



Christmas, the Krewe, and Kenneth

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No way out of it—Christmas 2020 was going to be different.

But Jackson Crow and Angela Hawkins are “home for Christmas.” Other agents are covering the office and they’ve just bought a home with a yard for their baby daughter and adopted son.

But their neighbor, newly widowed, hears strange noises in the yard, a rustling. She might be a little eccentric, but bodies have been found in the Potomac River. Accident or murder? The deceased couple had left behind an autistic son and fingers are pointing toward the boy.

Jackson and Angela are not on the case . . .

Until the “rustling” in the yard brings them into it, and their Christmas will be on hold as they rush to keep the consequences of the events from bringing about another death. But the spirit of the season is with them, and they will do what they can to save lives—and Christmas itself for their family.

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**CHRISTMAS, THE KREWE
AND KENNETH**

Christmas, the Krewe and Kenneth

“Angela! Angela! Come here!”

The hushed whisper came to Angela Hawkins Crow as she tossed a bag of trash into the bin by the side door from the house.

She knew, of course, the whisperer was their new neighbor, Sandy Wilson.

“Do you have your gun?” Sandy whispered.

“No. It’s locked up in a safe in the house,” Angela told her, her tone equally hushed.

She and Jackson were home—home for the holiday—meaning off work. And home for the holiday meant time with their almost-six-month-old baby girl, Victoria Sophia, and adopted eleven-year-old son, Corby. And since it had been such a hard year for pretty much so everyone in the country, they were grateful for the time with their children.

But they were “home for the holiday,” and as such both were fierce about making sure their weapons were in the safe when they were home.

“He’s here! The killer is *here!*” Sandy whispered.

Angela took a deep breath. Sandy was easily scared—and wasn’t very thorough in her explanations at first try. But she was a pleasant and giving woman, in her late seventies, tiny and thin with snow white hair and bright green eyes and a quick and easy smile.

“What killer?” Angela asked, deciding to be patient, and then concerned if necessary.

Sandy had been happy when they’d bought the home next to hers. She loved the idea the FBI agents—even if they were from the ‘weird’ unit—would be next to her thus adding a bit of safety to the neighborhood.

But Sandy was also fanciful. She had become a widow three years back; and while she was often uncomfortable alone in her house, she had told Angela the memories were wonderful, and she couldn't part with the house. And the children did come to visit.

Sandy hadn't been doing well lately, because the children—adults Margot and Denny with their own families—hadn't been able to come for a visit. Both were essential workers, and Margot lived in New York City while Denny was down in Florida. And while they both seemed to be loving and caring people, they weren't coming home for Christmas.

A vaccine was out there now. And they were waiting their turns and getting the vaccine before taking a chance with their older mom.

They did do Zoom calls constantly. Angela had gotten to meet both that way along with their mix of young children.

And she'd done her best to assure Sandy her children loved her enough to want to spend all the holidays with her.

They lost their father; they wanted their mother alive and well.

Angela took a deep breath.

Then Angela said, "Sandy, you know Jackson and I would know if there was a murderer in the area," she said, whispering as Sandy had done. "I don't think—"

"It was just on the news."

"When?"

"Just now. You know! 'Breaking news!' It was just on."

That was possible. She and Jackson and the kids had been watching an animated Disney movie.

"And then I heard the rustling again. I can't tell if it's coming from your property or mine because our trash cans and recyclers almost match up. Angela, haven't you heard the rustling around the garbage cans at night? Some people just don't care it's the season for peace."

“Sandy,” They were still whispering. “Sandy, please explain.”

“They found bodies in the Potomac, and that’s all they’re saying right now.”

Angela hadn’t heard anything about bodies in the Potomac. Even if they were out of the office, she and Jackson received briefs constantly.

But if it had just happened . . .

“Sandy—”

“I don’t hear it anymore. The rustling. But it sounded as if . . . as if someone were hanging around in the yards or between the yards. Anyone could jump the fence, . . . well, I couldn’t jump the fence, but younger, spryer people could jump the fence. Could you come over for just a minute? Oh, the baby is inside and Corby, but . . . and the dog? Oh, the dog! The dog would know if someone was in the yard, right?”

“Trust me, the dogs would know—”

“Dogs? You got another one?”

