



Stabbed Through the Heart--It's a Bitter Game

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A short story (Approximately 6,000 words)Krewe of Hunters - Valentine Themed

It's almost Valentine's Day and Jackson Crow is determined that he's going to be romantic this year. He and Angela work hard year-round, twenty-four hours a day sometimes while raising their two children, and this year, he's going to let Angela know just how special she is.

But a strange note arrives on their door, bringing Jackson back almost fifteen years to his beginnings as a young agent.

The killer known as the 'Poet' is back, and whether by accident or intent, Angela has received the first of the killer's poems.

They will have to race against time—with just a little help from the dead—to stop the Poet from taking another life on the day celebrating romance—be that the life of another innocent, or Angela herself.

And it's Valentine's Day. Jackson Crow is not about to lose the love of his life!

Stabbed Through the Heart—It's a Bitter Game

For once, Jackson Crow thought he had it right. An intimate dinner, and then the real Valentine's Day surprise for Angela, time off and a twenty-four hour stay at one of the city's most luxurious hotels, courtesy of the Krewe of Hunters founder, Adam Harrison.

Sitting at his desk in his home office, he smiled at the latest message-pic he had received from Axel Tiger—the kids were spending the night with Special Agent Axel Tiger's family.

The pic showed the kids at one of the kid-themed restaurants in the city, busy at a jungle gym. The baby was still just a bit of a thing, but she was pictured with one of Axel's nephews, a little boy about six months her senior. Axel and Raina were expecting their first child come summer—always great with kids, Axel had still assured Jackson he and Raina now needed practice.

Everything was set. He adored his wife and co-agent at the Krewe, and they had an amazing marriage, together for over ten years now with their adopted son and their baby girl—and demanding careers that were different from most and commanded hours and hours of their time.

Yet, they made it, and while he could handle any deadly evil that came their way at work, so could Angela. Yet she also seemed to have the perfect knack for teaching or playing with their children—while following up on research for their many agents from her phone, day, or night.

She deserved a wonderful Valentine's Day. He was going to be romantic this year, come hell or high water!

Dinner was set; the night was set. He even had flowers. He wasn't much of a flower person—but then, Angela seemed to prefer plants outside. He had chocolates—everyone liked chocolate, well except for those allergic to it, and none in his household were.

Now . . . for a poem.

He shook his head, staring at the paper in front of him. He wanted it hand-written. And with the task of being Field Director for the Krewe of Hunters, he'd learned to write quickly and legibly in cursive, so . . . it should be such a monumental task.

But . . .

Roses are red, violets are blue.

My darling, I'm nothing, when I'm without you.

That wasn't bad, was it?

He quickly leaned back, covering his note paper with his hand as Angela walked into the office, frowning.

"Hey! What's up? We leave for dinner in about twenty minutes and . . . well, I did tell you to pack a toothbrush, and clothes for tomorrow."

"I'm ready. Are you kidding me? I don't even care where we're going—a tiny bit of night-out vacation will be great," she told him, smiling. He smiled back. Angela was so many things—among them, she was a striking woman with her sleek height, fit figure, and soft blond curls.

"Any time with you is great!" he assured her.

"Right. I mean, thank you. I love you. But . . ."

"Yeah?"

"There was a poem stuck to the door. I found it when I took the dogs out for a walk. I thought at first . . . well, it was addressed to 'Beloved.'"

"I didn't write a note—yet," he told her. "Should I be jealous?"

"No, but I'm thinking someone wants me to be scared. Let me read this to you. 'Roses are red, violets are blue, so is dead, you'll be dead, too. Shot through the heart—there's so much black, but that's just the beginning of the game.'"

He reached into a drawer for gloves, frowning as he then took the note.

"Jackson, it could just be a prank. Then, of course, in our line of work we do make enemies. And, I'm sorry—my prints are all over it. Do you really think it's something serious?"

He shook his head, reaching for the note. "Yeah. I've heard a similar poem before!" he told her.

"Recently? Here?"

He shook his head.

