

New York Times Best Selling Author

HEATHER GRAHAM



The Easter Chicken

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(A Krewe of Hunters Short Story, approx. 5,000 words)

What seems like a wonderful occasion with friends becomes something quite different.

For Jackson and Angela Hawkins Crow, their son Corby, and their little daughter, Victoria, it should have been a day of warmth, friendship, and celebration. Things go horribly awry, but luckily, Angela has headed ahead with her friend, Brenda, a costumer, who will be the Easter bunny. Since Brenda has a hurt foot, Angela will be the Easter bunny herself in a strangely helpful turn of events. And she arrives at the event in time to sense the danger and send back a warning—after getting help from an unexpected source.

It's still a strange game of a chance and a race against time to see that all survive to truly appreciate the miracles of the season.

The Easter Chicken

“I’m grateful that we’re going to that party, Dad, and I think the Easter Bunny is going to be great for Victoria—and other little kids will hopefully love the bunny if they’re not terrified of it—but, Dad! Hey, I’m almost thirteen. I mean, I know Mom’s friend arranged for the bunny to be at the party.

Senator Cole and his wife were having the party and Angela had been asked to help. She was happy to do so. It was going to be a small get-together, early on a weeknight, hosted by the senator’s son, Sam, who was friends with Corby. The guest list included a few of Sam’s and Corby’s friends and their parents and, of course, their younger children, many of them closer to baby Victoria’s toddling age.

Angela was happy to be involved; Senator Barry Cole and his wife, Candace, called it their Easter-over-adon—Easter, Passover, and Ramadan--event, allowing for all manner of worship among their guests.

“Dad?”

Jackson Crow smiled at his almost-teen-aged, adopted son. Corby was often wise beyond his age, but life and his own “talent” with the souls of the deceased had made him so. They had, in fact, adopted the young man who was now their son because they met during an occasion during which a ghost was actively helpful.

“Not to worry, Corby. The *bunny* will get it. And you know, the season isn’t really about a bunny, anyway.”

Corby grinned. “No, I know. For us, it’s the Easter season. For my friend Isaac, it’s Passover, and for our friend Zakariya, it’s Ramadan.”

“Right. And we respect everyone’s religion,” Jackson said. “Always. Because almost always, our religions teach us to be kind to one another. Remember this. It isn’t religion that’s bad; it’s what men choose to do with religion that can be horrible and tragic. Always remember that we never disrespect anyone because of their religion or ethnicity.”

Corby started to laugh. “Okay, I’m African American *and* European American, I guess, and you’re Native American and European American, so . . . well, you know. I’m not likely to run around judging people on anything like that!” He grinned and then grew somber for a minute. “Yeah. Mom taught me something that I like. The human soul has no color. And I choose to believe most people are good, no matter what, but bad people can be bad, too—no matter what.”

“My boy, you are wise beyond your years.”

Corby grimaced. “Hey!” he said, his frown deepening. “I saw on TV. There’s some kind of vote going on. Doesn’t the senator have to work tonight?”

“Yes, he does. But he intends to be there for a bit, then head on in to work. And maybe he’ll get back later, but I doubt it. That’s okay. The get-together is for the kids, really, and Mrs. Cole wanted to be able to do this, so . . . hey. It will be okay.”

“Well, then, that’s great. Oh, their house is supposed to be haunted.”

“All old houses are supposed to be haunted. And,” Jackson admitted, “some are.”

“It’s cool. I’ve learned not to look like a freak talking to a ghost, so don’t worry. I can handle myself.”

“I know that. And I think Mom is still trying to get some stuff out to the car—without Victoria pulling on her at the same time. She could use some help and I’ve got to make a quick call and see that the office is covered.”

Corby nodded and started off to help but turned back.

“It’s an important time in several religions we know. So, how did a bunny come into it?” he asked.

Jackson grinned. “It’s an important time, yes, and we will go to church on Easter Sunday. Tonight, though, we’re going to have fun with some friends.”

“But a bunny?”

Angela, holding their toddler daughter in her arms, arrived outside by the car in time to give Corby the answer.

“I’ll answer that one!” she said cheerfully. And, of course, she would. Angela was an exceptional field agent with the FBI’s Krewe of Hunters, or, more officially, The Special Circumstances Unit, but she also had an exceptional ability to research almost anything.

