

HOLIDAY SECRETS



Romantic Suspense – Ebook

Cold Harbor – Book 1 – September/2017

Forensic artist, Hannah Perry’s skills made her a valuable asset to the police...

A young woman has been murdered. Her body unidentified. Her skull recently discovered by the police, and Hannah feels compelled to help find the killer. Even if she’s on a much-needed vacation on a secluded island with her young son. She could work on the reconstruction in the evenings while her son slept. But as the woman’s face takes shape, an assailant invades Hannah’s cabin and tries to end her life. Before he can permanently silence her, she and her son flee the island in a small boat. Trouble is, as they approach Cold Harbor, ocean waves capsize the boat, enveloping them both in cold terror.

But it also made her the next target.

Former SEAL Gage Blackwell can’t believe his eyes as he plunges into the raging waters to rescue the pair. Owner of Blackwell Tactical—a law enforcement training facility and protection services agency—Gage pulls the woman he once loved from the angry sea. When he learns of her attack, he vows to protect her while hunting down the killer. Alone and vulnerable, Hannah has to accept Gage’s protection—even if it means staying close to the man who’d once walked out on her without a backward glance.

Chapter One

“Murder and vacation *do not* go together!”

Forensic artist Hannah Perry held her phone away from her ear to keep her friend

Rachel's voice from breaking her eardrum. "Vacation or not, I had to agree to do the reconstruction."

"Had to, no. Wanted to, yes."

"You don't understand. Jane Doe needs a name. She needs me." Hannah waited for Rachel to sigh, but she didn't, and her long silence was even worse.

"I don't pretend to understand how it feels to have a sister abducted and never come home," she finally said. "To be driven every day to help others in similar situations. But I do understand the stress you've been under since Nick died, and you need a break."

Rachel was right. Of course, she was. As a professional counselor, she'd been instrumental in helping Hannah get through the loss of her husband and always knew when Hannah had reached the breaking point. In fact, this vacation was her idea. But...

Hannah's gaze drifted to the woman's unidentified skull perched on the small dining table in the quaint rental cottage. What had this woman looked like? Was she blond, brunette, or maybe she even had blazing red hair like Hannah's. Either way, Jane Doe deserved to be identified. How could Hannah say no to completing a facial reconstruction that might very well lead to the woman's identity and bring closure to her family?

"If you won't think of your own mental health, then think of David," Rachel continued. "He's a little boy, and this is his last vacation before school starts. He needs his mother to be present for him."

"I *am* present," Hannah snapped with more force than necessary. "I only work on the reconstruction at night."

"But I'll bet you think about it during the day."

"Okay, fine, maybe I do, but the investigation has stalled, and Jane has no one else."

Poor Jane. Her body had been discovered in a gravel pit near where Hannah was vacationing on the Oregon coast. She'd barely picked up the keys for the cottage when news spread through town about her career. Then the sheriff had shown up on her doorstep the second morning and pled with her to do a facial reconstruction. After her own sister had been abducted when they were teenagers, Hannah had never been able to refuse anyone needing her help. After all, that was the reason she'd become a forensic artist.

"I appreciate your concern, Rach, but I can't afford to waste time arguing." Hannah smoothed the clay over Jane's high cheekbone to fill in her muscles and stood back to appraise her work.

One more press of her finger above the cheekbone. Yes, that was it. Perfect. The underlying facial structure was perfect.

She let her hand fall and was suddenly aware that Rachel had been talking, but Hannah's work had taken over and she had no idea what Rachel had said.

"You've gone back to the skull, haven't you?" Rachel asked.

"Sorry."

"I guess there's nothing I can say that will convince you to relax and enjoy that fabulous secluded cottage."

"I promise not to think about Jane during the day, but the nights belong to her."

"That's something I guess. Text me a few pictures of you and David having fun."

"You just want proof that I'm following through."

"You know it." Rachel chuckled.

Hannah laughed, and after ending the call, she stretched her arms toward the ceiling covered in white shiplap. She desperately wanted Jane to be identified, but Hannah needed a

short break before starting on the tissue depth markers. She had a bad habit of hunching over the table resulting in headaches if she didn't stretch and get some fresh air.

