were hundreds of years old and certainly worth a fortune in an auction.

But she passed through the library and into Lacey's study. She saw the desk, printer, computer . . .

And the little flower vase that Lacey had mentioned. Nothing at all looked out of order, but as she stood there, she began to feel something.

She looked back to the library door she had just come through. A woman was standing there, a very pretty, young woman, dark hair swept around her face, blue eyes as big as saucers. She had to have been in her mid-twenties . . .

Annie Bainbridge when she had died!

"Come in," Angela said softly.

The apparition frowned in disbelief and then showed herself fully in the doorway.

"You see me?" she asked.

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Angela nodded. "I'm one of the few who may," she assured the vision. "And you're Annie. Annie Bainbridge. From what I've heard you were a wonderful person. Why on earth are you torturing poor Lacey?"

"Torturing her?" the vision demanded, as if truly astounded. She walked on into the office, facing Angela with perplexion.

"Torturing her?" she repeated. "Oh, no, no, no! I'm trying desperately to save her life!"

Chapter 4

As he drove, Jackson found himself thinking about the reports. They had given him nothing but dead ends.

And something was gnawing at him.

It wasn't just that he hadn't known Steven Bainbridge when his first wife had been killed, it was that it had been a local matter, he realized. That wasn't anything against the local police; they had to deal with a local matter and there had been no reason for the federal government to be called in.

But . . .

Sometimes crimes were solved because they mirrored other crimes. And if there had been other such crimes at the time, there just might be a connection somewhere. And in this area, it was easy to travel from D.C. to Virginia, to Maryland, and even West Virginia.

He hit a button on the car's phone, speed dialing Bruce McFadden. His co-agent answered immediately.

And it was good to have the amazing team of people who worked with the Krewe of Hunters. Bruce already knew what he was doing, where he was going and why, and Jackson's request that he look up any other murders in surrounding states at the time of Annie's death was almost anticipated.

The tech crew would be on it immediately.

Within twenty minutes—and three traffic tie-ups—Bruce was back with him.

"I think you're on to something, Jackson. Three months after Annie's murder, Cassie Landry, twenty-seven, was killed in her family's farmhouse just south of Harper's Ferry,

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West Virginia. A year later, Brenda Lipscomb, twenty-six, teacher, was killed at a remote estate outside of Baltimore. There's one in here—also unsolved—from last year in Delaware. I've got tech now trying to find out if there was a theater troop, specialized workers, any group who might have moved around from these areas. Could be a long shot, but—”

“Can't hurt. And they didn't solve any of these crimes? And you studied them—they were all similar?”

“Yes, Jackson, and you know I know what I'm doing. Tech is still at it. Back to you as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, yes, keep at it, please.”

“You think someone might want to kill a man's second wife?”

“Why not? If this is a serial killer, he might move around. It's one way not to be caught. But if this is one person, he chooses his victims, watches them, knows when they'll be alone in fairly remote places—even if they have outside lines for drying laundry, maybe animals to tend to, maybe even outside exercise equipment. If we're looking at something that might be real—”

“There's a serial killer out there.”

“There are always serial killers out there,” Jackson reminded him. “Some like to write letters to the press or police. Others . . .”

“All right, back on it,” Bruce told him.

They ended the call.

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Of course, if they were right, all they had was a theory. They would need to prove that crimes were moving state lines or be invited in on murder cases that were old and cold.

But, of course, they had friends. If Bruce and the tech team could find something, anything that might tie a few of the cold cases together, maybe they could make a move.

He moaned aloud as traffic moved to a snail's pace once again.

Yes, traffic sucked.

Well, that was life around the capital.

But his impatience was growing. Instinctively, he was certain they were on to something. He shouldn't have sent Angela ahead.

But it had sounded as if Steve desperately needed help. As if Lacey was retreating into a world of panic in which their lives could crumble around them. Moving quickly had seemed mandatory.

And he was a fool to ever underestimate Angela.

He smiled to himself. She'd been in perilous positions many times; she was one of the best field agents with whom he'd ever worked. But if Bruce called him back with something, he was just going to give her a call and mention the fact that maybe she needed to be careful.

