

Bad Boy

a novel

**Olivia
Goldsmith**



A DUTTON BOOK

*Bad
Boy*

DUTTON

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Also by Olivia Goldsmith

Young Wives

Switcheroo

Marrying Mom

The Bestseller

Simple Isn't Easy

Fashionably Late

Flavor of the Month

The First Wives Club

To Nunzio Nappi

As long as I can sit in the front seat

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Chapter 1

The sky was the same gray-white as the skim milk Tracie poured into her coffee. But that was what she loved about Seattle. It definitely wasn't Encino, where the sky was always a glorious blue, as empty of clouds as her house had been empty of people. As an only child with parents in "The Industry," Tracie had spent too many hours staring at that sky. No more empty blue for her. It made her feel as if she should be happy when she wasn't. Here in Seattle, any happiness against the overcast arc above seemed a reward.

Before Tracie had come here to college, she'd considered East Coast schools, but she wasn't brave enough for them. She'd read about Dorothy Parker, Sylvia Plath, and the Seven Sisters. Uh-uh. She knew, though, that she wanted out of California and far enough away from home that weekend visits wouldn't be possible. Unlike the heroine in a fairy tale, she couldn't say that her stepmother was wicked. Just passive-aggressive. So she'd picked the University of Washington, and the bonus had been that, aside from a pretty good journalism school, she'd made good friends, gotten a decent job, and fallen in love with Seattle. Not to mention that when the music scene got hot, she'd found a string of drop-dead-sexy guys. Of

course, Tracie admitted to herself as she took her first sip of morning caffeine, Seattle was famous for its bad boys, good coffee, and Micro Millionaires. And, staring up at the cloud-filled sky, Tracie Leigh Higgins considered herself an aficionado on all three.

Sometimes, though, she thought she had them in the wrong positions: Maybe she ought to quit the bad boys completely, cut back on the coffee, and start dating the Micro Millionaires. Instead, she got serious with bad boys, guzzled lattes, and only interviewed and wrote about Micro Millionaires.

Tracie looked up at the sky once more. Her boyfriend, Phil, was giving her problems again. Maybe I should quit coffee, date the Micro and Gotonet guys, and write novels about the bad boys, she thought, and considered the idea as she stirred a little skim milk into her brew. She considered one of the chocolate and yellow-cake muffins, but then she scolded herself because they were addictive and she was off them for good. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Tracie realized it was either the thought of giving up Phil or writing a book that made her so upset she craved comfort. Did she have the courage to quit her day job to write books? And what did she have to write about? Too embarrassing to write about her ex-boyfriends, she decided. Tracie loved the quiet time she spent each morning reading out-of-town papers and staring out the coffeehouse window, but she'd be late if she didn't get moving. She had another Nettie profile to write. Boring.

She took another sip from the cup and glanced at her watch. Wait. Maybe I should quit bad boys and write about coffee. . . . It was all too confusing this early in the morning. She was a night person. She couldn't sort out life issues this early in the day. She'd wait until next New Year's to make some resolutions. Today, she had a deadline. She had to finish the article about one more Seattle TechnoWunderkind.

Then she'd see Phil.

Tracie tingled at the last part of her thought and picked up the coffee, which was now an almost-undrinkable temperature. She took

a last gulp anyway and wondered if she could leave work early to get her hair done before seeing Phil.

She pulled out a Post-it notepad and wrote, "Call Stefan for a c,w & bd," then gathered her purse and backpack and walked to the door.

But as Tracie walked down the *Times* hallway, she was stopped by Beth Conte, eye-roller extraordinaire. "Marcus has been looking for you," Beth hissed. Even though Tracie knew Beth was a drama queen, her stomach took a little dive, and the coffee in it didn't like the plunge. The two of them kept walking toward Tracie's cubicle. "He's on the warpath," Beth added unnecessarily.

"Is that term politically correct?" Tracie asked Beth. "Or would it be considered a slur on Native Americans?"

"Putting Marcus in any ethnic group would be a slur on them. What is he, anyway?" Beth asked her as the two of them hurried along the corridor. "He's not Italian-American. I know that," she added, putting up her hands as if to defend her own ethnic background.

