

## Ugly Beginnings

### Chapter 5

Bella

Mimi departed this world shortly after news of her health issue reached us. Mom and I were devastated. Not only had I lost my grandmother, but also my best friend - someone I could confide in without reservation. Mimi was the one who would lend an ear to my ramblings, my nonsensical thoughts, and still find joy in our conversations. She was my rock, and after her passing, I felt more alone than ever before.

Then, Mom dropped another bombshell on me. We were relocating back to the city. Mom explained that the memories of Mimi and Grandpa were too overwhelming, and she needed a fresh start. She had secured a new job with a substantial pay increase, and she had managed to enroll me in a prestigious private high school in the city, thanks to a scholarship I had earned for my academic achievements.

I didn't protest much because, like her, I had nothing tying me to our current location. School was merely a place of learning for me, devoid of any emotional attachment. I figured the same would hold true for the new school.

Within a couple of days, everything was packed, and we were on our way back to the city, to a new beginning.

"Do you like your new job, Mom?" I inquired, noticing her joyous demeanor as she drove us to our new home.

"I love it! And look at the perks we're getting, Bella. A new apartment, triple the salary from my previous job. Finally, something good is happening for us," she exclaimed, her enthusiasm infectious.

"I'm proud of you, Mom," I replied, returning her smile.

The past two years had been all about me, but now it was time for my mom to shine. She was the most resilient person I knew. After Dad, she never entertained the thought of dating anyone else, solely because of me and our financial situation. I witnessed her toil day and night to keep the bills paid.

Even the cost of my therapy sessions was a significant portion of Mom's earnings, yet she never hesitated to prioritize my well-being, despite our arguments.

In this world, she had only me, and I had only her. For the first time in years, I saw her genuinely happy and alive. I made a silent vow to myself to strive for betterment so she wouldn't have to worry about me.

"Mom, if you ever meet someone you like in the future, please don't hesitate to date them. Don't stop living because of me," I expressed thoughts that had been swirling in my mind for some time.

Her reaction was one of surprise. "Belle, you're my life, and I appreciate your support for the idea of me dating, but I find joy in caring for you. You're my child, my everything. Besides, now I have a career to focus on. I'm happy, Belle, and I want you to be happy and live your life to the fullest too," she reassured me, parking the car in front of an apartment building.

"Welcome to our new home," she announced with a clap of her hands, and I couldn't help but smile. I was astounded that we could afford such a lovely place.

"In two years, I'll officially own this apartment," Mom declared with determination.

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In just a few hours, we transformed the apartment into a cozy home. As Mom plopped down beside me on the couch, she let out a tired huff. "Can't cook. Too tired. Order food," she mumbled, her exhaustion evident in her voice.

I chuckled at her worn-out demeanor. "How about I cook dinner tonight?" I offered.

Mom's brows furrowed in concern. "I love you, baby, but I just got the kitchen set up, and I really don't want to burn it down so soon," she pleaded, her tone laced with a hint of desperation.

Pretending to be offended, I replied, "My ego is bruised, but alright... how does pizza sound?"

"Great. I'm heading to my room. I've emailed you the document for your new school. Check it out if you're curious," she said before disappearing into her room.

I reached for my phone and opened the document about Westwood High School. My eyes widened as I scanned through the annual fee structure.

This school was exorbitantly expensive, the epitome of luxury for a high school. Without my scholarship, attending here would have been an impossibility. I considered myself fortunate to have gained admission.

The prospect of receiving top-notch education reassured me. As I delved into the school's history, I learned that it was established just two years ago by the Donovan Group. Within a short span, it had garnered immense popularity, with many students leaving their previous schools to enroll here. Westwood High School promised a bright future, and that was all I needed to know.

Suddenly, a notification from the pizza place interrupted my thoughts. "Mom, the pizza's here!" I called out.

"Coming!" she replied, her voice echoing from the other room.

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Three days later, Mom was already dressed in smart pants and a suit for her new job, while I donned my school uniform: a red skirt paired with long socks and boots, a white shirt adorned with a tie, and a red blazer. Unlike local schools where I could have worn anything, this institution had strict uniform regulations.

