CHAPTER 1

Meet the Good Girl

Good Girl. Two small words, heavy with history.

Say them out loud. Whisper them. Shout them. Emphasise one, then the other. Notice what comes up. For some, it's an image: a polite smile, a pat on the head. For others, it's a feeling: patronising, belittling, condescending, maybe even threatening.

When I asked the women in my community what came up when they heard the expression 'good girl', their words said it all: *peacemaker, obedient, loyal, polite, pure, likeable, responsible, dependable*. And underlying it all: *silence, compliance, submission, sacrifice, guilt, degradation, shame*.

She's agreeable.

She's demure.

She's accommodating.

She's non-confrontational.

She's defined by men.

She's on her best behaviour.

She's always smiling.

The Good Girl isn't just an idea. She's a role we're cast in from birth, a script we memorise line by line until we can recite it in our sleep.

None of us are born desperate to play the Good Girl. She creeps in through tiny corrections and constant adjustments — do as you're told, don't argue back, lower your voice, tidy your appearance, apologise when you've done nothing wrong. Keep it up long enough and it doesn't feel like an act anymore. It feels like … *you*.

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The Good Girl is shaped by what you were taught, told, praised for, punished for and what you silently endured. She's shaped by those who raised you and the systems that trained you. And she doesn't stop with you. She's found in how your mother, grandmother and great-grandmother survived, how they loved and lived. Their good girl experiences live inside you. The restrictions placed on them echo through you, even as you enjoy freedoms they couldn't. We are still unpacking the weight of their silence.

How the Good Girl influences you isn't just about how you speak or dress. She shapes your relationships, your career, your sexuality, your parenting, your confidence, your dreams. She decides whether you apply for the job or sit it out, whether you speak up in the meeting or let someone else take the credit, whether you leave the partner who drains you or just smile and say 'I'm fine.'

For many of us, the Good Girl began as praise. Parents, grandparents, teachers and coaches tossed it out as shorthand for approval. 'Good girl, you did it.' 'Good Girl, you made someone happy.' On the surface, it sounded affectionate. But beneath it sat the pillars of compliance. The unspoken rules that your worth lies in being agreeable, selfless, accommodating. No wonder so many of us are tired.

Are you ready to find out what life might look like without her?

Am I a Good Girl?

You might've picked up this book because the title struck a chord. Maybe you already know that you're playing the Good Girl role (and excelling at it, might I add). Maybe you're in the middle of uncoupling from her (consciously, of course). Or maybe you're only starting to see your own Good Girl patterns emerge and it's stirring something in you.

The Good Girl lives in all of us. But she's not fixed, she exists on a spectrum. Some days she's centre stage, hogging the microphone, other days she loiters in the wings, still watching and criticising your

every move. She can shift with context, people or seasons of life. I've painted her this way because she isn't something you simply cut out, she's a pattern to see clearly so you can work with her, not just around her.

Her grip depends on your upbringing, your environment and the systems you grew up in. But no matter how loud or soft she is, we've all been raised in a culture that nurtured her, where we were rewarded when she complied and penalised when she didn't. It's impossible to fully escape her.

This book isn't just for the obvious rule-followers or gold-star chasers. It's for the woman who swallows her words to keep the peace, who performs niceness when honesty is what she craves, who stays safe, likeable and small because that's what's expected.

If that's you, you've probably asked yourself questions such as:

- What if I'd said yes to that dream I pushed aside?
- What if I'd walked away sooner?
- What if I'd stood up for myself?
- What if I let myself want more?

The answers to these 'what ifs' might be a little window into what you've sacrificed. But rather than looking at them as regrets, look at them as an invitation to evolve — an opportunity for a different life.

Often, when we feel stuck, it's not laziness. It's a desire for safety. Staying put feels less risky than stepping into the unknown. Sometimes our stability even props someone else up. And even when the familiar suffocates us, it can feel like home.

But if you're beginning to question the old way of being, and you're craving more heart, more freedom and more truth in your life, you're not alone. I've met countless women who are carving out lives their mothers and grandmothers never imagined. Raising kids differently, building businesses and leading movements, or simply choosing rest over burnout.

And when I picture a woman with agency and power, I don't imagine someone *fabulous, fearless, free* (despite what clickbait headlines want you to believe), I picture a woman who, despite her doubts and even when her voice shakes, chooses herself.

