Roses are Red, But Can Make You Dead

Romantic Gifts

 The flowers were beautiful!

 And, of course, the candy would be delicious.

 But Brad Mayfield was that type of guy. She’d finally found . . .

 The right one. Her divorce had been painful in the extreme. She had loved David Brennan.

Maybe she still did, a little bit. They had been through so much in life together. And they

did their best to remain friends for the sake of five-year-old Emma. But . . .

 David certainly wouldn’t have thought of the flowers and the candy, or the amazing artistry of

the way they had been arranged. Of course, the florist had done all that, but she was sure it had

been Brad to tell the florist what he wanted, something beautiful and perfect. So wonderfully romantic!

And tonight, Emma would be staying with Allison, her friend from pre-kindergarten. Allison’s folks would

be taking the girls to a special children’s show and letting them camp in the living room for the night.

 A great night for Emma—and for her!

 Teresa Grant thanked the delivery man for the outstanding display of her gift, so intrinsically

designed with each rose stem tied with a tiny little velvet cord that connected to a gold covered piece

of chocolate. Brad was incredibly thoughtful, wanting to make sure she was covered in all things,

including such niceties as this, to more basic things in life, including her care for little Emma, her five-year-old daughter.

He was rare! So thoughtful.

 She placed the display on the counter thinking she should let Brad see just how great his

gift had appeared when it arrived, but she couldn’t resist. She plucked one of the gold-covered

chocolate bites from its velvet cord, unwrapped the foil, and indulged.

 Chocolate! Oh, how she loved chocolate. And the chocolates were formed in heart shapes!

 Delicious, and . . .

 The beautiful display suddenly blurred before her eyes; and all that she saw was a field of foggy,

miasmic . . . red. Like a . . . blood red.

 Red . . . yes . . .

 Red, blurring everything, and even that beginning to fade . . .

 Her phone was in her pocket. She tried to reach for it but she couldn’t see, and she tried to remember where the numbers were. She needed. . . emergency. 911 . . .

 All sensation was leaving her. She had no idea what she pushed because . . .

 The world was red. Red as the reddest rose.

 Ridiculous thoughts raced through her mind, tragic, terrifying thoughts . . .

 *Roses are red, my love,*

 *Violets are blue,*

 *Soon you’ll be dead,*

*Darkness the clue.*

Valentine’s Day

 “Hey!”

 Jackson Crow was walking by Angela’s office, distracted. Angela’s own office door was opened. She liked to keep it that way. Every agent within the Krewe of Hunters division knew they could come to her for help with any problem, professional or even personal. They were an unusual group by the very nature of the talent that had brought the team to become the Krewe of Hunters. And sometimes, agents just needed help in dealing with themselves and existing in a world with others who weren’t so gifted, or as some termed it, cursed.

 Jackson wasn’t the usual SAC, or Special Agent in Charge. The two of them had started together in their unit with a team of just six when a questionable death had occurred in New Orleans. He’d headed the small team then, and he headed their larger team now. There were almost forty agents working in the U.S. along with their “Blackbird” team in Europe. But he’d never been one to just sit behind a desk. He was always hands-on and he was out in the field. He never asked anything of anyone he wasn’t willing to do himself. She, second in command, felt the same. And while she’d found herself working more and more with the tech teams through the years, she was still ready and able to get into the field.

She smiled, as he looked at her as she hailed, frowning slightly as if he was thinking he should have remembered something but didn’t.

She laughed as he came into her office. “No, you didn’t mess up or forget anything. I just wanted to tell you that we’re all set for tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes! Valentine’s Day. The office is covered and Mary Tiger is going to be home with the kids. You and I are going to dinner!”

He winced. “I’m horrible.” he said. “I forgot, oh, man—”

“Jackson,” Angela teased lightly, “do not run into your office and try to order flowers. I prefer my flowers growing outside, and we don’t need more candy in the house. Let’s just get out for a bit of time together.”

He perched on the edge of her desk. “Dinner. Great. As long as the kids . . . ah, that’s what you and Mary were doing the other night. You were doing Valentine cards with the kids for school . . . I even knew it. I didn’t get the kids any little thing—”

“You’re covered. Video game for Corby and a stuffed puppy that talks for Victoria, not that you need to give gifts for Valentine’s Day, but I thought some little thing for the kids would be nice. But time together for you and me . . . that works!”

