

A Ghoulishly Grim Halloween

Heather Graham

Prologue

Killer

Halloween!

How Killer loved it. Killer was the name he had given himself because *of course*, once again—he was a killer.

He hadn't meant for life to be that way. But now . . .

He intended to keep being one! Until he had taken them all out, those who had ruined his life and taken what should have been his.

And Halloween! Could any time of the year possibly avail him better?

Darkness hadn't even fallen yet, and already the city was alive with crowds everywhere with street performances, princes and princesses, superheroes and superheroines—and every horrible creature of time, culture, and legend and every heinous villain known to man as well. Vampires, werewolves, mummies, and zombies, oh my!

And the actual holiday was still a few days off!

The thing was, far more than the revelers and the costumed idiots running about, buildings and flora and fauna were also mystically attired. Trees dripped skeletons, ghosts, and other such decorations which were meant to give the night the true proper feel of that time when ancient pagans had believed the dead could come back to the mortal earth.

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Yes! People were running around assuming every creepy vision was a decoration fitting for the holiday! How it made him smile!

Because he did love returning to the scene.

To the body.

He'd taken out William Kittridge two nights ago right after the costume party at the restaurant on Bourbon Street. The man had been an idiot, way too into the holiday and into role playing. He'd been a vampire—a jerk hitting on everyone female being convinced that he was God's gift to women.

Yep. Kittridge had been a vampire. But sadly for him, one who didn't really recognize death until it hit him right in the head. Literally.

Kittridge really looked like a vampire now. He was covered in blood.

His own.

The blood was drying and the body was going ripe. It was here by the river, barely covered up by the grasses that tangled around the embankment—right by the trees that had been so *creepily* decorated with plastic skeletons and misty white gauze.

No one had noticed the real corpse.

Of course, the city's police were pushed to the limits right now—a party city, as the central fabled French Quarter and river area had come to be known—could keep the cops busy at the slowest of times. But Halloween season . . .

Yeah, might take them awhile to find a real corpse.

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Killer almost laughed aloud. Of course, he could do so. He just looked like the city's historic axe murderer, The Axeman of New Orleans, who had been busy between 1919 and 1920.

A killer who was never caught and never known.

Through the years, many people had dressed up as what they thought the historic killer might look like. Of course, he was carrying a knife rather than an axe, but he wasn't walking around with anything plastic as most people did.

His knife was real. Like the saw he had at the house.

Still, that Axeman! Never caught, never known.

Just as Killer would never be caught, never be known. He had done all the right things to ensure it!

Enter the Krewe

Halloween.

The main night of the year when every scary creature known to man was out there.

Including *man* himself or herself, because seriously there wasn't a creature more capable of being dangerous and deadly!

Angela Hawkins Crow, special agent with the Krewe of Hunters unit of the bureau, knew that all too well.

The only redeeming feature of doing what they did was knowing there was equal goodness in the world. No, there was more goodness than evil; and their reward for fighting greed, cruelty, and depravity was the face that could often save those who were innocent—and who were so often the very *good* that was also to be found in humanity.

And this was difficult for another reason. She loved New Orleans.

Their first case as what they were now officially calling the Special Situation Unit—and unofficially the Krewe of Hunters—had been in New Orleans. And even though they were always called in for bizarre and usually tragic situations, she loved the city. She loved the architecture, what they called the faded elegance of all that was old and historic. Then they'd had the kids there on vacation several times. They'd gone to the zoo, the aquarium, and the wonderful museums, not to mention the delicious food, including dinner on a steamboat ride on the Mississippi, visits to shops and incredible bookstores and so much more.

But the kids weren't with them this time. They were working on a case.

But being away now still saddened her, because Halloween was on the horizon, and she loved reading at their schools, taking them to their parties, helping them with costumes, going trick-or-treating and all that the holiday entailed.

She smiled to herself briefly. They never dressed up as ghosts; because in her family, they knew that “ghosts” could sometimes be real.

Usually in the best way. And with any luck, she told herself, they’d be home when the actual day of Halloween arrived.

But that all depended. Jackson was the Special Agent in Charge of the Krewe. And while they now had several dozen accomplished agents in their unit, she and Jackson were here because the man responsible for the Krewe, Adam Harrison, had asked for help. Because the man who had seen to it that they specifically were called in was Detective Dante Harrison—one of Adam’s great nephews. Jackson managed so many cases from headquarters, and she had learned to work incredibly well with their tech crews. So when they were in the field these days, it often seemed to be because of personal requests, and that was fine. She loved it when they could use their training and their rare talents to help anyone, and maybe—just a little especially—a friend.