The stories in this book aren't hypotheticals; they're real stories shared with me through conversations and survey responses. They are proof that rewriting the Good Girl script can be seismic or subtle. They are stories of a woman who:

- walks away from her soul-crushing job in search of something meaningful
- decides not to have children, despite the pressure and society's side eye
- lives openly as gay, even when it's not what others imagined for her
- turns down a well-paying role to move overseas and pursue her purpose
- stops hosting Christmas for her ungrateful in-laws
- asks her partner to stay home with the baby so she can return to work
- files the formal complaint even when HR tries to bury it
- leaves her unfulfilling marriage of 25 years and books the dream solo trip
- quits after being passed over (again) for equal pay
- writes to her narcissistic father to finally tell him the truth
- starts her own business that runs on her values
- studies at 55 to become a career coach, proving it's never too late.

They are stories of a woman, choosing to live differently in quieter tones, who:

- refuses to miss her Monday meditation class because it makes her a better Mum
- lets herself rest and watch Netflix without guilt
- asks the event organiser why the panel guests lack diversity
- invests time only in people who bring her joy and ease

- tells the contractor trying to rip her off what she really thinks
- listens to her gut over the external noise
- puts her phone down and chooses rest over the doom scroll
- joins different networking groups to meet her social needs
- raises her kids differently, with freedom she never had
- takes the road less travelled.

These are the moves that matter. You don't have to set fire to your entire life; sometimes it starts with a single decision made for *you*, not for anyone else. If you recognise even a spark of yourself here, pay attention. That's you, rumbling with the rules you were handed.

So, welcome to cocktail hour. Good Girl conditioning is a heady mix of cultural programming, family dynamics, survival instincts and the constant hum of endless expectations. We're about to shake it up, pour it out and serve up something entirely new.

History of the Good Girl

To understand where we are — or even where we're headed — we have to go back in time. Back to the thinkers who revealed that femininity isn't innate, it's a cultural invention. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, '*On ne nait pas femme: on le devient*' — 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman'. With that powerful observation, she exposed how womanhood is shaped, rehearsed and enforced through culture. The Good Girl, she argued, is not a predisposition, she's a script — a set of rules that dictate how women must behave if they want to be valued.

Anthropologist Ashley Montagu (1957) later bolstered this position by drawing a distinction between 'first nature' — our biological inheritance — and 'second nature' — the cultural conditioning layered on top. Second nature, he explained, is so deeply ingrained it feels inevitable, even though it's learned. The Good Girl is second nature at work: not a biological truth, but a patchwork of expectations, roles and ideals that have moved way beyond their use-by date.

History shows just how far-reaching, and familiar, this script has been. In the British Empire, the Victorian ideal tethered a woman's worth to purity, piety and marriageability, and that legacy lingers. Shonda Rhimes' *Bridgerton* may wrap the Regency era in dazzling costumes and sweeping romance, but open Lady Whistledown's society papers, and you'll find the same suffocating decree inked between the lines: win a husband, have a baby, settle down. In South Asia, the *sanskaari* (well-cultured) girl has long been revered for obedience and devotion to family honour. Confucian traditions across East Asia demanded that a virtuous woman obey her father, then her husband, then her son. In the Middle East, chastity and loyalty weren't framed as choices but as duties tethered to family reputation. The languages shift, but the message holds its shape.

Yes, the corsets have loosened (though shapewear has taken their place), but the Good Girl hasn't vanished. Today she may look more airbrushed and ageless, and even sold to us as 'empowered', but the pressure remains.

Psychology helps explain how these external demands become internal truths. In the 1980s, psychologists William Fezler and Eleanor Field (1987) described the Good Girl as a subpersonality — a survival strategy. Many girls learn early that their wants and needs are unwelcome, so they practice being polite, agreeable, accommodating. Overtime, these behaviours morph into what they called `the Good Girl Syndrome'. Later, Beverley Engel (2008) added to the research by showing us the vulnerabilities associated with being a nice girl. Whatever the label, the pattern is the same: self-abandonment, internalised shame, emotional burnout and the haunting sense of never being enough. Psychology gave language to what women had long felt but rarely named.

This begs the question: who benefits from women being good and nice? The Good Girl isn't an individual flaw but a product of systemic inequalities, created through patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism and institutionalised religion all conspiring to keep us in line.

