

*New York Times Best Selling Author*

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**CHRISTMAS,  
THE KREWE,  
AND GIFTS OF HOPE**

Christmas, the Krewe, and a Gifts of Hope

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Once again, Sienna Murray thinks she's heading home for a beautiful and peaceful holiday—family, music, a tree and all the trimmings.

But a frantic call from an old friend and co-worker brings Ryder and Sienna out to the McMichael house where, long ago, tragic murders took place as Christmas neared. Ryder's old friend and co-worker has just purchased the house—and claims he's being tormented by a ghost!

Rumor is rife about what happened that fateful day at the McMichael house. But it will be their hunt to find the truth that will allow Sienna and Ryder to see just how beautiful the season can be and how the sweetest gifts can come in the strangest ways.

## Christmas, the Krewe, and a Gift

### Prologue

The McMichael House

December, 1815

Christmas was coming! Mary McMichael loved Christmas. They had come to embrace so many traditions. A tree in the house—a lovely custom brought over the ‘pond’ during the Revolutionary War-- adorned with lovely little decorations they made themselves, gift giving, church, singing . . . celebrating! That morning she had gone to the barn determined to create a pretty decoration for her mother’s room— a wreath for the inside of her door. She had suffered such a bad phase of sickness for so long with coughing, sneezing, and a fever. She was just starting to get better; and while she couldn’t join in all the festivities, Mary wanted her mother’s room to be cheerful so they might all visit her and bring her gifts.

She was out in the stables when she saw the men coming. And she knew her home was in a bad place. Andrew Jackson had gone so far as to negotiate with pirates because the enemy was coming to New Orleans.

Yes. Her family home was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. And they had been warned spies might be in the city.

No. Her heart fought against all she was seeing. Especially now.

It was almost Christmas! They would all fast on Christmas Eve; and because of their many French Creole friends and neighbors, they’d enjoy *Reveillon*—an endless and wonderful meal on Christmas Day. Friends and family would come. No, no, no! The house was all decked out, beautifully decorated, if she

did say so herself while her mother had been fighting an illness and just getting well enough so she might enjoy some of the love they would share this year for Christmas Day.

But now . . .

From her vantage point at the stables, she could see the men coming. They were not in soldiers' attire; but she heard one of the men shouting a joke to another, and she knew from his accent he was British.

And part of the assault that was expected from the Mississippi River.

They were heading to the house. Her father and her brother were out along with the men who helped tend to the property. They were drilling with men under Jackson, and she was alone in the house with her mother. She didn't know what to do.

She ran to the tack room and searched frantically for a weapon. She knew her father kept a long rifle hidden and pushed back on a shelf behind sacks of feed.

Just as she found the weapon, she heard a sudden bang and knew they had broken into the house. Her mother was alone sick in her bed. She was so frail!

Surely, Kathryn McMichael would offer no threat to the men? Mary ran as fast as she could from the stables to the back of the house. She heard some of the men in the house, and some heading up the front stairs; she quietly went up the back stairs.

She had to remain hidden. Unless they threatened her mother.

She heard them burst into her mother's room. Heard their mockery and strange sounds. They were ripping her mother's bed clothing away, taunting her. And she couldn't remain still.

She burst into the bedroom, the long rifle raised and ready. Her mother lay on the bed, stripped of her bed clothing, eyes closed, necklace ripped from her throat and dangling from the hands of one of them men. Another was going for the diamond on her finger.

There were three men in the room and another three in the house somewhere. She was one woman—with one gun. And there was nothing to do but play the men.

“I can’t kill you all,” she admitted. “But which of you wants to die first?”

“Get her!” One of them cried.

She fired.

And she ran. It was too late to help her mother. She made it down the stairs and to the basement door before a bullet caught her in the shoulder. She tumbled down the rest of the stairs and laid there, blinking as darkness seemed to come and go before her eyes. But she heard someone else, someone shouting and furious with the men.

“We belong to the finest navy in all the world! We are soldiers. We do not attack helpless women and children, we are—”

There was the sound of an explosion. Someone had killed someone, but she didn’t know if it was the looters and murderers who had come to her home, or the officer who had come to chastise them. All she knew was that as the darkness was descending, there was a sudden clattering.

Other bodies were cascading down the stairs. And she saw something more. A strange swirl of red and stygian black that was darker than any shadow in the depths of the basement. She heard a man screaming, and then . . .

No more.

## Chapter 1

### The McMichael House

December, 2021

“See, the house is wonderful! It was a steal,” Ned Barton said to his wife, Sarah. “Everything you heard about it being evil and haunted was . . . fun for the ghost tour guides.”

The house had really been a steal. Close to the river, it had escaped every blast of nature for over two hundred years. The previous owners, an investment group, had seen to the upkeep of the house. And the stories about it were ridiculous. Then again in New Orleans, anything old should come with a story and a ghost.

They had spent their first night in the house and nothing had happened.

Morning had dawned, just days to go before Christmas, and everything was fine. He rolled and leaned up on an elbow, smiling down at Sarah. They'd been married three years. They wanted to start a family. He had just gotten his detective's shield and Sarah had opened an art shop on Royal Street.

The world was beautiful. He was a cop; and he knew Christmas season might mean he'd be busy with shoplifters and those determined to try to make a joyous season into a time to set upon easy prey, but he would deal with all that. It was also a time of high emotion, when love and wonder were in the air—along with hurt and terrible feelings of vast loneliness.

Sarah looked at him with wide eyes. Although she'd finally agreed they should buy the big house so they could start a family and raise their children with a yard and plenty of space, she looked frightened.

"Sarah, hey! We have a tree downstairs to decorate. I have the day off. Everything is fine," he told her, smiling, and reaching out to move a lock of hair from her eyes. His wife was beautiful with her huge brown eyes and soft brown hair, and he loved her with his whole heart. They both wanted children, but they'd wanted a place where they could have space to play and grow. Real estate was at a premium. The chance to buy the old McMichael house—kept in such fine structural shape—had seemed a godsend to him.

Sarah reached out to touch his face in turn.

"I know, the house is beautiful, and I'm trying so hard not to sound silly. But, Ned, the history here gives rise to the ghost stories! And the realtor admitted one of the construction men ran out of here like a rabbit just last Christmas season! He said ghosts were hurtling Christmas ornaments at him."

"Sarah, the bad things that happened here happened way back before the Battle of New Orleans!" Ned told her.

"But they were pretty bad! A father and son returned from drilling to find a daughter had murdered her mother; and then, they think, killed herself. And they found dead strangers down in the basement, too. And because of the uncertainty of the times, the dad just locked them all in the

basement—dead!” Sarah said, her expression worried. “The son inherited the house when his father died, but refused to live in it. And the ghost people say Mary McMichael comes back every so many years to cause terrible things to happen at Christmas time! In the 1840s, an elderly man died in his bed upstairs! He’d complained about the ghost.”

“He was eighty-nine, Sarah. Sad as it is, we may die when we’re older.”

“But he might have lived to a hundred plus! And then during the Civil War, the Union tried to make a hospital out of the place. Patients ran around crazy, screaming that the ghost of death was staring at them while they slept. Even the man they called ‘Beast’ Butler allowed his medics and surgeons to choose another location for the hospital.”

