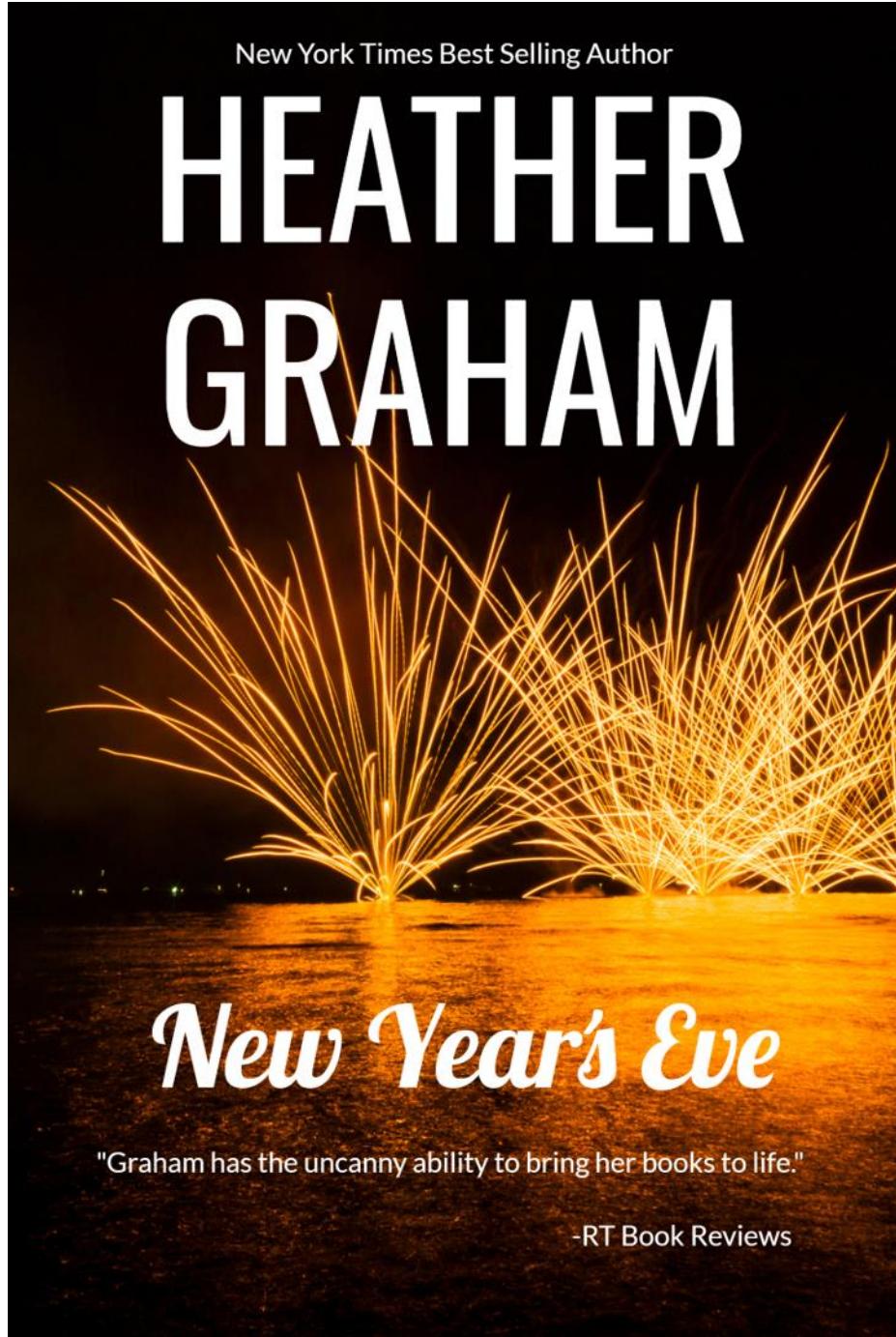


Heather Graham

New Year's Eve



New Year's Eve

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New Year's Eve

(A short Krewe of Hunters Story)

It's New Year's Eve. Jackson Crow and Angela had planned on being in the office, and then home to see in the new year with their children--who might or might not be awake at the magic hour.

But Adam Harrison came in, bringing a strange note warning of dire consequences just after the stroke of midnight.

Was the note—found between a coffee cup and a saucer a real warning against a random patron in the café, or a more specific threat against the man who discovered it? Was it possibly a prank, or was the threat far too real?

With no hard leads, the two will head out, determined to discover the truth and perhaps avoid a` tragedy as the old year gives way to the new.

Heather Graham

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Prologue

If intent were serious, did you write it up?

He looked at the words on the paper.

Serious, yes. Because agony had set in. And how did one allow it to go on?

The year was ending. So many were looking forward to the new year! And people said a new year offered new hope. He wasn't sure why, but it was a standard. This year, Friday would follow Thursday. Another day in another week.

But was there hope if you just went on the way you did before?

Or was there true conviction?

A definition of insanity was doing the same things over, and over again—and expecting a different response.

And if things were going to change, didn't he have to change them?

He felt his fingers shaking. He set the napkin under a cup with gloved fingers, aware that he was being summoned.

Time . . .

If he was going to act, the time was drawing near.

Jackson

"He is dead and gone, lady, He is dead and gone. At his heels a grass-green turf, at his head a stone."

The quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet was written first.

And then contemporary words were added.

"Some are gone as I write. But still. Suffering and pain. The brutality of life. And some need to be gone. I will see that it all ends with the year and beware! The clock will come to strike 12:01!"