“Dog!” Angela said quickly. There were two dogs, but with Sandy already thinking the Krewe of Hunters was a “weird” unit, she didn’t want to explain their terrier mix, Kelly, had a great friend Sean, who was an Irish wolfhound.

An Irish wolfhound . . . ghost dog. Not know his name when he was alive or who he belonged to, she named him Sean.

“Jackson is inside, Sandy. I can come over.”

The barrier between the two yards was a simple fence. No barbs on top. Angela gripped one of the posts and quickly climbed over. Sandy was standing behind the foliage that circled her garbage and recycling bins and the side door into her house.

“You didn’t bring your gun!” Sandy said.

Obvious, of course, since the gun was in the safe; and she hadn't been back in her own house. But she said softly, "We'll just see."

It seemed bizarre she had crossed over the fence to look for an intruder, a possible murderer. She and Jackson had been playing Christmas music. The baby had just fallen asleep after gurgling and clapping at the pretty lights. "Oh, Holy Night" was sounding faintly from her house right now.

And alone or not, Sandy set out Christmas lights and a plastic Santa on one side of her yard and her plastic Nativity scene on the other.

Their neighbors had set out lights. And decorations.

There was a soft, light snowfall on the ground.

The season of peace! She thought.

But of course, Sandy was right. Some people didn't care. And still, it seemed ridiculous to be prowling at dusk between their yards—unarmed—to look for someone with a heart of evil.

Even if Sandy could be paranoid, she should have gone back into the house and gotten her Glock. But as she had expected, she found nothing.

It was true. Kelly—and even Sean—would have been barking up a storm, even if it was only the members of Angela's household who could hear Sean.

There was no one there in either yard.

And there was no sign of anyone having been there.

Angela checked. Thoroughly.

"Sandy, what else did they say about the bodies in the Potomac?"

Angela and Jackson had recently moved in the house. She did have a gun and she was a crack shot with it. Probably, due to what they did, they were always careful. She didn't want Sandy to be frightened, but she did want to find out what she could about what the woman had seen on the news. That would be the only way to reassure her.

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Of course, she could find out more by calling headquarters. This Christmas, Jon Dickson was manning the office along with Will Chan and Kat Sokolov.

If something were going on, they would know soon enough. And as to intruders . . .

The house was always locked. They had an alarm system, something they had decided they were going to get for Sandy Wilson.

Raccoons? Had the woman heard raccoons, hungry creatures, just hoping to knock over a trash can?

It was just too absurd to think they were going to have something happen here close to Arlington Cemetery, a family neighborhood, a place where people could count on their neighbors—even if they saw them at a distance wearing their masks because of Covid19.

They had just purchased the house in Arlington and only been living in it a few weeks.

But Angela was in love with the place and the area; they had a home, a family home. It was the best Christmas present she and Jackson had ever managed for one another. For years and years now, home had been just being together. But now . . .

A real home for their family. They had gone so many years together since they'd met on the first "Krewe of Hunters" case as a couple, dedicated to their work and to one another.

But then just last year, they'd adopted a little boy—now eleven years old—and had their own baby.

And they were still dedicated to one another and their work, but now they had a family. They had wanted a yard where they could set up swings; in summer they would buy an above-ground pool. Corby could have friends over. The baby could learn to walk and stumble around in real grass.

It had meant a lot, and they had made a pact they wouldn't buy one another silly little things; they would buy their dream home.

Sandy Wilson was even part of what she loved so much—a quirky neighbor who was a little needy but endlessly kind to Corby.

“I . . . was making cranberry relish and not really paying attention. But then I heard bodies had been found in the Potomac right when I heard the strange rustling sound again, and . . . I don’t know. I mean, you’ll know, won’t you?” Sandy asked her.

Angela nodded. “I’ll tell you what. Let me go in and see Jackson and find out if we’ve gotten any calls. I’ll send Jackson over to go through the house, make sure you’re safe, and get you locked in for the night. How’s that? And you have our numbers on speed dial, so if you hear anything again, you just give us a call.”

“That would be great. Thank you,” Sandy said.

Sandy turned to go back into her house, and Angela climbed over the fence again to return to hers the way she had come.

Corby was on the floor by the Christmas tree watching an animated Christmas show and scratching Kelly’s ears.

Kelly, their strange looking mix, a dog that more-or-less resembled a mix of a Scottie and Vietnamese pig, was in seventh heaven getting scratched and curled up against her ghostly companion, Sean.

