

**NOT
LIKE
OTHER
GIRLS**

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To the girl I was when I needed this book the most.

*That girl totally would've rolled her eyes and denied she needed it
and refused to believe she deserved such kindness.*

She did.

I do.

And to all the other girls who need it: you deserve that, too.

1

So, this is the trouble with girls like me—

I stole that from my mother, by the way. Pass that woman a double shot of whiskey after a long day at the broadcast station, and three minutes later, she'll be sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor with a shoebox full of photos, searching for the best of me.

JoJo at fourteen, brace-faced but beautiful, a tiara pinned in her sun-streaked hair.

Joey at fifteen, sophomore class president, stunned at her landslide victory.

Joles at sixteen, June's Scooper of the Month at Costello's Frozen Custard, posing a touch too proudly with her bonus check.

No matter how often we repeat this scene—and trust me, it's often—my mother never strays far from the script. "My Lord, Jo-Lynn, just look at you," she likes to say, booze bringing loose the Tennessee twang in her voice. "Look who you could be if you still tried."

Sometimes I fight her on it, like, "Sure is a shame I blew my

shot in beauty pageants, high school government, *and* ice cream alternatives.”

Most times, I endure her wrath silently until she sighs, not mad, just disappointed, and says, “You won’t try. You never do. That’s the trouble with girls like you.”

She means wild girls. Reckless girls. Difficult girls who talk back and slack off, who tease bright boys with even brighter futures and roll their eyes when other girls dare speak—not in a nasty way, necessarily, but not nicely either.

Or else find a synonym for “bad,” and that’s the kind of girl I am.

Was, I mean. Past tense. I’m trying—*trying*—to be better, or at least less terrible. But the trouble with girls like me is that screwing up comes to us so easily.

“Okay, it’s okay,” I say now, alone in my bedroom. “We’re cool.”

I’m not panicking. Not yet. No, right now I’m multitasking: I wiggle into a pair of black leggings, dig in my hamper for a clean-ish sweater, call Miles Metcalf on my flip phone. (I don’t use a flip phone by choice, to be clear; this is a *consequence of my actions*.) The line rings once. Twice. On the third ring, I finger-comb a knot from my soaked, snarled hair. The fourth, I tug a turtleneck, drab green and two sizes too big, from the hamper.

The fifth, I heave a sigh and say, “Oh my God, Miles, will you pick up?”

He does not. I drop the phone on my bed as the call goes to voicemail. *Hey, this is Miles Metcalf. Apologies that I missed your call, but I’ll give you a ring as soon as I can.*

“Yo, it’s Jo.” I poke my head through the turtleneck. “You urgently need a new greeting, dude. ‘I’ll give you a ring’? What

are you, ninety?" I stop. Compose myself. Pick up the phone, say, "I know you're probably at school already or en route or whatever, but I need a ride, okay? You'd be my hero forever and ever, love you, bye."

I clap the phone shut, its snap startling my cat, Bay Leaf. She stares, unblinking, from her window perch. She has yet to realize a web of ice crusts the glass, frosting the view of our snowy street. Bay may be beautiful, but she has nothing in that skull but elevator music.

I point a finger at her. "I don't need your judgment, Bay Leaf."

Blame this—the multitasking, the not-panicking—on my broken alarm clock.

Okay, so it's broken in the sense that I forgot to set it last night, despite scribbling *SET ALARM!!!* on a hot pink sticky note and slapping it to my bathroom mirror. The reminder was right there, right in my face as I brushed my teeth before bed, and I thought, *Oh, yeah, I should do that*, and then I did not do that.

But I'm not panicking, remember? I dab concealer on a monster chin zit, hoist my backpack off the floor, hustle into the hall. Bay zooms past me, down the stairs, but I don't follow; I need to make a critical pit stop first.

"Lee!" I pound my fist on my brother's bedroom door. His mattress squeaks, shifts, yet he says nothing. I knock harder. "C'mon, jackass, I know you're awake. I need a ride to school."

"Huh?"

Louder, I say, "I missed the bus," and push open his door. My eyes strain against the sudden dark shift: blackout shades drawn, faded fleece blanket tucked into the curtain rod. I blink my vision into focus. "Cripes, are you on your deathbed?"

“Headache,” he says, like the word aches too. Like I’m too clueless to spy the open bottle of Dad’s best bourbon on his nightstand. Yawning, stretching, he says, “But I’m good.”

“Good, because we need to go.” I squint at his alarm clock. 7:04. That means twenty-six minutes until the first-period bell, at which point my ass better be seated in Mr. Chopra’s Digital Design II—or else. I swallow hard. “Like, now.”

“Ask Dad.”

“Dad abandoned us.”

“Forever?”

“Worse.” I slump against the doorframe. “For breakfast.”

It’s a bimonthly tradition: Dad and his old chef buddies gather at Flower City Diner in honor of their long-gone glory days, when they’d stumble drunk out of their restaurants at five a.m. in search of black coffee and pancakes.

