

# **Lying with Strangers**

**James Grippando**



HarperCollins*Publishers*

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

LYING WITH STRANGERS. Copyright © 2007 by James Grippando. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

Originally published in a slightly different form in 2006 by Madison Park Press. First HarperCollins edition published in 2007.

FIRST EDITION

*Designed by William Ruoto*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Grippando, James.

Lying with strangers / by James Grippando.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-0-06-113838-6

ISBN-10: 0-06-113838-X

1. Stalking victims—Fiction. 2. Trust—Fiction.

PS3557.R534 L95 2007

813'.5—dc22

2006050956

07 08 09 10 11 ID/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# **Lying with Strangers**

**Also by James Grippando**

*When Darkness Falls\**  
*Got the Look\**  
*Hear No Evil\**  
*Last to Die\**  
*Beyond Suspicion\**  
*A King's Ransom*  
*Under Cover of Darkness*  
*Found Money*  
*The Abduction*  
*The Informant*  
*The Pardon\**

**And for Young Adults**  
*Leapholes*

**\*A Jack Swyteck Novel**

*For Tiffany—Always and forever*

*Many people claim to be loyal,  
but it is hard to find a trustworthy person.*

—Proverbs 20:6

# Prologue

SHE WANTED HIM. FIVE MINUTES ON THE SUBWAY, AND HE WAS SURE of it. Rudy had a gift for detecting the most subtle signals.

The train was crowded, and he made a point of standing between her and the nearest exit. His eyes barely moved in her direction. He just leaned against the pole and read the *Wall Street Journal*. At least he pretended to read. It was all pretense, from the polished black wing tips to the Armani necktie, from the pinstripe suit to the tortoiseshell eyeglasses.

The train stopped and the doors opened. She started for the exit—right toward him. A long winter coat concealed her body, but the face was attractive. Nice mouth.

“Excuse me,” she said as she passed.

She looked straight ahead, never making eye contact, but she hadn’t fooled him. Her tone of voice, the way she’d passed just slowly enough to let him drink in the sweet scent of her perfume, were calculated steps in the age-old mating dance. Bottom line, no one had forced her to use the nearest exit; the other set of doors worked just as well. Surely it was no accident that her long brown hair had brushed against his coat as she passed. Most telling of all, she’d opened her mouth, parted those lovely lips, and actually spoken. *Excuse me*. A powerful message wrapped in precious few words. In one brief but electric moment, she had initiated the connection. Rudy could have said something back, and she would

have been receptive. They would have talked. Who knows where it might have led?

The chime sounded, signaling that the sliding doors were about to close. It wasn't his stop, but on impulse he hopped off. The train pulled away, leaving Rudy alone on the platform. He'd seized her invitation, but she was gone.

*Another worthless tease.*

He shook off his anger, climbed the stairs, and emerged at a dark street corner. Downtown was cold and almost deserted at this late hour. He took a moment to choose his path. Throughout Boston's financial district, meandering cross streets intersected at angles and intervals that defied logic, still patterned after old village lanes that only centuries later happened to be lined with forty-story office towers. It was a maze to most, but Rudy knew his way around. Years ago he used to cut through here on his way to the Combat Zone, a two-block area off lower Washington Street that was once infamous for its nude-dancing bars and porno shops. The area had since been cleaned up, and with the pornographic bonanza on the Internet, he didn't even miss the old jaunts downtown. No more trudging through the snow with an aching hard-on in his pants. No more glares from picketers who wanted the smut out of their neighborhood. No more fear of being arrested for jerking off in a dark adult movie theater.

He buttoned his coat and started down the sidewalk, bucking the wind as the salted ice crunched beneath his feet. It was a long walk to Back Bay. He'd exited the subway several stops too early, thanks to the fetching looks of Little Miss Excuse Me. It was just as well he'd lost her. He had to remain focused. He had an entirely different job to do tonight.

Her name was Peyton Shields.

Peyton would be asleep by now, he knew, assuming the time on the flashing bank marquee was correct. Just to be sure, he killed a good hour walking her neighborhood, up Comm. Ave., down Newbury, and finally cutting over on Clarendon to Magnolia. It was her jogging route, and on countless warmer nights he'd

watched her blaze down the sidewalks in her flimsy shorts and matching tank top that hugged the glorious shape of her body. They had never said hello, never even made eye contact. But he had passed her many times without her knowing it. She had always been in another world, caught up with the music from the iPod fastened to her belt. Rudy loved the iPod. A set of headphones could rob anyone of her usual alertness. Find a woman with headphones and you could follow her anywhere, practically crawl inside her panties before she even noticed you.

The cold night air stung his cheeks as he neared her apartment. Short hot breaths steamed from his mouth. He stopped beneath the bare magnolia tree across the street, his eyes locking onto her front door. He knew her husband was out of town tonight. Rudy had followed him to the airport. That meant Peyton was inside alone. Just her. And him.

