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A new Krewe Holiday story . . .

Four Krewe of Hunters Holiday stories, three are ‘ghosts of Christmas past’ with a brand new story for 2023.

Almost Christmas!

And for Angela Hawkins Crow and Jackson, it’s a special time. They’ve just enjoyed their first Krewe holiday get-together in New Orleans and are about to hop a plane down to Florida to meet up with families on Christmas Eve.

But a terrified cry of distress stops them. There’s no one else who can help . . .

Because they’re the only ones who can hear the cry.

As they work to unravel the kidnapping of a young girl caught in a perilous and deadly situation, time ticks by . . .

Well, they’re almost home. But they both know that Christmas reminds us all that the lessons taught were about love and kindness.

And the best Christmas gift in the world can be the feeling one can get from giving.

Almost Home for Christmas

(A Krewe of Hunters Holiday Story)

“No!” Angela breathed. “No, it’s Christmas!”

*Well, almost! Jackson Crow thought, but he understood his wife’s dismay.*

*Goodness was supposed to prevail—not evil!*

And the day had started out so well, but they weren’t even through half of the morning yet.

They were in New Orleans; and for the season, the city was dressed to a T with the main streets hung with garlands, public areas sporting decorated trees, nativity scenes, and on Chartres, Royal, Bourbon and more, the street musicians kept the spirit alive with carols, traditional, rock, pop, and jazz.

They had been enjoying what they could of a Christmas festival in the park, watching the Irish dancers currently on stage stepping away in green fur garnished with white Santa hats. And they’d been having fun with a wonderful set of family and vacation days ahead of them.

And then the scream . . .

“They have her . . . they have Alyssa! Oh, my God! Help, help, help, oh, can no one hear me?”

The cry was panicked, but . . .

*They were probably the only ones to hear it.*

Angela turned to look at Jackson. He knew her so well now; and still, his partner in so many ways, he didn’t think he’d ever get over the shimmering beauty of her eyes. He also knew every message in them so very well.

*They had to do something and fast!*

In an hour they were supposed to leave for NOLA’s Louis Armstrong International Airport, first to spend Christmas Eve with her family in South Florida and pick up the kids, and then to drive up to

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Lake Buena Vista and spend time with members of his family at Disney for Christmas day itself.

Vacations like this were so rare for them. They were the bulwark of the bureau's "Special Circumstances Team," unofficially known as the Krewe of Hunters, along with their international unit, Blackbird. They also had a family, Corby, now a teenager, and little Victoria Sophia, making family time—and together time—something exceptionally special.

Last night—the eve of Christmas Eve—they'd spent enjoying an incredible event. They attended a pre-Christmas gathering of Krewe of Hunters agents from the states and abroad, something long in the planning stages and thankfully a tremendous success. They had chosen New Orleans for the party because the first official case handled by their unit had been years ago now—in New Orleans. They'd spent months planning it, arranging it so that all agents would be able to attend every other year.

Because very bad and strange things sometimes happened oblivious of the holiday season.

Angela was already moving; the scream had come from around the stage, and she was tearing in that direction.

Jackson was one step behind.

Angela found the screaming woman. She'd been walking through the crowd, searching desperately.

Unheard . . . and unseen.

She was older perhaps in her seventies; and in life, she'd been an attractive woman with a slim, straight figure, silver hair handsomely coiffed, and a face that in her youth had surely been beautiful. She was simply dressed in a pantsuit, warm enough despite the cool southern Christmas.

But of course, warmth wouldn't matter to her now.

"Ma'am, ma'am," Angela said as she pretended she spoke via a phone and listened in return through earbuds. "Please, I can hear you. Who is Alyssa and what has happened to her?" she asked.

The spirit of the older woman stared at her incredulously.

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She appeared to sob softly, ghostly tears running down her cheeks.

“You hear me, you hear me . . . I’ve been so afraid. I’s been forever since I met one who can see and . . . oh, please, then you will help me?” she begged.

Jackson spoke then. “Of course. I know it’s difficult, but you must calm down and tell us what has happened.”

She nodded and looked around quickly.

Christmas cheer resounded about the grounds. The stage was now occupied by a small band and a choir. “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” was being exuberantly and beautifully sung.

