

The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face, with her right eye looking directly at the viewer. Her hand is visible near her mouth, which is partially obscured by a dark, jagged tear in the paper. A dog tag with a diamond-encrusted ring is attached to a pearl necklace. The background is a textured, yellowish-green surface with faint, repeating text. The author's name 'HEIDI GLICK' is at the top, and the title 'DOG TAGS' is in large, white, outlined letters across the middle and bottom.

HEIDI
GLICK

DOG
TAGS

YOU BELONG WITH ME. YOU'LL SEE.
I'LL PROVE IT TO YOU.

Dog Tags

Heidi Glick

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Dog Tags

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my father, Jack Mountz, who served as a shining example of Christ's love.

Thank you to my Lord and Savior, Jesus; my husband; my family; my friends; content experts; my critique partners; and Pelican Book Group.

Praise for Dog Tags

In *Dog Tags*, author Heidi Glick, composes a provocative and compelling novel. This gripping suspense story has well-developed, realistic characters, and a scintillating plot line. I couldn't put it down until I'd finished it!

~Marcy G. Dyer, author of *Down and Out*.

Breakout author, Heidi Glick, scores with a brilliantly fast-paced romance infused with a mystery that has twists and turns you'll never see coming.

~ Suzanne Hartmann, author of *Fast Track Thrillers, Peril and Conspiracy*

Heidi Glick accomplished her mission with *Dog Tags*. Her debut novel is a great mix of suspense, mystery and romance. Mark and Elizabeth are both authentic and delightful as they navigate through secrets and danger on the way to love. Well-researched, beautifully told, *Dog Tags* is a winner.

~Carole Towriss *In the Shadow of Sinai*,
November 2012

Prologue

The Knight's mind clouded over, like fog settling over the local San Diego metro area. One thing was clear as he sat in his white, sparsely furnished living room: his goal. He must continue his quest to help damsels in distress, ones like Juanita. He hoped she'd listen to him, that she'd understand he only tried to protect her, that she'd appreciate his chivalry. But as he'd learned from experience, the women he chose to rescue might not always be cooperative. Being a knight in shining armor did not always prove an easy task.

The finger in the jar atop the entertainment center served as a reminder: death was far kinder than the fate Juanita could have suffered at the hands of that other man. No matter what society thought, the Knight had done the right thing.

He removed the latex gloves he'd used to handle the jar and hurried over to the stainless steel kitchen sink—spotless and sterile, the way he liked it. He used his foot to open the trashcan and tossed the gloves inside. With great care, three times he washed his hands with antibacterial soap, rubbed them against each other under the warm water, and grabbed a paper towel. Infernal germs lived everywhere. One could never be too careful. Just look at how pneumonia had killed Mom.

His thoughts raced. A bottle of pills sat in the distance. The medication would soothe him, but that

could wait. He needed a clear mind for the task ahead.

He released a sigh, sat at his computer, and navigated to the Riversdale Community College website, where he clicked on a picture of the women's basketball team. Using the mouse, he zoomed in closer on the team captain. The next woman he'd help.

Beautiful and helpless. Another fair lady in need of his assistance. Her eyes called out to him, begged him to rescue her.

He opened an image he'd taken of the woman and her wheelchair-bound male friend chatting in the middle of the campus quad. The Knight hit the print button and grabbed the finished page.

A second Internet browser tab allowed him to search the college's website for clues pointing to the woman's major of study: chemistry. So far, she sounded intelligent. Maybe he could help this one without having to resort to drastic measures. He eyed the ammo on the dining table. Still, it didn't hurt to take precautions.

1

Mark Graham closed the book atop his shortened podium. “That’s it for today, class. Please read chapters twenty-three through twenty-five for next week.”

The afternoon History of Civilizations lecture on ancient fraternal organizations and mysterious societies ended—a topic that never ceased to interest his students. Who didn’t love hearing about a good secret? So long as they weren’t discussing *his* secrets. He rubbed tired eyes. His secrets would be his undoing. The recurring dream of the ambush had awakened him last night, and he hadn’t been able to return to sleep.

Mark packed his lecture notes into his brown leather briefcase, ready to leave Riversdale Community College for the day. As he rolled his wheelchair out of the stucco building, he crossed paths with two brunette female basketball players who took his morning class. They waved, and he continued to the parking lot.

If no one else stopped to chat, maybe he could leave on time for a change, not that it mattered. At thirty-one years of age, he didn’t have much to go home to—no wife, no kids, and no prospects. Just a little black dog named Sparky.

Once outside Peterson Hall, Mark undid the top button of his dress shirt and wriggled his tie loose. With his luck, the college would finally relax the dress code a year after retirement. He folded his silk tie and placed it in his briefcase. Order had its place, but he

worked alongside junior college students, not businessmen.