“Well, you see,” she explained, “most historians figure that the Easter bunny came to America in the 1700s with German Lutheran immigrants. He was the Easter hare and he was a bit of a judge, determining if children had been good or bad. And in that, he might reward good children with eggs and chocolate and even toys.”

“Kind of like Santa,” Jackson said sagely.

“I’m good girl!” Victoria piped in.

“Of course, darling,” Angela said. “Anyway, now, we have an Easter bunny. And, like the hare of the German Lutherans, our contemporary bunny brings eggs and candy and sometimes toys to the good kids. Eggs, candy, presents.”

“Okay, so!” Corby said grinning. “I’m going to believe in that Easter bunny! When is he coming?”

“Soon,” Angela assured them, grinning at Jackson.

Question, though, where does the Easter bunny get eggs?”

Jackson laughed. “From the Easter chicken!” he said.

“Not so funny, smart guy!” Angela told him. She grinned. “Brenda told me that if anyone wanted, she did have a cool Easter Chicken costume, complete with hidden pockets that hold chocolate eggs so the chicken can help his friend, the bunny.”

“Easter chicken,” Corby said, shaking his head, amused, and pretending it took great patience for any kid to deal with slightly crazy parents.

“I kid you not!” Angela told him.

“Corby, want to put the dessert plates in the car? I need to head out with a friend, but I’ll see you when you get there!”

She glanced at Jackson, arching a communicative brow.

She was going to drive to the party, of course, with the “Easter bunny.” Jackson was going to drive the children and while Angela had originally intended to drive over with Brenda and her assistant, usually one of the college-aged young men or women who could provide help with costumes—and wear the prince, princess, and superhero costumes best when needed--she was still driving over with Brenda, but now to *be* her assistant since most of Brenda’s usual helpers had headed home for the holiday break.

The Easter “bunny” was Brenda Hollister, a friend they’d met through Corby’s school who happened to own a charming company called “Occasion.” She created the most amazing costumes for almost every mythical creature known along with princesses, superheroes and more, and brought the fun to the entire D.C. area.

“All right, then! Victoria, come to me, baby. And let’s get this part of the party on the road!” Jackson said.

“I’ll get the baby in the car as soon as I get the containers in the car,” Corby assured him.

“Thanks. Just checking in,” he told Angela, pulling out his phone waving as she headed for the white *Occasion’s* van that had just pulled up to the house. As she headed to join Brenda, he thought that

he was truly blessed—while Axel Tiger was managing their office, at the moment, one of them always checked in. Their work, of course, was crazy and dangerous. And, somehow, still, they had days like today, they managed to make their family work, too. Perhaps because both knew what they did was important, as was their family, as was life.

As were holidays that frequently wound-up involving work!

Not today. The party was at Senator Barry Cole's house. The Coles were wealthy, very wealthy—both Barry and his wife Candace had inherited good sums of money. His parents had been in the technical field and her folks had been in the oil business. Jackson respected them tremendously—he'd seen them put their money where it was needed. They were generous with many different charities, most of them concentrating on children. Of course, Barry was in politics. Therefore, his every move was scrutinized. And he'd never found anyone in any political party who could dig up any dirt on the man. They were headed to Chevy Chase and the historical "farmhouse" where the Cole family lived. Barry's family went back to Revolutionary days and so did the house. However, it was no longer a farm but a beautifully refurbished home on five acres of carefully manicured lawn, and all surrounded by a high brick wall. Barry and his wife might be generous to a fault, but they'd also created an impressive home for their children.

He was almost at the house and could see the "bunny wagon" had pulled off onto the embankment that ran along the high brick fence. He was nearly at the point where he could ring the bell at the great iron gate that gave way to the crescent drive that stretched in front of the home when he was startled to see something come bouncing off the wall.

"Dad!" Corby shouted. "Dad, that was a woman!"

He quickly pulled off the road, warning the kids to sit tight as he leapt out of the car and raced across the embankment grass to reach the woman who was struggling to get up, her one arm dangling, her breath coming in a gasp and tears sliding down her cheeks. She looked at Jackson with recognition,

just as Jackson realized she was Miss Jeannette Margoles, one of the teachers in the pre-kindergarten at the school Corby attended.

“Jeannette, careful, stay down, what—”

She shook her head, fighting against the pain from what appeared to be a broken arm, staring at him with wet, desperate eyes.

