

GOOD GIRL

BAD GIRL

MICHAEL

ROBOTHAM

For want of a toy
A child was lost.

TOM WAITS,
'MISERY IS THE RIVER OF THE WORLD'

‘Which one is she?’ I ask, leaning closer to the observation window.

‘Blonde. Baggy sweater. Sitting on her own.’

‘And you’re not going to tell me why I’m here?’

‘I don’t want to influence your decision.’

‘What am I deciding?’

‘Just watch her.’

I look again at the group of teenagers, girls and boys. Most are wearing jeans and long tops with the sleeves pulled down to hide whatever self-inflicted damage has been done. Some are cutters, some are burners, or scratchers, or bulimics, or anorexics, or obsessive compulsives, or pyromaniacs, or sociopaths, or narcissists, or suffering from ADHD. Some abuse food or drugs, others swallow foreign objects, or run into walls on purpose, or take outrageous risks.

Evie Cormac has her knees drawn up, almost as though she doesn’t trust the floor. Sullen mouthed and pretty, she could be eighteen or she could be fourteen. Not quite a woman or a girl about to bid goodbye to childhood, yet there is something ageless and changeless about her, as if she has seen the

worst and survived it. With brown eyes framed by thickened eyelashes and bleached hair cut in a ragged bob, she's holding the sleeves of her sweater in her bunched fists, stretching the neckline, revealing a pattern of red blotches below her jawline that could be love-bites or fingermarks.

Adam Guthrie is standing alongside me, regarding Evie like she is the latest arrival at Twycross Zoo.

'Why is she here?' I ask.

'Her current index offence is for aggravated assault. She broke someone's jaw with a half-brick.'

'Her *current* offence?'

'She's had a few.'

'How many?'

'Too few to mention.'

He's attempting to be funny or deliberately obtuse. We're at Langford Hall, a secure children's home in Nottingham, where Guthrie is a resident social worker. He's dressed in baggy jeans, combat boots and a rugby jumper, trying too hard to look like 'one of them'; someone who can relate to teenage delinquency and strife rather than an underpaid, low-level public servant with a wife, a mortgage and two kids. He and I were at university together and lived in the same college. I wouldn't say we were friends, more like passing acquaintances, although I went to his wedding a few years ago and slept with one of the bridesmaids. I didn't know she was Guthrie's youngest sister. Would it have made a difference? I'm not sure. He hasn't held it against me.

'You ready?'

I nod.

We enter the room and take two chairs, joining the circle of teenagers, who watch us with a mixture of suspicion and boredom.

'We have a visitor today,' says Guthrie. 'This is Cyrus Haven.'

'Who is he?' asks one of the girls.

'I'm a psychologist,' I reply.

‘Another one!’ says the same girl, screwing up her face.

‘Cyrus is here to observe.’

‘Us or you?’

‘Both.’

I look for Evie’s reaction. She’s watching me blankly.

Guthrie crosses his legs, revealing a hairless pale ankle where his trouser cuff has ridden up his shin. He’s a jolly, fat sort of bloke who rubs his hands together at the start of something, presupposing the fun that awaits.

‘Let’s begin with some introductions, shall we? I want you to each tell Cyrus your name, where you’re from and why you’re here. Who wants to go first?’

Nobody answers.

‘How about you, Alana?’

She shakes her head. I’m sitting directly opposite Evie. She knows I’m looking at her.

‘Holly?’ asks Guthrie.

‘Nah.’

‘Evie?’

She doesn’t respond.

‘It’s nice to see you’re wearing more clothes today,’ says Guthrie. ‘You, too, Holly.’

Evie snorts.

‘That was a legitimate protest,’ argues Holly, growing more animated. ‘We were protesting against the outdated assumptions of class and gender inherent in this white-male dominated gulag.’

‘Thank you, comrade,’ says Guthrie sarcastically. ‘Will you get us started, Nathan?’

‘Don’t call me Nathan,’ says a beanpole of a boy with pimples on his forehead.

‘What should I call you?’

‘Nat.’

‘You mean like a bug?’ asks Evie.

He spells it out: ‘N . . . A . . . T.’

Guthrie takes a small knitted teddy bear from his pocket and tosses it to Nat. 'You're up first. Remember, whoever has the bear has the right to speak. Nobody else can interrupt.'

Nat bounces the teddy bear on his thigh.

'I'm from Sheffield and I'm here cos I took a dump in my neighbour's VW when he left it unlocked.'

Titters all round. Evie doesn't join in.

'Why did you do that?' asks Guthrie.

Nat shrugs nonchalantly. 'It were a laugh.'

'On the driver's seat?' asks Holly.

'Yeah. Course. Where else? The dickhead complained to the police so me and my mates gave him a kicking.'