The baby was still sleeping in her crib. When Victoria had fallen asleep in her arms; she’d gently placed the baby in the crib.

Jackson was near the group in one of the big comfortable armchairs they had chosen for the living room, but he was frowning and studying his phone.

“Bodies in the Potomac?” she asked quietly, coming up behind him.

He glanced up at her, surprised.

“You’ve added ESP to your talents?” he asked her. “I received a call on it about five minutes ago. And you’ve been in the yard . . . right! So wait, I’m a trained investigator. Let me reason this out or better yet, guess. Sandy already knows about them.”

“And she was convinced the murderer was hanging around in her yard.”

“So, you checked it out?”

“I did. But I promised you’d go over and search her house and then lock her in. But what about the bodies?”

He sighed softly. “They aren’t giving out a lot of information yet to the public, though I believe maybe they should be doing so. I talked to Jon Dickson. Two people were found, a husband and wife, both in their late forties.” He paused, shaking his head. “The matter is with the police, but Jon wanted me to know and to know the circumstances. We have good communication with the local authorities, thankfully, and they like us aware of cases even when they don’t involve us. The medical examiner hasn’t gotten to the autopsies yet, but in his initial and preliminary findings and educated estimation, they drowned. They have a son—and neighbors suspect the son.”

“That a son killed his parents—at Christmas?” Angela asked, shaking her head.

She’d wanted a quiet Christmas so badly! It had been a hard year, and she knew it had been harder for many people. They had lost friends during the year but not family. They had worked, and so many others were out of work. Despite what she did for a living, she’d wanted to believe in the Christmas spirit, in man’s goodness to man.

Jackson rose, indicating they should talk in their home office. She nodded and followed him.

“I believe it’s one of those cases that slipped through the cracks. The son has a severe case of autism. The parents felt saddled with him. They were charged with child endangerment once. They claimed he’d run off; witnesses said they’d seen the pair just put him out of their car on the beltway. The boy has the mind of a two-year-old but the strength of a powerful seventeen-year-old. The police

don't know the boy did it; but apparently—according to neighbors—if he did do it, it was well-deserved. I'm not a judge or a jury, but in my mind it might have been someone else. The couple was known for abusing drugs and for selling. Then there is this—no marks on the bodies. They weren't beaten; they weren't held beneath the water. There is the possibility of accidental drowning.”

“They both accidentally jumped into the river and drowned?” Angela asked.

“That doesn't sound plausible. But even if the child is autistic, for people to assume he's the killer—even if the parents had been brutal to him—doesn't seem right to me.”

“And I guess the police have chosen not to say too much because they don't want a scared person to shoot the boy on sight.”

“Something like that.”

“Well, it doesn't matter how you look at it, the situation is sad,” Angela said. “I hope they find the boy.”

He nodded. “One of the saddest situations I ever worked was similar. The kid did do it. He had been playing with his father, just wrestling around, when the dad fell on a marble floor and . . . well, he just fell wrong. He was in a coma, and we were looking for an intruder, but the kid was hysterical and couldn't explain, but finally he did. And here's the good upshot to that case—the dad lived, and the neighbor who had been arrested was released, and he was still kind to the kid and helped out around the place when the dad was released from the hospital.”

She smiled. “Sometimes, we get to prove that people are good, too.” She frowned.

“Mom!” Corby called from the living room. “Dad?”

They headed back out.

Corby was standing with Kelly in his arms; the ghost dog, Sean, was next to them.

“Is the gate closed? I think Kelly needs to go out. And Sean doesn't *need* to go out—he just wants to.”

Angela smiled and glanced at Jackson.

She sometimes wondered about the luck of her own life. To her, Jackson was as striking a man as ever. With mixed white and Native American blood, he was impressive with ink-dark hair, bronze skin, and blue eyes that were riveting against his coloring and high cheekbones. Better than that, though, Jackson had integrity and empathy. And while she found him to be unerringly kind, he was also bright and fierce when they were on a case; but he never let brawn outweigh the thought that went into any situation.

He was Field Director Crow for their unit, and Special Agent in Charge. As the Krewe had grown from the initial six members, she had fallen into the role of coordinator and liaison for the cases and agents with which they worked.

