

New York Times Best Selling Author

Heather Graham

Bunny-Napped



Bunny-Napped

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Bunny-Napped!

(A short-short story, 3000 words.)

A simple day—a little complicated because of restrictions, of course—but a day out with the kids for Jackson Crow and Angela for a socially-distanced Easter Bunny pic.

But suddenly the bunny is gone—and so is a young child.

The picture must be forgotten as a race through the mall takes place. But what seems evident might not be truth at all, and it may take a few friends, old and new, dead and alive, to bring the truth to light.

HEATHER GRAHAM

BUNNY-NAPPED

Slush Pile Players

Bunny-Napped!

The “Easter Bunny” was great. Dancing away in the middle of the mall to whatever music was playing over the central speakers and waving to kids and grown-ups alike as they passed by his flower-laden court. There was something fun and wonderful about him, a joy and kindness extending across “social distancing.”

Angela Hawkins Crow had been happy about a chance to come to the mall for a “socially distanced” picture of the kids with the Easter Bunny and had made an appointment when she had first received the email advertising the bunny and the rules that were to be followed for a picture.

She and Jackson had arranged their schedules carefully—as she did for every holiday—to make sure they could take the day with the kids before Easter. That night, they’d be together with everyone in the unit at their headquarters. Krewe agents were of different faiths and ethnicities and different everything, so they constantly did their best to have one event to include everyone. They had a “Spring Celebration” as a gathering, and it would be that night—not on Passover, not on Easter, or any other religious holiday, but one that celebrated them all.

That afternoon they would be taking the day for themselves, their children, and Easter. And so Angela had left the office first in her car to pick up the kids and Mary Tiger who watched them when they worked. Mary had her own family, but she was part of their family, too.

Jackson would finish up at the office and meet them at the mall.

Even waiting was fun—the bunny was great. Their appointment was about fifteen minutes away when the bunny took his scheduled break.

Heather Graham/Bunny-Napped

They wandered away a bit to look in windows.

That was when the woman's piercing scream sounded from behind them and could probably be heard the length of the mall.

"Charlie!" the woman shrieked.

"Mom?" Corby said anxiously.

"The bunny! The bunny stole Charlie!" the woman cried.

"Mom!" Corby said.

People were running everywhere, some alarmed, some trying to see what had happened; and someone else shouting for mall security.

"Mom!" Corby said again.

"I've got the kids!" Mary said sternly.

Angela nodded at her son and Mary then hurried forward, making her way carefully through the milling crowd to the woman who had screamed.

"What happened?" she asked, flashing her badge and trying to calm the woman. "I'm with the FBI, ma'am. Please—"

"Get the bunny!" she shrieked. "I have Charlie here for his picture," she blurted. "I mean, his parents are a mess, separating, but . . . they love Charlie, they adore Charlie . . . and I'm his grandmother, his mother's mom, and oh, dear Lord! I can't lose Charlie!"

Angela stared at the bunny's panicked assistant/camera-operator.

"The bunny took the kid?" Angela demanded.

“No, no, that couldn’t be—” the assistant said.

“How old? Quickly, a description!” Angela said to the child’s grandmother.

“Uh-uh-uh—”

“Please! I know you’re worried. I need help!” Angela said.

“I—yes! Eight years old, about four-feet, skinny, long blond hair,” his grandmother articulated.

“I saw him!” Someone shouted. “The bunny headed out—the kid was at his side!”

“Which way?” Angela demanded.

“Toward the food court and the exit,” someone else said.

“The mall restrooms and exit—that way!” the bunny’s assistant said. “But the bunny wouldn’t steal anybody!”

Angela took off before she could see that mall security were then hurrying to the site. She passed the usual stores and dozens of people, masked and distancing for the most part, and now all staring at her, at the upheaval, some hurrying out of the mall, afraid there might be escalating violence, and some just bewildered.

Angela ran, heading into a busy food court.

People stared at her. Most were standing.

The woman’s scream had been very, very loud.