“She—she got me out. The Easter bunny, your wife. She got me out. Thank God, Jackson! He— they--have the children. They have the children. No one dares move . . he has pulled the adults from the little ones. He wants to control Senator Cole . . . get him to change his vote. And if Senator Cole doesn't do what they want him to do, they're going to kill everyone, the kids, too!”

He felt his heart slam against his chest. Angela was in there. At he was equally grateful—*their children were not!*

No matter the circumstances, he had learned long ago to maintain control, to use logic and experience over emotion.

“Jeannette, I'm going to get you help. I need you to try to tell me exactly what is happening in there. You said 'they.' How many are in there. And they want Senator Cole to change his vote?”

Jeannette nodded painfully and he was glad to see that she seemed to understand just how important it was that she gain control, too, and tell him everything.

“Angela told Brenda that she'd be the bunny. Brenda has a bad ankle . . . Angela said that she didn't mind at all and the costuming was ready in the van . . . and so Angela is the bunny. She managed to hop around when she got wind of what was going on . . . “ She paused. “Candace was saying that guy had just been out to fix the camera and all that go with the alarm system, but that someone had messed up, a lot wasn't working, but at least she could still see the gate so that she could welcome guests. But then . . . I thought there were just more friends coming, but something Angela saw in the screen by the door that shows the gate made her nervous and she pulled me into the kitchen and then . . . it was so

weird, it was almost as if someone was leading her and she said she was getting candy and she got me out a kitchen door that was behind shelving. I don't how she found it, but I had said I was young, I could crawl . . . I thought . . . I thought I could get over the wall."

"You did get over the wall."

"And fell."

"You're scared. As any sane human being would be."

She tried a weak smile. "I hike a lot . . . I . . . anyway, I could hear them as Angela was getting me out! One guy is like the spokesperson and I think he blew up a statue or something with one of his guns. . . and he said they were going to separate the adults from the children. The children are screaming and crying and the parents . . . I heard one of the moms screaming because they were pointing their guns at the kids' heads, even the toddlers! They warned that if anyone called for help, they'd kill everyone, but they promised if Senator Cole changed his mind for some money bill going up for a final vote later tonight, they'd let everyone go. But if they so much as sniffed anyone calling for help, the kids would start dying! I—I was paralyzed at first, listening! Then I knew I had to get moving or that . . . they would kill someone. But if they see anything—"

"But right now, everyone is all right?" Jackson asked.

Jeannette nodded.

"How many are there—kids, parents, attackers?"

"Um . . . kids. Ten, five from like two to four, Evan, Sam, two little girls their age, and another little boy. I think they were collecting all the cell phones. Oh! And I know now what Angela said. They just walked in through the security system because they nabbed the Martinelli family out here and came in as guests . . . and, what can anyone do? If anyone comes in to help, anyone at all, they'll start killing kids!"

Jackson looked back at the car; Corby was amazing. He was trying to occupy his sister.

“Jeannette, how many are ‘they?’”

“Three. I think. Angela was murmuring that there would be no reason the Martinelli family was coming with three men she’d never seen before. Three men with three big guns, I think. I heard an explosion and I think . . . I think they shot the senator’s statue of Ben Franklin to prove that they could . . . they said, ‘*explode a kid’s head.*’”

“We’re not going to let that happen. Jeannette, I’m going to get you back to my car where you can sit with my kids. I’m going to get help out here—”

“No, no, no!” she cried with panic. If they see anyone, they’ll start killing kids!” She paused, wincing. “Angela said if anyone could get in, it would be you.”

“They will never know any kind of help is here, I promise you,” he assured her. He pulled out his cell phone and spoke with Axel Tiger. Then he helped Jeannette to the car, worried she might pass out from pain or fear. But when they reached the car, she swallowed hard and said, “It’s my left arm. I’m right-handed. I can drive. I can get Corby and Victoria out of here.”

“You’re sure?”

She sat up straight in the driver’s seat. “I am sure. Please, Jackson, let me get them to safety, at least. I . . . I don’t think I dare get an ambulance or . . . I mean, those guys are serious! If police try to come in . . .”

“Just get them home and stay with them until someone can get out there from headquarters. Corby knows the combination on the lock to the front door. Once someone is out there, you must get to the hospital. I have this. I swear to you, I have this,” he promised her, and he and hurried to the bunny van himself.

*

Angela stood by Brenda and Candace and the other parents in the large parlor area of the old mansion. The children had been ushered into the adjacent office.