It was intense. They worked hard. They were happy together, and they were also married to their work in a way. Well, they had a unit full of agents who had all gone through the academy, and who also saw and spoke to the dead. That did often call for complete dedication.

But last year, they had met Corby, an incredible orphan who also saw the dead. And Angela had also discovered they were about to have a child.

So, now they had a son and a daughter and a dog—and a ghost dog. Sean’s last master had chosen to go on. Sean had chosen to stay with them.

She was a lucky person. She knew more so than most because she did too often get to see the evil in mankind. But she was also able to see the amazing kindness that human beings were capable of as well. And she knew her own life was blessed.

“Mom?” Corby said, frowning.

“Sorry, sorry! Yes, the gate is closed. You two—sorry, you three--can go on out.”

“Are we going to build the gingerbread house when I come in?” Corby asked hopefully.

“Tomorrow is Christmas Eve.”

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“Yes, we will build the gingerbread house!” Angela assured him.

Corby and the dogs headed out the front door.

“Oh! Don’t forget,” Angela told Jackson. “I said you’d go over to Sandy’s house and check it all out.”

Jackson nodded and glanced back at her, grinning, as he headed toward the front door.

“I’ll use the gates. Not sure what you were doing over there, but . . . think I’ll use gates and maybe knock at the front door.”

“Just go—no, wait!”

He paused, looking back at her.

They’d had a Zoom meeting with Krewe agents in the area and beyond. All had agreed that those not working would lie low for the holiday.

They, like many others, usually loved their “office” party or just getting together in the groups of friends that had grown through the years.

The vaccine was on the horizon. Households would celebrate alone.

Angela loved having people over. But not this year. Getting a grip on the situation was close, and she wanted to get them all to the finish line.

But . . .

“You need to ask Sandy to come here for dinner tomorrow night.”

“I thought—”

“Sandy doesn’t go anywhere. She has everything delivered. And I was just creeping around her yard, and you’re going to go through her house. She’s one person. Alone. I want to ask her to have Christmas Eve with us.”

Jackson smiled.

“You got it,” he told her.

He headed on out.

With Corby in the yard, Angela switched on the news.

Two bodies, husband and wife, dragged out of the Potomac, apparently drowned. Kenneth, their seventeen-year-old son, remained missing, and police were looking for him.

They put out a warning the boy was autistic and strong, and people were to call the authorities and not engage with him.

Angela winced. The way the news came out . . .

Yes. People would assume the missing son had done something to his parents.

She cringed at the thought.

Maybe he had. All possibilities had to be considered. She just didn't want . . .

She didn't want it to be a boy who was surely hurting already.

*

"Jackson, thank you. This has been so strange. So very strange. I keep hearing the rustling out by the garbage cans. I could have sworn this morning . . . well, thankfully, Angela was out here," Sandy said. "I'm so grateful to you both. Angela is always so kind. I hear, though, she's hell on wheels when she's on a case! Such a lovely woman, too, with that blond hair . . . she could have modeled. Thankfully, though . . . well, she's a kick-ass neighbor!"

"Thanks, Sandy, and I know Angela cares about you, too. We all do, of course. Corby says you're the best. Oh, and Angela wants you to come for dinner tomorrow night," Jackson said. "We prepare a roast, mashed potatoes, gravy, all that on Christmas Eve and get lazy on Christmas day."

"That's so kind of you. Are you sure?" Sandy asked.

She was wearing her mask. She had donned it before answering the door.

"We would be delighted to have you."

"Well then . . . thank you!"

“And for now, Sandy, I will go room to room and look in every closet and under every bed.”

“Thank you!”

Sandy followed him at a distance as he went through her house.

When he had gone through every room—and into every closet and looked under the beds—he told her cheerfully there was no one in the house.

“I think you’re fine,” he told her.

“Do we have raccoons?” she asked, puzzled.

“Sandy, yes, this area does have raccoons. If we have a problem, we’ll get someone out to humanely handle the situation. Okay? Right after Christmas.”

“Funny,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“My bins are sealed. So are yours.”

“So, the rustling sound may be raccoons trying to get the bins open.”

“Okay. Maybe. And thank you—and Angela—for tomorrow.”

“We’re happy to have you,” Jackson assured her. “I’m sorry you won’t have your children and grandchildren, but they love you, you know.”

