

WHEN SHE WAS GOOD

MICHAEL
ROBOTHAM

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PRAISE FOR *GOOD GIRL, BAD GIRL*

‘This page-turning, emotional thriller keeps you thinking and guessing until the end’ *HERALD SUN*

‘Every chapter delivers an unpredictable development, while two storylines gradually come closer until they overlap, with violent consequences’ *WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN*

‘Haunting . . . Robotham expertly raises the tension as the action hurtles toward the devastating climax. Readers will hope the complex Cyrus will return for an encore’ *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

‘It’s the careful and often poignant interplay between Cyrus and Evie that elevates this consistently stellar yarn . . . Robotham is a master plotter at the top of his form’ *KIRKUS REVIEWS*

‘Explosive . . . This sensitive, suspenseful mystery firmly establishes Robotham in the top ranks of psychological-thriller writers’ *BOOKLIST*

‘A classic page-turner with a cracker ending’ *GOOD WEEKEND*

‘Intercutting between Evie and Cyrus’s perspectives (two fascinating characters who’ve found different ways to cope with each of their traumatic childhoods), *Good Girl, Bad Girl* engages quickly. It’s a real page-turner . . .’ *GOOD READING*

‘I always have a huge stack of books to read, but a Michael Robotham novel automatically goes to the top of the pile’ *STEPHEN KING*

‘A gripping and eerie read. You won’t be able to look away’ *KARIN SLAUGHTER*

Also by Michael Robotham

Cyrus Haven series

Good Girl, Bad Girl

Joe O'Loughlin series

The Suspect

The Drowning Man (aka Lost)

The Night Ferry

Shatter

Bleed for Me

The Wreckage

Say You're Sorry

Watching You

Close Your Eyes

The Other Wife

Other fiction

Bombproof

Life or Death

The Secrets She Keeps

There was a little girl,
And she had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead.
When she was good
She was very, very good,
And when she was bad she was horrid.

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW (1807–1882)

Nobody values the truth more highly than a liar.

ALBANIAN PROVERB

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Cyrus

May 2020

Late spring. Morning cold. A small wooden boat emerges from the mist, sliding forward with each pull on the oars. The inner harbour is so mirror smooth it shows each ripple as it radiates outwards before stretching and breaking against the bow.

The rowing boat follows the grey rock wall, past the fishing trawlers and yachts, until it reaches a narrow shingle beach. The lone occupant jumps out and drags the boat higher up the stones where it cants drunkenly sideways, looking clumsy on land. Elegance lost.

The hood of an anorak is pushed back and hair explodes from inside. True red hair. Red as flame. Red as the daybreak. She takes a hairband from her wrist, looping the tresses into a single bundle that falls down the centre of her back.

My breath has fogged up the window of my room. Tugging my sleeve over my fist, I wipe the small square pane of glass to get a better view. She's finally here. I have been waiting six days. I have walked the footpaths, visited the lighthouse, and exhausted the menu at O'Neill's Bar & Restaurant. I have read

the morning newspapers and three discounted novels and listened to the local drunks tell me their life stories. Fishermen mostly, with hands as gnarled as knobs of ginger and eyes that squint into brightness when there is no sun.

Leaning into the rowing boat, she pulls back a tarpaulin revealing plastic crates and cardboard boxes. This is her fortnightly shopping trip for supplies. With her hands full of boxes, she climbs the steps from the beach and crosses the cobblestones. My eyes follow her progress as she walks along the promenade, past shuttered kiosks and tourist shops towards a small supermarket with a light burning inside. Stepping over a bundle of newspapers, she knocks on the door. A middle-aged man, red-nosed and rosy-cheeked, raises a blind and nods in recognition. He turns the deadlock and ushers her inside, pausing to scan the street, looking for me perhaps. He knows I've been waiting.

Dressing quickly in jeans and a sweatshirt, I pull on my boots and descend the pub stairs to a side entrance. The air outside smells of drying seaweed and woodsmoke; and the distant hills are edged in orange where God has opened the furnace door and stoked the coals for a new day.