“Sarah, it was the Civil War. I’m afraid many soldiers saw ghosts of death. Sarah, we’ve moved things in. We bought and set up a tree. We shopped and had dinner. We haven’t seen a ghost.”

“Okay, I just . . .”

“When bad things happen,” Ned said quietly, “it’s the living, and not ghosts, who cause them to happen. Oh, I got a call from Ryder Stapleton. He and Sienna are coming back for Christmas. We’ll have them over on Christmas evening. Her family is joining them for dinner Christmas Day, but they’re going to come by and see the house after.”

Ryder had been with the NOPD before entering the FBI academy at Quantico. He and Ned had been partnered at various times through the years, and Ned considered Ryder to be one of the best cops he’d ever worked with—and one of the best guys in the world as a friend, too.

Ned continued, “And you remember Sienna—I know you two met at some function or another. If you have questions about the house, she’ll have answers. She works for the new museum.”

“I thought she moved to the D.C. area to be with Ryder,” Sarah said.

“She did. She comes down every few weeks but learned she could do most of what she does via the Internet. And she knows just about everything there is to know about New Orleans. If you have

questions about anything that went on here, well, you can ask her. Sienna will know all about the truth and not rumor.”

Sarah agreed. She stretched, yawned, and hopped out of bed, and hurried to the shower. He followed her and smiled. First morning in the new house. A little fun in the shower, then a little more fun, and then go downstairs and get going.

But she pushed him out when he would have joined her beneath the spray of the water.

“Hey!” he protested.

“I still feel like someone may be watching!” Sarah said.

“Sarah—”

“I’m serious right now! Let me get used to this place.”

Groaning, he waited his turn. Then showered and dressed, he went downstairs where Sarah was already busy opening the ornament boxes.

It was then he discovered his house was indeed haunted.

Because as he and Sarah watched, the Christmas ornaments began jumping out of their boxes, soaring across the house, and crashing into walls here and there and everywhere.

## Chapter 2

The construction at Ryder's house in New Orleans was complete, and Sienna Murray was delighted she and Ryder would be spending the holiday at his home. Of course now it was a home away from home since he was finishing up at the academy, and they had an apartment near Quantico.

But New Orleans . . .

And at Christmas!

Riding to the French Quarter from the airport, Sienna leaned back in their rental car just loving the displays of lights they passed and then the decorations in the city itself.

New Orleans knew how to do Christmas! And the holiday was just days away. There was so much she had to do! They needed a tree—a real one. And while Ryder had assured her he had plenty of decorations, she wanted it all perfect. Her parents were coming in—no great journey as they were just

about two hours west of NOLA—but it would be the first time they were all together in a while, and she loved her family and loved that they loved Ryder.

“You look more relaxed already,” Ryder commented, and grinned at he looked over at her.

“It’s Christmas! And we’re coming home.”

“And you do realize every time we come home for a holiday, something happens.”

“This is Christmas,” she said firmly. “We’re going to just love the holiday. We’re going to do jazz mass, and see friends, and you can visit your old cop friends, and—”

“You know you’ll wind up doing some kind of work at the museum,” Ryder said.

While he had been a cop before joining the Krewe of Hunters, Sienna was a media manager and had worked for one of the city’s newest museums. During the pandemic, she had learned she could continue her job via the Internet. And because she loved it so much—despite a few strange things in their lives related to people there--she had continued to do so. She came often enough to check in at the physical location, and everything was working out well.

“It’s Christmas. I will have to see it’s decorated properly. And we must have real wreaths because the scent of pine is so Christmassy! I mean, I do understand the season. Love and giving, and despite your job and my life, I believe in the goodness and humanity in most of us, and . . . Christmas! Ryder, I’m just excited to be with you, to have my family . . . and friends! And I love we can all be together; and I’m thankful for the unit you’re about to join—assuming you graduate,” she teased, “might deal with the very, very strange, but was founded by one of the most amazing philanthropists in the world. Christmas!”

Ryder grinned at her. “Adam Harrison did say he might stop by. But everyone wants him on Christmas! And he is pretty good at getting around.”

She smiled, feeling even more delightfully relaxed. They had arrived with the sun just setting, with lights just coming on everywhere. New Orleans had always been a place where each holiday was embraced, and the ride was beautiful. Houses in all the neighborhoods they passed had decked out—

there were life-sized Nativity scenes in some yards, giant Santa Clauses and reindeer in others, and bright lights in reds and greens and more just about everywhere.

“Jazz mass,” Ryder murmured.

“My favorite, and I’ve taken friends of all kinds of faith to jazz mass, I’ll have you know!” she told him.

“I love it, too. I think it’s great when the service includes all kinds of friendship and a good rendition of Happy Days! Now, wow, all the Christmas music.”

Ryder’s phone started ringing. He was driving but he’d set the phone in the console between the two front seats, so she glanced at him and he nodded, indicating for her to answer for him.

“Ryder?” A confused voice said as she answered.

“This is Sienna. Who is this?”

“Ned . . . uh, Ned Barton. Detective Ned Barton. We met at lunch with Captain Troy a few days after Thanksgiving. Sienna, right?”

“Yes, Ned, nice to hear your voice. Happy holidays!” she said cheerfully. “Ryder is here with me. Um, is this personal or do you want to be on speakerphone?”

She glanced at Ryder, frowning.

They had arrived at his place in the French Quarter. Captain Troy—Ryder’s old captain when he’d been with the NOPD—had seen to it the gate to the parking in the house’s courtyard would be open.

It was an old place; they hadn’t had a chance to get an electronic opener put in.

“I—uh—” Ned Barton seemed to have trouble speaking. Personal. It had to be something personal.

“Ryder is just parking. He’ll be right with you!” she said cheerfully.

She handed the phone to Ryder as she exited the car. They would settle in and head out to get a tree. Then, they'd walk down Royal Street and see all the window displays. And music! It was New Orleans. Music would be everywhere, including beautiful Christmas music.

She walked toward the courtyard door that led to the kitchen, and drew her keys from her bag and left Ryder to his phone call. It had been his home—a home he had bought from his parents—but she loved the house. It was a wonderful old place, complete with the great courtyard, two stories, balconies, and more.

She opened the back and stepped in and froze.

Her grandmother was standing in the kitchen. Smiling. Waiting for her.

Her grandmother was . . .

Sienna had never been able to accept the term 'dead' when it came to Granny K. Born in Scotland but having spent the majority of her seventy-plus years in Louisiana, she had always been wonderfully strong, determined, and ready to battle any wrong. She was a wonderful storyteller and had enchanted Sienna as a child. And to this day . . . the ghost of Granny K had a wicked sense of humor.

Members of the Krewe became so because they were part of the miniscule percentage of the population who could see and speak to the dead who had remained behind. In her case, she tended to have a personal ghost much of the year, but Granny K had stayed behind in Louisiana when they had left after Thanksgiving. She remained to protect Sienna and so that Sienna could protect others, but she had a social life of her own and many, many friends who 'haunted' New Orleans.

"Uh—hi!" Sienna said.

"Ah, lass, you're acting all surprised, and you knew I was here in the city."

"Of course," Sienna said. "I just—"

She broke off because Ryder had come into the kitchen, a look of concern on his face. "Sienna— oh, hi, Granny K."

“Ryder, what is it?” Sienna asked.