Their ghost gave herself a shake. “The cemetery. She comes every year and lays flowers by the crypt before Christmas. And this year . . . she’s just sixteen! We must get her back! They came up from behind. They slipped a hood over her head, and one of them lifted her. I think they knocked her out somehow . . . they carried her out of the cemetery. I’m not . . . I’m not sure where they went.”

“All right; we’re within easy walking distance from the park to Basin Street and the cemetery,” Jackson said. “Let’s start there. I’m going to inform the police—”

“And tell them a dead woman told you her granddaughter had been kidnapped?” the woman asked incredulously. “No, no, you must just get her yourselves and please! They were saying something about witnesses. They said if they were going to be caught, they’d just—well, the one told the other, ‘I’ll kill you and the little bitch, too.’ Please, please . . . you must help me yourselves.”

“All right we’re just two people, and we’ve got a lot of ground to cover. If you see the men, will you recognize them?” Angela asked her.

“I—yes! Yes, I will. They had on hoods when they grabbed her, but I saw them before they put them on their heads! I’m Vanessa Claiborne, interred in the Claiborne family vault. My son, Eddie, lives on Royal Street just the other side of Esplanade. Please, oh, please, he lost me five years ago, and his wife . . . his wife just last year. Eddie can’t lose Alyssa, too!”

Angela looked at Jackson. And he nodded. Of course. The hell with the plane. Her brother would be fine with the kids. It was Christmas, but . . .

*What would Christmas mean if they didn't help this woman and if they couldn't save this girl?*

"Let's start moving," he said.

They did. They hurried out of the park, hitting Basin Street in seconds; and as they moved, they asked her questions.

"Is your son wealthy? Are they holding his daughter for a ransom?" Angela asked.

"Wealthy? No?"

"Are drugs involved in any way?" Jackson asked.

"No! And I'm not just protecting my son or my granddaughter. I would tell you! Alyssa doesn't do drugs; my son doesn't do drugs! I would never lie when it might be important! I swear to you, she is a beautiful young lady, good in school, kind . . ."

"All right. Did you see a car? Did they take her away in a car?" Angela asked.

"I don't think so! He was carrying her as they left the cemetery . . . I think he went to a house right there. I mean . . . on the street, bordering the cemetery. I—I have friends! We can ask them!"

Jackson glanced at Angela, and he thought they both had an idea of what might be happening. He knew the looks she gave him just as she knew the look that he returned.

*Alyssa Claiborne was just sixteen, young and most probably, as her grandmother had told them, sweet and beautiful, the perfect victim for such a criminal enterprise.*

There had been several disappearances in the city and environs in the last months. Curbing crime in the city had not been an easy thing for the police; and then again, crime had been at an uptake in many major cities across the states. But this . . .

They had both seen the recent newscasts. Authorities feared there was a sex-trafficking ring working the general area, perhaps using locals with a drug or debt problem to help them, knowing how and when to target victims.

But in a way, if they were right . . .

Jackson suddenly stopped walking, looking over at Angela and wincing. "I forgot! We haven't been here in a while. Things have changed. We can't get in without being part of a tour group or with a pass. The Church owns it, and they allow a couple of tour companies with contracts or those who have family buried here to bring people through. Vandalism caused them to create the restrictions."

"We can go in and get arrested and tell the police we heard *Alyssa* screaming—" Angela began.

"No! No, no, I believe what I heard," Vanessa said. "Please, please—you both appear to be fit! Can you just leap the wall, or—"

Jackson frowned again. "If the passes are needed to get in, if you're not with a tour—"

"A tour had just left," Vanessa said.

"Then whoever went in managed to elude the tour as it was leaving, or whoever took her has family interred or buried in the cemetery!" Angela said. She pulled out her phone. He thought at first she was calling for help. Then he reminded himself she was the best computer researcher in the business.

She would know who had cemetery passes in a matter of seconds.

"My son and granddaughter have cemetery passes, of course," Vanessa said. "And she would have had hers on her—"

"How the hell did they just walk out with her then?" Angela murmured.

"They had to have . . . carried her. Whatever they threw on her face probably had some kind of a knockout drug on it, and they could have walked her *out* easily enough, pretending she was drunk—something that's not a stretch with visitors here," Jackson said thoughtfully.

