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The Good Girl

Written by Fiona Neill

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The Good Girl

FIONA NEILL



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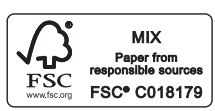
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For Hattie Longfield

The truth may be stretched thin, but it never
breaks, and it always surfaces above lies,
as oil floats on water.

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*

Prologue

May 2014

It was Matt Harvey, the new head of Biology, who first drew her attention to the problem. Although now of course she wondered how many other people knew. Matt had knocked on her door, unannounced, in the middle of the first lesson after lunch, and asked if he could have a word. Ailsa was midway through an email to a local biotech company, requesting work experience for sixth formers hoping to study science at university.

'Can it wait half an hour?' she asked apologetically, as he poked his head around the door. 'I really need to get this off.' She gently massaged a small circle between her eyebrows, hoping to ward off the frown line that was threatening to settle there.

'Sorry,' Matt said. 'It really can't.' He had such a panicked expression that Ailsa wondered whether he was about to resign. She glanced at his hand. He was holding something. To her relief, it wasn't an envelope but a mobile phone. This reprieve was immediately tempered by irritation that he needed to bring his phone with him at all. It was difficult enough to persuade students to

sever the digital umbilical cord when they came into school never mind if teachers failed to set an example.

Matt came in and shut the door abruptly so that the leaves of the cheese plant by her desk quivered. 'Sorry.' He opened his mouth and licked his lips a couple of times. Ailsa smiled in a way that she hoped was encouraging while retaining a professional distance. He looked away, unable to meet her eye.

'I'm not sure how to sort this one out,' he said, staring at his feet and drawing attention to the sort of casual footwear that sixth formers were discouraged from wearing. He must be in trouble, thought Ailsa, trying to ignore the split infinitive. She ran through typical problems encountered by teachers in their first year at a new school: he had fallen foul of Mrs Arnold, her tricky deputy head pastoral (everyone did); he couldn't master the new internal communication network (no one could); he was worried he was going to miss his GCSE targets (she would agree with him that league tables were blunt instruments, but funding depended on results and would suggest he should organize some extra classes on Saturday to avoid any disasters).

She was good at getting these messages across in a way that was sympathetic but firm. All the psychometric tests she had completed during the interview process for this first headship came to the same conclusions: Ailsa was a natural born leader. Where she went, her staff generally followed.

'Sorry about the mess. I'm trying to do a million

things at once.' She spoke with a cultivated informality appropriate for a workforce which, for the most part, was younger than her. 'How can I help you?' she asked.

'Help me?' He squinted at her quizzically as if she was being deliberately obtuse, and his thick dark eyebrows caterpillared into a single line. She squinted back, vaguely remembering from a management course that the best way to make people feel comfortable was to mimic their body language. Perhaps it was a less orthodox issue: a pupil with a crush maybe. When Ailsa interviewed for a new head of Biology, the only point against Matt Harvey made by Mrs Arnold was that he was too good-looking. Ailsa had said, only half joking, that if that meant more girls did Biology A level, it was a risk worth taking, especially now that there was extra funding for students who studied science.

Ailsa abandoned the email mid-sentence and invited Matt to sit on the small sofa in the corner of the room by the radiator. The heating was about to go off as part of a new money-saving scheme that had been disguised as an example of the school's commitment to environmental issues, she explained.

'But don't tell anyone.'

'It might be more convenient to stay near the computer,' Matt suggested, walking purposefully towards her desk. 'I need to use it.'

Ailsa stood up to make way for him. There was an awkward moment as they repositioned themselves. He removed his jacket and sat down on her chair in front of

the computer screen. She noticed shadows of sweat under his armpits. He undid his cuffs, carefully rolled up his sleeves and clicked each knuckle once, making Ailsa wince.

'Sorry. Forgot how you hate that,' he said, looking up at her with a smile so quick it had gone before it reached his eyes.

'It's like fingernails on a blackboard,' she said, and then instantly regretted betraying her age to someone who had only ever known whiteboards. Matt pulled the chair towards the computer screen and it screeched across the floor. Despite being someone who liked to melt into the background, everything he did was very loud.