She needed to take the few steps that separated her from Detective Dante Harrison and Jackson right now. Something had caused her to take just a minute and look down the length of Royal Street with its striking buildings filled these days with exceptional shops, restaurants, and iconic hotels. Of course tourists were out and about in large numbers. New Orleans was a Halloween destination since it vied with cities like Savannah,

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Charleston, Gettysburg, Salem and others for being the most haunted in America. And there was nothing like a good, haunted place for Halloween in the minds of many.

Which was intended to be fun.

The only problem being . . .

The city embraced the holiday, too, and decorations were everywhere. Most of them were frightening, some funny, and some a bit of both. Creatures from fiction and legend adorned shops and trees along the many of the streets in the French Quarter including the boundary streets of Esplanade on the east to Canal on the west, and then Rampart down to the Mississippi. Royal, Chartres, Bourbon, and many more were done up to the nines—not to mention that a penchant for decorations ran into Treme, the Irish Channel, the Garden District, Uptown and . . . everywhere!

Sadly, among the playful and creepy skeletons, ghosts, goblins, and more, something far more sinister and deeply disturbing had been discovered.

Human remains.

“I have asked Jack Dupree to come out in a minute. Naturally, I spoke with him immediately following the discovery, but I thought we’d speak with him here before heading up toward Uptown. The tree where the body parts were discovered is in a large line of oaks that parallel the street right off Canal. Not on Jack’s property, but when he went out to take his kid to school today, he discovered them. That was about three hours ago, but I asked them to make sure that nothing was disturbed until you arrived and observed the remains as they were discovered. I have never been so grateful for a decision I made, asking the captain to invite you down here. I mean . . . well, thank you!”

“No thanks necessary. You’ve followed an amazing man into law enforcement—different venue, but with the same purpose. Surely you know that this is what we do, and that anyone associated with Adam would do anything for him. Beyond that, we want to help in any way we can,” Angela said.

“Absolutely,” Jackson agreed. He glanced at Angela and smiled. “And we love the city; we want to stop any evil going on here.”

“Any evil,” Dante said, grimacing. “Interesting word, yet such a true use of it.” He shook his head. “New Orleans can be a party city. So much more, and still . . . you get that much partying, you get your share of drunks and violence. And more planned crime, robberies, shootings . . . crime went up after the pandemic; and we’ve been working hard to get a grip on it—like a lot of cities over the last year or so. But this . . . this is something different.”

“Geared to Halloween,” Jackson said dryly.

Dante nodded. “And since you were staying right here on Royal Street and Jack’s antique place is right across the street, it made sense to me that you talk to him. Then I’ll take you out there.”

As Dante spoke, a man of about forty—dressed as a character from a Harry Potter movie—emerged from his shop.

“Here’s Jack now,” Dante said. “Jack Dupree, Special Agents Angela Hawkins and Jackson Crow. Special agents, Mr. Jack Dupree.”

Jack Dupree nodded to them. “Sorry about this,” he began, indicating his costume. “We’ve got tourists and kids in and out all day, and they enjoy all this. I mean, I hope they

keep getting to enjoy all this. Not sure what I can do to help; except, my God, it's so horrible!"

"Just tell us what you found, if you saw anything unusual—" Jackson began quietly.

"Unusual? Oh, you bet! Even in New Orleans at Halloween! I went out to the car, and I was waiting for the kids thinking the decoration in the tree was a bit too much, especially in a residential neighborhood, and . . . I just walked closer to the tree and saw that blood was still dripping out of the 'zombie's' head and . . . the limbs were arranged on the branches, and I realized they were real, and I called the cops!"

"You didn't recognize the man?" Angela asked.

"I wouldn't have recognized him if he'd been my brother," Jack said, his face wrinkling with sincerity and the memory of what he had seen. "I whisked the kids in the car, and I know you haven't removed the, um, parts, and I hope—"

"Sir, these agents will take a look, and we'll have the M.E. and the crime scene people out there then as soon as possible. They're all on standby," Dante assured him.

"Thank you. Thank you, Detective Harrison, Special Agents. No kids should see that. I know you have the area cordoned off now, but . . . kids can still see it, you know," Jack said. "And I hope they all think it's just more crazy decoration, but . . ."

"We're going right over," Angela assured him.

"Thank you," Jack Dupree said again, his voice sincere.

"Thank you, sir," Jackson said. "Just one more minute, if you will. Have you seen anyone around the neighborhood who isn't usually here? Any people watching houses, anything unusual, or as if someone has been watching the neighborhood?"



