

Proximity

Two days before Halloween, a murderer broke into a family's home butchering the wife while her husband worked a midnight shift at the local beef packing plant. The couple's two children dreamed of the sandman in bunk beds down the hall. Harper Kellerman, a twenty-five-year-old bank teller, lived two blocks away and wanted to meet the killer.

At five-two, a tad thickset, and plagued with chronic asthma, Harper dropped out of the police academy at the urging of the lead instructor. An asthmatic, she discovered she couldn't jump, run, or pass the minimum on the required rowing machine test.

The decision to find a new career left her long-dead father's reputation on the force intact. Daddy's expertise for solving mysteries was more her aptitude for digging into the facts and discovering tiny details everyone else missed. They shared this secret. Discussing case files over dinner allowed her uncanny intuition to lead him in the direction of finding criminals.

Lounging on the sofa slipping treats to Ripper, her five-year-old Yorkie, she surfed news channels devouring a bag of Cheetos and breaking up the monotony with chocolate chip cookies as she the scoured for information about the murder.

Her phone buzzed.

“Is it the husband?” Macy, her coworker asked. Harper puffed with importance at her friend’s acknowledgment of her skills.

“Too early to tell. I’ll need to gather more facts.”

Sandra, the dog groomer, called next. “Right before Halloween. How freaky is that?”

A beep hit Harper’s eardrum. The caller ID hit her heart. “Sorry to cut you short but I’m getting an important call.” She clicked over.

“Harper. Watching the news like always? Any first impressions of the killer?” It was Lindsey Higgins, a police officer with the Lake Worth Police Department, her dad’s former partner, and the mother figure Harper never had. Before his death, her dad shared Harper’s crime-solving gift with Lindsey. Lindsey called from time to time for her input.

“You’re at the scene?”

“Of course.” Through the phone, Harper caught Lindsey’s feet scraping gravel back and forth.

“What do have?”

“The husband found his wife dead after returning from his shift. His story checks out. The two kids didn’t hear a thing.” Lindsey cleared her throat. “I have an assignment for you if you want it.”

Harper set up, straightened her back, and sucked in excitement. She wanted nothing more than to be needed and respected for her gift.

“Mingle in the crowd guaranteed to show up in the morning. Tell me if you see anyone suspicious lurking.”

“Absolutely. I’ll call you on my way to work with anything I find.”

“Your dad was the best and you’re pretty good yourself. We got to find this asshole. I’ll text the address.”

“Already have it.”

At seven a.m., Harper parked a half mile from the murder behind an SUV and walked to the scene. Wearing a sensible beige suit and black pumps, she sipped the last half of coffee from her bank logo mug.

She shifted to the middle of the sidewalk, infiltrating the burgeoning crowd. Full of salty undertones and grossly outlandish wisecracks, the breathy whispers circulated the lookie-loos.

Dormant Bermuda grass, shriveled mums, and toddler toys with missing wheels scattered the front yard of the murder scene. Gawkers rolled by in their vehicles on the street between the park and the house.

“Searching for killers requires honing in on the crowd, looking for the inconspicuous. Think banker in an expensive suit, or school teacher with horn-rimmed glasses, or maybe a priest or nun.” Her father repeated this advice before sliding the case file around the spaghetti bowl during dinner.

Daddy-daughter bonding time was more about blood and guts than which swimsuit Barbie should wear to the beach with Ken.

“Police solve puzzles of motivation and killers love cat and mouse games to keep law enforcement on their toes. All murderer thinks they are smarter than the cops. They get off eyeballing the frenzy of bystanders or checking out online conspiracy theorists.”

Newspapers lay by the cracked sidewalk leading up to the front door of the home. Two crudely-carved pumpkins sat on a step. A deflated basketball caked in layers of dirt cried for air.

Crisscrossed tape fluttered over the windows and the garage door—not overkill considering the circumstances. The closed blinds masked the horror from the night before.

Harper noticed an unmarked vehicle parked at a next-door neighbor’s house before she turned her attention back to the murder scene.

A shutter hung and groaned on a loose hinge. *A point of entry? Was the husband’s alibi tight? What about their finances? Was one of them having an affair?* She was eager to ask Lindsey.

She turned her attention to the crowd. Most appeared to be working stiffs, not too different from her. There was an elderly couple holding hands. Visibly shaken, it wasn’t them.

A construction worker revved his truck. Making too much of a show to be seen. Certainly wasn’t him.

