

Badboy 87

Chapter 87

Understand the pain

BEN

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Olivia's mum is not picking. I try again but her number goes straight to voicemail. As always, she's never there when her daughter needs her. I kick the air and let out a guttural groan. My fingers slip into my scalp and I tug on my hair. I should be on my way to the clinic Olivia was transferred to but I need to speak to Gracie first. Thinking of the last few minutes makes my head hurt. That was unlike her.

I stop pacing in front of the principal's office once the door opens. Gracie walks out with a smile that grows bigger when she sees me. Her knuckles are bruised and there's a cut on her lips but she's smiling.

Holding her in my arms, nose buried in her hair, I breathe her in. She scared me. "What did he say?"

"I'm suspended," she answers with a shrug.

For someone who is getting into trouble for the first time, she looks pleased with herself. "How long?"

"Two weeks."

I groan again. The play is this Friday and the Dean of SAS is coming. It might not mean so much to her but it means a lot to me. If I get in through the scholarship, I will be closer to Asher and I wouldn't have to worry so much about the expenses. In two years time, I'll have access to my funds. Life will be easier.

"Not bad," I hear a voice similar to mine say.

Gracie looks up. Her smile is no longer on her lips as she sizes me up. My lips twitch, she spins and starts towards the door without a word.

Usually, I would volunteer to carry her school bag but I don't. We are quiet as we head to her car and she slides inside. My head pokes in through the window. I have a lot to say but no idea how to start.

She ran off on me without a chance to solve the problem. "Why did you do it, Gracie?"

Gracie scoffs. "Do what?" Do what she did. It was unnecessary. She starts the car. "Olivia had it coming. I think I was too nice."

"You don't even know for sure that she posted that video." Granted, Olivia can be annoying but she has other issues going on in her life right now to worry about Gracie. "You should have waited for us to ask."

"Then what?" With a scowl, she gets out of the car and slams the door. Leaning on the car, she folds her arms on her chest. "What would have happened after? Another lame apology?" Her chest heaves as she tries to catch her breath. Her hair is all over her face but she doesn't care. "If you're going to keep defending her, then you should go be with her."

"I'm not defending her." I look down. It is not what she thinks. She already got a privy on the behind the scenes of Olivia's life, she should be more understanding. "It's just that I understand her. You should too."

Gracie whips her hair, sending some strands flying into my eyes. "I don't. I don't want to understand her." She bridges the gap between us. Her eyes are wide open and angry. I've never seen her this furious. That too, at me. "Me and Olivia are not friends. We can and we will never be friends. I refuse to understand her toxicity."

I open my mouth to say something but she cuts me off. Her hands go up in frustration.

"I cannot understand how you don't see it." I don't know what she sees but I see beyond the surface. Gripping my arms, she says, "She is using you, Benny. She is not this cute angel you think she is." Olivia is many things but an angel. Gracie's voice softens for a second. "She put that video out to humiliate me."

"It's not her." Her fingers dig into my skin so hard I jump back. "What's wrong with you?"

Her eyes go cold. The Gracie I love is gone, looking more like the Tessa that haunts me.

“You.” Her artificial nails poke my chest. “You are the problem.” Another poke. I step back again but it doesn’t deter her. Each word is punctuated by a poke. “You have made her a part of our relationship.”

It takes a few seconds for me to recover from that and my voice is just as cold when I finally come up with a reply. “You owe her an apology.” And she will be lucky if her parents don’t take this up legally. “There’s no evidence to show that Olivia uploaded the video. Was she the only one there that night?”

“What does it matter?”

“Apologise.” I cover the gap and use one hand to cup her face. “Please.” She starts shaking her head. “It doesn’t have to be now. She has been transferred to a clinic. I know she didn’t upload that video.”

Her hands wrap around my wrists. “No.” Her eyes don’t leave mine. “If anyone owes me an apology, it’s Olivia. And if you cared about me at all, you would be more worried about getting that video down.” I was working on that before I was called to the fight scene. This is all a big misunderstanding and Olivia seems to be in the middle of it. “But it always has to be about Olivia, right?”

Tears roll down her cheeks and my eyes burn from holding in my tears. Gracie is hurting my feelings and trying to make me look like the bad guy. The right thing would have been waiting to find out who posted the video. Olivia wasn’t alone that night. Zoey was there. Noah too. Why didn’t she get mad at Noah? Why didn’t she confront Zoey?

“It has always been about you,” I say. My thumb brushes her cheek. “I love you, Gracie. You know that.” My hand runs through my hair. I take a deep breath. She is making this difficult for both of us. “You are the first girl I have ever felt this comfortable with, babe. I am just trying to be a good friend to her.”