“Dinner, yes, great. I’ll talk to—”

Angela laughed. “It’s all right, I’ve spoken with Bruce McFadden; and he and his brothers will tag-team every five hours tonight, leading the day and night teams through until tomorrow morning, starting at five. So—”

She frowned, breaking off. Her phone was ringing; and it was one of their neighbors, Teresa Grant, a sweet young teacher who had purchased her parents’ home to hold on to it when they had gone into an assisted living facility.

She nodded to Jackson who always understood her answering a phone call and quickly picked up her cell. “Hey, Teresa, it’s Angela.”

She heard nothing but strange static and frowned.

“What is it?” Jackson asked.

“Nothing.”

“Butt dial?” he suggested.

Angela shook her head. “I don’t know why, but I don’t think so!”

“Angela, we may be federal agents dealing with matters of life and death concerns, but even we can get butt dials.”

“And eighty percent scam like the rest of the world on our private phones,” Angela said. “I know that. Jackson, I need to get over there. She’s a sweet person; and she’s been a dear friend, great with the kids and—”

“Right. I’m coming with you.”

She frowned slightly. “Jackson, it’s okay. It’s probably a butt dial, as you said. But I have my Glock and we have the McFadden brothers on point for the night—”

“And I can leave the office now. Let’s go.”

She took a moment to look at him. She was often amazed that he was . . . her life. They’d been partners first. Friends second. And then together forever. He was such a handsome man with his strong cheekbones, heritage from his indigenous father, along with his dark hair, distinguished height, and strong chin. His eyes had come from a Celtic heritage, and they were as light as those as could be found in the most northern Viking or Celt. His looks were striking, but it was his strength of character, his determination that had truly drawn her from the beginning. He could be intimidating, but his very strength also allowed him empathy, compassion, and kindness.

“Okay, great, thanks!” she told him.

When they reached Teresa’s house, she didn’t answer the bell.

“I know she’s home. I saw her when I was walking the dogs this morning, and she told me that she was taking a day to go through her students’ projects. The school had a great substitute, and she hadn’t taken a day off yet,” Angela said.

Jackson looked at her and arched a brow. “All right,” he said simply.

He reached into his pocket for a little tool he kept.

“You’re breaking in?”

“Isn’t that what you want?” he asked her as he pushed the door open.

She shrugged as she walked in the house. “Yeah. I’ll apologize up the kazoo if . . .”

She didn’t need to finish her statement because she could see Teresa Grant. The young woman was on the floor by the counter that separated the parlor and dining area from the kitchen.

“Teresa!” she screamed her friend’s name. No response.

Rushing over, Angela fell to her knees, desperately seeking a pulse and watching to see if she was breathing.

She was alive! Just barely, pulse weak, thready . . .

“Jackson!” she called.

But he was already on the phone, calling for an ambulance.

\*

The emergency crew that arrived was excellent. One of the EMTs immediately recognized a faint smell of almonds; he knew the poisoning was cyanide. Knowing was a strong part of the battle, and Jackson heard the man speaking with the doctor at the hospital. Thankfully, the EMTs carried an antidote. But even as that was given to Teresa along with oxygen as she was scooped onto a gurney to be rushed to the hospital, the EMT warned Jackson it would be some time before she could talk, before she could possibly explain what had happened to her.

“Maybe something on her hands when she put out rat poison?” the EMT suggested.

But Jackson knew better. “She uses humane traps and sets the critters free. This woman is barely capable of swatting a mosquito. We are law enforcement. We will be investigating, and we’ll find the source of the poison,” he said.

Naturally, Angela was heading off to the hospital with Teresa. She would stay by her side—more protective than the fiercest guard known to man.

He noted the stunning display of flowers and chocolate on the counter. The kind of thing he should have thought about. He adored Angela, his partner, his wife, amazing at work with her computer skills and ability to hop into any action, equally amazing at home with their children. Beautiful with her sweeping blond hair, an asset when a charming woman was needed to sidle up to someone for information. And he hadn’t even thought of—

Chocolate.