He ran his fingers through his hair. Ten years had passed, yet it was strange not to have the standard, Marine-issue haircut. Still, he didn't miss it.

Mark rolled his wheelchair to the faculty parking lot and unlocked his van. New vehicle, new job. He really had made a successful new start. After using a remote to open the right side door of the van, he maneuvered onto his wheelchair ramp, into the driver's side area, and locked his wheelchair in place. He remotely took care of the ramp then tossed his briefcase onto the passenger seat.

He drove south on Pacific Coast Highway, past the naval station, using hand controls to steer the vehicle. With the windows cracked, the chatter of seagulls resonated in the distance.

Mark pulled into the back parking lot of the bait and tackle store he co-owned with two Marine buddies. As much as he wanted to forget his time in the military, Bill and Tim Wilson offered him a job in California near the base where their unit had once been stationed, at a time when he was more than happy to leave his hometown in Ohio. A wooden sign hung slightly crooked in front of Fishy Business. He'd have to get that fixed. Hints of the original brick exterior of the former convenience store peeked out from beneath the newer stucco façade.

Using his wheelchair ramp, Mark exited the van. A slight ocean breeze touched his face. Pretty rare for that time of year. He couldn't complain, as it offered a refreshing break from the dry heat. Salty marine air pervaded as he wheeled through the back door.

Tim Wilson stared out the front window as a

young brunette stepped out of an older-model sedan and walked to the pay phone.

Arms crossed, Tim glanced at him. "Who uses a pay phone?"

Mark shrugged. "Guess it's good we haven't had enough dough to completely remodel the place."

"Why not use a cell phone?" Tim continued.

"Maybe it's out of juice. Give the woman a break." Someone that stunning had to have a good reason.

Tim stared out the window again. "Who forgets to charge their phone?"

"Some people are more on top of stuff like that than others." The need to defend her arose, and yet Mark wasn't sure why, except perhaps he hoped she had a good reason. And because he wanted to be the one to find out what it was.

The woman wore flared blue jeans, a white blouse, and brown sandals. The simple outfit complimented her petite frame rather nicely. Tim's type, or so he bragged.

A brunette, eh? Mark cracked his knuckles. He'd better meet her before his friend reached her first. Sure he may be in a wheelchair, but he wasn't dead. Not yet, at least.

He winked at Tim. "While you stand there, I'll go offer my assistance."

"OK, professor, you do that." Tim raised his voice. "Maybe you can enlighten her with facts about the history of the telephone."

"So I'm a history buff. Big deal." Mark went outside. "Excuse me, miss. I couldn't help but notice you used the pay phone."

She looked him in the eyes, as if studying his face, and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Most looked at

the wheelchair and turned away, but she ignored it altogether. "Is there a problem, sir?"

He rubbed his chin. "Well, that's what I was going to ask you. Do you need help with something?"

"Actually, yes. My cell phone's dead, and I left my car charger in my other bag at my apartment." She pushed her pink lips forward into a pout.

Bingo. He'd guessed right. A beautiful damsel in distress. Time to do something about that.

The woman continued. "I needed to make a call to AAA but couldn't get through. Maybe I dialed the wrong number. I have it in my car...somewhere." She walked toward her vehicle. A set of drama masks dangled from her keychain, jingling as she moved.

Thespian. Forgot to charge her cell phone and left the car charger at home. Probably a free spirit. He'd taught long enough to know the type. He followed along behind her. "Sounds like you have car problems. Maybe I can assist you?"

She turned. "Oh, that'd be great. I have a flat tire."

"I'll be right back." Mark went inside, grabbed a cola, and wheeled over to the utility closet. Various chemicals lined the shelves inside. He located a can of tire sealant next to a bottle of glass cleaner. Mark shook his head. Tim's organization of the store shelves proved less than efficient.

Tim swept a nearby section of the commercial-grade floor tile. "Looking for something?"

"Yeah, this." He held up the can of sealant and set it in his lap then went outside and handed the woman the soda. "Here, enjoy this. It might be a while."

"Thanks." She smiled, popped open the top of the can, and took a sip.

Examining her tire, Mark ran his hands along the

grooved surface. An object was lodged in a tread near the top of the tire. He pointed it out to her. "You must have picked up a nail from the road."

As she leaned in closer, she locked eyes with him then glanced away. "That can't be good."

"No, but it's not sticking out too far, so I'll put some sealant on it. Hopefully, that'll give you enough time to get it to a tire shop and get a new tire." Good thing the valve stem sat near the top of the tire. No need to ask Tim for help. Once he removed the nail and the valve cap, he injected the substance inside the valve stem. A scent like permanent marker solvent filled the air. After setting the tire sealant can in his lap, he removed a beige business card from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. "If you have any more problems with the tire before you get to the mechanic, give me a call." He crossed his arms. "Then again, I'm not sure how you're going to call me if your phone's dead. I can follow you to the nearest garage if you'd like."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll be all right."