Jack Dupree frowned. “Come to think of it, the dog was barking in the middle of the night. Because we’re in Halloween season, I didn’t think much of it. Our neighborhood is residential. But a lot of the houses in the Garden District and Uptown go all out. In fact, I have a giant pumpkin in the front yard myself. My neighbor had a plastic blow-up witch and cauldron in his yard. Some people have skeletons dangling from the trees in their yards. It’s Halloween, anything goes.”

“Of course. When the dog was barking, did you get out of bed and look out at the street?” Angela asked.

“Well, I did get up and I told Scotty to stop and behave. But I didn’t think to look out. My house has an alarm, so I figured it had to be something going on in the street, but . . . no. I didn’t think to look,” Jack said.

They thanked him again and let him return to work, telling him they’d be sure to check out his shop.

When he was gone, Dante said, “That wasn’t much help, but I thought maybe you would want a word with the man who had called it in.”

“Never hurts,” Jackson assured him. “We’ve got our rental car; we can meet you Uptown and that way—”

“If I get a call, you can still take your time. And we will head right up. I have Dr. Payne, one of our medical examiners, on hold there along with a forensic team. They do need to get started. Apparently, so far those who have gotten close enough to see the tree have thought the body parts were all part of Halloween.”

They parted ways and headed for their separate cars. As they passed Bourbon Street, Angela sat back and smiled slightly.

“And what is that smirk for?” Jackson asked her.

“Not a smirk at all. I was thinking of the places I love. Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop. The building definitely dates back to the 1770s, one of the few buildings to survive both great fires. Jean Lafitte’s brother Pierre was a blacksmith; they did need horses in those days.” She turned to look at him as he drove. “But apparently, people think they ‘see’ Jackson and Lafitte talking there together. Way back when, it wasn’t a bar, so the two didn’t have any casual conversations at the place—”

“If they are hanging around here at times, neither, um, *soul* is likely to help us at this time. But then again, maybe . . .”

“Maybe we’ll find someone,” she said softly. “This is so horrible.”

“Sadly it is, but not . . . entirely rare,” Jackson said. “Historically, Madame LaLaurie and her husband, mutilation and murder—chopping limbs off one slave to sew onto another. And they managed to flee, and there was no known justice for the pair. Did they land in France? An island? Did they return to living in a different district? No proof. Then! More recently after Hurricane Katrina—Zachary Bowen and Addie Hall. He jumped to his death, leaving a suicide note in his pocket. When it was investigated, they found a few of Annie’s body parts on the stove. We had our own case here, our first case—”

“And we had help. Maybe we’ll have help again,” Angela said.

She leaned back again. She wanted to believe the members of the Krewe were ace investigators on their own. But they were . . . special.

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And the dead could be so incredibly helpful.

Special—and special, she decided. But Halloween . . . and body parts in a tree!

“We’re here,” Jackson said.

They had arrived. Some cars were about; some people looked at the area from behind the barriers of the crime scene tape.

They parked and showed their credentials.

And they saw the tree. And the way that it had been ghoulishly decorated for Halloween with its bloody human body parts.

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Killer watched while trying to hide his glee.

There was something about the new arrivals at the scene that especially drew his attention. They weren’t just local police, and he knew that by their manner and not just by the fact they weren’t wearing any kind of uniform. He was tall and dark, a figure who looked like he knew where he was going and did so with confidence. The fellow looked to be at least partially Native American. She was blond, and while not nearly his height, tall enough for a woman, but it wasn’t her height that was impressive, it was the way she moved.

They’d brought down some of the big guns! Killer thought with glee.

Well, like the others, they could chase their tails.

He smiled. It was going to be fun!

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Jackson studied the tree while standing with Dante, Angela, and Dr. Barry Payne.

“I haven’t gotten up there yet; there was no worry that a doctor should rush up in case a victim was still alive,” Payne said flatly.

Like many of the medical examiners he’d met during his law enforcement, Jackson had found Payne had a dry sense of humor, something that probably kept him sane. He’d already told them he’d known he was going to be a medical examiner from the time he’d started medical school. After all, what living patient was going to be happy about seeing a doctor named *Payne*?

“But you do believe the body parts are all there?” Jackson asked him.

Payne nodded. “The head is highest. You can see it there. The torso is stretched out on that third heavy branch up. Arms and legs distributed around the torso. Feet are bare, but to the best of my knowledge, no one saw shoes and socks lying around anywhere near. My question is how the fellow got all those parts up there without being seen.”

