

A Strangely Victorious Valentine's Day

By

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“Wow! Am I glad that Valentine's Day has changed!” Angela Hawkins Crow murmured, her face knit in a mask of pained wonder over what she had just been reading on her computer.

Jackson Crow looked at his wife worriedly.

Standing in the doorway to her office, he'd been just about to ask her if she was ready to head out for dinner. They hadn't taken the day off, but Mary Tiger was staying with the kids. They had planned to do their best to sneak away from work and parental duties for a brief romantic excursion.

“Um, okay. Well, we've known, very bad things happen on any day,” he said.

Of course, they did. They already had reports of situations handled by the police, in which spurned partners, full of anger, had threatened or harmed their lovers. One of their agents had been called out because a man was pontificating about the fact there were two men who were historically known as St. Valentine, but there were more men who had to pay the price to become saints.

Of course, by the time their agents or other law enforcement arrived at a sighting, the man had moved on. They had no clues, nothing at all to go on.

But that seemed to be the “holiday” course of events. There was just something about holidays!

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Still, he wanted this holiday to be a little special for the two of them.

Angela looked up at him and grinned. "I guess I've known about the saints—the martyrs who shared the Valentine name—for a long time. I mean, it was sad of course that men had to become martyrs to push a culture of love. But hey, supposedly one of them restored the sight of one of the men imprisoning him; and before he was executed, he wrote a note to a woman saying it was from her Valentine. Okay, okay, I've known all that. But I've been reading further; and for some people I guess they didn't see it as a bad thing at all. Way back in ye olde Roman days, they celebrated the feast of Lupercalia from the 14th to the 15th. The 14th is right in the middle there, you see. Men killed a dog and a goat—and then skinned them and beat their wives with the skins!" she told him.

He arched a brow to her and said, "Yuck!" Before adding thoughtfully, "You definitely shouldn't be looking at me. I don't ever see me killing a dog or a goat, and definitely not skinning one. And since I'm completely aware of your abilities when it comes to self-defense, I wouldn't dream of trying to beat you with anything."

She laughed softly. "Not to worry—I can't see you in the role of an old Roman either. Though, I guess if we look back far enough—and sometimes not even that far back—every culture had some gruesome and brutal stuff going on. My reasons for being extremely grateful the world has changed. At least, our world! Oh! And it's true that even the good is kind of sad. Valentine's Day was named after at least two people who were martyred! But their message was always love and forgiveness!"

"Um, okay. You know, I love history, too, but in today's world—we're getting a night off from weird violence and people doing bad things. Are you ready for a meal with just you

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and me, that wonderful new place where we planned early on and have a reservation? Low candlelight—the real kind—not fake. Comfortable, soft booths, delicious food, excellent wine, and hm . . . me! By your side.”

Angela laughed softly and rose. “Oh, I’m ready! I’m sorry, I was just getting some information for Kat—she and Will are working the case in Chicago—and they’re after an historian who is creating havoc with holidays, so . . .”

“Being you, you looked up everything in the world you could on Valentine’s Day and the origin of the holiday,” Jackson said, grinning. “But tonight, we have reservations that would have been impossible to get if we didn’t have a friend with real clout. And remember, delicious food and beverage—and me! The man you married!”

“The weird man I married!” she teased.

“You mean because I talk to dead people?” he asked her, grinning. “Well, thank God then that I found you, a weird woman,” he said. “In the best possible way, of course.”

She laughed and stood reaching for her bag. “Yes, let’s go! Be romantic, make the kids happy because, as Victoria says, she loves it when it when we’re ‘kissy-face!’”

He grinned, suddenly realizing just how lucky he was. Of course, life hadn’t always been that easy. He’d known pain and loss as well, and he’d spent so many years hiding the fact that he could, indeed, speak to the dead—those whose souls who chose to remain for one reason or another and needed to be heard.

Now he had a beautiful wife, and together they managed the Special Situations Unit of the bureau—better known colloquially as the Krewe of Hunters. They supposedly

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handled special situations. And that they did—with the unusual help of those who had shed their flesh but left their souls behind.