The bell jangles on a metal arm. The shopkeeper and the woman turn towards me. They're each holding matching mugs of steam. She braces herself, as if ready to fight or flee, but holds her ground. She looks different from her photographs. Smaller. Her face is windburned and her hands are callused and her left thumbnail is blackened where she has jammed it between two hard objects.

'Sacha Hopewell?' I ask.

She reaches into the pocket of her anorak. For a moment, I imagine a weapon. A fishing knife or a can of mace.

'My name is Cyrus Haven. I'm a psychologist. I wrote to you.'

'That's him,' says the shopkeeper. 'The one who's been asking after you. Should I sic Roddy on to him?'

I don't know if Roddy is a dog or a person.

Sacha pushes past me and begins collecting groceries from the shelves, loading a trolley, choosing sacks of rice and flour; tins of vegetables and stewed fruit. I follow her down the aisle. Strawberry jam. Long-life milk. Peanut butter.

'Seven years ago, you found a child in a house in north London. She was hiding in a secret room.'

'You have me mistaken for someone else,' she says brusquely.

I pull a photograph from my jacket pocket. 'This is you.'

She gives the image a cursory glance and continues collecting dry goods.

The picture shows a young special constable dressed in black leggings and a dark top. She's carrying a filthy, feral child through the doors of a hospital. The young girl's face is obscured by wild, matted hair, as she clings to Sacha like a koala to a tree.

I pull another photograph from my pocket.

'This is what she looks like now.'

Sacha stops suddenly. She can't help but look at the picture. She wants to know what became of that little girl: Angel Face. The girl in the box. A child then, a teenager now, the photograph shows her sitting on a concrete bench, wearing torn jeans and a baggy jumper with a hole in one elbow. Her hair is longer and dyed blonde. She scowls rather than smiles at the camera.

'I have others,' I say.

Sacha looks away, reaching past me and plucking a box of macaroni from the shelf.

'Her name is Evie Cormac. She's living in a secure children's home.'

She grips the trolley and keeps moving.

'I could go to prison for telling you any of this. There's a Section 39 Order that forbids anybody from revealing her identity, or location, or taking pictures of her.'

I block her path. She steps around me. I match her movements. It's like we're dancing in the aisle.

‘Evie has never spoken about what happened to her in that house. That’s why I’m here. I want to hear your story.’

Sacha pushes past me. ‘Read the police reports.’

‘I need more.’

She has reached the cold section, where she slides open a chest freezer and begins rummaging inside.

‘How did you find me?’ she asks.

‘It wasn’t easy.’

‘Did my parents help you?’

‘They’re worried about you.’

‘You’ve put them in danger.’

‘How?’

Sacha doesn’t reply. She parks her trolley near the cash register and gets another. The red-nosed man is no longer at the counter, but I hear his footsteps on the floor above.

‘You can’t keep running,’ I say.

‘Who says I’m running?’

‘You’re hiding. I want to help.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Then let me help Evie. She’s different. Special.’

Boots on the stairs. Another man appears in the doorway at the rear of the supermarket. Younger. Stronger. Bare-chested. He’s wearing sweatpants that hang so low on his hips I can see the top of his pubic hair. This must be Roddy.

‘That’s him,’ says the red-nosed man. ‘He’s been snooping around the village all week.’

Roddy reaches beneath the counter and retrieves a speargun with a polyamide handle and a stainless-steel harpoon. My first reaction is to almost laugh because the weapon is so unnecessary and out-of-place.

Roddy scowls. ‘Is he bothering you, Sacha?’

‘I can handle this,’ she replies.

Roddy rests the speargun against his shoulder like a soldier on parade.

‘Is he your ex?’

‘No.’

‘Want me to dump him off the dock?’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

Roddy clearly has eyes for Sacha. Puppy love. She’s out of his league.