'Do you feel bad about that?' asks Guthrie.

'Not really.'

'He had to have metal plates put in his head.'

'Yeah, but he had insurance and he got compensation. My ma had to pay a fine. Way I see it, the dickhead *made* money.'

Guthrie starts to argue but changes his mind, perhaps recognising the futility.

The teddy bear is passed on to Reebah from Nottingham, who is painfully thin and who sewed her lips together because her father tried to make her eat.

'What did he make you eat?' asks another of the girls, who is so fat that her thighs are forcing her knees apart.

'Food.'

'What sort of food?'

'Birthday cake.'

'You're an idiot.'

Guthrie interrupts. 'Please don't make critical comments, Cordelia. You can only speak if you have the bear.'

'Give it to me then,' she says, snatching the bear from Reebah's lap.

'Hey! I wasn't finished.'

The girls wrestle for a moment until Guthrie intervenes, but Reebah has forgotten what she wanted to say.

The bear is in a new lap. 'My name is Cordelia and I'm from Leeds and when someone pisses me off, I fight them, you know. I make 'em pay.'

'You get angry?' asks Guthrie.

'Yeah.'

'What sort of things make you angry?'

'When people call me fat.'

'You are fat,' says Evie.

'Shut the fuck up!' yells Cordelia, jumping to her feet. She's twice Evie's size. 'Say that again and I'll fuckin' batter you.'

Guthrie has put himself between them. 'Apologise, Evie.'

Evie smiles sweetly. 'I'm sorry for calling you *fat*, Cordelia. I think you've lost weight. You look positively svelte.'

'What's that mean?' she asks.

'Skinny.'

'Fuck off!'

'OK, let's all settle down,' says Guthrie. 'Cordelia, why are you here?'

'I grew up too soon,' she replies. 'I lost my virginity at, like, eleven. I slept with guys and slept with girls and smoked a lot of pot. I tried heroin at twelve and ice when I was thirteen.'

Evie rolls her eyes.

Cordelia glares at her. 'My mum called the police on me, so I tried to poison her with floor cleaner.'

'To punish her?' asks Guthrie.

'Maybe,' says Cordelia. 'It was like an experiment, you know. I wanted to, like, see what would happen.'

'Did it work?' asks Nat.

'Nah,' replies Cordelia. 'She said the soup tasted funny and didn't finish the bowl. Made her vomit, that's all.'

'You should have used wolfsbane,' says Nat.

'What's that?'

'It's a plant. I heard about this gardener who died when he touched the leaves.'

‘My mum doesn’t like gardening,’ says Cordelia, missing the point.

Guthrie passes the teddy bear to Evie. ‘Your turn.’

‘Nope.’

‘Why not?’

‘The details of my life are inconsequential.’

‘That’s not true.’

Evie sighs and leans forward, resting her forearms on her knees, squeezing the bear with both hands. Her accent changes.

‘My father was a relentlessly self-improving boulangerie owner from Belgium with low-grade narcolepsy and a penchant for buggery. My mother was a fifteen-year-old French prostitute named Chloe with webbed feet . . .’

I laugh. Everybody looks at me.

‘It’s from *Austin Powers*,’ I explain.

More blank stares.

‘The movie . . . Mike Myers . . . Dr Evil.’

Still nothing.

Evie puts on a gruff Scottish accent. ‘First things first. Where’s your shitter? I’ve got a turtle-head poking out.’

‘Fat Bastard,’ I say.

Evie smiles. Guthrie is annoyed with me, as though I’m fomenting unrest.

He calls on another teenager, who has a blue streak in her hair and piercings in her ears, eyebrows and nose.

‘What brings you here, Serena?’

‘Well, it’s a long story.’

Groans all round.

Serena recounts an episode from her life when she went to America as an exchange student at sixteen and lived with a family in Ohio, whose son was in prison for murder. Every fortnight they insisted Serena visit him, making her wear her sexiest clothes. Short dresses. Low-cut tops.

‘He was on the other side of the glass and his father kept telling me to lean closer and show him my tits.’

Evie sneezes into the crook of her arm in a short, sharp exhalation, that sounds a lot like, ‘Bullshit!’

Serena glares at her but goes on with her story. ‘One night, when I was sleeping, the father came into my room and raped me. I was too frightened to tell my parents or call the police. I was alone in a foreign country, thousands of miles from home.’ She looks around the group, hoping for sympathy.

Evie sneezes again – making the same sound.

Serena tries to ignore her.

‘Back home, I started having problems – drinking and cutting myself. My parents sent me see to a therapist, who seemed really nice at the beginning until he tried to rape me.’

‘For fuck’s sake!’ says Evie, sighing in disgust.

