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Ugly Young Thing

ALSO BY JENNIFER JAYNES

Never Smile at Strangers

Ugly Young Thing

JENNIFER JAYNES

 THOMAS & MERCER

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For Mom.

Thank you for always being there for me.

PROLOGUE

URINE SKIDDED DOWN her leg, warming her bare skin. She was more terrified than she'd ever been, and in her short fifteen years, there had been plenty of reasons to be afraid.

A heavy downpour pummeled the small house, battering the living room window next to her. But Allie wasn't aware of the storm outside.

Only the storm inside the house mattered.

Her older brother was facing her, his eyes unfocused. In one hand he held a gun. In the other was the smooth stone he kept on his nightstand while he slept. The gun was pointed at her and he was rolling the stone around in the palm of his hand.

Hatred flashed in his eyes—and she could see just how much he'd come to loathe her.

"Please," she pleaded, tears flooding her eyes, making it difficult to see. "Please don't do this. I'll change. I will. I promise."

Please don't hurt me.

Thunder boomed outside, overpowering her words, so she wasn't sure if he even heard her. He just continued to stare, his eyes glassy. He swayed a little, and she wondered if he was on something, even though it wasn't like him to medicate with anything stronger than a beer or two.

The thunder died down and she tried again. “Just wait. You’ll be so surprised at how nice I can be. How *normal*.”

“No,” he said, his words slurring. “You’ll *never* be normal.”

“I will. I cross my heart. I . . . I love you.”

His handsome face twisted. “Don’t say that to me!”

“I’m serious. You’re all . . . you’re all I’ve got,” she cried, holding her palms out to him, showing him how vulnerable she was, just in case he didn’t already know. “You’re all I’ve *ever* had. Mama was sick. I knew that. I hated her for what she did to you. For what she did to everyone, but *especially* you.”

At that, he cocked his head. He seemed to weigh her words, trying to decide if, for once, she was telling the truth.

“I guess I just didn’t know any other way to act,” she added.

He stared at her for a long moment, then his face filled with rage. He shouted an expletive and sounded so angry Allie’s face burned with shame.

But it was true. She *didn’t* know how to act. At least not like others did. She didn’t fit in like most others did. She was always the outsider.

Her brother had been her only friend, so when he started avoiding her, she lashed back. She said nasty things to him and told him he was a loser, although she didn’t really think he was . . . and the more he ignored her, the nastier she became.

She was also frightened because he had grown sick, just like their mother had, and that summer he’d killed two teenage girls. The sheer fact that he’d done it really freaked her out. But what scared her even more was she feared he’d eventually get caught and be taken away from her.

Then what would she do?

How could she possibly live without him?

She didn’t want him to be sent away. She loved him more than anything, but she was also deathly afraid of rejection. So, instead of saying “please love me again” or “I need you more than anything,” she

did and said hateful things. She wasn't really sure why she did what she did; all she knew was that she didn't know how not to.

Her brother's countenance shifted. The hatred and loathing in his eyes was now replaced with something different. Something that looked like pain. His face went fish-belly white, his expression blank.

Allie realized that the moment had come. She slowly backed away from him.

Please, no! Give me another chance, she wanted to yell, but her mouth wouldn't move.

The stone tumbled onto the living room carpet. The light draining from his eyes, he pressed the old army-issue .45 to his temple—and stared at her.

“Quit causing people pain,” he said. “Just stop it. It's wrong.” He blinked a few times. “And don't think this is about you, because it isn't. It's me. It always has been.” With that, he inhaled sharply and his eyes flickered to the wall behind her. “God, please forgive me,” he whispered.

And he pulled the trigger.



Allie clamped her hands against her mouth. “No!” she wailed. But, of course, it was too late.

“No, please. My God, no!”

Don't die! Don't leave me!

Her ears ringing, she went to him. Her older brother, the only person who had ever meant *anything* to her, was about to be gone forever. Just minutes before she was sure he was going to kill her, but in the end he had decided to kill himself.

He made a gurgling sound, his eyes now frozen on the popcorn finish of the ceiling, a flood of red spreading out beneath his head. His eyes fluttered once, then stayed at half-mast.

He went very still.

“No! NO! NO!” She fell to the carpet. Trembling, she lifted his shoulders and scooted her legs beneath his back so that his head lay on her lap. Ignoring the warm blood soaking her legs, she held on to his arm and sobbed.

Yes, he had murdered people. But he’d never hurt her. In fact, he’d taken excellent care of her over the years: protecting her from their psychotic mother, buying groceries, making sure she had most of the things she needed.

She studied his face, trying to burn a mental image of it into her mind so she would never forget what he looked like—and she noticed something different about him. The edges of his mouth were slightly upturned, as though he had been trying to smile. Like maybe, just maybe, he had finally found peace.

“I’m not as mean as I pretended to be,” she whispered through her tears. “I’ve always loved you so much. I just wanted you to love me back and you . . . you wouldn’t.” She placed her brother’s hands in hers and squeezed them tight.

Eyes clouded with tears, she realized she had to leave, and quick. Either go or risk becoming a ward of the state, and she couldn’t let that happen. No one had ever controlled her or told her what to do—and she sure as hell wouldn’t let anyone do it now, especially the government that her brother had hated so much. After all, if he hated it, *she* hated it.

Scooting away from his body, she ran to pack a bag. Three minutes later, just as she heard the first of the police sirens, she threw open the screen door at the back of the house and disappeared into the woods.

Thirty minutes after that, she was sitting, bloodstained and paralyzed with fear, in the passenger seat of an eighteen-wheeler.

She was headed west on Highway I-10, toward Texas.