

**HEIDI
GLICK**

***HOLD FOR
RELEASE***

**BITTERNESS | ONE WILL CHOOSE FORGIVENESS
ONE WILL CHOOSE REVENGE...**

Hold for Release

Heidi Glick

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my mother, Elizabeth Mountz. When I was a child, my mom taught me to go back and revise my work and to do my best.

I'd like to thank her for her love and support.

I'd also like to thank God; my husband (John Glick); Pelican Book Group; my BSF group; my ACFW Scribes critique partners; my beta readers (Laura Spelliscy and Jeffrey Reynolds); my sensitivity reader (Jessy Alvarado); the Cops and Writers forum on Facebook; fellow author and retired nurse, Marcy Dyer, and retired nurse, Melissa Gauvin; and fellow author, historian, and retired police officer, Wesley Harris. All mistakes are my own.

1

“Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;” Hebrews 12:15, KJV

A scream escaped Carlotta Hartman’s lips as the overhead light revealed its hidden secret.

Red everywhere.

So much blood.

Chills swept down Carlotta’s spine as she inched closer to the lifeless creature lying nearby on the animal shelter floor. The worn, green linoleum provided a stark contrast to the surrounding crimson liquid. She swiped at the trickle on her face. She hadn’t even realized tears were running down her cheeks. The poor dog.

After locking the front door behind her, Carlotta crept along the dim-lit hall, rounded the corner, and entered the supply room at the end of the hallway. She clasped a hand over her mouth. Six dead dogs. All lying in their own blood. Were there others?

Horrible things happened in the Queen City—or in those romantic suspense novels she kept at her day job on the shelves at the Hyde Park Branch of the Cincinnati Public Library—but never to her. Sure,

awful things happened. Her husband, Jake, even reported on them. They just never happened to the two of them.

Carlotta wiped sweat beads off her neck and then crouched to inspect each corpse. Throats all slit. At least they'd died quick. She wiped a hand across her face, as tears poured down.

Dogs barked in the distance.

She jumped up, crouched in a defensive stance, and scanned the room for a potential weapon. A bright orange cell phone lay on the floor of the adjoining area. Not *any* device—*Ed's*. Her stomach churned.

Scissors glinted on the nearest counter. She snatched them and turned the blades outward. Smoke assaulted her nostrils, and she followed the scent. A flick of the switch and light illuminated Ed Gorman's darkened office. A fire raged in the metal trashcan.

"Ed?" After locking the door to his office, Carlotta inched closer.

A blue t-shirt and khaki shorts adorned the lifeless form on the floor behind the desk, a wrinkled issue of the local newspaper atop his chest. She set it aside and then sneaked closer to verify the body as Ed's.

He lay still. Burnt papers, a half-burnt flag with a peace sign on it, and a shattered dove figurine were heaped in a metal wastebasket two feet from the body. Why had someone done this, and how had they gotten in? It was like some dark tale told by Uncle Ramon to amuse her and her siblings. Only this wasn't meant to entertain.

Discarding the scissors, Carlotta searched for her

boss's pulse. Nonexistent. She leaned closer. No knife wounds on his body. "Ed, are you OK?" Using clammy hands, she shook him. Her heart was slowing into heavy beats that made her sluggish. Terror gripped her insides. But she needed to help him. It took every ounce of will to shake him again. No response. Bending down near his mouth, she listened for breaths and counted. Ten. Eight. Four. One.

No gasping, no breathing at all.

Carlotta dialed 9-1-1.

"Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?"

"Um. I'm at the animal shelter on Madison Road. And someone..." Carlotta choked back a sob. "Some lowlife hurt the volunteer coordinator and killed several dogs. I locked the front door of the animal shelter."

"Is there anyone else there with you?"

"Just the coordinator. He's unresponsive. I'm starting CPR."