“There!” Vanessa exclaimed suddenly.

Jackson looked. There, on the ground, was a cemetery pass.

“Oh, dear Lord!” Vanessa sobbed softly as Jackson retrieved the pass, and they studied it.

The pass belonged to Alyssa Claiborne.

“You’ll get by with it; we’ll just smile and move quickly,” Jackson said.

“We can ask if a young woman recently left,” Angela reminded him.

“No, let’s just get in. I think other friends may know more than a half-asleep ‘security’ guard or ticket-taker,” Jackson said. “So, what if he remembers? It won’t help us—”

“Hopefully, he’ll just glance at the pass!” Angela said.

And she was right. It wasn’t as if they had the national guard on duty at the gate. They were quickly in.

The cemetery was amazingly atmospheric.

There was a reason the cemeteries were called “cities of the dead.”

The two great fires that had raged through New Orleans at the end of the 1700s had contributed to the founding of the cemetery in 1789. It was behind Our Lady of Guadalupe Church—built in 1827 and dedicated as the mortuary church for the victims of the yellow fever that had raged through the city at the time. So many souls from that scourge rested in the cemetery. And more, of course. For almost two-hundred years the cemetery had been welcoming the dead. The tombs were lined up in a strange architectural beauty along with a few inground graves, wall crypts, great society tombs and more. And with Christmas coming . . .

It had come here as well. Many of the dead had been honored with flowers, streamers, evergreen branches, and more. It was extremely atmospheric, a place that contained the dead and drew the living.

Vanessa had said she had friends. They could only hope one of them had seen something.



Angela had remained glued to her phone. As they moved inward, heading for the Claiborne family vault, she looked up and told him. "I found one that could mean something. There's a man named Walter Gibson who lives just across the street at the rear of the cemetery. Going through channels to pull up his record and . . . Jackson! Drug charges. Debt . . . maybe?"

As she spoke, a man came around one of the large institution tombs.

A dead man.

"Vanessa?" he asked carefully.

"They see us, George. They can see us, hear us!" Vanessa said.

The man still seemed surprised, but equally as pleased. "It has been so long . . ." he murmured. Then he seemed to gather his wits about him. "Vanessa! They took Alyssa—"

"I know that. These people are going to help, George. Did you see—"

"Over the wall! Do you believe it? The one helped the other first, then they pushed and pulled poor Alyssa, and the other might have been a damned mountain climber, he got over. And . . . nothing! No one saw, and I couldn't find you and . . ."

"George—"

"George Seger, sir, killed during what I now understand to be the *first* world war. And I will be happy to accompany you—"

"They can help us, Jackson," Angela said, looking at him intently. "They can slip into that house and find out how Alyssa is being held—"

"Which house?" George demanded worriedly. "There are houses filling the streets here these days—"

"And we will check every single one!" Vanessa snapped. "George, I'm sorry—"

"We know where to start, George," Jackson told him. "If you find out for sure she's in there—"

"No!" Vanessa cried. "You can't call for help. I believe the man will kill her!"

Again, Angela looked at Jackson. She had read more of the man's rap sheet. She believed the man would kill before giving himself up, ready to die rather than face authorities.

"All right, all right, let's head around," Jackson said. "I'll have one of you go in and check out the situation, tell me where she's being held and where the men are."

"Come, come, let's go!" Vanessa said anxiously.

They walked out of the entrance and around to the rear. Angela checked the house number and nodded, looking at Jackson. "There," she said softly.

"I'm going in," George said. "Vanessa, you should stay here with—"

"Hell, no!" Vanessa exploded, and then she winced. "Sorry! It is Christmas Eve! But I must go in with George—"

"George is right, Vanessa—"

"What? If I get upset, they're going to catch me?" she asked dryly.

Angela lowered her head. "Remember, you're scouts. We need all the information you can give us about what—and where they might have weapons. If they're holding them, if they're on a table—we need to know everything."

The two spirits headed on into the house, a home that looked as if it had built in the eighteenth-hundreds, Victorian in style and handsome.

Jackson glanced at his watch. He looked at her and grimaced. "I think we're going to miss our plane."

She smiled at him. They usually had easy access to get wherever needed at the drop of the hat. But . . .

