

## **BadBoy 65**

### Chapter 65

#### **Gracie doesn't like me again**

BEN

The pain in Mum's voice splits my heart into a million pieces. I ball my hands into fists. "For what?"

She is the reason I have trouble sleeping alone. If Asher is not home, it's harder to fall asleep. I might give him a speech about being strong anytime he sneaks into my bed after a nightmare but those are the best parts of my nights. Sleep comes easily when he is there. She won't hurt me if I am not alone.

Tears cloud my vision as the dark memories try to overpower me. She's not here. She can't hurt me. My fingernails dig into my palms until they draw blood. I focus on the pain. I think about the fights. About my Gracie. Her sheepish grins and our silly notes. Our kisses. And the anger slowly eases from my body.

I raise my head to see Mum watching me and the pent up emotions come rushing down on me again. I needed her then. I still do. But I don't know how to move past this mental block. I think I hate her but I don't want to. She is here but she is so far away. And the question that has always been burning in my mind tumbles out.

"Where were you when I needed you, Mum?"

Mum chokes on a sob. The space between us vanishes. "Benny." My head jerks in her direction and my eyes narrow. She thinks I'm mad at her for marrying Josef but it's more than that. "Ben," she corrects.

She pulls my hand between hers, I allow her comfort me for a few seconds before retracting my hand.

"Ben." I don't look up. My gaze fixates on the maroon rug and my ugly slides. "You can't keep holding on to the past, Ben. I'm happy with him." Mum doesn't get it. She didn't get it then, she won't get it now. It is bigger than all my games she missed. It's Her. Mum sighs heavily. "Josef got you a laptop." She puts it in the space between us. "You have always wanted one." I still do but it's from him so it's a no. "Ben."

"I don't want it," a voice strangely similar to mine answers.

Seconds roll into minutes. The weight on the bed shifts. Her feet appear in my line of vision, she palms my cheeks, forcing my gaze on her face. She is the feminine version of me. We are identical to a fault.

“I’ll leave it here in case you change your mind,” she says. A colony of ants swarm my stomach when her lips meet my forehead. It has been so long since I got a forehead kiss from her. It makes everything better for a minute and I smile at her. “I love you.”

I love you too.

But my lips remain sealed in a tight smile. She smiles back at me, her hand hangs mid-air as she contemplates touching me again. Seconds later, she shakes her head and walks away. At the door, she leans on the frame and smiles at me for so long I begin to feel like an asshole for treating her this way.

“I hope you consider spending the weekends with us.” Probably not. But my shoulders roll in a shrug.

The silence after she leaves is deafening. Asher strolls in with a pack of gummy bears he munches on loudly, he eats more than everyone in the house. I don’t accept the chewy candy he offers me. I am wary of spending too much of Josef’s money. He’s a great giver, maybe a good man. I don’t know for sure. But he treats Mum and Asher well. Mum smiles as much as I do when I’m with Gracie.

Asher jumps on the bed while I arrange the last of our things. Josef has a fleet of cars, he has—on more than one occasion—offered to drop us off. But accepting his help might bring us together. That’s how he won Asher over. They bonded over a car ride to the mall and Asher fell in love. I don’t want to like him.

“Are you taking the laptop?” Asher asks.

I eye the MacBook laptop on the bed. It’s still in the pack. There’s a note attached to the end. On closer look, I see it’s a note wishing me the best of this new year with love from Mum and Josef. I crumple the note and toss it in the trash can by the door. Asher groans, he shakes his head when my eyes fall on him.

“He’s really not bad, Benny.” Maybe but he raised a bad person. He shuffles to the bin and retrieves the paper. Stomping towards me, he stretches the note to me. “Take it, Benny.” I shake my head. His eyes

narrow, so does mine. He gives up soon enough. "Would you be happy if someone wasn't nice to Daddy?"

Those identical eyes bore into mine. I push two fingers in my pocket and sway gently.

"He's not our daddy," I finally say, well aware of how bratty I sound. "I don't have to be nice to him."

Asher pouts. "Shame."

Shame.

I know shame.

I have felt shame.

Pain flits through me. I look down to my feet as my eyes start to sting again. His innocence is protected, that's all I care about. Besides, our dad was a good man, he raised great kids. People will be nice to him.

Asher folds the note with gentle care and slides it into his pocket. Walking to the wardrobe to dump my laptop, he murmurs, "You have to still try, Benny. He makes Mummy happy." That he does. "I like him."

We leave the room in silence. Josef stops in the middle of his conversation, Mum sits up when we walk downstairs. I don't look their way as I walk past the couches to the door. The chill air hits my face and I inhale greedily. Getting my bike out, I strap the bag to the luggage rack and wait for Asher to step out.

The skies are overcast, nearly as cloudy as my thoughts. I need Gracie to cheer me up with one of her lame pickup lines. I peek at my phone's screen. Nothing from her. I don't know if it's normal or if I am too needy. Must girlfriends text or call their boyfriends all the time? Whatever the case, I miss her. I am not happy.

Me: I love you and I miss you. Leaving today.

Gracie: miss you too.

I scoff. That's it? My jaw ticks in frustration. Anger builds up inside me. Frigging fuck.

"Let's go, Benny." I jump, almost toppling the bike. Asher chuckles, he is so sneaky. Bridging the gap, he hands me my helmet. I accept it with thanks and he climbs behind me. Someone cracks the curtain in the parlour open. At first, I see no one, then I see Josef and my mum. It is almost laughable, they didn't come out to spare me the awkwardness but this is way worse. In a way, I appreciate it, it shows that they care even with my attitude. "I love you."

Asher's arms close around my waist, a smile forms on my lips. I start the bike and wave at the window. Mum looks at Josef, they stare at each other with their mouths agape, then wave back at us. I chuckle.

"Love you too, Champ," I whisper under my breath.

He doesn't strike up a conversation on the ride home. As soon as he is settled in and playing with his phone, I start for Gracie's house.

Anticipation thrums through my veins as my bike curves into the corner leading to her street. I can't wait anymore. I miss my girlfriend. And we need to discuss this new attitude of hers. I cannot pretend everything is fine when it's clearly not. She is failing at communicating her feelings. There is no way to tell if I hurt her if she doesn't talk to me.

The sound of my bike cuts through the air, I slow down a few metres from the front of her house and walk the remaining distance.

Hidden in the shadow of a neighbour's tree with a view of her window, I pull out my phone to text her.

Me: You home?

The light in her room comes on. I have never been inside and the urge to see her intensifies. I miss her badly. A silhouette moves to draw the curtains close. My heart thuds as she walks away from the window. I didn't see her face clearly but I know she looks just as pretty as she did the last time I saw her.

I miss her. I miss her face. I miss her kisses. I miss us. The us from last year.

Gracie: No. What's up?

A soft gasp escapes my lips. I place a hand over my chest and lean on the tree for support. My gaze darts to her room. She switches off the light and the dagger in my heart twists harder, doing damage to the fragments. She lied to me. She has never lied to me. I climb my bike with a realisation dawning on me.

Gracie doesn't like me again.