

## Ugly Thoughts

### Chapter 11

Bella

"Mom, you don't need to cook anything for him. He's coming here to work with me on the project," I explained as she began mixing spices in her dish.

"He's coming over as a guest, and it's been a long time since you've had someone over. It's a milestone, Bella!" She chirped, dancing in the kitchen to the blasting music. "And what if you guys get hungry?" She asked.

I shook my head. "Then we'll order something. No need to cook so much for him."

"I'm cooking for my daughter and her friend. What's wrong with that?" She asked, grabbing my hand and twirling me around. She was becoming ecstatic for no reason.

"For the last time, Mom, he's not my friend. He's coming over just to work on the project with me, so please, I beg you, do not ask questions that would make the situation awkward."

She looked offended and gasped dramatically. "Arabella Rose Harrington, are you saying that I embarrass you?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes, a little."

My phone rang, and there was a notification from Ace: "I'm here."

"He's here. I'm going down to get him," I told Mom and headed to the elevator, making my way to the ground oor. I saw him walking near the reception, looking gorgeous even in casual attire. I waved at him and walked up to him.

Getting closer, I noticed how good he looked. Black pants, a white shirt, and a black jacket with white sneakers. The look was basic but so hot on him. He was also wearing a chain around his neck, and up close, I noticed he had a piercing on one ear. He didn't usually wear his piercing, but today it suited him.

I, on the other hand, was wearing comfy clothes: soft pajamas with a white crop top and a hoodie. He was dressed way too nicely, and I was way too casual.

He grabbed a big basket from the reception and handed me a basket lled with snacks and goodies.

"You didn't have to—"

"I wanted to. I was coming to your place, and it didn't seem right to come empty-handed," he said, and I couldn't help but stare at him for a moment.

So, this is what rich people's shenanigans are like?

"Thank you. Come with me," I said, leading him to the elevator, and he followed. We both entered, and I pressed the button for my oor.

Alone in the elevator, I stole a glance at him as he was busy on his phone. He smelled really nice, to the point where I wanted to get away from him, or I'd practically sniff him.

The elevator pinged, and before we entered my place, I warned him, "My mom was free today, so she's home."

He looked at me for a second and nodded. "Cool."

I nodded and opened the door, my cheeks ushing when I saw Mom right in front of us with a spatula in her hand, her face lightly dusted with our. She was wearing her 'World's Best Cook' apron, and I practically smacked my palm on my face inwardly.

"Hello, Mrs. Harrington. My name is Ace, Bella's project partner," he introduced himself.

Mom smiled, wiping her hands on her apron before extending one for him to shake. "Oh yes, Bella mentioned you. I hope you didn't have any diculty nding our home."

"No. I dropped Bella home yesterday, so it was no problem," he replied, and Mom shot me a look that screamed 'busted.'

God, she'd take this little thing to a whole new level. Since Mimi's passing away, Mom had adopted her personality. From helping me recover from my trauma, now she also wanted me to make friends, or worse, get into a relationship. The glint in her eyes told me she was awestruck by Ace, and it would denitely become a problem for me later.

"Come in, make yourself comfortable," she invited, and Ace headed to the living room.

"Mom, were you baking something?" I hinted, hoping she'd leave, and she made a silly face at me. "Ace and I will be in the living room working. When the food's ready, you tell me, and I'll come get it. Love you," I whispered before joining Ace in the living room.

"Do you want water, coffee, juice?" I offered, and he politely declined.

"Let me go get my laptop, and then we can start," I said, dashing to my room in a ash. There was no way in hell I wanted Mom to have any more interaction with Ace.

Returning with my laptop, I found Ace still busy on his phone. I handed him the laptop, and he put his phone away. We began working. I showed him the outline, and Ace mentioned he had read the whole novel.

He summarized the novel impressively, delving into its depth. We divided the workload, with Ace taking sixty percent of the project. He created the slides and presentation, and we decided to split the presentation into two parts: I would cover the rst part, and he would handle the second.

Next, we summarized the novel, focusing on the intense and often destructive relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, his childhood friend and love interest. We explored their tumultuous love affair, delving into the complexities of emotion, societal expectations, jealousy, and revenge. We discussed the themes of passion, revenge, social class, and the destructive power of love.

