

BadBoy 67

Chapter 67

Gracie has changed

BEN

I don't believe her. Either she likes Noah and she is lying to protect my feelings or she is tired of me. Last year, she asked a lot of questions about Noah. I didn't want to worry. I didn't think I had any reason to worry because I trusted her. I still do. Maybe I shouldn't. If she truly loves, she will want me to be happy.

Gracie has changed. I know it's not her period. It happened a day before Christmas. It shouldn't be here so soon already. I press a finger to my temple and set my painting brush down. This is not even my class.

Olivia drags her high stool closer to me. She nudges me with her elbow as her brush makes soft strokes on the canvas. I tuck a hand under my chin and try to guess a title or the inspiration behind the painting.

We have been doing that for half an hour since we escaped to this place but it's barely helping my mood. The last time I saw her was at the restaurant. Mum invited her and her mother so they weren't alone on new year. I don't want to be rude but I am bored out of my mind already and I want to talk to my Gracie.

I might have been too harsh. I was hoping to talk but as soon as I saw Noah, I forgot all about that.

"So... What do you think?" Olivia asks.

The sky on the canvas is the same as the one outside. Clear. But hers is raining. It's raining blood.

Looking away from the sky, I trail a finger across the edge of the canvas. "Why blood?"

"Dunno," she replies with a shrug. She knows. She likes sadistic or weird drawings. "You like?"

"It's pretty."

Olivia continues painting, adding darker shades of blue at the edge of the sketch to give it a realistic look. I stretch a hand to the painting and she slaps my forearm. Right. No touching because it ruins it.

The quiet is interrupted by her brush meeting the canvas. On occasion, she dips it into a cup of water on the stool by her side. The room is empty. No one cares about this place enough except her. She says painting is therapeutic. With everything going on in her life, I understand her intense need for a release

When I can't stand the silence, I push my chair so I'm leaning on the wall with an elbow on the window.

"Liv." A hand rakes my hair and some strands fall over my forehead. I pick a dry brush and run it over my arm. My chest grows heavier the longer I wait to ask her the question burning my mind. I don't want to hurt her feelings. She hums without looking away from her painting. "Did you say something to Gracie?"

"Gracie?" I nod. Her face scrunches, then her lips break into a smile. I sit up and fold my arms on my legs. Those two don't get along anymore and it's a shame. Though Olivia has refused to tell me why they hate each other, she can be nice. Most times. "You mean Tessa, right?" Yeah. "You call her Gracie?"

She places a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter but it sputters out. Her shoulders tremble with laughter, she snorts and holds her chest. I am not ashamed to have a special name for my girlfriend.

"No," she says when she's done laughing like a clown. Relationships can be great. "I didn't say anything to her." My eyes don't leave hers, she sets her brush down. "I'm serious. I haven't spoken to her since..."

The statement causes an influx of bad memories. I swipe my hands over my legs. She hasn't spoken to her since that day, the day we made our relationship official. Olivia's brows knit together, I finally nod.

She is not lying.

Seeing how rattled Gracie was after their encounter, I made her realise she will lose my friendship if she repeats it. I don't get why she would bully Gracie over her vitiligo. Asher has it too and she adores him.

I grip my knees firmly. "If I find out you did, I'll never speak to you again. Mark my words."

Olivia swats her hair out of her face. The black hair is a different colour from that at the dinner. I think dyeing her hair is another coping mechanism since it's one of the few things she has control over right now.

"I didn't do anything to her and it's not my fault you are dating someone as insecure as her."

The subtle jab flies over my head. That's if I can consider it a jab. Olivia's victorious smile causes me to shake my head. We are all insecure. I am. She is. Gracie too. I doubt there's anyone who isn't insecure about a physical feature of theirs or an attribute or talent. Some are just better at hiding it than others.

"Yeah. It's not your fault. It's also none of your business who I date." Olivia loses her smile and I almost feel bad. Sometimes, she can be selfish. Talking only about herself and her issues. I get it but I want to be selfish too, if only for a few seconds. I want Gracie. "I love Gracie. I love her with all her insecurities."

"Good for you," she snaps. Her brush touches the canvas but she doesn't resume painting.

She is pissed. I am annoyed. I pick my bag at my feet. "Good for me."

