

**THE RISE AND
FALL OF A VERY**
Bad Girl

SUZANNE BURNS

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This book is dedicated to Jason Cook, my first reader and my intrepid editor, who shaped this story into the book you are holding today, and the memory of his fiancée, Tara Michelle Young, the revelation in the red dress I wish I would've known.

If You Help Me Kill My Mom, I'll Help You Kill Yours

I practiced my first speech of the new school year, “How to Murder Your Parents,” while Marl taught us the difference between a Cosmopolitan and a French Martini.

“All I can say,” he spoke in his drama-club Brando, “is James Bond doesn’t know dick.”

Our line looped his mother’s wet bar in the sunken rec room, a space co-opted by the Spiegel catalog. That season “jungle” was in, not only in Marl’s split-level enclave of shabby chic suburbia, but it wound through all of our high-end cul-de-sacs.

Twenty seventeen-year-olds with names like Thaddeus and Zephyr, trust funds fat as the Grey Goose bottle Marl presented to the crowd, observed the rudiments of bartending. Marl came up with the martini mixer for our first 3-to-6 session of the season. He never said September was the month of the mixed drink. He probably forgot. Guys like Marl forget the details of things, and that makes girls love them even more. Thaddeus said the Sinatra CD and the cocktail onions looked too gay. Other 3-to-6ers fished their fingers in olive bowls, bit the zest of lemon wedges in time to Come Fly With Me.

So let’s not pretend you aren’t already rolling your eyes. I know what it’s like trying to believe in a liar. And according to the tabloids, I am one of the best liars you will ever meet. You’ve heard the telling, and re-telling, of my infamous life so many times, you know you have to keep turning the page. That’s what being famous is all about. The never-ending lure, the inexplicable draw. Scene-setting, character, plot, that’ll happen in ways you won’t even see coming, so let’s start things off with the first question of the day: Have you ever tried Ketel One vodka, with its transcendent clarity? Louis XIII cognac, all fruit and leather? Châteauneuf-du-Pape? Dom Perignon?

When you have everything, when no one ever tells you no, the instinct to rebel mutates. By my junior year of high school, a few months before a charge of manslaughter would lock up even a popular person like me for fifteen years, alcohol became sophistication instead of contraband. The 3-to-6ers replaced getting high with vodka, huffing with vermouth.

The 3-to-6ers, founded by Marl our Sophomore year, grew into a secret society with hormones too unruly for a secret handshake. We *had* managed, our teen angst pacified by Brie de Meaux, to pretend for three hours a day, September through June, that we existed beyond normal teenage life. Beer bongos never entered our consciousness, the projectile aftermath of chug parties reeking of a lower class into which we refused to assimilate.

We had the best cars, clothes, fondue pots of college tuition brimming for us to dip our fingers in. We trailed crumbs through our futures. The semester we would backpack through Europe and catch a very embarrassing, but thank God curable, STD; the quarter we would drop calculus for raku pottery or rock guitar, our faces kiln-burned, our fingers chord-blistered, knowing no matter how we fucked away our parents’ money, there would always be more. And we never even had to ask.

My heart skittered at the clock above the wet bar, and the way time, 4:35, collided with lounge music sho-be-doo-ing over the room. White bread voices blended with milk scalloping the surface of crème de cacao in a drink Marl offered to his devotees, a Hawaiian shirt tempered by his newest existential crisis and shadow of a Sex Pistols tee taunting beneath its print.

“Where’s the green apple schnapps? This looks gross,” Taffy, one of those girls who always wore pink, though everyone knew she was sleeping with half the lacrosse team, whined as she rejected the opaque spirit.

Marl said, “Green apple martinis are so out. Do you guys pay a-fucking-attention?” He gestured to me. I couldn’t stop staring at his rock-star eyeliner. “We’re running out of time.” Then he stared at a hangnail dangling on the pristine edge of his pinkie finger. Hesitating, he could not bring himself to rip off the annoying skin.

In an hour and a half our parents’ SUVs would trundle through the neighborhood, fathers or mothers uncorking a merlot, maybe asking about our days as they scanned the nadir of their high school years framed next to a limited-edition print by some artist everyone was supposed to know. No one ever listened to our watered-down response of, “Fine.” They spoke over us to mothers or fathers drained from legal de-briefing and interior decorating, but only long enough to decide on Thai or Indian take-out. Sometimes they asked if we’d finished our homework. Sometimes, they told us when to go to bed.

From three to six *we* were in charge. Taylor, the varsity soccer captain falling behind due to his inability to grasp pi, transformed into the Master of French Cuisine. From three to six he sauced our bellies with rémoulade. Bridgett didn’t complain about her curfew but taught us how to foxtrot, then, after we mastered the box step, how to roll Turkish cigarettes. We never spilled one fleck of Bali Shag.