“We’re in a residential area; and even in New Orleans, this kind of street can be quiet by night. In fact, I’m willing to bet that whoever did this watched the area for several nights,” Jackson said.

“But if he climbed up the tree, how did he carry all the parts?” Payne asked.

“One by one, probably,” Angela told him. “We’re going to go house by house with questions for the neighbors, but I believe our killer thought he could get away with saying he was just with the city decorating committee if he’d been noted by anyone. But two or three in the morning?”

“We’re not even that far off Canal!” Payne said. “And . . .” he paused, wincing, “we can get pretty carried away here at Halloween. But we get to tell our children it’s all fake, it’s not real, it’s just scary fun. Then . . .”

“Well, we’ll let the forensic team get started now,” Jackson told the man, looking at Dante. “And I hope, you can get right on it—”

“You bet!” Payne said. “And, yes, obviously, I’ll get with you the second I know anything.”

“His last meal might be important, so thank you,” Angela told the man. “Also, if there are any drugs in his system, anything at all. I sincerely doubt you’ll find any usable prints, but an identity will be extremely helpful, too. Of course, it will be good to know if you believe the person who did this has any medical knowledge or if it’s an awkward chop job.”

“Of course!” Payne told her.

“Thanks, Doc,” Dante told him. “A go all the way round,” he told Payne, nodding to him and to the head of the forensic team who was just waiting for his work.

Jackson and Angela ducked back under the crime-scene tape, nodding to the forensic team as well.

Jackson shook his head, looking at Dante. “This is going to need everything that we can get. I know we’re trying to avoid a panic—especially since it’s Halloween season, tourists galore, and the natives going all out. But we need you to put out request for help, citywide, looking for anyone who might have seen anyone unusual on the street.”

“You got it,” Dante told them.

He headed for his car.

“You have a particular side of the street you want to try?” Jackson asked Angela.

“I’ll go across, I guess?” she suggested.

“And I’ll take this block,” he agreed, shaking his head. “You know, Dr. Payne did have something. I mean, we aren’t that far from Canal. And while we’re not in the Quarter or down on Frenchman Street or Magazine, this city . . . well, at this time of the year, it goes twenty-four hours a day. Someone must have seen something.”

“And that could be anyone out there with a car,” Angela said. “But we’ll start with the neighbors.”

Jackson watched his wife, his partner in all things in life, as she walked across the street. He had long ago accepted the fact she was an amazing agent—analytical, resolute, careful, well-trained in self-defense, a crack shot—and a step above him when it came to all things that had to do with the internet, the dark web, hackers, et al.

But this . . .

Body parts in a tree for the Halloween season.

He wouldn’t be human if he wasn’t worried. Then again, he knew she wouldn’t be human if she didn’t worry about him in return.

He headed down to the first house next to Jack Dupree’s property, grimacing slightly to himself. There were a few things they had learned through the years.

Dead was dead. The body was a shell. The human soul was very real; and once a person was dead, it didn’t matter much what was done with the body, something cast off the soul, the essence of a man or a woman, as one might cast off a coat.

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He knocked at the first door and waited. A little boy answered the door, and Jackson asked him if his mom or dad was home.

The kid's mom came to the door. She was anxious to talk to him; anxious to know why cops had been on the street all day and just what had gone on. He assured her the best that he could.

Down the block. He spoke with one college-aged young man who told him he had just gotten home—he was usually in his dorm. He always spent Thursday evening having dinner with his parents, but they weren't home from work yet.

The next door was opened by a man of about twenty-five who frowned with confusion and demanded to know what was going on. "I'm Greg Eaton. I'm with the city," the fellow told him.

"Honey?" someone called from the back of the house.

"My wife," Greg explained quickly.

"Maybe she saw something," Jackson said.

Greg Eaton shook his head. "She just got here and she's with the kids—"

"I'd like to speak with her, too, please."

The woman, looking as worried as Greg, came to the door when Greg called out to her. Jackson thought he heard a child sniffing. Well, he wouldn't keep the kid's mom too long.

"Cassie, he's here about all that commotion on the street. Someone was murdered!" he said, looking at Jackson.

“Oh, no! The kids . . . we need to lock up, get the alarm on—can you get a cop or someone to watch over the street—”

“Cassie, the street is full of cops. It will stay that way, right?” Greg asked Jackson.

Jackson nodded. “They will be out there awhile. But neither of you saw or heard anything unusual—”

“A red pickup truck. Bright red. I’d never seen it before, and now it’s been cruising the neighborhood a few nights,” Cassie said, nodding as if all made sense then.