A man pointed towards the restrooms.

Angela tore off in that direction, bursting into the men’s room.

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The bunny was there; he was leaned against the wall, his bunny head resting on the side of a sink as he washed his hands.

“Where’s the boy?” Angela demanded. She had her hand at her back. She hadn’t drawn her weapon yet.

She was prepared to do so.

The bunny was a young man of perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two, dark-haired, dark-eyed, with a handsome and boyish face.

He stared at Angela as if she’d gone crazy.

“Kid? What kid?” To his credit, he appeared to be completely perplexed. “And this is the men’s room,” he told her. “What—what—kid?”

“A little boy disappeared—with you. Where is he?” Angela demanded.

“Hey, lady, I’m sorry. No kid came anywhere with me. Do you see a kid?”

She drew her weapon to kick open the first stall door.

The bunny continued to stare at her—fear in his eyes now. Well, possibly, in his mind, a crazy woman with a gun was invading the men’s room with extreme prejudice.

There was no one in the men’s room.

No accomplice in a stall.

No little boy.

“Lady, please!” the young man said. “I swear I didn’t take the child! He was upset when he was in line; I could see that. I think the kid ran away.”

Angela's eyes narrowed as she stared at him.

"I swear! In line . . . all kids are happy. And I'm a darned good bunny! But this kid—"

"Charlie."

"Charlie wasn't happy! I'm in college, and I'm going to work with kids when I graduate either as a teacher or social worker. I know kids. He wasn't happy. Trust me. I didn't take him—you have to believe me."

"The fellow is telling the truth!"

She was startled to hear a voice behind her, and she swirled around. She heard laughter.

"That isn't going to work against me, lady. I mean, it just isn't going to do anything since . . . well, you can't kill me."

Angela stared at the ghost in the corner of the men's room. He was dressed in a gray uniform.

He laughed again. "Don't want the kid knowing you see me and thinking you really are a crazy lady! Sorry, Ben Layton. I worked at this mall for almost thirty years. Still like to hang around especially during holidays."

He gave her a smile and said again, "I'm sorry. I just mean to help!"

"You have helped," she murmured. She turned back to the "Easter Bunny" and lowered and holstered her weapon.

"I do believe you," she said.

The young man put his head back on and started out.

"Wait! We're going to need your statement and your help!" Angela said. "Don't go out there—"

But the bunny walked out. And as she followed, she heard cries of fury going up.

People.

Banding together. A child was missing.

The bunny had been accused.

And they were heading toward the bunny and throwing food as the young man raced desperately to get away, to find safety from the vigilante crowd.

“The bunny doesn’t have the boy!” Angela shouted.

No good. The bunny still ran, dodging pizza, chicken nuggets, and egg rolls.

Angela knew they had to find the child—fast.

But the bunny might wind up a real victim of mob violence.

If she had acquired anything during the many years she and Jackson had now led the Krewe of Hunters unit of the bureau, it was the ability to shout very loudly and with authority.

“FBI! Stop! Everyone still! Stand still. Bunny, stop! We’re not going to hurt you. We need your help!”

People fell back. The bunny hadn’t heard or was ignoring her, or the young man had completely panicked.

He kept running.

But he didn’t get far. A man stepped out behind a store door.

The bunny crashed into him, ricocheted back, and bounced into him again.

It was Jackson, standing as solidly as a brick wall.

He looked across the distance of thirty or so feet seeing Angela.

And the food court customers frozen in place.

The floor and walls looking truly deadly as they were sprinkled with tomato sauce and noodles.

“I’ve got the bunny,” he assured her. He made a motion with his hand.

“Go!”

She turned, and as she did, she saw Corby sprint ahead of Mary and the baby trying to reach her.

“Mom! The sports shop—behind the shoe rack!”

She nodded and raced toward the sports shop situated at the far end of the food court.

She burst into the store and felt a tug on her jacket. Corby was there. Mary and the baby were running up behind.