His fingers moved deftly across the keyboard. So quickly that she couldn't see what he had typed into the Google bar. Ailsa watched the screen, intrigued to know what could be so important that he had to interrupt his lesson to show her. The afternoon was always the worst time to deal with a crisis. By then the optimism had been sucked out of the school day and she was filled with a wired energy fuelled by too much caffeine and too many unfinished to-do lists.

She impatiently smoothed down her skirt, trying to iron out the wrinkles and persuade it back towards her knees. You have to be careful what image you are projecting, she had told her seventeen-year-old daughter a few days ago when she appeared in the sitting room wearing a minidress so short that when she bent over you could see her knickers. Ailsa understood

the mysterious equation whereby teenagers responded to exhortations to be responsible with a similar urge towards independence, but was singularly unable to apply the science to her own children.

'It's a fancy-dress party. Dress code: Professor Green meets *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I can't exactly wear a burka,' her daughter had laughed. 'The trouble with you, Mum, is you're obsessed with what people think of you.'

It was true, Ailsa thought. She often wondered how others might see her, especially her team of teachers, but also people whose opinion she didn't need to worry about, like the locum doctor who had missed her mother's heart problem or her New Age next-door neighbours.

'Someone in my A-level set gave the game away. I wasn't sure whether you already knew,' said Matt. He paused and held his head in his hands, staring down at the desk. He was behaving more like a drama teacher than a biology one. 'Christ, I feel like the messenger in *Julius Caesar*,' said Matt, his sweaty palm hovering near the screen.

'*Anthony and Cleopatra*,' Ailsa corrected him, instantly regretting her fastidiousness. Once an English teacher, always an English teacher. She wondered how he really saw her. A hard-working and confident superior whose innovative schemes for incentivizing students had been adopted as policy by the Department of Education. A stickler for detail with an annoying radar for split infinitives in internal emails. Or a forty-two-year-old woman with a tendency to wear too much lipstick who didn't

notice when flecks peeled from her lips and stuck to her teeth. Ailsa made a quick sweep of her front teeth with her tongue. Maybe someone past youth, but still worthy of sexual fantasy. A MILF perhaps. When her eldest son, Luke, had finally explained what the term meant last week she couldn't work out whether it had given middle-aged women a new lease of life or added a new layer of pressure.

It struck her that this was a good example of cognitive dissonance, the ability to hold contradictory thoughts about the same subject. She had covered this in that morning's assembly using the example of smoking as something that gave pleasure but everyone knew was bad for them.

'Fuck,' he said. 'You've got filters. Give me a moment. I'll get round them.'

Ailsa was taken aback by his language. He was the teacher who had recently sent out a student for swearing in class.

'I'm in,' said Matt. His tone wasn't triumphant. He paused briefly, clicking his knuckles again. 'It's short. Shouldn't take more than two minutes.' He clicked play. 'I'll play it slow so you can absorb it properly, frame by frame.'

'Because of the resolution?' asked Ailsa, fumbling for the correct terminology.

'No. Because it's a sequence,' he said, furrow-browed as though puzzled that she still didn't grasp what was going on.

'Hadron collider, string theory, meta data,' said Ailsa breezily. 'Technology is leaving me behind.' She was looking for words of reassurance. None came. But then she was unworthy of his sympathy. Later, when she couldn't remember how it felt not to be anxious, she realized that this was the last time she had felt truly light-hearted.

Ailsa focused on the screen. At first it was a little hazy; the person taking the video clearly wasn't a professional. There were half-head shots. Limbs at comical angles. And overuse of the zoom feature. Or maybe it was a faux hand-held technique to give authenticity to what followed? There were two figures. Judging by the length of her long fair hair, the one at the front was a girl, although it was difficult to tell any more. The camera zoomed out unexpectedly and Ailsa caught a glimpse of a low-ceilinged space with a light blub swaying in slow hypnotic circles. There were no windows and apart from what looked like a pile of rocks on the floor behind the boy the room was apparently empty. As more frames played, Ailsa could see a narrative forming.

'It's a lot to take on board,' Matt said apologetically.

'Why are you showing me this?' asked Ailsa, wondering if this was how twenty-something men hit on forty-something women. Except she knew how twenty-something men hit on forty-something women. Their eyes locked. He knew what she was thinking and just as quickly she knew that this time she was wrong.