Carlotta put her phone on speaker and set it on the floor. She positioned herself to one side of Ed's body and placed her right hand on his chest, followed by her left hand on top. Kneeling forward and leveraging her body weight, she administered compressions. One. Two. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. Thirty.

"The police will arrive soon," the operator said. "I'll stay on the line with you."

"Thank you." Carlotta tilted Ed's head back, pinched his nose shut, and then delivered one breath. His chest didn't rise. After checking to ensure his head was tilted adequately, she delivered another breath

and clenched her fists. *C'mon, Ed.*

Repositioning her hands on his chest, Carlotta started more compressions. One. Two. Thirty. She checked his mouth. No obstructions. She continued to breathe. Still nothing.

Carlotta slammed her fist on the floor. Why didn't they have an AED device?

She kept compressing. More rescue breaths. Nothing. Carlotta continued compressions. Then she administered two rescue breaths. Back to compressions. Fifth cycle. Then what? Two rescue breaths. Pain shot through her arm muscles, and she sobbed. Five cycles of CPR. No movement, no sounds from Ed.

She felt her arm and then touched him again.

He's cold. Ed's gone. He's really gone. She cradled her head in her hands and sobbed. *I can't help him anymore. What if I'm in danger?* "The v...volunteer co...ordinator is dead." Carlotta's words were shaky as she touched her arm again and then Ed's to confirm. "I've tried CPR, but he's very cold to the touch. Obviously, uh," her voice cracked, "dead."

"OK, ma'am. You tried your best, but I'm concerned about your safety. The police will arrive soon, but I'd like you to try to get outside. The intruder could still be on the premises."

"Uh-uh. I'm locked in an office. I feel safe in here." Her breaths became ragged. She wrapped her hands around her knees and rocked back and forth. "I'm not doing it. Sorry."

"OK, ma'am. But I would feel better if you went

outside.”

Carlotta shifted her attention to the cabinets in Ed’s office. The intruder had broken locks and opened cabinet doors. Supplies littered the floor along with a piece of gauze and a syringe. Had someone killed Ed to get drugs? A month prior, Jake had reported on a burglary at the pharmacy down the street. Memories of her own brother-in-law’s desperation to score heroin flooded her mind. Addicts rarely cared who they hurt, including themselves. Like with Mom and her drinking problem.

The dogs resumed barking.

She sighed. Alone and surrounded by the stench of death and stale air until help arrived.

“I heard a noise. Is everything OK, ma’am?”

“Yes.” Maybe not totally alone. But what good could the operator do if the intruder was still nearby? She peered through the glass window at the top of Ed’s office door. The faulty light fixture at the other end of the building flickered. Her chest pounded harder. Carlotta shook her head. Not a panic attack. Not here, not now.

“Are you sure you’re OK, ma’am?”

“Yes, I...I need...to...take some deep breaths. I’ll be fine.”

Fine. Her standard response to everything in life, even when it wasn’t. Carlotta inhaled deep breaths as she’d learned in an article during her lunch break at the library. She shoved back childhood memories threatening to surface. Her mind grew foggy. Carlotta scrunched her eyes shut. *Think.* She opened them.

Maybe she should listen to the operator and run outside. What if he broke through Ed's office door? He or she. Jake always reminded her not to assume a suspect's gender.

Carlotta shifted her gaze to the other side of Ed's room. The private bathroom. She'd forgotten about it. It adjoined with Ed's office. As she crept closer, the scent of citrus bathroom cleaner became evident. What if she locked herself inside with the intruder?

Ugh. The only room with the light switch behind the door. Using her cell phone display, she provided herself with just enough light. What if the killer noticed it, too? As she prowled closer, goosebumps swept over her. Carlotta tripped over her foot, stumbled for the light switch, and flipped it on. She wandered around the room. Nothing out of the ordinary. She slumped against the wall. Her shoulders relaxed.

A cacophony of barks sounded in the distance, and her stomach danced. Carlotta fidgeted with the gold cross on the chain around her neck. It'd been a while since she'd stepped inside a church or talked to God. Would He listen to her now?

