

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 eye-liner pencils we lift from Woolworth's and the sort that laugh too loud when we're not supposed to and the sort that 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.

ONE

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 backseat 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 that 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 just right 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 at my back. "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.

TWO

I APPROACH THE concessionstand, digging into my pocket for the few coins I got babysitting the Rodriguez kids down the street.

Mrs. Rodriguez is the only mom in the neighborhood who'll hire me, but that's only because she can't afford to be all that choosy. I might have a reputation for running with the wrong crowd, but I'm good to those Rodriguez kids. I even help Nancy with her homework, which is sort of funny considering I don't really bother with homework of my own.

The thought makes me smile, until I reach the stand, where, of course, a line has formed. The scent of buttery popcorn floats over me, making my mouth water, even though I know Winkler's popcorn always smells better than it tastes.

"Isn't it wild that she would even show her face here?"

"It really is, Vickie. Some people just don't know when they should stay home."

The voices startle me out of my popcorn dreams. Girl voices. Judgmental voices. And without even knowing who they belong to, I understand these voices have more than a few coins from a babysitting job in their pockets. Honeyed and smooth, but not too sweet.

Rich voices.

“She looks like hell if you ask me.”

“She really does.”

“Always thought she looked so cute in pink, didn’t she?”

For a second I think they’re talking about me, but I’m not wearing pink, so they can’t be. Then I spot the voices and their target, too. Two girls from the tea-sipper crowd, the River Oaks bunch, are huddled off to the side of the concession stand, sipping sodas and staring down a pale auburn-haired girl in a light pink dress and pink cardigan ahead of me in line. The rich girls spit their poison nice and loud, so everyone hears, but it’s clear from what they’re saying who the words are really meant for.

Auburn-haired girl turns toward them, her mouth set in a firm line. She keeps her eyes fixed on the ground, but from the way her cheeks are flushing to match the color of her hair, I know she can hear them. They know, too, because they smirk in between every nasty line they toss in her direction.

I light a cigarette and watch. Normally, I wouldn’t get involved in some beef between a couple of girls from the right part of town, but then I realize Miss Auburn Hair looks familiar. Her name is Donna or Diane something-or-other, and she started at Eastside High this fall, just a few weeks ago. She doesn’t exactly fit in, that’s for sure, and her fancy clothes and brand-new school supplies mark her as more of a River Oaks girl than anyone from our neighborhood. She carries herself that way, too. Sort of snooty, I guess. Some of our crowd’s even given her a hard time in the cafeteria, bumping into her on purpose, giving her rude looks. That kind of thing. It’s just what they do sometimes to kids who think

they're better than us. I never have the guts to join in, but I sure wouldn't ever stop them.

Now, watching this girl's eyes start to glass over with tears, I almost feel guilty about that. This girl is already getting it pretty bad from her own crowd as it is.

"She should be ashamed to show her face around here," the one named Vickie says. "After everything she did. Look, here comes Betty. She won't even believe it."

At this a short brunette with apple cheeks appears among her fellow tea sippers, and I hear Miss Auburn gasp in surprise at the sight of her. The brunette takes in what's happening with one quick glance, and I can tell she's trying to bury her first reaction and quick, too. She opens her mouth to say something to Miss Auburn, then snaps it closed almost as fast.

"Let's leave," insists the brunette, her eyes never leaving this girl in front of me who's on the verge of tears. "Let's just leave her alone. Anyway, the boys are waiting for us." The brunette's voice quavers just a bit when she says this.

A single tear falls down Miss Auburn's cheek.

"Well, anyway," says Vickie, turning to go, "I'm glad she's moved out of our neighborhood and into this trashy one." She waits a beat, then spits out, "Because she's trash."

When my lit cigarette hits Vickie in the arm, sending bright red embers flying, she yelps, then turns and stares me down.

"That was you, wasn't it?" she screams, her face scowled tight. "You did that on purpose! What is wrong with you?" Her friends' mouths are open wide like fish, their eyes wide in shock.

"Why don't the three of you go bother someone else?" I say.

“Or better yet, you can stay put while I get my friends. I’m sure they’d love to meet you.” My kohl-lined eyes don’t waver from staring them down, and my mouth forms a sneer I’ve been practicing in my bedroom mirror since last summer. But my heart is thumping hard.

Still, I’m enough to send those prissy girls racing, and Donna-maybe-Diane turns around totally to face me, gratitude all over her tearstained face. That’s how I know she definitely isn’t from this neighborhood. The kids I run with would rather die than let anyone see that someone got under their skin that bad.

“Thank you so much,” she says. “I really appreciate that.” Her voice sounds rich, too, like summer camps and European vacations. But it’s softer than Vickie’s. Nicer.

“It’s nothing,” I say, glancing past her toward the concession stand window, where a pockmarked man is waiting, annoyed, to take an order. “You’re next.” I feel bad for this girl, but she’s not exactly the type I could bring back to my group of friends.

“I’m not hungry all of a sudden. But thanks again.” She sniffs, wipes at her face, and slips off into the crowd. Hopefully she’s heading home. A girl like that shouldn’t be at a place like Winkler’s alone if she can’t handle a few nasty tea sippers.

I get my popcorn and Connie’s, too, plus a Dr Pepper, then head back. Connie devours hers while she continues to hold court, retelling her stories from the state school, adding a little extra to them with each telling. By the time the second picture in the double feature starts, Connie has the whole crowd convinced that she started a prisoner rebellion at Gainesville and they locked

up the warden in a broom closet. And she hasn't stopped pulling long swigs off a bottle of Four Roses, either.

"Where's my brother, anyway?" Connie yells. "He needs to be hearing about everything I've suffered through while he got to stay around here and do whatever he wanted. Boys have it so easy. They never get in trouble as much as girls do."