He headed to the vase with the incredible arrangement of flowers and chocolate. One chocolate had been pulled from a tiny velvet cord. And when he looked closer, he saw the little gold pieces of wrapper that had covered the one consumed piece of chocolate.

He had his phone out instantly, calling the office, getting Bruce McFadden to send people from the lab, a team of forensic scientists, and someone to immediately test the rest of the chocolates in the vase. There was no card with the arrangement, and he quickly thought of what he knew about Teresa Grant. And he thought of traffic cams. Someone had delivered the flowers to the house; and if there was no picture in the front, a car might have been caught on the street.

Teresa Grant was divorced, he knew, which meant that someone had to tell her ex—they shared a little girl. And he knew Teresa had been seeing someone . . .

*Who? Angela must know!*

And if not, a friend at school might know. Or even her parents, though, until he had something to say, he hated the concept of visiting the assisted living facility with no news.

He dialed Angela as he awaited the arrival of his forensic team.

“The chocolates, Angela, I believe the poison was in the Valentine’s gift.”

“My God! Oh, no, we need to let her ex-husband, Emma’s dad, know.”

“Right. And I know she’s seeing someone. Do you know who he is?”

“Yes, his name is . . . Brad. Brad, um . . . oh! Brad Mayfield. He owns an auto repair shop . . . I’ll look it up on my phone. Hang tight! Northern Virginia, great, I’ll text you the address!” she said.

“And Teresa?” he asked. “How is Teresa doing?”

“We were in time, just barely, Jackson. She was poisoned as you know, but apparently, to make matters worse, when she fell, she hit her head. So they’ve induced a coma to keep the brain from swelling, but they believe the poison has been countered quickly enough. And they’re just being carefully precautious. It may just be a matter of hours for them to keep a careful watch. I’m afraid to leave her. I—”

“Angela, I’ll send agents. We’re going to need to question the men in her life. Find out if there may be a jealous ex on the new guy’s side. There was no card with the flowers. There’s nothing to indicate the flower shop or anything about the delivery. Did she have a door camera of any kind?”

“Maybe on her phone. Find her phone, Jackson, and give it to tech. Her parents might know something . . .”

“If we need to, we’ll go to them. I’m grateful to hear it sounds as if she’ll make it. Let’s get another report from the doctors so we can tell her parents about the good news that she should recover *after* the bad news that she was attacked. Also, they’ll start worrying about their granddaughter and I’d like us to have a little more information before we get to that. ”

“Keep me informed, Jackson.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll stay here until we have something. And I’m working on finding out about Emma. Teresa told me last week that something special was going on for Valentine’s Day, and Emma was all excited. She was going to get to spend a night at a friend’s house. Oh! And I know her ex-husband. He’s a good dad to Emma, Teresa even said so. I’d like to--”

“Question him. Don’t forget. Someone meant to kill Teresa. And no divorce is all that amicable.”

“Jackson—"

“Sorry! I know you know what you’re doing. Well, thankfully, it sounds as if we’re not going to need to give a five-year-old horrible news. And don’t worry; we won’t leave it to anyone else. I’ll get some of our people to watch over Teresa.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust the police—we have good police, I just . . . ”

“We’ll use our people; but while you’re sitting there, you can liaison with them. We are overstepping our directives here.”

“On it!” Angela promised. “And I’ll find whoever is watching Emma.”

He ended that call and put through another to Joshua Dean, one of his best techs.

“Josh, hey—”

“Thought you were gone for Valentine’s Day!” Josh said.

“Right. But no. A neighbor, Teresa Grant, was poisoned through Valentine’s candy and—”

“What? Bad, bad, oh, man!” Josh said.

“True. I need the whereabouts and backgrounds of men named David Brennan and Brad Mayfield, both late twenties or early thirties, I believe. And get me anything you can find out about their relationships with others. Check—”

“All social media accounts as well as records, got it,” Josh said.

“Thanks.”

Forensics had arrived. He’d barely made sure that the chocolates were being carefully packed for the lab before Josh called him back.

