

Badboy 79

Chapter 79

I'm Juliet

Ben's mum is nice. Really nice and sweet. I want to be on Ben's side but my little interaction with her makes it hard to believe she and Josef are the bad guys in Ben's story. I steal another peek at Ben, he pushes his meal around and finally takes a bite. His mum stares at him for a full second, then smiles.

"How's football?" Maddie, his mum, asks Ben. Josef beams at her question, maybe he also likes football.

Football was Ben's first love. I think she's trying to lighten the mood but it is the wrong question. Ben stopped playing last session after his knee injury. He found fighting and has not turned back to football.

Ben's fork stops moving on his plate and a wave of anger rolls off him. "It's fine," I reply on his behalf. He clenches his fist on the table and I wrap my hand around his to calm him. "He's taking a break from it."

"Ah." Her mouth closes. I stare at my plate and count the seconds until the awkwardness passes. Sadly, it doesn't but I am thankful she doesn't ask why he is on a break. "Are you still involved in any sports?"

Her voice is hopeful and I feel so bad for her and Josef. They are trying. We steal glances at Ben who shoves more food into his mouth like no one is speaking to him. He scowls when my eyes narrow at him but he doesn't proffer a reply. If he wasn't going to behave himself, he shouldn't have invited me over.

"He still loves to dance," I quickly add to stifle the tension and she sends me a grateful smile.

Josef also smiles. I hide a smile when he grabs Maddie's hand in quiet solidarity. Ben notices their body contact and his fork clatters to his plate. Fear flashes in her eyes and Maddie slowly eases her hand from Josef's.

"Ben has always been a great dancer." Running her fingers through Asher's messy hair, she smiles down at him. He stares up at her in confusion but reciprocates her smile before diving into his meal. "Him and this little champion here love to dance." Ben snorts but we ignore him. "How did you and Ben meet?"

Is it a thing with parents to ask this question? I clear my throat. Ben's hand drops to my leg. No one notices as everyone is busy filling their mouths. He gives my knee a small squeeze and goes rigid.

"We go to the same school." She nods as if to tell me she's already aware of that. I have a feeling Asher volunteered that information to her. "We started talking in Drama club. He plays Romeo and I'm Juliet."

A familiar warmth spreads through me. It has been so long since Ben called me Juliet. Miss Jota notified us of the new drama schedule, we resume practise on Monday. I can't wait to be Benny's Juliet again.

"Drama club?" She looks to Ben, then me. A sad look creeps into her eyes and I frown. I was hoping my answer would lighten the mood but it does the opposite. "I didn't know Ben had interests in drama."

"Well, you don't know a lot of things about me," Ben snaps and jumps to his feet. "Stop acting like you care because my girlfriend is around." After folding his napkin, he murmurs, "Thank you for the food."

Breathe. I force myself to breathe.

A pin-drop silence falls over the table, Ben's eyes roam over everyone's faces as if daring them to speak back. Josef's cheeks burn a faint pink, his mum wipes her lips with the napkin and excuses herself to get some juice. The only problem with that is—the jar of juice is filled to the brim but no one says anything.

"Babe," Ben calls. He taps my shoulder, I swallow the heavy lump blocking my throat. "I'm going up, are you coming?" I already lost my appetite but I force more rice into my mouth. "Gracie, please come up."

Josef never once looks in our direction. Asher is unusually quiet until I notice he has those new ear buds plugged in. He probably didn't hear a word Ben said. Ben tries to take my hand under the table but I duck.

"I think I'll just stay here and finish my food."

He squats in front of me, his brows knot in confusion. I place a kiss on his lips to stop him from arguing with me. After a moment of silent passes, he stands and wraps me in a half hug. The contact does nothing to ease the stiffness in my joints but I hug him back because I know he needs the reassurance.

“Where’s Benny going?” Asher asks with a pout when his big brother is out of sight.

Josef chuckles. “Upstairs.”

He stares at his half-eaten plate of food, then at me, then Josef. “Can I go upstairs too?”

“Sure.”

I have a feeling Josef would have refused on another day but today is already awkward. Asher rushes up the stairs to join Ben, I get tired of forcing food down my throat and push my plate aside. Josef smiles.

“You can join them,” he volunteers.

I shake my head. We observe each other in silence. He looks nothing like them. Josef is bald with brown eyes and beards that are slightly greying. There’s a calmness around him that makes people want to stay in his presence. Everyone but Ben. Josef takes a few more bites and stops pretending this isn’t bizarre.

He stands. “I think I’ll go check on my wife.”

“Can I go instead?” I blurt out.

He eyes me. “Okay.” Stacking the plates onto the tray, he motions to a door. “That’s the kitchen.” I offer to help him arrange the plates but he refuses with a polite smile. “Tessa,” he calls out to me when I am about to leave. “I don’t know what Ben told you but please don’t be so hard on her. She’s a good mum.”

I kind of believe him. I am still thinking about what Josef said when I enter the kitchen. It’s twice the size of ours with a big island ten teenagers can stand on. Maddie is by the sink, loading neat plates into the dishwasher. I cough twice and she slowly turns to me. Her eyes are red like she has been crying.

“Hi.” I raise my hand in an awkward wave. I am not sure what I’m doing here. Her hand goes behind her to grip the counter. “Ben is not always like this,” I say. “We had a little fight yesterday. He’s still moody.”

“Oh.” She wipes her hand on a towel. “What about?” I frown. “We can talk about something else,” she adds with a fake laugh. She hops to the fridge and pulls out a carton of yoghurt. “Would you like some?”

No. “Yes.”

I sit by the island and she returns to my side with a plate of cookies and a glass of yoghurt. “Asher says you bake,” she tells me with a smile. I nod. Running a hand up her arm, she whispers, “How’s he like?”

“Sweet.” My lips automatically move into a smile and the memories of every wonderful thing Ben has done washes over me. “He’s my first boyfriend and the best one ever. I love him.” We both laugh. And I tell her about Ben’s injury, why he gave up football. She tears up a little. “He does other things now.”

“He doesn’t tell me anything,” she says. Her eyes glaze and she stares into space. I wrap my arms around the glass of yoghurt. “Everything changed after Josef. I thought I was doing them a favour.” She looks at me. Feeling uncomfortable under her state, I nibble on the cookies. It’s nice. “I’m happy Benny has you.”

“Me too.” I look out to the window while contemplating my next choice of words. “I was supposed to travel today,” I say after seconds of silence. Maddie fists the hem of her gown. “That’s why we fought.”

Maddie’s silence encourages me to tell her everything about the relocation and my choice of school and fear of breaking his heart by moving many cities away from him. She takes my hand when I start tearing up. I’m such a cry baby. Maybe it’s my period. It makes me so emotional. She offers me a paper napkin.

“I don’t know what to do,” I say at the end of my tirade. “I don’t want to leave him.”

“I also don’t want you to leave him,” she says with a laugh. Seconds later, her face goes serious. “As his mother, I want him to always be happy and you make my Benny happy.” She holds my hands with a firm gentleness. “But as an adult who has seen a bit of life, I want you to do what makes you happy, Tessa.”

Making Ben happy makes me happy. Going to NYU will make me happy. Moving to New York will make Mum happy and I love making Mum happy. There’s no way to go about this without hurting someone.

“If you choose to stay back here because of him, a few years down the line, you might end up resenting him for a lot of things beyond both of your control.” I am not sure I understand her point but I nod. She gives my hands another squeeze and smiles softly at me. “I trust you will make the right choice, Tessa.”