He winced, looking truly pained. “Sienna, I know it’s Christmas, but a good friend of mine, a fellow who had my back on the force time and time again, is having . . .”

“A ghost problem?” Granny K asked politely.

“He and his wife bought the old McMichael place. It’s outside of the French Quarter, but still one of the oldest remaining homes of that type, and it has a history—”

“Starting with the War of 1812,” Sienna finished for him. “This is the story. Right before the Battle of New Orleans, a young woman went crazy, killed her mother, and disappeared; but her father supposedly discovered her body in the basement—along with the bodies of six men he didn’t know. And not knowing if they were friend or foe, Mary McMichael’s father closed-up and sealed the basement. The remains weren’t brought out of the basement for years. Her brother, having inherited the house, claimed it was haunted by his sister; and since his father had died, he told the authorities the truth and the remains were removed from the basement. But her brother refused to live in the house; and when it was used as an orphanage, the caretakers ran out screaming one night. Most of what we know is legend; but from what I’ve read in letters and journals by those who knew Mary McMichael, she wouldn’t have hurt her mother in a thousand years. It was right before the battle and British were arriving, and pirates were gearing up with Jackson. My guess is someone broke in and things just went wrong. But with enemy troops all around, the dad wouldn’t have wanted to make any waves; and he would have kept silent about anyone being in his house—dead or alive.” She stopped speaking and frowned, lowered her head, and smiled slowly before she looked at Ryder again. “I guess we’ll get the tree later. Are we heading over to the McMichael house?”

She knew Ryder was feeling his worst; he couldn’t turn down a friend, not in a situation like this. And was horrified to ruin what he was seeing as something that meant so much to her. When she had

first met him, she'd thought the intensity in his gray eyes was unsettling. Now she loved the concern she saw in them.

"We'll play Christmas carols on the way!" she said, and walked over to him and touched his face. "Christmas trappings are nice. But remember—the message is the reason for the season! Maybe helping a friend is the very best way to start."

"Ah, don't you two go being too mushy on me, now!" Granny K said. "And you're not going near the McMichael house without me!"

"Not to worry, Granny K," Ryder said. "No mush 'til we've booted you out!"

Granny K laughed. She really liked Ryder. "You'll not be having to boot me out, luv. I've friends to meet, places to be. I just came by to welcome you back to the city. I thought if I was already in the house, I'd not take a chance of interrupting any mush going on. I mean, I do believe I'll stick around long enough for a great-grandchild or two. Neither here nor there! Let's do this!"

Sienna looked at Ryder with an amused shrug as Granny K wafted her way out the front door. He shrugged in return. He'd explain to Sienna on the way about the "ghostly" activity Detective Ned Barton had seen in his new home.

"So, what's happened?" Sienna asked him.

"The house has a long history of ghost stories and of buyers getting out as fast as they can; and I believe the ghost apparently scared a man to death years ago. Of course, Ned, being a detective, didn't buy any of it. He has the day off, and he and his wife were supposed to start decorating . . . and he went downstairs to see ornaments go flying around the downstairs parlor. He knew we were coming; we'd talked about dinner or coffee or something during the holiday."

"So, he called you right away because he knows you're going to be with the Krewe of Hunters or the supposed 'ghostbusters' of the bureau?" Sienna asked.

"Well?" Granny K demanded from the back.

"But I don't know any destructive ghosts," Sienna murmured. "I don't know a ghost who would try to scare anyone to death."

"Hey, even I have heard that story," Ryder told her. He smiled and glanced at her quickly as he drove. She was truly the love of his life. She was beautiful with her sweeping locks of chestnut hair, and dark and expressive green eyes, and so much more. She had wanted a 'Christmassy' Christmas and was excited to be home in NOLA where, in her mind, street musicians performed some of the most beautiful carols possible. But she was also quick to support whatever he needed. Then again, she knew things the Krewe knew that others didn't. And in her words, she loved that he loved her family—all of her family—including the ghost of Granny K. She often said that, beyond a doubt, they were haunted!

Sienna turned to him now.

"A story! Just a story. Oh, my God, do you know how many ghost stories there are in and about New Orleans based on flimsy little bits and pieces?"

“Ah, but maybe some entities are vengeful,” Granny K said worriedly. “I mean, I haven’t met anyone—spirits hang around for loved ones. Oh, and for justice, too, of course, but . . .”

“Well, we’ll see what’s going on,” Ryder assured them.

It didn’t take long to reach the McMichael house. While it wasn’t in the French Quarter, it wasn’t far, just down Frenchman Street and toward the river. And while the city had grown up around the house, it still sat on an acre of land. There was nothing “haunted house” looking about the building; those who owned it through the years—be they corporate or a family—had kept the home in excellent condition. But it was what one might call a Victorian mansion with an outstanding wraparound porch, turrets, and gables.

“Were the English out here when this place was built?” Ryder wondered aloud.

“Ah, New Orleans 101!” Sienna said. “French and other fur trappers and traders were busy in the area in the 1600s. In 1718, Jean Baptiste Sieur de Bienville founded the colony of La Nouvelle in honor of Philip II, Duke of Orleans. 1720 rolled around and a hurricane destroyed almost everything and thus the Vieux Carre—or Old Square —came into being when Adrien de Pauger drew up plans, and thus we have the French Quarter. But after the Seven Years War, 1763, the Spanish came into power when they were ceded the lands west of the Mississippi. They were in control until 1800 when the area was returned to France, but not for long! Because France then sold the entire territory to the United States. So, yes, by 1812, New Orleans was part of America, and there were many English people among that population. So, while the Garden District came into being circa the 1840s, there were many people building with English designs, so--”

“I was just wondering because it looks like a Victorian house,” Ryder said, grimacing.

“Don’t ask the media director of a museum a simple question,” Granny K said with amusement. “You’ll never get a simple answer.”

“Anyway, we’re here,” Sienna said. “And Ryder knows NOLA history as well as I do.”

He did know the history, but not the nooks and crannies of all the years of history Sienna knew. Her work had to do with media, advertising, and public relations; but the “Museum of Oddities” focused on the truth and on history.

“I was more concentrated on the present,” Ryder reminded her. “Cops kind of have to be.” He loved his city, but it was not without crime. And as a former detective, he’d been involved with the dark side of things, too. He grinned at Sienna. “It just looks like it could be a haunted house because all Victorian houses kind of look like they could be haunted houses. I mean, in my mind. Go to any amusement park and the ‘haunted’ house is usually Victorian. Except no chipping paint and no spider webs. Anyway, we’re here.”

“I’ll be doing my own investigation!” Granny K announced, wafting her way out of the car.

“I’d expect no less,” Sienna called after her.

They had barely stepped out of the car before the front door to the house burst open, and Ned Barton stepped out.

Ned was in his early thirties, a solid guy, tall and built, and a logical man who had always used a cool head to best determine the way to handle a dangerous situation.

Today . . .

His hair was tousled, his color was pasty, and his eyes appeared to be glazed.

“Thank you! Oh, man! Oh, lord! I don’t know what we’re going to do! I sunk our savings into this place. I convinced Sarah the stories were stories and that . . . uh, sorry, I’m rambling. Thanks for coming. I could be wrong, but there are rumors about that unit you’re joining, and about some of the agents down here before the last, and . . .”