From three to six Marl abandoned his starring role in the high school version of *Our Town* to bartend, rabble rouse, and lead. Plus, he made the lists, with fewer misspellings than your average teenage boy.

1. The five best ingredients to stuff in olives.
2. Frank Sinatra’s albums, in chronological order.
3. How to poison just about anybody with just about any common household cleaning product. (Though even back then I knew Marl didn’t have the balls to kill a soul.)

In school my role was prettiest girl without rhinoplasty, so during our meetings I gave speeches debating all kinds of topics: the war on terrorism; how artificial sweetener actually stopped the spread of cellulite; the aesthetic value of Waterford crystal. The more you know me, the more you’ll understand. More than what tabloids tell you, those regurgitations of semi-fact mixed with snapshots of my bad side, even though all those *National Enquirer* front pages turned me into God, my face more recognizable than the profile on any coin. What the rag mags never capture is how back then, before my arrest, I nearly floated. Of course the first name on every slumber party list. Boys pointed every erection my way.

I was the desirable one. The Chosen One. Very nearly the messianic one, until *she* came to town. All through my teenage years I was used to being the girl everyone loved, in one way or another. Until Audrey moved to town and attended her first 3-to-6 meeting that afternoon, I never thought I could fall in love with a girl, especially one even prettier than me. And when Marl warned me about not letting anyone get in the way of our plan, I refused to listen.

Two months before our junior year he had whispered on a blanket spread beneath the 4th of July, “Don’t you see, Serena? It’s not enough to pre-fucking-tend. Only being allowed to be our true, real selves from three to six isn’t enough. I want it all the time.”

“How can you go from twist endings of lame old TV shows to world domination so fast?” I joked as Marl didn’t try to kiss me or rub against any part of my eager skin. And Jesus, he was beautiful, messy, both dangerous and sweet behind those troubling, dark blue eyes.

Marl’s response became a catchphrase bastardized from a Rod Serling biography: “The purpose of a teenager, Marl substituted teenager for writer, is to menace the public’s conscience. Cool, huh?”

Then he confessed how *The Twilight Zone* marathons snagged him, causing such nostalgia, he knew it wasn’t enough from three to six to imagine sophistication cloaked us in cashmere and filled us

with canapés. Those short hours meant nothing compared with twenty-one remaining hours of freedom without freedom.

After all this time, my parole up and gone with two years remaining on my sentence, I don't know if Marl missed life before his dad died and his mom stopped baking cakes, or if he longed for a televised lie. Under the bottle rocket sky Marl got off on *The Twilight Zone* not for its refined terrors, but Rod Serling's refined style. How, whether or not Talky Tina tripped Telly Savalas so he fell down the stairs, beforehand the whole family, doll included, ate a sit-down dinner. The mashed potatoes were fluffy as crinoline. The roast beef, tender.

"Why should we only have three hours a-fucking-day day to rule our own lives?" Marl had questioned as my body attempted to snuggle closer.

Go ahead and ask, the way they all do in letters penned in the bubble writing of teenage girls. A fascination with the pretty girl who killed, in their heart-doodled letters they even ask for my fucking autograph. I never answer questions about my second murder, the one mothers tell their daughters to watch out for, like it's ever possible to circumvent a crime of passion. Believe me, you will be the victim of somebody someday. Even if it doesn't end in a funeral, at the very least it will end.

Ask and ask again, but I don't know why I wanted Marl when he didn't want me. Admitting I felt lonely makes me sound too dumb for you to keep reading. The beautifully lonesome misfit everyone longed for but never understood? The poor little rich girl everyone wanted to hang out with and talk at and touch and it still wasn't enough? Maybe the heart just has its reasons and we can leave it at that.

Instead of answering any questions about my second murder, or about Marl, I write suggestions on what books to read or what magazines to buy. When I have PMS, I tell the ones who seem the most desperate to steal *Cosmo* from the supermarket. And I hope they get caught. I hope they embarrass their parents. Sometimes, I hope they think of me and want to kill themselves, but I don't really know why. For the ones who send yearbook photos I write back beauty tips with specific colors of foundation to narrow a wide nose or lipstick to fill in a thin mouth. I almost always tell the truth. And I always suggest that my admirers change the color of their hair. Brunette to black. Blonde to red. If the girls are writing to a half-ass convict like me, something in their lives needs to change.

Flag-print blankets quilted the park where our town butte erupted in Roman candles on my final 4th of July of not caring about the reason I wanted Marl to want me. My lit cigarette tried to compete with the fireworks sputtering off the butte's top.

