



Never on a New Year's Eve

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Angela is waiting for Jackson Crow to come home—he'd just run into the office for a bit of last-minute work. Her dream was for a quiet night with just her kids, her husband and a cup of hot cocoa enjoyed together on the couch.

It's getting closer to midnight when she suddenly receives a call. She is warned—there will be a murder at midnight. Immediately after she hears Corby scream for help. While on their front porch, Corby had witnessed a kidnapping, and tells her the man is taking his victim to the cemetery. There is one just down the street, one that is as old as the country itself.

She's not a fool—Corby calls in other agents while Angela rushes out to discover what she can while waiting for back-up. Strange conversations with the would-be killer keep her moving closer through gravestones and mausoleums, and when she knows others have arrived, she also sees that she must act and act quickly if she is to save a life.

She tackles the kidnapper before he can act, but the act brings them both crashing through the door of one of the old cemetery's mausoleums—and into a strange encounter that will change her perception of every new year to come.

Never on a New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve. It was close—too close.

But Jackson would be home any minute, and neither of them minded that the work they had chosen called on them being available at all hours.

Most of the Krewe had the holiday off. Only a skeletal group was working, and that was how they had always wanted it. And while she knew some of their friends and fellow Krewe of Hunters members would be enjoying fireworks and get-togethers, all Angela Hawkins Crow wanted was a night with the family on the couch. She could envision the baby sleeping, the dogs curled up and doing the same, but Corbin, eleven and almost twelve now, would be up with her and Jackson and waiting for the stroke of midnight.

They had watched some wonderful movies together. They planned that a few minutes before midnight, they would turn on some news to see fireworks and the ball fall and all the revelry—right from the comfort of the couch, as they would hug one another—ready to greet the new year.

Okay, so, the world knew 2021 had been tough. And—especially since they were agents determined on saving the innocent and fighting injustice—2022 didn't promise to create all peace and harmony; but she truly believed a safer, kinder world was headed their way with the new year.

She glanced at her watch. Jackson would make it back in time so they could be together for the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. He'd gone in just to make sure a suspect had been secured by the proper authorities and to see he was incarcerated and no longer a danger to others.

Heather Graham/Murder at Midnight

Jackson handled so much of it himself. The Krewe was an official—if unique—unit of the FBI; but since the official word was they handled those cases that had to do with people involved with the occult or strange rites and rituals, paperwork could be tricky when finishing up various cases.

If others knew the unit was composed of those who often received help from the dead, they'd be laughed out of the bureau—and many heinous killers would go free.

No, she never resented the fact they were always ready to head to work. They'd already had a good night. Steaks had been marinated and grilled. She had a pecan pie—Corby's favorite—for dessert. All that was left was New Year's cocoa with Jackson and Corby. The baby was in her crib, peacefully sleeping and no, she wasn't going to wake her for the new year!

Her phone rang and she answered it quickly, thinking it would be Jackson telling her he was on his way.

But it wasn't Jackson.

She was greeted by heavy breathing and at first, she just sighed with impatience, wondering how that kind of sick stalker had gotten her number, or if he had rung in by keying in random numbers.

She was about to click 'End' on her phone when a voice said, "Don't do it. Don't hang up on me. There's going to be a murder at midnight. A nice end to 2021."

"Who is this?" she snapped.

"Murder at midnight. A nice end to 2021."

What?"

"Never on a New Year's Eve, huh? So, murder at midnight!"

She suddenly heard the dogs going crazy just outside on the steps of their house—and Corby crying out for her.

"Mom!"

Heather Graham/Murder at Midnight

She raced outside. Corby, she knew, had been on the top step just outside their home, waiting for Jackson. Now, frightened, she ran to him, sweeping him up in her arms. “What? Corby, what?”