“License plate? Anything about it?” Jackson asked.

“I’m so sorry, no. Just a pickup truck. Red. A cab for two people and a bed in back—nothing in it. Not that . . . not that I saw when I saw it.”

“All right, thank you. Thank you very much.”

“We’re looking for anyone who might have seen—” Jackson began.

“That many cops! It was a murder, and here—right here? We need to know everything! We need to know if we should worry—”

“Keep things locked up and pay attention to what you’re doing,” Jackson told him.

“Okay, okay. And I’m sorry as hell, but I didn’t see anyone. I didn’t even see the pickup truck; and Cassie, you didn’t mention it to me,” Greg Eaton told him.

“I didn’t think anything of it—until now!” Cassie said.

Jackson thanked them.

He went on to speak with Amy Anthony, a stay-at-home mom who was terrified and told him she was going to head to her sister’s house in the Florida panhandle.



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He met Brian Felton, fortyish, a fellow who had just retired from the military and assured Jackson he was armed and ready if anyone threatened him, his family, or anyone else in the neighborhood.

In the last house on the block, he met with Chad Mortenson, an elderly gentleman, who assured Jackson he knew how to keep himself safe as well. He'd also been military—way back during the Vietnamese War.

Besides Cassie's telling him about the red pickup, none of them had seen anything else that had been the least suspicious.

*But someone, somewhere in the city, had to have seen something!* Dante, he knew, was sending out a call for help from anyone who had seen anything unusual on the streets at night.

He called Dante and told him to get an APB out on red pickup trucks.

And still . . . asking about the unusual might not be that helpful.

The city was in full Halloween mode.

Almost anything could be unusual.

He started to head across the street to meet up with Angela. His phone rang and he saw that it was Dante Harrison. He frowned; he had just spoken with the man moments earlier.

"There's another one, Jackson," Dante said. "We've got another body—"

"In pieces?" Jackson asked quickly.

“Not this one, but it’s made up to look like a zombie decoration—and the body decomp just adds to the look; only the smell alerted an observer,” Dante told him. “I’m down by the river—take Esplanade down and follow the cop cars.”

“We’re on our way,” Jackson promised, beckoning to Angela who was standing on the sidewalk finishing a discussion with an elderly woman.

She saw him; saw his face and nodded.

She knew him well.

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Angela frowned as they drove. It occurred to her it was actually rather unusual that someone had been home at every house they had gone to.

“What?” Jackson asked her.

“Every house you went to—was there someone home?” she asked.

He nodded. “What about you?” he asked.

“Every house.”

“Well, I saw you talking to the older woman—” Jackson said.

“Who certainly didn’t climb any trees. But think about it. Every house had someone answer the door? Kids are in school; people go to work,” she said thoughtfully.

“Well, you’re usually the one doing all the computer searches—” Jackson began.

“Right. But I’m going to call Bruce McFadden. He’s in the office while we’re out, and I’m going to get some tech people going on this,” Angela said.

“Excellent,” Jackson agreed. “Did you speak with anyone who seemed suspicious?” he asked her.

She was thoughtful. “There was a man of about forty who almost seemed amused—but then a little kid, maybe three or four, walked up by him; and he wanted all talk of anything gruesome stopped. There was one other fellow, same age, with a woman, his wife, and he seemed . . . squirrely?”

“Squirrely?”

She made a face at him. “The other guy; the one in the house with the kid. He seemed more suspicious to me—until the kid arrived.”

“BTK,” Jackson said.

“What?”

“The guy had a family—and got away with murder for years and years.”

“True,” Angela agreed. She looked at her phone. “Guy with the kid was Peter Alexander. Guy and wife were Harold and Missy Nottingham.” She looked over at him. “So, I’m not sure about a dad or a couple. But Jackson, what if one of those people who opened a door didn’t belong in the house? What if—”

“What if the dead man in the tree was the rightful owner of one of the houses?” Jackson suggested. “Since we don’t have an I.D. on our corpse yet. The only thing I got was the woman who thought that she’d seen a red pickup in the neighborhood, as if whoever was in it was watching, studying, the street. Dante put out an APB and called me back two minutes later about this new corpse.”

She shrugged. “I’m putting through a call to Bruce.”

“Do it,” he agreed.

She made the call. When she had finished speaking with Bruce, she saw they had just about travelled down Canal and over to Esplanade. Soon, they saw Dante's car along with a few other police vehicles.