“Ned,” Ryder had reached the porch by then. “It’s okay. You remember Sienna, right?” he asked, taking her hand to bring her up the last steps to stand by him.

“Yes, of course. I’m not usually rude. And I’m not usually . . . I saw them! I’m a cop! I’m not the kind who goes running . . . a cop! Can you believe that? I swear, though—”

“Ned, it’s okay,” Sienna said softly. “Can you show us what happened?”

“Yes, come in. Please, please,” Ned told them.

They entered the McMichael house. It was truly a magnificent old home. A foyer gave way to an expansive parlor with a sweeping staircase to the far right that led up to the second floor. The ceilings had to have been about twenty feet high with a balcony from the second floor looking over the parlor. A huge marble mantle and fireplace took up the far side of the room from the entry while the area that fronted the street held a magnificent bay window.

That’s where the Christmas tree stood. And it was where the floor seemed littered with broken ornaments.

“The strangest thing is . . . that box over there has old ornaments, collector’s items from our families. It was pushed aside. I should get it out of here, maybe. I mean . . . the broken stuff is like drug store things I just bought. You know, not . . . special. And still, Ryder, I saw ornaments fly around the room!”

As they stood, surveying the scene, Ned’s wife Sarah came hurrying out of the kitchen.

Her eyes seemed wide with horror. She was shaking.

“Hi. Thank you. I was . . . making coffee. And it . . . it . . . I had just filled it. The coffee maker, I mean. It went on by itself. So . . . uh . . . coffee. There will be coffee. But we have whiskey. I may have whiskey,” she said.

Ned walked over to her, slipped an arm around her shoulders, and gave her a hug.

Ryder had known her since she and Ned had started dating. She was a sweet, beautiful woman not usually given to fancy. She was strong and capable on her own; someone who made a great wife for a detective in a city that was incredible but could be dangerous.

“Sarah, we’ll get it figured out,” Ryder promised. “You remember Sienna, right?”

“Yes, yes!”

Sarah broke away from Ned to throw herself into Sienna’s arms. Sienna gave her a reassuring hug and promised, “It will be all right.”

“But—but—I didn’t want to be right. Honestly. I didn’t want to be right! But this place! They say when Mary McMichael went crazy, she killed her mother and others. And her father locked them all in the basement, living and dead. And then that man died in his sleep! And then . . . in the late eighteenth hundreds, they say a maniacal serial killer lived here, putting more bodies, slashed to ribbons, down in the basement. And now—”

“Wait! Back up!” Sienna pleaded. “Sarah, that’s not true. I work for a museum—The Museum of Oddities. We have a massive historical section and more records than you would ever want to see. That’s not true. Sarah, New Orleans is now centuries old and bad things have happened, enough that we don’t need to add to them, but people will always embellish stories. What happened here, well . . . I don’t believe Mary McMichael murdered her mother. No one really knows because bodies were just found in the basement later; and an educated guess would surmise her father was afraid of repercussions from whoever won the Battle of New Orleans once it was fought. The world then, as it is now, was a bit of a mess. Napoleon had surrendered to the British in July of 1815, and the British and Americans had signed peace treaties. The War of 1812 should have been over, but fighting was still going on. The British were coming and there was going to be a battle. Andrew Jackson knew it was coming, and he had been in negotiations with the pirates. Many, many things may have happened.”

“Maybe pirates broke in and killed everyone!” Sarah said. “And that’s . . . pirates! Pirates are here, their ghosts are living in this house, haunting us, tearing everything apart! Jackson had asked Lafitte for help I know, but who knows what kind of men were working with Lafitte—”

“Most of the populace liked the Lafitte brothers,” Sienna said with a sigh. “They brought goods into the city that couldn’t be obtained in other ways. But—”

“Right. I think I knew that. And Napoleon was supposed to come here. I mean, that’s why there’s the Napoleon House in the French Quarter, the restaurant, some guy thought he was coming—”

“Nicholas Girod, then mayor of the city. He offered the house to Napoleon in 1821—when the War of 1812 was really over; but as history goes, he never made it,” Sienna murmured. “Girod was born in France. They say he helped Andrew Jackson because he hated the British and not because he loved Americans.”

“Uh--right, that dude. And they say Napoleon House is haunted, too, but . . . I’ve eaten there a zillion times and there’s nothing like what’s happened here! And this I know to be true--an old man was scared to death!” Sarah said.

“Or he had a heart attack and died, as he would have no matter where he lived,” Sienna said gently. She looked over at Ryder, and he knew she was looking for help.

He stepped forward. “I have an idea. The two of you need to take a ride around the city. If you don’t want to walk around and listen to Christmas music or have your whiskey at the Carousel Bar, you are welcome to go to my place. But I think it might be best if you let Sienna and me investigate here a bit with open minds.”

“I’m a cop!” Ned repeated. “I . . . I mean, I’m not supposed to run!”

“You’re not running. You’re just letting us look at this with fresh eyes,” Ryder assured him.

Ned stared at him. “You are the *weird* police then, right?”

Ryder winced. “The unit I’ll be with handles unusual circumstances like this.”

“Ghosts!” Sarah said determinedly. “We have a ghost. Okay, see what you can do. Please, sorry. Please, and thank you!”

He walked the two of them to the door and looked back at Sienna after he’d closed it.

“If the ghost really made coffee,” he said dryly, “I’d love some.”

Sienna smiled. “I’ll go see,” she said.

She headed into the kitchen.

“Hello?” Ryder said quietly. “We’d love to talk to you.”

“You bet you would!”

It wasn’t the ‘ghost’ of the McMichael house who spoke; it was Granny K. She came wafting through the room to stare at him.

“You want the story?” she demanded. “I’ve got the story for you!”

#### Chapter 4

The coffee cups moved.

Sienna stared at the counter. If there was a ghost in the kitchen, she should have seen it! But the cups had moved closer to the coffee pot.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Mary? If that’s you, please. I don’t believe any of the stories I heard about you. I believe you loved your mother, and you would have tried to protect her. Mary, if it’s you, please, let me see you.”

She saw nothing and heard nothing. And the cups remained still.

She shook her head, puzzled. She’d known nothing about her own ability to see the dead until Granny K had died, and she hadn’t believed her grandmother was dead because she had told her to go and warn her neighbors—save her neighbors—from a fire. Then, of course, she’d had to go to therapy because her explanation that her grandmother had told her about the fire had not been accepted by anyone else.

It had been a fire again—with Granny K warning her again—that had brought her and Ryder together. And it was the Krewe of Hunters who had understood and welcomed them both.

But she was . . . she was good! She could see the dead.

Unless, of course, the dead didn’t want to be seen.

Sienna frowned and poured cups of coffee and walked back out to the parlor. But Ryder wasn’t there. She set the cups on a coffee table, slowly turned around the room, searched for a reason he might be gone.

Then it seemed the entire house rattled. And she heard a dark and husky whisper warning, “Get out! Get out now, before you die!”

She spun around again. No ghosts to be seen. Where were Ryder and Granny K?

“Ryder!” she shouted his name and waited.

Nothing.

Then she noted the beautiful sweeping staircase that graced the room. She realized that behind the steps leading up to the second story, there was a set of steps leading downward.

