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The Good Girl

Written by Mary Kubica

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THE GOOD GIRL

MARY KUBICA

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For A & A

EVE

BEFORE

I'm sitting at the breakfast nook sipping from a mug of cocoa when the phone rings. I'm lost in thought, staring out the back window at the lawn that now, in the throes of an early fall, abounds with leaves. They're dead mostly, some still clinging lifelessly to the trees. It's late afternoon. The sky is overcast, the temperatures doing a nosedive into the forties and fifties. I'm not ready for this, I think, wondering where in the world the time has gone. Seems like just yesterday we were welcoming spring and then, moments later, summer.

The phone startles me and I'm certain it's a telemarketer, so I don't initially bother to rise from my perch. I relish the last few hours of silence I have before James comes thundering through the front doors and intrudes upon my world, and the last thing I want to do is waste precious minutes on some telemarketer's sales pitch that I'm certain to refuse.

The irritating noise of the phone stops and then starts again. I answer it for no other reason than to make it stop.

"Hello?" I ask in a vexed tone, standing now in the center of the kitchen, one hip pressed against the island.

"Mrs. Dennett?" the woman asks. I consider for a moment telling her that she's got the wrong number, or ending her pitch right there with a simple *not interested.*

"This is she."

"Mrs. Dennett, this is Ayanna Jackson." I've heard the name before. I've never met her, but she's been a constant in Mia's life for over a year now. How many times have I heard Mia say her name: *Ayanna and I did this…Ayanna and I did that....* She is explaining how she knows Mia, how the two of them teach together at the alternative high school in the city. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she says.

I catch my breath. "Oh, no, Ayanna, I just walked in the door," I lie.

Mia will be twenty-five in just a month: October 31st. She was born on Halloween and so I assume Ayanna has called about this. She wants to plan a party—a surprise party?—for my daughter.

"Mrs. Dennett, Mia didn't show up for work today," she says.

This isn't what I expect to hear. It takes a moment to regroup. "Well, she must be sick," I respond. My first thought is to cover for my daughter; she must have a viable explanation why she didn't go to work or call in her absence. My daughter is a free spirit, yes, but also reliable.

"You haven't heard from her?"

"No," I say, but this isn't unusual. We go days, sometimes weeks, without speaking. Since the invention of email, our best form of communication has become passing along trivial forwards.

"I tried calling her at home but there's no answer."

"Did you leave a message?"

"Several."

"And she hasn't called back?"

"No."

I'm listening only halfheartedly to the woman on the other end of the line. I stare out the window, watching the neighbors' children shake a flimsy tree so that the remaining leaves fall down upon them. The children are my clock; when they appear in the backyard I know that it's late afternoon, school is through. When they disappear inside again it's time to start dinner.

"Her cell phone?"

"It goes straight to voice mail."

"Did you—"

"I left a message."

"You're certain she didn't call in today?"

"Administration never heard from her."

I'm worried that Mia will get in trouble. I'm worried that she will be fired. The fact that she might already be in trouble has yet to cross my mind.

"I hope this hasn't caused too much of a problem."

Ayanna explains that Mia's first-period students didn't inform anyone of the teacher's absence and it wasn't until second period that word finally leaked out: Ms. Dennett wasn't here today and there wasn't a sub. The principal went down to keep order until a substitute could be called in; he found gang graffiti scribbled across the walls with Mia's overpriced art supplies, the ones she bought herself when the administration said no.

"Mrs. Dennett, don't you think it's odd?" she asks. "This isn't like Mia."

"Oh, Ayanna, I'm certain she has a good excuse."

"Such as?" she asks.

"I'll call the hospitals. There's a number in her area—"

"I've done that."

"Then her friends," I say, but I don't know any of Mia's friends. I've heard names in passing, such as Ayanna and Lauren and I know there's a Zimbabwean on a student visa who's about to be sent back and Mia thinks it's completely unfair. But I don't *know* them, and last names or contact information are hard to find.

"I've done that."

"She'll show up, Ayanna. This is all just a misunderstanding. There could be a million reasons for this."

"Mrs. Dennett," Ayanna says and it's then that it hits me: something is wrong. It hits me in the stomach and the first thought I have is myself seven or eight months pregnant with Mia and her stalwart limbs kicking and punching so hard that tiny feet and hands emerge in shapes through my skin. I pull out a barstool and sit at the kitchen island and think to myself that before I know it, Mia will be twenty-five and I haven't so much as thought of a gift. I haven't proposed a party or suggested that all of us, James and Grace and Mia and me, make reservations for an elegant dinner in the city.

"What do you suggest we do, then?" I ask.

There's a sigh on the other end of the line. "I was hoping you'd tell me Mia was with you," she says.