‘I’ll buy you breakfast,’ I say.

‘I can afford my own breakfast,’ she replies.

‘I know. I didn’t mean . . . Give me half an hour. Let me convince you.’

She takes toothpaste and mouthwash from the shelf. ‘If I tell you what happened, will you leave me alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘No phone calls. No letters. No visits. And you’ll leave me and my family be.’

‘Agreed.’

Sacha leaves her shopping at the supermarket and tells the shopkeeper she won’t be long.

‘Want me to go with you?’ asks Roddy, scratching his navel.

‘No. It’s OK.’

The café is next to the post office in the same squat stone building, which overlooks a bridge and the tidal channel. Tables and chairs are arranged on the footpath, beneath a striped awning that is fringed with fairy lights. The menu is handwritten on a chalkboard.

A woman wearing an apron is righting upturned chairs and dusting them off.

‘Kitchen doesn’t open till seven,’ she says in a Cornish accent. ‘I can make you tea.’

‘Thank you,’ replies Sacha, who chooses a long, padded bench, facing the door, where she can scan the footpath and parking area. Old habits.

‘I’m alone,’ I say.

She regards me silently, sitting with her knees together and her hands on her lap.

‘It’s a pretty village,’ I say, glancing at the fishing boats and yachts. The first rays of sunshine are touching the tops of the masts. ‘How long have you lived here?’

‘That’s not relevant,’ she replies, reaching into her pocket where she finds a small tube of lip-balm, which she smears on her lips.

‘Show me the pictures.’

I take out another four photographs and slide them across the table. The pictures show Evie as she is now, almost eighteen.

‘She dyes her hair a lot,’ I explain. ‘Different colours.’

‘Her eyes haven’t changed,’ says Sacha, running her thumb over Evie’s face, as though tracing the contours.

‘Her freckles come out in the summer,’ I say. ‘She hates them.’

‘I’d kill for her eyelashes.’

Sacha arranges the photographs side by side, changing the order to suit her eye, or some unspoken design. ‘Did they find her parents?’

‘No.’

‘What about DNA? Missing persons?’

‘They searched the world.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘She became a ward of court and was given a new name because nobody knew her real one.’

‘I thought for sure that someone would claim her.’

‘That’s why I’m here. I’m hoping Evie might have said something to you – given you some clue.’

‘You’re wasting your time.’

‘But you found her.’

‘That’s all.’

The next silence is longer. Sacha puts her hands in her pockets to stop them moving.

‘How much do you know?’ she asks.

‘I’ve read your statement. It’s two pages long.’

The swing doors open from the kitchen and two pots of tea are delivered. Sacha flips the hinged lid and jiggles her teabag up and down.

‘Have you been to the house?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’

‘And read the police reports?’

I nod.

Sacha pours tea into her cup.

‘They found Terry Boland in the front bedroom upstairs. Bound to a chair. Gagged. He’d been tortured to death. Acid dripped in his ears. His eyelids burned away.’ She shudders. ‘It was the biggest murder investigation in years in north London. I was a special constable working out of Barnet Police Station. The incident room was on the first floor.

‘Boland had been dead for two months, which is why they took so long to identify his body. They released an artist’s impression of his face and his ex-wife called the hotline. Everybody was surprised when Boland’s name came up because he was so small-time – a rung above petty criminal, with a history of assault and burglary. Everybody was expecting some gangland connection.’

‘Were you involved in the investigation?’

‘God, no. A special constable is a general dogsbody, doing shit jobs and community liaison. I used to pass the homicide detectives on the stairs, or overhear them talking in the pub. When they couldn’t come up with any leads, they began suggesting Boland was a drug dealer who double-crossed the wrong people. The locals could rest easy because the bad guys were killing each other.’

‘What did you think?’

‘I wasn’t paid to think.’

‘Why were you sent to the murder house?’