“At the expense of your girlfriend?” To those words, I can’t think up a reasonable reply. “I can’t do this anymore with you and her. You have to pick.”

No. I cannot do that.

“Why can’t I have both of you, Gracie?” My voice cracks. I need her to set aside her jealousy and see the bigger picture. I’ll never ask her to give up her friendship with any of her friends even if it discomforts me. I shoot her a silent plea with my eyes. “You always come first but don’t make me choose. Please.”

Gracie hugs herself. “You have to pick, Benny. Me or Olivia.”

But I don’t want to. I want to be that friend to Olivia because I never had anyone by my side when I was going through the same thing. No one gets it except they have walked the same shoes. And I have.

My hands return to Gracie’s shoulders, I give them a small squeeze. It’s not in my place to tell her the truth about Olivia’s fucked up family dynamics but I am desperate for her to understand me. Olivia is all bark and no bite. It is her armour. A stupid armour if you ask me but it works well for her in school.

“Olivia’s parents are getting a divorce.” She nods, she already knows this. I release a soft breath. I am betraying Olivia’s trust by telling her but I’ll rather be on Olivia’s bad side than my girlfriend’s. “Her dad was cheating on her mother with someone close to Liv’s age. So her mother decided to do the same.”

Gracie is calm now, listening to me. Well, I hope she is. I used to think Mum remarrying was the worst thing that ever happened. I only appreciated their peaceful divorce after hearing about Olivia’s parents.

“She’s cheating on someone about the same age as Olivia with only a few years difference.” Maybe five or less. The rest of the words I should say hang in my throat again. I am doing this so Gracie might judge her less harshly. “He lives in the house with her mum and Olivia.” I gulp hard. This is the hard part. “Sometimes he gets into these dark moods and he errr... He hits her and he harasses her.”

He touches her in places where she doesn’t want to be touched and her mum does nothing about it.

I shake my hands as if it will ease the anger. It’s one thing when parents who are supposed to protect you are the ones bringing in the danger to the house. Talk to people about it, they say, what will people do? Nobody gives a flying fuck until you wind up dead, then they troop to your grave with fake sympathies.

Minutes later and Gracie is still quiet. I shove my hands into her pockets and wait for her verdict. I am the only one who knows the true state of things in Olivia's house. To everyone, she is this bold, sexy cheerleader in control of life. Meanwhile, she is doing her best to survive while holding on to the hope she will be out of the house soon. It is why she chose a college many states away from this place.

"I'm sorry this is happening to Olivia but going through bad stuff doesn't give her the right to be mean to others. If we all treated everyone based on our life situations, none of us would be where we are now."

Logically, she makes a lot of sense but emotions and logic don't work so well. Not in this instance.

"That is her problem, not mine or yours." I think I misheard her. She wouldn't say something so cruel. A look at her face and I release another shaky breath. "I don't want you to be friends with her anymore."

I stop listening after that first statement. Olivia's problem, not hers. I guess it would be my problem alone if I shared my experience. I nod till my head is bobbing like a lizard with a bone stuck in its throat.

"It might not be your problem, Gracie but it's mine." My smile is too sad. I expected more from her. Maybe permission to see Olivia or a promise to apologise so we can find the real culprit. If she doesn't want me to be friends with Olivia, she should at least let me be there for her until this whole thing is over. "Because I understand the pain of watching your parents fall in love with someone else and forgetting you ever existed. It hurts."

As much as her words hurt my heart. It is making me remember. I don't want to remember. I breathe out a sigh. I can't see her through my tears but my voice is loud and clear. Life isn't black and white. There are too many grey areas and most times, we are stuck in them. She needs to step outside her bubble.

"I understand the pain of being the second, third or whatever available option," I murmur. "I understand the pain of always asking yourself where you went wrong. I understand the pain of needing someone to be there for me but having no one. The pain of standing in a crowd but feeling so alone and empty."

"You can never understand it." And I say this part without any hate. She wipes the tears rolling down her cheek. "You come from this perfect family. With perfect parents. So you can't understand it. But I do. So I will be there to support her even if you don't want me to. If you refuse to understand that, then I have no words for you." I press the heels of my hands to my forehead. "You hit her, Gracie."

Without remorse. No guilt. This is not my girlfriend.

“She already has enough bruises under all that makeup.” I already have enough scars beneath my smile. If this is the only way I can help, I will. For a while after, none of us says a thing. “I’m going to the clinic.”