Strange—she thought. The steps had to lead to the basement. Usually, the basement was accessed through the kitchen. Maybe there was a second set of steps she hadn't noticed.

Leaving their coffee cups on the table, Sienna turned toward the steps.

"Ryder? Granny K?"

Still, there was no answer. She started down the steps and came to a door. It was slightly ajar.

She pushed it and the door moved inward with an ancient creaking sound.

At first, she saw nothing but darkness. Bit by bit, pale light from the upstairs filtered down.

The basement was not like the rest of the house. It hadn't been maintained with care—not loving care like the rest of the house.

Spiderwebs permeated the whole of the place.

But she could see the water heater was in the basement along with old crates, some of which had possibly been there since the house had been built. The basement was part of the foundation, and as such, had many rooms as well. But if Ryder and the ghost of her grandmother were down here, they would have heard her calling.

"Mary?" she asked softly.

It seemed that a breeze arose, whisking around her, touching her, pulling spiderwebs from the walls to tangle around her face.

She wasn't sure just what it was about spiderwebs.

"Stop!" she screamed aloud. And for the first time in forever maybe, she was afraid of the dead. She turned and headed for the door to get the hell out of the basement

The door slammed closed just as she reached it.

It seemed the whole of the world was pitched into sudden, stygian darkness.

\*

Out on the porch, Ryder stood next to Granny K and nodded in acknowledgement of the introduction she had just made to the ghost standing there. The man was wearing the uniform of British Royal Navy lieutenant, breeches, waistcoat, and all. He had been in his late forties or early fifties when he had died, and the ghost of the man stood straight and dignified—and skeptical.

“He sees me? He really sees me?” the ghost asked Granny K.

“That he does,” Granny K said.

“How do you do, sir” Ryder murmured. Knowing what he did about the rumors, he had to assume this man had been with the British on shore before the Battle of New Orleans. As such, a proper greeting seemed in order.

“Lieutenant Oswald Brennan, please meet my almost grandson-in-law, Special Agent Ryder Stapleton. Ryder—and my granddaughter—are among those who are able to speak to those of us who remain, and he is interested in righting all wrongs,” Granny K told the ghost.

“I am pleased to do anything I can,” Ryder said. “Sir, I admit, I don’t understand the destruction—”

“The ornaments? That was me, and I am sorry,” the ghost of Brennan said. “I fear I get frustrated as I was on the day I lost my life. I had no argument with these people; I was serving the Crown.” He gave Ryder a grimace. “I sometimes think so much might have gone differently if we’d had cell phones in my time, and then again I wonder. We sometimes have all the communication possibilities in the world and yet we fail to communicate. The war should have been long over when the battle was fought here. And I would swear to the honor and integrity of my men, but those who came here were not men who sailed beneath me. And here is a truth—no matter what war mankind has devised, there will be those of integrity and those who seek evil on either side of the fighting.”

“Sir, I promise you, time has gone by. I am grateful for British friends, and I am aware that good men—and bad men—exist in every society. But I admit, I am surprised to see you. Per history—and the stories that men tell—the ghost that haunts this house is supposedly that of Mary McMichael,” Ryder said. “I would love to help you, to see justice done, but I’m not sure how I can help you.”

“Dear me, sir, it is not me who needs justice. It is, indeed, Mary McMichael herself!”

“Lieutenant Brennan has stayed to help Mary?”

“I have stayed because I am partly responsible for what happened here, and for the pain poor Mary has now felt for years, but now . . .” the ghost said, looking at Ryder. “Can you really help us, sir?” he asked.

“I can try, I can promise you that. And possibly, Sienna can help a great deal more. She works for a museum, and she loves history. If we need to correct history, she’ll be the one,” Ryder said.

“So,” Granny K said, “dear lads, we’ll head back in and find Sienna! I wonder where she might have gotten to!”

A scream suddenly seemed to permeate the air and shake the very walls of the house. A sound loud and terrible, coming from the very bowels of the earth.

Ryder turned like a bat out of hell and raced back to the house as Granny K murmured, “I believe we’ve found her!”

## Chapter 5

Sienna should have been the last person in the world to scream.

*She spent a great deal of time with the dead! She had learned not to fear them.*

But something happened when the door closed and darkness surrounded her like a miasma. It was almost as if she were permeated by a terror long gone, but still there, palpable in the air, pain, and fear and . . .

“Oh, by all the saints, I am sorry!”

The whisper cut through the mist of the past and the darkness. The door swung back open.

And finally in the murky light that filtered through from the floors above, Sienna saw the ghost of Mary McMichael standing before her.

“Mary!” she breathed.

The woman was clad in a lovely empire gown. In life, Mary McMichael had been beautiful with dark curls framing her face, lovely cheekbones, and expressive dark eyes. Right now, she wore a look of deep concern and sorrow.

“I—um. Yes. Indeed. But . . . I’ve never encountered the living before. Indeed, I speak poorly. I have not encountered them—when they have encountered me!”

“Sienna!”

Ryder was shouting her name. Mary moved aside because he came racing down the stairway, followed by Granny K, and the ghost of a British Navy man.

Ryder would have crashed through any ghost to reach her. Sienna quickly stepped around Mary McMichael and into his arms.

“You’re—all right, you’re all right?” he demanded. And she almost smiled. She loved him so much. She thought about her own strange fear—that which had brought out the scream. Ryder had faced just

about everything in the world in his years on earth, and he seldom allowed fear to affect him—except when it came to her!

“I am fine, and sorry, so sorry, I don’t know what happened—”

“What did you do to her?” Ryder demanded, a fierce frown on his face as he turned to Mary’s ghost.

“I am heartfully sorry!” Mary wailed.

The ghost of Lieutenant Brennan was staring at her, too, showing confusion on his spectral countenance.

“I closed the door on her,” Mary admitted. “And I’m sorry. And confused. And who are you?” she demanded of Ryder. “And you—you’re dead!” she said to Granny K.

“Thanks, lass, I hadn’t noticed!” Granny K said.

Mary looked at Lieutenant Brennan. “They—they see us!” she said, incredulous.

“Yes, they see us.” He smiled at her gently. “Mary, maybe they are the Christmas present we have waited years and years to receive!”

“Christmas present?” Sienna murmured.

“Truth!” Brennan said. “Sometimes, there is no greater gift than simple truth.” He shrugged suddenly, showing a sense of humor. “Okay, maybe love is the greatest gift, but truth may be a close second!”

“We’d love to know the truth!” Sienna said. She winced. “Perhaps we could learn the truth upstairs—out of the basement.”

“Oh, that will be quite fine with me!” Mary said, and she led the way up the stairs and out of the basement.”

They went to the parlor where Mary paused, looking at the Christmas tree.

“That’s exactly where ours stood!” she said softly. “We were fascinated by the tree and the decorations in the house. Andre LaCroix, a friend of my father, fought in the Revolutionary War with a bunch of Hessian soldiers and it was something that they did, and Andre was an old fellow then, but he helped us find a tree and decorate it and it and it was so wonderful because we got to show other people our tree and . . . it stood right there.”

“You had a tree?” Ryder asked her.

“Oh, yes!” she said. “We were celebrating with trees and ornaments and gifts—and church, of course. We did Christmas Eve at church ‘til late, and then feasted and gave gifts and sang Christmas carols just the same. I love Christmas music so much!”