Jackson Crow read the words on the napkin now encased in an evidence bag and wondered if those words would soon be blazoned all over the media, no matter what effort there might be to control a panic before law enforcement knew where the threat had come from—and exactly what it meant.

He'd been surprised when Adam Harrison—Krewe founder and all-around exceptional human being—called and said he'd be coming to the office.

Adam had put the Krewe together not because he had special "talents" himself, but because he had the ability to know about those who did. For years, when he heard about strange events, he looked for the right person among those he knew—then he experimented with just six original members and the Krewe was formed as a separate unit of the FBI.

But Adam didn't go out on cases. He didn't even own a gun. He had learned through the incredible abilities of his son, passed on to the friend who had held Josh Harrison as he had died.

The good thing now was while Adam didn't normally see the dead, the time had come when he had been able to see Josh.

With Covid19, however, Adam's one companion had been Josh—Adam was in the over eighty crowd, but while he mourned many of the people he had lost in life, he knew that he was a viable human being, important himself to others.

And he was careful to social distance, and while they had taken all measures for safety in the office, Adam simply hadn't come by.

But now he sat in front of Jackson, having handed a photograph of the note that had been discovered under a patron's cup at Café Kona, a charming little place in Alexandria where they'd all enjoyed many a cup of coffee on a long day or night.

"The owner called me. He's an old-timer, like me. Tony Marino—we were in the service together just about a lifetime ago. Seems the man who found it—Bart Winston—is terrified. And even the owner of the café thinks it's a threat against someone living at the Alistair Apartments. I alerted the bureau, and we've also alerted the local police. Do you think it suggests a credible threat?" Adam asked him. "People . . . sometimes, they think things they'd never really do. Or write them."

Jackson was thoughtful.

"The words are suggestive, yes. Of course, the end of the year is often a time when people who are depressed become more so. Christmas, holidays . . . and this year, so many people away from those they love. Except that . . ."

Jackson paused. He'd had a degree in criminology but not psychology. And still, he had seen a great deal through the years, coming to know a lot of what was good—and bad—among humanity.

Many people were saddened and depressed because they hadn't seen their families this year. But the depression that could cause extreme behavior often came about because there were no family members or friends who might be with someone no matter what the circumstances.

"Have there been any calls to the police? From the apartment complex, or other? And the note was found under a cup? How did it get there? You say people are afraid, but have you heard anything about anyone who might not live in the apartment complex? Anything from anyone who saw or heard something that might have them frightened that someone they know—or don't know--might . . . be dangerous?" Jackson asked.

The Krewe had a good relationship with local authorities—and with the major offices of the FBI in the D.C. area. When something was going on, Jackson usually heard. But there was always the possibility that something real had been dismissed, or that a warning hadn't been understood.

He indicated the note.

"What about prints?" Jackson asked.

"Whoever handled the napkin before Bart Winston wore gloves. His are the only prints that are on it."

"What do you know about Bart Winston?" Jackson asked.

"Nothing. I drove by and picked up the note from Tony Marino, the man who owns the place, and brought it to the lab—and then I came to see you. I haven't physically seen anyone—except Tony, at a distance. Hey, I'm old as the hills. I'm not seeing people. You need to go and see Bart Winston. With your mask on, of course. He isn't a youngster either."

Jackson smiled. "You're not as old as *all* the hills!" he assured Adam. "But I'm glad you're being safe. We need you."

"That's nice and thank you," Adam said.

"Where's Josh?" Jackson asked him.

The ghost of his son was usually with Adam.

"At the café—watching," Adam said.

Jackson nodded. "Good."

It was nice when they had spies who couldn't be seen by the average person.

"Okay, so . . . I'll get Angela. We'll start at the café and talk to Tony Marino and then see Bart Winston and whoever else we're able to interview at the apartments."

"It may just be . . . a prank. I hate sending you out, but . . ."

"It's all right. Gratefully, Angela and I had Christmas. And she doesn't like New Year's anyway—it's the best time of the year not to do anything except enjoy one another at home, so—"

"You won't be at home."

"Oh, we will be. Eventually. Adam, it's all right."

Adam nodded. "Thank you. Obviously, the police have investigated, but it's New Year's Eve—they've already got a full plate with your run-of-the-mill early New Year's Eve drunks and crazy stuff because . . . because it's New Year's Eve. They didn't ignore the threat—but I don't believe they have the time to give to it that I believe it deserves."

"It's all right—"

"Yeah. I know. It's what you do," Adam said, smiling. He'd heard Jackson say the words before.

Rising, he looked back one last time. "Keep me—"

"Informed. Of course."

"I'll be home. With Sylvester."

Sylvester was his cat.

Jackson smiled and nodded.

Adam adjusted his mask and left him.

Jackson headed out of his office, too, walking the short distance down the hallway to Angela's office. He wondered sometimes—gratefully, of course—how he and Angela managed to work together, live together, parent together, and pretty much so do just about everything together, and seldom argue. When he walked in and sat in the chair across from her desk, she looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"Adam came in. Must be something," she said.

He nodded, explained everything Adam had told him, and said, "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. Our kids are good. Mary Tiger is with them."

He nodded. Mary Tiger was Special Agent Axel Tiger's aunt. She was an amazing help to them, and she could live in the area and be close to Axel, too. He sometimes wished he was as adept with taking care of the world and the kids—as Mary could.

"What?" Angela asked him.

"I was just thinking that it's amazing we don't argue more. Are we really that perfect?"

"No. We're just really that worn out most of the time."

"I know. It is New Year's Eve. With normal jobs, we'd be home."