“As quick as I can. Teresa Grant and David Brennan were divorced a few years ago, amicably on paper, no money changing hands, but apparently, according to social media, David was a distracted businessman and Teresa much more of a people person. I’m reading some of this between the lines. All right, he can be found at a media news source, Eyes on the Eyes, working a story. On this guy, Brad, he recently moved here, bought an auto repair shop; and I can send you that address now, too. I’m guessing the flowers would have been sent from the new guy, not the old. Oh, and there are plenty of pictures of both on social media with both Teresa Grant and other women. Seems like those with Brad are from somewhere out west, other than those with Teresa. Checking on facial recognition for others with David Brennan, and I’ll get back asap.”

“Anything from traffic cams?” Jackson asked.

“Nothing right in front of her house. I’m pulling up records on everything I can find at the first light.”

“Thanks, Josh.”

“The team and I will keep at it.”

“Good man.”

Their tech people were great. Field agents were trained to deal with human threats, bombs, bullets and more—but they had to know where to find them.

Jackson was certain Josh, and his team would find out what vehicles had been on the street. Angela was going to deal with Teresa’s ex, possibly a key suspect at the moment.

Jackson would see to the new man in her life.

He left Teresa’s house, headed for his car, and Brad Mayfield’s auto repair shop.

Great way to spend Valentine’s Day.

\*

Angela had met David Brennan several times. Corby was a teenager now, but he was a great son, careful and patient with little ones. Victoria was closer to Emma’s age, and the two played when they could; therefore, she had seen David on several occasions when he had come to pick up his daughter for his days with her. He’d wasn’t a demonstrative man, but he’d always been polite and cordial. Emma appeared to adore her father, eager to run into his waiting arms when she saw him.

She glanced at her watch. Agents would be there to replace her in just a few minutes. She realized she’d arrived at the hospital in the ambulance, but whoever Jackson had called on to come in would give her their car to use. She knew they had to discover the truth of what had happened.

A nurse walked into the room. One Angela hadn’t met yet.

“I’m Sandra Larkin, just came on,” the woman told Angela. “I need to add an antibiotic to our patient’s IV. I’m sorry, I need to be where you’re sitting.”

“Of course,” Angela murmured.

“No!”

She started, hearing the harsh whisper from just behind her. The nurse, of course, didn’t hear the whisper.

Because the speaker was dead.

Angela frowned, looking at the ghost of the elderly man who stood behind her.

“She slipped up the stairs, she isn’t real!” the ghost said.

“Stop!” Angela commanded, stepping forward and wrenching the syringe out of the woman’s hands before she could inject it into Teresa’s IV tube.

The woman let out a gasp and then a roar of anger. She pulled a scalpel from her pocket and made a lunge for Angela.

But Angela easily sidestepped her, and the woman’s impetus took her across the room. She spun around, ready to attack again. But by then Angela had drawn her Glock and pointed it at the woman, shaking her head. “Drop it!”

She did. And then she turned to flee.

Angela groaned inwardly and took flight after her. The woman held the answers to what was going on. Why anyone would want to kill a single mother who taught school for a living.

She didn’t need to run far. The so-called “nurse” was hardly an experienced assassin. She ran into a hospital lunch cart and went sprawling down on the floor. Angela hurried over, pointing the Glock at her in warning as screams went up in the intensive care ward.

“It’s all right, it’s all right!” Angela called out. “The situation is under control.”

And it was. She looked up to see that Bryan McFadden, an experienced agent not to mention dear friend, was behind her. She nodded to him and knelt by the still sprawled woman.

“Who made you try to kill Teresa Grant? Who?” she demanded.

\*

Brad Mayfield was in jeans and a blue denim work shirt. He was a decent looking guy with his dark hair long, but neatly cut. He was talking with one of his workers when Jackson arrived, indicating an old Chevy and apparently instructing him on repairs.

He looked up curiously as Jackson arrived, smiled, and said, “Welcome. How may I help you today?”

“Brad Mayfield?” Jackson said.

“That’s me, sir. Again, how may I help you? Oh, man, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, but we get pretty busy around here—a good thing—but I’m down a man today.”

“I’m afraid I have information for you and a few questions,” Jackson told him.