The bell for break rings before I can decide what to do next. Olivia screws the caps of the paints on and arranges them into the rectangular box. My hands curl at my sides, I don't assist her. It's best to keep my distance after a spat. She shrugs out of the stained apron and leaves the painting by the window to dry.

When we are in front of the door, Olivia taps me on the back. She stops in front of me, hands clutching the strap of her backpack so tight her knuckles turn white. Her eyes brim with tears and she looks away when I try to talk. Olivia doesn't cry in front of anyone. She thinks it's weak and it will ruin her makeup.

A heaviness settles in my chest. I frown, a bit annoyed at her and myself for making her sad. Life hasn't been fair to her in a while. And it won't for the next few months until her mother gets herself together.

"I don't want you to leave me behind," she whispers. Her head is down but I hear the misery in her voice loud and clear. It was probably how I sounded the day my dad had to move out of the house. My heart couldn't take it. I cried so hard that night. In the morning, he was gone and the screaming bouts ceased.

We stand in awkward silence for a long minute. Her head remains bowed and my heart sinks. I draw her in for a hug. "I won't." I know how it feels, I won't do the same to her. "I promise. Just be good to her."

She pulls back with a nod and a faint smile touches my lips. "I didn't say anything to her."

"It's okay." I take out my phone. There are no missed calls or texts from Gracie. "I have to go."

Without waiting for her response, I walk out. A few girls ogle me as I step into the cafeteria. I don't spare them a second glance. Their desperation can be smelled from half a mile and it's irritating. I shove my hand into my pocket. Even if I plaster the words—I belong to Gracie on my forehead, it won't stop them.

The cafeteria is loud. Everyone is in pairs. Talking and playing catch up. The only fun parts of the holiday were the moments with Asher and our first proper date. A smile touches my lips as the sweet memories play in my mind. Gracie smiled so much that day.

I pretend not to see the cheerleaders waving at me. I only sit with them because of Olivia. The squad waves me over to their—our table but I shake my head.

I came here for one person. Where is she?

A while later, I spot Gracie at her table by the far end of the cafeteria. Alone and staring at her food. She tries so hard to be invincible and I don't understand why. She is pretty. Smart. Kind. An awesome baker with a smart mouth and witty replies. With Maria gone, it's easier for her to hide away from everyone.

If only she could see herself through my eyes.

My heart clenches and my feet move in her direction but Noah beats me to it. He slides his tray to the table and sits beside her. They exchange words. Noah laughs but Gracie doesn't. I continue staring. Her head raises at the right moment and our eyes meet. I wink, her cheeks colour and she averts her gaze.

She is shy until it's time to demand a kiss from me. Walking over to them, I dump my bag on the table and drape my arm around her shoulder. My lips press to her cheek and she stiffens. So cute. I pinch her cheek and chuckle. Noah gives me a curt nod, a look passes between both of us and he leaves the table.

My hands weave into Gracie's hair, she tries to move but I plant another kiss to her neck, a corner of her lips, then her jaw. Her resolve melts, she leans into me and moans softly. When she figures out what I'm doing, she tears herself away from me. I steal a fry from her plate and she scowls. But it doesn't stop me from dipping it into the white plastic bowl of ketchup. All it does is make me hungrier so I take another.

We feign ignorance when she shifts the tray within my reach. "What did you say to him?" she asks.

"Nothing." She glares at me. I devour half the fries and push it back to her. It's her meal, not mine and she needs it. "Bro code, babe. He can't be here when I'm trying to have a private moment with my girl."

Gracie pries my hand hanging loosely from her shoulder, she inches to the window. "I'm not your girl."

"But you are Noah's girl?" I tease. My voice comes out flat, making it awkward. Gracie picks a fry. All thoughts about them being nothing gradually ebbs and the fears take over. "I'm talking to you, Gracie."

"I don't know what you expect me to say to that."

Annoyance fleets through me. Her response irritates me more than her silence. I stomp a foot on the bench, she glares and I sit properly. Yesterday's lie and her lack of remorse earlier today ring in my head.

"I'm your boyfriend but you were eating with Noah," I mutter. "You didn't even check on me."

Biting into her fry, she mutters, "Sure did." She takes a noisy sip of her drink. "You were with Olivia."