

## **BadBoy 47**

### Chapter 47

#### **Labels**

I am picking Ben up today like I have been doing for the past two weeks. His bike is working perfectly well but our arrangement is better. We don't share so many classes so this is one of our chances to get a private moment before school.

The other option is to let him pick me from the house. My boyfriend might be an expert biker but I am scared to death of bikes. Ben has promised to teach me but nope, I will stick to fighting for now.

Their front door swings open and Asher runs to my car with an excitement I never feel on a Monday morning. He is always so happy and I wish I could share some of his happiness. He takes his rightful position in the front and pulls me in for a hug. Ben is not the only one who stole my heart, his younger brother did too.

"How was your weekend?" Asher asks. He breaks away from the hug and I smoothen the collar of his white T-Shirt. Ben comes out in a shirt of the same colour but with blue jeans. We are all wearing jeans. I might have slipped that into our conversation last night. I honk. Ben holds up one finger and returns inside to pick up something. He does that every time. It is annoying in a cute way, if that makes sense.

Asher snickers at his brother's forgetfulness. He takes pride in embarrassing his big brother. I might pretend to be on Ben's side when he starts his funny uncensored stories about Benny but I secretly love hearing them. Who knew the school's hot jock loved singing in the bathroom with his horrible voice? Asher claims Ben sounds like a dying frog.

"Fine." The weekend was filled with texts, calls and scheduling. I ruffle Asher's hair and his eyes light up. He stops me from removing my hand from his head so I let it rest there. My God, he is so cute sometimes. "How was yours? How's your mum?"

I don't understand their family arrangement. Ben doesn't want to talk about it and I am afraid I will push him away if I insist. His mum is a no-go area, it is the same as talking to a brick wall. Asher wasn't home all weekend. He returned last night.

"Champ," I call out to Asher who's already raiding my car for his cookie stash. "How's your mum?"

Asher grins. Since I started picking them up, I bring him cookies on Mondays. "Mummy is fine." That's all I get. Nothing more, nothing less. He's more forthcoming than Ben but his answer is unhelpful. "Is Benny your boyfriend?" he asks after he's done with the first round of cookies. Cream chocolate chips stick to a corner of his lips, I pass him a paper towel to clean his mess. "Are you dating Benny?"

My hands close around the steering wheel. A pink hue stains my cheeks as my eyes fall on the curb we had our first kiss. I should take a picture of it to show our kids. Hold up. Where did that come from?

I push that silly thought down. Who says we will last after high school? We haven't talked about college yet. I glance at the duplex. He is taking too damn long. We will be late and I have to drop Asher off first.

Asher tugs on my hoodie. Oh, snap. "Sorry, Champ. Yes," I reply at last, "Benny is my boyfriend."

Ben didn't ask me out but he acts like my boyfriend all the time. We both fell into our respective roles without a word. I drop him off at school, he carries my bag, walks me to class, and is always waiting for me at the end of my last class. Our chemistry is sizzling. Miss Jota even commented on it at the last rehearsal.

"Strange." Asher presses his index fingers to his lips. "He says you are not his girlfriend."

Come again, say what?

Those words run over me like hot coals. My heart thumps like an angry squirrel, I unfasten the seat belt that grows too tight around my neck.

"When?" I whisper. His forehead wrinkles in confusion but he doesn't reply. I don't find him so cute right now. He should have kept his mouth shut. "When did he say this?"

"Last night." I fake a smile he doesn't see through. We spoke last night. The load in my chest shifts to my hands and they grow too heavy for me, which is good because I really want to strangle Ben right now. "When we were talking."

Asher licks his lips, then continues demolishing the cookies. My hands tremble slightly as I clench them into fists to stop myself from doing something as stupid as storming into the house to hit the two-faced jerk.

“Thanks for telling me.”

A smile spreads to his lips, his missing tooth comes into view. “No biggie but I want both of you to date. I want you to be his girlfriend.” I want to be his girlfriend too. Tears spring to my eyes but I force them down. I thought I was his babe, isn’t that what a girlfriend is called? Maybe not. “Benny likes you very much.” His voice lowers, he curves his hand around his mouth. “He told me. And I like you too.”

My head bobs and he returns to his cookies. I like him too. Him and Benny. Very much. When Ben joins us, I manage to plaster a tiny smile on my face. Throughout the ride to Asher’s school, I am quiet. I don’t hug him when he alights and my fake smile must have been convincing because none of them questions it.

When we are alone, Ben flicks a finger over my ear and the tip turns red. It stings but I don’t react. I am numb and still trying to process Asher’s words. I start the car as Ben tries to join me in the front, he falls back to his seat with a pained sigh and curses.

“Hey. What was that for?” I drive out of Asher’s school compound without answering him. “Babe.”