For women of colour, queer women, women with disabilities and those from lower socioeconomic or immigrant backgrounds, the Good Girl script isn't just restrictive, it's policed with higher stakes. A white middle-class woman might be praised for being 'ladylike', whereas a woman of colour might be punished for failing to embody the same narrow ideal. An immigrant daughter may be expected to carry family honour more heavily than her peers. Queer women often face the double burden of rejecting heteronormative scripts while still being measured against them. The Good Girl is never one-size-fits-all, she morphs with context, but her purpose is to keep us contained.

Together, these perspectives reveal that the Good Girl isn't who we are, she's who we were taught to be — a cultural invention, a second nature, a survival strategy.

The Words We Use Matter

The word syndrome might've worked back in the 1980s, but today it carries a lot of emotional weight. By definition, a syndrome is a cluster of symptoms that points to a disorder. And sure, the Good Girl comes with her fair share of 'symptoms' — self-silencing, over-apologising, dodging conflict, wafer-thin boundaries — but syndrome implies pathology, that there's something *wrong* with you.

So, timeout. Enough already. This isn't a deficit, this is an adaptation. You became her, because the system demanded it, because your environment rewarded it.

Fezler and Field (1987) cracked something open, I'll give them that. But the field of psychology at that time was obsessed with what was *wrong* instead of what was *strong*. By pathologising women's coping strategies while ignoring the cultural and systemic forces that shaped them, it missed the bigger picture. That's why I think the word 'syndrome' is ready for the retirement village. Science isn't just about learning; it's about unlearning too. As Adam Grant (2021) advises us in *Think Again*, the ability to revise your lens is just as important as having

one in the first place. And when it comes to the Good Girl, 'syndrome' just doesn't cut it anymore.

But removing the term syndrome doesn't minimise the damage she's caused. The costs are real to our health, our identity, our ambitions, our relationships, our sense of self. When we call it for what it is — a coping strategy and a survival tool — we reclaim our power and open the door to change.

The words we use matter. If you're told you've got a syndrome, you'll treat yourself like you're broken. If you're told you've learned an adaptation, you'll see yourself for what you are — someone smart enough to survive.

The Many Faces of the Good Girl

The concept of the Good Girl is an intricate one. You can't just mute her, unfollow her, or shake her off. She's been assigned to us in different ways: nice versus mean, quiet versus confident, compliant versus bossy, good versus bad. But most of us don't live in the either/or. We live in the *and*. We're a unique, *never-one-note* kind of blend — like a nice glass of red wine. I think describing the Good Girl as changing faces is more fitting. Some of her faces are almost indistinguishable from one another, but it's the same script, just with different makeup, contouring and perhaps a new shade of lip tint. These faces show up across research, literature and lived experience, mapped in different ways.

When I asked women to fill out the Good Girl survey, some swore they weren't that 'type of girl'. But then they told me about the jobs they didn't go for, the times they stayed quiet or the choices they made to keep the peace — the patterns were loud and clear. Turns out you don't have to wear the Good Girl label to live by her rules. If you grew up in a world that rewards women for being agreeable, selfless, high-achieving or, as Beverly Engel (2008) notes, stubborn as a way to stay in control, she has shaped you, whether you realise it or not.

Detailing the faces of the Good Girl, and giving them names, is not about giving you boxes to fit in, but about helping you notice the scripts you might be running on autopilot. Because once you can name them, you can disrupt them. And once you disrupt them, you can unlearn, rework and eventually rewire them.

The Nice Girl

The Nice Girl is perhaps the Good Girl's most recognisable face. She's the one most written about, most celebrated and most exploited. She chases approval and thrives on external validation, but winds up over-giving, under-valuing herself and exhausted from performing a version of womanhood that keeps everyone else comfortable.

As Beverly Engel (2008) writes:

> Being a Nice Girl means that a woman is more concerned about other people's feelings than she is about her own. And it means she is more concerned about giving people the benefit of the doubt than she is about trusting her own perceptions.

The Nice Girl overrides her gut instincts to keep the peace. She scans the room, tries to control the vibe, and loses touch with her own intuition in the process. She learns to tolerate disrespect and harm, convinced that niceness will protect her.