I asked, "Since when's everyone so patriotic?"

Marl grabbed my cigarette by the cherry and extinguished the tip without flinching. "You know this 'you and me smoking Camels against the world' shit won't get us anywhere, right?"

"But in two years we can have any life we want. What's the big deal waiting until then?" Then I joked, "And won't it be a lot easier enjoying life if we aren't in prison for murder?"

Witch whistles screeched through the park. The pop of firecrackers mirrored a war zone, though neither of us had lived through anything more traumatic than the wrong custom-colored Mercedes SLK arriving on our sixteenth birthdays.

Marl said, "In two years we could be dead. We could be working as fast food zombies, drooling into the French fryer. Or worse, we could forget what this feels like, to want this so much we'd kill for it."

I scooted away from him to focus on the finale. Jimi Hendrix and Neil Diamond battled from dueling radios at opposite ends of the park. I knew Marl well enough to know he didn't have it in him to change the course of his destiny. Not without my help. But he still continued to menace me, his Ramones shirt grazing my breasts as he pulled me towards him. The black painted fingernails. The

subscription to French *Vogue*. Even though others said he turned gay after playing an especially queened-up Puck in the Sophomore Shakespeare fiasco, I knew he still crossed against traffic. I knew he still played rough. Then Marl stared at me, full-body eye contact. I knew, and he knew, he could get me to do anything he wanted.

As the last firework fizzled to darkness over the butte, Marl sighed close to my cheek. “Come on, Serena, if you help me kill my mom, I’ll help you kill yours.”

Horrible, Wonderful Things

I think I heard Audrey's step-dad before I saw him, a man masturbating between the toilet and tub in the bathroom attached to Audrey's bedroom at the Corona Hotel. The bathroom had no door. Not like her step-dad would close it. Men like that never close anything. And he grunted, back to us, pants around his ankles as he squatted in a pile of clothes. Can you believe I saw him, that fleshy, 3D amateur porn right before my eyes? Unaware of my watching eyes, my gaping mouth, classic rock blasted from a corner stereo in time to the thrust of his hand.

My life ended the day I decided to go downtown.

Our town layered itself like a dessert terrine with us, the heavy cream of mansions and tennis courts, on top. Forested hillsides then flattened into pre-fab Craftsman houses, the bane of our parents' Homeowners Association with their candy-colored siding and all those porches brimming with dog beds and kiddie toys. A blue-collar neighborhood sat at the crossroads with railroad tracks carrying away the pulp of wood mills, a literal dividing line between us and them. The ones who lived there probably played Keno and collected yard ornaments, but at least they didn't live downtown like Audrey. Don't worry. I'll get to the dead trailers later, so no matter what you've seen on *Larry King Live*, don't skip ahead.

I can reveal how, after my first speech of the New Year, I winked at Byron and his tattooed forearms, my never-ending negotiation to make Marl jealous enough to love me, or at least want me just a little bit. There is something so genetically tantalizing about wanting someone who might not want you back. Especially if they cast themselves as the star of their own personal tragedy without knowing how the play will end.

Of course you know about Marl's composition notebook, heavy with "formulas" that the media dubbed *The Scribblings of a Mad Man*. He only pretended, with his wild horse beauty, to understand the way any chemical reacted to another. Even though he flunked math, Marl swore math was why his black hair dye contained a blue pigment that, in the shower, *looks fuckin' purple* and why _____ and _____, a common cleaning supply and a specific chemical compound, combines to form the most deadly poison known to humankind. Or so the media would have you believe. I'm sure you've seen facsimiles of the notebook flashed across the news with all the best parts blacked out. The best parts are always blacked out.

Years ago my lawyer told me Marl got a better deal. Part of mine is to never contact him again, which is easier than it sounds, erasing an obsession like a mistake. Marl's attorney helped him snag a larger cell with a window overlooking a harbor full of ships. My view at the women's prison is the visitor parking lot. Even though we both turned thirty last year, I wonder if he grew his ponytail back after court, and if all those holes in his body closed. They don't allow jewelry in jail, as anything can be a weapon in the right, or wrong, hands.

Marl introduced Audrey to the 3-to-6ers by asking her to help serve the chocolate martinis. She looked like the girlfriend of a superhero, all black hair and high cheekbones. She came from Canada, or a town in Mississippi known for its Labor Day fish fry. The details evaporate because Audrey surpassed the natural surroundings of any place. She was the first beautiful girl I wanted to kiss instead of destroy.

Audrey smelled less like perfume and more like autumn as she slinked between Marl and me after the last line of my speech, where I had said, 'If we do not kill our parents, we will never truly be