The obvious suspect was a man in a black hoodie standing apart from the throng. As he vaped, his eyes shifted constantly. A mother with a stroller of twins shot him a dirty look as she

rolled past. A smart killer would wear a button-down and a happy face and stand inside the shocked group. She followed her dad's theories on people like this. Not Mr. Obvious.

A man bumped Harper's elbow and coffee splattered, splashing on her pump.

"Sorry." She glanced over, connecting with the man's Caribbean-blue eyes. The beach-boy blonde curly hair shouted innocence but his rock-hard body smoked. The hairs on her neck prickled, and an electric current contacted her nerves. A breath trapped in her throat.

"Not a problem." Better looking than guys she dated. He oozed testosterone. The fire in his eyes, his swagger, and the intensity in his voice distracted her from her assigned task.

"You think it's the husband?" The edge of his lips turned up and his eyes flickered and flirted.

"The news said he had an alibi."

"I understand, but maybe he hired someone. You may never know."

"Oh, the police will get it sorted out. The killer will be found." The timer set earlier on her watch beeped. "Got to get to work, but it was nice talking to you." *Ask for my number.*

He nodded. "Yeah. You too." He turned and walked, leaving her disappointed. An object on the ground flickered in the sunlight at her feet. Harper bent down. It was a silver fabric button with a tiny stain. She slipped out a sandwich baggie from her purse and pick it up. She sealed the bag before dropping it in her pocket.

On her way to the bank, she called Lindsey and left a voicemail. "I bagged a piece of possible evidence for you. Off the subject, I met a super-hot guy this morning but he didn't bother to ask for my number."

After work, she stopped for bananas and a small bag of dog food at the grocery store before picking up tacos in a drive-through. Hours of thinking about the murder left her exhausted and hungry.

She opened her apartment door and Ripper danced circles at her feet. Poop bag in hand, she grabbed the leash. He dragged her along the perimeter of the complex.

Lindsey didn't call.

Something startled her awake. She had fallen asleep in front of the muted television. Convinced, it wasn't a dream, she jumped from the sofa, and split the blinds, staring across the pitch-black parking lot. A security light was busted, but there wasn't any movement.

She paced the perimeter of her third-floor studio. Her obsessive-compulsive behavior attributed to her failure at the police academy. Every detail morphed into a personal issue.

She backed from the blinds to search for her inhaler. Ripper's tag jingled when he bumped his wet nose against her heels.

The red plastic case of the inhaler peeked from the floor at the edge of the sofa. She took two puffs and continued checking the locks. Moving to her bedroom window, she pulled the curtains apart, careful not to expose herself. She turned the back door lock. Opened. Locked. Opened. Locked. Opened. Locked. Opened. Locked.

Exhausted, she pulled a throw over her on the sofa and fell asleep.

Groggy when the alarm sounded, she reached for the remote and turned up the volume when the picture of the murdered woman's face appeared on the screen. A neighbor was interviewed. The man, awake at the time of the husband's arrival home from work heard screams

outside. He walked into the front yard and found his neighbor on his knees, covered in blood, and inconsolable.

The man's front door stood open. The neighbor entered the house and found the young mother on the living room floor between the couch and a broken glass coffee table. He picked up the husband's cell phone, lying next to the deceased, and called 911.

The rumor mill was abuzz when Harper got to work—a bank employee who knew somebody knew about a missing antique Bowie knife from a display case in the master bedroom.

The coroner released an initial report: thirty stab wounds. 48 Hours or the Crime Junkies Podcast would call this an excessive number indicating a crime of passion. Something about the passion theory didn't sit right with Harper. Did the murderer take their anger out on her body—her life—her family—or would the murderer continue to take it out on the entire city?

Customers at the teller window kept her thoughts of the murder and the too-good-looking stranger away for most of the day. Was the button dropped by the hunky guy, left by someone else, or not a clue at all? She couldn't recall seeing it when the splash of coffee landed on her shoe.

Work—another day, another dollar, followed by another Taco Bell dinner and a drive through rush hour traffic home. The evening news anchor had a new background picture of the murdered woman. She was in her late 20s with brown hair and green eyes. The reporter announced the victim suffered from asthma.

Odd. Lindsey didn't call. Harper dug out her inhaler from between the sofa cushions and took a puff.

On her morning break the next day, she called Lindsey. “Got a minute?”

“Sorry I haven’t called. Covered up with this case. You were my next call. Meet me at the usual?”