Of course, even that might be insane. If they were right, if a killer had been moving across several states, there was no proof whatsoever he'd return to the scene of one crime. Police had questioned anyone and everyone in connection with the couple at the time. Annie had the ill luck to have been seen by someone who might have seen her, chosen her .

..

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And watched for the right time.

He was finally at least on a highway that was moving. Soon, he'd pull off and follow the country road that led out to the Bainbridge estate.

The movement on the highway slowed again. He took a deep breath. No choice except for patience.

Angela no longer fit this killer's victimology, he told himself. She was in her late thirties now, but still, she was beautiful, and not just because he was prejudiced. Maybe age had made her even more stunning with her wealth of blond hair, fine cheekbones, and huge, luminous eyes. She had gained such a great dignity, maturity and wisdom with the years. She had seen such horrendous things, and retained compassion, empathy, and kindness. He was a lucky, lucky man. They lived together, worked together—allowed in the Krewe because of its very special nature—and it worked. They respected one another, never tired of one another . . .

And there was no reason to be concerned now; he'd seen her pick up her Glock.

And he knew that she knew damned well how to use it.

Finally, finally, he pulled off the highway. The miles on the country road were all that remained.

He didn't see a major pothole in the road and swore softly as the car jumped and jerked to the side. He wasn't speeding, but he was moving. They really needed to get road crews out here more often.

The thought spurred him to hit the phone and call Bruce once again.

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“Road crews, electric crews, get people looking for any companies working in the states surrounding D.C., those with permits for several states. See if you can find what coincides with the dates of the murders!” he told Bruce.

As he spoke, he saw the cones that warned him a road crew had just left for the day.

“They were starting on work crews. I should be back with you in a matter of minutes,” Bruce told him.

“Get them on road crews and thanks,” Jackson said.

They ended the call and Jackson stepped down harder on the gas pedal.

He was close, so close, but he wanted to be there now.

Instinct.

He knew he was right.

He was going to find the killer. Now.

And, of course, the hard part. Catch him before he could strike again and prove his guilt.

He hit the phone button. Speed dial. He needed to speak with Angela.

Now.

Chapter 5

“She’s a wonderful woman,” Annie Bainbridge’s spirit assured Angela. “She takes wonderful care of my children. Before . . . she prays at my grave, prayers that she means. You and she just really don’t understand and Steven . . . oh, a ghost could smack Steve in the head, sleep on his chest—he hasn’t the first sense of the next world, so I haven’t been able to warn him. Now Lacey, she can sense me, but . . .”

“Okay, Annie, thank you, thank you. And I can’t really explain, but they think that this ability is something genetic and inherited, but no one really understands. Anyway, the thing of it is—”

“I was always here, watching the children,” Annie said. “With Lacey in their lives, I thought . . . I thought I could move on! There is that beautiful, beautiful light. Friends go and I promise that I’ll be right along, but—”

“You . . . you didn’t mind that Lacey was with Steve, watching your children?” Angela asked.

Annie smiled. “Love lives on, but the death of what is physical changes it to something different, all encompassing. No, I believe we’ll all meet again one day and that our souls embrace all. But I don’t want Lacey to meet my fate! My children, what if they were to walk in? Thank God, you can see me! He’s back, the man who killed me is back!”

As the ghost spoke, Angela’s phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket and saw that it was Jackson.

“Excuse me!” she said, taking the call.

“Angela, watch out. No proof, but tech has gone through unsolved related murders here and in the bordering states. We’ve been looking into crews working in the area and there was road work then by the Bainbridge house and again today. I don’t think Annie is trying to hurt anyone, she’s trying to warn Lacey.”

“I’m with Annie right now. And I guess you’re right on it being someone from a road crew. Annie has just been trying to help—”

“Get out of there. Get Lacey and get the hell out of there now. I’m almost with you. But the crews have broken for the day and if it is someone who studied victims and opportunities because they were working the area, well . . .”

“Copy that! Lacey is at the door, she didn’t come in. I’ll get her now!”

Angela pocketed her phone, staring at Annie. She reached for her Glock.