"With normal jobs, we'd be crazy." She waved a hand in the air. "We're good. If Adam wants us in the field, we can leave. We have ten agents out across the country, but I've just checked in with them all and they're moving along with their cases. Kat and Will are in their offices, so headquarters will still be manned, so to say. I'm ready."

"You knew we were leaving?"

"Adam was here. I knew something was up. So, we're off to the café. That's good. I could use an espresso right now. Maybe two espressos!"

Angela

New Year's Eve.

There would be fireworks over D.C. It was, after all, the end of one year, the beginning of another.

Most of the world was ready to say goodbye to 2020.

But there had been good things, too, Angela thought. Technically, Corby had become their son in 2020, though it had been 2019 when they'd taken him into their hearts. But Victoria Sophia had been born in 2020, and while they had witnessed and hopefully helped friends through tremendous pain and strife during the year, they could never regret the wonder of their children, their family.

But she understood and emphasized with those who would never want to think about the year again. So many human souls had been lost.

But 2021 was promising hope.

"A penny for them," Jackson said, looking over at her.

"For my thoughts?" she asked.

"Yes," he said slowly.

She laughed softly. "I'm sorry. Inflation. They're worth much more. No, I was just thinking . . . here's the good. We have beautiful kids. We've been careful, we're all okay. And we have a chance to stop something—rather than being called in after something terrible has happened."

He nodded, but she thought he looked a little grim. And she understood why. It was almost 2:00 P.M. They had ten hours to find out what the note had meant.

"Jackson, it might have been—"

"A prank. I don't think so. The wording. In Shakespeare's play, Ophelia first sings the words referring to Polonius, who was killed by Hamlet, a murder that changes the dynamics and set into motion the entire disastrous finale. Hamlet is no longer a heroic figure, and there is little hope for anything but tragedy."

"All because of a ghost," Angela murmured.

"Speaking of ghosts, let's see if Josh Harrison is still 'haunting' the café."

"He would have grown into an amazing man if he had lived," Angela murmured.

"Yes." Jackson paused, shaking his head. "He must have a tremendous will—Adam still doesn't see the dead, usually. Gives you faith in eternity, doesn't it? That Adam does see him."

She nodded and smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "Faith—and gratitude. Josh is a great spy!"

They left the car and walked the short distance down the block to the café.

Angela had always loved the little place herself and having been there once with Adam, she'd met the owner, if just briefly. Tony Marino had been born in the United States, but both of his parents had come from Rome. The café, however, didn't concentrate on Italian food—though it offered fantastic little mini pizzas, individually crafted with or without anything on them that a diner desired. But otherwise, the café offered danishes and other bakery delectables, sandwiches, and quick fare for both the busy worker and the casual shopper.

And for the times they lived in, Tony had filled the broad sidewalk in front of the café with tables—all nicely set at socially distant angles and offering space heaters. When there was snow on the ground, the space heaters quickly warmed the sidewalk beneath the tables.

A sign asked patrons to order inside; all would then be brought to them outside. Masks were required, and the ground was marked with footprints, all six feet apart.

"I'll head in," Jackson told Angela. "Espresso?"

"Double, seriously," she told him.

He grinned and she found a table. As she did so, she noted the ghost of Josh Harrison. He was leaning against the glass window just to the side of the door. He perked up when he saw Jackson enter, but he didn't attempt to speak with Jackson; he could see Jackson giving the young man at the register their order and asking about Tony.

But when Jackson headed back out to the table, Josh followed him.

He grinned, sliding into the chair next to Angela as Jackson sat across from her.

"Still chilly, huh?" he teased Angela.

"Just a tad. Hey, I have a good coat. I'm good," she told him. "And you?" she teased in turn.

"Cold as death, and, hey, that's okay! I don't feel a thing and I don't have to wear a mask! Oh, you're allowed to take yours off when your order comes!"

"Thanks!"

"Ignore the young man," Jackson said, shaking his head. "Tony is on the way out."

"Ignore me?" Josh said. "I'm the one who has been here—watching!"

"And have you seen anything?" Jackson asked him.

Josh sighed. "Delicious food I can't taste!" he said.

"I'm so sorry," Angela said. "Don't worry—we won't savor anything in front of you. I can complain that the espresso is rancid if you want?"

He grinned at that. "That's okay. I'll endure!" He grew serious then. "I've been watching here all day. And I'm wondering a few things. Such as, how did the note get under a cup, or between the cup and the saucer? Tony opens at 6:00 A.M. He has four servers and two cashiers. He's closed on Sundays, and his staff divide the week, all working three twelve-hour days." He paused, shrugging. "Oh, and two cooks in the kitchen, same split of time working. I don't think there's a problem with tipping because it's done at the counter when you order, and all tips are split between the working cashier and wait staff."

He fell silent because Tony, in his mask, was coming out to greet them.

Angela thought it might be difficult for Tony—he was an effusive man, accustomed to hugging those he deemed to be his friends.

But he stopped a few feet from them, a stocky man in his late sixties or seventies who had maintained humor in his blue eyes and still sported a full head of silver hair.

"Angela, Jackson! I get the bigwigs themselves! Welcome, welcome, and thank you! And you paid for your coffees—you should not have done so."

"That's okay, Tony! We're customers," Angela told him.

"Should I sit? I will sit. But a bit away!" Tony said, luckily taking the last of the four chairs and not sitting on the ghost of Josh Harrison.

"Tony, Adam showed us the note on the napkin," Jackson said.

"Yes, of course," Tony said. He shook his head. "Is it serious? Was it intended for Bart Winston? Or was . . . someone fooling around, or perhaps trying to shake up Bart? But how would anyone know what cup one person would get?"

"Did you—or any of your staff—see anyone around the cups?" Angela asked.