Angela was his wife—his partner; and together, they shared work and two beautiful children. And Valentine's Day was special indeed.

They didn't get much time to just be the two of them, be together as a couple.

All "kissy-face," as Victoria would call it.

They bid goodnight to Bruce McFadden and the skeletal staff covering the office at night and headed out. The restaurant wasn't far; and as they drove, Angela read reviews on the restaurant from her phone. "This man writes that the most amazing thing about the place is that the décor is warm and intimate, the food is delicious, and they manage to keep it at a reasonable price. The only difficulty is being able to get a reservation!"

"Ah, but we have one. On Valentine's Day!" Jackson reminded her.

And the restaurant was just as described.

They were greeted at the door by a pretty young hostess with short dark hair and huge green eyes. Her name tag identified her as Meg. As she looked for their reservation, Angela told her just how cute she was dressed in the red velvet she was wearing; and Meg thanked her with a huge smile.

"Shouldn't you be out for Valentine's Day?" Angela asked her.

But Meg laughed. "No, the owners here are great—double pay on holidays! I'll see my fiancé later, and we'll pretend it's still Valentine's Day after midnight!"

She led them into the restaurant.

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The décor was muted, handsome tables with comfortable chairs in the center, plush booths to the sides. Each table held a real candle with a metal shield, a slender vase with a few bright red roses, and beautiful Virginia landscapes covered the walls.

They were led to an intimate booth.

One of the few left empty that night. Naturally. It was Valentine's Day.

"This is . . . wow!" Angela said after they had ordered, and glasses of wine had been delivered. Her fingers curled over his hands where they lay on the table. "Beautiful, and really nice. Great ambiance, wine, food . . . and, of course, you! And while we're going to love this, Jackson, you know I'd be just as happy with you at a fast-food burger joint!"

"I know," he said softly. "And that's one of the million reasons I love you so much."

She laughed softly, picking up her wine glass and taking a sip.

"Not that I'm a connoisseur, as you know, but . . . this stuff is good!"

"Better than a frosty shake, eh?" he inquired.

"And still, it never matters!" she told him.

"Never!" he agreed. "And the best presents ever—"

"Me?" she suggested.

"Sure, of course. But I was thinking about the cards the kids make for us, and the way they want us to get out so badly. We're incredibly lucky human beings."

"I know." She winced. "Okay, sometimes we work with the very, very bad. But we work with great people, and best of all—"

"We have each other."

She smiled but held off speaking.

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A couple had arrived and were walking by their booth before they could reach their own to be seated in one that was just beyond theirs. They were young; the woman was a very pretty redhead of about twenty-seven and the man was perhaps the same age, tall, dark-haired, dignified and handsome in a black suit.

Jackson didn't notice the white collar at first.

Angela did.

"A priest?" she murmured. "Out for Valentine's Day?"

Either the man heard her very low whisper or was perhaps accustomed to being judged. He stopped, smiling at the hostess who had been seating them, and smiled at Angela.

"Hi. I'm Father Matthew Carson, Episcopal priest; and this is my wife, Lucy," he told her.

"Oh, ouch! Sorry!" Angela said quickly. "I'm so sorry, it's just the collar threw me for a bit of a loop. I should have known, of course!"

"Hi!" Lucy, his pretty young wife said, grinning and waving from around his back. "It's okay, not everyone knows that priests of different denominations exist, and that it's fine that they are married men."

"I know, I know, but . . ." Angela said, looking at them with distress.

"Please, please, don't be upset!" Matthew told her. "It's Valentine's Day. You two enjoy. We intend to!"

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Angela said. "And forgive me—"

"Trust me! Forgiveness is my business!" Matthew said.

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"Yep, happy Valentine's Day!" Jackson said, grinning.

The couple were seated at their booth. Angela winced and groaned softly. "What was the matter with me? What was I thinking?"

Jackson covered her hands then with his own, grinning. "Angela, it's okay! You gave them a laugh!"

She nodded, but she was frowning again.

He was facing the inner wall of the restaurant. She was facing the door.

He turned.