The two company jets were flying other agents around the country.

"Jackson—"

"No, no. I know. Let's just pray we can manage a Christmas miracle!"

Vanessa and George remained in the house for about five minutes. When they emerged, Vanessa appeared extremely distraught. George tried to calm her with a spectral hand on her spectral shoulder.

“She’s there! You were right! And two men, but the two men are in the parlor. I headed there, listening, trying to discern where they had their weapons,” George said. “They aren’t fools; they have their weapons on them, holstered, but on them. And the girls—”

“Girls? Plural?” Jackson said, frowning.

“Three of them,” Vanessa said. “My Alyssa and two others. Alyssa is sobbing, she’s wide awake now, and one of them is warning her to be quiet, that she’ll be hurt by them if she disturbs them while they’re having their whiskey.”

“All three of them are all right?”

George nodded. He glanced at Vanessa unhappily. “They . . . they’re supposed to be picked up by someone tomorrow.” He winced. “Christmas presents for someone.”

“An alarm system?” Jackson asked. “There must be—”

“Yes! But I got it off!” George said, pleased with himself. “I learned to put enough ‘spirit’ into touching brew buttons on coffee pots and . . . and it worked! I got it off.”

“Okay, last question. Layout. The back door—”

“Leads to the kitchen. Kitchen heads through the dining room to the parlor—that’s where the two men are.”

Jackson smiled at him. “You are one good man,” he told him. “Thank you, thank you!”

George grinned. “I was about to say that I live to serve, but . . . maybe I hang around to serve!”

“You have done a tremendous service, an amazing thing. Now, Angela and I just must do the same. All right,” Jackson said. He turned to Angela. “I’ll be—”

“You’ll go around the back,” Angela interrupted. “Jackson, please, I know you’re the field supervisor and that you’re great at it; but I’m second in command, and please, please, listen to me. It will be better if I take the front. I checked the info on the house, and I’m just going to ask if I can peak in the door. I’m going to say I’m a Cardiff, a member of the family that owned the house twenty years ago and play it all innocent; and by then, you’ll be through the back—”

“Angela—”

“Jackson, if you confront them—”

“Angela.” He took her by the shoulders and smiled. “You’re right,” he told her softly. “Am I scared to death anytime you’re in danger? Yes. But I know you feel the same. And I do believe you’ll play it right. But give me time to get in.” He inhaled deeply and admitted. “I have that gizmo in my pocket. I can pick the lock, and with the alarm not activated . . .”

She smiled and nodded. “Six minutes?”

“Five,” he assured her.

“We’re going back in,” Vanessa said. “George . . . well, he’s learned to do a few things that some can never manage. Maybe . . .”

“Wonderful, yes, go on in again,” Angela said.

The two spirits once again headed straight up to the front door.

Thankfully, the house was surrounded by a large hedge. Jackson used it to make his way around it to the back door. Slipping his hand into his pocket, he found his all-purpose gadget and tried to work on the lock as silently as possible.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he heard the bolt slide. Slowly, carefully, he twisted the knob. There was a second lock, but an easy one.

He picked it, turned the knob again, and opened the door.

George was waiting for him in the kitchen. He waved a hand and nodded; it was all right to go through the dining room. He found a position against the archway leading to the parlor to look through and observe the two men.

One was maybe twenty-five, disheveled, and appeared to be nervous. He was also on something, cocaine, Jackson thought; he kept wiping his nose. He was a slim man, wiry in build, and might have been decent looking if he didn't appear to be so drugged out.

The other was older, harder, bald, and muscular—the man who had scaled the cemetery wall on his own, Jackson imagined. He was watching the television on the far wall, a wall next to the stairway that surely led to the second floor.

And the imprisoned girls.

He heard the knock at the front door.

“What the hell?” the older man demanded, staring at the other. “Who is that?”

The younger one was immediately defensive. “No one—I didn't order anything. It's no one that I know anything about, I swear!”

“Get up and get it. Now. And get rid of whoever the hell it is quickly. And remember, I will be right behind you. If you fail me or if anything goes wrong—”

“I know, I know! I've got it, I've got it!” the younger man said.

He rose quickly and hurried to the door. He opened it to a smiling Angela.