"He sprang from Zeus's forehead," Tracie conjectured as they turned the last corner and entered her cubicle at last.

"'Zeus's forehead?'" Beth echoed. "Is Marcus Greek? What are you talking about?"

Tracie took off her raincoat, hung it on the hook, and stowed her purse under the desk. "You know, like Diana. Or was it Athena?"

"Princess Diana?" Beth asked, wrong and one beat behind, as usual.

This was what happened if you talked Greek mythology with Beth before 10:00 A.M. (or after 10:00 A.M.). Tracie took her sneakers off, threw them under her desk, and rooted around for her office shoes. She was about to explain her joke when the doorway to her cubicle was darkened by Marcus Stromberg's bulky form. Tracie pulled her head out from under her desk and hoped he hadn't had more than a few seconds look at her butt. She pushed her feet into her pumps. Facing Marcus barefoot was more than she could bear.

"Well, thanks for the lead," Beth squeaked, and slipped out of the cubicle.

Tracie gave Marcus her best I-graduated-cum-laude smile and sat down as coolly as she could. She refused to be cowed by Marcus. He wasn't so tough. He was a much smaller bully than all the men that her dad worked with back in L.A. He wasn't even as big a bully as her father. Just because Marcus had hoped one day to be Woodward or Bernstein and had wound up only being Stromberg was no fault of hers.

"How kind of you to drop in," Marcus said, looking down at his wristwatch. "I hope it didn't interfere with your social schedule."

Marcus had a habit of acting as if she considered herself some kind of debutante. "You'll have the profile by four," Tracie told him calmly. "I told you that yesterday."

"So I recall. But as it happens, I also need you to do a feature today."

Shit! As if she didn't have enough work to do. "On what?" Tracie asked, trying to appear unconcerned.

"Mother's Day. I need it good and I need it by tomorrow."

Tracie's beat included interviewing high-tech moguls and moguls-to-be, but, like everyone else, she was occasionally given other assignments. To make matters worse, Marcus had an uncanny knack of assigning the very story that would ruin your day. To Lily, an overweight but talented writer, he'd always assign stories about gymnasi-ums, anorexia, beauty pageants, and the like. To Tim, who tended to be a hypochondriac, he'd assign stories on new hospital wings, treatments. Somehow, he always found their weakness, even when it wasn't as obvious as Tim's and Lily's. Since Tracie rarely saw her family and didn't particularly like holidays, she was usually stuck covering the special occasions. And Mother's Day!

Her mother had died when Tracie was four and a half. Her father had long ago remarried, divorced, and remarried. Tracie could barely remember her mother and tried to forget her current stepmom. She considered Marcus's square jaw and the beard, which, to be accurate, should be called "10:00 A.M. shadow." "What's the angle?" Tracie

queried. "Or can it be a sensitive essay on how I plan to spend Mother's Day?"

Marcus ignored her. "How Seattle celebrates its mothers. Mention a lot of restaurants, florists, and any other advertiser you can stuff into it. Nine hundred words by tomorrow morning. It'll run on Sunday."

God! Nine hundred words by tomorrow would kill any chances of fun with Phil tonight. Tracie looked at Marcus again, his curly dark hair, his ruddy skin, his small blue eyes, and wished, not for the first time, that he wasn't good-looking as well as totally obnoxious. Looks aside, Tracie made it a policy that she'd never give Marcus the satisfaction of knowing he'd upset her. So in keeping with her policy, she merely smiled. She knew that would bug him, so she tried to make it a debutante smile.

"As you wish," said Wesley to the princess," she added.

"You're the only princess around here," Marcus grumbled as he turned and took himself off to darken the cubicle of some other poor journalist. Over his shoulder, he added, "And would you please try to get that Gene Banks profile fluff-free? I don't want to hear about his schnauzer."

"He doesn't have a schnauzer," Tracie called after him. Then, in a lower voice, she added, "He's got a black Lab." It was true she mentioned the Micronerds' pets and hobbies in her pieces, but that was a humanizing touch. Anyway, she liked dogs.