Sometimes—something that could prove difficult at times—they didn't always recognize if a person was living, or if they were a soul, visible to only them and that tiny division of the population with their strange gift, curse, or talent.

But he realized quickly the man who had just entered the restaurant was a dead man, one who was looking extremely agitated.

He was in his early fifties, Jackson thought, dressed in a handsome suit as if he had a date himself for Valentine's Day. He had silvery-white hair cut short, and a strong face with a good square jawline.

Angela murmured softly, "He looks upset."

She was staring at him. Apparently, the ghost knew she saw him. He was surprised, of course, but his agitation was greater than his surprise.

He immediately started walking toward the two of them. Halfway there, he stopped, staring beyond them, seeing Father Matthew and Lucy in the booth just a few feet behind them.

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He then looked as if he was about to cry. But he winced and hurried toward them again, sliding into the slim space next to Angela and then frowning as he looked at Jackson.

"You . . . you, too?" he said incredulously. "Well, good, two of you. You don't have to look crazy. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I mean, I don't know you. I don't know anything about you, but you see me, so I need your help. I'm Gary Barton. I'm . . ." He paused again, once again trying to hang on and not cry. "I'm Lucy's father. She's the young lady just behind us. And she's wonderful. And Father Matt is an incredible man, truly. He's a priest at St. Celia's, and he's wonderful with the college group that makes up so much of his congregation. And she has loved him forever . . . they were in high school together. They're married and it's okay, it's good with their church. But that crazy man thinks that she should love him—"

"Um, what crazy man?" Jackson interrupted.

The man law enforcement had been missing all day?

"He's out there!" the ghost assured him passionately. "He . . . he latches onto women, onto Valentine's Day. He thinks Matthew is supposed to die if he really loves Lucy; and if she doesn't understand, then she needs to die too. He's been running all over town trying to find them; and I think he knows . . . Oh, I'm so terrified for both Matt and Lucy because I think he somehow knew they were coming here tonight. He's coming to get them. You can't begin to understand how terrified I am. I can see things, hear them, even feel warmth, know that my daughter loved me, that she's loved deeply by her husband, that she is in extreme danger and . . ."

He broke off, staring at the door.

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“He almost killed another man last year; they couldn't get enough evidence against him to prove it in court. His name is Caleb Carpenter—they arrested him, but they had to let him go—even with all the forensics these days, they had to let him go. He threw the gun he had into the Potomac. The poor fellow is still in a wheelchair and all the witnesses couldn't identify the crazy guy. But now, please, you need to warn them for me! Warn Matthew and Lucy. They need to get out of here, they need to lock in for the night and someone needs to get to this man, and oh, my God! We're too late!”

The door had swung open.

And there was a man standing there, just inside the restaurant. The friendly hostess walked up to him, asking if he had a reservation.

“Yes, I do!” he told her. “I'm meeting someone here, and I think I see her right back over there, if you don't mind . . .”

They were armed, naturally. With what they did, Jackson and Angela were always armed.

Angela was up in a flash, Glock drawn, as was Jackson himself.

But the man saw them.

And before anyone could blink, he had the young hostess, Meg, in his arms with a Smith and Wesson pressed against her skull.

“Drop them! Drop them now or I will just saunter on over there and split her skull open and let her blood spurt all over that lovely wine you're drinking!” he roared.

Another man in the restaurant started to rise.

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“Sit down!” the man—Caleb Carpenter if their ghost was right—spun around, never losing his grip on his Smith and Wesson. He never moved the nose of the gun an inch away from being held hard to the young hostess's head.

“Sit down! Everyone stay seated or she dies along with as many people as I can shoot before I become a martyr myself!”

The poor girl was terrified. Her eyes were wide; she was shaking so hard within his hold that Jackson feared the gun going off.

“Get those guns down!” Caleb Carpenter roared.

“Down, down, yes, we'll get them down, Caleb!” Angela promised. “We'll get them down right now, but first . . . well, first Caleb, you need to let Meg go.”

“No way in heaven or hell!” he replied.

