

## **BadBoy 54**

### Chapter 54

#### **I love you too**

Seconds after his statement, we are still staring at each other. "What do you mean you are not broke?"

We have been on an unofficial date. I loved our movie date but if he's not broke, why did he lie? Doesn't he want to go on a real date? Ben rakes his hair, I roll away from him when he tries to kiss me and start searching for my gown. His kisses are addictive, they mess with my brain. He is trying to distract me.

"Gracie, wait," Ben says. My hands close around my gown, he extracts it from my grip and hugs me from behind. I suck in a rush of air. He's bare chested. "I'm not broke," he mutters, "I just don't have money."

He makes no sense and I am glad the lights are off because the look on my face will hurt his feelings. I let him carry me back to the bed but I place a pillow between us to reduce the temptations of touching him.

Legs crossed, eyes cast down, he says in a voice so low I have to tilt my head to hear him, "After our dad died, we stayed here for a bit until Mum remarried." I splay my hand on the pillow but he doesn't take it. "I don't like her husband, Asher thinks he's cool. I think he's meh..." His hand covers mine, I push the pillow away to offer him comfort. Our knees touch and he offers me a smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Back then, I was quite problematic. Bashed his car once and she almost had a heart attack," he mutters with a sad laugh. "It's crazy, yunno? One day we are the three musketeers and the next day, this man is coming into our lives trying to be our father. Who wants a fucking father? My dad was good enough."

I flinch at Ben's sharp tone. He eases his grip on my hand and leans in for a peck but I hug him instead.

"Sorry, babe. Talking about him makes me angry. He is not a bad man. He is just..." He runs his hands over his face and sighs. I look up with a smile. I can't relate to his struggle but I want to be here for him.

"They realised our arrangement wasn't working. I was always ruining things. Breaking stuff. Getting into trouble. So when Mum walked into my room one night to ask what I wanted, I came up with this crazy idea of getting my own place," he adds. The emptiness of his laughter hurts my soul, I place a hand on his knees and he inhales. "Saw it in a movie. Didn't think it would work but she agreed."

Ben shifts, I draw circles on his knees. He's telling the story like it happened to someone else, with a nonchalance that makes it hard to sympathise with him. Maybe that's his plan, to make it seem like he's okay when he's not. I can see through his facade, catch a glimpse of the little boy hurting for his mother.

Taking his hand, I trace the lines on his palm. "I guess I expected her to say no but she didn't." My heart constricts at the emotions packed in his voice. "I mean, if my son is throwing a fit and asking to move out, I would sit him down to have a heart to heart, not push him out but whatever. It's done, it's done."

Silence falls over us and I release a soft sigh. I want to do more, say something but I don't know what.

"There were conditions attached to it though." He wiggles his brows like he's cracking an actual joke and a wave of anger flickers through me. This is not funny. He's hurting. "I wanted Asher and she only agreed on the condition Asher would spend the weekends at their house." He continues caressing my thigh but his gaze is fixed on the wall behind me. "That's why Asher is never home most weekends. As for me, I have to be there for all the holiday dinners but I manage to escape this one." He smiles. "Thank you for today."

"You are welcome, babe." An awkward pause ensues. His fingers stop moving on my thighs and I clear my throat. "How does it feel to live alone?"

"Not so good," he says. His lips brush my hair, he sniffs me and my cheeks colour. "Couldn't sleep most nights Asher wasn't around so I started coming here. They had a son his age, I would watch him until I got tired. As soon as they put their house on sale, I snuck in here. Didn't know picking locks could be so easy. Fell asleep here one night, started coming back regularly on most nights Asher was at her place."

My face wrinkles. Many things could have gone wrong if the former owners found him watching their son. It freaked me out the day I thought it was someone else watching me. "Must have been creepy."

"Not as creepy as living alone," he replies.

I clamp my mouth shut. There's nothing I will say to make it better. It's not the same for me. My parents might be late but I know they will always be there, at least Mum will be there to shower me with love.

Good thing Ben doesn't need me to speak. He continues, "Mum is a full time housewife so all the money she gives us comes from him. I don't want anything to do with that man." I pepper kisses on his knuckles until the anger rolls off him. "Food, light, groceries, he pays for everything. I even have a credit card for it but I don't want to spend his money. I want mine and fighting at the ring is the only way to have that."

