BAD GIRLS NEVER SAY DIE

Also by Jennifer Mathieu

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Moxie

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Devoted

The Truth About Alice

BAD GIRLS NEVER SAY DIE

JENNIFER MATHIEU

HODDER

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For every bad girl – past, present, and future

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many locations mentioned in this novel are based on real places that exist – or once existed – in my hometown of Houston, including Glenwood Cemetery, Winkler Drive-In, Foley's, Clayton Homes, River Oaks, the Jive Hive, the Shamrock Hotel, the Domed Stadium (better known later as the Astrodome), Playland Park, and others.

The sit-in by students from Texas Southern University at the lunch counter of Mading's Drugs took place on March 5, 1960, and was one of several sit-ins held by students from TSU in the city of Houston in an attempt to challenge segregation. The 1998 documentary *The Strange Demise of Jim Crow* is an excellent resource for learning more about this period in Houston's history. The word *Negro* is used in this novel, as this was common usage in 1964 and the term preferred by civil rights leaders of the time period. With the rise of the Black Power movement in the mid- to late sixties, the term *Black* gained in popularity.

The Gainesville State School for Girls was a real place for female juvenile offenders in the state of Texas. It opened in 1913 and still exists today, although it became an all-male facility in 1988.

While it was my attempt to set this novel as realistically as possible in my beloved Houston, some geographic elements and school names have been changed.

If you or someone you know needs information about sexual assault, please call the National Sexual Assault Hotline operated by RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) at 1-800-656-HOPE. You can also go to rainn.org for more information or to use the online hotline.

HOUSTON
1964

We're the sort of girls mothers warn their daughters about.

Don't turn out like that trash.

We're the sort teachers whisper about and boys dream about – even the boys who won't give us the time of day in the cafeteria or at a school dance.

Not that we're the sort of girls who go to many school dances.

So what sort are we?

The sort of girls who draw fake moles on our faces with eyeliner pencils we lift from Woolworth's and the sort who laugh too loud when we're not supposed to and the sort who are so bad that some of us have been sent away to places where bad girls go.

Usually we return even worse.

When I was little and wore starched secondhand dresses to elementary school and listened to Miss Carter as she taught us the ABCs, probably no one thought I'd grow up to become a

bad girl. But I became one anyway. Being a bad girl can break your heart over and over, and when I think about what happened to me and my friends last fall, sometimes my heart cracks in pieces all over again, and I wonder if I'll find the strength to put it together one more time.

But the truth is if I'd never become a bad girl, I never would have met Diane. And I never would have learned the honest truth that sometimes bad girls are the best friends a girl could ever have.



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It's Connie's idea to go to the drive-in. We all say yes, of course. After all, it's Saturday night and she just got home after three months at the state school for girls up in Gainesville. Three months we've spent throwing parties and cutting classes and missing Connie. So the way I see it, she has the right to decide how we spend her first night of freedom. And anyway, when it comes to what we do, Connie's always boss.

'It's so nice to be back in the real world,' she tells us as we share cigarettes by the concession booth. A balding manager with sweat stains all over his white T-shirt comes out more than once to tell us to move along. We ignore him as usual.

'Well, this place is real something, that's for sure,' Juanita answers, tucking her black hair behind her ear and motioning to the weed patches and dirt surrounding us at the Winkler Drive-In. Her words are followed by a sharp laugh. Connie grins back at her, her red lipstick and bottle-blond hair flashing bright under the glare of the lamplights above us and the

headlights nearby. I glance back at the screen behind me, not even sure I know what picture this is. I should probably figure it out in case Mama asks too many questions when I get home.

'So it was that bad, huh?' I ask, in awe of Connie, like always.

I tug my black cardigan closer around me. It's cold for Houston in October, and I shiver just a little.

'Real bad,' Connie answers, relishing the chance to spill the details for the tenth time. 'We had to be in bed with the lights off by nine thirty, and they hardly ever let us smoke. But I came off like an angel compared to some of the girls there.'

Now it's Sunny's turn to laugh even louder than Juanita. As she pulls out a compact to check her lipstick, Sunny insists this couldn't be true – Connie is legendary at Eastside High, after all. But then our long-lost leader amuses us with a story about girls who sniffed nail polish remover for a buzz and cut the screens at night to try and sneak out. They got caught and sent to solitary confinement.

'I wasn't going to mess around like that for some lousy buzz off nail polish remover,' says Connie, flashing us a proud smile. 'I just played it cool until I could get home to my girls.'

Her girls. Us. Connie, Sunny, Juanita, and me, Evie, the youngest and the only sophomore in the bunch. In my mind we're four corners of a tiny square, drawn close to protect ourselves from the rest of the world. They're all juniors, and Connie's old enough to be a senior on account of having been

held back, but they accept me because I'm the sort of girl who never breaks a promise and never rats out a friend.

'Let's go see who else is around,' Connie decides, and the rest of us troop after her to the back end of the lot, where most of the kids we hang out with park their cars, rusted-out jalopies that are all we can afford. Connie slides up near Sunny, and soon all of us are linked arm in arm. Without Connie around, Juanita, Sunny, and me haven't felt as tight. We still hang out and cut class together, sure, but it's been like a ship without a captain. Not that I've ever been on a ship. Or anywhere a ship would sail to, for that matter.