She crossed over the rough-hewn floors to the front porch only big enough for the two chairs bolted in place. Wind howled from the ocean, battering her body back against the cottage, but the cool air was refreshing. She braced her feet against the late summer storm and stared into the dusky sky. Choppy waves crashed into the rock-lined coast, the spray misting the air. Offshore, a small fishing boat bounced on rough waves, rising and falling with the surf stirred up by an impending storm.

"Foolish to be out in this kind of weather," she muttered as she stepped back inside, forced the door closed, then locked it. She'd been a competitive college rower and had continued rowing for exercise, but even she wouldn't try to navigate such choppy waters, much less in the fading light.

Back at the table, she settled headphones over her ears to tune out the wind. The sultry jazz tones of Garfunkel's "I Only Have Eyes for You" emptied her mind, and she started to cut long tubular erasers.

The song ended, and before the next one started, she heard the floor creak. If she was home in her condo with solid concrete floors, she would jump, but not here. The cottage was set on stilts due to flooding, and it groaned and moaned with even a light wind. Tonight it was positively swaying. Besides, no one else inhabited the island, which was precisely why she'd chosen the secluded location.

The next song spilled through the headphones, and she hummed along as she finished slicing differing-length markers. Once cut, she would attach them to the skull in twenty-one predefined locations to help determine the right depth for the clay. She glanced at her chart for a

European female, and using her measurements, she started affixing the markers to the skull.

She leaned closer. An unexpected movement to her side caught her attention. She turned to look. Before she could make out the object, an arm shot around her neck and jerked back, pulling her against a hard body.

A scream came to her lips, but the paralyzing hold cut off her oxygen.

“You thought I wouldn’t find out.” The man’s deep baritone came from behind, anger vibrating through his words. “I won’t let you destroy me.”

“Help!” she managed to squeak out as she clawed at his forearm. Her fingernails gained purchase, drawing blood.

He muttered a string of curses. A gloved hand slammed into her temple, and pain razored into her skull. Nausea swam through her stomach. Blackness threatened.

She blinked hard. Blinked again.

The darkness was winning. Drawing, pulling her toward the black void.

No! Don’t give in. David lost his dad. He needs you.

She forced her eyes open. Kept clawing at the arm and looked over the table for something—anything to fight him off.

The needle tool. She grabbed it and plunged the steel into his arm. Hit bone. Jerked it out. Blood spurted freely.

Curses spewed from his mouth, and his arm loosened. She stabbed again.

Once. Twice. Three times.

He howled and let her go.

Gasping for breath, she snatched up her ball peen hammer from the table. Spun and swung it hard. The steel slammed into his head covered by a ski mask. He went down like a

boxer connecting with a hard punch.

Mind racing, Hannah ripped off her headphones and sucked in air. Her throat was sore, the skin tender and bruised, but she couldn't focus on the pain. She had to act.

The man lay unmoving, but still the threat emanated from him.

What should she do? Stay here and call for help? Go outside in the brewing storm?

She couldn't use her phone. Even if she could get a signal, which was iffy, it would take too long for anyone to arrive in the raging storm. Remaining in the cottage was certain death, right? Maybe if she had something to tie him up with and buy time, but what?

Think, Hannah, think!

She shot a look around. Spotted her phone cord. A lamp cord. They wouldn't make a firm knot to hold him. She had to leave, but how? The ocean was probable death, too.

Oh my gosh, David.

What about David? She had to save him.

Run. Now.

Yes, run. She grabbed her backpack and jacket. Raced to his small bedroom and saw her precious five-year-old son asleep on his stomach. Fist tucked under his chin. Rump up in the air. Dreaming of wonderful things, not the nightmare in the other room.

Please help us! Help me to take him on this dangerous journey.

"Wake up, David." She shook his shoulder. Gently at first. He didn't stir. "Now, son!" She shook harder until his powder-blue eyes opened, and he blinked, his soft red hair stuck to his forehead.