I catch his blue eyes blazing with annoyance in the rearview mirror. “Don’t call me babe.” His irritation turns to confusion, he puckers his lips and bats his long lashes. Damn him for being sexy. “You told Asher I was not your girlfriend.”

Thankfully we are at a traffic light so I watch his face for a reaction. He rotates his shoulders in a casual shrug and it stings more than hearing it from Asher. Tears rush to the surface of my eyes, my breath comes out shallow. I can’t cry. I won’t cry for a boy. Chanting the mantra works, I finally meet his gaze in the rearview mirror. He is still unbothered.

“Yeah.” The pieces of my heart clinging to the hope he would deny those words shatter. A jolt of pain flicks through me, I swipe the back of my hand against my eyes. “I hate labels.” But I don’t. I want this particular label. “It puts pressure on me.” He breaks eye contact and looks out the window to other cars waiting in the traffic. “I don’t like labels but I like you.”

Different emotions explode inside me. I can't identify any of them but the raw anger flowing through my veins. He hates labels because it puts pressure on him. Pressure to do things boyfriends are expected to do. I roll down the windows to let in a breath of fresh air. I don't need someone like him.

"Okay," I reply.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't care to ask if I am okay with labels too. Nothing. Selfish, arrogant prick. The rest of our ride to school is quiet, he doesn't make his usual lame jokes and I don't try to start a conversation. My eyes sting from holding it all in for so long, I park in the available slot and take a deep breath before opening my door.

The tears are harder to keep at bay, my heart slams against my chest when Maria's car slides into the space beside mine. She warned me. Ben gets out of the car first and opens my door. I don't find the move or his smirk attractive, all I want to do is slap some sense into him. Hurt him like he's hurting me.

He takes my bag like he has always done, I snatch it from him. "Babe," he whines. I ignore him and empty the contents of my bag on the front seat, then put them back slowly so he doesn't feel bad. He takes a step back for me to get out of the car, I grab my phone when he offers me his hand so it doesn't seem awkward or too obvious I am being a bitch. His lips press into a line as his eyes trail my body, I gulp audibly. "Where's my note?"

A smile appears on his face as he asks this, I push my bag over my shoulder. We formed a habit of giving each other notes every morning. It's silly. I write silly things I think he might like and he does the same. Sometimes I doodle a caricature of his face. He always slips mine into my back pocket after dropping me off in front of the class and I am expected to give his to him at the parking lot. He stretches his hand to me with that smug smile.

"I forgot," I lie. His face falls. And the illogical part of me wants to wipe off that sad look. The note is between my biology textbook but I don't want to be playing girlfriend roles with someone who hates the label. "Sorry." His lips quirk in a half-smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "I'll make up for it tomorrow."

His disappointment is so thick it forms a veil around us. Guilt gnaws my insides when he nestles his head in the crook of my neck. He presses a feather kiss to my shoulder and shivers travel down my feet. I will miss this. Asher too. My toes curl at this thought, I push him away gently before I start getting in my feelings. We can't continue this. I'll only get hurt.

"It's okay," he says with a smile. He runs his fingers through his hair, sending it in all directions. I want to sink my hand in his scalp and straighten the sexy mess he created but I opt for warming my hands in the pockets of my hoodie.

He hates labels. I must never forget that.

"I got you something." He retrieves a clip from his backpack. It's the same as the one I gave Asher with a little butterfly attached to the end. My lips twitch in a smile. That hair clip earned me a second punch. Only now, this one is brand new and shinier than the old one I have had since elementary school. Ben tucks my hair behind my hair, stares at the clip on his palm, then back at me. "Err... Do you like it?"

His voice is shaky, I should placate him since I am the reason he's nervous but I reply in a flat tone, "Yes."

The lights in his eyes dim when I don't say more. I don't know how to act unbothered about his confession. Maria's voice interrupts our stare-off, I fight a smile as the lyrics of 'One love' float into my ears. She's always singing. It doesn't matter where, her earpiece must be plugged in. Sometimes, she forgets how loud she is with those devices blocking her ears. I'm sure it's the case now but I don't check to find out. I can't even move with Ben's stare pinning me to this spot. He is glaring.

"I have to go," I whisper. Ben's mouth moves into a disappointed frown, I bite my lips to stop from kissing him and sidestep to the left to avoid his touch. He tries to touch me again but I grab his hand and give it a small squeeze. "Maria will walk me."

Flattening his hands on the hood of my car, he nods. He motions to the hair clip sticking out of my pocket. "Will you put it on? I'd like to see how it looks on you." He shrugs in that careless manner but his eyes are hopeful. I want to make him happy but he hates labels. "I was pretty excited to show you."

And I am excited to show off my first gift from him but I am not his girlfriend so why should I indulge him? Maria drags me from Ben before a reply leaves my lips, I release a shaky breath and let her lead me inside.