She could still hear the tears from the little ones, though the attacker guarding them had struck a few of them, and they were quieting down from their fear of further abuse. They had been warned they needed to stop fussing and crying. When he had left, Senator Cole had tried to assure the little ones everything would be all right.

The senator had driven off for the vote himself. They hadn't sent anyone with him; they had apparently believed he would do as he had been told because they very evidently meant what they said—if he didn't obey, everyone would die, except for him of course, and he'd be left to live with the deaths of his family and friends for the rest of his life. He had to comply. That would be the only way he could save not just his own children, but a dozen others as well, not to mention his wife and friends.

There were three attackers. They had come in with Gina and Herve Martinelli and their three children, pretending at first they were cousins, but with the gate camera working, Angela had seen them.

Something just didn't seem right.

And the men had quickly shown their true intent.

Angela had been stunned at first—she was in the home of a United State Senator. But Candance Cole had told them all about her frustration with the system, *even after someone had come to fix it for them purportedly from the alarm company!*

The adults were as terrified as the children. Including the Hampton mother and father and two kids who had arrived *after* the takeover had begun. It seemed the attackers had planned to allow in the invited guests who just thought they were coming for a get-together.

The man doing the talking had seen them at the gate—and seen they were let in.

No problem. A few more terrified people to hold until . . .

But the spokesperson for the three attackers—while brandishing a semi-automatic rifle he'd pulled from his jacket—had told them if they behaved until after the vote that evening, they'd be fine.

He was lying. Experience had taught Angela to judge a situation. And this man—late thirties, early forties, brown hair and beard, logger-look, well-spoken—had taken aim at one of the busts in the grand parlor of the house, blowing it to bits, warning them against the least infraction. The senator was due to be on the floor for a vote in just an hour, something to be brought in before the Easter weekend. All they had to do was wait for the senator to do the right thing—*or the thing they wanted*—and when the vote was in, they'd all be released.

Except they wouldn't be, Angela knew. Because all of them had seen the faces of the three attackers. The senator would vote.

And they would all die.

When the men had come in, before they had shown themselves, Angela had known. And as the bunny, she had grabbed Jeannette, closest to her, and pulled her into the kitchen. At that moment, she'd had no real plan.

But then, like a miracle for the season, the ghost of the mansion had appeared, an elderly woman in dress from the mid nineteenth-century, confused at first when she realized Angela saw her, then frowning worriedly as she urged her toward what was a false wall—with a door behind the pantry shelves.

Angela couldn't leave herself. She had to stay and observe and somehow discover a way to stop these men. But as she urged Jeannette out, she told her she had to get over the wall, and stop Jackson—and warn him that the people in the house could die if the attackers were fearful of anyone coming in. Jeannette started off telling her she could do it, then she appeared nervous, worried she might fail, that she might enrage the men. That she might not manage to slip through the yard, to crawl the wall far enough from the gate."

Angela could hear the Martinelli family was in the house—and their "guests" were already shouting and firing off warnings.

“You’re all we have, Jeannette, go, please. I can’t. I must watch here for any weakness among these men, for any opportunity I might have to change things. And I’m dressed as a giant bunny. I cannot hippity-hippity-hop over a wall like that! You must stop Jackson somehow—he’s headed here with the kids. Make sure he knows the situation. If anyone can get in here without appearing to be a threat, it’s Jackson.”

Jeannette had gone just before one of the men had come into the kitchen to drag her back out to be with the adults.

Now, she had to pray that Jeannette had gotten over the wall, and she had to believe that she had.

Angela stood against the wall, a giant Easter bunny, next to Brenda and near the kitchen door when the ghost sidled up next to her. “I am Elizabeth Wallace and I lived here with my husband years ago. Theodore was an attorney who had worked with our dear Mr. Lincoln. Just so you know. I have never . . . well, you do hear me, right?”

Angela nodded, not daring to speak.

“Of course, of course, you can’t appear to be talking now, dear. Is there help for this dreadful situation? I wish I could take a frying pan to these men but the best I can do, I’m afraid, is cause a bit of rustling or rattling.”

“That could help!” Angela whispered. “And thank you; you helped already you know.”

“Stop talking!” The man holding guard over the adults snapped.

“The Easter bunny is talking?” the man watching the door and the gate—their ‘spokesman,’ so to say—called out the question, laughing. “That’s going to just blow the Easter thing!”