"We have to leave now." She lifted him into her arms and wrapped him in the quilt, covering his eyes from seeing the monster on the floor, but her son had gone back to sleep.

Perfect.

She hurried for the door. Found her attacker stirring.

No! She'd spent too much time thinking and now he was awake.

She jerked open the door. The wind buffeted her. She fought hard and trudged onto the tiny porch. Down the stairs. Across the yard and over the boat ramp's worn boards. Her small rowboat and her attacker's boat bobbed on opposite sides of the dock.

Footsteps sounded from the porch.

She risked a glance back. Saw the man. Tall. Foreboding. Filling the open doorway. Interior lights spilling around him. He shook his head as if trying to clear his brain.

She wouldn't be here when he did.

She settled her sleeping son in the small rowboat, then untied her attacker's boat and set it adrift.

His footsteps barreled down the steps, but a limp seemed to slow him down.

Hurry! Hurry!

She got to her feet. Crossed the dock and dropped down into her boat. With an oar, she gave a solid push away from the dock just as the attacker reached the end. She plunged her oars in the water, and thankful for her rowing experience, she propelled the boat forward.

The wind howled over the bow, water spit and sprayed in her face, but she managed to move far enough away from the attacker so he couldn't leap into her boat. He stood on the dock, raising his fist and shaking it.

"This isn't over," he shouted into the wind.

She memorized the voice so if she ever heard it again she could call him out, then turned her attention to escaping.

Heavy chop rocked the boat while waves crashed over the hull and water settled in the bottom. At this rate, they'd soon fill with water and sink. She couldn't let that happen. She had to move.

Faster. Faster.

Adrenaline fueled her arms. When the attacker was no longer visible, she tied a life jacket securely on David and turned the boat toward shore. She glanced behind her to see if the man was in sight.

Forget him. Move.

A large wave took them high and crashed them down hard.

"Mommy." David's eyes were huge. "Why are we here?"

"I need you to stay down, son."

"But—"

"No buts. Do as I say!" The words came out harsher than she'd like, but she had no time to convince him to listen.

"We're almost there," she said, softer now as the lights of Cold Harbor appeared ahead. Beckoning her. "Hold on, son!"

They rose on the surf again. Plummeted down. Water nipped her calves, and she paused in her rhythm to look at the bottom of the boat. A foot of water had settled inside, and the boat rode dangerously low.

She had to hurry. *Move.* She started rowing in long, even pushes, riding the ocean swells, each one adding to the pool of water. A sudden gust of wind caught the boat's bow, turning them from shore.

She frantically rowed trying to turn them around. Sideways now, a monstrous wave

rolled toward them.

They were going to capsize.

No!

She let go of the oars to dive for David. She lifted him into her arms.

The water hit like a tidal wave.

The boat swirled. Churned. Turned. Lifted. Crashed down, wrenching David from her arms.

“David!” she screamed, panic overwhelming her as the water washed over her head and took her into the deadly depths.

*

Gage paused on the dune and strained his eyes for a better view of the shoreline. Had he really seen the boat? The one that a twenty-foot wave just tossed into the air?

Yes, there it was again, slamming into a boulder and ejecting two people into the frigid ocean. One he guessed was an adult. The other small enough to be a child.

What kind of fool took a rowboat out on a night like this, much less brought a child with them? Didn't matter. They needed his help, even if it was dangerous for anyone to enter the angry waves.

He raced down the dune, the sand fighting to take him down, but he powered on, counting on years of running on the beach and years of Navy SEAL training to see him through.

Ahead, he saw the pair. A female and a child. She was clutching the child in her arms and floundering. She suddenly shoved the child up over a crashing wave and disappeared.

“Mommy!” the boy screamed as he clawed through the foam to remain upright.

“Mommy!”

Gage reached the shoreline and shed his jacket and shoes. He barreled into the icy water, grabbed the boy, and slogged through the currents, carrying him to safety. He wrapped the drenched child in his jacket, then set him on the sand. The boy shivered, his hair dripping and freckled face pale, but he didn't seem hurt in any way. Gage could now see the child was five, maybe six, the same age his Mia had been when she'd nearly died.