"Boys are lucky that way," says Sunny, who's finally emerged out of the backseat of Ray Swanson's car along with Ray. Her honey-blond hair is mussed and her lipstick is smeared.

"I think girls get lucky, too, sometimes," says Ray, elbowing Sunny. Sunny rolls her eyes as Dwight Hardaway and Butch Thompson, hanging out nearby, laugh at Ray's remark. I swear, the two of them seem to exist solely to cheer Ray on when he cracks some dumb line.

"Why so quiet, Evie?" Ray says, noticing me. "Never gotten lucky?"

My cheeks flush just like that poor girl's at the concession stand, and I wish I weren't the center of attention.

"Leave her alone, Ray," Sunny says, giving him a playful push. "She's just fifteen."

Ray says something about how Sunny shouldn't get fresh with him and also that he remembers her at fifteen, and there are more screams and laughter. I know I have to come back with something and quick, too. Otherwise they'll just keep going at me.

"Jesus, Ray, we get it," I say. "You're a real dynamite in the sack." And even though it comes out just right and everybody laughs, part of me hopes Grandma doesn't get telegrams from

God alerting her to my using the Lord's name in vain. They are awfully close.

I drain my Dr Pepper through the red-and-white straw to a satisfying slurp as Connie starts her one-woman act back up. Then I spot Johnny again, appearing from near the concession stand. He doesn't look any happier than the last time I spotted him skulking near the fence line, but my heart picks up its pace. His big eyes are such a lovely chocolate brown they can only be described as delicious, and he's so tall that if I ever got the chance to kiss him, I'd have to stand on my tiptoes to do it. Not that I'd ever have the chance, of course.

"Hey, Connie, there's that brother of yours," I say.

Connie squints and spies Johnny, then stumbles for a minute. Someone needs to cut her off and soon.

"There's my brother, all right. He's been acting like a real candy-ass all night. What's he got to be so sulky about, anyway—I'm the one who's been locked up for ages!" She burps and laughs at herself. "Hey, brother!" she shouts at top volume. "Come here!"

Johnny looks up and sees his little sister, shoves his hands into his pockets, and heads over. A lock of his greased-up, jet-black hair falls into his face as he moves, and he tosses his head to the side until it flips out of his eyes. He's so tuff it's enough to make a girl dizzy.

"Hey, brother!" she yells again as he arrives before giving him a gentle push on the chest with both hands. "Didja miss me?" She's slurring her words.

"Hey, Connie, maybe you've celebrated enough tonight, huh?" he asks, then glances at me. There are small purple moons

underneath his dark eyes, and I wonder why. There's always been something about Johnny that's mysterious. Something that reminds me a little of George, my second-favorite Beatle.

"Hey, Evie, how much did she have to drink anyway?" Johnny asks.

I'm momentarily mute at the fact that he knows my name, then manage to answer, "I'm not sure. But it seems like a lot." Not exactly helpful, I realize. I wonder if I'll ever be able to speak to boys.

"Yeah, it seems like a lot," he echoes, shaking his head. "Connie, hey. Maybe we should get you home?" His voice is soft and tender.

Connie sticks her tongue out at her brother and crosses her arms defiantly in front of her. A few of the kids nearby laugh at the sight. "I don't wanna go home!" she says, stomping her foot. "I wanna stay here. With you and my friends. Even if you don't want to hang out because you're so sad and you won't even let me say why!" She draws two fists up to her eyes and mimics a little child's tears, rubbing her hands into her face. Her voice slips into slurry baby talk.

"I'm Johnny," she starts, "and I'm a widdle baby who's so sad because—"

"Connie!" Johnny interrupts, putting his arm around her and tugging her away. "Cut it out!"

Connie protests as Johnny walks her off into the darkness, and I spy her stumble a few times before he helps her stand back up.

"Jesus," says Ray, "what the hell was that about?"

"Who knows," says Sunny, and we catch eyes. With Connie and Johnny, anything is possible. The one thing that's certain is

that the two of them will always look out for each other with ferocious loyalty. After all, they don't have much of anyone else to look after them. Their mom drinks too much and their dad is sort of rough with them, and that's on a decent day. No wonder Connie ran away.

After Johnny and Connie leave, things grow quiet for a moment, but the party atmosphere picks up again before long, and I realize I have to go to the bathroom. I think about asking Sunny or Juanita to go with me, but suddenly I feel like being alone. Maybe the excitement from earlier in the night is starting to wear off. Or maybe I'm just tired of worrying about saying or doing the wrong thing in front of everyone. I don't tell anyone I'm leaving, and nobody seems to notice.

As my shoes crunch over the gravel and my crowd's voices fall farther into the distance, something unusual happens. The hair on my arms stands up totally straight, and I shiver just a little bit. It's enough that I pause in my steps for the smallest moment. Then a single sentence marches through my mind, demanding attention.

Turn around and go home, Evie.

I frown and keep walking, brushing it aside. I know my mother would call it woman's intuition. The same woman's intuition that told her when I was three years old that my father wasn't coming back from the corner store. The same intuition that told her that her manager at the diner where she used to wait tables was still married even when he swore up and down that he was as single as they come.

"Every woman has a little warning system in place," she's said to me. "And you have to pay attention to it."

I love my mother, but I think that's ridiculous. And anyway, if a woman's intuition was real, wouldn't she have gotten some warning not to marry my no-account father in the first place? And if a woman's intuition was worth anything, wouldn't being a girl be just a little bit easier instead of harder, like Connie always says it is?

So I just keep walking, wondering why I can't manage to shake off whatever it is that's making me feel so out of sorts.