"Did you question your staff?" Jackson asked.

"Well, of course! But I know my people! They're good kids—well, in their twenties, but kids to me. And Bart was so upset—everything stopped! He rushed in, pushed through the line to talk to me. Customers were upset. They heard what was going on, of course, but most thought that a threat on a napkin was a joke and that maybe Bart was crazy himself."

"No one saw anything?" Jackson asked. "I saw the cups are behind the counter."

"And there is nothing blocking anyone from getting to them. This morning . . . well, every morning we have a little staff meeting. The doors are open, just before opening time for the café. I could only figure that someone slipped in. I mean, people do come in, but customers make noise . . . they ring the little bell on the counter if they're early."

"Tell me about your people," Angela said.

"Good kids, honestly! Julio, on the counter today, is a student at Georgetown. Jake—bringing your coffees right now—is the son of an old friend. He's going to move to Hollywood to be an actor! And Liam there is a great kid. Lost his mom a few years back, but he's still putting himself through school, too."

Angela observed the young man coming toward her, Jake. He did seem to have the makings of an actor—he was a handsome young man with a devilish lock of dark hair that angled in a sexy slant over his forehead. He was wearing a mask that advertised a sci-fi movie. He set the coffees down in front of Angela and Jackson, nodded to Tony, and asked if they needed anything else.

Angela thanked him and assured him, no.

"These are my friends; take good care of them!" Tony said.

"Of course," Jake said. Angela believed that, behind his mask, he was giving them a winning smile.

But then, as Corby always told her, you could see a smile in someone's eyes.

"So, I hear you're going to be an actor! Shakespearean?" she asked him.

She saw his brows crinkle. "Um—an anything actor! I've done stage work, but I really love film and video. They're forgiving. You mess up on stage, and you ruin it for everyone. Except in rehearsals, there are no do-overs in front of a live audience."

"True!" Angela said cheerfully. "Well, then, as they say, break a leg!"

"Thanks!"

He left them.

"I'm sure they're all good kids, Tony. But we need last names. On everyone working today."

Angela drew out her phone, tapping a note to herself. "Julio Garcia, Jake Appleby, and Liam Cross. And in the kitchen today I have Matty Ayers and Jean Greely."

"Thank you," Angela said. "Is it all right if I walk inside for a minute?" she asked.

"Of course!"

She stood and went in. Tony kept the place spotless; there was a bottle of hand sanitizer on the counter.

His people were all wearing gloves, and a notice alerted staff and customers that staff were required to change their gloves frequently.

There were a few tables inside, but they were empty. The walls were adorned with posters—mostly from Italian movies.

The counter was long—with a break in the center for staff to come and go for the preparation of the different espressos, coffees, and cappuccinos that were offered.

Julio Garcia smiled at her—she saw the smile in his eyes.

“What can I do for you?” he asked politely from behind the register.

She smiled back. She hoped he saw that she was smiling back.

“I’m all set, thank you. I’ve been here before; I was just taking another look.”

“Ah. Well, that’s free!” he said cheerfully.

She turned to look at the positioning of the tables again.

“Inside job! I don’t care how good the ‘kids’ may be.”

She almost jumped; she hadn’t realized that Josh had followed her.

“Sorry!” he said quickly.

She gave him a quick “eye smile” too and stepped a little closer to the counter.

“This is such a great place,” she told him.

“It is.”

“You like working here?”

“Sure. Tony is great. Most people are nice. Even now. And since most people are nice, you just shrug off the few jerks you meet.”

“That’s a good philosophy.”

He shrugged. “Hey, it’s life.”

“I guess it is. Anyway, thank you!”

She headed back out to the table. Kat and Will were in the office. It was going to be easier for them to research what could be found on the staff at the café.

She sent an email.

“Don’t forget social media!” Josh said.

“I never do,’ she assured him, and returned to the table.

"Excuse me, and thank you, thank you," Tony said. "I must go in and see that Mrs. Harrison's latte is made with sugar free vanilla and two pumps of fat-free pumpkin!"

He rose and pulled out a chair for Angela, then paused.

"The police did come by this morning. I believe they think it was a prank. They talked to everyone here."

"And?" Angela asked.

He shook his head. "They were more worried about Bart."

"We'll talk to him, too," Jackson assured him.

Angela saw the other young waiter, Liam, carrying a tray out to a table down at the end of the sidewalk.

"Liam," she murmured.

"We had a chat," Jackson told her.

"And?"

"He likes working here. He likes school. And . . . I got nothing."

"Customers like him," Josh said. "He's polite, he's quick. And he and the others all seem to like each other fine, too. No one accused anyone else. There's no back-stabbing here."

"I'm still wondering . . ." Angela murmured.

"What's that?" Jackson asked.

"If we should divide and conquer. Time is not on our side. We're down to nine hours before midnight."

As if to accentuate her words, some early fireworks flashed across the sky.

"All right. I'll go and talk to Bart Winston," Jackson said. "Josh—"

"I'll stay here with Angela. She can order a Danish." Josh grinned. "And I can 'live' vicariously through her!"

"Funny, funny," Angela said.

Josh grinned. "I try!"

Jackson rose and left, and Angela slipped off her mask to take a long sip of her drink. She pulled her phone from her bag and set her earphones on.

"We can talk, and you won't look crazy!" Josh said.

"That's the plan."

"But you need to go in and buy a Danish," Josh told her.

"Josh—"

"Ah, come on! You need a reason to sit here."

"I guess I do. Okay, so you tell me. I believe it had to be an inside job, too. I think that if someone had slipped in during a meeting, they'd have been heard by someone. I haven't met the people in the kitchen—"

"I don't think you need to."