Caution to the wind. Fine on her own. Yep, definitely an independent mind.

The woman glanced at the card then scowled as she walked away.

Or maybe she didn't want his help. Perhaps she didn't take kindly to strangers. "Everything OK?"

The woman stopped, held up the card, and turned around. "It says here you're Mark Graham."

"That's right." She appeared to be older than the average Riversdale Community College student—mid-twenties perhaps. But if she did attend there, that made her completely off limits. "Are you taking one of my classes next semester?"

"No."

An attractive woman. Not a student, yet she knew him. Interesting. "Should I know you?"

She gave him a once over. "Nah." The woman began to walk away but stopped. "Mark Graham from Beaumont, Ohio?"

He flinched. His mind searched through memories of all the pretty girls from home, but he drew a blank. "I'm sorry I can't remember your name, though I wish I did." He bit back a grin.

She stretched out her hand to shake his. "Beth...Elizabeth Martindale."

The warmth of her touch jolted him, and it took a moment for her words to register. He studied her face again and factored in for age progression. Those cheekbones, that nose. Yep, a Martindale all right. Heat raced up his cheeks as he remembered his earlier thoughts. Very complicated. She might as well have been a student—definitely in the untouchable, out-of-reach category.

Beth stared at him then at the ground.

Had she noticed the look of fear that must have shown on his face?

"Anyway, thanks." She walked toward her car.

"You're welcome." His mind flashed back to the last time he'd seen Private Martindale, or his sister, for that matter. The only thing about her appearance that might have given away her identity earlier was her slight Midwestern accent, which he recognized the more she spoke. What was she doing here?

Beth rested one hand on the door handle before entering her car. She turned toward him. "I have a question for you. Sort of personal. But you're here, so I might as well ask."

Had she recognized him in front of the Hometown

Dog Tags

Café, ten years prior? He'd stopped in Beaumont for coffee on his last trip home, but as he'd left, he ran into Beth. Back then, she'd been so young, and she'd given little indication she'd recognized him. Shoot, when he'd first come home from duty, he hardly recognized himself. And she certainly had changed over the years—blossomed into a beautiful woman.

"I ran into Bob Overmeyer in Beaumont a few weeks ago. He told me you were injured trying to save my brother." Beth lowered her voice. "Is that true?"

Leave it to Overmeyer to have such a big mouth. Mark avoided eye contact. How much did she know? His shoulders tensed.

2

The Knight sat in his vehicle during a break and perused the *Riversdale Herald*. The investigation into Juanita Martinez's death ended nine months prior, and yet the Riversdale Police Department was still trying to dig up clues, always one step behind the Knight, or so it appeared. But there were ways of throwing them off.

The afternoon sun coming in through the windshield proved harsh. The Knight flipped down his visor and continued reading. A robbery had taken place at a pawn shop two nights earlier over on Third and Bayshore. The thieves had stolen weapons and ammo. The Riversdale PD investigated and asked for witnesses to come forward with any clues. The Knight finished part of his break-time snack, removed a disposable, prepaid cell phone from his pocket, and dialed the tip hotline. "Hello. I'm calling about the robbery at Surfside Pawn. I was parked nearby when it happened. I saw two, no, make that three, men enter the store. One was Hispanic, one was African American, and one was Caucasian. The Caucasian man was in a wheelchair. Um, he sat outside, probably their lookout man."

"Where were you parked, sir?" a nasally female voice asked.

"Across the street."

"You mean in the parking lot of the grocery store?"

"Uh, yes."

“Did you notice anything else unusual about the men? Happen to see what kind of vehicle they drove?”

“They drove a dark SUV, black or blue. The Hispanic man had tattoos all over his arms. Looked like anchors, sailor type stuff.” Being close to the sea, plenty of men should fit the description. That ought to keep Riversdale PD occupied.

“OK, may I have your number in case we need to ask you anything else?”

He ended the call. The cops had what they needed—a trail to follow. As long as the path didn’t lead back to the Knight, things were good, and even better if he could cast suspicion on a man in a wheelchair.

He rubbed his arm and remembered the first warning he received when he found his stepdad could walk and used his wheelchair as an excuse. A cigarette burn reminded him not to tell anyone what he’d seen. And the man who’d tried to steal Juanita away, warning her about the Knight—he’d been in a wheelchair, too. So when the basketball team captain smiled while talking to a fellow student who was in a wheelchair, the Knight figured the girl could easily use his help, just as Juanita did. He’d be the one to rescue her from another man in a wheelchair. Even if he couldn’t rescue Mom from his stepdad, the Knight could still help other women.

3

Mark's encounter with Beth in front of the café had been long ago. She surely couldn't remember that. Besides, chances were she hadn't recognized him then. Good thing a nonconformist didn't pay attention to detail.