“That lady—the nice lady who works at the coffee shop down the street—was walking by and a car pulled up and a man—I think it was a man, he was in a weird mask with devil horns or something—grabbed her and put something over her face and threw her into the back of the car. Mom! He said *you* must stop him, or he’ll kill her by midnight! But she kept screaming you shouldn’t come, it was a trap and he was heading to the cemetery with her and . . . Mom! You can’t just—go.”

“I have to just go. Corby, call your father. Tell him to get to the cemetery right away. Tell him what happened!” Angela said.

She hurried inside and to the safe for her service weapon and headed back out. Corby knew to listen to her and he was on the phone with Jackson.

“Mom, wait! I’ll come—”

“No. When you’re older. Corby, I am an agent, I have been law enforcement since I was very young, and I’m capable! Please, stay here. Watch the baby and have Dad get to me as quickly as possible. Please, sweetheart, listen to me now!”

Her adopted son looked at her and nodded gravely, his face twisted with concern and worry.

“Dad is coming—”

“Right. You talked to him! Corby, you know I am not stupid, and I depend on a team. I’m going to observe, not walk in blindly. Your dad is coming—he’ll get others to help. You get in and lock up so you and the baby are safe. Trust me, believe me. I don’t try to save the world on my own. Right now, I need your help and depend on you.”

He nodded to her gravely. Corby was amazing. “Gifted” himself, he understood the Krewe.

She left her son, knowing he had learned many of the lessons that were so important, especially among her family and the Krewe of Hunters.

Heather Graham/Murder at Midnight

Teamwork was everything.

She needed Jackson—or whoever he could send first--as soon as possible. She wouldn't engage in dangerous activity until she had backup. But she would get to the cemetery.

"The cemetery."

Odd.

She knew just which cemetery. It wasn't a full mile from their home and had been there since the Revolutionary War. Various mausoleums held the remains of men and women who had settled the country—and those who had fought and died in many wars since. A so-called 'hospital' had been there once because the operators had preferred calling it a hospital to referring to the place as a mental institute. But in truth, the mental institution had become a hospital for those injured in the wars that had raged in the area, and sometime during the early 1800s, a little chapel had been built across from the institute/hospital. It was cared for now by an historical group, but the place maintained a strange aura of the sadness that had thread through history along with various triumphs.

Angela didn't want to bring a car; that would alert whoever it was who had taken the young woman. She knew she would come up behind the high brick wall that faced the northern end of the cemetery and then skim along the trees in the small patch of forested park land to the west.

She was fast and she quickly reached the vantage point she was seeking and headed around, using the cover of the rather overgrown trees and bracken on the side. From where she stood, she could see the interior. High on dark hill, cast into an eerie silhouette by the moonlight, was the old 'hospital.' Down to the left of it was the chapel, and surrounding the chapel, all manner of graves, in ground, above ground, family and society mausoleums, and more.

And there, winding up the old path toward the hospital, was a car running with its parking lights only.

She saw it stop near one of the old mausoleums between the hospital and the chapel.

Heather Graham/Murder at Midnight

Dragging the woman he had kidnapped out of his car, she realized he must have stopped to place a bag over her head and bound her wrists together behind her back.

To her surprise, she recognized him. It was Len Baxter, a man who lives down the street from her. She winced. She knew he'd lost his mother to Covid.

And he'd lost his job as well.

She started to move in closer, winding her way through trees first, and then making use of the small family mausoleums as cover.

She paused, and realized her phone was vibrating and, by rote, she'd turned off the ringer. Sinking down behind a moss and lichen covered mausoleum, she answered the phone—watching the kidnapper as she did so.

“Murder at midnight. It’s a fitting end to the year. People are hateful. There are too many shootings in our schools. The left hates the right and the right hates the left.” He started to laugh. “Remember the song? Sly and the Family Stone—Everyday People! Well, I’ve had it with everyday people. I’m going to get rid of some and put them out of their misery.”

“I believe the woman you kidnapped to be Alicia Montgomery. She is one of the nicest people I have ever met. Why would she be miserable?” Angela asked.