"Oh?"

"They never left the kitchen. My dad got here with me right around the time the police came. Both the cooks went straight into the kitchen when they got here—others attested to that. They never left."

"So, okay. Liam, Julio, or our handsome young actor, Jake?"

"That's where I get stuck."

"Me, too. I was thinking actor—the first line is Shakespeare."

Josh leaned closer to her, though, of course, he couldn't be heard by others.
"I'm not so sure he's ever read Shakespeare. The guy is pretty. He intends to make it on being pretty."

"Harsh!"

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New Year's Eve

"I've been watching. Now, both of the others seem to be bright enough to read."

"I'll go buy my Danish," Angela said. "Chat with Julio again."

"Are we staying to six?"

"We are. We're going to see what happens when they close."

Jackson

Jackson noticed that there were two police cars sitting in front of the Alistair Apartments. He parked himself and walked toward the old building that housed the apartments, he noted that the dwellings had no main entry—the individual homes could be approached by the street or from behind. If he remembered his history, the building had been erected in the early 1800s as offices and since then, it had been used as a school, a mental hospital, and then as an office building again before being refurbished and redesigned as an apartment and condo building.

On his way over he'd called Tony Marino, curious as to why they thought that if the threat hadn't been directed at Bart Winston why it had been assumed it was against someone who lived in the Alistair Apartments.

Tony explained.

It was just because so many of his customers lived in the apartments.

They were the regulars.

The people most likely to be at the café every morning.

The building had been designed in the gothic style and with its repair and fresh paint, it was a beautiful structure, sporting handsome arches and walkways and even a few gargoyles strategically placed over the walkways that led to the front entry paths. Land was at a premium here, but there was still a small garden with benches in the immediate front.

Jackson thought the cherry trees in the front had been added to create an atmosphere of peace and homecoming when the building had become apartments. They'd only been open as such for a few years now, but he remembered the advertisements for the place.

Above his budget as a government employee, and he preferred the house he and Angela had recently acquired, though the proximity to the Krewe offices here would have been nice.

Anyone living here would have a decent income. More than decent. Or they'd inherited a decent income. That didn't necessarily mean anything, he thought dryly.

Killers with a cause, crazy killers, and just those with a grudge didn't necessarily kill someone because they were affluent. But money could breed jealousy and hatred.

He studied the building for a minute. There were security cameras that would capture anyone coming or going from the front.

As he approached Bart Winston's apartment Jackson saw there were officers in the garden area. He waved to Officer Bill Wheatley, a friend he'd met on previous occasions.

Wheatley acknowledged him and strode toward him along the path that was shaded by the cherry trees, empty of flowers and fruit in their winter apparel, but still standing like sentinels along the path.

Wheatley was a young officer, maybe mid-twenties, and a good one, in Jackson's estimation. He took simple assignments seriously.

"You're here because of the napkin note?" he asked Jackson.

Jackson nodded.

"They called in the big guns on this, huh? We've had a few other crazy warnings," Wheatley told him. He shrugged. "It's New Year's Eve. One guy warned that Jupiter was going to crash into earth. Another says that Satan is arriving at the Lincoln Memorial." He paused and grimaced. "At least they didn't ask me to arrest Satan. We're leaving that to someone more experienced."

"This may not be credible, but it's low key enough to mean something," Jackson said.

"A Shakespearean killer! Have you thought about a disgruntled actor?"

"Of course. But I think it's the sentiment expressed. There's something sad and final about the words that suggests—the way they were used—that someone is at a breaking point."

"Half the country is at the breaking point," Wheatley said. He gave Jackson an encouraging smile. "But there is hope out there!"

"That there is," Jackson agreed.

"Hey, I'm hopeful this is nothing and we're wasting our time and taxpayer money, but it's all right. One of my buddies from the precinct is spending the holiday in the hospital—he got clocked by a drunk he was trying to help who suddenly thought the cops were aliens. This isn't so bad!"

"Glad to hear it—and sorry for your friend."

Wheatley pointed to the ground floor entry to Bart Winston's apartment. "He's in there. He's with a friend. Grant Lockwood from 207. We are keeping watch, Special Agent in Charge of the Field, or . . . wow. I forget your title. Forgive me. No disrespect intended."

Jackson laughed. "Not to worry. I'm going to check on our man, see if he thinks he got the cup and saucer randomly or if it was intended for him."

Wheatley nodded. "I'm here through the witching hour with Officer Bennett. Good guy. Prank, real, whatever—we are watching. And we are capable."

"Never doubted it," Jackson assured him.

He headed on to the door to Bart Winston's apartment.

The door opened before he could reach it.

Bart Winston was a tall, lean man, a dignified figure in a casual suit. He looked at Jackson anxiously. "FBI?"

"Yes, sir. Special Agent Jackson Crow."

Winston frowned. "I hear you're from a special unit. One that deals with weird events. I don't think this is weird. I think it's a direct threat."

Jackson smiled grimly. "Well, sir, if it's a direct threat, we need to understand why."

"Um, come in," Winston said. "I'll grab my mask."

Jackson entered the apartment. Another man had been sitting on the handsome sofa in the parlor area. He stood. He was a tall man, too, but older, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and tired blue eyes.

"This is Grant Lockwood, Special Agent Crow. A friend—and a regular at the café. We've been going over and over the note wondering if they were crazy depressed words, or if . . ."

Lockwood stretched out a hand and then seemed to remember that people didn't shake hands during the epidemic.

"I'm with Bart most mornings; we walk in together before going to work," Lockwood said.

"And he's a divorce attorney. He gets crazy threats now and then," Winston explained.

