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Good Me Bad Me

Written by Ali Land

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Good Me Bad Me

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To mental health nurses everywhere. The true rock stars.
This book is for you.

‘But the hearts of small children are delicate organs.
A cruel beginning in this world can twist them into
curious shapes.’

Carson McCullers, 1917–1967

Have you ever dreamt of a place far, far away? I have.

A field full of poppies.

Tiny red dancers, waltzing in glee.

Pointing their petals to a path that leads to a shoreline,
clean. Unbroken.

Floating on my back, a turquoise ocean. Blue sky.

Nothing. Nobody.

I long to hear the words: 'I'll never let anything happen
to you.' Or: 'It wasn't her fault, she was only a child.'

Yes, these are the kinds of dreams I have.

I don't know what's going to happen to me. I'm scared.
Different. I wasn't given a choice.

I promise this.

I promise to be the best I can be.

I promise to try.

Up eight. Up another four.
The door on the right.

The playground.

That's what she called it.

Where the games were evil, and there was only ever one winner.

When it wasn't my turn, she made me watch.

A peephole in the wall.

Asked me afterwards. What did you see, Annie?

What did you see?

I

Forgive me when I tell you it was me.

It was me that told.

The detective. A kindly man, belly full and round. Disbelief at first. Then, the stained dungarees I pulled from my bag. Tiny.

The teddy bear on the front peppered red with blood. I could have brought more, so many to choose from. She never knew I kept them.

Shifted in his chair he did. Sat up straight, him and his gut.

His hand – I noticed a slight tremor as it reached for the telephone. Come now, he said. You need to hear this. The silent waiting for his superior to arrive. Bearable for me. Less so for him. A hundred questions beat a drum in his head. Is she telling the truth? Can't be. That many? Dead? Surely not.

I told the story again. And again. Same story. Different faces watched, different ears listened. I told them everything.

Well.

Almost everything.

The video recorder on, a gentle whirring the only noise in the room once I finished my statement.

You might have to go to court, you know that, right? You're the only witness, one of the detectives said. Another asked, do you think it's safe for us to send her home? If

what she's saying is true? The chief inspector in charge replied, we'll have a team assembled in a matter of hours, then turned to me and said, nothing's going to happen to you. It already has, I wanted to reply.

Everything moved quickly after that, it had to. I was dropped off at the school gates, in an unmarked car, in time for pick-up. In time for her to pick me up. She would be waiting with her demands, recently more urgent than usual. Two in the last six months. Two little boys. Gone.

Act normal, they said. Go home. We're coming for her. Tonight.

The slow grind of the clock above my wardrobe. *Tick. Tock. Tick.* And they did. They came. The middle of the night, the element of surprise in their favour. A nearly imperceptible crunching on the gravel outside, I was downstairs by the time they forced their way through the door.

Shouting. A tall, thin man dressed in plain clothes, unlike the others. A string of commands sliced through the sour air of our living room. You, take upstairs. You, in there. You two take the cellar. You. You. You.

A tidal wave of blue uniforms scattered throughout our house. Guns held in praying hands, flat against their chests. The thrill of the search, along with the terror of the truth, etched in equal measure on their faces.

And then you.

Dragged from your room. A red crease of sleep visible down your cheek, eyes foggy with the adjustment from a state of rest to a state of arrest. You said nothing. Even when your face was mashed into the carpet, your rights read out, their knees and elbows pressed in your back. Your

nightie rode high up your thighs. No underwear. The indignity of it all.

You turned your head to the side. Faced me. Your eyes never left mine, I read them with ease. You said nothing to them, yet everything to me. I nodded.

But only when no one was watching.

New name. New family.

Shiny.

New.

Me.

My foster dad Mike's a psychologist, an expert in trauma; so is his daughter, Phoebe, although more in the causing than the healing. Saskia, the mother. I think she's trying to make me feel at home, although I'm not sure, she's very different from you, Mummy. Skinny and vacant.

Lucky, the staff at the unit told me while I waited for Mike to come. What a fantastic family the Newmonts are, and a place at Wetherbridge. Wow. Wow. WOW. Yes, I get it. I should feel lucky, but really I'm scared. Scared of finding out who and what I might be.

Scared of them finding out, too.