Sienna glanced around the room and saw Ned and Sarah had set up their entertainment system against the far wall. She hurried over and switched on the stereo, keeping the volume low and finding a station that played just what was needed. Christmas music.

“Many believe St. Francis of Assisi was the ‘father’ of Christmas carols,” she murmured, returning to the group. “One Christmas, he created a nativity scene, and villagers gathered around while he spoke and then he had everyone sing! So, um, yes. . . by the 1800s, we had many!”

She smiled. To prove her point, the song that came out first was, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.”

“Yes, beautiful!” Mary said.

Sienna turned to Ryder. “We just have to take her to jazz mass! I mean, a lot of the music will be new to you or played in a new way, but I think you’d love it!”

“I . . . I’ve never left these grounds,” Mary said.

“Doesn’t mean you can’t do it, lass!” Granny K assured her.

“I just . . .”

“Mary wants to . . . be with her family,” Lieutenant Brennan explained.

“But then . . . ?” Ryder asked her. “Why don’t you—”

“I think it’s unfinished business,” Granny K said. “Mary did not murder her mother!”

“I just wanted Christmas!” Mary whispered. “Dinner, the Creole way with so many of our neighbors, and the love and the . . . Christmas. The Christmas message about a wonderful birth of love and kindness and forgiveness. Peace for the world!” she added dryly. “I forgive. But still, even in forgiving, knowing there can be peace for me, I am missing something I need!”

“The truth!” Lieutenant Brennan said firmly.

“What is the truth?” Sienna asked quietly.

Mary sighed, sinking down to the loveseat near the Christmas tree.

“People can be so cruel! I never wanted people to think evil lingered here at this house. It was our home. I loved it. I never meant to hurt anyone. I just tried to reach out . . . to find a way to tell people the truth of what happened. Some think ghosts are monsters! It is the living who can be monsters. The War of 1812 should have been ended. But now I’ve watched war after war. And in the name of war, people think they can do such terrible things!”

“They do them with or without war,” Sienna told her softly. “But Mary, I still believe most people are good. Ned and Sarah are good people. They are . . . excited about Christmas, too.”

“That’s all I’ve wanted all these years. The truth—and the Christmas I never had that year!”

“All right, let me start,” Lieutenant Brennan said, as he stood by the tree, very much at attention, his posture tall and proud. “One of my men warned me in the middle of the night, he saw a group of sailors slip from their ship and he was concerned. They weren’t spies—they were up to no good. He feared his cousin might be among them. I received permission from my captain, and I came after them. When I arrived, shots had been fired, and Mary’s mother was dead. My determination to bring the wastrels to order was lost. They knew they would face severe consequences, because I had caught them looting and behaving as common criminals, a huge disservice to the Royal Navy! We were, at the time, the finest on the earth. That’s neither here nor there. I heard Mary screaming; I was injured, but by then, the men had

left me for dead and pursued Mary to the basement.” He hesitated. “I was shot and killed by a dying man. I fell next to Mary and . . .”

“It was amazing and terrifying,” Mary whispered.

“There was a strange swirling darkness. I heard men screaming.”

“Then there was silence,” Mary murmured.

“We turned to each other, slowly realized we were dead, and the others were dead, too, but that . . .” Brennan continued.

“The darkness had come for them,” Mary murmured. “When my father returned, I tried so hard to speak to him; but for my brother’s sake, he sealed off the basement. No one knew then what would happen, and if the battle had gone the other way . . .”

“You have to do something!” Brennan said. “Mary did not kill her mother.”

“Oh!” Mary said indignantly. “We did not kill that old man! “

“We did not,” Brennan agreed. “In fact, Mary tried to get help, but . . .”

“No one sees us!” she wailed.

“Until today,” Brennan said, looking at them with a frown, as if he were still finding the situation to be incredible.

Maybe, Sienna thought, after more than two-hundred years, it was incredible.

“There are others like us,” she assured him. “But now! How do we get the truth out?” She looked at Ryder. “I can do a paper and circulate it, but without any kind of proof, my story would be the same as anyone else’s story! I am happy to do that, of course.”

They were all silent. “Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful” began playing on the stereo system.

“Wait!” Mary said. “There is something almost like proof! My father kept a journal—mostly accounting and business—but when he came home and sealed the basement, he also hid the journal. It’s there!” she said excitedly, pointing at the stone hearth and mantle. “Second stone from the bottom!”

## Chapter 6

Ryder and Sienna looked at one another and hurried over to the mantle. The stones appeared to be sealed together. "I'm going to need tools," Ryder murmured.

"Check the kitchen!" Sienna suggested.

He did. If Ned had brought his tools into the house yet, he hadn't stored them in the kitchen. And it hadn't appeared anything had been brought down to the basement.

No tools but enough cutlery. He would apologize to Sarah later for using her silverware to hack away at the mantle.

Sienna and he went down to their knees, studied the stone, and then started.

They chiseled away at the grout around the stone, and finally it gave way. The ancient, leather-bound text fell into Sienna's hands.

"Oh, my lord!" she breathed as she gently held and carefully opened the journal they had found.

She read aloud because there, in pen and ink and an impressive cursive hand, was written the truth—ruffians had broken into the house. In horror, he had discovered his wife and daughter dead. But they were dead along with the men who had broken in; and most regrettably, the officer who had apparently tried to stop them. Lest his home be burned to the ground and his son become a target to pay a price, he would keep silent on all.

"This is incredible!" Sienna breathed. "I have to get to the museum. Pictures, I need all kinds of pictures of the book; and I need to get it all written up. And the truth will be out there, Mary, the truth will be out there! I promise, I'll get it done this evening, and it will be known everywhere!"

"But it's night; your museum will be closed and—"

"No problem," Sienna said, laughing. "I have a key!"

She was so excited, Ryder thought, amused. Not only were they succeeding in helping the dead, but Mary had given Sienna a gift—the truth, as Mary called it. Proof of the truth. And to someone who loved history so much, that was incredible.

“All right, you two,” Ryder said. “We’ll get to the museum and get started on this. I know Sienna— she will have an article and pictures and everything out by tomorrow morning. Then—”

“Christmas Eve,” Mary said softly.

“We can fix more,” Ryder said, looking at Sienna.

“Indeed, we can!” Granny K said. “Well, all right, they can. Lieutenant, Mary, you do realize, others don’t see me either.”

Mary gave her a beautiful smile and laughed. “Of course!”

“But! Because they can’t see doesn’t make people . . . maybe unappreciative,” Sienna murmured. She frowned as she looked at Ryder.

“I’m going to get you to the museum, and then I’ll go and talk to Ned and Sarah,” he promised.

“I should help on that.”

“Of course. You may be . . . better than I can be,” Ryder said. “She’s much more of a diplomat.”

“And he’s all brawn, you know?” Sienna teased in turn. “Anyway, let’s get started!”

“I’ll hang with these two,” Granny K said. “But you two—”

“We’re on it,” Ryder promised.

And they were.

He drove, and Sienna talked about the way she really needed gloves to handle the volume; but as soon as she had the story and pictures, she’d see it was in the hands of the museum’s preservation department.

She looked at him. “Go figure,” she murmured.

“Yes?”