GABE

BEFORE

It's dark by the time I pull up to the house. Light pours from the windows of the English Tudor home and onto the tree-lined street. I can see a collection of people hovering inside, waiting for me. There's the judge, pacing, and Mrs. Dennett perched on the edge of an upholstered seat, sipping from a glass of something that appears to be alcoholic. There are uniformed officers and another woman, a brunette, who peers out the front window as I come to a sluggish halt in the street, delaying my grand entrance.

The Dennetts are like any other family along Chicago's North Shore, a string of suburbs that lines Lake Michigan to the north of the city. They're filthy rich. It's no wonder that I'm procrastinating in the front seat of my car when I should be making my way up to the massive home with the clout I've been led to believe I carry.

I think of the sergeant's words before assigning the case to me: *Don't fuck this one up.*

I eye the stately home from the safety and warmth of my dilapidated car. From the outside it's not as colossal as

I envision the interior to be. It has all the old-world charm an English Tudor has to offer: half-timbering and narrow windows and a steep sloping roof. It reminds me of a medieval castle.

Though I've been strictly warned to keep it under wraps, I'm supposed to feel privileged that the sergeant assigned this high-profile case to me. And yet, for some reason, I don't.

I make my way up to the front door, cutting across the lawn to the sidewalk that leads me up two steps, and knock. It's cold. I thrust my hands into my pockets to keep them warm while I wait. I feel ridiculously underdressed in my street clothes—khaki pants and a polo shirt that I've hidden beneath a leather jacket—when I'm greeted by one of the most influential justices of the peace in the county.

"Judge Dennett," I say, allowing myself inside. I conduct myself with more authority than I feel I have, displaying traces of self-confidence that I must keep stored somewhere safe for moments like this. Judge Dennett is a considerable man in size and power. Screw this one up and I'll be out of a job, best-case scenario. Mrs. Dennett rises from the chair. I tell her in my most refined voice, "Please, sit," and the other woman, Grace Dennett, I assume, from my preliminary research—a younger woman, likely in her twenties or early thirties—meets Judge Dennett and me in the place where the foyer ends and the living room begins.

"Detective Gabe Hoffman," I say, without the pleasantries an introduction might expect. I don't smile; I don't offer to shake hands. The girl says that she is in fact Grace, whom I know from my earlier legwork to be a senior associate at the law firm of Dalton & Meyers. But it takes nothing more than intuition to know from the get-go that I don't like her; there's an air of superiority that surrounds

her, a looking down on my blue-collar clothing and a cynicism in her voice that gives me the willies.

Mrs. Dennett speaks, her voice still carrying a strong British accent, though I know, from my previous fact-finding expedition, that she's been in the United States since she was eighteen. She seems panicked. That's my first inclination. Her voice is high-pitched, her fingers fidgeting with anything that comes within reach. "My daughter is missing, Detective," she sputters. "Her friends haven't seen her. Haven't spoken to her. I've been calling her cell phone, leaving messages." She chokes on her words, trying desperately not to cry. "I went to her apartment to see if she was there," she says, then admits, "I drove all the way there and the landlord wouldn't let me in."

Mrs. Dennett is a breathtaking woman. I can't help but stare at the way her long blond hair falls clumsily over the conspicuous hint of cleavage that pokes through her blouse, where she's left the top button undone. I've seen pictures before of Mrs. Dennett, standing beside her husband on the courthouse steps. But the photos do nothing compared to seeing Eve Dennett in the flesh.

"When is the last time you spoke to her?" I ask.

"Last week," the judge says.

"Not last week, James," Eve says. She pauses, aware of the annoyed look on her husband's face because of the interruption, before continuing. "The week before. Maybe even the one before that. That's the way our relationship is with Mia—we go for weeks sometimes without speaking."

"So this isn't unusual then?" I ask. "To not hear from her for a while?"

"No," Mrs. Dennett concedes.

"And what about you, Grace?"

"We spoke last week. Just a quick call. Wednesday, I be-

lieve. Maybe Thursday. Yes, it was Thursday because she called as I was walking into the courthouse for a hearing on a motion to suppress." She throws that in, just so I know she's an attorney, as if the pin-striped blazer and leather briefcase beside her feet didn't already give that away.

"Anything out of the ordinary?"

"Just Mia being Mia."

"And that means?"

"Gabe," the judge interrupts.

"Detective Hoffman," I assert authoritatively. If I have to call him *Judge* he can certainly call me *Detective.*

"Mia is very independent. She moves to the beat of her own drum, so to speak."

"So hypothetically your daughter has been gone since Thursday?"

"A friend spoke to her yesterday, saw her at work."