"Harmless for the most part." Lockwood shook his head. "I do my best for my clients, but we work a fair game, too. I try to see that children don't become pawns in the proceedings. You'd be amazed at the amount of people who would hurt their kids just to get even with a spouse."

"Not too much surprises me," Jackson assured him. "So, among these threats—"

"I usually know who sends them and why—you know the kind of thing, 'I worked every day for him—or her—to get through school and I deserve my share.' Or 'take the kids and I'll kill you!' I usually talk to the person. I try to bring in both parties. And I know an attorney is battling for one party, but the battle is best when both parties can come to an amicable place, especially when kids are involved."

"But you think this might have been intended for you?" Jackson asked.

"Don't people hate lawyers from the get-go? Don't they call us sharks?" Lockwood asked.

"Well, those hurt—be it by an attorney or anyone else—can be resentful. That's human," Jackson said. "Acting on those feelings, well, that's criminal."

"But I've been trying to tell Lockwood here that I'm the one who found the napkin with the note," Winston said.

"But no one would be after you," Lockwood said, attempting a weak smile.

"All right. Do either of you have a beef with anyone working at the café?" Jackson asked.

They both looked at each other and shook their heads.

"I don't think that . . . well, what would those young men have against customers?" Winston asked.

"We both tip really well!" Lockwood said.

"Worked our way through college," Winston agreed.

"Let me see where we are now, if there is anything anyone has learned," Jackson said.

Lockwood looked at the clock.

The afternoon was slipping away.

"Hurry, please!" Winston said.

"The police are just outside," Jackson said. "But if you were planning anything for the night, you might want to skip it."

"We were just going to open a bottle of champagne together," Winston said.

"A good plan," Jackson told him.

"You'll come back?" Winston asked.

"Yes, but I can't investigate sitting here, and as you said—" Jackson began.

"Time is slipping away," Winston said.

Angela

Josh insisted that Angela get a Danish. He assured her she'd look ridiculous drinking one espresso—even a double espresso—for hours on end.

She bought a blueberry Danish and assured him it was, indeed, delicious.

And they watched. Both the young waiters were careful with their gloves and their masks. Both kept their masks on and were polite and accessible to customers.

She tried to catch Jake when she could and ask him about his acting. If he was lying about anything, he did it well.

He talked about his love for the movies and the few bit parts he'd had so far. He was enthusiastic and ready to move on. He'd be moving in November.

It wasn't quite as easy for her to talk to Liam. He wasn't her waiter. But she watched him, and accidentally bumped into him when she went in for another espresso.

"So, you're still in school I hear!" she said.

"I am."

"And working your way through."

"I am. But it's okay."

"Even on New Year's Eve?"

"That's okay. We get off here at six. Plenty of time. And with everything going on . . . well, yeah, I'm young, but I am working, so I didn't plan on seeing a lot of people or going wild anyway."

"That's good of you. So, what are you planning?"

"A good book."

She laughed softly.

"No girlfriend?"

He shook his head. "Not now. And, well, I've other things on my mind!"

"School."

"Uh, you bet! Excuse me, I have two pizzas to get."

"Of course!"

Back at the table, she checked her phone.

Kat had come through. She had information on everyone there. Julio's parents had immigrated from Venezuela, but he had been born in the states. His parents were both teachers. Jake came from Virginia, and his parents were a little more than comfortable—his dad worked stocks and his mother was a fashion designer.

Liam had lost his mother at a young age but been raised by an aunt who had just passed away. For all reports, she had been loving and his childhood had been normal.

"Whatever normal might be," Kat had added.

And as to Bart Winston . . .

No arrests. The man didn't even have parking tickets.

"I'm still working on social media," Kat wrote.

Time was ticking by.

Angela didn't think that she could eat another Danish.

Checking in with Jackson, she found he was walking through the Alistair Apartments, seeking any weaknesses in security.

"So?" Josh asked.

She didn't answer him. She saw the door was opening and though it wasn't quite closing, Liam appeared to be leaving.

She texted Jackson quickly and rose in what she hoped was a leisurely fashion.

He's had a "normal" childhood. Whatever that meant. His mom had passed away, but he'd been raised by a caring aunt.

As she walked, following Liam at a distance, she texted Kat back.

What about the boy's father?

Jackson

He'd been meeting with a security guard and didn't see Angela's text until several minutes after it had been written.

He quickly called her back.

"What are you doing? Sorry, following Liam. But why?" he asked her.

"He reads, for one. And I'm waiting on a reply from Kat. He was raised by an aunt after his mother died. I'm trying to find out about the father. Oh, and his aunt just passed this year."

"Okay, I have your location on the phone. Just be careful. I'll catch up with you."

"Fine. We're not heading for the apartments," she said.

"Where are you heading?"

"No idea yet!"

"Okay, Josh is still with you, right?"

"Right behind me," she said, glancing at the ghost keeping pace with her.

Josh heard her and grinned. "Not that I can beat anyone up!"

"You can help, and you have helped before," she reminded him.

He smiled. "Yeah, I have!"

Angela noted Liam's backpack, but everyone carried a backpack these days.

She couldn't help but wonder if it carried a gun or worse.

She was startled when they arrived at another outdoor café and she wondered how she could appear casual, being at a café again after leaving a café.

This one promised music—safe music, of course, with a husband-and-wife duo performing on an outdoor stage.

Did he plan on just spending the next hours listening to music?

Her phone started to ring again. She glanced at the caller I.D.

Jackson was calling her back.

"Hey," she said softly, keeping her distance from the tables at the café.

