

## BadBoy 28

### Chapter 28

#### My name is Tessa

A hush falls over the hall, I start for the stage, nearly exploding with anxiety. My heart beats against my chest, I feel eyes on the back of my head and all I want to do is scream, instead, I hurry to join Miss Jota.

She points to a line in her script. Scene two. "We can start from here today," she says. Unable to talk, I nod. Her hand lowers, she frowns. "Where's your script?" I swallow, my finger juts in the direction of my school bag and she lifts a tiny brow, probably wondering why I left it there. In my hurry, I forgot it. "Do you know the lines?" I don't know how I manage to nod but I do and she walks off the stage. "Start."

Blondie puts two fingers in his mouth to let out a whistle of support, Miss Jota's stern gaze lands on him. "Quiet." He offers a sheepish apology and her eyes fall back to me. "Tessa, over to you. We are waiting."

Ben is alone on the first row with the others seated behind him. He frowns when I delay to start and I lose focus. My insides quake with trepidation. God. He's making me nervous. The scene opens up with Romeo sneaking into Juliet's room, I know the words she says to him, his replies but once I open my mouth, they evaporate. I can't remember.

"Tessa, do you need help?" My mind blanks, Miss Jota walks up to me with a script. I accept it from her with a small smile. "It's okay, you can read from the script today." But that's not my problem, that boy in front with a small smirk playing on his lips is. She gives me a thumbs up. "You can do it. Go on, Tessa."

The lines blur, I breathe slowly, try to shake off the nerves and pretend there's no one watching. I can't fuck this up. Miss Jota must not regret making me Juliet. With my nerves under partial control, I clear my throat and let it flow. To the thin air where Romeo should have been, I say, "Good night, good night."

As I continue, I start to really get into it. I can tell there's something lacking in my performance but I am not sure so I don't dwell on it. I soon forget about the script, moving across the stage as I recite my lines.

"Your emotion, Tessa." The disapproving tone cuts through my bubble, I pause without turning to her. "Put your heart into it just like you did yesterday." Only yesterday, there wasn't a crowd. My head jerks furiously in a nod, the crowd will be massive on the D-day. Miss Jota mutters, "Again. Start again. You have to make the audience feel it." The bells in my head trip when I hear a snicker, I don't bother to confirm who it came from but it heightens my nervousness. "Tessa? We don't have all day. Start again."

My nerves are worse this time, I can hear them in my voice. My palms become sweaty and my speech falters multiple times. Miss Jota stops me again and crosses over to the stage. I look down at her, my teeth sink into my lip and she crosses her arms.

“What’s going on?” She sighs. Tears burn the back of my eyes. She’s disappointed in me. “You were doing so good yesterday.”

“She needs her mask, Miss Jota,” someone yells. “Can’t do shit without it.”

What mask? Juliet doesn’t need a mask for this scene. “Language, Mister Carter.”

Mister Carter. Benjamin Carter. My eyes snap to the audience to find him, he cocks his head to his side. That idiot. Isn’t he over losing that match to me already? He has won all of his matches after that, I know that for sure because we both qualified for the All-Rounder coming up next year. All-Rounder is our own form of Olympics but only fights, as usual. This time, there are rules, fighting in pairs is allowed. Coach is subtly agitating for me to find a partner because the prize money for dual matches doubled this year.

Miss Jota turns to Ben, I ball my hands into fists. If he so much as mentions a word about the ring, I will deny him. Ben matches her stare with equal intensity, she shakes her head and peeks at her wristwatch. “We will continue next week.” My relief is enormous, I exhale and nod vigorously. Her phone rings, she pulls it out of her pocket and frowns at the screen. “Just a minute,” she says and exits the hall.

One minute passes without her return. Then it starts. “Juliet, show us your tits.” I am not sure which of the idiots said that but when my eyes raise, Ben’s wide grin is the only thing I see. His smile vanishes and he glares at me. I ignore the room of jerks, using my leg to make circles on the floor. This is our last year together, it will end soon. I’ll never see most of them again. “Come on. A little peek won’t hurt anyone.”

“Guys, leave her alone.” I recognize the voice as Ben. “Miss Juliet is not so tough without her mask.”

The smile making its way to my lips at hearing him defend me fades and the idiot winks. “Stop calling me Juliet,” I say through gritted teeth. Somehow, it is more offensive coming from him. The others are being their usual annoying self with no real harmful intent but Ben is deliberately trying to get under my skin.

“I’ll call you whatever I want, Juliet,” he fires back with enough anger to make the hall grow quiet. The whispers increase, they must have sensed the underlying animosity between both of us. I don’t reply with words, just flash the arrogant doofus my middle finger. Snickers break out from the crowd behind him. “What was that, Juliet?”