Mayfield frowned. “Um—sure.”

“You’re dating a young woman named Teresa Grant?” Jackson said.

“I am.”

“And you sent her flowers today?” Jackson asked.

“Ah, man, no! I mean, we have this big night out planned, and I was going to stop and get them, but I . . . are you some kind of a cop?” he asked, confused. “Valentine’s police?” he asked, as if he was truly lost. “I mean, ah . . . wait. I’ve seen you. Your Teresa’s neighbor. Some kind of FBI guy.” He suddenly started to laugh. “Did she send you after me because I didn’t send flowers? You know, as a joke or something?”

“You didn’t send her flowers—or chocolate?” Jackson asked.

“No, I told you that I intend to make sure we have a super evening tonight, that I give her everything that her romantic little heart might desire!” He paused, looking at Jackson. “Oh, no. Something is wrong, right? Teresa . . . did something happen? Is Emma okay? Does Teresa need me? I’d leave anything if she needed me!”

“No, you can’t be with Teresa right now. She’s in the hospital—”

“Hospital!” The man appeared to be truly stunned. “Oh, no, please, please tell me she’s going to be all right. Why can’t I be with her? If she’s in the hospital, she needs me! And Emma, oh, that poor kid, she’s going to need me, too. I promised Teresa if she was ever sick or needed help, I’d be right there. I love that kid like I love Teresa! What happened? Oh, my God, what happened? She’s going to be all right—right?”

He stared anxiously at Jackson and Jackson nodded.

“Teresa will be all right. She’s going to be in the hospital for a day or two, I believe.”

“But—”

“She was poisoned. Through Valentine’s chocolate.”

Brad Mayfield blinked. Then he shook his head as he stared at Jackson, anger filling his entire being, his muscles tightening, his jaw clenching.

“That rotten bastard!”

“What rotten bastard?” Jackson asked.

“David Brennan. He wants custody. He wants custody of Emma, and I guess he was willing to do anything to get it. Arrest him, arrest him! He did this. The jerk never remembered to do anything special for her when they were married. Oh, man, he did this just because he saw that she was happy with me! You’ve got to go and arrest that man!”

“We’re questioning him, too, of course,” Jackson said.

Brad looked at him, still tense and angry. “How could he have done this?” he demanded. “I hope you get to him before I do!”

\*

“Why? Who are you and why—” Angela began, aggravated. Bryan McFadden was watching over Teresa like a hawk. Angela had her attempted murderess in the back of Bryan’s car, waiting for a police detective to bring her in for arraignment.

“Clair Norton. I told you and you have my I.D. My name is Clair Norton!” the woman announced, exasperated and shaking her head.

She was perhaps thirty-five, attractive with soft reddish-brown hair, green eyes, and a slim figure.

“Why?” Angela repeated.

The woman shook her head. “I will never tell you! I will never betray—”

“Are you afraid of someone?” Angela asked.

“Afraid?” Clair asked, and despite the circumstances, she began to laugh. “Afraid, no! I will never betray love. Never, never, never.”

“Oh, yeah. Valentine’s Day, is that it?” Angela asked.

“No. Didn’t you hear me? I will never betray love—on any day!”

“And who are you in love with?”

Again, the woman started to laugh. “Come on now—that would mean I was betraying my love!”

“Okay, whatever,” Angela said. She stood as she saw that Detective Henley had arrived and was pulling up in the garage near her.

She greeted him, and he thanked her for calling him in. The murder attempts against Teresa Grant were really local, not federal. Angela liked to keep their relationship with the local police good. She knew the man who arrived. He was a fine detective in the homicide division, and he would handle this woman and the situation well.

“One last try before you take her,” she told him, turning back to Clair Norton. She doubted that Clair was going to give it up—even when she understood just how long her prison sentence could be.

“Save yourself,” Angela said.

“Oh, um . . . yeah. Her ex-husband! I’ll cooperate. He paid me.”

“I thought you were in love!”

“I am, but, um, money is good, too!”

Angela shook her head and stepped back.

“We’ll keep at her at the station,” Detective Henley promised.

“Thanks!” Angela told him.