Rudy crossed the street, careful not to stand in any one place too long and draw attention to himself. He walked neither fast nor slow. The street was deserted, but he knew better than to sneak around like a prowler. You never knew when someone was watching—he knew that better than anyone. His heart pounded as he reached her front steps. He felt some fear but mostly excitement. A little fear was healthy. It helped prevent mistakes.

He climbed one step at a time, the right foot, then the left. Every muscle in his body suddenly seemed in sync, the voluntary and the involuntary, the landing of each footstep seeming to match the beating of his heart. He had played this scene over in his mind at least a hundred times. He had studied his surveillance photographs of the front steps and porch. He had memorized the lighting conditions, both with the porch light on and the porch light off. Tonight, she had left it off. The steps were lighted only by the glow of a street lamp forty feet away. Forty-one, to be exact.

Gloves on, he reached inside his pocket for the house key. It had been easy enough to get it. Peyton's husband valeted his car at the same restaurant every Thursday and was stupid enough to

hand over his whole set of keys. Rudy had taken a job there just long enough to trace the key to their front door.

His hand shook only slightly. This was a huge step, but he was ready. He grasped the key firmly and aimed it at the lock. Gently, he touched the key to the metal and circled the opening, as if teasing before entering. With a steady hand he guided the tip to the opening and let it fall into the hole just the slightest bit, barely inside, and held it there for several seconds. He felt a sudden urge to ram it home but didn't. He drew a deep breath and inserted it slowly, one click of the lock's tumblers at a time. The adrenaline flowed as the fit grew tighter. A perfect union, so gratifying, so metaphorical. His eyes closed as it slid past the halfway point, deeper and deeper with each passing second. When the tips of his gloved fingers touched the metal casing of the lock he knew he was in. All the way in. Never in his life had he felt so connected to another human being, just knowing she was on the other side. The sensation was almost unbelievable, so he touched himself to make sure and nearly groaned with delight: He was *enormous*.

His eyes opened, and a thin smile crept to his lips. Slowly, but a little faster than he had entered, he pulled out the key and gave it a gentle kiss before tucking it away. His heart pounded, and he could feel the change inside him. He was losing all fear of doing the things that he knew she wanted done to her. His only remaining fear was that he might yet be less than perfect.

He could wait for perfection.

"Good night, Peyton," he said softly. Then quietly, he climbed down the steps and vanished into the night.

## **Part I**

# **WINTER**



PEYTON SHIELDS COULD FEEL IT COMING. NO ONE HAD TIPPED HER off. No neon lights were blinking. But her sixth sense was in high gear.

Peyton was in her first year of residency in pediatric medicine at Children's Hospital, Boston, one of an elite thirty-seven interns chosen from premier medical schools around the world. She'd vaulted to the top through relentless drive, stellar academic credentials, and a mountain of debt to Harvard Medical School. Good instincts, too, were part of the successful package, and at the moment they were telling her that something strange lay ahead.

She parked her car in the space marked PHYSICIAN outside the North Shore clinic, about thirty miles north of Boston in the city of Haverhill. Peyton was at that stage of her professional training where pediatric residents spent three or four days each month at an outlying clinic to broaden their experience. Haverhill was somewhat of a plum as far as clinical assignments went, situated in the affluent Merrimack Valley. Driving out in any direction, you were virtually guaranteed to run smack into a quaint, three-hundred-year-old town whose 98 percent white population earned more than double the state's median annual income. Though not the most charming in the valley, the city was an interesting mix of one of the finest Queen Anne-style streetscapes in America and blue-collar housing that

had grown from the once-prominent shoe industry. With roughly 10 percent of its population living below the poverty level, the routine medical needs of its Medicaid children were served primarily by the clinic. Today, that meant primarily by Peyton.

"What are you two doing outside?" asked Peyton as she stepped out of the car.

It was a fair question. Even though it was a sunny fifty-six degrees—a heat wave for late February—it was highly irregular for Felicia and Leticia Browning to be caught chitchatting outside the front door at nine-thirty in the morning. The clinic's two full-time nurses were identical twins with polar-opposite personalities. Felicia was the more serious sister and a frequent pain in the neck.

"Power's out," said Leticia, giggling as usual.

"That's weird. All the traffic lights were working on my way over here."

"Cuz you was coming from the south," said Felicia. "Power's out from here north."

"What happened?"

"Earthquake," said Leticia. More giggles.

"Very funny."

"No joke," said Felicia. "We're on the southern edge of what they call the active zone, thirty miles north of Boston and on up to Clinton. Two dozen quakes in the last twenty-one years. Usually little bitty ones, like this."

"How do you know all that?"

"We'll always know more than you," said Felicia, only half-kidding. "We're nurses."

Leticia pulled a battery-powered radio from her sister's coat pocket. "They just interviewed a Boston College seismologist on the air."

"Shut up, fool," said Felicia.

"Ah," said Peyton, seeing they really weren't yanking her chain. "I take it there's no backup generator for this place."