Guilt rips my insides. I understand why he was so upset with me but it doesn't excuse his behaviour. I won the fight but I took more from him without knowing. His fingers caress my scalp absentmindedly.

"You can have the money," I say. Ben freezes. I don't give him a chance to talk. "I just like to fight, I don't really have a use for the spare cash." If my parents are good at anything, it's making life easier for me. I never lack funds. "I don't even use the money. Just stack it somewhere for the future. You can have it."

Ben shakes his head. "No way. It's yours." Pressing a finger to my lips to stop me from speaking, he says, "You won. It's your money." I sigh and he caresses a side of my face. My boyfriend is too stubborn. I will lose this argument before it starts. "If things get so bad I can use the card. I wanted to take you out with my money, not his."

My eyes soften and the words I should say refuse to form. We have the rest of our lives for a date. If it doesn't happen this year, it can happen next year.

"Who needs a date when I have you?" I manage to say and he laughs. He laughs so hard tears spill from the corners of his eyes. I grin broadly at him.

Making a mental note never to mention a date to him, I grab his hand between mine. We are okay.

"Lemme show you something," he says.

We separate for him to find his phone. I moan at the loss of contact and he pats his laps for me to make myself comfortable. He doesn't have to request twice because I am already crawling to his laps. I think he is making me clingy. My phone beeps with a text from Mum, she wants to be sure we are okay.

I send a short reply to her and push the phone under the pillow while Ben fiddles with his. He taps on his phone for a while and a file takes over the screen. I am not sure what I am looking at but it resembles a spreadsheet with numbers and dates. A long list of items that causes my head to spin from looking at it.

“Every time Mum buys me stuff, I write it down here so I can return it in the future,” he explains. My heart cracks into a million pieces as he zooms to the total figure at the end. I am afraid to ask how much it is. I am afraid to peek at it so I stare at my hands. This is not how it should be. Kids shouldn’t have to worry about repaying their parents. “I get access to my trust fund on my twenty-first birthday. Hopefully, I have some cash left for my future after that.”

If my heart was breaking before, now it shatters into tinier pieces. “Don’t say that.” I straddle him and take his hand, loving and loathing the semi-darkness that prevents me from completely seeing his face. “You don’t have to return a cent to them.” I shake my head vehemently to stop him from replying. “She brought you into this world. She should take care of you.” He retracts his hands to run them through his hair but a part of me feels like he’s avoiding my touch. “She’s your parent, Ben. It’s her responsibility.”

His smile is so sad I have to look away. My heart hurts. My eyes burn from trying to keep the tears that rush to the surface at bay. It feels like I took the little things I had for granted. When did I ever have to refund my parents? In cases where I explicitly asked them to lend me money, we all knew it would never be returned because that’s what it is about. Tending to my needs. I am their baby. Mum’s sweetheart. Daddy’s pet.

“You can’t understand,” he whispers.

I grab his hands and hold it to my chest so he can feel my pounding heart. “Then make me understand.”

Ben replies with a kiss to my forehead, I tuck my head in the crook of his neck knowing this conversation is over. His hand crawls up my back, there’s nothing sensual about his touch but my body thrums.

“Your body is perfect the way it is,” he mutters into my hair. My pulse quickens, my heart races so hard I fear it will tunnel out of my chest. I remember our state of undress as we share the heat of our bodies. “Dad used to say it’s a super power.” The first time I saw Asher, he called his vitiligo his super power. I think his Dad was his favourite parent. “I agree. Not all of us are lucky to have super powers like this, I think you should own yours. Flex it, babe.”

Staring at him with eyes shimmering with tears, I whisper, “I love you.”

Adults say teens are too young to fall in love or too immature to understand the intricacies of love but what I feel for Ben is real. We might not love the same way adults do but the way I love him is enough.

The intense look in his eyes has my head lowering, I fiddle with the waistband of his briefs as the silence stretches. Did I say it too soon? We became official less than a month ago and I am already saying this. I steal a peek at his face, he's frowning. Did I scare him? Shit. I ruined this. My lips part but he cuts me off.

"How do you know you love someone?"

I think back to all the times Mum talks about Daddy even in his absence, the little things they do for each other. How much she prioritises his happiness and how much he reciprocates the simple gesture. It is not entirely the same with me and Ben and that's okay. I bring Ben's hands to cup my face. He pouts, I grin.

"When you are always thinking about them," I reply, "and you want them to be happy."

He touches his forehead to mine. "I love you too, Gracie."