Gunshots to their heads would blow the whole Easter thing, too, Angela thought. But just as she wondered how she, alone, could possibly change the situation, the spokesman started laughing again, and pushing the buzzer by the front door that would open the gate. “The Easter bunny is talking, and

you're not going to believe this—there's a chicken coming. The chicken is wearing a sign that reads 'Easter chicken.' Who the hell ever heard of an Easter chicken?"

"The young lady did get away," the ghost of Elizabeth Wallace whispered. "So . . ."

"The Easter chicken brings the chocolate eggs!" Angela cried out. "Bunnies don't lay eggs, but chickens do, and at Easter, the Easter chicken makes special chocolate eggs."

"Whatever!" the man said. "The Easter chicken is more than welcome to join the party!"

He opened the door and stepped out. Angela barely dared breathe.

The chicken stepped in. The man did not. And Angela knew that—even dressed as a chicken—Jackson had managed to take him out.

The Easter chicken had a headdress much like her own. Large, with feathers. But while Angela's bunny costume was the head and fabric, the chicken costume had a butt that stuck out from the backside, also covered with feathers.

But it also had pockets. And Jackson would know that. And in his pockets . . .

'Wings' covered his arms, but she could see he had left his hands and fingers free.

"What, what, oh, my God, what's going on?" The "chicken" asked, stepping into the room.

As Angela had hoped, the man guarding them walked up to him, brandishing his gun. "Just a bit of delay on the party. Get over there with the stupid rabbit. I'll take your cell phone, don't scream, don't cause any problems, or your head gets blown off. You got it?"

"I got it, I got it!" Jackson stuttered. "But—"

"Where's Cam?"

"Who?"

"Cam! The man who let you in."

"I—I don't know. He came out and opened the door and said I should go on in and . . ."

"Cell phone! Just give me your damned cell phone!"

There was a minute, just a minute, when the chicken looked across the room at her, and Angela knew, it was time to act.

“Rattle something, please!” Angela begged the ghost.

“Indeed, dear woman, I shall do so!” the ghost said passionately.

Angela swept by as the ‘chicken’ tried to maneuver his hands into the pockets of the costume. This man’s eyes were on the chicken; the second man remaining was with the children. That doorway was to her left and she silently made her way across the room, flat against the wall.

Suddenly, the sound of rattling came from the kitchen. The man watching the “chicken” turned instinctively at the sound.

Jackson reached into his pocket, pulling out his Glock.

Angela didn’t have a weapon on her. She just had the bunny head.

And while Jackson slammed the Glock down on the head of the one man, Angela waited for the second man to come rushing out.

And he did rush out.

She hit him with the heavy bunny head as hard as she could, and when he staggered back, stunned, she kicked his arm with all her strength, sending his weapon flying across the room.

The man Jackson had taken down was out cold. The man who had watched over the children was rolling on the floor.

Angela dived for the semi-automatic, picking it up and training it on the would-be attacker. Jackson quickly had plastic cuffs on the unconscious man at his feet and moved quickly to her side. She nodded and he moved forward, reaching into his chicken costume for more cuffs.

With both men cuffed, he pulled out his cell phone.

She smiled as he put through a call. The front door, still ajar, opened immediately and Axel Tiger rushed in along with Bruce McFadden, Kat Sokolov, and Will Chan.

And then there was total chaos as tearful children went rushing to their parents.

Brenda was quickly at Angela's side. "I can help you get out of that costume now. Oh, Angela, I know you and Jackson are agents, and—oh. Jackson is the chicken, right?"

"Jackson is the chicken."

"Let me help you. The bunny's head . . . well, it's bashed in. I don't know how you managed to do that. I wouldn't have had the nerve . . . no, I mean, I wouldn't have even thought of trying to do something like that . . . thank God you decided to be the bunny!"

Under Axel's direction, the offenders were taken out under arrest. While Jackson was on the phone again—still in full chicken regalia—he wanted to make sure the local police were kept in the loop. But the charges would be federal.

Candance Cole moved up to Angela while others were still moving about, hugging her—battered bunny head and all—and then moving back.

"I called my husband. He knows we're all right! The vote hadn't happened yet! But . . . I don't believe this! These horrible people did this to sway a vote?"

"So, it appears," Angela said quietly. She tried to assure Candance. "I'm glad you thought to call your husband right away."

"I'm glad they dragged those men out of here quickly. I would have wanted to do a lot worse!" Candance said. "Children! And they meant to kill us all, no matter how my husband had voted!"