"Yes, and I think you'll remember, too. It was all over the news at the time—police and the FBI were taking a real beating over it. Years ago, before we were the Krewe, I was just a young agent when a woman in Arlington, Virginia, was killed on Valentine's Day—stabbed through the heart. The next year, two women were killed, one in D.C., and one in West Virginia. They'd been sent poems like this. And you know the media—they called him the Poet. The following year, another two women, killed—stabbed through the heart—in the same area. The last girl was found in her bathtub. I'll never forget that one. Her note said, 'Roses are red, in red you'll be dead.'" He winced. "I know that one well; I was the agent who found her—and it looked as if she was swimming in a sea of blood."

Angela looked at him, perplexed. "Jackson, I'm sorry! I can only imagine. But, Jackson, wasn't he taken down? I remember the case vaguely, but I thought the killer was finally caught by the FBI, crawling out one of his victim's windows. That would mean—"

"That would mean we may have a copycat killer, yes. But I always wondered because the man caught climbing out the window was swearing he wasn't the Poet. He had been engaged to the young woman and they'd split . . . and he'd just come to beg her to forgive him and panicked when he saw the agents and police."

"Was he innocent? If he was pleading with authorities, why was he shot?" Angela asked. "And now . . . I do remember 'the Poet' and reading that the Poet had been killed while resisting arrest."

"He did resist arrest—he tried to grab one of the officer's guns," Jackson said. "But I always wondered."

"And no one else did?"

"I never thought he was *the* killer, though he might have been a copycat, hoping he'd get away with murder by knowing the media would pin it on the Poet. He was holding the note and his fingerprints were the only ones found and he had an arrest record—assault and with a knife. The Poet became a closed case. And there were no more like murders with notes, so . . . yeah. Everyone considered the case closed."

"Hm. This could be a prank, or we could have a copycat about to enter the ring—or the original Poet suddenly active again after, what, twelve or thirteen years?" Angela asked. "And right now, this is just a note. And," she said, frowning, "why would it come to me? We've been married over a decade now and we haven't split up."

Jackson was thoughtful for a minute. "I don't think it was intended for you. I mean—you're not leaving or anything, right?"

Angela laughed. "No, I have not been stepping out in my free time. Wait, what's that? Free time? No, my love. When I have free time, it is with you."

"Then we need to find out what is going on!"

He turned to his computer, first sending out an FYI to the Krewe offices and the main offices of the FBI. He stood then, glancing at Angela, but she was deeply involved in whatever she was reading on her computer.

"Angela?" he asked quietly.

She turned to him. "Jackson, I may have it!"

"Okay?"

"I tried to figure out why the note would have been left on this house. Right before we bought the property, it had been owned by—"

"Smith and Anderson," he interrupted, frowning. "A real estate company known to take on old homes—especially row houses like this—do some updating and selling for a profit. Luckily, we bought at a good time!"

"Right. But before that, it was owned by Elda and Herbert Granger. Does that mean anything to you?"

He arched his brow to her, waiting.

"They were the parents of Chelsea Benson—name change because she was a divorcee."

"She wasn't one of the victims. But the name—"

"She's alive and living in Arlington. But she was attacked and didn't die—her ex-husband fought off the attacker. The police arrived, and a man named Arthur Magnuson was arrested on the spot. But Michael Benson died. He literally took a bullet for Chelsea—jumping in front of her when Magnuson fired at her."

"And you believe that she might be the intended victim?" Jackson asked. "The Poet—or the copycat—might believe she spurned the ex and he died for her anyway?"

"That was the way the Poet worked, right? I was reading on one victim—she walked out on her fiancé at the altar. From what I see, the Poet was after women he believed had humiliated or rejected a man who was in love with her."

"Let's find her and get warnings out," Jackson said. "Here's one thing about the Poet. Whether the right man was killed or not, while active, the Poet liked to call various radio stations. He would complain about Valentine's Day. Love was never real—and sorry—all women were cold-hearted witches, and thus, deserved knives in the ice of their hearts. There were certain women who deserved death because they were living with no hearts."

"I think we need to get going!" Jackson said. "Find Chelsea Benson."

Angela was already up, grabbing her catch-all bag and sliding her tablet into it and sliding her holster into place on her belt.