‘Not the house – the road. The neighbours were complaining about stuff going missing. Bits and pieces stolen from garages and garden sheds. My sergeant sent me out to interview them as a public relations exercise. He called it “bread and circuses”: keeping the masses happy.

‘I remember standing outside number seventy-nine, thinking

how ordinary it appeared to be, you know. Neglected. Unloved. But it didn't look like a house where a man had been tortured to death. The downpipes were streaked with rust and the windows needed painting and the garden was overgrown. Wisteria had gone wild during the summer, twisting and coiling up the front wall, creating a curtain of mauve flowers over the entrance.'

'You have an artist's eye,' I say.

Sacha smiles at me for the first time. 'An art teacher once told me that. She said I could experience beauty mentally, as well as visually, seeing colour, depth and shadow where other people saw things in two dimensions.'

'Did you want to be an artist?'

'A long time ago.'

She empties a sachet of sugar into her cup. Stirs.

'I went up and down the road, knocking on doors, asking about the robberies, but all anyone wanted to talk about was the murder. They had the same questions: "Have you found the killer? Should we be worried?" They all had their theories, but none of them actually knew Terry Boland. He had lived in the house since February, but didn't make their acquaintance. He waved. He walked his dogs. He kept to himself.

'People cared more about those dogs than Boland. All those weeks he was dead upstairs, his two Alsatians were starving in a kennel in the back garden. Only they weren't starving. Someone had to be feeding them. People said the killers must have come back, which means they cared more about the dogs than a human being.'

The waitress emerges again from the kitchen. This time she brings a chalkboard and props it on a chair.

'What about the robberies?' I ask.

'The most valuable thing stolen was a cashmere sweater, which a woman used to line her cat's bed.'

'What else?'

'Apples, biscuits, scissors, breakfast cereal, candles, barley sugar,

matches, magazines, dog food, socks, playing cards, liquorice allsorts . . . oh, yeah, and a snowdome of the Eiffel Tower. I remember that one because it belonged to a young boy who lived over the road.'

'George.'

'You've talked to him.'

I nod.

Sacha seems impressed with my research.

'George was the only person who saw Angel Face. He thought he saw a boy in an upstairs window. George waved, but the child didn't wave back.'

Sacha orders porridge and berries, orange juice and more tea. I choose the full English breakfast and a double espresso.

She is relaxed enough to take off her coat; I notice how her inner layers hug her body. She brushes stray strands of hair behind her ears. I'm trying to think who she reminds me of. An actress. Not a new one. Katharine Hepburn. My mother loved watching old movies.

Sacha continues. 'None of the neighbours could explain how the thief was getting in, but I suspected they were leaving their windows open or the doors unlocked. I rang my sergeant and gave him the list. He said it was kids and I should go home.'

'But you didn't.'

Sacha shakes her head. Her hair catches the lights. 'I was walking back to my car when I noticed two painters packing up their van. Number 79 was being renovated and put up for sale. I got talking to a young bloke and his boss. The house was a mess when they arrived, they said. There were holes in the walls, broken pipes, ripped-up carpets. The smell was the worst thing.

'The young guy, Toby, said the house was haunted because stuff had gone missing – a digital radio and a half-eaten sandwich. His boss laughed and said Toby could eat for England and had probably forgotten the sandwich.

“What about the marks on the ceiling?” said Toby. “We’ve

painted the upstairs bathroom three times, but the ceiling keeps getting these black smudges, like someone is burning candles.”

“That’s because ghosts like holding séances,” joked his boss.

‘I asked them if I could look around. They gave me a guided tour. The floorboards had been sanded and varnished, including the stairs. I climbed to the upper floor and wandered from room to room. I looked at the bathroom ceiling.’ Sacha pivots and asks, ‘Why do people have double sinks? Do couples actually brush their teeth side by side?’

‘It’s so they don’t have arguments over who left the top off the toothpaste,’ I suggest.

She smiles for the second time.

‘It was Friday afternoon and the painters were packing up for the weekend. I asked if I could borrow their keys and stay a while longer.’