"I just did some research on Bart Winston and Grant Lockwood. Lockwood is a divorce attorney who has never been married himself. Bart Winston was widowed twenty years ago. He has two grown children and grandchildren, and I haven't been able to find an evil thing that the man has done to anyone. Both donate to several charities. I'm wondering if the note was intended for either of them. I looked for information on Liam's father."

As she listened, Angela watched Josh. He'd walked over to watch Liam. The young man had been digging in his backpack.

He pulled out a book.

"Angela?" Jackson asked.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Anything on Liam's father?"

"There is no father listed."

"Oh! Okay. Thanks."

"Angela—"

She cut the call as he said her name. Josh was hurrying back over to her.

"He has a box cutter in there—in the backpack!" Josh said. "He was just fingering it, and then looking at his watch!"

Angela made a split-second decision. If she was wrong, well . . .

They'd be back to square one. But Liam was young, and she had been at her job a long time. She hoped she was reading him right.

She walked straight to his table and sat across from him.

He looked up from his book, startled. Then he frowned, confused.

"I just saw you at the café and . . . you're not six feet away from me, you know."

"I'm taking a chance," she said quietly. "You're reading Shakespeare."

"I like Shakespeare! And that's no crime."

"But planning to kill people a minute after midnight is."

"What?"

"At his heels a grass green turf, at his head a stone."

He turned the color of new fallen snow as she spoke.

"You wrote the note on that napkin, Liam. You were wearing gloves, so you left no prints. You were in early, and you intended the note for Grant Lockwood. We know that."

They didn't really know it at all. But it sounded better when she spoke with conviction.

"I—I—I didn't. I . . ."

"You did. We know that you did. What we don't know is why you want to kill Grant Lockwood."

"I didn't intend to kill him!" Liam protested.

But he had written the note! It was more than evident.

"Then why do you have the box cutter in your bag. Again, *we know you wrote the note.*"

She was surprised to see the silent tears that suddenly streamed down his face.

"I didn't intend to kill him. I intended to kill myself—in front of him!"

"But—why?" she asked, stunned by his response.

"Because he's my father and he abandoned my mother and didn't even stay around. I wanted him to know he had a son. A dead son."

He was openly sobbing then.

And he was telling the truth. She was certain of it. The hurt and pain in his voice, in the way that his shoulders sagged . . .

"It was all right when Aunt Minnie was alive, but this year . . . she was gone, too, and I was young when mom died, but Aunt Minnie always told me it didn't matter, I had her . . . she told me my father was dead. But later Aunt Minnie told me that . . . she thought she knew who it might be, and I found out in a letter my mom had written her years ago when I had to clear out her things after she died. And I was suddenly just so alone . . . everyone who ever loved me . . . and my father who abandoned my mother was still alive and well and he had to know that . . ."

She didn't mean to be careless in any way, but Angela couldn't stand the pain. She walked around and slid another chair next to him, putting her arms around his shoulders.

"But you're a smart and talented kid and the whole world is out there! There will be people to love, and I will tell Grant Lockwood what a jerk he is and there is no reason for you to kill yourself over someone else's bad behavior!"

She winced, praying he wasn't a better actor than his coworker Jake, and he wasn't playing her.

She just didn't think so.

She saw Josh was by them, looking at her with sadness in his eyes.

Angela quickly pulled out her phone.

"Jackson, are you still at the apartments?"

"I was just about to come and find you—"

"No, please, get to Grant Lockwood. Ask him if he had a son he abandoned."

"What?"

"Please, Jackson. Do it quickly."

"All right. I'm near Winston's apartment . . . I'm at the door, knocking. The phone is on speaker. Winston. Where's Grant Lockwood?"

"On the sofa. Why? Is there something—"

"Lockwood, do you have a son?"

"What?" Angela could hear the surprise in the man's voice. "No. I've never been married."

Liam could hear the conversation.

"He never was married. Ask him about a woman named Mary Cathleen Cross," he said.

Jackson did.

Lockwood let out a pained sigh. "She was the love of my life. But that was years ago, years and years ago. And I was hooked on drugs back then. I . . . I needed heroine more than her, and when I finally managed to clean up . . . she was gone. She wanted nothing to do with me. She thought I was dangerous. I might have been. But I've been clean now for almost twenty years. I knew Mary Cathleen, yes. I loved her. But what does that have to do with what's going on?"

"Angela?" Jackson asked.

"Tell Mr. Lockwood that he does have a son. And his son is in agony. Alone. There was never a threat against his life."

Lockwood heard her. "A son! I have a son. Oh, my God, I'd have given anything to have a child . . . but I have a child. Who wanted to kill me?"

"No," Angela heard Jackson say quietly. "He wanted to kill himself."

Lockwood let out a "No!" that was heart-wrenching.

"Angela," Jackson said, "I'll come to you—"

"No. We'll come to you," Angela said. She ended the call and looking hard at Liam she said, "Liam, don't you see? Your mother was trying to protect you. The man she knew was a mess, an addict. She was afraid he'd do nothing but hurt you. You heard him. You don't fake that kind of pain—you weren't faking it with me. Please."

Liam sat back. He stared at her, lost, afraid, and confused.

"He knows what I wrote. He knows I'm a . . ."

"Slightly broken, needing fixing. Please, Liam. Maybe you can heal one another. Maybe he needs help, too."

"But—"

"Please. Liam, you were thinking about the most horrible thing in the world—what can be worse?"

"I was wondering if the pain of death could be worse than the pain of living," he said.

"Tell him that it is," Josh said softly.

She didn't say those words; she really wouldn't be able to explain them. Instead, she reached out and took his hand.

