

BadBoy 52

Chapter 52

Happy Thanksgiving

“How do I look?” Ben asks for the umpteenth time.

We are standing in front of my house and he is convinced my parents hate him. They might give him a tough time but they will be nice, I think. I am not sure. It's my first time inviting a boy over. Ben smoothens the invisible wrinkles in his suit. If he wasn't so worried, I would have had time to admire him. He is sexier in a tux. I want to kiss him.

“Babe?”

“Like a coconut.” He breaks into a smile and I grab his shoulders. “Don't worry,” I tell him but he is stiff. “They will love you.” Like I love him. No. Not again with these thoughts. They have been haunting me. Do I love him? I don't know. I cast him one last reassuring glance and push the door open. “Ready?”

The parlour is empty. Soft music plays from the speakers under the TV and I roll my eyes. It's dinner not a wedding reception but trust Mum to go wild and crazy. Ben's gaze darts to every corner, he barely has time to take in his surroundings as I usher him to the dining. We can do that after. He is late. We stop at the table and Daddy rises to his feet.

Daddy is also in a suit and like Mum, I am in a floral gown. I am not trying to impress Ben but Mum might have done a little something to my face and hair. The lipstick was the first thing Ben noticed before his nerves got the best of him. Ben clears his throat and grabs the hand Daddy stretches to him. I pretend not to notice the discomfort written all over his face as Daddy grips his hand for a second too long.

Yeah, they will get along.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Ben says when Daddy finally decides it's time to let go of his poor hand.

“Happy Thanksgiving...”

Ben throws me a frantic look and it takes a lot of courage to not glare at Daddy. “Ben. Benjamin.”

Daddy is being tough. He knows Ben's name. First, last and middle names. They already grilled me before his arrival. Mum takes over the introductions, saving my boyfriend from my father.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Benjamin."

Still rooted to that spot, he fakes a smile and nods. I shift closer to him to grab his hand but Daddy's stare has me creating some distance between us.

"Ben," I correct. "He prefers Ben."

Tension thickens the air, Ben's lips stretch in a close-lipped smile when Mum spares him a glance to confirm my statement. Some of the awkwardness dissolves at her smile and she pulls out a chair for him. I take the seat beside him, linking our hands under the table. Daddy doesn't stop staring at Ben, he shoots him his infamous glare a few times and each time, Ben squeezes my hand.

"We prepared this..." Mum says as she opens one of the dishes. I tune her out once she starts talking of the food. It's from a recipe she found on YuuTube.

The table is covered with different trays. I doubt Ben will be able to eat anything with how uptight he looks. I place a hand on his knee and give him a small smile, he returns it but it disappears as soon as Daddy clears his throat. I am not sure why he invited Ben to the house if he intends to make him uneasy.

"How did you two meet?" Mum asks.

Really? I pass her a disapproving glance and she shrugs. They are making this whole dinner awkward like it's so surprising that I have a boyfriend. Okay, it's a bit surprising but they should act grown up about it.

"School," Ben replies. I relax a bit when he does and the knots in my joints slowly wear off. "But we never got talking until I joined the drama club."

Mum's eyes widen. Uh oh. I push my plate around after she dishes the food. I tell her almost everything but drama club skipped my mind. My mouth waters when she opens a bowl, I inhale the strong aroma.

“Drama club?” she says. Mischief colours her voice but Ben misses it. He nods. “Tell me about it.”

There is a shift in the atmosphere at her question. Ben relaxes in his seat as he dives into full details about the school play. Sweat breaks out on my temples, I bunch the hem of my gown and bite my lip. He is talking about us with so much fondness but Daddy is looking at him with anything but that.

“So yeah. I’m her Romeo,” he says this part with a smile, “and she’s my Juliet. She’s very good at it.”

An unusual calm falls over us, Ben takes my hand in silent reassurance as if he can sense my worries. He still has that smile on his lips as I wait for the questions to follow. I hope Mum doesn’t burst his bubble. She knows her onions when it comes to movies. I take the first bite of my turkey.

“What’s your favourite scene from the play?” Her voice is calm like she’s setting him up. Ben’s eyes light up with mirth as he replies. Heat crawls up my neck at his answer but he doesn’t notice. Mum pushes Daddy’s plate to his front. She serves his meal, then asks, “Is that the part where they kiss?”

I choke on my turkey, Ben passes me a glass of water and my eyes sting with tears. His hand moves to my lower back and his thumb caresses my knuckles until my coughing subsides. I flash him a smile when he passes me his handkerchief to wipe the top of my gown and he kisses my temple.

Daddy clears his throat to remind us we are not alone. Ben grows beetroot red and Mum hides a smile behind a table cloth. She is the only one enjoying this. I cut the turkey into tiny bits and chew slowly to avoid any question they might direct at me. Daddy redirects his gaze to my boyfriend and my breath hitches as Ben’s hand lowers to my knee. My gown rides up, giving him free access to my skin and he traces random shapes on my thigh.

“Four in ten girls will get pregnant at least once before they are twenty,” Daddy starts. His eyes are fixed on me as he picks a slice of turkey with his fork and my cheeks burn brighter than Ben’s. I will send all his patients a video of him dancing in his onesie. I will tell his co-workers he likes to sing in the shower. That he dislikes a staff member by the name Martha but only tolerates her because of her age and experience. Also, on game nights, he wears pink onesies so he can collect free beers. “That’s eight hundred thousand teen pregnancies a year.”