She nodded. “I know,” she said softly. She brightened. “I have something for Corby I think he’ll like. I can give it to him tomorrow night.”

“That’s great of you. Thank you,” Jackson told her. “So, see you tomorrow!”

She smiled and Jackson managed to leave the house at last.

But when he returned—going out Sandy’s gate and in through his own—he found Angela was in the front yard, holding the baby, and watching as Corby threw a little ball for Kelly to go after.

She looked concerned.

“What’s the matter?” he asked her.

She grimaced, looking at him.

“Rustling,” she said.

“Cattle rustling? My love, we don’t have any cattle.”

“Ha-ha. I was getting the baby up and . . . I heard something. Outside.”

“Okay, I’ll go around our house now.”

“I did that. There’s nothing here.”

“Maybe you listened to Sandy too long.”

“Maybe. Anyway . . . okay, Corby!” she called. “Dad’s back. Let’s go do the gingerbread house.”

They all went in. The gingerbread house was prefabricated. The walls were cookies that Corby could put up and stick together with the icing. Victoria helped now and then by sticking her fingers in the icing. The “house” didn’t exactly look like the box when they were done, but they had a great time putting it together. And as Corby said, they’d be tearing it down to eat it anyway.

They made pasta and chicken strips for dinner then watched a Disney movie together. Victoria went down for the night, and then an hour later Corby went to bed, too.

Jackson and Angela curled up on the sofa to watch a suspense movie on cable he’d been wanting to see.

Angela laughed as they watched.

He did have a habit of really wanting to see a movie, then editing it along the way with comments like, “It would never really happen that way,” or “Oh, come on, seriously!”

“Hey! We both know things are seldom by the book,” Angela said.

She was smiling, curled against him, and it was wonderful. And then she promised she had a Christmas present for him in the bedroom, and he teased back he had one for her. “God’s gift, eh?” she asked him.

“Oh? You said first that—”

“Okay, okay!”

Even though they’d been together a long time, making love had never grown old. And despite all, Angela had a wonderfully playful side. So she dressed in Christmas socks, a cap, and nothing else. She made him laugh, and as always . . .

She was an amazing present.

He fell asleep easily that night. He’d long ago learned there were others out there who also worked to solve the problems of the world, protect the innocent, and catch the guilty.

He had time off. He was home for Christmas. He was sleeping with his wife and partner curled in his arms, and he knew he had a hell of a good life.

It wasn’t until the wee hours of the morning that he jumped up aware Angela had flown out of bed and was grabbing her robe.

*

Angela had heard the rustling sound again.

It had woken her up.

Worse.

It had come with a voice. A weak voice, garbled, not creating words, just . . .

She saw Jackson was also awake and staring at her with total confusion.

“Jackson, there is something out there! I heard it clearly! I swear, and it’s not that I went paranoid because of Sandy!”

And Kelly and their ghost dog were barking, his sound softer like a whisper in the air.

“Okay!” he said.

Angela knew he hadn’t heard anything.

She also knew he believed in her.

The safe was in the closet and he went straight to it, opening it and handing her the Glock she carried for work and getting his own.

He nodded to her.

“Side door, out the laundry room, by the garbage,” she told him urgently.

Right where Sandy had whispered to her that morning.

“The dogs are barking,” Jackson said. “Let’s go.”

They headed out together ready for anything. Kelly followed them, not snarling, but woofing and snorting and sniffing as with curiosity.

“Wait!” she said as they started toward the laundry room. He held still, knowing she was going to look in on the baby and Corby.

They both slept like little angels.

She nodded and they started out together again, Angela standing back and to the side, Jackson unlocking the door and throwing it open.

Nothing.

They stepped out back-to-back, looking around, and still there was nothing.

Angela nodded, indicating the yard. And by unspoken agreement, they moved in opposite directions, ready to circle back together after he went around the front and she went around the back.

Angela loved their yard. It was covered in a light dusting of snow tonight, and she was chilly. She should have grabbed warmer clothing! Too late for that. They had decorated a few pines with colored lights, and they gleamed now casting beautiful Christmas shades upon the snow. But now she wished the yard wasn’t quite so rich with pines. They were great hiding places if someone did want to disappear.

She was staring at the trees when she heard a voice—speaking softly, ethereally, but plainly.

“Please, please, I know you can see me!”

She swung around. And she let out a pent-up breath.