Jackson parked and they produced their badges to get through the tape and by the officers holding the site to where Dante was waiting for them.

He pointed.

This time, the corpse lay in a low-lying thicket of grass and waterside weeds. The face had been mutilated and painted so that it looked like a zombie.

Fitting, since the surrounding trees had been fitted out with ghosts created from white sheets and plastic hanging skeletons.

*How many people might have looked over from the street and imagined that the dead man was just another Halloween decoration.*

"The coroner's office is sending another medical examiner out," Dante informed them as they reached his side.

He stood close, staring at the dead man.

"Cause of death . . ." Jackson murmured. "Most probably that long line of red at his throat. Looks like he bled out and quickly."

Dante nodded.

Angela studied the dead man. In her mind, she saw a faceless figure approaching from behind, knife ready.

And before the victim could turn around . . .

The attacker swept the knife from left to right around his throat.

So, that someone might well have been caught in the blood spatter, but . . .

It was Halloween. And this body had apparently been here at least a day or so.

Whoever had killed the man had ample time to be in another state by now.

Except it was likely that the same killer had murdered again, this time chopping his corpse into several pieces before “decorating” an area for Halloween.

“We can only hope for DNA, something,” Jackson murmured.

It was then Angela noted a man looking on from behind the crime-scene tape. She thought she had seen him with a woman at one of the houses across the street from her side, perhaps the woman who had told Jackson about the pickup truck.

“Jackson, take a look,” she murmured. “Didn’t you just talk to that man?”

“Yep, Greg Eaton, husband of Cassie who saw the truck.”

“I’m going to wander over; he had to have been right behind us getting over here.”

Jackson nodded. “Lay on the charm. See if he knows anything else.”

She made her way back to the street where the man was standing. “Greg?” she said, joining him. “Special Agent Crow was just speaking with you and your wife. Was there something else that you thought might help us?” she asked.

He was staring toward the spot by the river where Jackson stood with Dante Harrison.

“Another one. Halloween. I was just . . . well, could one of you possibly come with me for a minute? There might be . . . something else you should see.”

“Oh?” Angela winced inwardly. “Another one. Another corpse?”

“Our son might have seen something, but he’s very upset. I was hoping if he saw that someone in law enforcement was with me . . .” he appeared to be pained and naturally, of course, a man concerned for his son.

As bodies were popping up with the Halloween decorations.

“Of course, let me just—”

She was startled when he moved, when she felt the sharpness of a blade against her rib cage.

“No,” he told her, smiling. “Just come quietly now.”

“Come quietly? Come where? I guess you are the killer. Enjoying all the havoc you’ve created. Come with you. You want to kill me in front of your son?” Angela demanded.

“I could kill you right here in the blink of an eye. You might have realized I know exactly what I’m doing with a knife,” he told her. “Now, here’s the thing. That isn’t my son back at the house. Oh, ouch! That isn’t even my house. But you know my dear ‘wife’ does not like children at all, and she’s watching over the boy, so . . . no fuss! Wave to the others, and just come along with me. If not, I kill you now; and when I’m arrested, the boy dies.”

Angela managed to smile sweetly. “I will come along with you.”

“I figured you might. Though honestly, you must have an inflated picture of yourself—you must know that I intend to kill you both eventually! What a beautiful, beautiful decoration you will make! All that blond hair—I think I’ll make you a princess. And it’s all okay. I counted on the fact you’d be convinced you could save the kid and yourself.”

“Don’t kill the kid.”

She turned to smile back at Jackson.

No, she wasn't so convinced she could save herself and the child.

But she believed Jackson could. And she told him, with her sweet smile and wave, that something was very, very wrong.

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"Someone! Anyone!"

Jackson was ready to move when he saw the man in the crowd, the many crying out, trying to touch others . . .

Some of them gave little shudders at his touch, but none seemed to hear him.

Of course, Jackson knew why.

The man was dead.

"Dante, something is up. I know by the way Angela looked at me. Stay on the phone—"

"If you know something, I'll get officers out—"

"No! Just listen for my call or text. I'm afraid we're going to need to be careful to avoid being seen. This kind of killer will take anyone with him if he thinks he's going to die," Jackson said. "Please, trust me."

He moved through the crowd, speaking softly when he reached the spirit of the dead man.

"I can see you; I can hear you."

"That man, that awful man! That young woman just went with him. He isn't Greg Eaton. Greg Eaton is my grandson, and he's at work. This man is Emory Dalton. He isn't married, and that isn't his child in the house. The boy was kidnapped. The two of them . . .

him and that woman; they, oh God, they get off on what they're doing! She likes to help, she likes to lick blood . . .”