“Then ask your friends.” Lee pauses. “Friend, singular.”

Rude, but not incorrect.

It’s just that Miles, ever the overachiever, gets to school an hour early each day. Most mornings he marks lab reports for the science faculty or runs scales on his baritone saxophone. Others, he eats his breakfast—an untoasted blueberry bagel with butter—with Principal Lund.

For fun.

I guess being a kiss-ass is why he’ll for sure secure the valedictorian title and its \$15,000 scholarship, *made possible by the generous support of the Culver Honors High School alumni fund and viewers like you, thank you*, and I will . . . not.

The point is: “Miles is a no-go. Can’t you do this one thing for

me, Lee? I never ask for anything.” I quickly and loudly add, “Except an occasional ride.”

“Not happening.” He flips onto his stomach. “It’s not my fault you’re a—”

“That I’m a what?” I say it like a dare. *Go ahead. Try me.*

Lee lifts his head, the movement slow. Pained. He stares at me, his sandy hair flattened on one side, his eyes glassy in the dark of his bedroom. Then he rests his head again. “Shut the door on your way out, will you?”

I could fight him on this. Say, *Don’t pretend I’m the only fuckup between us anymore.* But I’m late enough as it is. I abandon his bedroom for the stairs, my middle fingers thrown up, his door wide open. From the landing, I shout, “You’re lucky I have a backup plan!”

He’s less lucky about what the plan entails. I march into the kitchen, which is thick with the bold, bitter smell of Dad’s morning coffee, and snatch Lee’s keys off the counter. Just because I’ve flunked my road test four times doesn’t mean I *cannot* drive; it simply means I’m not good at it. Mostly parallel parking and left turns, anyway, and who needs those?

I am, at the very least, capable enough for the two-mile trek to Culver.

Bay Leaf follows me into the foyer and mews as if to say, *Uh-huh, sure.*

“Can it, Bay.” I drop the keys on the console table, next to Lee’s old senior photo. He’s pure golden boy in the picture: the pristine tuxedo and twinkling eyes, a shiny white smile that notches dimples in his cheeks.

My own portrait is *not fit to be displayed*. I keep a copy shoved inside my desk drawer, half-hidden under a dozen stray paper clips, three expired condoms, and a crumpled baggie of weed I mooched off Cody Forsythe last fall, back when I still talked to Cody Forsythe.

Back when I talked to anyone.

More quietly, I add, "It's fine."

That's the trouble with girls like me: we tell ourselves lies until they sound something like the truth. As I lace my boots? It's fine. Zip my parka to my chin, the faux-fur trim tickling my nose? It's fine! Throw open the door and reveal the white winter morning?

"Ah, shit."

Outside, snow falls in fat, heavy flakes, and the sky is a bruised yellow-gray, bright and dark all at once. God forbid the district call a snow day. It's the side effect of a Rochester winter: we're too prepared. The snowplows, salt trucks, unearned confidence behind the wheel . . .

Bay mews again: *Godspeed, dumbass!*

What's my other option here? Call Miles a million more times? Or worse, call my mother at Channel 12 and admit I screwed up, again, and prove I'm exactly the girl she thinks I am?

That's a hard pass.

I reach for the keys and crash out the door in one quick motion. Too quick. The keys fall to the floor, and I end up outside, empty-handed. I sigh, swear, but when I spin back—

"Looking for these?" Lee jingles the keys. He's sick-pale, his face a queasy green. Yet he still manages a smirk when he says, "Nice try, Jo."

Then he slams the door in my face.

The force of it rattles the leaded glass. Clinks the mail slot open, shut. Stuns me so still that I never even think to lunge for the doorknob until the deadbolt latches with a hollow click.

I smack my forehead against the glass. "Kill me."

"Will do!"

I whip my head back. Any other day, and I might joke about it. *Wow, that's quick service, ha ha ha.* Not today. Today I exhale, my breath a cloud in the cold, and I do the one thing I try to never, ever do: I look across the street.

Like a camera finding its focus, there's pretty, nice Maddie Price.

She stands in the glow of the last lingering streetlamp, a golden ray of light shining upon her and—this part is crucial—her stupid white Prius. One gloved hand wields a snow brush. The other holds her phone to her ear.

"I said *fine*." Her words barely carry, but her tone is clipped. Like she's annoyed, maybe.

Nix that. Now she's giggling. Must be Cody on the other end. They've been dating, what, three months? Four? The way she gushes about him being the best boyfriend on the planet, you'd think she was the first girl to ever fall in love. Never mind that none of what she says is true.

Believe me, I know the real Cody Forsythe. Someday Maddie will too.

For now, she says, "I'll see you soon," and ends the call with a dreamy smile.

Excellent opportunity for me to shout, "Maddie!"

She jerks her head toward me, startled, but looks away just as quick. If I had to guess, I'd guess she's thinking, *Ew, what does she want?* I dash down the snow-packed walkway, up to her.