“Is that a direct order from the police?” Toby asked, making fun of me.

“I can’t really make orders,” I said. “It’s more of a request.”

“No wild parties.”

“I’m a police officer.”

“You can still have wild parties.”

“You haven’t met my friends.”

‘Toby’s boss gave me the keys and the van pulled away. I went upstairs and walked from room to room. I remember wondering why Terry Boland would rent such a big house. Four bedrooms in north London doesn’t come cheap. He paid six months in advance, in cash, using a fake name on the tenancy agreement.

‘I sat on the stairs for a few hours and then made a make-shift bed from the dust sheets, trying to stay warm. By midnight, I wished I’d gone home, or I had a pillow or a sleeping bag. I felt foolish. If someone at the station discovered I’d spent all night staking out an empty house, I’d have been the office punchline.’

‘What happened?’

Sacha shrugs. 'I fell asleep. I dreamed of Terry Boland with belts around his neck and forehead; acid being dripped into his ears. Do you think it feels cold at first – before the burning starts? Could he hear his own screams?'

Sacha shivers and I notice the goose bumps on her arms.

'I remember waking up, bashing my fist against my head trying to get acid out of my ears. That's when I sensed that someone was watching me.'

'In the house?'

'Yeah. I called out. Nobody answered. I turned on the lights and searched the house from top to bottom. Nothing had changed except for a window above the kitchen sink. It was unlatched.'

'And you'd left it locked.'

'I couldn't be completely sure.'

The waitress interrupts, bringing our meals. Sacha blows on each spoonful of porridge and watches as I arrange my triangles of toast so that the baked beans don't contaminate the eggs and the mushrooms don't touch the bacon. It's a military operation – marshalling food around my plate.

'What are you, five?' she asks.

'I never grew out of it,' I explain, embarrassed. 'It's an obsessive-compulsive disorder – a mild one.'

'Does it have a name?'

'*Brumotactillophobia*.'

'You're making that up.'

'No.'

'How are you with Chinese food?'

'I'm OK if meals are pre-mixed, like stir-fry and pasta. Breakfast is different.'

'What happens if your baked beans touch your eggs? Is it bad luck, or something worse?'

'I don't know.'

'Then what's the point?'

'I wish I could tell you.'

Sacha looks baffled and laughs. She is lightening up; lowering her defences.

‘What happened at the house?’ I ask.

‘In the morning I drove home, showered and fell into bed, sleeping until early afternoon. My parents wanted to know where I’d spent the night. I told them I’d been on a stakeout, making it sound like I was doing important police work. Lying to them.

‘It was Saturday and I was due to go out with friends that night. Instead, I drove to a supermarket and picked up containers of talcum powder, extra batteries for my torch, orange juice and a family-sized chocolate bar. Near midnight, I went back to Hotham Road and quietly unlocked the door. I was wearing my gym gear – black leggings and a zip-up jacket and my trainers.

‘Starting upstairs, I sprinkled talcum across the floor, down the stairs, along the hallway to the kitchen. I went from room to room, covering the bare floorboards in a fine coat of powder that was invisible when the lights were turned off. Afterwards, I locked up the house and went to my car, where I crawled into a sleeping bag, reclined the seat and nodded off.

‘A milkman woke me just after dawn – the rattle of bottles in crates. I let myself into the house and shone my torch over the floor. There were footprints leading in both directions, up and down the stairs, along the hallway to the kitchen. They stopped at the sink, below the window I found unlatched the night before. I followed the footprints, tracking them up the stairs and across the landing and into the main bedroom. They ended suddenly beneath the hanging rails of the walk-in wardrobe. It was like someone had vanished into thin air or been beamed up by Scotty.