“Mom go easy. I know what happened,” Corby said.

“I . . . well, of course, I’ll go easy.”

“His grandma is with the cops now; his parents are on the way. I think he just . . . well, he didn’t mean to hurt the bunny. He just wanted to . . .”

“Run away,” Angela said.

Corby nodded.

She let him follow behind her as she walked into the sports store, and as Corby had pointed out, there was someone hiding behind a rack of shoes.

“Charlie,” she said softly.

There were only a few people in the store. One of the clerks looked at Angela in panic. She raised a hand and nodded to assure him there was no danger from a hurt child, but he wanted out anyway.

He ushered the few shoppers in the store toward the exit and hurried out himself.

Angela approached the shoe rack.

“Charlie, it’s okay. But you scared people so badly. Charlie, everyone just wants you to be all right.”

“It won’t be all right!” A little voice called back. “They hate each other!”

Angela turned to Corby. “Go get Dad. See if Charlie’s folks got here yet,” she said softly.

Corby hurried out to do her bidding.

“Charlie, your grandmother loves you very much. She wanted you to have a nice picture with the Easter Bunny. And, sweetheart, running away won’t help anything.”

“It will get me away from them!”

Angela was quiet for a minute. She didn’t know what he was running away from.

“Charlie, do your parents hurt you?”

“Hurt me?”

“Do they beat you or twist your arms or—”

“No!”

“Then—”

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“They fight! And they . . . I haven’t seen my dad. They fight. They . . . they’re going to split up and I’ll wind up . . . I don’t know!”

“Corby, sometimes people split up. But that doesn’t mean they don’t love you incredibly! Please, Corby. The Easter Bunny was nearly attacked—”

“You attacked the Easter Bunny?” Charlie said, appalled.

“No, I didn’t attack the bunny. But people love kids, and they were afraid the Easter Bunny had . . .”

“They thought I was bunny-napped?” Charlie said incredulously. “I just . . . used the bunny. Oh, man! I have to apologize.”

“Charlie, I’m so sorry. I can’t say I can make the world perfect for you, but I believe that whatever happens, both your parents love you. And your grandmother loves you.”

Angela felt Corby return sidling up next to her.

“Charlie, having someone love you is a great thing. I had parents once who . . . well, I didn’t run away from them. They ran away from me. I got lucky. I’m getting loved again. Please, Charlie, don’t throw people away when they love you.” Corby said softly.

Jackson had come with a young couple, a lean, dark-haired woman with beautiful bright eyes—moistened now with tears—and a tall, athletic man in a handsome business suit.

“Charlie!”

The woman called his name with a deep wealth of emotion in her voice, the sound of her tears and her fear rich within the single word.

And the man said his name, too.

In his voice, Angela could hear anguish—knowledge of what their fighting might have done to their son.

The young couple had heard everything Charlie had said.

She stepped back with Jackson, pulling Corby to her.

Charlie hesitated, and then he ran out. Both his parents knelt.

He went into their arms.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Charlie cried. “I just . . .”

“No, we’re sorry, son. And we promise you, no matter what the future brings, we won’t yell and scream and be mad at each other in front of you.”

“We love you, Charlie,” the woman said. She took a long look at her husband. “We both love you. I love you. Your father loves you very much!”

Angela turned around. Charlie’s grandmother was standing back with the crowd that had gathered outside the store. The windows were now lined with police and security.

“I’ll handle all this,” Jackson murmured.

Charlie’s father stood and turned back to Jackson and Angela. “We . . . we don’t know what to do. If we’re liable for damages—”

A man slipped in from the outside. “We have to clean the food court, and that’s no big deal. Sorry, I’m Mitch Anson, mall manager. No charges unless the police insist.”

The police did not insist. The situation slowly died down. People left the mall.

People came back to the mall.

Heather Graham/Bunny-Napped

The Easter Bunny took up his position at the photo booth again.

They found out Charlie was Charles Michael Miller, and his parents were Sheila and Hank Miller, and they admitted they had separated and had been . . .