“That’s just it—she’s nice. She’ll suffer like crazy. And she is ‘everyday’ people. Her mom is half African-American and her dad is some kind of a weird Euro-Asian mix. People will hurt her. I’m going to kill her at the stroke of midnight. She will be able to move on. Not live in this hateful world.”

“Len, my son is mixed race and he is happy and confident and could make a real change in this world!” she said angrily, forgetting for a minute her training meant she should keep him talking to reason with him.”

“You know who I am?” he queried.

“I do.”

“But—never mind. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters anymore. There is a better world.” He laughed again. “Maybe I’ll be really kind and get your son, too. Except, well . . . I am planning on suicide by cop or whatever they call it.”

“Why didn’t you just take yourself to that better world?” Angela asked, before wincing. Cruel! Her words were cruel! What was the matter with her? She was losing perspective here. But that’s what happens when her children were threatened.

“All I know is, I have my gun to her head and I will shoot her before midnight.”

“Trade.”

“What?”

“Trade. Trade Alicia for me. You can shoot me instead. Let Alicia go.”

In truth, she had to stop talking if she wanted to get any closer. And, watching, she thought she had a chance if she got closer. He said he had his gun to Alicia’s head; he didn’t.

“Oh, I think I need to shoot Alicia. That will hurt you.”

“Technically, I think it will hurt me more if you shoot me.”

She saw him glance at his watch. “Time is getting close. I did this really well. While your Krewe and the cops may be fast, they’ll get here just at the stroke of midnight! I’m sure you’re on your way now thinking it’s been forever. But, oh, Angie, baby! It’s just been a matter of minutes.”

She ended the call, slipping closer. He was angry because she had hung up on him, and he was dialing her again. She ignored the vibration, getting closer and closer to him.

It had only been a few minutes.

Jackson and/or others had to be close!

As he turned, walking toward one of the old society mausoleums, looking up at the hill and the hospital, he dialed her again.

Maybe he was wondering if he would have been in an institution in years gone by, Angela thought. She answered the phone.

He seemed to be a strange kind of crazy. His voice was hard as he spoke of the hatred that had seemed—she had to admit herself—to have raged through the year. It had been tough for so many people, confined to their homes, losing jobs, watching loved ones die, and looking for solace or outlet.

“Why do you want to hurt others?” she asked.

“Truthfully.” he whispered. “I care for her—I don’t want her to live with all the horror that is going on. And you! You married a Native American and adopted a child who is bi-racial. Don’t you realize how cruel people can be?”

“I do. But we have to rise above it, and we have to just live and love others.” Angela said.

He started to laugh. “What? No more agent? Are you going into the ministry?”

“No. I’m like you. I want to live in a kinder world. And I really believe we do that by just being kind to everyone. But if you hurt someone and I will see you caught and incarcerated!” Angela told him and then hung up.

She was close, really close. She dared to hit return call on her phone and wait for him to answer.

Confused, he did so as he turned.

Her timing couldn’t have been better. She saw what he could not—agents were slipping into the cemetery from the cover of the distant brick wall.

It was her chance.

She went streaking across the space that separated them, throwing herself at him with a vengeance, hitting his arm in a way that sent the gun flying and releasing his hold on Alicia.

She hadn’t counted on the uneven ground in front of the mausoleum—nor perhaps the strength of her own impetus.

So she and the would-be killer crashed through what had appeared to be a solid steel door into the mausoleum. And as she hit the stone floor, she heard the strangest sound . . .

The door slamming shut behind her.

Briefly, she saw a bit of colorful light streaking through the round, stained-glass window just above the small altar at the end of the mausoleum.

Then darkness seemed to wash over her like a wave and claim her.

*

“Hello! Welcome!”

Angela blinked and opened her eyes.

The voice was strange. And when she looked, she was being greeted by a man. Or, at least, the form of a man.

A ghost? She had fallen into a mausoleum.

With Len Baxter!

