

BadBoy 48

Chapter 48

America's Got Talent

I don't wear the clip. It remains in my pocket.

"Why do you keep touching your pocket like that?" Maria screams. She's so loud, thanks to her earbuds.

To avoid further yelling, I retract my hand from my pocket. She inserts one earbud into my ear and her melodic voice envelopes me. I press my fingers against it to prevent it from falling off.

"Sorry for taking you away from loverboy," she offers at my glum look, "but this is important." I respond with a wicked laughter that earns me the look. The look that says something is going on but I don't want to find out. "What do you think?"

We halt at my locker and she releases the second earbud to me. I can barely hear her above the cover of the song blasting in my ears. I tap my foot to the floor in tune to the beat, her voice is insanely good.

"It is the song I want to use for AGT." America's Got Talent. She believes the shorter version sounds cooler. Kind of. "I need to send it today." She bounces on her toes, hands clasped together as her big, bright eyes wait for my evaluation. "I'm so fucking nervous. What if they hate the song?"

"They won't," I murmur.

Forgetting Ben for a moment, I close my eyes and let the lyrics wash over me. My eyes sting with hot tears. It is an emotional song that brings out the best of her singing. As far as I am concerned, she is the best singer in our school and might end up the best on the show if the AGT judges are not so tough to crack.

"Do you have a backup song?" I ask. She leans on the locker with her shoulder supporting her weight and shakes her head. "I love this one. Everybody loves Celine Dione. But try to get a backup."

She groans. "Any ideas?"

If she can make something along the lines of—give me my label, call me your girlfriend, it will be great.

“You can ask Daniel.” Irritation flashes across her face, she slams my locker door and I scoot back. “Shit, woman. Take it easy on the poor thing.” She bares her teeth, I mimic her and we are baring our teeth at each other in the hallway like two primitives. Her phone’s ringtone echoes in my ears, I flinch for the second time in five minutes. She peeks at the caller and slips the phone back to the pocket of her cropped hoodie. “Daniel?”

There’s a terse moment of hesitation and she covers it up with a false smile. “Yep.”

Daniel doesn’t hate labels. They have a shot. “Are you going to try to talk to him? It wasn’t his fault.”

And he likes her. She likes him too. I don’t want to be the only friend in a relationship. Wait a second, I am single. I have always been single but at least I got to tick one item off my bucket list before her.

She twirls her curls around her pencil and blows air through her closed lips. “For now, I just want to focus on the music.” I offer her a tight smile and she shrugs. “We will be out of school soon anyways, Daniel won’t matter then.” Tears gather in her eyes, she redirects her gaze to her feet. I will miss her. This loud, obnoxious lady. We must make it in Hollywood but she will have to go first. Her phone rings again. She sighs. “He won’t stop calling.”

“Maybe you should hear him out,” I say, “give him a chance to prove himself.” Like I gave Ben, right? I am such a hypocrite but at least Daniel doesn’t hate labels. The phone stops ringing and resumes immediately. Her back connects with the locker. “We know how manipulative Olivia is...” She nods. A smile flits to my lips. If only I was good at convincing myself. “You know you want to. Pick.”

“Fine.” Before she picks the call, she says, “I think I might have judged Ben too early. He’s a good guy.”

Tracing circles on the tiles with my feet, I nod. He is a good guy who doesn’t like labels. “He is,” I say.

Maria’s head bobs but she is no longer listening to me. She rips her earbuds from my ears and stalks in the opposite direction to answer the call. There will be a lot of swearing. Poor Daniel. But he will be fine.

The hallway goes silent as I resume the lonely walk to my class. I am late already but curiosity gets the best of me. I peek at the door to see Ben with his backpack hanging over his shoulder. His eyes roam above the heads of students for... For me? I use my notebook to hide the blush spreading to my cheeks, his eyes find mine and he waves. I wave in return and spin on my heels. I can't let myself get hurt again.

Footsteps close in on me, I try to hasten my steps but I'm not fast enough. "Gracie." Ben. I don't stop neither do I look at him. My gaze remains glued to the tiles as I continue to my class. It is a miracle I don't bump into a wall. "Did I do something?" I shake my head. "Was it what I said about the labels?" Yes. But I shake my head for the second time. He halts in front of me, I almost bump into him and he steadies me by holding my waist. "I'm sorry."

My gaze flickers to his face. "For what?"

He shrugs and releases his grip on my waist to take my hands. His palms are warm, I want him to cup my cheeks to share some of the warmth. "I don't know, babe." My heart thuds. I love it when he calls me babe. "Whatever I did to earn this... attitude."

Guilt pushes a lump into my throat, I hide my hands behind my back and my heart cracks at his pained smile. I am not an awful person but I need to protect myself. His thumb brushes my cheek. Oh, God.