*Clair Norton claimed she was in love—and that she’d been paid. The two didn’t chime!*

She needed to get to the video station to speak with David Brennan, and she still needed to speak with the parents watching Emma Brennan for the night. But first . . .

She hurried back up to Teresa Grant’s room. Bryan McFadden was sitting next to the bed; two police officers were outside the door.

“I’ve worked with administration; police have done their reports,” Bryan assured her. “And I’ve been having a great conversation with—”

“The gentleman I need to thank?” Angela asked.

Bryan nodded, pointing across the room.

The ghost who had whispered to her stood there, tall and dignified. He appeared to have passed away at seventy or eighty years of age but had kept his posture and presence to the very end.

“Sir, thank you—” Angela began.

“It is my pleasure to remain to stop evil,” he assured her. “That’s why I stay. Captain Emery Smith, ma’am, 94th Airborne Squadron, World War II. I was blessed to survive the tail end, blessed to see men and women and children released from the horror of the camps, make it home, and survive until 1985, when, alas, as happens to all human flesh, mine failed. I am here often, though seldom in such a capacity as today. Not many remain as I have, but you must know that. And still, for those who leave the earthly world behind, I lend a hand when I can.”

“The captain is wonderful,” Bryan assured Angela. “He is teaching me so much about history that I didn’t know!”

“Again, sir, I must thank you. I have to leave, but I had to thank you. As I’m sure you did many times in the past, you saved a life today,” Angela told him.

“My pleasure. And I’m enjoying the shocking pleasure of a conversation with two living souls today!” he said. “Hurry on now! I’m grateful to see that others seek justice to this day!”

Angela smiled at him and nodded and turned to Bruce who gave her a nod and a wave.

She hurried out of the hospital, eager to reach Teresa’s ex-husband at the station.

She’d sent a picture of Clair Norton and her I.D. to Josh at headquarters, and she called him as she drove.

“I have no idea of what she was saying, really,” Angela told him. “She did it for love! She did it for money. I guess the logic would be that she was killing Clair for David Brennan so that he could have his daughter, but . . . if love was her thing, what was the bit about the money?”

“I’ll find out,” Josh promised her.

Soon, she was at the station. She was passed through reception and led to a conference room where, after a few minutes, David Brennan arrived.

“Special Agent!” he greeted her, frowning. “Is . . . oh, no. Something is wrong. Emma—”

“No, Emma is fine. But Teresa is in the hospital.”

He looked truly stricken. Then again, would-be murderers were capable of amazing acting abilities.

“What—what happened?” he asked.

“Did you send your wife flowers?” she asked him.

“Ex-wife, I’m afraid, and no. I believe that half the reason I’m her *ex*-husband is that I’m horribly forgetful when it comes to flowers and the little things. In the hospital. Oh, my God, was she allergic, was . . . what happened?”

“She was poisoned by the chocolate that came with the flowers,” Angela said.

She watched him. She was supposedly good—even great—at reading people. But it made sense that he might have wanted Teresa out of the way.

And still . . .

Her phone was buzzing.

Josh.

She excused herself, making a motion that indicated he shouldn’t leave.

“Angela!” Josh told her. “I matched your woman to the guy! So, I pushed it further and went into financials and other records. Angela! The boyfriend, Brad Mayfield! He had Teresa write up a will—did you know that her parents have a huge trust set up for Emma? Teresa wrote it all up—if anything happened to her, he was to be executor! He would be in charge of more than two million dollars. That is, if anything happened to Teresa!”

*She had read David Brennan right. The man still loved his ex-wife.*

“Call Jackson. Now. He’s with Mayfield.”

She ended the call and looked at David Brennan. Not many people could fake real tears. Tears were dripping down his cheeks. “I understand why . . . I mean, I guess I wasn’t a great husband. But I never stopped loving Teresa.”

“Come with me. You can see her—for just a few minutes. They’ve induced a coma—”

“Oh, my God, no!”

“She’s going to be all right; it’s a safety measure.”

“Emma . . . Emma is staying with the Watson family. I’ll call them and let them know I’ll get her as soon as needed. They don’t need to say anything to Emma yet . . . no, not until she can see her mom and know that she’s going to be okay.”