No. Don't go there.

"My mommy," the little voice said, wrenching Gage's heart.

He squinted at the surf, waiting for the woman to come back up. She did. Briefly. Gasping. Fighting.

He dug out his phone. "Do you know how to call 911?"

The boy nodded, teeth chattering.

"Then stay here and call." Gage handed his phone to the child and plunged back into the frothy waves. The sixty-degree surge of water hit him like an ice bath, but his SEAL training taught him to ignore it, and he pushed toward the spot where the woman went down. He'd acclimated his body to the cold over the years and could survive longer, but the water temperature was life threatening to her if he didn't get to her soon.

She popped up just ahead, arms flailing, her head barely breaking the water.

"Hold on. I'm coming," he called out, his mouth filling with salty liquid.

"Help," she got out before a wave crashed over her head.

He started to swing his arms against the tide, his right arm nearly worthless in the current. *Right.* It didn't work well anymore. Had taken him out of the SEALs. Gave him a new life. This life.

His body slid back in the cresting wave. *No. No.* He had to forget about the pain. The

weakness. She needed him. A woman needed him. He wouldn't fail her.

He gulped in air and put his face in the shadowy water. When he reached the spot where she'd gone down, he dove in. Deep. To the bottom. Felt through the murkiness. Touched fabric. Grabbed it and jerked her up, then swam to the surface.

The petite woman broke the water. She coughed and gagged, but didn't fight him. From behind, he got his good arm around her chest to ensure he didn't lose her in the pummeling waves and paddled with his gimp arm. Something wet and sticky found his face. Not water, but blood. He knew the feel. The smell from his military days. She'd likely hit her head on a boulder or the boat. Not only was she at risk for hypothermia if he didn't get her out of the water soon, but the head injury put her in even more danger.

He tried to pick up his pace, but his arm slowed them down.

"David?" He heard her ask, and he assumed she meant the boy.

"On shore...he's fine," Gage replied, though he had no idea if the child really was okay.

He wanted to reassure the woman she would be fine, but he had no breath left to talk. He'd once been so able-bodied and could have brought this woman in easily. But since the accident, he'd had to work twice as hard with his arm to accomplish half as much.

"Mommy," the boy's shriek broke through the roar of the storm "I called 911. They're coming!"

The woman sagged against Gage, the little fight she'd had evaporating—the protector was gone, now that her son was safe. Gage couldn't relax. Not yet. He estimated she'd been in the water for less than fifteen minutes, but still cold shock had likely caused a loss of breathing control, and she would become progressively weaker. Still, it took at least thirty minutes for hypothermia to set in for average adults, even in freezing water. Thankfully, it hadn't been that

long yet and the water wasn't freezing.

He paddled the last few yards, then found his footing in the chest-deep water. After using the last of his strength to push through the current, he clambered to safety and collapsed on the sand, still holding her. He maneuvered her limp body carefully, pulled soggy red hair aside, and caught his first look at her face in the moonlight.

Shock traveled through his system, and he blinked hard to look again.

"Hannah?" he asked, but her eyes were closed and she didn't respond.

Could it really be her, back in his life again after so many years?

Tons of questions followed, but the sight of her wounded temple grabbed his attention. He wished he had a first aid kit. He needed to disinfect the wound and immediately warm her body until the medics arrived. Air temps weren't much higher than the water, and if he didn't slow her heat loss, she'd be headed for hypothermia.

David came stumbling toward them, his large blue eyes so much like Hannah's.

"Hey, buddy, let's put my jacket around your mother." Gage wrapped Hannah snugly in his large coat and tucked David under his arm for warmth.

"Mommy. Wake up, Mommy." David took her limp hand and peered up at Gage, his eyes wide and terrified. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Of course," Gage said. But—as he'd once experienced with his wife as she lapsed into a coma for months before losing her battle—he had no idea if Hannah would make it. None at all.

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