“Sure.”

“Bring me what you have.”

“See you there.”

Harper scooted into their regular booth at the Crazy Angus.

“Sorry, I’m late.” Lindsey showed up in jeans and boots, very noncop-like, sitting in the booth across from Harper.

“A date?”

“Hardly. Had to feed the horses.” Lindsey laughed.

Harper pushed a Chilton across the table. “I ordered. Jalapeno poppers should be here soon.” She shoved the bagged button across to Lindsey. “So, what do you think?”

“A dirty button? Tell me more.”

“The spot might be blood or nothing. I found it on the sidewalk across the street from the murder scene. A guy bumped into me, literally, and we talked. He was too charming. Too much Chris Hemsworth. Not the loner type, but after he walked off, I saw it lying there. I swear it wasn’t there earlier. I didn’t get a name. Sorry.”

“I’ll check it out. The few leads we had, dried up. No cheating spouses. No financial irregularities. Small life insurance policy. Not even a disgruntled friend or coworker.” A waiter placed appetizers in the middle of the table and walked away.

They both left The Angus with more questions than answers.

November 11, a banking holiday, Harper drove with Ripper to the humane society. She sat in the parking lot until someone unlocked the front door of the offices. She scooped Ripper in her arms and placed him inside an oversized quilted bag, his head bobbing out the top, for a ride underneath her shoulder to inside the shelter.

Ripper’s rhinestone collar sparkled beneath the fluorescent lights in the reception area and his tag tinkled.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t bring him in unless you’re surrendering him. I’m guessing you’re not,” the clerk smirked behind the counter.

“I was hoping we could find a compatible addition to our family. I wanted Ripper to help make the decision.”

“You’ll have to take Ripper to your car. Roll the windows down for air, and I’ll gather some information from you. Then, I’ll be glad to give you a tour of the pets ready for adoption.”

Harper muttered to Ripper about the stupid rules out to the car. She rolled the window about six inches down and set Ripper in the driver’s seat. He’d be safe until she returned. She locked the doors, patted him, and returned to the office.

The woman with the clipboard in hand was ready for her.

“Name?”

“Harper Kellerman.” The clerk worked her way down the sheet, filling in the lines.

“So, Harper. Are you wanting a dog or cat?”

“A dog. A big dog. A guard dog.”

The clerk’s pen and clipboard clattered against the counter as she sucked in an audible breath. Disappointment and judgment clouded her eyes.

“Look. Honey, big dogs have all been adopted. Can I interest you in something small as a companion for Ripper?”

Harper shook her head. She and Ripper required protection.

She returned to the car, sitting for a few moments while Ripper licked her face. There was a rap on the window and she jumped. It was the stranger from the murder scene. She punched the door lock.

“So, this is little Ripper,” he said. A slow smile spread over his face. She swallowed hard and her heart raced.

“Y...yes.” She choked out the words. He reached through the partially open window and ruffled Ripper’s hair.

Her heart slammed against her breastbone. She hadn’t mention owning a dog the day they met at the murder scene much less said his name.

“I’m...Emily. And your name is ...?” Her words tumbled over her lips ripped and ragged. Her throat felt rusty, raw. Her cell phone, tucked inside her purse, lay on the passenger side floorboard. Panic seized her chest. Where was her inhaler?

He withdrew his hand. “Thinking about adopting a dog? Maybe something big for protection? There is a killer out there, you know.” Not waiting for her to answer, he turned, and sauntered with the assuredness of 007, into the adoption center.

Adrenaline ignited her nerves. Her damp hands quivered on the steering wheel. She reached for the ignition and a tear of panic trailed her cheek. This was nothing like sharing case files over spaghetti. This was real shit and it was scary.

Fearing he’d follow, she inched through shopping center parking lots after parking lots, checking her rearview mirror. She stopped for a drink at a Sonic then cut over the Henderson Street Bridge keeping in the middle lane of traffic. Hours later, with no sign of him and the sun sliding to the horizon, she drove home.

She called Lindsey. It went to voicemail. “Lindsey. That guy at the murder scene was in my car window. I’m more certain than ever, it’s him. I think he’s following me. Call me.”

Should she call 911? What could she say to make any sense? *A cute guy knows my dog’s name. He was at the murder scene. I gave Officer Lindsey Higgins a button.*

“Along with hundreds of others, Lady,” they’d say. “So, you told a cute guy your dog’s name and you can’t remember doing it. Do you know how many nut cases we’ve spoken to since the murder?” Her dad was right. She needed evidence.