The phone rang, and it reminded her she'd have to call Phil about tonight, but at five after ten, it couldn't be him. He never got up before noon. She lifted the receiver. "Tracie Higgins," she said in as brisk and upbeat a voice as she could manage.

"And for that I am eternally grateful," Jonathan Delano teased. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Marcus just had an aneurysm," Tracie told him.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Jon asked.

Tracie laughed. Jonathan always made her smile, no matter what. He had been her best friend for years. They'd met in a French class

at the university. Jonathan had the biggest vocabulary and the worst accent that Tracie had ever heard. Her accent was pure Paris, but she couldn't conjugate a verb. She'd helped Jon with pronunciation and he'd helped her with grammar. They'd both gotten A's, and the partnership had thrived ever since. Only Jon or her girlfriend Laura could tell from four syllables that she was upset.

"I have a huge new assignment and I wanted to go out tonight. Plus, Laura is threatening to visit, so I gotta clean up my place."

"Famous Laura, your friend from Sausalito?"

"Sacramento, actually, but what's the dif? Yeah. She broke up with her freak boyfriend and needs some recovery time."

"Don't we all? What kind of freak was he?"

"Oh, just the usual 'I'm-sorry-I-didn't-call-you-can-I-borrow-three-hundred-dollars?-and-I-didn't-mean-to-sleep-with-your-best-friend' kind of freak."

"Oh. A freak kind of like Phil."

Tracie felt her stomach drop as if she were in the Needle elevator. "Phil's not like that. He's just having a hard time working on his writing and his music. Sometimes he needs help getting by, that's all."

Actually, Tracie more often felt Phil didn't need her help at all. While she always asked him to read her pieces, he rarely shared what he wrote. She still couldn't tell if it was because he was too sensitive to criticism, or if he didn't respect her opinion. Either way, Tracie felt attracted to that in him. His self-containment was so unlike her too-eager hunger for acknowledgment. He was cool. She was not.

Jon snorted. "Phil's a distraction from things that matter."

"Like what?"

"Um. Like the story of your mother's early death. Your complicated relationship with your father. Your *real* writing."

"What writing?" Tracie asked, playing dumb, though she'd been thinking the very same thing over coffee that morning. Jon meant well. He believed in her, but sometimes he . . . well, he went too far. "I don't do any *real* writing."

"Sometimes it creeps into the middle of a puff piece," Jon said. "Your real stuff is good. If they give you a column—"

"Ha! It will be forever before Marcus lets me have a column." Tracie sighed. "If he'd just stop cutting them and I got a few features published the way I wrote them . . ."

"You'd be a great columnist. Better than Anna Quindlen."

"Come on. Quindlen won a Pulitzer."

"So will you. Tracie, your stuff is so fresh that you'd blow everyone away. Nobody is speaking for our generation. You could be that voice."

Tracie stared at the receiver of the phone as if hypnotized. Neither one of them said anything for a moment and Tracie put the phone back to her ear. Then the spell broke. "Come on. Marcus doesn't even let my punch lines stay in my features. I'll be writing holiday features until I'm old and gray."

Jon cleared his throat. "Well, maybe if you focused more on your job . . ."

Tracie's other line rang. "Hold a minute, would you?" she asked Jon.

"I'll hold for Marcus but not for Phil," Jon said. "I have my pride."

Tracie punched the button, glad to hear Laura's soprano. "Hey ho, Tracerino. I phoned because I'm actually getting on the plane now."

"Get out. Right now?" Tracie asked. "I thought you were coming on Sunday."

"Face it. You thought maybe I wasn't coming at all. But I am. I really am. I'm just calling to say I packed up all my stuff and left my pots and pans with Susan."

"So that's it? You've told Peter?"

"I don't think I had to tell him. He saw the look on my face when I caught him going down on our next-door neighbor in our bedroom. Plus, he told me Quincy was an asshole."

Back in high school, Laura'd had a tremendous crush on Jack

Klugman. Tracie could never understand why, but sometimes the two of them drove through Benedict Canyon and staked out the house where somebody had told Laura he lived. They'd never seen him, but there wasn't an episode of *Quincy* that Laura didn't know by heart.