‘I studied the wardrobe, pushing aside hangers and running my fingers over the skirting boards. When I tapped on the plasterboard it made a hollow sound, so I wedged the blade of my pocketknife under the edge of the panel, levering it back and forth, making it move a little each time. I put my weight against the panel, but something seemed to be pushing against

me. Eventually, I hooked fingers through the widening gap and pulled hard. The plasterboard slid sideways, revealing a crawlspace behind the wardrobe. It was about eight feet long and five feet wide with a sloping ceiling that narrowed at the far end.

I shone the torch across the floor and saw food wrappers, empty bottles of water, magazines, books, playing cards, a snow-dome of the Eiffel Tower. "I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "I'm a police officer."

'Nobody answered, so I put the torch between my teeth and crawled through the hole on my hands and knees. The room seemed empty, except for a wooden box that was wedged between the ceiling and the floor. I moved closer, saying, "Don't be scared. I won't hurt you."

'When I reached the box, I shone my torch inside on to a bundle of rags, which began to move. The slowness became a rush and suddenly, this thing burst past me. I reached out and grabbed at the rags, which fell away in my fingers. Before I could react, the creature was gone. I had to backtrack through the panel into the bedroom. By that time, I could hear door handles being rattled and small fists hammering on the windows downstairs. I looked over the banister and saw a dark shape scuttling along the hallway to the sitting room. I followed the figure and saw legs poking from the fireplace, like a chimney sweep was trying to climb up.

"Hey!" I said and the figure spun around and snarled at me. I thought it was a boy at first, only it wasn't a boy, it was a girl. She had a knife pressed to her chest, over her heart.

'The sight of her . . . I'll never forget. Her skin was so pale that the smudges of dirt on her cheeks looked like bruises; and her eyelashes and eyebrows were dark and doll-like. She was wearing a pair of faded jeans with a hole in one knee, and a woollen jumper with a polar bear woven on to the chest. I thought she was seven, maybe eight, possibly younger.

'I was shocked by the state of her and by the knife. What sort of child threatens to stab herself?'

I don't answer. Sacha's eyes are closed, as though she's replaying the scene in her mind.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "My name is Sacha. What's yours?" She didn't answer. When I reached into my pocket, she dug the point of the knife harder into her chest.

"No, please don't," I said. "Are you hungry?" I pulled out the half-eaten chocolate bar. She didn't move. I broke off a piece and popped it into my mouth.

"I love chocolate. It's the only thing in the world I could never give up. Every Lent my mother makes me give up one of my favourite things as a sacrifice, you know. I'd happily choose Facebook or caffeine or gossiping, but my mother says it has to be chocolate. She's very religious."

'We were ten feet apart. She was crouched in the fireplace. I was kneeling on the floor. I asked her if I could get up because my knees were hurting. I eased backwards and sat against the wall. Then I broke off another piece of chocolate before wrapping the bar and sliding it towards her across the floor. We stared at each for a while before she edged out her right foot and dragged the chocolate bar closer. She tore open the wrapping and stuffed so much chocolate into her mouth all at once, I thought she might choke.

'I had so many questions. How long had she been there? Did she witness the murder? Did she hide from it? I remember making a sign of the cross and she mimicked me. I thought maybe she was raised a Catholic.'

'That wasn't in the file,' I say.

'What?'

'There's no mention of her making a sign of the cross.'

'Is that important?'

'It's new information.'

I ask her to go on. Sacha glances out of the window. The sun is fully up, and fishing boats are returning to the bay, trailing seagulls behind them like white kites.

'We must have sat there for more than an hour. I did all the

talking. I told her about the talcum powder and the latch on the kitchen window. She gave me nothing. I took out my warrant card and held it up. I said it proved I was a special constable, which was almost the same as being a trainee police officer. I said I could protect her.'

Sacha looks up from her empty bowl. 'Do you know what she did?'

I shake my head.

'She gave me this look that laid me to waste inside. It was so full of despair, so bereft of hope. It was like dropping a stone into a dark well, waiting for it to hit the bottom, but it never does, it just keeps falling. That's what frightened me. That and her voice, which came out all raspy and hoarse. She said, "Nobody can protect me."''