“You’re right, Annie, I think he might be out there—now! Let’s get Lacey!”

The ghost of Annie Bainbridge nodded solemnly and turned to hurry back to the front of the porch. Angela drew her gun and followed and stopped cold when they reached the parlor.

The killer had come back.

He had Lacey Bainbridge in his hold, and he had heard Angela, knew she’d been in the office, but he’d already seized Lacey.

He held a gun to her head.

Angela judged him to be about forty, well-built, a man who had worked at hard labor for many years. His face was worn from time in the sun, and he was still wearing his orange road-crew vest.

"Come any closer, she's dead," he warned.

"All right. I'll stand right here," Angela told him. "But I need to warn you that I'm afraid your gig is up. You shouldn't have come back—that put the right people on these cases, people with ability to put together the fact that you managed to have solid employment, find your victims, and move state to state, leaving the local police with nothing. Now—"

"Shut up. Shut up and drop your gun. If what you've said is true, I will kill her before you can kill me," he said.

Angela held her Glock and shrugged.

"No, Angela, no!" Lacey whimpered. "He'll kill us both."

And that was true.

There was a different way to play it.

"Annie, you can't take that gun from him, can you?" Angela asked the ghost.

As she had hoped, it threw the killer off. He looked around.

"Annie? That was the name of the pretty little thing who lived here once upon a time!" he said. "Come on now, there is no such thing as . . ."

"I feel her!" Lacey whispered.

As well she probably did. Annie had gone up to the killer and Lacey. She tugged on the killer's arm, not able to move it, but—"

"Stop it!" the man suddenly roared.

"She's here and you know that she's here. And what she can do to you is far worse than what you can do to us!" Angela promised.

“No, no, no! It's the air conditioning—you've done weird things with the air-conditioning!” the killer exclaimed.

“We all know that it's not the air-conditioning,” Angela said. “And let's see, you have a gun, I have a gun, and yet, we all want to live a while longer. Now Annie is already gone, thanks to what you did. You stole her life. Her time with her children. And because of what you did, she's here to protect Lacey. She's not about to let her children be hurt again, so, here's what I propose. You let Lacey go and keep your gun trained on me. You walk to the door and get the hell out of here and never come back—”

“You already told me that everyone knows who I am!” he thundered, jerking Lacey, causing her to cry out again as the nose of the gun pressed into her throat.

“Well, here's the thing. Proving what happened. So, if you were to let Lacey go and get out of here and run . . . it would be my word against yours in court and they have a theory about what happened in all the cases, not any proof—” Angela began.

“Your word and her word!” he interrupted.

“Okay, that may be true. And I can promise you that law enforcement will be here very soon, but! You can still run. Run into the woods, disappear, take on a new identity. Look, I'm just trying to find a way so that we can all live. Except for Annie, of course!” she added sadly.

The ghost was still trying to wrestle with the killer.

Angela shook her head slightly; the ghost didn't have the power to wrench the gun from the man's hand. But she could cause movement, just a shift in the air . . .

A Mother of a Mother's Day/Heather Graham

“Lacey, it’s wonderful that you keep that picture of Annie and the kids on the mantle!” she said.

And, thankfully, Annie understood. She hurried to the mantle. The picture was on the edge.

And the picture crashed to the floor.

Perfect.

The killer turned.

And three things happened at the same time.

Angela took aim and her bullet struck him in the knee.

Lacey jerked free of his hold as he fell.

And Jackson burst through the still open front door, moving like the wind to stand behind the screaming killer, wrenching his gun from him, kicking it across the room, and sliding his cuffs around his wrist.

On the floor, Lacey sobbed with relief.

Jackson looked at Angela and they both nodded. Sometimes, partnerships were amazing.

They might have killed the man—but then they’d never had had the chance to give closure to other families, to solve the many crimes of his past.

She was startled when the spirit of Annie Bainbridge came flying across the room, enveloping Angela in a hug, a sensation that was beyond strange.

Sensation . . .

Something many felt, even when they didn’t actually see and hear the dead.

A Mother of a Mother's Day/Heather Graham

"Thank you, thank you!"