Leticia just laughed. Her sister said, "Dr. Simons canceled his morning appointments and went home over an hour ago."

Good ol' Doc Simons. He ran the clinic, but hands-on he was not. To him, *carpe diem* meant "seize the day *off*."

The three women looked at each other in silence, as if soliciting ideas on how to keep busy. Peyton was about to walk inside when a car sped into the parking lot and screeched to a halt. The driver's-side door flew open and a teenage girl jumped out with a baby in her arms.

"Somebody—help my son!" She looked barely old enough to drive and sounded even younger. Peyton ran to her and gathered the baby in her arms.

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-one months," she said in a panicky voice. "His name's TJ. He got stuck with a needle."

"Are you his mother?"

"Yeah. My name's Grace."

"Take him to Room A," said Felicia. "It's got plenty of sunlight."

Peyton hurried inside, stepping carefully through the dimly lit hall. The baby's cry was weak, as if he'd wailed to the point of exhaustion. They slid the examination table closer to the window to take advantage of the streaming sunlight, then laid the boy on it.

"Needle went in right there," said Grace, pointing at his leg.

Felicia aimed a flashlight. Peyton noticed a minor puncture wound inside the thigh. "What kind of needle was it?"

"Sewing needle. About an inch long."

"Did you bring it with you?"

"It's still in his leg."

Peyton looked closely but still didn't see it. "You sure?"

"The very tip was sticking out at first. I tried to work it out, you know, like a sliver. But it disappeared inside him."

Leticia slipped a small blood-pressure cuff onto the boy's right arm and pumped it. "You're sure it was a sewing needle, child?"

"What else would it be?"

Felicia grabbed the girl's wrists and rolled up her sleeves. "Show me your arms."

Grace resisted, but Felicia was much stronger. "I'm no druggie. Leave me alone."

The arms were trackless, but Felicia wasn't finished. "You shoot between your toes, girl? Or is it your boyfriend who does the drugs and leaves his needles laying around?"

"Nobody is on drugs, so just go to hell!"

Peyton was about to side with the girl, but then she noticed the marks on the backs of her legs just below the hemline of her skirt. "Is that blood behind your knees?"

Grace backed away. The nurse grabbed her and hiked up her skirt. The backs of her thighs were pockmarked with bloody needle holes.

"What is going on here, child?" said Felicia.

"My boyfriend did it."

"Did what?" asked Peyton.

"We got in a fight. He started jabbing me with this stick of his, so I grabbed TJ and ran out the door. He got TJ in the leg, and the needle broke off when I jerked away."

"What kind of stick has a sewing needle on it?"

"He made it himself. A broomstick with a needle on the end of it. He uses it when I jog."

"Excuse me?"

She lowered her eyes, as if embarrassed. "I got fat when I was pregnant and couldn't lose it after TJ was born. So he makes me jog. He uses the stick to keep me going."

"You mean like a cattle prod?" asked Leticia.

"Who the hell is your boyfriend?" said Peyton. "I want to meet this chump."

"Believe me. You don't want to meet him."

The baby started crying. Peyton sterilized her hands and gently palpated the leg, starting at the entry wound and inching her way up. "Does it hurt here, little fella?"

"What are you doing?" Grace asked.

"Trying to locate the needle. It seems to have traveled beneath the skin away from the point of entry. If it doesn't exit on its own, it might work its way into the bloodstream."

“Gross,” said Grace, grimacing. “It’ll rip up his little veins.”

She was still too much of a kid to grasp the gravity of it. Peyton said, “My real concern is that it could travel to his heart.”

“Then you gotta get it out.”

Leticia said, “We can’t X-ray without electricity. He has to go to the hospital.”

“No way,” said Grace. “It could hit his little heart by the time I get him there.”

“Hold on,” said Peyton. “I think I got it.” Gently, she pressed two fingers against his inner thigh. TJ cried as it poked from beneath. Peyton could feel the blunt end of the needle just below the skin.

“Get me a little lidocaine, please.”

“You’re not going to cut him open,” said Felicia.

“With his mother’s consent, I will. Just a teeny incision, and it will pop right out.”

“Do it,” said Grace.

“Don’t you dare,” said Felicia. “You’re an intern in pediatric medicine. Even surgical residents can’t do surgery without a supervisory physician.”

“This isn’t surgery. You’re being silly.”

“Silly is a know-it-all doctor who oversteps her authority and puts this clinic at risk of losing its malpractice coverage.”

Peyton simply injected the local anesthetic and said, “Scalpel, please.”

“This is your neck,” said Felicia. “You know this is against the rules.”

Leticia held the flashlight. Peyton made a minuscule opening, more of a poke than a slice. It barely bled. With the slightest encouragement, the needle’s eye emerged.

“Tweezers,” said Peyton. She grabbed the end and pulled it straight out, then placed it on the table in front of Felicia. “There you go. I think I’m ready to move on to kidney transplants now, don’t you?”

“Go for it,” said Felicia. “I’ll add it to my incident report.” She left the room in a huff.