"What time?"

"I don't know… 3:00 p.m."

I glance at my watch. "So, she's been missing for twenty-seven hours?"

"Is it true that she's not considered missing until she's been gone for forty-eight hours?" Mrs. Dennett asks.

"Of course not, Eve," her husband replies in a degrading tone.

"No, ma'am," I say. I try to be extracordial. I don't like the way her husband demeans her. "In fact, the first forty-eight hours are often the most critical in missing-persons cases."

The judge jumps in. "My daughter is not a missing person. She's *misplaced.* She's doing something rash and negligent, something irresponsible. But she's not *missing.*"

"Your Honor, who was the last one to see your daugh-

ter then, before she was—" I'm a smart-ass and so I have to say it *"—misplaced?"*

It's Mrs. Dennett who responds. "A woman named Ayanna Jackson. She and Mia are co-workers."

"Do you have a contact number?"

"On a sheet of paper. In the kitchen." I nod toward one of the officers, who heads into the kitchen to get it.

"Is this something Mia has done before?"

"No, absolutely not."

But the body language of Judge and Grace Dennett says otherwise.

"That's not true, Mom," Grace chides. I watch her expectantly. Lawyers just love to hear themselves speak. "On five or six different occasions Mia disappeared from the house. Spent the night doing God knows what with God knows whom."

Yes, I think to myself, Grace Dennett is a bitch. Grace has dark hair like her dad's. She's got her mother's height and her father's shape. Not a good mix. Some people might call it an hourglass figure; I probably would, too, if I liked her. But instead, I call it plump.

"That's completely different. She was in high school. She was a little naive and mischievous, but…"

"Eve, don't read more into this than there is," Judge Dennett says.

"Does Mia drink?" I ask.

"Not much," Mrs. Dennett says.

"How do you know what Mia does, Eve? You two rarely speak."

She puts her hand to her face to blot a runny nose and for a moment I am so taken aback by the size of the rock on her finger that I don't hear James Dennett rambling on about how his wife had put in the call to Eddie—mind you,

I'm struck here by the fact that not only is the judge on a first-name basis with my boss, but he's also on a *nickname* basis—before he got home. Judge Dennett seems convinced that his daughter is out for a good time, and that there's no need for any official involvement.

"You don't think this is a case for the police?" I ask.

"Absolutely not. This is an issue for the family to handle."

"How is Mia's work ethic?"

"Excuse me?" the judge retorts as wrinkles form across his forehead and he rubs them away with an aggravated hand.

"Her work ethic. Does she have a good employment history? Has she ever skipped work before? Does she call in often, claim she's sick when she's not?"

"I don't know. She has a job. She gets paid. She supports herself. I don't ask questions."

"Mrs. Dennett?"

"She loves her job. She just loves it. Teaching is what she always wanted to do."

Mia is an art teacher. High school. I jot this down in my notes as a reminder.

The judge wants to know if I think that's important. "Might be," I respond.

"And why's that?"

"Your Honor, I'm just trying to understand your daughter. Understand who she is. That's all."

Mrs. Dennett is now on the verge of tears. Her blue eyes begin to swell and redden as she pathetically attempts to suppress the tiny drips. "You think something has happened to Mia?"

I'm thinking to myself: isn't that why you called me here? *You* think something has happened to Mia, but instead I say, "I think we act now and thank God later when

this all turns out to be a big misunderstanding. I'm certain she's fine, I am, but I'd hate to overlook this whole thing without at least looking into it." I'd kick myself if—*if*—it turned out everything wasn't fine.

"How long has Mia been living on her own?" I ask.

"It'll be seven years in thirty days," Mrs. Dennett states point-blank.

I'm taken aback. "You keep count? Down to the day?"

"It was her eighteenth birthday. She couldn't wait to get out of here."

"I won't pry," I say, but the truth is, I don't have to. I can't wait to get out of here, too. "Where does she live now?"

The judge responds. "An apartment in the city. Close to Clark and Addison."

I'm an avid Chicago Cubs fan and so this is thrilling for me. Just mention the words *Clark* or *Addison* and my ears perk up like a hungry puppy. "Wrigleyville. That's a nice neighborhood. Safe."

"I'll get you the address," Mrs. Dennett offers.

"I would like to check it out, if you don't mind. See if any windows are broken, signs of forced entry."

Mrs. Dennett's voice quavers as she asks, "You think someone broke into Mia's apartment?"

I try to be reassuring. "I just want to check. Mrs. Dennett, does the building have a doorman?"

"No."

"A security system? Cameras?"

"How are we supposed to know that?" the judge growls.

"Don't you visit?" I ask before I can stop myself. I wait for an answer, but it doesn't come.