"I want my Juliet back," Ben whispers with a small smile that doesn't transfer to my lips. His worried eyes take in my appearance. My flustered face and pouted lips but I don't say a word to him. He frowns. "Alright. Can I at least walk you to class?"

The warning bell rings, we jump apart and Ben chuckles. Students bump into us in their hurry to leave, he jerks his head in the direction of my class. But I am stiff. His chest deflates, he pecks a corner of my lips and slips his hand into the crook of my elbow before I can process anything. It almost feels like we are back to being cool but that voice in my head doesn't fail to remind me of our status.

"Have a good day, Gracie," Ben says when we are at the front of my class. He darts in the opposite direction without hearing my reply and goosebumps spread all over my skin at the thought that hits me.

What if I chase him away with my attitude? Even if we are not dating, I want him to be in my life. Ugh. I am so confused. I want him as more than a friend.

I zone out during class. Once I get the chance, I excuse myself to use the toilet. I splash water on my face and grab the edge of the sink, glaring at myself in the mirror. My wet hair sticks to my forehead, aside from the droplets dotting the front of my shirt, I look okay. No eye bags or bruises. And a hint of lip gloss. I have been putting more effort into my appearance. Talk about wearing coordinated outfits and trying more colour combinations after Ben jokingly asked if I had anything other than black t-shirts.

The door creaks, I clamp my eyes shut, willing the intruder to leave. A girl cannot get a moment of privacy in this school. My eyes jerk open when the person claps.

“Who do we have here?” If I missed her by mistake, I can’t miss her sarcasm or the mockery in her voice. Our eyes lock in the mirror, she flips her imaginary hair and I stifle a laugh. Her hair is in a bun, she would remember that if she wasn’t bent on making me miserable. Bitch. “Poor you. Trouble in love island?”

She and Abigail would make great friends. They make up phrases on the spot.

“None of your fucking business,” I spit out. “Get a life, Olivia. Ben chose me over you, deal with it.”

Olivia clicks her tongue and takes menacing steps towards me. My back presses into the sink as she covers the distance to level me a distasteful look. I can punch her but it won’t help me in the long run. And I am not ready to start world war three with her.

“Don’t be so sure about that, Loser.” She sticks her nose in the air, leaning so close her breath fans my face. We are standing toe to toe, the perfect position to headbutt her. Will Ben take my side if he finds out I hit his friend? Why am I thinking about him? He is the reason I couldn’t concentrate in class.

“You are not even his girlfriend.” Olivia steps back to gauge my reaction. Knots form in my belly and I force myself to meet her gaze. I cannot let her get to me. “And you will never be.” She is jealous and hurt. “I wouldn’t want to date you too. Not with that white craw craw on your body. Is it contagious?”

Vitiligo is not craw craw and it is not contagious. She would know this if she picked up a book to read. But I still absorb her words like a sponge.

She jumps another step back. "I bet it is. It's why no one wants to talk to you. No one wants to be friends with you except Maria. Makes me wonder if she also has that thing." Her face contorts on the last word like she's holding back her puke and disgust coils my spine. She is not worth the effort. She is a hater. "Maria has the looks but what do you have?"

Olivia knows where to hit and she hits it hard. What do I have? Nothing. Flat chest. Long skinny legs and arms for days with no fashion sense. Her words burn holes into my fragile confidence, I tug my sleeve over my knuckles and shrink into myself.

Her pointy heels click against the floor as she sashays forward to deliver the last blow. "Ben will never ever pick you over me and you know why?"

A traitorous tear spills to my cheek, I swipe at it and the dam finally bursts open. Olivia shudders. Her condescending gaze sweeps over my body and she smirks. I hate that we were once friends. She knows how to hurt me. Stripped by her gaze, I hug myself.

"Because I am everything you will never be, Mother Theresa." She is not lying. I can never perfect that aura of confidence she has going on for her. I can never look as sexy as she does in something as simple as faded jeans. "People like him don't date people like you. They date me. You will never be good enough for him. So..." She straightens up and pokes my shoulder. "Don't bother trying. Find your type and stay away from him. Benjamin is mine."

The ensuing silence after her departure is loud. My tears make a small puddle at my feet, I let them pour shamelessly until the pain in my heart subsides. It was meant to happen. All I needed was a reminder and a wake-up call. But it was fun while it lasted.

Her words are a shield over me as I step into the corridor. They echo so much in my head I begin to believe them.

Ben is out of my league.

I will never be his type.

He hates labels only because it's me.

What was I thinking? That he will be my prince charming? I rush to the nearest trash can and dump the hair clip inside. I will never be good enough for him to put a label on this thing between us, so why bother trying?