“Good call. I’ll drive; you should not be driving right now.”

He followed her out, explaining to a co-worker that he had to leave.

\*

“We may need to speak with you again,” Jackson warned Brad Matthews.

“I need to see her! I need to see Teresa,” he said.

“I will let you know as soon as that’s possible,” Jackson told him.

“Don’t let that bastard ex-husband anywhere near her, please! He’ll kill her somehow!” Mayfield cried passionately.

Jackson’s phone was ringing. Josh. He answered it quickly, turning away from Brad Matthews. Josh was good; he knew something already.

And the really great thing about Josh was that he could speak clearly at a zillion miles an hour. Clair Norton had tried to finish off Teresa at the hospital; he’d found a picture of her with Brad Mayfield on social media.

Somehow, even with his back to the man, Jackson heard him make a movement.

Mayfield knew Jackson had learned something. Something damning.

And he was pulling out a gun.

Jackson spun and aimed in one movement, firing a second before Mayfield could manage to do so.

The man went down groaning. Jackson hurried to his side, kicking the man’s gun far from his reach. By then, some people had run, some had screamed, and some had come rushing toward the sound of gunfire.

“You’ll have a local news story for Valentine’s Day,” Jackson said wearily.

Local police arrived, headed by Detective Henley, a man the Krewe knew and worked with well. There was still paperwork. The night waned on . . .

Jackson talked to Angela. In was growing late, but she’d brought David Brennan to the hospital where, miraculously, they’d deemed Teresa was doing well. When she’d been brought gently from her coma, she’d awakened to find David holding her hand, tears in his eyes.

When Jackson arrived, Angela was seated a bit from the bed along with Bryan McFadden—someone would still watch over her through the night. But seeing Jackson, Angela said something to Bryan, grabbed her bag, and hurried out to meet him.

He smiled at Angela, looking into the room.

“’All’s well that ends well,’” he quoted. “Hey, you knew to check on Teresa.”

“And what a weird, weird day,” she said, shaking her head. “But . . . David has been here a while now. They’ve talked and talked and whispered, and oh! She has seen to it that Emma is fine for the next two nights, and she should be home by then. We’ll have some definitive evidence set, and . . . life could be normal for them. This has been so . . . well, he still loves her. She still loves him—especially since she knows someone she thought was being great was really trying to kill her. We still need to discover who created the bouquet, and we will. Brad tried to kill you, eh?”

“He tried.”

“But you are—you. Hearing like a hawk.”

“Well, thanks, but . . . you would have heard him, too. They weren’t experienced people.”

She nodded, heedless of where they were, slipping into his arms and looking through the glass doors to Teresa’s room.

“I think Teresa got to learn something in all this,” Angela said.

Jackson looked at her, arching a brow. “Be careful who you date and who you trust?”

She smiled. “Valentine’s Day. It’s not really about flowers or candy or any kind of gifts. Except, maybe, human gifts. Love is in the day to day, the little things, the knowing that any time, someone else will care, and that when needed, they’re there.”

He looked through the window to Teresa Grant’s hospital room again. No flowers. And she would probably never eat candy again. But David Brennan was there, holding her hand. Just holding her hand.

“But,” Angela said, shrugging, “we do still have time for dinner! Oh, ouch. We’re going to need to eat, to find something open. It’s past midnight. Valentine’s Day is over.”

“Ah, I beg to disagree,” Jackson said, turning to her, gently lifting her chin so that she looked up at him. She smiled, her eyes beautiful as they met his.

“With you,” he told her, “my partner, my mate, my love—Valentine’s Day is every day.”

For a moment, he knew she shared the sentiment.

Then she smiled, laughed, and nodded.

“And beyond that, I’m starving! Dinner it is! The two of us, alone, so romantic as we share diner food in an exhausted state! But it’s the life we’ve chosen, and I wouldn’t have it any other way!”

Neither would he. He was a lucky, lucky man, and he knew it. They had chosen hard lives, fighting for the lives of others, for their country, and most importantly, each other. They knew they took risks. But whatever the world might throw their way, they would always meet it together. And that was, he believed, exactly what he had said.

Valentine’s Day. Every day!