But now Connie's back, and she leads us with sure steps, her blond curls bobbing like they're as certain of themselves as she is of herself. As we make our way over, my brown eyes take in all the different crowds that gather at Winkler's on a Saturday night – the middle-class kids with their matching sweater sets from Foley's and the no-account hoods with their leather jackets and permanent scowls and the tired moms and dads with their whiny toddlers covered in ice cream stains who just wanted a night out and couldn't find a babysitter.

Only there's one group that sometimes shows up at Winkler's that really bugs me, and that's the crowd from River Oaks High. They could head out to ritzier spots like the Majestic or the Loew's downtown, or they could steal vodka from their daddies' liquor cabinets while their parents are in Europe or at the club, but no. They choose to slum it at

Winkler's, miles away from their mansions and their maids and their mint-condition convertibles.

It's like they do it to remind the rest of us they've got someplace better to be. Like they do it to remind girls like me that we're stuck here while they're just passing through. Or maybe they do it to start fights that they'll never get blamed for because the fuzz believe them over our crowd every single time.

'Check out those tea sippers,' Sunny mutters, reading my mind. She nods toward a crowd of River Oaks girls drinking Cokes and hanging off some sporty boys like they'd collapse into a pile of money without the support. The whole crowd is gathered around two Mustangs parked side by side, one black, one midnight blue. Fancy. It's hard to believe this is some kid's first car at sixteen, and it's nicer than anything I'll probably ever set foot in.

'Why don't they stay in River Oaks where they belong?' Connie says, and loud, too, so she'll be heard.

'Bitch,' one of the boys yells back. It's a sea of khakis and buzz cuts and madras, but it's clear the voice belongs to a blond boy with the build of a football player, all broad shoulders and puffed-out chest. Our gazes lock for just a moment, and he sneers, enjoying himself. I feel a chill I know isn't just from the cool autumn air.

'Drop dead twice,' Connie hollers back at him, not skipping a beat. He scowls at us, and a chorus of angry voices rises up,

but not one of the boys makes a move. Not that Connie isn't ready if one does. Juanita and Sunny laugh out loud, but I just want to get away from this snarling pack. We keep moving, and I wonder if I'll ever have half the guts that Connie Treadway has.

We find our crowd of kids by the final row of cars, and soon we're ducking into smoke-filled back seats and taking little sips of Four Roses and Schlitz and trading gossip. I drink enough to make my cheeks flush but not so much the room feels like it's spinning. Mama and Grandma will already be angry at me for taking off tonight without saying where I was going, so the last thing I need is to come home drunk again. Juanita and the girls got me so blitzed on my fifteenth birthday six months ago I could barely walk, and after that I wasn't allowed to leave the house for ages.

Sunny floats away with her sometimes-boyfriend, Ray Swanson, into the back seat of Ray's car, parked in the shadows under some trees. I don't like him, honestly, because he's always acting like Sunny's his property, like his leather jacket or something. But he's probably one of the cutest boys in our crowd, second only to Connie's twin brother, Johnny, who is all dark eyes and lean muscles and cheekbones almost too pretty for a boy. But only just. Sometimes in bed under the covers, I've imagined what it would be like to kiss him, but he would never look at me twice. I'm sure to him, I'm just a kid.

Johnny's here tonight, too. I spotted him the moment we arrived, brooding sullenly by the chain-link fence bordering Winkler's, smoking and staring out over the crowd. His sister is acting the total opposite, quickly making herself the center of the party.

'It's so good to be *home*,' Connie says, over and over again, jumping from group to group, bouncy and grinning, really emphasizing the word *home*. I'm pretty sure she's on her way to getting real loaded, but she deserves to let loose tonight of all nights. For Connie, home is here with all of us. All the kids who make the cops grimace and the teachers nervous.

No one's really watching the picture, and I give up trying to follow the plot. I spy Juanita giggling with a few other girls we know. It's Juanita I'm closest to, really, but sometimes I can't help but wonder if that's only because we're next-door neighbors and she sees me as a younger-cousin type to look out for. When I started tagging along with her about a year ago, right around the time my older sister, Cheryl, left home, Juanita never said I couldn't join in. When it's just her and me, it's all right, but when it's the whole crowd, I worry I don't fit in sometimes. Like I'm really more of a pet or a mascot or one mistake away from being declared not tuff enough. Like if I'm not careful, I might disappear into nothing, leaving only traces of cigarette smoke and Aqua Net.

'I'm gonna go get some popcorn,' I mutter to no one in particular, turning back to the concession booth.

'Get me some, will ya, Evie?' Connie yells to me. 'I'll pay you back later, I swear!'

I smile at Connie's false promise and head off through the crowd. The crisp air hits my lungs and I breathe it in, enjoying the chill against the warmth of the booze. I'm glad that Connie is home at last and everything is back the way it should be. And I'm glad it's a Saturday night and I'm out at Winkler's with the tuffest kids in the neighborhood. The smile stays on my face as I walk off to buy my popcorn, the happy shouts of the others fading behind me.