There was someone there.

Just not someone . . . in flesh and blood.

The ghost standing there was clad in a uniform. She thought it was a World War II Navy uniform, and she wondered if he had come from the Arlington Cemetery.

He'd been older at his death, and he had a rich headful of snow white-hair and a long, snow-white beard. Dress him in red, and he could pass for Santa.

"Yes, I see you," she said, lowering her gun. "How can we help you?"

The ghost let out something that sounded like a sigh of relief. "Chief Petty Officer Arnold Hanson," he told her, inclining his head. "They talk about you and your husband and your . . . unit."

"They?" Angela asked, confused.

"At the cemetery."

"Ah—oh," she murmured.

Jackson came around from the front of the house. Kelly was with him, and Sean was at Kelly's side. Kelly barked and Sean padded over to greet the newcomer with his tail wagging.

"What they say is true," the ghost murmured.

Jackson arched a brow, looking at Angela. But he spoke to the ghost. "Jackson Crow, sir, and my wife, Angela. And the pup there is Kelly, and that's Sean."

The ghost smiled. "Dog people! Dog people are good people!"

"Well, we like to think so," Angela murmured. "Sir—"

"It's the boy," he said quietly.

Angela and Jackson looked at each other, and then back at the ghost.

"Sir, what boy?"

“Those idiots! Yes, the kid has problems. But he’s out there alone and hurt, and people think he’s a monster, and he didn’t do a thing!” He shook his head. “I’m sorry; let me start over.”

“Yes, please, that would be great,” Jackson murmured.

But Angela already knew what he was talking about.

“The autistic boy—Kenneth. The kid whose parents were found drowned in the Potomac,” she said.

The ghost nodded.

“I think he sees me. You know when one thing doesn’t work right, other things work better? Anyway, he’s been running around the neighborhood, hiding, and looking for food. Not far from here he was in a yard, and a man came out with a shotgun. I tried my best to lead him away. I’m afraid someone is going to shoot him and . . . okay, once again. Back to the beginning. His parents took him out in their boat—one they didn’t maintain very well.” He winced. “I don’t think they were nice people, but I don’t know, and I’m not judging. But when the boat went down, they reached for the life preservers and Kenneth was . . . on his own. But he reached shore, and he tried to drag his mother out, but she was dead and . . . he cried, and he ran. And now . . . he’s near here. Please, you have to help that kid before someone shoots him!”

“Can you lead us to him?” Jackson asked.

“He’s sleeping under a bench in the park. Yes, I can lead you to him.”

“We’ll get dressed right away,” Angela said. “Wait—the kids.”

“I’ll get Sandy to come over,” Jackson said.

“Sandy?” Angela murmured. “Do you think—”

“I think she’ll be fine,” Jackson said.

He looked like he was about to leap the fence—but remembered he was wearing nothing but a robe. And nodding to them both, he hurried around to the front.

“You’re welcome to come in,” Angela said. He was a ghost—he could have come in anyway. But she figured for this ghost that would be rude. He was an officer—and a gentleman.

“Thank you. But please do hurry. I’ve spent a day trying to figure out how to get you outside so I could talk to you.”

“You could have knocked at the front door,” Angela suggested.

“I tried. I can rustle cans—haven’t managed the knocking yet.” He was quiet a minute and then said, “I haven’t been . . . as I am now . . . long. I just died last June. Heart attack, but . . . I had a good life. My one regret is I couldn’t say goodbye to my wife. She wasn’t allowed in the hospital at the time.”

“Covid19,” Angela said.

He nodded and then brightened. “I do catch what news I can. Hope is on the way!”

“Yes, it is. Come on in. We’ll go and find Kenneth!”

He followed her in, along with the dogs, and took a seat in the living room while she quickly went in to change. Jackson came in a minute later.

“Sandy?”

“She’s out there.”

Jackson looked odd.

“What is it?” Angela asked.

“She’s, uh, talking to our ghost.”

“Oh!” Angela said, startled.

“Go see while I get dressed.”

Angela hurried out to the living room. Sandy and Chief Petty Officer Arnold Hanson were indeed talking, laughing, and enjoying one another’s company.

“Um, Sandy. Thanks for coming to watch the kids,” she said. “And you—”

“This is amazing!” Sandy said. “I always thought I was crazy. I mean, I never really got to talk to a . . .”

