



↓ **START READING** ↓

Book Reviews

"... a captivating look into a severely ill mind." - Sarah T.

"The whole time I thought I knew who the killer was! You won't guess! It was well written, with good characters." - Hope L.

"... a haunting, chilling suspenseful book that you want to finish reading in one sitting." - Mary S.

"Just when you think you have solved the mystery, a new twist proves you wrong!" - Tom W.

"I was absolutely blown away by this thriller and could not put it down. For a psychological thriller the characters were compelling and well developed." - Ajooba C.

"Could not put it down. Almost like your living it yourself. Some kids have I'm sure. I was almost one of them..." - Sherry T.

"Loved how twisty it was, and how much depth the author gave to the characters and especially to the killer." - Jessica B.

"Page turning excitement and mystery. Could not put it down." - Joanna S.

"Kept me guessing the whole way through." - G.

"...has all the ingredients to make a top notch mystery thriller and succeeds where so many fail." - TKandKK

"The plot had definite twists that kept me wanting to turn the page to see what happened next. Can't wait to read more by this author." - Renee W.

"Very enjoyable murder mystery, interesting characters and lots of unpredictable twists and turns." - Karen B.

"Very few books intrigue me as this one has. I read them both in two days!" - Michelle T.

**Never
Smile at
Strangers**

JENNIFER JAYNES

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Strangers**

f THOMAS & MERCER

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For Brian.

Thank you for believing in me.

PROLOGUE

THE BOY OPENED his eyes and turned to the window. It was late, and the screen door to the back of the house had just slammed shut.

Thunder rumbled, and raindrops struck the glass in loud, maddening beats. Wide-eyed, he clutched the wool army blanket that reeked of urine and watched the downpour through his tiny bedroom window.

A burst of lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the branches from the giant oak outside and the Spanish moss that clung to them. The flash disappeared, and the world grew pitch black.

An oak branch scraped the filthy glass, and the screen door banged shut a second time.

A restless energy filled him.

Something wasn't right.

His room, not much larger than a closet, smelled of mildewed wood. The nasty odor grew thicker during a storm, more menacing. Gulping musty air, he reluctantly crawled out of bed and tiptoed down the hallway.

He stood outside his mother's bedroom door, listening for her usual drunken snores. All he heard was the ticking of her wind-up alarm clock.

Something was smeared against the doorjamb.

Blood.

His heart skipped a beat. There was blood on the floor, too.

Moving into the tiny kitchen, the scarred linoleum cool and bloody beneath his bare feet, he stood at the window and watched the storm. The weeping willows leaned, overpowered by the screaming wind. He looked out at the moonless night and tried to remember if he'd flipped the pirogue, the small boat they kept out back.

Earlier that afternoon, his little sister, Allie, had followed him to the pond. Her eyes had been teeny, mischievous. She wasn't supposed to wander past the small yard. He'd been too worried about convincing her to follow him back to the house to even consider the boat. But he worried now. If Mother saw it filled with rainwater, there'd be trouble.

They usually didn't lock the house, but he now flipped the latch on the screen door. He grimaced, imagining his mother in the morning, her thin mouth set in a stiff line, furious about the slamming door that had kept her up at all hours of the night, whether it did so or not.

He couldn't risk it.

Lightning struck, illuminating the rusted Buick that for all of his nine years had sat atop concrete blocks next to the old, splintering shed. The night became dark. In the blackness, he thought he saw something move. A moment later, he saw it again.

He flipped on the porch light, bathing the yard in a dull, yellow haze. He had to blink twice before he believed what he saw.

Trembling, he backed away from the window.

His mother, naked and standing in the yard, stared up at him through a tangle of rain-soaked hair, her eyes wild. As he bolted from the window, he could hear her calling to him.

Ten years later

“IT’S GOING TO be another muggy day in Grand Trespass with a high of 91 degrees and a relative humidity of 94 percent. Expect it to be partly cloudy with wind gusts from the west-southwest. Not entirely unpleasant, but none too comfortable, either. Now, here’s Billy with the traffic.”