“Hi! I'm so sorry to bother you, but I used to live here! It was my home when I was growing up. I was wondering if I could take just a little peak inside. I don't want to disturb you or go upstairs or anything, but I'm back in the city for just a night and . . . it would mean so much to me!”

She smiled at him prettily. Angela was a beautiful woman. And she knew how to play it when she needed to.

“I—uh—I’m sorry,” the younger man said. “I . . . I’m so sorry. We’re having a meeting, and well it’s just not a good time and . . .”

The big bald man had risen and was standing right behind the younger man—just as he had promised.

Jackson didn’t hesitate; he had his Glock out but he didn’t shoot. He flew across the room and slammed the butt of his gun down on the bald man’s head with force.

He knew where to hit . . .

The man never heard him, never so much as begin to turn . . .

And he went down. Hard.

The younger man spun around, stunned. By then, Angela had her Glock out, and she quickly warned, “Don’t even think about shooting anyone!”

“Or moving, for that matter,” Jackson said casually. “I think you want to live.”

“I do, I do! It wasn’t me, I didn’t have a choice, he said he’d kill me!” He stood still, hands raised, trembling and crying.

“I guess we call the cops now?” Angela asked.

Jackson nodded. “I have plastic cuffs on me, I’ve got them covered. Call the precinct. They’ll know who we are, and they can take it from here.”

“Oh, no, Jackson. Paperwork,” Angela reminded him. “We never really get out of the paperwork!”

She dialed.

Jackson cuffed the big man on the floor first. Then he cuffed the younger man. “I know a good attorney down here. You’ll do time no matter how good, but . . . maybe that time will allow you to kick your drug habit.”

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The younger man was sobbing as he looked at Jackson; and to his amazement, the younger man whispered, "Thank you! At least . . . at least I'm going to live!"

Sirens blared in the street almost instantly. The police arrived; they had been aware of the rash of disappearances in the area and quickly understood.

Of course, Jackson and Angela had to lie.

"We met a man on the street who was confused, thinking there was something going on," Jackson said. "He saw the men bring the girl into the house. We're Federal; and rather than run any risk, we used a ruse to gain entry."

"Of course," Angela continued. "We're all briefed on such events at headquarters, so . . ."

There was no problem. *Exigent circumstances.*

The younger man blabbed about being taken hostage himself; because, yes, he got into trouble on a drug bill and then . . .

The older man was taken by ambulance.

Night fell on Christmas Eve. It was late when Angela called, but Angela's brother and his wife were happy to have the children. They understood and were just glad to hear everything had worked out.

And it had . . .

Three hysterical girls were amazed, certain Jackson and Angela *were* a Christmas miracle. They were able to be at the station when the families were reunited. The living families . . .

And Vanessa was there, still supported by George's spectral arms. She was still sobbing but sobbing with happiness as she saw her son arrive at the station to take his daughter tenderly into his arms, incredulous that all was going to be well.

When they left the station at last, George and Vanessa came with them.

Vanessa kept thanking them, over and over.

George did the same, and it was nice, of course. He was very proud of himself, as well.

As he should have been, Jackson thought.

“George, this could have ended all differently if it hadn’t been for you,” Jackson told him. “If we’d triggered an alarm . . . well, we would have had to have played it differently, and it might not have worked out so well.”

“Best feeling ever!” George told him.

Jackson smiled.

“Yes,” he said, looking at Angela. “It is the best feeling ever.”

She smiled and nodded.

“Please, please, come back and see us?” Vanessa asked them. “We don’t always hang out in the cemetery, but . . . it’s not a bad place to be! George does enjoy a good sports bar, and I go with him sometimes.”

“We will come back,” Jackson assured her. “If not before . . . well, same time next year.”

“Wonderful. You’ll be the best Christmas present ever a second time!”

“Drop you at the cemetery?” Angela asked.

“Lovely,” Vanessa assured him. “Other friends may be back. There are festivals all over town, families . . . but now, they’ll be back. You know. Friends like . . . us.”

“Yes, we know,” he assured her. “And it’s wonderful for us to have friends like you here. Next year when we have a party, you’ll need to come too—a party where everyone will see you.”

“What?” George exclaimed. “That’s . . . is it possible?”