In just an hour, Ace and I were able to get on the same page. While I had read the novel a couple of times before, seeing Ace bring forth such impressive points on his rst read-through was a relief, assuring me of our potential for an A-grade.

"Bella, check this out?" He asked, and I sat right next to him. As he explained the issue with one slide, I found myself distracted by how good he smelled. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and then quickly snapped them open, horried at my action.

What on earth was I doing?

Correcting my mistake, I excused myself to the kitchen to get some water, attempting to calm myself down with each gulp.

Turning around, I nearly screamed when I found Mom right in front of me. "He is gorgeous, Bella," she whispered loudly, and my brows furrowed in annoyance.

"Stop! Not a word about that. He and I are nothing, nor will we ever be anything, Mom. So, please, let me do my project in peace, so he can leave."

Her expression turned annoyed. "Such a killjoy. Anyway, I made pasta, chicken rice, and for dessert, there's banana bread."

"You should have rested, Mom. It was your day off. Why are you tiring yourself?" I asked her.

"I'm not tired. I was in the mood to eat all these things. Ace was just an excuse. Now, clean up the mess and come to the dining table for lunch."

"Fine. You're great."

"I know," she icked her hair dramatically, and I couldn't help but smile.

Meanwhile, Ace was engrossed in some papers, typing eciently. If he worked at this speed, we'd be done by nightfall. Now, I understood why everyone wanted him as their project partner.

"Lunch is ready," I informed him, taking my seat opposite him.

"Okay. Can you come here and check this? If you approve, then we can proceed," he said, and I gulped hard. In class, I usually sat a little farther away from him. I reminded myself not to overdo little actions and make things awkward.

Approaching, I leaned in to grab the laptop, but he moved to sit right next to me, to the point where our thighs were touching, and I felt my heartbeat quicken. This proximity was affecting me, especially with him smelling so delicious.

"Bella?" He called out, and I looked at him.

"I'm checking. Just give me a minute," I said, trying to focus on the task at hand.

Suddenly, Mom rushed into the living room, clutching her ooe bag in one hand and her shoes in the other. She beckoned me over urgently, and I quickly joined her.

"What's going on?" I asked, noting the urgency in her movements.

"Bella, there's an emergency at the ooe, and I have to leave immediately. I'm worried about leaving you alone with him. Can you ask him to leave? I'd stay if it weren't for this emergency," she explained, her tone laced with concern.

I considered her request carefully. "Mom, that might come off as rude. Plus, we've just started making progress on our project. But don't worry, I'll be ne. I've taken self-defense classes, and you're on my emergency contact list. And we have security downstairs. I can handle it," I reassured her.

"Are you absolutely sure?" she pressed, her brow furrowing with worry.

"Yes, Mom. Please go take care of your work. I'll manage here," I insisted, giving her a reassuring smile.

"Thank you, sweetie. If anything feels off, ask him to leave. And if anything unexpected happens, call me or the reception immediately. Got it?" She instructed, her concern evident in her eyes.

"Got it," I armed, nodding rmly.

Mom quickly packed her lunch, apologizing profusely for leaving abruptly. "I'll be back before dinner. I hope so, and I'm really sorry once again," she said, hurriedly making her way out the door.

As I turned back toward the living room, I found Ace standing there.

"You startled me, Ace," I chuckled nervously, trying to dispel the tension.

"Where did your mom go?" he inquired, his curiosity piqued.

"She had an emergency at work," I explained as I settled back into my seat.

"Should I leave then?" he asked, uncertainly.

I shook my head. "No need. We're here to nish our project, right? Let's keep at it," I replied, hoping to maintain our momentum.

He nodded in agreement, and I gestured toward the kitchen. "Let's grab a bite before we continue," I got up and directed him to where he could wash his hands.

I served the dishes on the table, and we began to eat in silence. An awkward tension hung between us, palpable and almost painful. The only sounds were the clinking of utensils against plates.

Suddenly, a urry of notications lit up Ace's phone. He glanced at it, a hint of annoyance crossing his expression as he silenced the device.

"Is everything alright, Ace?" I asked, breaking the silence. "You've been on your phone quite a bit. If it's personal, you don't have to share."