Her voice trailed and she looked pained and uncomfortable.

“Ghost!” Hanson told her. “It’s okay. I had a long and wonderful life. I just wish . . . well, I would love to see my wife. I would love to tell her I’m okay, that . . . it’s okay. That I’ll be waiting.”

“Is she near here?” Angela asked.

He shook his head. “Our home is in Nevada. I was buried here because of my military history.”

“Well, we’ll work on something,” Angela promised.

She was still surprised their neighbor—who had always seemed so paranoid about everything—was sitting there excitedly talking to a ghost.

Jackson came out.

“The kids should sleep,” Angela said.

“I’ll watch the little angels!” Sandy promised.

They headed out to the car. The park wasn’t far.

Hanson slid into the back seat.

“No,” Jackson murmured as they neared the park.

There were police cars there already. Officers, guns in hand, were standing outside their cars.

Angela jumped out of the car dragging her badge out and showing it as she approached the officers.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

“The kid is in there—hiding in the swing set. We’ve been told he could be dangerous,” the officer in charge shouted.

“No, he’s just scared!” she said. “Let me try to bring him out!”

Jackson and the ghost were quickly behind her.

Heather Graham - Christmas, the Krewe and Kenneth

Chief Petty Officer Arnold Hanson called out to the boy.

“Kenneth, these are good people! They aren’t going to let anyone hurt you. Please, Kenneth, I think you can hear me!”

“Kenneth, my name is Angela. And this is Jackson with me. We just want to get you somewhere safe, with warmth, out of the snow. We want to help you!”

There was no answer. Angela slipped through the wooden playground, finding the place behind the slide where the boy was hiding.

He was staring straight ahead, banging his head softly against the wooden structure.

“Kenneth,” she said very gently. “Let me help you.”

“Mom. Mom. Dad,” he said. “Mom. Mom. Dad. Mom. Dad.”

“Kenneth, it’s okay. Come on. Take my hand.”

She was afraid he wouldn’t respond. But he blinked and noted her. And saw her hand.

“Kenneth, I just want to help you.”

He took her hand. And he looked at the ghost of Chief Petty Officer Hanson.

“It’s okay,” Hanson assured him.

The boy listened to the ghost. He managed a smile. He came out with Angela, a tall, beautiful boy, simply beset with a problem medical science had yet to solve.

He walked with her calmly as they approached the police cars.

The officers put away their guns.

“We need child services,” Angela said.

“We’ll get him cuffed and into one of the cars. He’s strong—he could hurt you,” he warned Angela.

She kept Kenneth’s hand.

“No but thank you.”

“She’s fine; we’re together,” Jackson said, his voice ringing with authority.

She thought the officer would argue; maybe he decided he didn’t need to be plagued with more problems that night.

“All right, but there’s the possibility that—”

“He didn’t kill his parents. They were out in their boat and it went down. We received an anonymous call,” she said.

It was as close to the truth as she could get.

“Well, we haven’t heard anything like that yet,” the officer said. “But—”

“He’ll be in our custody, and any flack can come back on me,” Jackson said firmly.

“I, well . . . okay. I’ll call it in,” the officer said.

Kenneth stood there, his grip on Angela tight. She smiled at him and said softly, “It will be all right.”

The officer called it in. Jackson wound up speaking with his superior, assuring him they would be responsible, and the boy would not be free on the streets.

But in the end, they took Kenneth. And Sandy was gentle and kind, delighted to be with Hanson, Kenneth, and both dogs!

Corby woke up at about six, right when a couple from child services arrived. Angela was grateful they were both as kind as could be, and gentle. And Corby was good with Kenneth.

It turned out Kenneth was excellent at video games.

And Kenneth seemed to love Sandy, and he seemed to understand that would come and see him. When she told him she was personally going to make sure he had a good home, one where she could visit, and where he would be loved, he seemed to understand that, too.

The woman from child services explained that “autism” meant an incredibly big spectrum; poor Kenneth was at the far end.

But he could love and be loved in return.

In the end, it was about eight o'clock Christmas Eve morning, when Sandy went home to get more sleep. Angela and Jackson gave up the concept of sleep since Corby and the baby were up.

And it *was* Christmas Eve. So, they watched movies, made cookies, started dinner, and opened presents.

