

Badboy 91

Chapter 91

Different is good

Ben pecked me. In the play, Romeo kisses Juliet on her lips. No one questioned that because we were a couple so we didn't think it would be a big deal. The standing ovation, the cheers, I remember it all too clearly.

They liked it. But I didn't. I wanted a real kiss. I also want to stop thinking about him. Argh. I collapse to the bed and give the ceiling my middle finger. Why are things falling apart for me?

By this time next week, I'll be in school. Today is the last day of my suspension. Tomorrow is our last match. I am nervous. It shows in the way my arms shake when I reach for my laptop on the nightstand.

We haven't practised together in two weeks. Our third match was okay but the opponents for tomorrow are trickier. They have Ben's height and stature. It will be tough. I tap on the keyboard and the screen of my laptop comes to life.

For some reasons, I have become obsessed with the BG site. I keep checking for some sort of news, anything about Ben. I don't like asking Noah. He gives me these pitiful looks. I hate it.

There's a new video on the site. I don't think before hitting play and slide under the cover. The screen is black for the first six seconds, then Asher's face takes over. What is he doing in our school's auditorium?

Asher is not alone. He's on the stage with Ben and Olivia flanking him on the left and right side. Her face is perfect as always. My lips curl in a half-smile. Beneath the makeup, there are a lot of scars. How many students have gotten good at hiding their scars? I know about Noah's. But I want to know about Ben's. Why does he feel so alone?

I unmute the video and Asher's voice pierces the air.

"Good day everyone. My name is Asher Jason Carter." He nudges Ben with his elbow. "And this is my brother, Benny." The crowd laughs and Asher frowns at them like he is not the only kid in the hall. "I'm the only one allowed to call him Benny."

Me and him. Sitting cross-legged, I put the laptop on my legs. "Today, I want to talk about Vitiligo." My heart quietens. He raises his shirt to reveal his stomach. There's barely an inch of skin that isn't covered with big, white patches. It's much worse than mine. "It's not contagious. It's a superpower."

I push my fist into my mouth to keep from crying out but my eyes continue to water as he delivers a speech on my skin condition. I laugh a little when he hugs Ben to buttress his point about it not being contagious. He's doing a great job. My mouth dries up when Olivia takes over from where he stopped.

If she knew these things, then why was she always teasing me? Olivia ends her speech with an apology.

"I'm sorry if I ever made you feel less of yourself," she says while looking directly into the camera.

I have a feeling it is directed at me. Stupid girl. Why can't she apologise to my face? My chest weighs less. I am not angry at her, I just want my Benny.

Ben takes over. He concludes with a note on being more accepting of people and their differences. How different can be good. I hold a hand to my chest and another to my stomach. He is right. If we were all the same, the world would be boring. I am different, so what? Different can be good. Different is okay.

The auditorium erupts in a loud cheer and everyone stands to clap as the three of them exit the stage. Someone whistles. I think it is Noah. The principal comes on stage and the hall falls quiet. Everyone sits. He is talking about the effects of bullying and the consequences for the culprits when I close the laptop.

I jump out of bed. I need to speak to Ben.

The ride to his house is the shortest one ever. His bike is outside. I inhale feverishly to calm my nerves and step out of the car. I knock twice without a response. He can't be mad at me after that video.

Shuffling from behind the door stops me from leaving. The door opens to reveal Asher. He is in pyjama bottoms without a shirt. His hair shoots in all directions like he just rolled out of bed. I force myself to smile.

“Tessa?” He rubs his eyes. I take a careful step forward. “I’ve missed you,” he says into my neck when I crouch for him to hug him. I’ve missed him too, more than I will ever know it. “Where have you been?”

“Home. I wasn’t feeling too good.” His eyes narrow in suspicion. I hop on one foot, then the other. “But I feel much better now, Champ.” Flexing my arms to show my invisible biceps, he laughs. “Where’s Ben?”