Angela eased her way past the ghost at her side, giving Jackson a slight nod that promised she knew what she was doing.

“Look, as you can see, I have a Glock. I'm an agent. Now, you need to take me and let Meg go. I'm more important, and if anyone saw you coming here and called the police, well, you'll want to be holding on to me,” she said. “And frankly, Caleb! I've known about you; I'm fascinated by you! I'd love to know more about you believing that some men need to be martyrs—”

“It's Valentine's Day!” Caleb roared. “And that man, oh, yes, I know he's here! That supposed priest! He's here, and he's brainwashed Lucy. He thinks he can do whatever he wants! No! He has to die; if he's any kind of real man at all, if he really loves Lucy, he needs to die, and Lucy needs to come with me!”

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“Sir! Caleb!” Jackson said. “We need to discuss this. I mean, maybe we’ll all agree with you, but you need to let Meg go and explain to us just how this thinking comes in!”

Matthew had stood and was behind Angela.

“I would die for Lucy. But you can’t take her,” he said quietly.

“No, no, no!”

Angela, her gun lowered, walked toward Caleb.

“First, sir, you must let Meg go and take me. I will put my gun down—”

“That man has a gun, too,” Caleb noted. “What? Do I look stupid?”

No, just apeshit crazy! Jackson thought.

Angela looked over at him, smiled, and looked back at Caleb.

“He will lower it. You exchange Meg for me. And then, please, before anything else, you need to explain to me why this man should die, please. You shot someone last year, right, Caleb? And you were brilliant. You threw the gun into the Potomac!”

There was silence for a minute.

“How do you know that?” Caleb demanded.

“I know things,” Angela said softly.

“She does know things! She’s amazing. But if you want to put that gun against someone’s head, it should be mine. I mean, come on, I’m the big dude here and—”

“What? You think you have some kind of Native American magic that will save you?” Caleb asked.

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“Native American and Northern European,” Jackson told him. “Black hair, blue eyes, two worlds—and no magic. But don't you want your message out there? Don't you want people to understand?”

Caleb frowned at Jackson, giving his words thought. “You know!” he said. “You all should know. Saint Valentine of Rome! He lived during the third century and the Romans locked him up for marrying Christians! He was jailed and he was executed, but he left his message! He was killed in the year 269, he was a martyr, don't you get it! Because he really believed in love. His relics exist; they were in the Church and Catacombs of San Valentino in Rome until they were sent to Santa Prassede when Nicholas I was the pontiff. The skull is crowned with flowers . . . it is at the Basilica of Santa Maria. That's Rome, but there are relics in Dublin, too. You can see them. I have seen them.”

“Oh, Caleb! I'm sure they exist!” Angela said.

“There's more!” he told her. “St. Valentine of Terni—he died a martyr, too, always preaching his message of love. They were good men.”

“Let the young woman go, and you can shoot me,” Matthew said quietly. “I love Lucy, and I am willing to die for her.”

He was going to move around Angela's side. She stopped him, holding her gun low, nose toward the floor, and walking toward Caleb.

“Sir! I'm fascinated. But, please, please, take me!”

“No!” Jackson argued. “Look, if the cops come, you need me—I'm big enough to keep anyone from shooting you, you just push me in front of you!”

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Caleb started to laugh. "Look at you guys, all you big, brave guys, willing to come up to protect your poor fragile lovers!"

"Oh, there's nothing fragile about Angela," Jackson assured him. "But we have kids, and I'm pretty sure they love me, but love her more."

"Oh, stop!" Angela said. "They love you as much. And I am so intrigued by Caleb. I mean, I guess they couldn't prove that he tried to shoot someone because he is so clever, because maybe he knows something that we don't—"

"I'm bigger than you are!" Jackson snapped.

"Hey, guys!" Father Matthew protested.

It was working. The arguing, the movement, the questions . . . leave it to Angela. She'd known how to get the man talking and now . . .

"I'm going!" she snapped.

She headed straight for Caleb, smiling, her gun down. His gun was lowered as well.

