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THE OVERNIGHT GUEST

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HEATHER
GUDENKAUF

A NOVEL



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Outstanding Praise for *The Overnight Guest*

“*The Overnight Guest* is not only compelling, it’s addictive. I’ll be thinking about this book for a long time.”

—Samantha Downing, bestselling author of *My Lovely Wife*

“A tightly woven braid of a novel guaranteed to raise the hairs on the back of your neck and keep you turning the pages deep into the night. Atmospheric, fast-paced and perfectly plotted.”

—Catherine McKenzie, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *I’ll Never Tell* and *Please Join Us*

“Atmospheric and claustrophobic, tense and twisted, this chiller will make you hold your breath as you turn the pages. Cancel your plans when you start reading this one because you won’t be able to put it down.”

—Hannah Mary McKinnon, international bestselling author of *You Will Remember Me*

“Chilling, gripping, and gaspingly surprising. The oh-so-talented Heather Gudenkauf has created a modern-day *In Cold Blood*.”

—Hank Phillippi Ryan, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *Her Perfect Life*

“Scrupulously plotted and layered with multiple narratives that culminate in some explosive surprises. A chilling and heart-stopping stunner.”

—Kimberly Belle, international bestselling author of *My Darling Husband*

The Overnight Guest

Heather Gudenkauf



For Greg, Milt and Patrick Schmida—the best brothers in the world.

Heather Gudenkauf is the critically acclaimed author of several novels, including the *New York Times* bestseller *The Weight of Silence*. She lives in Iowa with her husband and children.

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August 2000

On August 12, 2000, Abby Morris, out of breath with sweat trickling down her temple, was hurrying down the gray ribbon of gravel road for her nightly walk. Despite her long-sleeved shirt, pants, and the thick layer of bug spray, mosquitoes formed a halo around her head in search of exposed flesh. She was grateful for the light the moon provided and the company of Pepper, her black Lab. Jay, her husband, thought she was unwise to walk this time of night, but between working all day, picking up the baby at day care and then dealing with all the chores at home, 9:30 to 10:30 was the one hour of the day that was truly her own.

Not that she was scared. Abby grew up walking roads like these. County roads covered in dusty gravel or dirt and lined with cornfields. In the three months they'd lived here, she never once encountered anyone on her evening walks, which suited her just fine.

"Roscoe, Roscoe!" came a female voice from far off in the distance. Someone calling for their dog to come home for the night, Abby thought. "Ro-sss-co," the word was drawn out in a singsongy cadence but edged with irritation.

Pepper was panting heavily, her pink tongue thick and nearly dragging on the ground.

Abby picked up her pace. She was almost to the halfway spot in her three-mile loop. Where the gravel met a dirt road nearly swallowed up by the cornfields. She turned right and stopped short. Sitting on the side of the road, about forty yards away, was a pickup truck. A prickle of unease crept up her back and the dog looked up at Abby expectantly. Probably someone with a flat tire or engine trouble left the truck there for the time being, Abby reasoned.

She started walking again, and a feathery gauze of clouds slid across the face of the moon, plunging the sky into darkness, making it impossible to see if someone was sitting inside the truck. Abby cocked her head to listen for the purr of an engine idling, but all she could hear was the electric buzz saw serenade of thousands of cicadas and Pepper's wet breathing.

“Come, Pepper,” Abby said in a low voice as she took a few steps backward. Pepper kept going, her nose close to the ground, following a zigzagging path right up to the truck’s tires. “Pepper!” Abby said sharply. “Here!”

At the intensity in Abby’s voice, Pepper’s head snapped up and she reluctantly gave up the scent and returned to Abby’s side.

Was there movement behind the darkened windshield? Abby couldn’t be sure, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching. The clouds cleared and Abby saw a figure hunched behind the steering wheel. A man. He was wearing a cap, and in the moonlight, Abby caught a glimpse of pale skin, a slightly off-center nose, and a sharp chin. He was just sitting there.

A warm breeze sent a murmur through the fields and lifted the hair off her neck. A scratchy rustling sound came from off to her right. The hair on Pepper’s scruff stood at attention and she gave a low growl.

“Let’s go,” she said, walking backward before turning and rushing toward home.

12:05 a.m.

Sheriff John Butler stood on the rotting back deck, looking out over his backyard, the wood shifting and creaking beneath his bare feet. The adjacent houses were all dark, the neighbors and their families fast asleep. Why would they be awake? They had a sheriff living right next door. They had nothing to worry about.

He found it difficult to catch his breath. The night air was warm and stagnant and weighed heavily in his chest. The sturgeon moon hung fat and low and bee pollen yellow. Or was it called a buck moon? The sheriff couldn’t remember.