"I was trying to write a poem for you," he told her, leading her out of the house. "I really thought this holiday, we'd have a bit of time. The kids are taken care of, we were free spirits—"

Angela smiled, looking at him with her crystal eyes. "Hey, people who *see* spirits don't get to be free spirits. And . . . well, you know. Valentine's Day. You spend it with your loved one, right? We're together."

"Right. This just isn't what I thought we'd be doing! Okay, so, let's head out."

"I'll get our techs to find a number and we'll give Chelsea a call on the way out there," Angela said. She hesitated.

"What?"

"What if I'm wrong? Jackson, what if there is another woman out there—"

"We have good people at headquarters. We'll get our tech people on it; they can find some traffic cams or security footage that will show who delivered the note to our house. We're not in this alone, we have a great unit and beyond that—"

"The whole force of the D.C. office. Right. I just still feel that . . ."

"We're racing against time. Or, it's a prank because someone knows what we do—and that I was on the case years and years ago," Jackson said. "Still—"

"Chelsea needs to be warned."

*

Chelsea Benson lived in a residential neighborhood in Arlington in a colonial style house on a pretty tree-lined street. Jackson was frowning as they arrived.

"What?" Angela asked.

"I'm going to park about a block down. I don't want the car sitting too obviously in front of her house."

"Good call."

They'd called and she knew they were coming and answered her door before they reached it.

"Please, please come in," she told them, anxious. Then she realized if she was under a threat, she should have asked for their credentials first. "I mean—"

"Jackson Crow, Angela Hawkins Crow, from the bureau," Jackson assured her, producing his credentials. "And thank you for taking time; we aren't sure—"

"No, no, please! Thank you. Come in. I have coffee ready in the dining room. I thought the parlor was comfortable, but . . . I am so nervous, I figured we needed to talk, and . . ."

Angela placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "I can only begin to understand how distressing this must be for you. We can sit anywhere, and it was so courteous that you thought to have coffee. Please, let's talk. In the dining room."

She glanced over at Jackson, and she couldn't help but wonder if she had raised an alarm and put the bureau, themselves, and surely this poor woman into trauma over what might have been an evil prank. But it was Valentine's Day, and she had curiously wondered at first if Jackson hadn't left the note. He'd told her that he'd had a surprise for her that day; Axel Tiger and his aunt had come to pick up the children and they'd been due to leave for whatever their night was meant to be when she had discovered the note on the door.

"Please!" Chelsea murmured, indicating the way to the dining room.

Angela had read the record on what had happened while they'd driven to Arlington. Chelsea was in her early forties now. She was an attractive woman with short, swing-cut blond hair, a tall, fit figure, and an attractive, angled face, strong chin, and hazel eyes.

She asked them to sit while she poured coffee, talking nervously all the while.

"You said that a note was left on the door of your home—the house I grew up in."

"Yes."

"And you're afraid . . . that I may be in danger," Chelsea said. Coffee poured for three, she took a seat at the table opposite them. "But the man who came at me . . . he wasn't the man they thought to be the serial killer. I mean, this guy. . ." She broke off, wincing. "I think he didn't know that Michael was in the house. He meant to assault and kill me. But I broke free and raced for a back room and when he was going to shoot me . . ." She shook her head, tears stinging her eyes. "Michael jumped in front of me and he was hit and then the door burst open and the police were there and I ran to Michael and . . . it was too late."

"I'm so sorry," Angela murmured. "Chelsea, I'm sorry, bear with me on this. Why did you divorce Michael?"

"Me? Divorce him? Oh, no, no. I didn't want a divorce. I loved him with my whole heart. Michael had . . . Michael had an affair. And he thought he was in love. But in the end . . ." Chelsea shrugged. "In the end that didn't work out and he came to see me that day to apologize for what he'd put through. He didn't know if we could try it again after what he had done, but he knew that he'd hurt me and he was sorry, and . . . oh! I never stopped loving him. And . . ." She lifted her arms as if indicating the emptiness of the space around them. "I never fell in love again."