But niceness rarely does what we hope it will; instead, it walks us straight into danger. Engel (2008) found that Nice Girls are more vulnerable to mistreatment because they second-guess themselves, minimise red flags and become silent when they should speak up. Being 'too nice' often overrides the need to protect ourselves. Carol Frohlinger and Lois P Frankel (2011) reminds us in *Nice Girls Just Don't Get It* that being nice isn't a guarantee for getting what you want — in fact, it's the very thing that stops you from naming your needs in the first place.

Kindness matters. But kindness and niceness are not the same. Kindness is rooted in love, generosity and truth. Niceness is rooted in self-sacrifice and fear. One expands you; the other has the capacity to harm you.

Putting on that Nice Girl face costs you your voice, your power, your growth and your peace. The Nice Girl doesn't protect you; she only serves to protect everyone else.

The Shrinking Violet

Another face of the Good Girl is the Shrinking Violet. She looks shy, modest, easy to overlook. But her retreat isn't temperament — it's fear.

The name itself sounds delicate, withering. A violet curling in on itself. But flowers don't wilt because they're weak, they wilt without enough sunlight, water and fertile soil. Shrinking violets don't disappear because they lack strength; they disappear because they were never nourished.

It's easy to mistake shrinking for softness. Stillness can be a source of depth and creativity, but shrinking is different. Shrinking is blending into the background because you believe it's safer there. It's a survival strategy in a world that punishes women for taking up space.

I've worked with brilliant, magnetic women worn down by a thousand tiny paper cuts telling them that they're 'too much' or, at the other end, 'not enough'. So, they adjust. They get out of the way. They nod instead of challenge. They bite their tongue, swallow their tears and shrink their dreams until they disappear.

Dr Thema Bryant (2023) writes in *Homecoming* that shrinking is often a survival response — especially for women of colour. To be visible is to risk being targeted. So, we hide. We stay small in the hope it keeps us safe. But shrinking, while protective in the moment, robs us of belonging to our own lives.

Growth requires safety, self-respect, support and small steady steps in the right direction. You don't have to be the biggest bloom in the bunch — but you do have to believe you're worthy of blooming.

The Pretender

You might call her the Fraud, the Faker, the Imposter or the Inner Critic but at her core, she's the Pretender — the Good Girl's glossiest face. She shows up at the worst times, reminding you 'You don't deserve this.' Sometimes she yells 'You're a failure. Stop trying to fool everyone.' Her criticism is dressed up as honesty, but her real aim is to clip your wings and keep you restrained.

If you're a professional, you might know her well. She's got the credentials, the knowledge, the experience — maybe even a couple of shiny awards to recognise her hard work — but she feels like she's an inch away from someone figuring out she doesn't have a clue what's going on.

She was probably told to 'fake it 'til you make it' — the Pretender's favourite motivational saying. But it's the worst possible advice, as if being real and having a human experience is somehow dangerous. She'd rather keep it polished and perfected, even when life is *far* from it.

When life calls her forward, her body reacts. The tightening in her chest as she enters a room she's been told her whole life she doesn't belong in. The split-second freeze, like a deer in the headlights. The nervous smile when she's asked a question, pitches an idea or advocates for her own needs.

Psychologists gave this experience a name: imposter phenomenon, later called imposter syndrome (see we really do love inventing pathologies). At its heart, this is the Pretender in disguise — a face that tells you 'You don't belong', even when you do. Women feel it layered with centuries of conditioning. We don't feel like we belong because, in many ways, we were never invited to play along. If the past didn't want us in certain rooms, of course it feels foreign walking into new ones. And even the rooms we've been in for years haven't been redesigned to fully accommodate us.

Feeling like a fraud or a faker isn't a personal failing. It's the system that's flawed. This is a deep crisis of belonging. And for

women of colour, women with disabilities, immigrant women or anyone in male-dominated fields, that feeling is multiplied. What happens when the feelings become too much? The Pretender leans into perfectionism, convinced that if she does it flawlessly, then maybe she'll finally belong. But perfectionism is also a trap. And it comes with a cost: exhaustion, disconnection and a wedge driven between effort and joy.

For some, the Pretender shows up everywhere. For others, only in certain rooms. Either way, she isn't proof you don't belong, she's just another face of the Good Girl, painted on thick with the contouring of conformity. What she doesn't want you to know is that the Pretender doesn't protect you, she only keeps you guessing.