He was different from any ghost she had ever encountered. Most of the time, ghosts materialized in the form they had when they died. Hair done and make-up for some, but, in one way or another, they looked as they had appeared in life, except, of course, only certain people could see them and speak with them.

This man . . .

He was a form, yes, a human form. He had a kind face. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties or so, but . . .

There was nothing else about him. He was sheer. He had no color, he was just—a form.

“I . . . hello,” she murmured.

She heard Len Baxter trying to rise from the floor near her side.

“Hello, sir!” the form said.

Heather Graham/Murder at Midnight

“Angela?” Len murmured.

“I’m here,” she said.

“Then who . . . ?”

“Ah, how rude. Let me introduce myself!” the form said. “Brian Norton. And it’s not often we see such as yourselves among us!”

Angela looked around.

He was surrounded by other forms. Men and women . . . she thought. But they were . . . forms. Not ghosts as she knew them.

And yet . . .

They certainly weren’t living!

“Hello! Welcome!” a smiling form said.

“Um—where are we?” Angela asked. “We fell into a mausoleum, but . . .”

“Oh, is that where we are?” Len asked.

“We can’t really tell. Except that, you are alive. We’re pretty sure you’re not supposed to be here, Miss, or you, sir!” Brian remarked.

“Here—where?” Len wailed.

Angela came to her feet. The little family mausoleum was filled with the forms. People. But people without . . .

“No one is . . . anything,” Len said, sounding confused.

“Sir! I beg your pardon,” Brian said. “We are all someone.”

A woman laughed softly. “We were all human beings. Now, we are souls, and we’re in a beautiful place! Friends, family, and even those who might have been enemies! Don’t you see, we’re souls! Human souls. We don’t have colors or ethnicities, nor do sex or sexual orientation or anything

else at all matter! We have come to that place where we are all human beings, and here, we get to see the beauty of the human soul, and nothing else!”

“Oh,” was all that Angela could find to say. “I’m . . . I’ve seen the dead for most of my life, but I’ve never—”

“I don’t think you’re here because of you,” Brian told her. “But, Sir . . .”

He looked at Len.

“No, no, I just . . . I’m so tired of people being mean. I didn’t really want to hurt anyone. Am I going to hell? I guess I belong in hell. I mean . . .” He broke off, staring at Brian. “Wait! Can I stay? Oh, my lord, this is where I want to be! I want to find the love and the beauty in everyone, I want to stop being hurt, I—”

“We have to live to learn to see nothing but the beauty of the human soul,” Brian told him gravely. “Hell can be on earth. But on earth, we do all we can to see we live a life which allows others to see the beauty of the human soul. Am I making sense? Len, I see an oddly bright future for you!”

“For me? I’m going to prison if—if I’m really still alive,” Len said.

“I think we are alive,” Angela said dryly. “I can see you perfectly.”

“We can all learn!” another young man said, stepping forward. “Hey, Buddy and I over there shot one another in the Revolution. And Teddy was a Rebel and Jacob was a Yankee. Ginny was a slave and she’s forgiven Annabelle and they are together constantly now! But . . . for most of us, living was where we learned the truth. We were all human beings, nothing more, nothing less. And now—we are together and we see one thing. That we are all beautiful souls!”

Angela smiled, wanting to hug the man. She reached out, but oddly, light was beginning to fill the place, and the form of the man was fading.

“Remember! Living can be its own form of hell—it we allow it to be! So, live for yourself, and for others, and live by example, and one day, the world will know—we are all just beautiful human souls! And with every new year, we have renewed hope that this may be learned .

*

The light suddenly washed over Angela, just like the darkness, in a mammoth wave.

She was back on the floor, lying next to Len Baxter. His eyes were closed.

The light came from a massive FBI torch. And Jackson was on his knees by her side, reaching for her, ready to draw her into his arms.

Beyond the steel door, there was suddenly an abundance of light in a multitude of colors.

Fireworks!

Outside the little mausoleum, people were talking, wishing one another, “Happy New Year!”

“Angela?” Jackson’s voice was hushed and worried.

