

BadBoy 45

Chapter 45

Manipulative bitch

Maria is wrong.

Ben likes me. And he proves it by coming up to our table to slide his tray close to mine. His arm goes around my shoulders, I am a blushing mess when he pecks my cheek and Maria shakes her head.

“Sorry, babe. Olivia kept me waiting,” he says in an annoyed voice like he didn’t want to be there with her. He pouts and my anger dissolves. “Had stuff she needed my help with. Didn’t know it would take so much of my time. But I’m here now,” he adds with a smile and my heart riots in my chest. “Sorry.”

Ben’s gaze roams my face, the pad of his thumb brushes the under of my eyes and my lips spread in a shy smile. Maria must have gotten annoyed by our interaction, she snaps. “She didn’t,” Maria says.

We turn to her. “Sorry, what?” Ben says, a wedge between his eyebrows as he awaits her answer.

I slide my hands under the table and take his. Maria doesn’t like him. I know she’s looking out for me but I need her to give him a chance the same way I did with Daniel. Yeah, we have known Daniel for long but this is not so different. It’s Ben. I like him. I want him to be my boyfriend. I want my best friend’s blessing.

“Olivia didn’t need help, she just wanted to take you away from Tessa,” Maria says. Her flat tone brooks no argument and my hand slips from Ben. If they get into an argument, I don’t want to be in the middle. But I agree with her. It’s not beneath Olivia. We slide a glance Olivia’s way to see her staring at us. A smile touches her lips once Ben glances her way. I imagine strangling her and the thought calms me down. “She deliberately kept you waiting.”

“Don’t say that,” he replies. He looks to me for help, I stare at my hands. “You don’t know her like I do.”

What the fuck does that mean? Did he lie about not being her boyfriend? I take an involuntary inch away from him, he sends me a pleading look I ignore. I hate this. Cheers break out in the cafeteria as two people start dancing in the centre, I focus on their feet rather than Ben’s hand clenched on his knee.

“Maybe. But I know she’s a manipulative bitch,” she retorts. Maria tilts her head to the side and gives him a onceover. “Something you fail to see yet you claim to know her.” The dancing couple exit the cafeteria and Maria’s smile falls when her gaze returns to me. “I will leave you lovebirds to catch up.”

The sarcasm in her voice flies over Ben’s head, he covers the distance between us and steals a fry from my plate. I push my tray towards him, my appetite as dead as the smile Maria flashed me before leaving.

“What crawled up her ass and died?” Ben asks once Maria is out of earshot.

Anger flickers through me and I ball my hands into fists. I like him but Maria is my best friend. She will be there when Ben decides he has had enough of this skinny girl with vitiligo and insecurities larger than his ego.

“Your attitude.” Taken aback, Ben gasps. The fry sticks out from a corner of his mouth like a cigarette, he takes it out and a sombre expression falls over his face. “You should have come to our table first.”

Ben juts his lower lip, his hairs fall over his forehead and his eyes shine with remorse. This guy is all mine but he’s annoying. I need to know I can always count on him. “Babe.” My heart clenches, I allow him to lace our fingers and he gives my hand a small squeeze. “I’m sorry, Gracie. It’s hard to say no to Olivia.”

That familiar ball of insecurity rolls through me. The part of me that always feels second place to Olivia jumps awake. “But easy to say no to me, right?” I fold my arms on my chest. Maybe Maria is right and I will get hurt if I continue this with him. “What if I want you here and she doesn’t, will you go to her?”

The bell rings before Ben can form a reply, his hand circles my wrist when I attempt to stand. “We are not done talking.” I am. I don’t want to have this conversation. I snatch my hand from his grip, he whispers, “Please.” I close my eyes and take deep breaths to calm myself. We are not doing this right. This is why I shouldn’t date. I don’t know the first thing about relationships. The cafeteria is almost empty when my eyes open again, Ben’s contrite face fills my vision. “Babe. I am sorry. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“It was. It is,” I whisper, eyes cast on my hands tucked between my legs. His finger moves under my jaw and our gazes meet. “Maria was right. She’s manipulative.” He winces like I punched him so I switch

topics to avoid an argument. I can already tell she will be an issue for us in future. "Ben, I have to get to class."