Tracie's eyes widened. "He didn't like Quincy?" she asked in mock horror. "And he went down on your neighbor?" she continued. "Was your neighbor a man or a woman?"

At least Laura laughed at that; it was better than tears. By Tracie's count, Laura had cried fifteen gallons' worth over Peter already. "So what's your flight number and what time should I meet you?" While Laura fumbled for the info, Tracie thought of her deadline and her date, but Laura had been her best friend for years. "I'll meet you at the airport," Tracie said, trying to assuage her guilt.

"You don't have to do that. I'm a big girl," Laura said, and laughed. Laura was six feet tall, and not skinny. "I'll just take the bus to your place," she offered.

"Are you sure?" Tracie asked.

"Yeah. I'll be fine. Besides, you've got work to do. You still get *Quincy* reruns in Seattle, don't you?" Laura added.

Tracie smiled. "Yup."

"Great. So hang up. I don't want to hold you up," Laura said.

That reminded her. "Oh no! I've got Jon on hold!" Tracie exclaimed.

"Don't worry, he's still there waiting for you. Hey, I'll get to meet the nerd at last." Laura laughed. "See you later," she said, and then hung up.

Tracie pushed the button for line one and, sure enough, Jon was still on the other end. "What's up?" he asked.

Chapter 2

“You’re sure this isn’t going to be inconvenient?” Laura asked, her sizable butt in the air, her head in the bottom drawer of the bureau Tracie had cleared out for her. She was putting away her T-shirts. Tracie had always marveled at how neatly Laura folded her shirts. Of course, once she put one on, it became as messy as her wild dark hair.

As she watched Laura, Tracie realized that she’d been really lonely for a girlfriend. She was pals with Beth and a few of the other women at work, but they were just work friends. Jon was her close pal, and though she adored him, it was nice to have Laura back again.

“I’m sure this *is* going to be inconvenient. Living in a one bedroom with a friend, not to mention a boyfriend as a frequent guest, is going to be very inconvenient, but it doesn’t mean it’s not going to be *fun*. I’m thrilled that you’re here.” Tracie squealed the way she had back in high school and opened her arms.

Laura gave great hugs. Sometimes, Tracie thought it was Laura’s patient, listening ear and her great hugs that got her through. They had met in the seventh grade and for the next six years had spent less time apart than most married couples. In all that time, they’d never had one fight or disagreement—unless you counted the time Laura

wanted to buy a dress with a fake fur bolero jacket for the junior prom. Tracie had absolutely forbidden it because (although she couldn't say so) it made Laura look almost exactly like a gorilla.

Tracie thought that they'd grown so close because they both were so needy at the time and yet so different. Laura was as tall as Tracie was short. Laura was big (God alone knew her weight) and Tracie was thin (104, but no more bulimia since she'd promised Laura not to throw up). Tracie was boyish, had almost no chest, and wore her hair short and streaked with blond. Laura was a brunette earth mother, had huge breasts and an unruly mane. Laura had always loved to cook; Tracie wasn't sure there'd been a kitchen in her Encino house.

"You can stay here as long as you want. As long as you don't bake farm cakes," Tracie told her girlfriend as they ended their hug. "I think you should move to Seattle permanently. But you do whatever you want as long as you don't go back to Peter."

"Peter, Peter Woman-eater. Hadda neighbor, hadda eat her," Laura sang.

"Was that really what he was doing when you walked in on them?" Tracie gasped.

"Sure was. Somehow, it was a lot worse than if they'd been fucking," Laura said. She stopped unpacking and sat down on the edge of Tracie's bed. "A guy can fuck a girl he doesn't even like, but he doesn't . . ." She paused and then shook her head. "Jesus, he hardly ever went down on *me*." She sighed, diving back into her bag to take out yet another perfectly folded T-shirt.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Tracie told her. "You're just never going to see him again. He's going to miss you."

"I don't know about me, but I do know he's going to miss my short ribs with braised cabbage and mango-apple-cranberry coulis." Laura laughed. "But enough about Peter. I can't wait to meet the famous Phil."

Tracie waggled her eyebrows in a poor imitation of Groucho Marx. "Well, you're not going to have to wait long. You finish unpacking