Angela grimaced. "We'll never know. Sometimes, even in war, soldiers know when something is wrong, and they stop at pure carnage of innocents. But . . . it is over. Really over."

"Thank you, thank you . . .!" Candance said again, teary-eyed.

"I'm grateful that the chicken arrived!" Angela said, trying to make the woman less anxious. "But! Brenda, Candance, excuse me for just a minute please!"

She hurried into the kitchen, looking for the ghost of Elizabeth Wallace.

The ghost was there, smiling. "I did all right?" she asked eagerly.

"You did brilliantly. I can't thank you enough. Elizabeth, honestly, if you hadn't provided the distraction that you did . . ."

"I am so grateful. I feel that . . . well, I feel I know why I have been here . . . I wanted to help so many times during my life when I was helpless. And now . . . I look at all the faces of the children and I know and I'm so very, very grateful!"

"I don't know what would have happened without you!" Angela told her.

Elizabeth smiled. "The Easter chicken?" she queried.

"Hey!"

Angela turned to see Jackson had come and found her in the kitchen.

"What's wrong with an Easter chicken?" he asked, and Angela could imagine the light in his eyes and his smile as he asked the ghost the question. "Seriously, what rabbit have you ever seen lay an egg?"

The ghost first looked at Angela.

"He sees me, too?"

Angela nodded. "We are part of a federal government law enforcement unit that's a bit unusual. We . . . see those who are gone and, hm, choose to be seen."

"That's quite wondrous!" Elizabeth said. "Mr. Chicken, there is nothing in the world wrong with the Easter chicken. In fact, I am amazed and awed by the Easter chicken!"

"Thank you. And it's a pleasure, ma'am," Jackson said. "I would so love to get to know you, but I'm afraid we're going to have all kinds of interviews and paperwork happening right now. May we speak at a later time?" he asked Elizabeth.

"Sir, it would be my pleasure." She smiled suddenly. "I would love to see you without a chicken head. And, of course, the Easter bunny."

“You’ll see us both,” Angela assured her. “We work together, and we’re married to one another.”

“Oh!” Elizabeth said. “And, um, how does that work out?”

One of Jackson’s chicken wings came around Angela’s fur-clad shoulders.

“Surprisingly well!” he told Elizabeth. “We’ll meet again!” he assured her, and he looked at Angela and said, “Paperwork, my love.”

Angela nodded. “Wait, should we get out of these costumes?”

“Maybe we should let the kids think they were saved by the Easter bunny and the Easter chicken!” she said. “We can leave the costumes in the van—it’s still out there, right?”

“It is. You know, we’re going to owe Brenda a new bunny head. And I can’t begin to tell you just how happy I’m going to be to invest in her new bunny head!”

“Me, too.”

“The kids?” Angela asked.

“With Jeannette. All we need is to get to work.”

They did. The night was long. It was late when they came home, but Corby was still awake, sitting with Mary Tiger, Axel’s aunt.

Jeannette had gone to the hospital. Her arm, thankfully, hadn’t been broken, just badly sprained, but they were keeping her overnight for observation since she’d taken such a hard fall.

Corby and Mary had seen the news. It was repeating.

While agents had kept the media out of the house and the yard, Axel had given a press interview, explaining it would be an ongoing investigation but while three men with semi-automatic weapons had threatened the senator’s wife, children, and guests, to coerce his vote, agents had been among the guests, and the threat had been contained. As it was all unraveled, the public would know more.

“But as it stands, folks,” the reporter said, “the group was saved by the Easter bunny—and the Easter chicken.”

Video had captured the Easter bunny and the Easter chicken entering the van. Somehow, Axel had kept them from seeing Angela and Jackson as they had exited.

“I was so glad to see you!” Corby said. “I was so scared. I love you so much!”

He’d given them both the kind of hugs that made them grateful to be parents.

They finally got them to bed.

Despite the hour, Angela and Jackson put a speaker call through to the senator, telling him they were grateful it had all gone down before the vote.

He told them how grateful he was.

“And you got to vote as you wanted to,” Angela said.

“Ah, yes, but, in reality, I got to vote as the people—my constituents—wanted me to. And that’s the American way, what should always be the American way. We have our problems. I quote Sir Winston Churchill, ‘Democracy is the worse form of government, except for all others.’ Our government is for the people and by the people and today . . . well, I served my people.”

“I knew there was a reason I admired you, Senator.”

“Well, thank you on that. And thank you for our lives. If I can ever do anything . . .”

