

## **BadBoy 64**

### Chapter 64

#### **Mummy**

BEN

“No. Leave that,” I tell Asher, shaking my head at the boots he tries to sneak into the bag.

Josef, Mum’s husband, got him nice leather boots for Christmas. He also bought me a pair. Thanks but no thanks, I did not accept it. He thinks he can bribe his way into my life with gifts, forced smiles and compliments, the way he did with Mum and Asher. It can’t be me, it will never be me. He already took Mum away from us and Asher likes him a little too much. I hope he doesn’t take Asher away from me.

Asher dives into the bed face first, his legs dangle from the edge as he pushes himself up on his elbows. He watches me arrange our clothes into the duffel bag on the bed. The small pile soon disappears into the bag and Asher sits up. His back rests against the headboard, we share one glance and he looks away. He does it twice and I sigh.

He wants something.

Shoving the last item of clothing into the bag, I drop it at my feet and inch closer to him. Asher brings his knees to his chest and smiles a little. I like it when he smiles. It’s free and genuine without any hint of malice. I might not be the best brother but I am keeping to my promise. I am protecting his innocence.

“What do you want?” I ask him. I drag his feet to my lap and pop his foot knuckles. He chuckles.

“Why don’t you like Josef?” His face is an exact replica of mine. Sadly, we both look like our mother. Asher pulls one leg back and his hand sweeps over the room we share in Josef’s house. “He’s not bad.”

Josef loves our mother. That is undeniable but before him, Mum loved us more than life itself. At first, it was Asher, Benny and Mum. Now, it’s Josef, then Asher and Benny. I don’t like it but I have to deal with it. It’s weird how one person can change your whole life. Their presence will upset your perfect balance.

Like Gracie's presence ruined mine. The thought of her causes a painful twist in my guts. I can't shake off that awful feeling. I think she's already tired of me. She has not called me today. We haven't spoken this year. Not that I haven't tried but each time, she comes up with silly excuses. Her texts are so monotone.

For someone who spends so much time with her phone, she is doing great at missing my calls. I thought the new year signified new things—more love, texts and calls. She has been everything but my Gracie.

What if, like Mom, she has found her own Josef? I kick the bag at my feet and groan. That's why I never dated. If you are not in a relationship, stuff like this will never bother you.

What if she is not okay? This is so unlike her. I pick my phone on the nightstand with the intention of calling her. My lips twitch at the contact picture I used.

Her face is turned to the sun, eyes closed with her arms spread out. Warmth spreads through my chest as the memory from that day trickles over me and my lips spread in a wide grin. Gracie loves me as I am.

She doesn't need a Josef. I am enough for her.

The phone rings uninterruptedly. I try two more times before giving up. I don't know why I bother trying these days. She won't pick. But she will text later with an excuse so genuine I would believe it if it didn't happen often.

On cue, my phone beeps. It's a text from her.

Gracie: sorry, was with Mum. She's cooking a storm.

As expected. I am not sure why her text elicits a sad smile from me. Maybe because it was the same way it started with Mum. She would miss our calls and follow them with apologetic texts. The missed calls progressed to missed practises. She missed Asher's dance classes a lot and in the end, he gave it up.

Another peek at my screen and my knees clench. Words lump in my throat, my brain jumps to overdrive trying to excuse her behaviour. Okay, she was with her mother. If that's the truth, why can't she call back now she has access to her phone? Why is she okay with not speaking to her boyfriend for a week?

School resumes tomorrow and we have not even spoken about it. Am I picking her? Is she picking us up? Asher prefers her driving us to school because it means more treats. She spoils him with her cookies. It's one more reason I love Gracie. She cares about Asher. Anyone who cares about Asher has a good heart.

A growl shoots out of my lips when a palm connects with the back of my head. Mild pain spreads to my scalp, I wince and my eyes dart to the culprit—Asher. He bares his teeth, balling his small hands into fists like he is ready to punch me. Little man can't fight but he likes to show off. I close my hands around his.

"Sorry," I tell him. His frown disappears and he pulls a pillow between us. "What were you saying?"

Since the family dinner with Olivia and her mum, I might not have been the most attentive brother. My girlfriend is all I think about. She is too chill with our silence. I can't survive on texts alone. I want to hear her voice when she says she loves and misses me too.

Is she lying about it? Did I do something wrong?

I glance at Asher and a contrite smile touches my lips. I did it again. I zoned out again. "Champ..."

Asher shoulders fall. He tries to smile but it doesn't reach his eyes. I need to think more of him and less of her. "Let's just watch a movie." He jumps out of the bed and dashes to the door. "I'll get your laptop."

The only problem is: I don't have a laptop. Josef can easily get me one but it only will add to the long list of items I have to repay him in the future. Throwing the bag over my shoulder, I walk out the room but halt once my feet meet the wooden stairs.

Twenty-four more steps and I'll be in the dining room. I hear their voices. My mum, Asher and Josef. She's not here but I spin on my heel and head back to my room.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead. I toss the bag on the bed and pace the room, stopping in front of the TV to stare at my reflection. My fingers rake through my hair, I suck in a sharp breath and try to control my galloping heart. I have everything I need up here. TV, the cable, speakers and connected bathroom.

Mum and Josef made sure of that. I barely have a need to go downstairs. I never have to bump into her. I sneak a look behind me, expecting her to jump out of the shadows but nothing happens. Goosebumps break out on my skin, my insides knot at the memory. I don't like coming here. It has her presence. But Mum won't budge on this holiday rule.

She was absent this Christmas and the year before that. No one mentioned it. I didn't care to ask. The house is calmer when she's away. I stalk to the window and push it open. She liked dark places. It is the reason I hate the dark.

The sky is cloudy and the air is a bit chill, I stretch out my arms to embrace the cold. Gracie will like this view. A tap on my back pulls me out of my reverie. Her scent hits me first, I hesitate to turn around.

"Hey," Mum says. She smiles but it disappears before I can reciprocate it.

As usual, she looks perfect—flawless face, no hair out of place. She puts on makeup in the house. I think it's a rich people's thing and Josef is a filthy rich man. Mum is a housewife but she has helps. We didn't have that when Dad was around. She reaches for my hand, our eyes meet and her arm drops to her side.

Things have not been the same for a long time. It got worse after she married Josef.

"Benny," she calls out to me in a desperate tone.

Mummy.

I grit my teeth. "Ben. Call me Ben." She nods. She's nervous. I make my own mother nervous.

"Ben." I force a smile to my lips. I miss her. I miss the days when we were all she had but every time I try to be nice to her, I remember. And I am angry all over again. She motions to the bed. "Can we talk?" I glance at the bed for the first time. There's a laptop box. Asher told Josef I didn't have one. "Please."

Closing my eyes, I let out my breath. She is not her. She won't hurt me. "Okay."

Mum walks ahead of me to the bed. She sits on one side and I sit on the opposite end. Her smile is so sad as she observes the distance between us. Once upon a time, I was such a mummy's boy. It's because of her I am constantly doubting myself. Wondering if Gracie has had enough of me and moved on to a Josef.

It's hard to be mad at her sometimes. She is happy. She radiates a happiness that was missing when she was married to Dad. Maybe Dad really wasn't making her happy and the divorce was the right option. I don't know but she deserves happiness too.

"You're leaving," she murmurs. I ignore the disappointment in her voice and my head jerks in a shaky nod. She hugs a pillow to her chest. Her voice breaks when she whispers, "Will you ever forgive me?"