The rest of the customers in the restaurant were silent, scared, just watching, almost frozen in place, maybe even hoping that the crazy man would change his mind to shoot whoever he had come to shoot, and kidnap the woman he wanted . . .

And leave!

No.

He had always had faith in Angela. It was almost as strong as his love.

"What's she doing?" the ghost of Gary Barton demanded. "I didn't come to get you killed, too, I'm so sorry! But my baby, she'll go up there, she'll let him take her, hurt her, kill her, if it will stop him—"

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"Angela knows what she's doing!" Jackson assured him in a whisper.

"Who are you talking to?" Caleb demanded.

"Myself; I'm scared!" Jackson said. "But I'll come—"

"No!" Angela snapped.

She still walked straight to Caleb, determined he would switch Meg for her as his hostage.

"Take me, take me! I'm not as big as my husband, but I'm important! Cops won't shoot me, you can use me to get away, too!"

It was the moment Jackson had been waiting for.

Valentine's Day. He smiled inwardly. He had now known and loved his wife forever. And his faith in her was as deep as his love.

Caleb was forced to lower his gun more—just edge it away from the vantage point against Meg's head in order to reach out and take Angela into his arms.

Meg was almost thrown to the floor. She was sobbing uncontrollably.

But when Angela tossed her own gun aside in good faith to be taken as the new hostage, Caleb reached around her to envelope her into a tight and lethal hold.

Not happening.

Angela knew her moment.

She suddenly jerked with frightening speed, going low.

And it was Jackson's chance.

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No choice. In split seconds he aimed and shot the man in the right shoulder, sending him flying back with the power of the block and causing him to lose his weapon so that it went sliding across the floor.

Caleb screamed in agony.

"I've medical training, too!" Father Matthew explained quickly, brushing by Jackson and hurrying over to the fallen man's side.

Angela went down to her knees by the fallen man as Matthew did. The priest was already ripping at his shirt to staunch the flow of blood.

On the man who had come just to kill him.

Customers screamed and went running from the restaurant.

No blame on them there, Jackson thought. They'd all headed out for a great Valentine's Day dinner and . . .

Well, he didn't blame those who ran.

With Angela and Matthew helping Caleb Carpenter, Jackson quickly dialed 911, identifying himself and the situation. But the police were already on the way; his gunshot had been loud and someone passing by had called to say it looked like there was a man with a gun holding everyone in the restaurant hostage.

Jackson hurried over to Meg, helping her to her feet, holding her gently as she sobbed. "I'm such a coward! And you . . ."

Lucy was at his side, looking at him with gratitude, and trying to take over with Meg, assuring her that she wasn't a coward, that anyone in their right mind would be worried about the nose of a gun against the side of their head.

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Paramedics and police arrived. Despite the many people who had fled the restaurant, there were plenty of witnesses left to describe the situation. They were all making Jackson and Angela out to be heroes, and Jackson kept thanking them but telling them it was all part of the job.

Jackson had to turn his weapon over, of course, and no matter what one did, there were reports that had to be given.

Paperwork.

It was a long, long night.

A much longer dinner than he had ever planned.

The paramedics complimented Angela and Matthew, telling them that they'd kept the man alive.

Jackson was there when Caleb was wheeled into the ambulance.

"You're going to live. Probably go to prison, yes, but you'll get help, and somewhere along the line, sir, you might have a life," Jackson told him.

"But . . . if he wasn't the martyr, maybe I was supposed to be?" Caleb said. His eyes were glassy, confused.

The EMTs were just about ready to head out; Caleb would be at the hospital soon. He'd already been rigged with an IV that was supplying needed liquids to him.

But Jackson told him. "The martyrs were in the past, Caleb. The message is love. They died because of their message that we needed love in our world, not hate, not war, something that is still being desperately taught by some today. And I promise you, maybe, with a lot of help you may have a real life one day."

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The ambulance door shut.

One of the customers who had acted as a witness for the police walked by Jackson shaking his head.

"You're a better man than I. I would have killed the bastard!" he said.

"If I'd had to, I would have," Jackson said.

He stood in the parking lot, watching the ambulance go, its siren shrilling, seeing others as they finally made their way to their cars.