“They say the best gifts you receive are also those you have given. We gave nothing but a little bit of time, and here . . . this is a remarkable discovery, Ryder. In so many ways. But I think Lieutenant Brennan is right. We need to give Mary a Christmas Day. But . . .”

“A Christmas Day at her house. And you are thinking Ned comes off as being a manly-man, an Alpha guy, not in a bad way, but just in a confident . . . cop way. True. But he was shaking when he left here, and Sarah will listen, too.”

“What are you proposing?” she asked.

“The truth.”

“The truth? That their house is haunted not with one ghost but two? Ryder, I knew a lot of ridicule—”

“Let’s take a chance. I’m willing to bet both Ned and Sarah already believe their house is haunted. If we can make them understand the ghosts mean them no harm, we can figure out a way to let Mary have Christmas, too.”

Sienna was silent for a minute and then she nodded slowly. “They’re not going to let ghosts come to Christmas unless—”

“We come to Christmas, too. And your parents are coming in. But does it matter if we help fix that house this year and all of us have Christmas? And,” he added, “you can have Granny K and Mary at Christmas Eve jazz mass, too.”

Sienna smiled, lowering her head. “Yep. We can do jazz mass!”

They reached the museum and he dropped her at the door then hesitated. He hated leaving her alone.

“I am fine, all problems here have been solved. I want to work! And I don’t need you micro-managing anything. Get out of here. Go and get started with Ned and Sarah!”

“Call me. Tell me who is on tonight,” he said.

“Will do,” she promised.

He watched her enter the museum and lock the door. He knew there was always a security guard working now, and he’d helped vet those who were working there.

He drove to his house and called Ned on the way to make sure he and Sarah were still there.

They were.

He parked and walked in to find them standing at his dining room table, anxiously waiting for his arrival.

Ned stood. “Anything?” he asked.

Ryder hesitated. “Um, quite a bit, actually,” he said, and winced inwardly as he indicated they should both sit.

They did.

“Well?” Sarah whispered.

“Um, your house is haunted,” he said.

“I knew we should have never bought that house!” Sarah said, looking desperately at her husband.

“Wait, your FBI unit really knows . . . “

“I’m not saying anything about my unit—and I’m still in the academy by the way. But . . . Sarah, it’s not a bad thing.”

“Christmas ornaments flying around isn’t a bad thing?”

“Lieutenant Brennan apologized for that,” Ryder said.

“Lieutenant Brennan?” Ned repeated, his face white. “You know them by name?”

“It’s a long story. You’ve got an incredible house, and news will come out tomorrow about a discovery we made. We took the liberty of removing a stone from the hearth. We found a journal belonging to Jeremiah McMichael, and it will clear the history of the house. It explains everything that went on. Mary McMichael never murdered anyone. The home was invaded by enemy sailors who went

AWOL off their ship, and Mary's mom was killed. Mary fought back, a furious British lieutenant arrived, and the remaining men knew he would turn them in for discipline or worse—and everyone ended up dead," he explained quickly. "Sienna is at the museum now; she'll have a paper written and pictures out of the journal before the night is over." He hesitated. "That's what the ghosts wanted. The truth. Mary McMichael has been maligned in stories now for over two-hundred years. All she wanted was justice."

Sarah looked at her husband.

"That poor girl! It's all so tragic."

Ned gave her a sage nod. "Sad, yes. No, tragic. So . . . we can go back? But . . ."

"I think your ghosts will move on," Ryder said quietly. "Except . . ."

"Except?" Sarah asked.

"Well, there was one more thing," he said. He did his best to give them a cheerful smile. "How do you feel about guests for Christmas?"

## Chapter 7

Sienna spent two hours or so at the museum, and it was late when she finished, but she was happy with all she had managed in the time.

She had set the journal in a box to be handled next by the preservation department. Before she called Ryder, she thanked the security guard on duty for staying with her then waited for Ryder to swing by and pick her up.

Homes and businesses by the museum—and the museum itself—were decked out in beautiful Christmas ornaments. She wasn't sure she had ever felt the season quite so much, and she was smiling when Ryder picked her up.

"It's going to be a really late day," he warned her.

"Too late to say that. What is it? About nine or ten?"

"Thankfully, NOLA is a night life city," he said. "Anyway, Ned and Sarah are swinging by a place they love on Royal Street and picking up dinner. We're going to meet them back at the McMichael house."

"And?"

"They are willing to have guests for Christmas. But they'll need our help tonight—you know, sweep up broken ornaments, get the decorations up—and then, well, we'll call your folks and have them come there."

"You told them—"

"The truth and nothing but the truth," he said, grinning at her.

"And they're okay?"

"No, I think they're scared silly, but they're ready to give it a try."

When they reached the McMichael house, Ned and Sarah were still in their car.

"It's okay to go in," Ryder assured them.

“Yeah, we thought we’d wait for you anyway!” Sarah told them. “And we have dinner!”

As they walked into the house, Sarah balked slightly almost backing into Sienna.

“It’s okay,” Sienna assured her.

Sarah walked on in nervously, whispering, “Are they here? I feel something, I mean . . . not really, yes, something, I don’t know what.”

“They are here,” Sienna answered honestly. “I don’t know if Ryder told you about my grandmother, Granny K, but she’s there on the loveseat.” She hesitated. “Mary McMichael is next to her, rising to meet you and Ned. Lieutenant Brennan is standing there by the tree.”

“Please tell her I’m really sorry,” Brennan said.

“Lieutenant Brennan wants you know he is truly sorry about the ornaments. He was frustrated, but that was no excuse for his behavior.”

Sarah nodded. “It’s okay. You left the ones that meant something to me. Was that on purpose?”

Brennan nodded and Sienna conveyed his reply to Sarah.

To her surprise, Sarah suddenly laughed and turned back to her husband and Ryder.

“Okay, cool. So long as we’re all on the same page. They don’t still eat, right?” Sarah asked Sienna. “Dinner. I’m starving. Then, we’ll get to it! Oh! Tell them both, please, that I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry for what happened to them. And . . .” She looked at her husband again. “Tell them Ned and I will be delighted if they’ll spend Christmas with us!”

“Oh!” Mary cried, leaping up, her hands to her mouth. She looked at Sienna hopefully. “And--?”

“I’ve written what I believe to be one of my best articles ever. I admit, I’m a media manager and I do mostly promotional work; but I talked to a friend at the paper and another at our local affiliate, and they were both incredibly excited to be getting this kind of a story first. By the end of Christmas Day, everyone will know the truth.”

“That’s incredible. Thank you!” Mary said.

“That was amazing for us,” Lieutenant Brennan said.

“Well done, lass,” Granny K said.

“And you must go eat—I do miss food!” Mary McMichael said. “Alas! Ah, well, I shall so enjoy tomorrow and Sunday.”

“Oh, Granny K, my folks will be here on Christmas Day, so don’t you go getting them worried about me again—”

“Girl!” Granny K said. “Are you forgetting your father is my beloved son?”

“Nope. And I’m not forgetting you like to torment us both!”

“Hey. The dead have to have a little fun!” she said.

“Dinner!” Ryder said. “Into the kitchen.”

They went into the kitchen where they all opened bags and removed the food Ned and Sarah had picked up from Mr. B’s, one of their favorite restaurants on Royal Street. They set out biscuits and gravy, shrimp and grits, salads, and one of Sienna’s decadent loves, pecan pie.