There was an alert on their phones; Angela saw that Jackson's vibrated and softly buzzed at the same time as hers.

She looked down quickly.

Bruce McFadden, assistant field director and manning the office when Jackson was out, had sent them a bulletin.

"On the news; someone claiming to be the resurrected Poet has warned that vicious women using men and demanding diamonds for sex will die."

She gazed across the room at Jackson and asked Chelsea, "May we turn on a television?"

"Yes, yes, of course, is there—"

"The Poet is claiming to be active again," Jackson told her.

"Oh, my God! Why would he want me? I was the one hurt. I never wanted Michael to die. He saved my life. I will love him forever, but—" Chelsea began.

"Let's see what's going on," Angela said. "And don't worry; we'll keep you under protection, I promise."

"Oh, thank you. I'm terrified to be alone!" Chelsea said. "Television is in the back parlor!"

She raced ahead of them, going back through the dining room and parlor to a charming little room in the back with glass windows from ceiling to floor allowing for a view of the small, but lushly planted, yard in the back of the house.

Grabbing a remote, she turned on the television screen and sought out a news channel.

An anchor was speaking.

"Valentine's Day!" the anchor said. "A day for love—when couples by the thousands across the world decide to become engaged, when weddings are planned, and for those who are couples, a day to celebrate with chocolate, flowers, and even diamonds. But this year, a hater is threatening to be at it again! While the FBI claimed over a decade ago the Poet was dead, he is at it again, sending messages to this station and to others across the country. The poem he's sent to the media reads thus. 'Roses are Red, love is dead, her ego is fed for his heart has been led, it's all in his head, or so she has said, and now, like love, like the man she made dead, unto such darkness, so she'll be led!'"

The man dramatically paused. "For those who remember, years ago, the Poet wrote such notes—and even called into radio stations—to warn he'd be busy. Police and the FBI and every agency out there is forewarned. We, here, at this station, want to remind our listeners this man's threats were very real. Whatever you may be doing this Valentine's Day, be alert, be wary, be careful!"

The anchor was still talking, but Chelsea didn't seem to hear him. She was shaking her head.

"Does he mean me? But I never wanted diamonds and I didn't care about candy or flowers. Love isn't about jewelry! It's just wanting to be together, finding happiness and triumph are greater when shared, finding solace in the arms of someone when times are bad. Why would anyone think I had been like that, a demanding person . . . I never hurt Michael, I was naïve, I wanted to pretend that what was going on wasn't, I . . . and still! He did *it* for me!"

"Chelsea, it may not be you he's going after; we have rooms filled with some of the best tech experts in the world checking for possible suspects, and for others who might be targeted. We're going to go through the house—doors and windows locked? Is there an alarm system?"

"I have one of those cameras for the front door," Chelsea murmured. "But . . . even after what happened, I . . . I bought this house because it's rated one of the safest neighborhoods to live in. It's filled with kids. There's a neighborhood watch," Chelsea said.

"But doors and windows?" Angela nudged gently.

"I—I don't know."

Angela looked at Jackson. "I have an idea," she told him. "May I speak with you alone for a minute?"

He arched a brow and nodded. "Excuse us for just a minute, Chelsea?" he asked softly.

"Sure. I'll go—somewhere."

"No, no, you sit tight," Jackson said. He rose and headed to the archway between the parlor and the back room. Angela followed him.

"We need to get her out of here. The Poet—or copycat or whoever—will have figured out that she doesn't live where he left the note. We get her out of here—and leave me sitting in the back room." Angela told him.

She could see the worry that instantly clouded his face. She was an agent, a well-trained agent, she'd mastered her classes at Quantico after having been a Virginia police officer.

But he loved her, and he would worry. Just as she worried about him every time one of them was working in the field.

But he loved her enough to trust her competence as well.

"I'm calling in. We'll get some people around the house."

She nodded and then winced. "What if I'm wrong, Jackson? What if Chelsea isn't an intended victim at all, and . . ."