“I’m fine.” she assured him.

A police officer was in the tomb with them, reaching for Len Baxter.

“Get up!”

“Hey, hey, it’s all right!” Angela said quickly.

Jackson frowned, looking at her. She nodded, letting him know it was okay—that *she* was okay.

So, he quickly helped her to her feet. The police officer was confused, but he looked at her and Jackson and let them handle Len Baxter.

Angela offered him her hand. Len appeared dazed and stunned, but he took her hand and came to his feet.

“I kidnapped a woman,” he said. “I have to go to prison.”

“Not if I don’t press charges,” a soft voice said.

Angela was stunned when she turned to see Alicia was standing at the entrance to the mausoleum. She was bathed in the stunning sparks of multi-colored lights from the fireworks streaming over the D.C. area and northern Virginia.

Len Baxter looked at Alicia. And he wept.

“Um . . . I don’t know what to do here.” the police officer said.

“I am not pressing charges,” Alicia said firmly. “Although, I would love a ride home!”

“We’ll get you home,” Jackson promised her.

“And . . .” The police officer said, his tone still confused. “My partner is out there, and a host of agents from your place and . . .”

Jackson looked outside.

“But I do need help,” Len whispered.

“We know some great places,” Jackson told him. “Here’s how we solve this. Officer . . . Manning, I see by your badge. Take Mr. Baxter in tonight for disturbing the peace. My boss, Adam Harrison, will be in touch with the right authorities in the morning. We will sort this all out.”

Len Baxter looked at Angela. “How crazy am I?” he whispered.

“You need help, yes,” she said softly. But she smiled. They had shared something strange. The same hallucination?

Or a lesson the living all needed to learn?

“You are crazy. But not much crazier than I am,” she assured him.

Officer Manning started to lead him out. Len balked just slightly, pausing to give her a tentative hug.

She hugged him back.

Len was right. He needed help. But he’d already been helped in a way no one living would ever be able to surpass.

He went out with Manning.

“What the heck happened?” Jackson asked her.

She smiled. “Well . . . it’s a New Year! A new year, new hope—new chances! I wanted to give him a chance.”

“But—”

“The human soul is beautiful,” she murmured.

“Okay . . .”

“It’s a bedtime story,” she said. “Let’s get back to Corby and the baby. And then I’ll tell you all about it. You may not believe me . . .”

“I never doubt you,” he said.

She touched his face gently.

“This time . . . hm. I’m not sure myself.”

She slipped her arm through his. They headed out, wishing anyone else there a very happy new year. Before getting into the car, Angela stared up at the hill. The moon and the fireworks were still casting strange arrays of light together, all the colors in the rainbow. And the cemetery and even the pain suffered through life by those buried there seemed to be gentled by something else.

“My love?” Jackson said softly. He grimaced at her. “Okay . . . I’ll get my bedtime story, I’m sure. I’m sorry it wasn’t what you wanted—just the kids and us, curled up on the couch, wishing one another a happy New Year.”

“Sometimes, we don’t get exactly what we want—but end up with something oddly spectacular instead!” she said.

They reached home. She held and cherished Corby and looked in on the baby. She explained to him everything had worked out oddly well. The man had been Len Baxter, and he—like many others—had struck out because he’d been in so much pain himself. And Alicia had refused to file charges.

Heather Graham/Murder at Midnight

“She’s amazing!” Corby said.

“Yes, she is,” Angela agreed. “And . . .”

“And?”

“I think they’re going to wind up being friends.”

It was about two A.M. when she settled down with Jackson for the night. She told him what had happened. And she wondered again if she had hallucinated the entire event because of the conk on her head when she fell, bursting into the mausoleum.

“Well, my love,” Jackson said, “Hallucination—or reality? Beautiful either way! Because all souls are beautiful, and . . .”

“And?”

“Yours most of all!” he whispered to her.

And he kissed her.

And it wound up being an extraordinarily beautiful beginning to the New Year!