The ghost's voice trailed, and he shook his head.

Jackson studied the man briefly; he had been older at his death, somewhere between seventy and eighty. He was always grateful when the dead he met were older; they had at least lived good lives. And this man—

“Charles Eaton,” the ghost told him. “During my life, I restored half the old homes in the French Quarter. I love New Orleans. I watched the good and the bad, but this horrible monster . . . he's just taken that woman—”

“My wife and partner; she's an agent. She'll keep playing him. She's good; and I'm going to get there as quickly as I dare, and she'll know how to work it with me.”

“I watched him; I watched him, and I couldn't stop him!” Jackson's newfound ghost friend told him. “He was ranting as he chopped up the body he left in the trees; he's killing people he thinks wronged him. And he doesn't understand that my grandson cares about the work he does at City Hall. And suffice it to say, this bastard was fired for being totally inefficient. Apparently, he wanted to run for some kind of office . . . the body parts on the shore is that of a fellow who dated his ex-wife. The pieces in the trees . . . well, they belong to the man who fired him.”

These were all things that Dante needed to know, but Jackson was hurrying to his car. The man—Emory Dalton—had evidently followed them, and he would recognize the car. But there was a clump of trees at the corner near Jack Dupree's house, and he could park there and slip around.



“He will kill them!” the ghost whispered. “And he’ll try to frame my grandson!”

“We will stop this. Because you can help me,” Jackson told him.

“No one even sees me. I can’t fire a gun. I can’t—I can’t even fight with a knife!” the ghost said.

“But you can tell Angela we’re there; and I’m willing to bet, you can create a distraction,” Jackson assured him.

The ghost didn’t bother to open the passenger’s door when they reached the car, but he did slide in. Jackson drove as quickly as he could while carefully taking a route that brought him through the Quarter rather than around it, and taking backstreets rather than the more direct way on Canal, not wanting to be seen following the man, Angela, or the car.

He’d moved quickly.

That or Emory hit a lot of traffic lights, because he’d hidden the car; and he and the ghost had emerged when Emory Dalton drove up to the house.

He had made Angela drive; he had her Glock and was holding it on her as they exited the car.

Jackson contemplated taking a shot; he was just a little too far away to guarantee he wouldn’t hit Angela instead.

He let them head into the house. Then he nodded at the ghost, and the two of them hurried to the house where Emory Dalton had taken Angela.

“Get in there and report back to me,” Jackson told the ghost. He pointed to the front windows of the home that had been built in the mid eighteen-hundreds.

“I know the house,” Charles Eaton told him. “I was called out to repair some damage in the back after a bad storm. The owners wanted to move west, and I’d fallen in love with the place, so I bought it. There’s a back door and it has a code. The code is 8847. You can slip in!”

*Nice! And of course, the house had once belonged to Charles Eaton!*

“I’ll still need help. Sir, can you knock books over, create any small disturbance?” Jackson asked.

The ghost nodded grimly. “Get in that way, and I’ll see to it the coast is clear from that back door. Kitchen flows into a dining room; there’s a front parlor. He’s been keeping the kid in the music room, second archway after the parlor.”

“Got it!” Jackson said. “Thank you! Thank you so much.”

“No! Thank you!” the ghost whispered. “He either plans to frame my grandson or kill him—or both. Please, please . . . make this the reason I stayed!” he whispered.

Jackson nodded, assuring him. “We will stop this. You and me,” he said.

And he prayed he was right.

Angela, he told himself, could hold her own. She had done so many times in their years with the Krewe.

She would do so today.

As the ghost of Charles Eaton slipped through the door, Jackson quickly made his way around the back of the house.

The back door code box was there, just as the ghost had said. He keyed in the numbers Charles Eaton had given him. The door lock silently sprang open, and he slipped into the house.

The minute he had done so, he heard the boy crying.

And he heard the man he now knew to be Emory Dalton laughing with the woman, pushing the boy in front of Angela.

“So, little boy, little boy! Do I cut you up in front of her, or cut her up in front of you?” he asked.

“Let the kid go!” Angela said. “There can’t be any fun in chopping him up. And, no offense, but you’re an idiot. People saw me leave with you. They’re never going to believe Greg killed us because they know—”

“Oh, honey, honey!” the woman said. “Greg will come home, and we’ll shoot him with your gun. It’s all perfectly planned. It will look like he went on a killing spree—such a smart, dedicated man, you know—and before you bled out, you managed to shoot him! Come on now, we’ve figured it all out!”