"Sometimes, we go by gut instinct, same as all other officers and agents," he said. "Gut instinct is what we have right now. And . . ." he said, before pausing for a minute, "you and Chelsea are about the same height, fit . . . blond. Your hair is long but you can sweep it up. It will be dark soon and I imagine this killer is waiting for dark. Keep the lights low in here. I can sit against the wall by the mantle and if he comes in . . ."

"Let's do it. But we have to get Chelsea out of here."

"Right. I'll put through some calls. First things first. Chelsea!" he called, bringing the woman hurrying around to look at them both anxiously. "We're going to have you brought into our offices. Trust me, no one can get to you there. We'll be here, waiting."

But, first . . . those windows and doors. We want to hear if someone is sneaking in from somewhere."

"Okay, what do—"

"You sit tight. We'll check out the house while I get someone over here to pick you up, Jackson said. Angela and Chelsea watched as he called in to Krewe headquarters. He didn't have to explain anything. "Special Agents Jane Everett and Dallas Samson will be by any minute, but I need you and Chelsea to change clothes, just in case someone is watching."

"Let's go," Angela said. She led the way into what she thought of as an 'anything' room where she quickly took off her clothing while Chelsea did the same. Chelsea noted her holster and Glock.

"Don't worry; I'm keeping those," Angela assured her.

Chelsea smiled. "I wouldn't know how to use it," she said. "I'd probably shoot myself!" She frowned. "That's just it . . . Michael was shot. The man who attacked me didn't stab women—he had a gun. So why . . .?"

"I don't know," Angela said. "Maybe he feels the man who assaulted you didn't do the job right. We just have to hope we catch him. Tonight."

Jackson called out to them. "Transportation is here!"

Chelsea looked at Angela and impulsively threw her arms around her. "Thank you!"

"Hey, I'm hoping we get whoever this is—and we didn't put you through a lot of pain and trauma because of a hoax."

"I'd rather the safety," Chelsea assured her.

They hurried out. The Krewe agents hadn't come to the door; Jackson had decided it was best to send Chelsea out to the car alone, a cap over her head, so anyone watching might think it was Angela leaving.

Gut instinct, Angela thought. Jackson's *gut instinct* had been right on when they'd parked a distance from the home.

They watched from the parlor window as Chelsea made it safely out to the car, and as Jane, at the wheel, moved away from the house.

"Locks," Angela said.

Jackson looked at Angela. "I'll take the upstairs."

"Downstairs," she said.

"Basement together," he murmured.

There was no possible entry from the back parlor or sunroom—not without knocking down one of the massive windows. She hurried to the parlor; the bolts on the front door were good. Heading to the right of the house, she checked window locks in an office and the little 'anything' room, moved back through the parlor and dining room, and into the kitchen. A few of the kitchen windows were open, as was the window on the back door.

It was while she was locking that window and checking the bolt that she felt an odd sensation. Turning around, she almost started.

There was a man standing there. But not a killer, she quickly realized.

Rather, a dead man. A ghost.

He waved a hand in the air and she leaned against the doors, crossing her arms over her chest.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"What? You see me?" he demanded.

She nodded. "There are those of us who do," she said softly.

"Well, who are you? And what are you doing here? And what have you done with Chelsea?" he demanded, deeply agitated.

"My name is Angela Hawkins Crow. I'm with a special unit of the FBI. We've had Chelsea taken into our offices for her safety. You, sir, I believe, must be Michael Benson."

The ghost stiffened. In life, Benson had been a striking man—very much a man who might have been referred to as tall, dark, and handsome. She thought he'd been in his early thirties when he'd died—a man in the prime of his life.

"I'm so sorry about what happened to you!" she said softly.

He shook his head, his face tightened in a look of pain. "I . . . I deserved what happened to me."

"No. No one deserves what happened to you. But—"

"No! I was horrible. I was all about myself. I didn't care what I did to Chelsea, I didn't care how I hurt her. And when I filed for divorce, I tried to turn it all on her, say it was her fault, that she was cold and disinterested in me, that she was the one cheating . . . I was horrible. And then one day . . . I don't know how . . . I just realized I had hurt her, I had hurt myself, I had thrown away the best thing in my life because I was young and thought I could rule the world. We had a chance, a bit of a chance . . . I was able to apologize and . . ."