They heard sirens; help was coming. The man would face arrest, trial, and Angela was certain, conviction.

"Can she hear me?" Lacey cried. "Can she hear me?"

"She can," Jackson assured her.

"Thank you, Annie, thank you!" Lacey whispered.

Annie left Angela's side, walking over to kneel by Lacey. "Tell her that I say thank you to her, that I thank her for taking such good care of my children. And for . . . I can go now! I can go in peace!"

"She thanks you," Jackson said.

"For caring so much for her children," Angela added.

"And for Steve! He's a good man. He deserves happiness, and when the time comes, well . . . everyone will understand. The love shared by the human soul can be universal!" Annie told them.

Angela and Jackson repeated her words.

The killer screamed that they were all crazy as the local police swept in, ready to take the man away.

And then, of course, insanity reigned as reports were filed, as they all headed to the local station where Steve arrived at last, shaking, desperate to hold the wife who had almost been taken by the killer who had taken his first.

Annie came to the station with them, ready to fill in details they might not have gotten without her.

A Mother of a Mother's Day/Heather Graham

And then, finally, they were able to return to the house.

And Steve, still skeptical, was let in on the fact that his first wife had come back to protect his second wife.

He was so tragically confused and grateful all in one.

And, of course, it was something "Krewe" members so seldom shared . . .

But he pretended to believe, of course, telling Annie how he had loved her, how very grateful he was to her.

And they were able to repeat Annie's words when she laughed and said, "If someone was going to take my place, I couldn't have found a finer woman!"

But then Annie turned to Angela and Jackson and told them, "It's time, please, if you don't mind, come with me, I'm just a little bit nervous!"

"Come outside," Jackson told the others.

Curious, Steve and Lacey followed him, Angela, and Annie outside.

Darkness was coming. The sun had sunk into the horizon. Just a pale glow remained.

But Annie walked out into the yard and lifted her arms to the sky. She smiled, glanced at Angela and Jackson again and said softly, "Until we meet again!"

And then the phenomenon occurred. A ray of shimmering golden light burst from the sky, falling upon Annie. It was wrapped around her and smiling, closing her eyes, she disappeared, becoming one with the light.

Epilogue

Mother's Day!

Corby, Victoria, and Jackson poured into the room and the kids jumped on the bed.

Of course, Angela had already been awake, but she pretended to be asleep, allowing them to "wake" her with cries of, "Happy Mother's Day, Happy Mother's Day!"

"To the best mom ever!" Corby told her.

She smiled, ruffled his hair, and drew her children into her arms.

She looked up at Jackson.

"To the best mom ever!" he assured her.

She smiled, and she found out what they'd planned for the day.

First breakfast. Jackson wasn't a great cook, but he could manage a decent omelet.

Then . . .

They had reservations at a hotel with an indoor water park. And a spa.

She and Victoria were to have manicures and pedicures and after that . . .

Water park fun!

It was an incredible day. Her children were wonderful. Jackson was, as always . . .

The most amazing partner known to man.

To add to the wonderful day, Lacey Bainbridge called her, thanking her again.

A Mother of a Mother's Day/Heather Graham

“We’ve kept what we can from the kids, except, of course, they’re old enough now to appreciate the fact that the man who hurt their mother has been arrested. And they’ve been wonderful to me. I mean, I’m not their real mother—”

“Lacey!” Angela told her. “Being a mother may be biological. But, hey! Victoria is my biological child, Corby is adopted, but I love them both the same. You’re a stepmom, but that takes nothing away from being an incredible mom. Being a mother . . . it means nurturing. Sometimes single dads are like mothers. Sometimes there are people out there who care for nephews, nieces, orphans . . . even pups and kittens! Being a mom means loving and nurturing. And remember, always, how grateful Annie was that you were there to be a mother for her children!”

“Thank you!” Lacey told her. “Thank you. Thank you so much for everything.”

“I’ve only said what’s true!” Angela said softly. “And dealing with criminals . . . it’s what we do. But you are very, very welcome.”

“One more thing. Just one more thing,” Lacey said.

“What’s that?”

“Please have a happy, happy Mother’s Day!”