A thick, awkward silence ensues after he drops the unsolicited statistics and the air crackles with suspense. Mum stops eating and Ben's hand slips from my knee. Daddy doesn't notice or he doesn't care at this point because he takes another bite of his meal and nods in approval. Why is he like this?

Sweat breaks out on Ben's forehead even with the air filtering in through the tall windows. I try to hold his hand under the table but he tucks it between his legs. Daddy holds up his fork as if he remembers something he forgot to add, I start shaking my head. At this rate, Ben will never set foot here again.

"Teen pregnancy is quite high in the US."

Ben is a statue by my side. Rigid and unmoving. I am more or less the same. The food in my mouth loses its taste and I grip the edge of the table.

Through gritted teeth and a fake smile plastered on my lips, I manage to say, "Daddy."

He feigns innocence, his eyes wide with mischief. I grip the edge of the table. "What?"

The arguments I didn't seconds thinking of escapes me, my mind blanks and I blurt out the most stupid comeback, "You just made those numbers up." Ben shifts. His chair squeaks and all eyes turn to him. This is not going great at all. "They are not real."

"Look it up if you like but I'm the doctor here."

I stab my turkey. I'm definitely sending that video. I will send it to Martha first, then his assistant.

"A neurologist," I remind him.

"Still a doctor." We stare at each other until he sighs in defeat. "Fine. All I'm saying is, protect yourself."

Ben snaps out of the control of whatever is holding him and says, "We are not having sex."

For the first time, Daddy smiles genuinely at Ben. Pointing his fork at him, he says, "Keep it that way and we will get along just fine." Ben nods and the urge to laugh takes over me. Daddy is annoying. I get that teenagers my age are already having sex but he has to give me some credit. "Good boy."

We continue our meal while Daddy throws easy questions at Ben, mostly about football.

Minutes later, Ben's plate is empty and he pushes it aside. "Thank you for the meal, Mrs Mower."

Mum's hand flies to her chest, she pales like she encountered a ghost. "Oh, dear. Call me Theresa." Yep, I am named after Mum and Hayden's named after Daddy. Ben stiffens. "Mrs makes me feel so old."

None of us laughs like she expects and her smile falters. A lump collects in my throat when Ben offers Mum a tight smile. His hands are balled into fists on his laps, I try to pry them open but he doesn't budge. It's the name. He hates that name and he won't tell me why. Mum's gaze seeks mine on noting the change in his countenance, we can spot a fake smile from a mile radius.

"In Ben's house, it's forbidden to call parents by their names." Daddy raises a brow that almost disappears into his hairline. I'm not sure he likes Ben but if Mum likes him, it's easier to convince Daddy to like him too. "So he cannot call you that."

Her lips move into a contrite smile and my heart clenches in gratitude at my narrow escape. I am the worst liar at home. It's something I didn't have to do often so I never got good at it. "Mrs Mower is perfect."

"So was the meal," Ben says after his recovery. "It was delicious." I agree. Mum is the best cook I know but I bake better. Ben reaches for my hand, his palm is sweaty but I lace our fingers and he visibly deflates. "Thank you for having me."

"Thank you for coming. Maybe next time you can invite your mum and brother." Ben's nod is stiff but thankfully, no one notices. We finish the food and Ben and I are automatically assigned kitchen duties.

My parents leave us to clear the table and my heart thumps erratically like it's our first time together and alone. He is silent as he carries the plate to the kitchen, I follow behind him with the empty glasses.

“Your mum’s name is Theresa,” he whispers when we are in the kitchen. That faraway look blankets his features, his nails dig into his palm till they draw blood. I inch closer to him to cup his face but he doesn’t notice me. “Her name is Theresa too.”

“Hey.” I snap my fingers in his face, his eyes lower to me but they seem to see through me. “I’m here.”

A yelp escapes me at the sudden contact of our bodies. He hugs me so tight I have trouble breathing but a muffled sound from him quiets all my worries. His chest presses to my head and my hands lock around his waist until his breathing regulates.

“You are here,” he whispers over and over again. I nod against his chest. I’m here for him. He presses a soft kiss to my hair. “You are here, Gracie. You are here.”

When we break apart, his lips quirk in a half-smile and he shakes his head as soon as I open my mouth to question him. I sigh. Ben grows uncomfortable under my gaze and moves to the sink to start on the plates. If he won’t talk about it now, then when?

Leaving a small distance between us, we finish the dishes in silence. Sometimes, I catch him staring at me through the window hanging over the sink but he doesn’t say a word, only grins and my heart skips a beat. We step out through the backdoor after he bids my parents farewell and I take a big gulp of air.

Hand in hand, we walk to his bike and he tucks his helmet under his armpit. A smile tugs my lips but it doesn’t reach my eyes. I don’t want him to leave yet.

Ben leans on his bike. “Do you think your parents will be okay with you coming home late?”

I look back at our house. My smile turns real at the silhouettes moving in a circle in the living room. They must be dancing. I send Mum a text so she doesn’t worry about me and turn to Ben with a grin.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” I collect the helmet he stretches to me and hop in behind him. He doesn’t start the bike and my head lowers to his shoulder. “Where to?”

The wind ruffles my hair, flipping strands into my mouth and eyes. I push the helmet over my head and the bike vibrates under me. My arms loosen around his waist as I press a kiss to his neck.

“It’s a surprise,” he whispers.