Ace rubbed his temples, a sigh escaping his lips. "It's nothing. Ariella wants to meet me. She says she has something important to discuss about the charity event I'm managing on behalf of my parents at school. She's part of the organizing team."

"What kind of event is it?" I inquired, passing him the pasta.

"We invite kids from an orphanage and throw them a surprise birthday party. It's essentially an event to bring joy to their lives. We collect donations from students and the school also contributes nancially," he explained.

"When is this event taking place?" I probed further.

"In two weeks. There's a lot of preparation needed. I needed a team, so Ariella, her group, and some other students volunteered. They'll handle the stalls, decorations, and gifts. She's been bombarding me with calls and messages since yesterday," Ace replied.

"Did you tell her you're here... with me?" I asked, and he nodded.

Of course. The reason why she was going nuts.

He replied with a wry smile. "I explained I'm busy with the project and will manage the event once I'm free from here, but she's being her usual over-the-top self. Anyway, the food is really nice."

"Can I be part of the team?" I asked, watching as he wiped his mouth with a tissue.

"Well, the more help, the better," he agreed, switching off his phone.

"Then it's settled. Write my name on the team list too. I'd love to contribute to such a good cause," I said with a smile, and we nished our meal.

.

.

.

Ace and I worked diligently, and in a couple of hours, I could feel the awkwardness slipping away. He was okay, even nice. He was becoming more bearable with each passing moment. I focused on providing input and suggestions, while he took charge of creating the presentation.

By 6 pm, we were nally done, and I dropped my tired body onto the couch. Ace got up and retrieved bottles of water from the refrigerator, handing one to me.

"This is the fastest I've ever made a presentation," he remarked, raising his hand for a high-ve. It seemed a little childish at rst, but I reciprocated, giving him a high-ve.

"Do you think we'll get an A?" I asked him.

"I believe so," he replied, looking at me for a moment. I sensed there was something he wanted to ask me. "I should leave now. Thanks for lunch," he said, getting up from his seat.

Having company other than my mom and Mimi, I'd forgotten how smooth it could be. Ace was straightforward yet well-mannered.

As he made his way to the door, I followed him. "About the event, am I in? Or is there a procedure I need to go through?" I inquired.

Retrieving his phone from his back pocket and switching it on, he answered, "The decorations and gifting team has already been assembled. But you can assist me with other management tasks. How about being the co-manager? You're smart, and I think you can handle it well."

"No, no. Don't burden me with such a big responsibility. You barely know me. Just let me join the manual team. I'll be a helping hand," I insisted.

"We already have assistance, Bella. What I lack is someone who can manage things in my absence. How about this: after tomorrow, you come with me, and I'll walk you through the entire plan and process. If you understand it, then you can join us," he proposed, offering me a choice.

Why was he so kind and supportive? What was wrong with him? So far, I hadn't been able to nd a single aw in him, and his excessive niceness toward me was beginning to bother me.

I wasn't accustomed to people being so nice. It was my own fault. Subconsciously, I was letting him in, and that could be the worst mistake I could make.

"Earth to Bella?" Ace's voice snapped me back to reality.

"Sounds ne. I'll email you the le, so you have a copy too. It was nice working with you, Ace," I replied, noting the chill in my tone, his smile faltered slightly as he nodded and bid me goodbye before leaving.

Was he going to meet Ariella? She had been pestering him all day.

Closing the door behind him, I massaged my temple. I noticed that Ace had forgotten his jacket. Grabbing it, I hurried to catch up with him. However, as I opened the door, I collided with him and almost lost my balance. He caught me just in time, and I found myself in his arms.

Our eyes met, and my heart raced. I attempted to compose myself, still held in his grasp.

"You forgot your jacket," I murmured softly, and he released me. The spot where he had touched me still tingled with warmth.

"Yeah, thanks," he said, taking the jacket from me and turning to leave. As I started to retreat inside, I heard his voice again.

"Bella," he called out.

"Yes?" I turned back to him.

He shook his head, as if debating something. "Never mind. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Ace," I replied as he departed, closing the door behind him once more.

What was that? I needed to keep my distance from this guy, yet at the same time, I needed him to help me deal with Ariella. I reminded myself not to let him play tricks with my mind.