If the situation wasn’t so dire, Jackson might have smiled.

Because Angela knew he was there; the ghost was at her side.

Emory Dalton had the gun; the woman was brandishing the knife. Angela saw him and gave him a nod, grabbing the boy and ducking.

Jackson took the shot, bringing Emory Dalton down.

And Angela shoved the little boy aside before lunging with precision at the woman, knocking her off her feet, sending the knife flying across the room.

Jackson hurried out from the dining room, producing zip-tie cuffs and lowering himself by Angela to cuff the woman.

Angela stood.

“Sir! Thank you!” she told the ghost.

“Thank you, thank you!” Jackson whispered.

The woman lay on the floor, alternately cursing and swearing she’d been forced into doing everything lest she wind up in pieces herself. She screamed they were crazy, talking to the air, and they had been the killers themselves.

The little boy was crying. Angela loved children and she was great with them. She promised him they would get him back to his mommy and daddy.

Jackson called Dante; officers and an ambulance were on the way. He’d shot Emory Dalton in the right shoulder; the man had a chance of living, but Jackson had been more intent on him losing the gun than on killing him.

They had learned many things in the field. A kill shot was sometimes necessary. And sometimes, it was right to remember they weren’t juries or judges.

Soon, it seemed that sirens were going off everywhere. In the middle of the chaos, the real Greg Eaton returned home.

The ghost of his grandfather appeared to be weeping as his grandson learned about the plot against him. He was stunned. And grateful.

Jackson and Angela spoke with him along with Dante. The ghost of Charles Eaton looked on.

And when the woman had been brought away by the police, Emory Dalton taken away by the ambulance, and child services had come for the boy, it was time for them to leave.

Dante wanted to take them to dinner.

The ghost of Charles Eaton wanted just a minute.

Jackson looked at Angela and knew she wanted just one thing.

To go home. But she would spend time first with Charles, thanking him again and again, and accepting his belief it was now time for him to move on.

If he chose not to, of course, they'd find him again. They seemed to wind up in New Orleans often enough.

They managed a few minutes alone out by the car, the three of them incredibly grateful, Angela for her life and that of the child, Charles for his grandson, a good man with tremendous promise.

Charles gave Angela a massive hug. She more or less managed to give him one in return.

But then Charles slipped back in the house; he was going to watch over his grandson while he grappled with the terrible things that had been done by a bitter man he had once known.

Angela agreed they could have dinner with Dante, if they headed home right after.

And it was good.

They expected no less from anyone associated with Adam Harrison.

"How did you . . . how did you know how to get in the house?" Dante asked Jackson.

“Uh, luck?” Jackson suggested.

But Dante laughed. “You forget, Adam Harrison is my great uncle! If there was someone special.”

Jackson glanced at Angela. She glanced at him and shrugged.

“The real Greg Eaton’s grandfather,” she said softly.

Dante nodded, not missing a beat. “I just wanted to know, to have a special commendation to the man at church this week.”

“I’m sure that would be appreciated!” Jackson assured him.

Dinner was good.

Then, their plane was waiting.

\*

Halloween!

The day itself had been an ancient pagan holiday, one celebrated by Druids and more. It cleverly became the night before All Saint’s Day, and in the United States maybe the most wonderful commercial holiday next to Christmas.

Angela had always loved Halloween, especially because their children loved Halloween.

And returning home with just two days to spare, she was delighted that Mary Tiger, while watching the children in their absence, had given them a few great costumes.

Little Victoria Sophia dressed as a princess.

Corbin was Batman.

And though it was really hard to get together so quickly . . .

## A Ghoulishly Grim Halloween/Heather Graham

They managed to have a “Princess and Superhero” party for Halloween.

No ghouls.

No goblins.

No zombies.

Just carving pumpkins and playing with makeup and games and . . .

They watched the kids have fun.

Angela felt Jackson behind her, slipping his arms around her.

“Happy Halloween!” he whispered. “To my princess, of course.”

She turned into his arms. Victoria was Sleeping Beauty. She had decided that she’d dress up as Rapunzel.

And Jackson . . .

“And to the man who is always my superhero!” she assured him. Because, of course, he had dressed as Superman.

Others could have *ghoulish* fun that Halloween. When it wasn’t real, it could be fun.

But for them . . .

Well, they’d had enough of the ghastly and grim . . . when it had been real.

And there was nothing at all like children for a holiday, a beautiful little princess and a wonderful young superhero!

A Ghoulishly Grim Halloween/Heather Graham