"Liam, I wouldn't have known what you were suffering. You're a great person. Your boss thinks the world of you. You're going to school. And you're going to come with me and meet your father, and I don't know him, but Jackson has met him, and if he were any kind of a monster, Jackson would know, I truly believe that, and . . . please?"

He nodded slowly.

She started to rise. He was going to come with her.

Then she remembered that Jackson had taken the car.

"Hm. You're walking, right?"

"Yes."

"Uber!" she said. And she smiled again.

Because he had smiled at last.

Jackson

The amazing thing about the introduction of Liam and Grant was that both stood staring at one another . . . shaking like leaves.

Then both were sobbing.

Grant Lockwood reached out for the son he'd never known he'd had, tentative, afraid.

Liam walked into his arms.

And both sobbed and held one another.

It was a hug that had to make up for years and years of hugs that hadn't been.

Jackson watched Angela's face as she stood silently, watching father and son. And he smiled, grateful and newly amazed.

She never ceased to surprise him.

She had managed to turn it all around. In his own mind, he was still putting all the pieces together. But as the two finally parted, as Bart Winston suggested that they sit together and asked everyone if he could get anyone anything, they began to talk.

And Grant Lockwood explained how he had loved Liam's mother, but she had done the right thing keeping him away—and never telling him that she was going to have a child.

Liam explained that he thought that his father was a monster who had abandoned her and hadn't wanted a child.

Then there were questions, so many questions. And the two were focused on one another with wonder and amazement.

"Maybe we should leave them together to get to know one another," Jackson murmured. "And I should go out and tell Adam what's happened. He'll be waiting."

"May I tell him?" Josh said. "I need to be with Dad at midnight anyway, and it's getting closer and closer, you know."

"I think I'll go out for coffee," Bart Winston said.

Lockwood heard him. He rose and clapped his friend on the shoulder.

"No, no, you don't need to leave your own apartment! Son, we'll go to my place. It's just upstairs."

"You—you're sure?" Liam asked.

"My home is your home. I . . . I mean if you want. I mean, I can't tell you how much I regret my past, how much I longed for a child," Lockwood said.

Liam looked at Angela.

"Thank you!" he whispered.

She nodded. "Thank you!" she told him.

"We'll get out of here," Jackson said.

"But!" Angela stepped forward, producing one of her cards. "You will call us and let us know how you're doing. And if there's anything we can do for you."

Liam and his father nodded as one.

"Well," Bart Winston said lightly, "There goes my New Year's!"

"No, no, sir. I'm sorry, I—we'll come back. Right Mr. Lockwood?"

"Right—Dad?" Lockwood suggested.

"Right, Dad?" Liam said.

"If you'll have us, Bart," Lockwood said.

"Yah!" Bart Winston said. "Hell, yeah!"

Jackson, Angela, and Josh managed to slip out. As they walked to the car, Jackson called Adam, who would let everyone know the alert was over.

They dropped Josh at Adam's house and drove on to their own.

Mary was there to greet them. She'd set the house up for their small family gathering, having cookies and sparkling apple cider ready for all.

Midnight came. The baby slept through it. Corby played with his noise maker and they all clicked plastic glasses of sparkling cider.

Then Corby and Mary Tiger gave it up and went to bed.

"The new year!" Angela said.

"The new year. Hope and good things," Jackson said. "2020—so rough for so many people. So many losses. And yet—"

He paused. He could hear Angela's phone ringing. She answered it quickly, smiled, and said, "Happy New Year!"

She listened for a minute, repeated the words, and said "Thank you," softly.

She looked at Jackson again.

"Liam. He wanted to assure me he was fine and say happy New Year. He and his dad are still fine, which is great. Jackson, I can't believe it! It was so wonderful. Lockwood was never in denial, demanding a DNA test or anything. And it's amazing! The kid was just so lost, and this little twist of finding out that someone out there wanted and loved him was so . . . incredible."

"You should still suggest therapy," Jackson told her.

"Yes, definitely," she agreed. "And still . . ."

Jackson walked over to her, taking her into his arms.

"A tough year. But at the end, you turned a possible tragedy into triumph. And we have our children. So much to be thankful for."

"So much. And still . . ."

"And still?"

She laughed.

"Happy New Year! Hallelujah! And here's to 2021!"

"Here's to 2021!" he agreed. "Let's start it off with a bang!"

And rising, he lifted her into his arms.

"To 2021," he said. "And every year that I am blessed to spend with you!"

Also by HEATHER GRAHAM

WICKED DEEDS
DARK RITES
DYING BREATH
A PERFECT OBSESSION
DARKEST JOURNEY
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FLAWLESS
THE HIDDEN
THE FORGOTTEN
THE SILENCED
THE DEAD PLAY ON
THE BETRAYED
THE HEXED
THE CURSED
WAKING THE DEAD
THE NIGHT IS FOREVER
THE NIGHT IS ALIVE
THE NIGHT IS WATCHING
LET THE DEAD SLEEP
THE UNINVITED
THE UNSPKEN
THE UNHOLY

THE UNSEEN
AN ANGEL FOR CHRISTMAS
THE EVIL INSIDE
SACRED EVIL
HEART OF EVIL
PHANTOM EVIL
NIGHT OF THE VAMPIRES
THE KEEPERs

GHOST MOON
GHOST NIGHT
GHOST SHADOW
THE KILLING EDGE
NIGHT OF THE WOLVES
HOME IN TIME FOR CHRISTMAS
UNHALLOWED GROUND
DUST TO DUST
NIGHTWALKER
DEADLY GIFT
DEADLY HARVEST
DEADLY NIGHT

THE DEATH DEALER