Having stepped away from her car, Beth stood in the parking lot of Fishy Business, a few feet from his wheelchair. The afternoon sun reflected light off a shimmery silver toe ring on her right foot, causing Mark to squint.

Beth sighed. "You never returned to see my family. Never spoke to any of us. It would have been comforting for my mom and dad to know you tried to save their son."

Patrons walked by and waved at him before entering the store—people who didn't know about his failed rescue attempt, and he wanted to keep it that way.

He shrugged and lowered his voice. "Everyone got hurt, right? Am I any better than anyone else?" Sympathy. The last thing he wanted from anyone.

"I appreciate what you did. You put yourself at risk to save my brother. Thank you." Beth bent over and gave him a slight hug. A floral scent wafted in his direction. After thirty seconds of awkward silence, she walked away.

"He would have done the same for me."

Beth turned to face him. "Regardless, you laid

down your life for your friend.”

Interesting choice of words. “Are you going to be in the area for a while on vacation or...”

“I took a teaching job in Warner’s Bay. I found an apartment, but I’m still in the process of moving in.”

“Warner’s Bay.” He scratched his head. “That’s about twenty minutes away from here, right?” Was asking a question he already knew the answer to a form of lying? Some sort of deception at least. Quite out of character for him. But fear can make a man do strange things.

She nodded and looked at the ground. “In his letters home, Chris made this area sound exciting.” She smiled. “I decided to check it out for myself. Maybe find out more about why he liked it so much.”

Moving on a whim. Then again, he’d sort of done the same. But for different reasons. Ones he preferred to keep to himself. “I teach at Riversdale Community College during the day, but on the evenings and weekends, my buddies and I run Fishy Business. The number’s on the card I gave you. If you need anything else, let me know. If I can’t help, I have friends who can.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have offered to assist her. In doing so, he might run into Mr. and Mrs. Martindale. What did Beth know about the past, and what might she find out?

Lord, help me.

Mark entered the employee restroom, carrying a small duffel bag. Changing out of his work shirt felt good. Afterward, he went to the back of the store,

opened the lid on the bait freezer, and inhaled. Chum, sweet chum. He chuckled and set his bag on the floor by his desk then began to review the company books. Lucky him—being elected to manage the company finances. But at least his math skills had given Bill and Tim a reason to partner with him. Mark manually performed several calculations and recorded them. He scratched his head for a moment and smiled. No reason to complain. Business was good.

He sniffed. Nacho cheese. That could only mean one thing—Tim was nearby.

“What kept you so long?” Tim asked. “The night crawlers have been restless without you here.”

Mark kept his head in the books, entered a number into his calculator, then proofed it against a number in the ledger to ensure he’d entered it correctly. When did Dalton invent the modern calculator—1902? Mark set down the calculator, turned to face his two friends and attempted to take an interest. “The night crawlers? Restless? Really?”

“That’s a joke.” Tim held a bag of chips in one hand and wiped his cheese-covered hand on his denim shorts.

Mark raised an eyebrow. It wouldn’t hurt Tim to at least try to prevent crumbs from falling on the floor.

Bill Wilson stood nearby at the register, perusing a comic book. “If that was a joke, then it was a lousy one.”

Mark grinned as Tim flashed Bill a dirty look. How could two brothers be so different? “I knew our stranded traveler, so we chatted for a while.”

“A student from Riversdale?” Tim asked. “Because you can’t date students, but you could introduce her to me. She is one, isn’t she? Does she play sports?”

Volleyball? Basketball?"

Could Tim think about anything other than food, fishing, or women? Mark sighed and shook his head. "Someone from back home." He didn't have to specify who.

The snack vending truck pulled into the driveway as Tim munched on more nacho cheese-flavored chips.

"Does she need help with anything?" Bill asked.

The door opened, and a bell announced the presence of Randy, the snack vendor. The lanky man entered, bringing in products to restock the store. Mark held his ledger away from his face and squinted. Time to restock again already? He wheeled over to the counter and picked up a pair of reading glasses then moved back to his desk. "I fixed her tire. She didn't say she needed anything else, so I assume we won't be hearing from her." He reached into his pocket for his cell phone and ensured it was turned on. Just in case.

Tim tilted his head. "Your hometown was pretty small, wasn't it?" He popped a chip in his mouth.

Mark peered at Tim over the top of the books. "And your point is?"

His friend shrugged and finished munching his chip. "What are the chances of running into someone from back home?"

"Well, and someone related..." Mark bit his lip. It was too late to reel the words back into his mouth like a large kelp bass on a line.

Tim's hazel eyes widened, providing a stark contrast with his ginger-colored mop. "Related to...?"

Mark clenched his jaw.

His friend took a break from his chip fest for a moment. "Details, I want details."

Mark glanced at his ledger and continued