“Are they in here with us?” Ned asked Ryder.

Ryder shook his head. “They’re out by the tree.”

They sat to eat, passed pitchers of tea and lemonade, as Ryder tried very hard to make light conversation, but Ned still looked shell-shocked.

Sienna finally said, “Hey, guys. Much appreciated if you don’t tell anyone else about . . .”

“All the ghosts you guys know?” Sarah asked. She shook her head, smiled and reached across the table to place her hand on her husband’s. “Ned, I’m really wishing I was one of them! I wish I could have helped Mary—”

“You are helping her,” Sienna said. “You’re giving her Christmas.”

Sarah smiled at that and leaned back. “Thank you. And not to worry—we’re not opening a bed and breakfast and advertising our most haunted room or anything of the like.” She frowned. “What will happen after Christmas?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” Ryder told her. “Mary has said she wants to see her family. Maybe she’ll move on.”

“To where?” Ned asked. “Is there really a heaven and a hell?”

“We don’t know. We know that um, well, sometimes, ghosts know a light is coming for them. I like to believe that’s heaven,” Sienna said. “And,” she added, as she frowned and glanced over at Ryder.

“There may be something else. Hell? I don’t know. I do know heaven and hell are different things to different people. Maybe there’s a place for cleansing or second chances. We truly don’t know—and neither do those souls who remain for whatever reason. But it’s Christmas, and I’m going to have faith in all good things,” Ryder said, lifting his glass of tea.

Ned lifted his glass and finally laughed. “That—from a cop-about-to-be-agent who has seen the worst humanity has done to humanity.”

“Because I still believe in the true humanity in most of us, and because it’s Christmas, and because . . .”

He paused dramatically, looking over at Sienna.

“Because happiness on earth comes with the people who fill our lives. Family, siblings—and soul mates. And, while I may sometimes deal with the worst, I am an incredibly lucky man to be where I am in life, seeing the bad but hopefully helping the innocent, too, and living with and soon to marry my best friend and the most amazing woman I have ever known.”

Sienna lifted her glass to him, and the warmth and love that filled her at the moment were almost overwhelming.

But Granny K came into the kitchen then.

“Ah, but the man can be mushy! Finish up with that food, now. We’ve got some surprises for you in the parlor!”

They headed into the parlor.

To Sienna’s amazement, the glass had been swept to a pile in one corner. Lights were out of a box and ready to be wound around the tree. The boxes of special ornaments had been dragged over and opened.

“Ghosts—can do this?” Sarah asked with amazement.

“Not many,” Sienna said. “It takes most ghosts forever and ever just to make moaning sounds or cause a door to close. But some . . . well, Mary can start the coffee for you!”

“I’m happy to start it for her anytime!” Mary said.

Sarah spun around her parlor, smiling. “Please tell Mary for me she is welcome here. It is her home. It was her home before it was my home. She is welcome here for as long as she chooses to stay!”

Mary smiled at that and turned to Lieutenant Brennan.

“Oh! And Lieutenant Brennan, too!”

“They have heard you,” Sienna assured them. “So, let’s get to decorating! Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. We have to get moving here!”

## Epilogue

Christmas was coming. And once again, Mary McMichael loved Christmas.

The house was beautiful, adorned with bright lights. And in the parlor, the tree was lovely, decorated as she would have loved to decorate a tree herself, with ornaments bearing pictures of family members, little ones, nieces, and nephews and more. Some had been handmade by Ned's and Sarah's family, and they were charming.

Granny K spent a lot of the morning explaining about herself, Sienna, Ryder, and Sienna's parents, who arrived right about noon.

They seemed to be wonderful, kind, loving people.

They didn't see ghosts, Granny K said, though they knew something was special about their daughter and Ryder.

There was so much laughter and love in the house.

Oh! Christmas Eve! Sienna had been right. How she had loved jazz mass! She could have stayed there endlessly, listening to the musicians, the choir, and joining in on the songs of celebration. She had loved the beautiful old church—just as she had enjoyed stepping out with Granny K after for a few minutes for Granny K to say hello to friends who still met one another at the cemetery just a block or so away. Sienna had known what her grandmother was up to, and they had waited for their 'hitchhiking' ghosts before heading home for the night. Sienna had whispered to Mary that Granny K had always been a storyteller—and loved the adoring crowd of friends who would gather to listen to her there.

But it was Christmas. Christmas—with the promise of hope which was truly the best gift of the season. Hope, peace, love, kindness. A person's chosen religion didn't matter. Even in her day, she'd been taught to respect the faiths of others.

It was the season, with other religious holidays falling in at a similar time.

Mary sat in her house on the loveseat between Granny K and Lieutenant Brennan as the living opened gifts, laughed and teased, enjoyed, and thanked.

Christmas music played all the while.

Mary decided that of the songs she heard that weren't new—but were new to her—her favorite was a man named Bing Crosby singing about a little drummer boy.

Sienna told her Bing Crosby had passed away.

Maybe, Mary thought, she'd get to meet him some time.

The day was beautiful. Everything she had imagined. Sienna's parents left around eight, and Sienna chastised her grandmother for trying to cause trouble. Granny K told her she was a ghost of the same woman she had always been. Trouble was her job!

Sienna and Ryder were about to leave when Sarah stopped them, asking, "Wait. I swear I can feel her. Is . . . Mary still here?"

"She is," Sienna said, glancing at Mary and smiling.

"Is she leaving?" Sarah asked.

"She is here. You can ask her yourself," Sienna said softly.

"Mary, please. We'd love for you—and Lieutenant Brennan, of course—to stay."

Mary smiled, looking over at Sienna. "Please tell Sarah I will stay a bit if she wishes. I have been so happy to see the news, to see people are so excited about my father's journal. To see people know I loved my family and tried to save my mother. And a Brit was one of the finest people out there. I mean, you all know about Brits now, but . . . never mind. We will stay a bit! Because she is a beautiful and loving person!"

Sienna repeated her words. "I can feel her more all the time," Sarah said. "I mean, it's okay, right, Ned?"

"It's beautiful. The best and most amazing Christmas!" he said.

Sienna smiled at Mary and said softly, “Merry Christmas!”

Mary smiled in return. “And to you and Ryder.”

Ryder slipped his arm around Sienna, and the two of them headed to their car. Mary thought it was wonderful the two of them were together. And though this Christmas had been beautiful with all the trimmings she had longed for, she knew they both knew that the beauty in Christmas was in those one loved, family, friends, and the amazing people met in life.

And death—in her case.

Beautiful souls—from any century!

She watched them go and felt Brennan at her side. She smiled. All these years, she’d had this amazing man at her side. And she knew he wouldn’t follow the light until she was ready to do so.

“Merry Christmas, Mary!” he said.

“Merry Christmas!” she said, giving him a ghostly hug. “Come! We’ve got to get back in there. We have some Christmas haunting to do!”

He smiled at her. Times could be hard. So hard. And they could be easy. And the trick, she thought, was loving every little thing that was good.

She caught his hand and pulled him back inside.

“Merry Christmas!” she cried.

Sarah stopped where she stood and shouted to her husband, “Ned! I think I heard Mary!” She spun in Mary’s direction. “Mary! Mary, Mary—merry Christmas!”

And it was!