'Look at the uniform,' said Matt, tapping the screen to get Ailsa's attention as the girl fumbled with the boy's

zip. She leaned over his shoulder and he enlarged one of the frames until it filled the screen. How could she not have noticed? The girl's sweater had the distinct green and yellow stripe of the Highfield School uniform around the neck and cuffs. Another of Ailsa's innovations. To give pupils high visibility. Not so clever now, she thought. He pressed play again and the girl inexpertly released the boy's penis from a pair of underpants. It was too much. Ailsa stepped back from the screen.

'How did you get hold of this?' she asked, casting around for something to say.

'I caught Stuart Tovey watching it just now.' He gave Ailsa the phone that he had been holding when he came in the door. 'Obviously I've confiscated it. To look for clues.'

Why did he talk in such short sentences? wondered Ailsa. Was he nervous or had his brain had been atrophied by Twitter?

'Did you ask him how he got hold of it?'

'He said someone had forwarded it to him.'

'What do we know about the boy?'

'He's left-handed,' said Matt. 'That's about it.'

'How can you tell?'

'Look,' he said as the boy gripped his penis in his left hand.

'It's not Stuart Tovey, is it?' asked Ailsa, reluctantly turning her attention back to the screen, feeling like a grubby voyeur. 'You'd expect it to be but he's much shorter than this boy.'

'You don't get to see his face. Unfortunately. I can't work out if that was deliberate or down to poor technique.'

The girl was kissing the boy. He kissed her back. The passion was real or at least the acting was convincing. Just as Ailsa thought she was about to see the boy's face, the camera teasingly panned down for a mid-body shot. The girl got on her knees in front of the boy. Ailsa knew instinctively what she was about to do.

'What about her? Do you recognize her?' asked Ailsa, recoiling from the screen.

'Yes,' said Matt.

She wondered how she was going to deal with this. Cyber-bullying, contraception, chlamydia, chemical highs, even the drugs were high tech. But she had them all covered. It was the unknown unknowns that always got you in the end. She felt so bad for the girl. How would she tell her parents?

'Who filmed it? Do you think they did it themselves? Do you think the girl even knew?' She turned towards him, searching for answers. 'I think I've seen enough, Matt.'

'You need to watch to the end, Ailsa,' he insisted, using her name for the first time. 'I'm really sorry.' He got up from her chair. 'I think maybe you should sit down.'

When it was finished he leaned over her and dragged the file to the bottom right-hand corner of the screen.

The email she had been writing popped back up on screen. Ailsa glanced at the last word she had written,

aspiration. It sounded like a medical procedure. She wished someone could perform it on her. To wipe her memory of the images she had seen. But even if this were possible, she would be reminded of it in other people's faces. Because by now surely most of the school must know. People would tread on eggshells around her. It would be like when her mother died almost exactly a year ago. Already she knew this was different. Any sympathy this time would be tinged with judgement. How could you allow this to happen on your watch?

Matt explained to Ailsa that he was going to speak to the head of IT. 'We need to get the film taken down as quickly as possible,' he said gently.

He made the phone call without waiting for her response. Certain phrases from this conversation reverberated around her head. 'Inappropriate content . . . YouPorn . . . RedTube . . . Facebook . . . gone viral.'

She was relieved it was he who had approached her – his calm measured approach to helping nervous A-level students work out anything from revision timetables to genetic sequencing was exactly what she needed. The scale of the problem was beginning to dawn on Ailsa. Tsunami, earthquake, avalanche. The metaphors all involved natural disasters. But this was an unnatural disaster. It shouldn't have happened.

'No one will hold you responsible,' Matt said. His hand hovered by her shoulder but he didn't touch her.

'Of course they will,' Ailsa said. 'I am accountable.'

This was clear minutes later when the chairman of

the board of governors called to talk about the situation. In lieu of sympathy, he discussed strategy, for which Ailsa was grateful because she couldn't face any platitudes. He talked about crisis management and media blackouts. He pointed out that she was running a flagship academy and adverse publicity could be used to score political points. For legal reasons, he was overly concerned about whether 'the incident' had taken place on school property. He pointed out that a school scarf was visible in the background but agreed with himself that this wasn't conclusive evidence.