Jackson drove to the cemetery while Angela did her best to describe the Krewe of Hunters to him.

“Truly a miracle! After all these years . . . in a moment of need . . . we meet people who see us who are federal agents!” Vanessa exclaimed.



“Bad things happen. So do good things,” George said. “Christmas . . . I believe there can be such things as Christmas miracles!”

At the cemetery, the two ghosts slipped from the car, and Jackson drove on. He had barely swung onto Rampart Street when his phone rang. He glanced at Angela, and she answered it and put it on speaker mode.

The caller was Captain LaSalle, one of the men who had been working the disappearances.

“You two pulled off something amazing,” he told them. “The young guy was hoodwinked, caught up in something horrible because he’s a junkie, and . . . he’ll do time, but he’s already receiving medical help. The real news is about the big guy, the one you clocked. He’s ready to give it all up for protection. We sent out a team, and they raided a place out on the bayou. We have another six women who were held captive, and we’ve info to get another three back to their homes in time for Christmas. Thought you’d want the update.”

“Great. We’re thrilled,” Jackson assured him. “Thank you.”

“Yeah. And oh, Merry Christmas,” the captain said.

“Oh! Thank you. Merry Christmas to you, too!” Angela told him.

They ended the call with the captain assuring them the local bureau as well as the police now had the situation in hand because of their amazing break in the case. They’d keep them updated.

They ended the call.

Angela leaned back against the passenger’s seat, smiling. “Merry Christmas!” she said.

He nodded, smiling.

“Merry Christmas. So . . .”

“Well, we didn’t exactly make it home for Christmas,” she told him. “But . . .”

“But?”

She opened her eyes and grinned at him. "I talked to my brother, Eamon. He and his family are going to drive up and join your family at Disney World! And if we just drive through the night—"

"Ah, but we don't need to!" he told her.

"Jackson, I'm not sure about tickets tomorrow—"

"We don't need tickets. One of our Krewe pilots is happy to fly us down because both jets are now free tomorrow, and he has family in Orlando, too. So . . ."

"So, we can sleep!"

"Yeah, sleep. And whatever," he said.

She started to laugh.

"We don't even have a hotel room anymore."

"But you're magic online. Find us one. By the airport."

She grinned and pulled out her phone. A second later she said, "Okay, head toward the airport. We're set. Chain hotel, even has free breakfast."

"On it."

Forty minutes later, they were checked in. Ten minutes after that, they were showered. They should have been exhausted. But . . .

He grinned at her. She smiled. "You're okay with the 'whatever' part, right?" he asked her.

They knew one another so well.

And it was Christmas . . .

He kissed her lips . . . her flesh . . . and slipped into 'whatever.'

And then, they lay close together and she whispered. "Okay, we're late for Christmas," she said.

"But Jackson—"

“Christmas is a time for kindness, for goodness . . . for us to remember we’re supposed to love and care for one another. The date doesn’t matter. I think the date was chosen hundreds of years ago by the Church, and many scholars believe Christ was really born in summer.”

“And, in a strange way, this has been the most amazing Christmas ever. We have families who understand and are always there for us. We have beautiful children who understand and . . . well, one day might well take places in the Krewe as well,” Angela said.

“We helped make Christmas for so many others,” he said softly. “We broke something apart, and we didn’t need to kill to do it. Best Christmas ever.”

“I agree!” she told him.

“And home,” he said softly.

“Home?”

“I am home for Christmas,” he told her.

“And I’m home, too,” she whispered softly in reply as she smoothed his hair back. “Home for me is in your arms, and it will never matter where we are!”

“And my home is in your arms,” he returned. “A miraculous Christmas . . . a truly miraculous Christmas . . . and maybe just a little more ‘whatever.’ I miss the kids, of course, and I know that you do, too. You’re an amazing mom. But it will still be Christmas when we reach them. You know, it will be wonderful with the kids, our families . . . and Mickey Mouse. It’s going to be busy and crazy . . .”

She laughed and curled against him, running her fingers down his torso.

“Merry Christmas, my love,” she told him.

“Merry Christmas to you, my love.”

And he knew they were lucky. Very lucky.

Because Christmas could be filled with miracles.

And they’d been part of one!