At home, she microwaved a bowl of mac and cheese and she turned on the television hoping a reporter spoke the word—arrested. Her phone vibrated on the counter. She raced to the kitchen bar to get it.

“Lindsey. It’s him.”

“I believe you. The silver button had the first victim’s blood on it. Come to the station. Let’s create a composite.”

“On my way.”

She spent several hours in a small room with a forensic artist and a book filled with various noses, hair, and eyes to help complete the rendering. Unfortunately, the result was a man staring back at her on the paper that could be thirty percent of any man in that age bracket. She didn’t remember anything distinguishing him from the pack.

Christmas arrived with a slight chill. She visited her brother’s family thirty miles away. They played monopoly, opened presents, and drank cocoa. She returned home with a sense of peace and hope.

By late February, daffodils bloomed in the flowerbeds below her front window. The killer on the loose melted with the changing season, and no longer made the news.

Lindsey’s search for the killer stalled and faded with short mentions when they talked.

Excitement built in her circle of friends at the announcement of a Billie Eilish concert. Hungry customers lined up around a street corner waiting for a table at the latest tapas and wine bar, and her nightmares about the cute guy dimmed. She convinced herself she had told him Ripper’s name. No big deal. Cute guys made her nervous.

On April 9, a woman was killed in broad daylight as she worked alone in a retail gift shop in a busy shopping strip close to Loop 820. The twenty-five-year-old former Miss Lake Worth contestant was stabbed multiple times. Her Facebook profile could pass for the picture of the first victim.

Harper's paranoia fizzed to life. Murder one. Murder two. If he killed again, he'd achieve serial killer status.

The police followed bloody footprints from the shopping center to a dumpster where the tracks stopped. At the bank, her coworker, Macy, told her a friend worked in the same shopping center.

After work, Harper mapped the location, parked her car on a side street, and walked with Macy until they found the crime tape close to a dumpster.

Macy pointed toward the sky. "Uhhh, isn't that your place?"

Harper saw her apartment building's top floor from where they stood. She located her living room window. She grabbed Macy by the hand and they ran to the car.

When they returned to the bank parking. Harper left her engine running and waited until Macy was safely in her car.

At home, she locked in her apartment, bit her nails to the quick, and returned to the door to examine the locks. She needed to pull herself together.

She stuck her cell in the nightstand drawer with the television remote and unplugged the WIFI and the laptop. She pulled a yoga mat gathering dust out of the entry closet. Unrolling it, she sat crossed-legged, closed her eyes, and went through a series of breathing exercises.

May arrived. Then, in June, the paranoia subsided. After work, she and Ripper went for an afternoon walk in a nearby park surrounded by young mothers and their laughing children. A little girl approached the sidewalk where Ripper was trotting along, happy to be outside for something other than a dart out and pee or dart out and poop.

The girl's mother scurried over to them. "Sorry. Mackenzie loves dogs, especially little ones. Do you mind if she pets him?"

"Of course not. Ripper likes the attention." His name slipped from her tongue without hesitation. She realized how easily she could have said his name to another stranger.

Mackenzie's mom nodded, and the little girl sat on the sidewalk. Ripper climbed on her lap and licked her face while Mackenzie giggled.

The mother thanked her and pulled her protesting daughter back to the playground.

Harper scooped Ripper in her arms. His tag was missing from his collar.

She returned to her apartment and loaded Ripper in the car, driving to the pet store for a new tag. After several minutes, she chose a tag. to match his sparkly collar. The machine by the front door engraved the inputted information over the metal as she watched. Name. Address. Phone number.

The machine spat out the tag. "Cute," said the store clerk, before attaching it to Ripper's collar. Cute—the word unnerved Harper.

"On second thought, I've changed my mind. Could you please make another one with just his name?"

"Of course."

She slipped the unused tag into her purse and they left the pet store.

Her coworkers planned a night out and Harper agreed to go if they promised not to talk about the murders. They went to a bar, had a few drinks, and danced with a couple of guys.

A guy brought drinks to the table and introduced himself as Rail. They danced and had a couple more drinks. They danced some more.

“Want to come home with me?” Rail asked.

“No thanks.”

She followed her friends to their cars and they waited until everyone was in their vehicles before leaving and after agreeing to meet Rail in a couple of days.

They met for coffee after work. He was a good conversationalist and they discovered they had mutual friends. She relaxed and gave him her number, but didn't want him to know where she lived.