Jake had prayed for his dad to live. Clearly, that hadn't turned out. Who was to say God would protect her? Where was He during the huge thunderstorm when she was little? She swiped a tear and shook her head.

If only Jake were around to protect her. She'd melt into his arms. They'd had some arguments as of late, but once she got out of there...no way she could be angry with him.

~*~

Jake Hartman sat at his desk and played with his gold wedding band. An image of his fiery, petite brunette wife flashed through his mind. How mad would Carlotta be once he saw her later that evening?

Jake repositioned a framed photo of an article about journalist Victor Riesel on his desk to reveal the rose bouquet behind it. Leaning in closer, he took in the floral, fragrant smell and then grabbed the bouquet. After lifting the flowers, ready to toss them in the trash, he set them back down and covered his face with his hands. What was he thinking? As if flowers would compensate for his wrong. He shifted good ole' Victor's photo in front of the roses.

Jake's shoulders tightened. Poor Victor. Having a gangster exact retribution on him. Revenge. What an ugly thing. It happened to journalists sometimes—being hurt or killed. Shaking his head, Jake shifted his gaze back to the flowers.

He sighed. The bouquet wouldn't make up for his mess. Got to start somewhere. Jake rubbed his neck. Maybe two dozen flowers would have been better. At least he had time to stop off at the florist's shop on his way back from interviewing the mayor. Not his most exciting interview as a journalist, but more desirable than writing recipes for the food section of the newspaper. At least Stu tossed most of the crime reporting gigs his way. They were the assignments bosses often gave to the newbies, yet Jake found a thrill in them. Not the crimes themselves. But wondering

what made someone tick, what set them off. And of course, there were the victims. He wanted to write about them with dignity. Could a reporter straight out of college do as good of a job as he could?

As a journalist, he was driven by a need to uncover the truth. Still, over the years, compassion fatigue set in. How many tragedies could he get worked up over? But people talked to him. He had a way of getting them to open up. Otherwise, Stu might overlook him for some of the younger employees. And yet, by now, he hoped to be higher up the rungs on the career ladder, closer to senior editor.

No, his career wasn't turning out as planned. A lot like his marriage. Jake cracked his knuckles. Was it wrong to want a pleasant, peaceful evening where Carlotta would eventually forget everything? He huffed. As if that would happen. Regardless of what he wanted, what happened with Allison was like a breaking story begging to be told. The truth needed to come out. If only he knew what the truth was. Jake rubbed his eyes, trying to remember.

He'd had a drink or two. He didn't remember being drunk, but he couldn't recall much else, either. Maybe it was a blessing that he couldn't. *Not that Carlotta will believe me.* Even donning a scarlet letter might not appease her.

He curled his hands inward. His mind raced to the past. As a young man, he'd squirmed next to Granny on a hard wooden church pew. From the pulpit, the loud, fiery preacher yelled a slew of acrid remarks about various topics. The Big A happened to be one of

them. If Jake took as much stock in God as Granny did, that might be a conundrum. But he'd graduated to other ways of thinking. Not that the God stuff was all bad. Loving your neighbor, being nice. Some of it was helpful. Like any article, Jake edited out the bad, kept the good. Whatever worked with his philosophy of life.

As for Carlotta, all he could offer her about the night in question was what he could remember. Then, and only then, could the two of them move forward, get past this. Speaking of things to fix...

Shifting his focus to his work assignment, Jake killed the last section of his story on the current Cincinnati mayor, rewrote and saved it, and shut down the computer. He located his to-do list and crossed off his last item. Good thing Carlotta had suggested creating one.

With Stu close to retirement, a handful of news pieces like this latest, and Jake would replace his boss as senior editor and gain more control over his assignments. Half the time, Stu took credit for his story ideas. He stole a glance at his boss across the office. If only he could speak up. Nope. Better to bide his time than to lose his chance at his dream job. Besides, while he was an accomplished news journalist, he'd made his share of mistakes.