The only person who didn't seem to know anything was the girl. Ailsa had sent Mrs Arnold to call her out of class and positioned the venetian blinds so that she could see out of her office into the corridor outside but no one could see in. Romy was sitting on a narrow bench, leaning over so that her long hair covered her face like curtains. Ailsa could see her lips moving and at first wondered if she was rehearsing what to say but then realized that she was revising from a science textbook. Even though to her it was upside down, Ailsa could see she was looking at a cross section of a human heart. The girl had coloured each of the four chambers and blood vessels a different colour, transforming it into something beautiful. Right atrium, left atrium, inferior vena cava, superior vena cava. As she read each label, her finger drifted from one part of the diagram to the next, like a child learning to read for the first time.

It was such an innocent gesture. Ailsa felt her stomach heave and thought she might be sick. She swallowed a couple of times and took tiny sips from a glass of water. The girl wouldn't be revising anatomy if she knew. She would be nervously flicking through the pages of one of the magazines strategically placed on the table beside her. Or biting her nails. Or crying. Most likely crying.

It didn't surprise her that she was revising. In contrast to everything else that had happened, it was what she would have predicted. Ailsa skim-read the reports from staff for a second time to steady herself. Apart from a recent blip in a Biology exam, Romy was a straight-A student. She was taking four science A levels; she wanted to apply for medical school. 'Both parents are professionals,' the director of studies had noted, as though this gave her ambition credibility. Outside of class, there were no issues flagged. Her parents weren't divorced; there was no recent history of alcoholism, sexual abuse or drug addiction in the family. No involvement in gangs; no history of bullying or being bullied; no symptoms of depression. She was what Ailsa called a blank canvas.

The only hint that something might be wrong came from Matt, who said that over the past few months Romy had spoken back to him a couple of times in class and been sent out once. Ailsa put this to the back of her mind. There was nothing here that came close to offering an easy explanation.

Ailsa glanced out the window again. She was discom-

posed to discover the girl was staring straight back at her, although of course she couldn't see through the venetian blind. Romy wasn't one of those girls coated in thick layers of foundation, lipstick and mascara. If pressed to identify which girls might be vulnerable to this type of situation, she would have been close to the bottom of the list.

She was curious-looking. Pale-skinned and dark-eyed. Inherited from her father. Striking rather than beautiful. In her first term at the school a small group of children had mocked her for being albino. 'Why would I want to look like you?' Ailsa had heard her retort.

She looked nothing like her dark-haired older sibling, thought Ailsa. Ailsa's stomach clenched as she realized that perhaps Romy's older brother was already aware but didn't know how to deal with the situation. In which case she had failed him too. He sometimes hung out with Stuart, the boy who had the video on his phone. Perhaps he should see Mrs Arnold? Ailsa wrote this down in a new notebook specially dedicated to the scandal and underlined it several times.

Stuart swaggered along the corridor. Ailsa didn't know the name of every pupil in her school. She had decided early on that the effort of memorizing every student would be at the cost of something more strategically important. So she knew the names of the kids that came to her notice, either the clever ones or the naughty ones. Stuart fell into both categories.

He stopped beside Romy, which surprised Ailsa

because she couldn't imagine they were friends. He said a couple of words to her and Romy looked up. He had a striking profile. A long aquiline nose and big dark eyes. He had gone from boy to adult without the awkward transition through spotty adolescence. His body was ridiculously muscular, his school uniform barely contained his thick thighs and overworked shoulders. Steroid abuse was to boys what anorexia was to girls, thought Ailsa, remembering something she had read in the paper.

Stuart smiled at Romy. The smile turned into a lip curl and then suddenly he stuck his middle finger in his mouth and simulated the motions of oral sex. Romy looked taken aback. She frowned and shook her head. Stuart threw back his head, laughed and slouched off. When he passed her window, his lip turned into a half smile and he blew Ailsa a kiss as though he realized that she was watching.

Ailsa gripped the edge of her desk. Her hands were shaking. It was ten past four in the afternoon. She couldn't wait any longer for Romy's father to appear. It wasn't fair on the girl. Her anger towards Stuart transferred to him. Knowing what was at stake, how could he be late? She would have to be careful not to betray her feelings in front of the girl. One of the most important issues, Mrs Arnold had flagged, was to present a strategy that made Romy feel as though the adults around her were in control of the situation. They all had to present a united front.