A week ago now Mike came to collect me, towards the end of the summer holidays. My hair brushed neat, pulled back in a band, I practised how to speak, should I sit or stand. Every minute that went by, when the voices I heard weren't his, the nurses instead, sharing a joke, I became convinced he and his family had changed their minds. Come to their senses. I stood rooted to the spot, waiting to be told, sorry, you won't be going anywhere today.

But then he arrived. Greeted me with a smile, a firm handshake, not formal, but nice, nice to know he wasn't

afraid to connect. To run the risk of being contaminated. I remember him noticing my lack of belongings, one small suitcase. In it, a few books, some clothes and other things hidden too, memories of you. Of us. The rest, taken as evidence when our house was stripped bare. Not to worry, he said, we'll organize a shopping trip. Saskia and Phoebe are at home, he added, we'll all have dinner together, a real welcome.

We met with the head of the unit. Gently, gently, he said, take each day as it comes. I wanted to tell him, it's the nights I fear.

Smiles exchanged. Handshakes. Mike signed on the line, turned to face me and said, ready?

Not really, no.

But I left with him anyway.

The drive home was short, less than an hour. Every street and building new to me. It was light when we got there, a big house, white pillars at the front. Okay? asked Mike. I nodded, though I didn't feel okay. I waited for him to unlock the front door; my heart spiralled up into my throat when I realized it wasn't locked. We walked straight in, could have been anyone. He called out to his wife, I'd met her a few times now. Sas, he said, we're home. Coming, was the reply. Hi, Milly, she said, welcome. I smiled, that's what I thought I should do. Rosie, their terrier, greeted me too, jumped at my legs, sneezed with joy when I reached for her ears, gave them a rub. Where's Phoeb's? Mike asked. On her way back from Clondine's, Saskia replied. Perfect, he said, dinner in half an hour or so then. He suggested Saskia should show me to my room, I remember him nodding at her in a way that looked like encouragement. For her, not me.

I followed her up the stairs, tried not to count. New home. New me.

It's just you and Phoebe on the third floor, Saskia explained, we're on the next level down. We've given you the room at the back, it has a nice view of the garden from the balcony.

It was the yellow of the sunflowers I saw first. Brightly coloured. Smiles in a vase. I thanked her, told her they were one of my favourite flowers, she looked pleased. Feel free to explore, she said, there's some clothes in the wardrobe, we'll get you more of course, you can choose them. She asked me if I needed anything, no, I replied, and she left.

I put my suitcase down, walked over to the balcony door, checked it was locked. Secure. The wardrobe to the right, tall, antique pine. I didn't look inside, I didn't want to think about putting on clothes, taking them off. As I turned round, I noticed drawers under the bed, opened them, ran my hands along the back and the sides – nothing there. Safe, for now. An en suite, large, the entire wall on the right covered with a mirror. I turned away from my reflection, didn't want to be reminded. I checked the lock on the bathroom door worked, and that it couldn't be opened from the outside, then I sat on the bed and tried not to think about you.

Before long, I heard feet pounding up the stairs. I tried to stay calm, to remember the breathing exercises I'd been shown by my psychologist, but my head felt fuzzy, so when she appeared at my door I focused on her forehead, as close to eye contact as I could manage. Dinner's ready, her voice more like a purr, creamy, a dash of snide, just as I remembered her from when we met with the social worker. We

couldn't meet at the unit, she wasn't allowed to know the truth, or be given the opportunity to wonder. I remember feeling intimidated. The way she looked, blonde and self-assured, bored, forced to welcome strangers into her home. Twice during the meeting she asked how long I'd be staying. Twice she was shushed.

Dad asked me to come and get you, she said, her arms folded across her chest. Defensive. I'd seen the staff at the unit calling patients out on what their body language meant, labelling it. I quietly watched, learnt a lot. It's days ago now, but the last thing she said before she turned on her heels like an angry ballerina stuck in my head: Oh, and welcome to the mad house.

I followed her smell, sweet and pink, down to the kitchen, fantasizing about what having a sister might be like. What sort of sisters she and I might become. She would be Meg, I thought, I would be Jo, little women of our own. I'd been told at the unit, hope was my best weapon, it would be what got me through.

Foolishly, I believed them.