“Horrible!” Sheila told them. “Horrible fighting . . . with Charlie hearing.”

“We don’t know what will happen in the future, but we were horrible. And I will swear this under oath, the fighting will stop.”

“We were never violent. We don’t hit each other or—”

“But I guess we never realized what weapons words could be,” Hank Miller finished.

“Anyway, if the Easter Bunny can stand us, we’re going to get a good Easter picture for this year,” Hank said.

Angela found herself smiling. “If the Easter Bunny will have us, we’re going to get a good Easter picture for this year, too.”

They were way off from their appointments, but there was space in the Bunny’s schedule. And so nicely, the Easter Bunny remained wonderful.

He danced between his socially distant greetings.

Jackson, Angela, Corby, his little sister and Mary watched as the Miller family along with Sheila’s mother all apologized to him. The Easter Bunny went into all kinds of dancing motions that showed he forgave them.

Then they had their picture and Mary joined them.

Heather Graham/Bunny-Napped

Angela wasn't sure how Corby had met the ghost of the mall, but Ben Layton—a tall ghost, a little ragged and rugged-looking with a great smile—was watching as Charlie's family got their pictures made.

Corby motioned to him, too, and so—while he wouldn't appear in the picture—there would be something on the image, maybe a bit of fog in an area that would remind him Ben Layton had also been there.

The bunny stood behind Angela and whispered, "It's all cool—really cool. Happy Easter to you and yours! If I'm ever in trouble, I hope you're around!"

She was smiling when the picture was taken.

And when she thanked the bunny, it was sincerely.

That night, the Krewe offices were alive and ablaze. The season was celebrated. Easter, Passover, and more, old beliefs, Asian, Indian, and Native American beliefs.

All things that helped teach about love and human decency.

When they left that night—a little earlier than some of their fellows who didn't have small children—they were busy planning on timing for the kids' baskets.

They had just gotten home when a call came in from the office.

It was Alex Tiger.

He just wanted them to know they had received a call from Hank and Sheila Miller.

Angela had the phone and put it on speaker so she and Jackson could both hear Axel.

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The Millers did both love Charlie. They had been incorrigible. They didn't know if they could work out all their differences, but they were going to try counseling and give it a go. No matter what happened, they would make sure Charlie wasn't involved in any way in their personal problems.

"They said they would make sure he'll know he's desperately loved—whether they're together or not," Axel told them. "Thought you'd want to know. Boy, you guys can't even see the Easter Bunny without something coming up!"

"Well that seems true, okay . . ." Jackson said. "But what the heck? We met a great Easter bunny and . . ."

"Maybe we made something better. Oh, and we have a new friend at the mall!" Angela said. "You never know when we just might need to know a good ghost at the mall."

"True," Jackson said.

They ended the call.

"Happy Easter!" Jackson said.

"A really happy Easter! A beautiful time for hope and love, and hey, Hank and Sheila might make it, and though they might not—they might!"

"They might," Jackson agreed.

"Renewal." Angela sighed. She slipped into his arms. "Video service and baskets in the morning. And . . . for tonight . . ."

She leaned down and kissed him and laughed. "It was an amazingly productive picture day! We've acquired a great new ghost for a friend, and what a bunny we got to meet!"

"An innocent bunny—accused of bunny-napping!"

Heather Graham/Bunny-Napped

“Ah, but cleared, justified, and proved to be—well, the best Easter Bunny ever!”

She curled into her husband’s arms.

A season of goodness, love, faith, and renewal. Tomorrow, Easter.

Tonight . . .

Never hurt to enjoy a wee bit of renewal!

PRAISE FOR New York Times bestselling author Heather Graham

“Graham wields a deftly sexy and convincing pen.”

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“The vivid details throughout the story are conveyed with precision and planning...Graham has an amazing way of bringing her worlds to life, and the inclusion of historical lore emphasizes the already exceptional writing.”

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--Publishers Weekly

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