The Giver

Another of the Good Girl's faces is the Giver — the matriarch of self-sacrifice, the architect behind generations of politeness, perfectionism and self-abandonment. If anyone knows how to anticipate the needs of everyone around her, it's the Giver. She's Mary Poppins with a bottomless bag of remedies, tending to everyone else's pain and rarely, if ever, to her own. Always available, with a radiant smile firmly fixed on her face.

Don't mistake her for weak (you wouldn't dare); the Giver is powerful in ways the world can't quite comprehend — and definitely doesn't reward. Her intuition is sharp and her capacity to hold others is vast. She was promised safety in exchange for her service — a promise that was never delivered. She learned to give love more than she ever received it.

But constant giving wears her out. It drains her body and her spirit. It results in stress, sickness and burnout — the slow erosion of her liveliness. The very thing she was told would keep her safe becomes the thing that depletes her most.

In *Burnout*, Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski describe the divide between Human Givers and Human Beings. Givers (overwhelmingly

women) are expected to pour their energy into others. 'Beings' (overwhelmingly men) are permitted to chase goals, express anger and take up space. Women are praised for how much they give — to families, workplaces and communities — but rarely respected for it. A woman's value, we're told, lies in giving, not in being. Sit with that for a moment.

If giving had its rightful status, it could change the course of the world. Instead, it's been twisted into obligation. Society would buckle if women stopped giving for even a day — yet it still insists on taking them for granted.

The Giver reminds us that generosity is powerful but only when it's chosen, not coerced. Giving freely can ground you. Giving under pressure will only wear you down.

The Bad Girl

The Bad Girl isn't really another face of the Good Girl at all — she's the name society gives you when you refuse to wear any of them. If you don't smile sweetly, shrink politely or serve endlessly, you're pushed into the opposite box: bad. She's too loud, too confident, too sexual, too opinionated … too much.

Now, let's get one thing straight: yes, there are women who grow into the Bad Girl label and own it (no judgement, you're welcome here.) But for most of us, 'bad' is just the word society hurls when we dare to step outside the scripts. When we live on the fringes. When we do our makeup differently, ask for our fair share, demand better conditions, or simply say no.

It's not that we're actually bad; it's that we're harder to control, and that unsettles people.

As teenagers, she was the rebel who got detention for talking back, wore whatever she wanted, smoked behind the oval and didn't care what teachers thought. She attracted judgement, sure, but also admiration. She was exploring moving through the world unapologetically, daring to express herself and not to let others call the shots.

Sadly, we condemned her (the patriarchy encourages us to police other women). We called her crazy. But deep down? We envied her refusal to play by the rules.

I tested those boundaries myself — but even my version of rebellion came with a polite tone and a contingency plan. Like the time I wasn't allowed to wear a one-shoulder top (apparently a bare shoulder was the highway to moral hell), so I bought two, criss-crossed them and, technically, covered both shoulders. A DIY win for me, a sigh of relief from my mum and an outfit that looked … like a regular top. Honestly, no notes. I wanted to push the limits, but not so far that I'd get grounded.

That's the thing about the Bad Girl or the Naughty Girl or the Rebel — she isn't the opposite of good. She's what you get called when you refuse to play nice. She's the catch-all term for women who won't wear any of the Good Girl faces.

Sometimes when we're trying to work out who we are in the world, we get pushed to the extremes. But in trying to work out who we are, we need to be encouraged to sit somewhere in the middle. It's where you start to meet yourself — not the Good Girl, not the Bad Girl, just you.

Meet You in the Middle

Do you wear any of traditional Good Girl faces? Do you notice when they show up? You might not wear them all the time, but you've probably slipped one on here or there — maybe at work, at home, in love or in friendship. When you think about it, which ones feel most familiar? Which situations bring them out in you?

These faces aren't permanent identities; they're survival strategies. Born of love, shaped by fear, reinforced by culture. The goal isn't to reject the Good Girl entirely, it's to recognise which ones you're familiar with, how often she's in control and whether she still serves you.

This next chapter explores how the Good Girl is shaped by the systems and institutions we operate within. Exploring the full history and research behind these systems would require far more space than I have here. Still, it's essential context. I trust you'll follow the ideas that ignite your curiosity, because this material is important and worth diving into well beyond these pages. If you've ever wondered why the Good Girl grip is so tight, you're about to find out.