"Michael! You took a bullet for her. That's a damn fine apology," Angela said softly.

"Well, I hope."

"She's never married again. She loved you," Angela said.

He smiled. "I know. I'm buried at the old cemetery just down the road. But I spend time here, just watching Chelsea, just wanting her to be happy. Today . . . Valentine's Day. I'd hoped I might reach her, touch her somehow, let her know she should fall in love again, find happiness. I don't know how I would have managed, but . . . I love her. I like to think I stay . . . or whatever it is we do as spirits . . . to protect her until her dying day. And I saw the news! The Valentine's Day killer is known to be dead, but someone wants to pick up where he left off, or . . . and because of all the awful things I said, I'm so afraid he's after her! He mentions a dead man in that letter he sent into the news stations. That could be me—except everything about me was a lie!" He shook his head. "FBI agent, great. But you can't be here if he comes. This house . . . I've spent hours searching it for danger points. There's a connection in the basement. I think this home was once part of the Underground Railroad. It's been sealed up, but . . . you need to get out of here! You can't be here alone."

"I'm not alone. My husband, field director for our unit, is here," Angela assured him. "We're securing windows and doors, and he'll join me here soon to get into the basement together. Okay, just let me slide the bolt on this door window!"

She turned back to the door to secure the window. As she did so, she heard a soft, strange, scraping sound.

"Watch it!" the ghost of Michael Benson cried.

She spun back around again to find a man facing her.

This one was alive.

He was a big man, heavy set, with blood streaks in his eyes and the kind of fatty face that indicated years of heavy alcohol usage. His hair was graying, his clothing was rumpled and dirty as if he slept outside in the elements.

He held a knife, nervously rubbing his thumbs over it as he stared at Angela. He was close to her—just a few inches away.

She could draw her Glock. But maybe not before the nervously held knife made it into her flesh.

"My God!" Michael Benson murmured. "It's . . . Vic Pearson. He . . . he was a friend of mine. Oh, my God, I used to complain to him about Chelsea . . . no, no, no . . . Vic, no!"

The ghost set his hands on the man's shoulders.

But Vic Pearson heard nothing. Felt nothing.

"You understand why you're to die, right?" he said to Angela.

"First of all," Angela said. "You might take a second look—I'm not Chelsea Benson. Secondly, Michael Benson's ghost is right there, and he's been telling me that the breakup was his fault—"

"Bull!" Pearson said, enraged. "She destroyed that poor man. She cheated on him, she used and abused him, humiliated him . . . and then killed him!"

"That's what he wanted people to believe," Angela said softly. "But we don't know, we never know, what happens between others."

"He's sick!" Michael's ghost told Angela. "He—poor man! He did three different tours in Afghanistan, came home to find the woman he loved was married to someone else, and his injuries put

him on all kinds of pain killers. When they were gone, the guy started drinking and . . . he's a wreck! He was never a horrible person, never a killer, except, of course, he was in a war . . . oh, God, this man needs help, not a bullet!"

"Vic," Angela said. "How would I know who you were if Michael wasn't here, talking to me? I know you did three tours in Afghanistan. I know you were injured and you're drinking yourself to death. Please! I am not Chelsea, I'm Angela, and I can help you!"

He stared at her, confused. Then he closed his eyes tightly in pain.

"No! No! I can't believe that, you're the reason my one friend is dead, you're evil and you must pay for what you've done!"

Oh, God, she didn't want to shoot this pathetic remnant of human life! Neither did she want to die herself.

Split-second decision!

But she didn't have to make it. A blur of motion suddenly flew through the kitchen. She felt the wind of the force executed by Jackson as he burst from the door to the dining room through the kitchen, his weight taking out Vic Pearson and throwing him down to the floor.

Pearson raised the knife against Jackson, but by then, Angela was standing over him, her Glock pressed down low by his face.

"Let it go!" she said softly.

And the man did. He started to weep.

"You don't understand!" he cried. "Michael didn't deserve to die!"