‘We’re not here to pass judgement,’ Guthrie warns her.

‘But she’s making shit up. What’s the point of sharing if people are gonna tell lies.’

‘Fuck you!’ shouts Serena, flipping Evie the finger.

‘Bite me!’ says Evie.

Serena leaps to her feet. ‘You’re a freak! Everybody knows it.’

‘Please sit down,’ says Guthrie, trying to keep the girls apart.

‘She called me a fucking liar.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ says Evie. ‘I called you a *psycho* fucking liar.’

Serena ducks under Guthrie’s arm and launches herself across the space, knocking Evie off her chair. The two of them are wrestling on the floor, but Evie seems to be laughing as she wards off the blows.

An alarm has been raised and a security team bursts into the group therapy room, dragging Serena away. The rest of the teenagers are ordered back to their bedrooms, all except for Evie. Dusting herself off, she touches the corner of her lip, rubbing a smudge of blood between her thumb and forefinger.

I give her a tissue. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m fine. She punches like a girl.’

‘What happened to your neck?’

‘Someone tried to strangle me.’

‘Why?’

‘I have that sort of face.’

I pull up a chair and motion for Evie to sit down. She complies, crossing her legs, revealing an electronic tag on her ankle.

‘Why are you wearing that?’

‘They think I’m trying to escape.’

‘Are you?’

Evie raises her forefinger to her lips and makes a shushing sound.

‘First chance I get.’

2

Guthrie meets me in a pub called the Man of Iron, named after the nearby Stanton Ironworks, which closed down years ago. He's perched on a stool with an empty pint glass resting between his elbows, watching a fresh beer being pulled.

'Your regular boozer?' I ask, sitting next to him.

'My escape,' he replies. His fingers are pudgy and pale, decorated with a tri-band wedding ring.

The barman asks if I want something. I shake my head and Guthrie looks disappointed to be drinking alone. Over his shoulder I see a lounge area with a pool table and fruit machines that ping and blink like a fairground ride.

'You're looking good,' I say. Lying. 'How's married life?'

'Terrific. Great. Making me fat.' He pats his stomach. 'You should try it.'

'Getting fat?'

'Marriage.'

'How are the kids?'

'Growing like weeds. We have two now, a boy and a girl, eight and five.'

I can't remember his wife's name but recall her being eastern

European, with a thick accent and a wedding dress that looked like a craft project that had gone horribly wrong. Guthrie had met her when he was teaching part-time at an English language school in London.

‘What did you think of Evie?’ he asks.

‘She’s a real charmer.’

‘She’s one of them.’

‘One of who?’

‘The lie detectors.’

I suppress a laugh. He looks aggrieved.

‘You saw her. She knew when they were lying. She’s a truth wizard – just like you wrote about.’

‘You *read* my thesis?’

‘Every word.’

I make a face. ‘That was eight years ago.’

‘It was published.’

‘And I concluded that truth wizards didn’t exist.’

‘No, you said they represented a tiny percentage of the population – maybe one in five hundred – and the best of them were accurate eighty per cent of the time. You also wrote that someone could develop even greater skills, a person who wasn’t disrupted by emotions or lack of familiarity with the subject; someone who functioned at a higher level.’

Christ, he did read it!

I want to stop the conversation and tell Guthrie he’s wrong. I spent two years researching truth wizards, reading the literature, exploring the research, and testing more than three thousand volunteers. Evie Cormac is too young to be a truth wizard. Usually, they’re middle-aged or older, able to draw upon their experiences in certain professions, such as detectives, judges, lawyers, psychologists and secret service agents. Teenagers are too busy looking in the mirror or studying their phones to be reading the subtle, almost imperceptible changes in people’s facial expressions, or the nuances of their body language or their tones of voice.

Guthrie is waiting for me to respond.

‘I think you’re mistaken,’ I say.

‘But you *saw* her do it.’

‘She’s a very clever, manipulative teenager.’

The social worker sighs and peers into his half-empty glass.

‘She’s driven me to this.’

‘What?’

‘Drinking. According to my doctor I have the body of a sixty-year-old; I have high blood pressure, fatty tissue around my heart and borderline cirrhosis.’

‘How is that Evie’s fault?’

‘Every time I talk to her I want to curl up in a ball and sob. I took two months off earlier in the year – stress leave, but it didn’t help. Now my wife is threatening to leave me unless I agree to see a marriage counsellor. I haven’t told a soul that information, but somehow Evie knew.’

‘How?’

‘How do you think?’ Guthrie doesn’t wait for me to respond. ‘Believe me, Cyrus. She can tell when people are lying.’

‘Even if that were true, I don’t see why I’m here.’

‘You could help her.’

‘How?’