“Sure,” Jackson said. “Give us another invite over. I’d love to see more of the house.”

“Come for Easter! We eat about two in the afternoon, after church.”

Angela smiled at Jackson. They both wanted their chance to thank the ghost of Elizabeth Wallace. Easter dinner would be lovely.

*

It turned out to be a wonderful Easter. Once having kids, Jackson had discovered that he made great pancakes.

Pancakes, church. And then they headed out to the Cole estate.

It was different now. The cameras were working, the alarms were working—and a human being from a security company was also working. Jackson spoke with him. The man worked for a highly regarded security firm, one with many contracts with the government and private citizens.

The Cole family made sure a great plate of dinner was brought out to him, too.

And Angela managed to get the senator and his wife and the kids playing in the great parlor while Jackson and she snuck into the kitchen.

And the ghost of Elizabeth Wallace followed them on in.

“I so wish I could hug you!” Angela told her. “But I did do something.”

“You did dear?”

“I looked you up. And I know you were always a giver and a wonderful person! You were a nurse during the Civil War, treating anyone who was wounded.”

“What else could I do?” she said. She waved a hand in the air. “Bad times come, and good times come. And even in the bad times, I believe in the goodness of people. And I thought that . . . well, after the events of the other evening, I thought it must mean it was time for me to go. I’ve seen too much disease, war, and horror, but . . . sometimes, the right people are where they need to be, and goodness prevails. So! I’m sticking around. That senator—he’s a good man. But too trusting! So, I shall watch over this family.”

“That’s lovely, Elizabeth,” Jackson assured her. “And you are, of course, welcome at our home anytime.”

“And your offices?” Elizabeth asked anxiously.

“Of course,” Angela assured her.

“A place full of people who will see me?” Elizabeth said, delighted.

“Absolutely,” Jackson assured her.

“Ah, lovely!” Elizabeth said, clapping her hands together. “Now, you two get out there with your beautiful family and your friends. Make sure the kids get lots of those eggs from the Easter bunny and the Easter chicken!”

Jackson and Angela smiled at her and then one another.

Easter. A day of rejoicing.

And they had so much to be grateful for!

Heather Graham

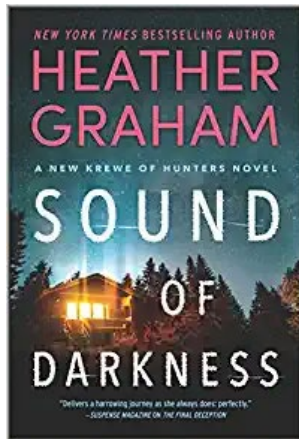


New York Times and USA Today bestselling author, Heather Graham, majored in theater arts at the University of South Florida. After a stint of several years in dinner theater, back-up vocals, and bartending, she stayed home after the birth of her third child and began to write. Her first book was with Dell, and since then, she has written over two hundred novels and novellas including category, suspense, historical romance, vampire fiction, time travel, occult, sci-fi, young adult, and Christmas family fare.

She is pleased to have been published in approximately twenty-five languages. She has written over 200 novels and has 60 million books in print. Heather has been honored with awards from booksellers and writers' organizations for excellence in her work, and she is the proud to be a recipient of the Silver Bullet from Thriller Writers and was awarded the prestigious Thriller Master Award in 2016. She is also a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from RWA. Heather has had books selected for the Doubleday Book Club and the Literary Guild, and has been quoted, interviewed, or featured in such publications as The Nation, Redbook, Mystery Book Club, People and USA Today and appeared on many newscasts including Today, Entertainment Tonight, and local television.

Heather loves travel and anything that has to do with the water and is a certified scuba diver. She also loves ballroom dancing. Each year she hosts a Vampire Ball and Dinner theater raising money for the Pediatric Aids Society and in 2006 she hosted the first Writers for New Orleans Workshop to benefit the stricken Gulf Region. She is also the founder of "The Slush Pile Players," presenting something that's "almost like entertainment" for various conferences and benefits. Married since high school graduation and the mother of five, her greatest love in life remains her family, but she also believes her career has been an incredible gift, and she is grateful every day to be doing something that she loves so very much for a living.

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Women are being taken in Virginia, and FBI agent Mark Gallagher is determined to put a stop to it. Certain he's closing in on the killer known as The Embracer, Mark is less than thrilled when he's partnered with rookie agent Colleen Law, worried she's a liability when there's so much at stake.

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