But his actual goal—how badly he wanted it—Carlotta wouldn't understand or care. For years, she'd helped him stay on task, avoid procrastination, and keep track of things. These days, he could drop dead, and she probably wouldn't notice. Only one thing on her mind, and it wasn't him. And presumably not fun,

excitement, or adventure, either.

He opened his top left drawer and sifted through it. A paper tumbled out, and he stuffed it back inside. Jake opened the right desk drawer and, after rifling through another pile of papers, located a flyer for an upcoming escape room game in Hyde Park. He set the crumpled pamphlet next to his computer. While he would have more fun zip lining, or kayaking, Carlotta would prefer escape rooms and murder mystery dinners. Before visions of babies had clouded Carlotta's thinking, they could have fun together. The plotting of menstrual cycles, infertility drugs, and trips to the doctor's office had replaced movies, dinner dates, and long walks. Nothing wrong with wanting a baby, but... Carlotta's hopes and dreams had become an obsession.

Jake's cell vibrated, and he leaned back in his office chair. He glanced at the display. An incoming text from Carlotta.

You've got to get over here. Fast.

Carlotta's message sounded frantic. Yikes, something sure flipped her lid. Like how Mom acted anytime Jake would get sick after Dad had died. Cancer changed lives, and not only the person whose life it claimed. Nope, it ate through everyone. Like his faith. God was supposed to be benevolent, but He allowed good people to die.

The phone chimed. Another text from his wife.

Are you working on a story?

So what was the crisis this time? Another failed pregnancy test? Hadn't she checked last week? Jake

focused on the bouquet. Perhaps he should have opted for a puppy instead, attempted to quell her mothering time clock. Adoption wasn't an option. He shook his head. Don't even get him started on her family. Uh-uh. Maybe he could encourage Carlotta to join a women's group at the church around the corner. Too religious for his taste. Still, the men's group had helped him gain some work connections. Not a total waste of time. Jake held his phone and slid one foot at a time back into his loafers. He texted a response.

What is it, baby? Carlotta, R U OK?

Jake's jaw tightened. Had she already found out? Who else would even know?

6 dogs killed.

They didn't own any... oh, *those* dogs, at the animal shelter. Sorry, but they couldn't keep them all. She was always wanting to take in some lost cause. He scratched his head. Like him.

6 are dead.

Bad dog kibble? He responded.

Like the story he'd covered three years ago. Probably another case of cheap, tainted dog chow from Asia.

U sound upset. Have you been taking more of those hormones?

She could be jumpy, especially lately. Like a smoke alarm going off for no reason.

Ed is dead. Thought you'd want a scoop on the story. I'm on the phone with 9-1-1.

A knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

B there soon. B careful.

Delicate hands massaged Jake's shoulders, and their owner let out a sigh. Hands covered his eyes. A sickening, yet familiar, scent of lemons overpowered his senses. Jake spun his office chair around. Buxom-blonde Allison in a tight, hot pink suit. All five feet, ten inches, and one hundred and twenty pounds of her. Jake's cheeks flamed at the knowledge. One time this journalist did not want the facts. Was it his imagination, or had she become more aggressive? Or had he been so desperate to talk to someone else, he'd overlooked obvious warning signs?

That night, Allison had said she wanted advice on an assignment. Not that many years ago, Jake had been the newbie. He knew what it was like. He'd just wanted to help. And then, like any talented journalist, she got him to talk. Yeah, he should have discussed his problems with Carlotta and not with Allison. But Carlotta had been volunteering more and more lately. She didn't have time for him, and that night, Allison did. The alcohol didn't help matters.

"I've been looking all over for you," Allison said.

"I... I interviewed the mayor earlier." Jake stood, averted his gaze, and moved out of her way. "I've gotta go."