He realized that the ghost of Gary Barton was standing next to him.

"I probably would have killed the bastard, too!" he said softly. "Why? What got into his head that he needed to kill Matthew and take Lucy? He never really knew her; I guess he just saw her around. I don't . . ." He turned to Jackson and grimaced. "I'm dead, and I still don't understand. Maybe one day . . . but I'm not ready to go yet! I'm just going to make sure that Lucy is really okay!"

"She will be, sir. She does have an amazing husband!"

"That she does. And now . . . thank you! Thank you, thank you!"

He said the words and hurried away. Jackson saw Lucy was across the parking lot with her husband still speaking with Meg. There was a young man with them now, too.

Her fiancé, Jackson thought. He smiled.

And he turned because his own wife was joining him there. He took her into his arms. "I promised that we'd stop by the police station—"

"And we're doing it now!" she said. "Hey, we were pretty good, right?"

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He smiled. "I think maybe those saints of old were really with us—along with a knowing ghost, of course. I'm sure it helped that you knew his name, all about him . . . and Gary Barton did allow all that!"

"Right! Police station. Let's do it."

They did. The cops were great, telling them how lucky the people in the restaurant had been with two agents there in the middle of what could have been a deadly incident.

They were professional and polite and friendly. They were all law enforcement, and they'd even worked before with some of the men and women on duty that night.

And while they were there, Jackson got a text from Adam Harrison. Of course, what had happened was all over the news. He would hear from all their agents.

But the text from Adam was the good one. He'd share it soon.

Finally . . .

They were headed out to the car.

"What is it about us?" Angela asked him. "Do we just attract trouble wherever we go?" she asked.

Jackson smiled at her. "Maybe . . . hm, think about it! Things happen around us because the fates know that we'll be able to manage whatever happens, do whatever is needed? I mean . . . okay, there aren't all that many people in the world that the ghost of Gary Barton might have been able to talk to. And more than that . . ."

"More than that?" Angela asked, frowning.

"There aren't that many people with your knowledge, your knowledge of history, and your deep-rooted understanding of what makes people and the world tick!" he told her.

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She smiled. "Okay, so, in truth, I don't really count on having great holidays anyway."

"But! We are going to have a great holiday," he told her.

"We are?" She laughed. "It's ten something already. Not much of Valentine's Day left! The wine was great, but we never did get food."

"Ah, ha! But we got a great Valentine's Day present after all this. A friend has talked to Mary Tiger and our children. Mary is staying overnight. The kids know that we adore them, but they're both anxious that we get time to be a romantic mommy and daddy duo. There's this place . . . well, truthfully, Adam Harrison, our great beloved founder, looked quickly into something called 'Ridley's Inn.' It's owned by one of the chains, but this hotel falls into their new luxury group. According to Adam, we have a room until four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Angela, it's a cabana room out by the pool with a private little stream into it and a private whirlpool inside. It's incredible. Oh, and Marcie from tech picked up our go-bags and dropped them at the office, so . . ."

She stared at him, her eyes opening wide, a smile curving into her lips. She was as beautiful as that long ago day when he had met her before the years of work and children and all that had filled their lives.

She didn't speak.

"Well?" he said hopefully.

And she laughed.

"Happy Valentine's Day, my love! And yes, yes, please! Let go be romantic! The most romantic mommy and daddy investigators in the whole weird world!"

He pulled her into his arms.

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Oh, yeah. Valentine's Day was going to end.

But it was going to be all right.

Because there really was a message to the day.

And it had come out all right. Even Caleb was alive; and while he would go to prison, he'd receive psychiatric help and maybe, as he had told the man, he'd have a decent life one day.

Father Matthew had helped to save the life of the man who had wanted to kill him.

Their ghost Gary Barton could be relieved; his beloved daughter was fine.

And for them . . .

Love was the message.

And the meal didn't matter, flowers didn't matter . . .

Just the two of them. Knowing that the message of love could extend in so many wonderful ways.

And a whirlpool right now, private, alone with Angela . . .

Yeah. The day was ending all right!