Jackson and Angela had promised they weren't getting each other anything. And they had stuck to their promises. But Corby and the baby both loved tearing at the paper that covered their new toys and books.

Sandy arrived with Arnold Hanson.

They had talked all day.

"I have an idea!" Sandy told them.

"Oh?" Angela asked her.

"Arnie wants to say goodbye to his wife. We can do a Zoom call!"

"Okay," Angela said carefully. "But is his wife going to think we're horrible, making things up, making the loss worse?"

"No," Arnold Hanson said. "I think . . . I think she could sense me. I don't know if she'll see me, but . . . please?"

Angela looked at Jackson. They were so careful as special agents. Only a miniscule percent of the population had the sixth sense that allowed them communication with the dead who remained for their various reasons.

Jackson looked at her and said, "We're going to do a Zoom church service. Right after, we'll try a Zoom for our new friend."

And they did.

Angela stumbled at first, along with Corby, Jackson and Sandy as they managed to get Martha Hanson to come on to their Zoom call—and then try to explain that . . .

“Um, Mrs. Hanson . . .”

She didn’t get any further.

The woman on the other end of the Zoom call gasped and cried, “Arnie?”

“I just want you to know how much I loved you, how you were everything to me, how wonderful you are—and that it’s okay, I’m okay . . . and—”

“Arnie! I can see you,” Martha whispered. “And oh my God! Arnie, you’ve just . . . oh, my love! I miss you terribly. The world is a bit of a mess, and . . . you’ve still managed to make this an amazing Christmas for me.”

It was an amazing Christmas so far—and a stunning one. Angela looked at Jackson. He shrugged and smiled.

“Why don’t we let them chat, and we’ll start on dinner?” he asked.

She nodded.

They left the two talking.

Later, they had dinner, with Hanson not eating of course, but joining them still. Both dogs hung around the table, and Kelly got treats.

The baby cooed from her chair. Corby was fascinated by Arnie Hanson’s tales about the Navy.

Dinner was wonderful and when it was time to end the evening, Chief Petty Officer Arnold Hanson walked Sandy home.

But he came back to their house. Jackson had gone into the office to take a call. She had just put the baby into her crib.

“I’d be going now. I mean into the beautiful life that awaits, but . . . well, I am going to wait for Martha. I will be there, and as we did so many things in life, we’ll walk into that light together. Strange,

though. I always thought I was waiting just for her. But now I know. I stayed because sometimes we're just supposed to do a kindness for someone else. And I thank you for helping me perform that kindness."

"Kenneth," Angela said quietly.

And as she spoke, Jackson came out of his office.

He nodded to Hanson.

"That was Jon, from our offices. They found the boat—the couple didn't take care of it. The boat sank and they couldn't swim. It's a miracle the boy survived. The medical examiner said there wasn't a mark on either of them. Kenneth didn't hurt them. It was an accident. Jon told me Kenneth will be going to an extraordinary home for kids like him, and we can visit him, and Sandy can visit him, too. Sir, you truly performed a great kindness." He grinned. "Not to mention, Corby may be convinced forever there really is a Santa Claus, and you came to give us all a special present—a new friend in Kenneth."

Hanson smiled. "Maybe I'll sit by your fire for a while."

"Sir, you sit by our fire as long as you like," Jackson told him.

And he was there when they woke up on Christmas morning.

He was sunk in a chair, and it looked as if he was sleeping, and yet sleeping with a smile.

Jackson set an arm around Angela's shoulders and said softly.

"Strangest Christmas ever," he murmured. "And yet . . ."

"And yet, Christmas is about love and peace, and it seems that while different, we've discovered a lot of love and peace," she said softly.

He grinned at her. "And you remain the best Christmas present ever!" he told her. "In every way."

She grinned. "And you, too. Most of the time. Hm. Maybe always!"

"We have mistletoe around here somewhere," he said.

But she smiled and stood on her toes and kissed his lips and murmured against them, “We don’t need mistletoe! Merry Christmas, my love.”

No way around it—2020 had been a brutal year.

But there was peace and love in the season. Hope was on the way.

“Merry Christmas, my love,” he said softly in return.

The world would always need help.

And they would always do their small part to help.

And have each other.

“Merry Christmas!” Corby said, bursting out of his room.

And they scooped him into their arms.

Yes.

They would do their best.

And remember the message of the season.

Hope.