Allison blocked Jake's path and grabbed his shoulders. "What is it, sweetie? The wife?"

He quirked a brow. *Why did I ever talk with her?*

"You and I should go out again for drinks," she said. "We could just talk."

Yeah, like last time. No, thanks. Jake pried off Allison's brightly painted claws, put on his sport coat

and black fedora, grabbed his car keys, and dashed down the hall. "A dead man and dogs at the shelter. Carlotta's shaken up." He bit his lip. "She could be in danger." Carlotta just had to be there alone. Who volunteered at night after work? And for a nonprofit, no less. Only Carlotta, the do-gooder. Anything to help her stay busy and keep her from dealing with reality.

A tall, dark-haired, hefty figure stepped closer and stopped short of colliding with him. "Whoa."

The kid from the entertainment section. Todd, No. Keith? Randy, Randy Rader. Likable guy, but somewhat green. Jake performed a double take at Randy's attire—a black shirt with a blue telephone booth and black and blue plaid pants. Apparently, the guy enjoyed watching a certain British science fiction show. Come to think of it, he'd like a time machine himself, so he could go back and avoid spending time with Allison in the first place.

"Oops. My bad." Randy adjusted his glasses. "Hey, did you say dead animals? Where and when?"

"My wife volunteers at the McKinley Animal Shelter. Dogs were killed, also, the director." He pushed past the kid, raced toward the lone elevator, and pressed the lit green arrow.

When the elevator doors opened, Randy tripped as he followed Jake inside and shook his head. "The triad, dude. The McDonald Triad." Hydraulics pressed the elevator doors shut. The shaft creaked.

Jake rubbed his temple. "Huh?" The lingering odor of a variety of hygiene products worn by other employees overwhelmed him.

Randy counted off on his fingers. "You know, bedwetting, fire-setting, animal cruelty. Three characteristics that can predict psychopathic behavior."

Jake loosened the blue tie Carlotta had given him for his last birthday and examined it. "Yeah, I'm familiar with the triad. What does that have to do with this?"

"We've received several reports of arson fires lately. Shelly's on maternity leave. So, I'm working on a story right now. Now those animals at the shelter..."

Bing. The elevator stopped, and the doors opened. Jake stepped forward, teetering on his right foot. One more step and he'd hit the mail guy—tall kid, dark hair, yellow jogging suit—like a giant pencil. Wow, could Pencil Boy's cart be any fuller? After the cart passed, Jake hopped out and darted toward the front door of the *Cincinnati News* building, but then he stopped and oscillated toward his coworker. "What, no number three for your triad, man?"

Randy exited the elevator and shrugged.

Jake stepped closer and patted Randy on the shoulder. "As my math teacher used to say, 'Keep this to yourself.'" He shifted his gaze upward. "And get some new pants. If there is one thing Stu doesn't trust—"

Randy grimaced. "People who speak with accents—"

Jake counted off on his fingers. "Wear plaid, mispronounce names... I gotta go." He hurried outside, his path illuminated by muted lights overhead. He unlocked and opened the door to his

shiny red compact car, climbed inside. and fastened his seat belt. Jake started the car engine and kicked off his brown loafers. Much improved. He grabbed his cell phone and texted Carlotta. *I'm on my way.*

Dogs R barking again. I think someone might B outside.

Maybe it's the police, baby. Any sign of them yet? Ask the 9-1-1 operator. His phone alarm chimed. A reminder to pick up Carlotta for dinner. Perhaps Jake should tell her his news at the animal shelter and not at the restaurant. Might be handy to have some officers on hand, keep the peace.

No. And I smell smoke 2. wondering if I should leave. I better tell the operator.

Arson. Dead animals. Jake dropped his phone. He blew out a breath, muttered a curse, and threw the vehicle in reverse. His wheels screeched as he drove across rows of empty parking spaces and raced out of the parking lot. "Whatever you do, Carly, don't become my next exclusive. I don't want to report on you."