Red briefly clouds my vision, my eyes twitch and I snap. “What was that, Loser?” I mimic him and the hoots grow louder. My head jerks left and right like a puppet on string, their laughter fuels me with more courage. “Shouldn’t you be with your fellow losers? Why are you even here?” The thing is, I ramble a lot not just when I am nervous, it happens when I get too excited and right now, I am. In a singsong voice, I add, “Loser. Loser. Loser.”

Ben jumps to his feet, his chair clatters to the floor and the rest of my words hook in my throat. Shit. The room shrinks in size, I start backing away from the stage once his foot connects with the stairs. Double shit. The hall is too silent, nobody is trying to stop the menace storming towards me like I am the source of his bad attitude. He finally climbs the stage, takes one step and another until he is a few feet away from me.

Fear zips through me with each step he takes, my eyes dart to the door in a frantic search for Miss Jota. Where is a teacher when you need one? I don’t want to be punched again. My feet fail me, they stop moving and Ben closes the distance in one giant stride. My hands tremble, I can’t look up. His hot breath fans my neck when he leans to snicker in my ear and my legs recover. I take one step back, he covers it.

We continue the cat and mouse game until I am backed up against the wall with nowhere to hide. “I can smell your fear.” Ben snickers, I gulp. I hate this boy so much. I fucking hate him. Maria is wrong, I don’t have a crush on him. My chest sags in gratitude when he steps back, he stretches his hands like an MC about to reveal an item on sale and cocks his head to his friends. “Mother Theresa, oh, sorry, I meant Juliet. Little Miss Juliet isn’t so tough now, is she?”

They erupt in laughter, whistling while stamping their feet. They are so loud I expect Miss Jota to burst in through the doors and admonish them but nothing happens. Noah claps like the fucking moron he is and his head falls back with laughter. It is not even funny. Ben’s joke is lame. Noah’s partner, Whitney, is all over him, giggling like a fool. I hope his neck snaps and his head rolls onto Whitney’s ugly laps so the bitch will be scarred forever.

Ben returns to torment me, my gaze remains on the floor. I will endure until Miss Jota arrives. I count to five but she doesn’t show up, so I start thinking up a list of drugs I’ll put in Ben’s cake. Asher will have to forgive me but his brother and everyone who eats that cake will purge until their anus bleeds. Then we

will know the true tough guy. Idiot. It's unfair that he is allowed to do whatever he likes and get away with it.

Hooking a finger under my jaw so my eyes are set on him, Ben mutters, "You said something when I was down there." A lump collects in my throat. He is so close I can't breathe properly without inhaling him. Why does he smell so nice? So manly? He looks more handsome up-close. Pray tell, why am I thinking of this right now? I need a grip. "What did you say to me, Juliet? Cat got your mouth now, eh? Miss Juliet or should I say, masked girl?" He hardens his grip on my jaw, pain shoots up my face and I wince. "You dumb or something, Juliet?"

I shove him but Ben is a firm wall of muscles so my effort is useless. His free hand comes to rest beside my head, my heart sinks to my belly. Still, I try to defend myself by speaking up. Our gazes meet and I take a deep breath to ease some of my nerves.

"My name is not Juliet," I start, "my name is not masked girl. My name is not Mother Theresa. My name is Tessa. You don't have to be an asshole to me all the time. I am tired of you treating me like shit. It's unfair." Tears rush to my eyes. Great, I'm going to cry in front of the jackass, give him more ammunition as if he doesn't already have enough. "Don't talk to me at all rather than talk shit to me each time you open that dirty mouth of yours."

Holy Jesus. Bloody Mary. I slap a hand over my mouth, stunned by the words that left it. That wasn't what I meant to say. I mean it but it was supposed to remain in my head. Ben's eyes narrow, I gulp and squeeze my eyes shut. I hope I get a chance to tell my parents I love them before he buries me alive.

"What did you say?"

"Stop treating me like shit," I whisper, eyes still clamped shut. Ben snickers, I mentally reprimand myself for talking back. I need to learn to keep my mouth shut in the right circumstances. His breath fans my neck, I imagine him trying to strangle me and I blurt out, "I'm sorry, okay? Please don't punch me."

Nothing happens. I open one eye to see him staring at me with a bemused expression. Maybe he is not so bad. I freeze when his finger traces the outline of my lips, is he going to squeeze my lips until I pass out? Can people die from that? The fear gradually fades and I become aware of our position. His eyelashes are so long and curvy, I bet his hair is soft to touch too. My mouth opens to utter a stupid remark because my brain can't handle our proximity, Ben presses a finger to my lips to shut me up.

“You’ve got a sharp mouth. Razor sharp,” he whispers. “It will put you in trouble one day.”

Then he walks away like he did nothing.