‘Evie has made an application to the court to be released, but she’s not ready to leave Langford Hall. She’s dyslexic. Anti-social. Aggressive. She has no friends. Nobody ever visits her. She’s a danger to herself and others.’

‘If she’s eighteen, she *has* the right to move on.’

Guthrie hesitates and tugs at his collar, pulling it away from his neck.

‘Nobody knows her true age.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘There’s no record of her birth.’

I blink at him. ‘There must be something – a hospital file, a midwife’s report, school enrolments . . .’

‘There are no records.’

‘That’s impossible.’

Guthrie takes a moment to finish his beer and signal the barman for another. He drops his voice to a whisper. ‘What I’m about to tell you is highly confidential. I’m talking classified. You can’t breathe a word of this to anyone.’

I want to laugh. Guthrie is the least likely spy in history.

‘I’m serious, Cyrus.’

‘OK. OK.’

His beer arrives. He centres it on a cardboard coaster and waits for the barman to wander out of earshot. A shaft of sunlight is slanting through a window. Full of floating specks, it gives the pub the ambience of a church and that we’re in a confessional.

‘Evie is the girl in the box.’

‘Who?’

‘Angel Face.’

Immediately, I understand the reference, but want to argue. ‘That can’t be right.’

‘It’s her.’

‘But that was . . .’

‘Six years ago.’

I remember the story. A girl found living in a secret room in a house in north London. Thought to be eleven or twelve, she weighed less than a child of half that age. A mop-headed, wild-eyed, feral-looking creature, more animal than human, she could have been raised by wolves.

Her hiding spot was only feet away from where the police had discovered the decomposing body of a man who had been tortured to death, sitting upright in a chair. The girl had lived with the corpse for months, sneaking out to steal food and sharing it with the two dogs that were kennelled in the garden.

Those first images were flashed around the world. They showed an off-duty special constable carrying a small child through the doors of a hospital. The girl wouldn’t let anyone

else touch her and her only words were to ask for food and whether the dogs were all right.

The nurses dubbed her Angel Face because they had to call her something. The details of her captivity dominated the news for weeks. Everybody had a question. Who was she? Where had she come from? How had she survived?

Guthrie has been waiting for me to catch up.

‘She was never identified,’ he explains. ‘The police tried everything – missing person’s files, DNA, bone x-rays, stable isotopes . . . Her photograph went around the world, but nothing came back.’

How could a child appear out of nowhere – with no record of her birth or her passage through life?

Guthrie continues. ‘She became a ward of the court and was given her a new name – Evie Cormac. The home secretary added a Section 39 Order, which forbids anybody from revealing her identity, or location, or taking any pictures or footage of her.’

‘Who knows?’ I ask.

‘At Langford Hall – only me.’

‘Why is she here?’

‘There’s nowhere else.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘She was placed in a dozen different foster homes, but each time she either ran away or they sent her back. She’s also had four caseworkers, three psychologists and God-knows-how-many social workers. I’m the last one standing.’

‘What’s her mental health status?’

‘She passed every psych test from Balthazar to Winslow.’

‘I still don’t understand why I’m here.’

Guthrie sucks an inch off his pint and looks along the bar.

‘Like I said, Evie is a ward of the court, meaning the High Court makes all the important decisions about her welfare while the local authority controls her day-to-day care. Two months ago, she petitioned to be classed as an adult.’

‘If she’s deemed to be eighteen, she has every right.’

Guthrie looks at me plaintively. 'She's a danger to herself and others. If she succeeds . . .' He shudders, unable to finish. 'Imagine having her ability.'

'You make it sound like a superpower.'

'It is,' he says, earnestly.

'I think you're exaggerating.'

'She clocked you straight away.'

'Being perceptive doesn't make someone a truth wizard.'

He lifts his eyebrows, as though he expected more of me.

'I think you're trying to fob her off,' I say.

'Gladly,' he says, 'but that's not the reason. I honestly thought you could help her. Everybody else has failed.'

'Has she ever talked about what happened to her – in the house, I mean?'

'No. According to Evie, she has no past, no family and no memories.'

'She's blocked them out.'

'Maybe. At the same time, she lies, she obfuscates, she casts shade and misdirects. She's a nightmare.'

'I don't think she's a truth wizard,' I say.

'OK.'

'What files can you show me?'

'I'll get them to you. Some of the early details have been redacted to protect her new identity.'

'You said Evie broke someone's jaw. Who was it?' I ask.

'A male member of staff found two thousand pounds in her room. He figured Evie must have stolen the money and took it from her, saying he was going to hand it over to the police.'

'What happened?'

'Evie knew he was lying.'

'Where did she get the money?' I ask.

'She said she won it playing poker.'

'Is that possible?'

'I wouldn't bet against her.'