She knew Romy would be feeling nervous about

being called from class to the headmistress's office. Since as far as she knew she wasn't in any trouble, she might be worried that something had happened to her family. Ailsa phoned her assistant to send Romy into the office.

'Everything is fine at home,' said Ailsa abruptly, as soon as the girl breezed through the door. She had spoken a little too quickly and Romy looked puzzled, as though unsettled at the possibility that something might be wrong. She left the door open. It was the best evidence yet that she had no idea what had happened.

Ailsa was overwhelmed with a desire to protect her. Perhaps Stuart was the only person in school who had seen the video clip? Perhaps she need never know? And then just as quickly she abandoned the idea because the file was like a forest fire. Matt had kept her updated through the afternoon on websites where it had appeared and what action had been taken to get it removed.

And besides, as Ailsa was fond of telling troubled students, everything that went wrong should be used as an experience to learn from. It was a way of encouraging children to believe in the possibility of renewal. People could evolve. Reputations could be rebuilt. Except in this case she wasn't sure she really believed her own rhetoric. She vaguely remembered the story of a girl in south London who threw herself off a building when a boy refused to delete sexual images of her from his phone. She felt a sudden venomous rage towards the boy in the video. He had obviously forced her to do this. She needed to confirm his identity as quickly as possible.

She would press the girl for details. After that she would have to speak to his parents. He would be expelled. The police would be called. He would be prosecuted. But none of this would make the girl feel any better. In fact it could make her feel worse.

Ailsa got up from her desk and slowly walked over to close the door. She wanted to delay the moment for as long as possible. She looked at the girl's face knowing that in the next minute her world would tip on its axis.

'Is there something wrong?'

'How is your work going?'

'I was in a Biology exam.'

'Were you doing a practice paper?'

'Yes.'

'How was it?'

'Fine. I think. Now I'll never know, because I was only halfway through and it won't be a true result.'

'Medical school is very competitive.' *Would this affect the girl's application?* Ailsa wondered. A new worry rippled through her body. She had to accept that she had no control over the situation, Mrs Arnold had advised, barely able to disguise her excitement at this latest drama. Matt had said something similar then he had contradicted himself by insisting that he would personally take charge of checking which websites were showing the film.

Even if they got to the bottom of how this had all started, there was no telling where it might end. She thought of the draft she had written for her next assem-

bly. She wanted to warn the pupils about how in the digital age one badly thought-out decision could end up defining you for the rest of your life. She swallowed a couple of times.

'There's something you need to see, Romy,' said Ailsa.

'What are you talking about?' asked the girl.

Ailsa opened the file in the corner of her computer screen.

'I'll sit on the sofa while you watch. I've seen it already.'

'Is it something to help with my university application?' Romy asked as she pressed play.

Ailsa couldn't bear to watch again. She couldn't decide whether she was being cowardly or sensitive. She sat down on the yellow sofa. When Romy replayed this scene in her head, as surely she would, periodically, for the rest of her life, would it be worse for her to watch it alone or with someone else? Ailsa, usually so decisive, didn't know the right answer. She pressed her fingers into her temples until she could feel the blood vessel pulsing beneath. And then it was too late. Romy's face froze. Her usually pale complexion flushed until even the tips of her ears were red. Her lips turned down until she looked like the mask of the goddess of tragedy that hung above the door of the school theatre. It was as if her face was separating from her body. For a moment it was a perfect mask. Ailsa knew she was about to cry. Her life as she knew it had ended.

It was too late for anger, yet part of Ailsa wanted to shake Romy and demand why she had allowed this

to happen. The other part wanted to hold her in her arms like a small child and protect her. She knew from experience that this was the moment where she had to ask the question. Children would always tell the truth when there was nothing left to lose.

'Who is the boy?'

There was a knock at the door. Her father came in before Romy could respond.

'Sorry,' Harry said without offering any explanation. Ailsa's anxiety spiked again at his bad timing. 'I got a call about giving a lecture in Cambridge.' He went over to his daughter and put his arms around her. Ailsa didn't say anything. The girl didn't need to ask how her mother would react. She knew already.

'Oh, Mum,' said Romy, getting up from the chair and looking at Ailsa for the first time. Ailsa walked over to her daughter, arms outstretched, like she did when her daughter first learned to walk. For a moment all three of them stood in a silent embrace. Ailsa looked up at Harry.

'How has this happened to us?'