The last seven days had been quiet. Too quiet. There were no burglaries, no serious motor vehicle accidents, no meth explosions, not one report of domestic abuse. Not that Blake County was a hotbed of lawlessness. But they did have their share of violent crimes. Just not this week. The first four days, he was grateful for the reprieve, but then it seemed downright eerie. It was odd, unsettling. For the first time in twenty years as sheriff, Butler was actually caught up on all his paperwork.

“Don’t go borrowing trouble,” came a soft voice. Janice, Butler’s wife of thirty-two years, slipped an arm around his waist and laid her head against his shoulder.

“No danger of that,” Butler said with a little laugh. “It usually finds me all on its own.”

“Then come back to bed,” Janice said and tugged on his hand.

“I’ll be right in,” Butler said. Janice crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a stern look. He held up his right hand. “Five more minutes. I promise.” Reluctantly, Janice stepped back inside.

Butler ran a calloused palm over the splintered cedar railing. The entire deck needed to be replaced. Torn down to the studs and rebuilt. Maybe tomorrow he’d go to Lowe’s over in Sioux City. If things continued as they were, he’d have plenty of time to rebuild the deck. Stifling a yawn, he went back inside, flipped the dead bolt, and trudged down the hall toward his bed and Janice. *Another quiet night, the sheriff thought, might as well enjoy it while it lasts.*

1:09 a.m.

The sound of balloons popping pulled Deb Cutter from a deep sleep. Another pop, then another. Maybe kids playing with firecrackers leftover from the Fourth of July. “Randy,” she murmured. There was no answer.

Deb reached for her husband, but the bed next to her was empty, the bedcovers still undisturbed and cool to the touch. She slipped from beneath the sheets, went to the window, and pulled the curtain aside. Randy’s truck wasn’t parked in its usual spot next to the milking shed. Brock’s was gone too. She glanced at the clock. After midnight.

Her seventeen-year-old son had become a stranger to her. Her sweet boy had always had a wild streak, which had turned mean. He’d be up to no good, she was sure of that. Brock was born when they were barely eighteen and barely knew how to take care of themselves, let alone an infant.

Deb knew that Randy was hard on Brock. Too hard at times. When he was little, it took just a stern look and a swat to get Brock back in line, but those days were long gone. The only thing that seemed to get his attention now was a smack upside the head. Deb had to admit that over the years, Randy had crossed a line or two—doling out bruises, busted lips, bloody

noses. But afterward, Randy always justified his harshness—life wasn't easy, and as soon as Brock figured that out, the better.

And Randy. He'd been so distant, so busy lately. Not only was Randy helping his parents out on their farm, but he was also in the process of refurbishing another old farmhouse with half a dozen decrepit outbuildings, a hog confine, and trying to tend to his own crops. She barely saw him during the daylight hours.

Deb tried to tamp down the resentment, but it curdled in her throat. Obsessed. That was what Randy was. Obsessed with fixing up that old homestead, obsessed with the land. It was always about the land. The economy was probably going to tank, and they'd end up on the hook for two properties they couldn't afford. She wasn't going to be able to take it much longer.

One more bang reverberated in the distance. Damn kids, she thought. Wide-awake, she stared up at the ceiling fan that turned lazily above her and waited for her husband and son to come home.

1:10 a.m.

At first, twelve-year-old Josie Doyle and her best friend, Becky Allen, ran toward the loud bangs. It only made sense to go to the house—that's where her mother and father and Ethan were. They would be safe. But by the time Josie and Becky discovered their mistake, it was too late.

They turned away from the sound and, hand in hand, ran through the dark farmyard toward the cornfield—its stalks, a tall, spindly forest, their only portal to safety.

Josie was sure she heard the pounding of footsteps behind them, and she turned to see what was hunting them. There was nothing, no one—just the house bathed in nighttime shadows.

“Hurry,” Josie gasped, tugging on Becky's hand and urging her forward. Breathing heavily, they ran. They were almost there. Becky stumbled. Crying out, her hand slipped from Josie's. Her legs buckled, and she fell to her knees.

“Get up, get up,” Josie begged, pulling on Becky's arm. “Please.” Once again, she dared to look behind her. A shard of moonlight briefly revealed a shape stepping out from behind the barn. In horror, Josie watched as the

figure raised his hands and took aim. She dropped Becky's arm, turned, and ran. Just a little bit farther—she was almost there.

Josie crossed into the cornfield just as another shot rang out. Searing pain ripped through her arm, stripping her breath from her lungs. Josie didn't pause, didn't slow down, and with hot blood dripping onto the hard-packed soil, Josie kept running.