He stands. "I'll walk you."

It takes a few seconds for me to accept his hand, I stare at it like it's out to attack me. He shoves his hands into the tiny pockets of his jeans. "Gracie." The pain in his voice chews me up with guilt. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't make sense," I blurt out.

We meander through the long wooden benches, I finally slip my hand into his as we walk down the near-empty hallway. Ben slows his pace. We don't have a class together for the rest of today so I want this moment to last a while longer. Emotions are weird. I am mad at him but I still want to be around him.

"What doesn't?" he asks once we climb the stairs leading to the lockers.

"The fact you like me all of a sudden," I answer.

His sigh is so deep it bounces off the wall. Ben stops. I stop. He makes sure I am facing him before he offers a reply. "What if I have been secretly crushing on you?" I frown. That is not possible. I am not the type of girl anyone would crush on. Secretly or openly. "Give yourself a bit more credit, Gracie. Own it."

Easy for a jock who is wanted by everyone to say. I can't own it like him. I force a smile to my lips and nod. We resume walking with our soft footsteps echoing as a reminder that we are both late for class.

"What if Olivia doesn't want you talking to me?"

He doesn't reply until we are at my locker. I take out the books for the next classes. "What about it?"

I steal a glance at him. Is he deliberately being obtuse like Maria said? "Everything about it." He looks on in confusion, I facepalm. Boys. They need us to spell everything out for them. "What if she asks you to pick between me and her? Your friendship with her or me?" He snorts, I punch his chest. "I'm serious."

The lines on his forehead deepen. "If Maria told you to pick between me and her, would you?"

Maria will always be my best friend but I don't want to be in that position. And she won't do that to me.

"I won't."

"Me too." Ben touches his forehead to mine and the worry choking me slips away. I plant a soft kiss on his lips. "Olivia is just my friend." He lays emphasis on just. I nod in agreement because it feels like that's what he wants me to do. I hate that girl. "She won't come between us." Pleased with the mention of us, I grin sheepishly. "Promise."

When he pushes his hand out for a pinky promise, I know we will be fine. Turning to my locker, a laugh slips from me when I realise I picked out the wrong textbook. I take out the correct one and bring out my bag.

Ben places one hand on the locker beside mine, an image flashes through my mind and chills race down my spine.

Last time we were this close, he hit me.

What if he hits me again?

My breath comes in shallow rasps as that thought begins to take form. I lean on the locker for support. My chest falls and rises as the memory washes over me and an invincible cord tightens around my neck.

He hit me twice.

Ben grabs me by my shoulders. I quiver so much I am unable to stand on my own. His lips move but I can't hear a word. I have been sucked into a hole created by this image. Memories rush through me like a movie on fast forward. He starts breathing, I follow his breathing pattern until I eventually calm down.

When I come to be, my face is pressed against his chest and he's drawing circles on my lower back. I breathe him in. Seconds later, I push away from him to stare at him. He stares back with a worried face.

He palms my face. "You good?"

I contemplate telling him. In the end, I decide to fuck it. "Remembered when you punched me," I mutter with a fake smile spreading from ear to ear. If we will move forward in whatever this thing between us is called, I want to be honest with him. His hands drop from my face. I shrug. He might be sorry now but it doesn't change what happened and I am such a dumb bitch for still liking him. "You punched me twice."

Ben nods. "Yeah. I'm sorry." His hands hang over my shoulders but he doesn't touch me. "You forgive me?"

Feeling much light-hearted, I push myself up to press a soft kiss to his lips. "You have to earn it."

"I will, Juliet." He deepens the kiss. "I will."