Oddly enough, I found myself appreciating the uniform policy. It leveled the playing field, preventing judgment based on attire. If only they could include masks as part of the uniform, shielding students from superficial judgments based on appearance.

"Are you nervous?" Mom inquired as we sat in the car.

"Not really. Are you?" I replied.

"A little. I want to make a good impression," she confessed.

"You will, Mom. You have a charming personality. In no time, you'll make plenty of acquaintances," I assured her.

"You think so?" she asked hopefully.

"I believe so," I affirmed.

"Thank you," she said gratefully, and I nodded in response.

Mom dropped me off outside my new school. "Try to get along with the other students," she advised, to which I shot her a glare.

"I said try. No need to give me the death glare," she teased, planting a kiss on my cheek. "Good luck, baby. I'll be the one to pick you up after school today, and starting tomorrow, you'll take the school bus."

"Got it. Bye, Mom," I replied before exiting the car.

The school building was magnificent. It was hard to believe that this was a high school. As students wearing the same uniform as mine hurried past me, I made my way to the admission office to collect my schedule.

Uncertain of where my first class was located, I wandered the halls alone. I didn't engage with anyone, nor did I have any intention to. I resolved to stick to my old routine: mind my own business and avoid interaction.

I noticed a group of guys staring in my direction, their curious eyes and sly smiles triggering a familiar sense of discomfort. Sensing their intentions, I quickly turned away and approached a girl to ask for directions. She was in her junior year and proved to be surprisingly talkative for my taste. Despite my reservations, I mustered the courage to ask her for help, and she kindly showed me around.

Thanking her, I went my separate way as she headed off to her own classes. I was about to head to my first class when a familiar voice halted me in my tracks.

"Kevin's party was lit. I thought Ace would be there too. He usually attends Kevin's parties. I went there just for him," the voice rang out, its owner oblivious to my presence as she passed by with her group of friends.

It felt like a cruel joke. Ariella couldn't be here, could she? Was this a dream? A nightmare? I looked around, pinching my cheeks in disbelief, but nothing changed. The reality remained stark.

My tormentor, the girl I had fled from, was here. How was this possible? She belonged to a different school.

My hands trembled, and my head spun as memories flooded my mind. The bell ringing snapped me back to reality. I struggled to compose myself and headed to class. However, as soon as I entered, I was greeted by two familiar faces I never wanted to see again.

Marcus and Ariella.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't stand. For a moment, the world blurred around me, and all I could see were them, sitting together, laughing.

It wasn't a hallucination. It was real. They were here.

I could barely function. Tears welled up in my eyes as their mocking smiles haunted me. Ariella's words echoed in my ears. Why were they here? Why was fate playing such a cruel trick on me?

I ran, not knowing where I was heading. All I knew was that I couldn't stop. I ran until I collided with someone, tumbling to the ground.

Wiping my tears hastily, I struggled to control my breathing.

"Are you okay?" a voice asked, and I looked up to see a boy extending his hand to help me up. I refused his assistance and attempted to flee, but he caught my arm.

Confused, I stared at him, then at his grip on my arm. His expression furrowed in concern.

"You don't look okay," he observed.

"Leave me," I whispered, pulling away from him and darting off. Away from Marcus and Ariella.

Desperately searching for an exit, I found myself in a garden, the surroundings now resembling a labyrinth with no clear way out. There was a gazebo nearby, and further ahead, a small building resembling a library. Turning to retreat, I yelped in surprise as I stumbled upon the same boy I had collided with earlier.

"You seem new here. Are you lost?" he inquired, offering his hand once more. Tall and strikingly handsome, with his black hair, straight nose, and piercing green eyes, he cut a captivating figure.

I rose to my feet again, determined to regain my composure. There was no use in running aimlessly. Wiping my tear-streaked face with the back of my hand, I faced him.

"Yes, where is the exit, exactly?" I asked, my voice steady despite the turmoil raging within.