She dialed the two friends he claimed they had in common. “How well do you know this man?” He checked out.

He called and they met at a restaurant for dinner. He was friendly, funny, and smoking hot. She gave him her address, inviting him to join her work friends at her apartment to watch Survivor, a T.V. obsession none of them ever missed.

She baked cookies. A couple of people brought beer. Rail showed up with chips and dip.

The jerk they collectively hated on Survivor got voted off the island. After her coworkers left, Rail stayed behind to wash dishes. He examined each glass under the kitchen light.

“My sisters ream me when I don't scrub hard enough to get off the lipstick stains.” He handed a tumbler to her. They ended the evening with Rail kissing her. His lips were tender. She was thankful he didn't ask to stay. She locked the doors and checked the windows.

She curled up on the sofa but got a few hours more sleep than after the first murder. Ripper's gentle snores were a comfort after he jumped beside her and curled against her legs.

The next morning, waiting in line at the Starbucks drive-through, Lindsey sent a text. *We have a name. Works at the pharmacy close to you. Don't refill your inhaler script until we catch the guy.*

Vehicles backed up at the bank window. She'd have to wait to call Lindsey to ask for a picture.

On her lunch break, a coworker filled her with more information. "The police had a match to the palm print found on the first dead woman's windowsill and another print at the scene of the second murder. Police are looking for a twenty-two-year-old male named Jay Simpson."

The guy from the park, from the adoption center, did he look like a Jay?

She pulled out her cell phone and searched for the story. She wanted to see his face. News affiliates hadn't released a picture.

She checked the identity of everyone at the teller window. By now, the killer had to know the police were looking for him. No Jays withdrew money at the drive-up.

The low fuel light flashed, when she started her car after work. She chose to ignore it because Ripper had been stuck inside all day. He'd need a potty break. She drove home.

After she clipped on his leash and hurried Ripper down the stairs, he stopped at the first bush. She placed him on the front seat of the car to ride shotgun, then drove to a gas station a few blocks from her apartment.

She rolled down the window, then got out and stepped to the pump with her gas card. Putting in her PIN, she turned to her car to fill up. The gas cap was crooked and in a bind.

A vehicle pulled in behind her.

“Need help?” She recognized the voice.

He closed in behind her, his breath heating the back of her neck.

“I... can't ...gas cap.”

He reached over and placed his hand on hers. She was trapped. He tugged on the cap. It popped loose.

“There you go. His slow smile returned and he handed the cap to her. Then, he bent over and picked up something on the concrete.

“Yours?” His steely eyes narrowed. One side of his lip turned up. He placed a silver button in her palm.

“No. J...aaaa...yyy. I think this is yours.” She held the button in her open trembling palm, turned it over and checked for blood stains, then handed it back to him. She plunged the nozzle into her gas tank and pumped, steadying her demeanor.

He grinned at hearing his name and walked to her driver's side door. Ripper danced and stuck his head out the window. She checked the gas pump, giving herself a second to think.

What would dad tell her to do?

Jay clutched Ripper's collar in his hand. Ripper jerked his head to break free, but the guy had a firm grip, studying the tag. Her stomach tightened, forming a steel knot.

Nobody messes with Ripper.

“Let go of him, you creep.” She reared back and kicked his leg with all the force she could muster.

“Owww.” He crumpled to the ground, but recovered and righted himself using the car’s door handle. His eyes sparkled at the silver button rolling under the car. “I love a girl with a little fight in her.”

Sirens blared. Police cars, lights flashing, screeched into the gas station and surrounded the pumps. The officers bolted from their vehicles. Lindsey led with a gun pointed at Jay.

Harper’s emotions dismantled and cracked open with all the almos and what-ifs.

A cop grabbed Jay’s body and shoved him toward the front of the car, slamming his upper torso atop Harper’s hood.

There was a click behind her. The pump shut off, but the action on the front paralyzed her.

Behind her, Lindsey pushed the nozzle into the pump and turned and wrapped her arms around Harper.

“You gave us the clue we needed. When we searched his house, we found the shirt he wore to both murders covered in blood. There were four missing buttons. The one you gave me matched. He was prepared to kill again. The convenience store manager called in his plate number from a bulletin we sent out today.” Lindsey said. “You’re safe.”

Harper nodded.

The killer raised his head, winked, and grinned at Harper. “Button. Button. The next one is who has the button,” Jay said.