Maddie keeps her back to me, sweeps the last layer of snow from her windshield. She'd likely ignore me forever, except I skid on a patch of ice and slam into the trunk of her car, hard, which is objectively pretty funny, but Maddie doesn't laugh. Or smile. Or blink.

I nod at her, righting myself. "What's up?"

"Are you lost?" She swipes a snowflake from her cheek, bored with me already.

"Oh, no." I jab my thumb behind me. "I live right over there."

"I was kidding."

"Right. I was also kidding." I fake a laugh. She doesn't seem to find it as funny. "See, the joke is that we're neighbors, so—"

"Did you want something, Jo?" Maddie crosses her arms. Shivers. The air has stung her face a painful pink. The tips of her ears burn even redder. Her outfit of the day—fitted trousers, ankle boots, a soft cream sweater under an unbuttoned wool coat—is both fashion *and* function.

"You look like a dang L.L. Bean catalog," I blurt out.

"That's what you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes. Actually, no. Can I hitch a ride? I was going to commit grand theft auto, but . . ."

What I mean is: *You're my only hope*. Maddie knows it too. Knows the bus schedule by heart from her pre-license days, knows I'll be late without her. She sighs, annoyed, but I swear the edge in those ice-blue eyes softens. I'm positive her posture relaxes. I'm certain—

"No."

I laugh, sort of. "Come again?"

Maddie takes one big step toward me. We're close enough for me to see the smudge of pink lip balm in the corner of her mouth.

To smell her orange blossom perfume. She's a solid five inches taller than me, but I don't shrink back. I refuse.

Not even when she says, "No, Jo. Never," with a grin so big it could split her face in two.

We stand like this—silent, still—for what feels like forever. Then I tuck a frozen lock of hair behind my ear and say, "That certainly sucks."

"I don't know what you expected." Maddie heaves open the car door, fighting a gust of wind that flutters the soft waves in her hair. "Not to be mean, but why would I ever help *you*?"

"Because, Maddie." I'm shameless. Daring her to think back to when this—the two of us, together, talking at the curb—felt so normal only a few years ago. I know she remembers it, too.

For a second, Maddie falters—grin flattening, eyebrows pinching in the middle.

This is pretty, nice Maddie Price, after all. I never meant for the rhyme to stick. To stalk her until our senior year. But it's not like it ruined her life, and it's not like it isn't true. The girl has perfect attendance, top-notch grades, an early acceptance to NYU all but guaranteed. Throw in the soccer star boyfriend, the popular friends, and everything about her is what you'd expect.

No one thinks twice about a girl like that.

Maddie shakes her head, like she's shaking that exact same thought from her head, and drops behind the wheel. "Good luck with the ride."

"Maddie, wait." I wedge my foot in the door. "You know I can't be late. Like, cannot."

Her lips curve. "Why is that again?"

Rhetorical question. I've spent the past six weeks under

academic review, and somehow everyone knows it. But a late arrival would add an extra week to my sentence, which is supposed to expire tomorrow when first-semester report cards post, so again: *I cannot be late.*

“God, Maddie, do you need me to beg? I’ll beg.” I drop to my knees and spread my arms out wide. “You know I’d never ask if I weren’t desperate, but I am beyond—”

She yanks the door shut. It echoes down our street, straight to my bones.

I guess this is how it ends: Maddie, gone; me, alone.

But first, she lowers the window and leans her head out, snow swirling fiercely, furiously around her. “I don’t feel sorry for you, Jo,” she says, serious as ever. “You have no one to blame but yourself.”

I choke out another laugh, but this one hurts. Burns. With one final sweet smile, Maddie shifts into drive, pulls away from the curb—and she leaves me behind.

Something hot prickles behind my eyes. I won’t cry. I don’t cry. Not when I was nine and tripped on a crack in the sidewalk, my front teeth shattering, mouth slick with blood. Not when I pierced my foot on a rusted nail last summer, and not the summer before that, when the boys got drunk and told me they were the ones who scratched my name onto that urinal that one time, and why couldn’t I let it go, it’s just a joke, you know?

So, no. Maddie Price will not unravel me either.

Instead, I stand. I wipe the slush from my cold, drenched knees.

And I think, inexplicably, of another photo—one my mother can never see.

Last fall, late October. The night of the bonfire at Durand Eastman Beach. In the photo, I wear tight denim shorts, beat-up white Keds, a black zip-up that isn't mine. It's bad enough how I tilt my head, just so, a hickey bruised on the curve of my neck, but even worse is my smile. Sly. Coy. Like I know more in this moment than some girls will ever know.

I didn't know shit.

I especially didn't know that when the night sky filled with stars, when the fire hissed, half-dead, when every phone pinged with SIX NEW IMAGES, I'd so seamlessly become the worst of me: Jo at seventeen, outcast.

But I guess that's the trouble with girls like me. We always get what we deserve.