Asher hesitates. He looks behind him like Ben is somewhere inside and might jump him if he gives out his location. I try to take a peek but he steps outside and shuts the door. He taps on a corner of his lips.

“He’s not at home.” His innocent smile is the reason I believe him. “Are you and Benny fighting?” I swipe my sweaty palms over my shirt and my head bobs slowly. “Have you broken up?” I don’t know how to answer that so I keep staring at him. “Don’t break up with Benny. I like seeing both of you together.”

Me too. I really do. “Do you know where he is?”

If he does, I might be able to fix this. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s at the gym.”

I hug Asher for so long he writhes in my embrace. Something tells me this is the last time I’ll see him. I hope that something is wrong. I return to my car and wave at him until he disappears into the house.

My next stop is the gym. It takes all of five minutes to get in and get out. Ben is not there.

* * *

It is today.

I contemplate dialling the number on my screen like I have been doing for the last five minutes but I don’t.

Will he come for the match? What if he’s so mad at me he doesn’t care for the All-Rounder again? I swallow the thick lump clogging my throat. It’s so crazy how you can go from being lovers to strangers.

Finally growing a pair, I dial his number. It rings and rings but Ben doesn't pick. I flatten my hand on my knee and allow my thoughts to surround me. I didn't do anything wrong. He is the one who picked another girl over me. If he holds Olivia with so much high regard, he should have asked her out.

Gosh. I hate that boy.

I roll on my stomach and scream into my pillow. He's hurting me and he doesn't care.

What happened to making his Gracie happy? If he doesn't care about my happiness, then I shouldn't care about his. He can fight today all by himself since he can do without me. He is the world's worst boyfriend. I am tired of begging him when we both fucked up.

Cuddling another pillow, my eyelids flutter at the vibration coming from the bed. I retrieve my phone, heart beating fast and wild. Is he calling? My heart sinks at the name on my screen. It's not him. It's Coach. Is he calling to find out about us? If we win, he will get a small token. I don't recall the amount.

I clear my throat. "Coach."

He gets straight to the point. "Are you coming?"

I close my eyes and picture his face. I'm doing this for him, not Ben. Liar. "Yes."

The call ends and I jump into the shower. Minutes later, I'm driving down to the ring. Ben's bike is at its usual spot. Stupid. I roll my eyes and let out a long hiss as if the bike is the reason for all my problems.

Soft music pours in through the speakers in the corridor. The music will be changed to something more metallic when the match starts. I stop in front of the door to my changing room and take another deep breath. We might not have been training together but I have been doing all the drills Coach gave me religiously.

If we lose our final match, it might be for a lack of coordination or communication. A good team is one that communicates. On a soft sigh, I push the door open. Coach is on the only couch with his hands behind his head. He looks up at the sound of the door opening and I try to force my lips into a smile.

“Took you long enough,” he says with a shake of his head like he’s disappointed in me. But I am not late.

The match isn’t until one hour later but he likes having us here earlier. I join him on the couch without a word. The air thickens with a feeling foreign to both of us. It is never this awkward between us. I don’t try to diffuse the tension. Whatever he has to say, let him say it. Although I have a feeling it’s about Ben.

“Are you and loverboy good?”

“Yeah.”

His piercing gaze follows me. He beckons on me to stand and he does the same. He grabs my shoulders. “In the ring, it’s you and him against your opponents. Whatever beef you two have must not interfere with the match, you got it?” Yeah, I do. But he should be telling this to Ben, not me. “Alright, kid.”

I whip out my phone and send Ben a text to let him know I’m here. Whatever happens next is up to him. If he doesn’t reply or come to check on me, I’ll walk out without a backward glance. All-Rounder be damned.

Coach pulls on his gloves and starts me on some punching drills. There’s frustration behind each punch. Anger too. A knock distracts me for a moment and Coach slaps my head gently to get back in the game.

I must never lose focus. No distractions.

The knob finally turns and the door opens. Ben is here.