"No, he didn't. We all have our personal ups and downs, truths and lies—but what is sometimes our bad behavior doesn't mean we deserve to die. And Vic, you haven't killed anyone. You will face charges, but we know about you because . . . we know about you. You are going to face jail time, but you'll get help, too."

Even as Jackson spoke, he stood. Other agents and local police were bursting into the house.

There was the usual confusion as Jackson spoke to his people and the police, as endless reports were filed, and then Vic Pearson was taken away and Angela and Jackson were left alone.

With the ghost of Michael Benson.

They spoke awhile, with Michael in amazement that Jackson could see him—and that their entire unit was made up of those who could and did speak to and see the dead—when the dead chose to be seen and spoken to.

“I didn’t know, I didn’t imagine . . . I . . .”

The ghost broke off, looking at them both. “You saved Chelsea—and you didn’t kill Vic. Thank you. You . . . you’re pretty awesome.”

“Thank you. It’s what we do,” Jackson told him.

The ghost shook his head again. “You do it together—and you’re married to each other? Wow, um, that is pretty damn cool. Amazing, really. I mean, some couples can’t even agree on breakfast!”

“Oh, well,” Angela said lightly, “We don’t always agree on breakfast. But if he wants pancakes and I want eggs, that’s okay, too. And, if I’m not mistaken . . .”

She walked to the door, opening it. Chelsea Benson was returning to the house. Angela opened the door for her. She hugged Angela, then Jackson, then went on and on until they managed to calm her down and assure her everything was all right.

Then Angela looked at Jackson and he nodded, and she said, “Chelsea, I’m about to say something that I need you not to share with others, but it’s important you know. Jackson and I and others in our unit see—ghosts. And I need for you to know Michael was here tonight, trying to save you. And you need to know he loves you very much. He also wants you to be happy. He doesn’t want you to be alone.”

“Michael—is here?” Chelsea whispered.

Angela and Jackson both nodded.

"I thought sometimes . . . I've wondered!" she said. "It was as if I could almost feel him! Can he hear me?" she asked.

"He can," Jackson said.

"Michael, I hope I live a long life. But I had one love, and that love was you! I promise, I will lead a good life, I will be a great aunt to my nephews and nieces. I will do good things—I'm working for a children's society, you know. I will be happy! But don't ask me to find someone else. You are my love." She grimaced sheepishly. "My forever Valentine."

"Oh!" Michael's ghost murmured, stepped forward to embrace her.

Chelsea smiled. "He's holding me!" she whispered.

"He is," Jackson agreed. He looked over at Angela. "All right, then! Chelsea, we have agents outside in a car, just watching over you through the night. Tomorrow, we'll need you for more paperwork. For now, we'll leave you."

Chelsea nodded, barely hearing them. She closed her eyes, feeling the ghostly touch of the man she had loved and who, in the most horrific way, and certainly earned forgiveness.

"And we're out of here!" Jackson said as they closed the door to the house behind him. He looked at his watch and smiled at her. "We have an hour of Valentine's Day left! Angela, we have a special room at the hotel, and I think we lost our dinner reservation, but we'll have room service. And we have a Jacuzzi!" he said sheepishly, "And. I know you don't really care, but I bought flowers and chocolate and . . . well, I just wanted you to know you are the most amazing woman in the world. You're the best mom to my kids, and at the office . . . wow."

She took his hand and smiled. "Those are all lovely. But I . . . hm. Chelsea and the ghost just reminded me of something."

"What's that?"

“Everything else is lovely. But what I really need is just your arms around me, just knowing that—like tonight—you have faith in me, believe in me, respect me. Jackson, I am ready for a Jacuzzi—but none of it matters. Love isn't a diamond. It isn't flowers or gifts of any kind. Love is being there for one another.”

She curled her arms around his neck. “You, sir, are my forever Valentine!”

“And you are mine,” he whispered. “Forever, always, and again, forever!”

They kissed long and deeply on the street. It didn't matter—finally, there was no one around.

And, after all, it was Valentine's Day.

Such a kiss was simply . . . right. Because it was true. Love isn't in anything material; love is being in one another's hearts, minds, souls, and arms.

And with an hour . . .

Still! A beautiful Valentine's Day.