

## Ugly Meetings

### Chapter 6

Bella

The guy peered at me with a curious gaze. His eyes lingered on my face longer than I preferred, and I felt a sense of unease creep over me. Why did I even ask him for help in the rst place?

"Nevermind," I muttered, turning to leave.

"You're going in the wrong direction," he interjected.

My hand clenched, and I turned to face him. I must have looked like a mess, but I couldn't care less about impressing him.

"I can show you the exit. Come with me," he offered, hands casually tucked into his pants pockets. I followed him quietly, neither of us exchanging a word. Embarrassment consumed me, and all I wanted was to escape from there, from them, from everything.

We walked until I spotted the golden gates, and I bolted towards them as if my life depended on it. But to my dismay, the doors were locked, and the guards instructed me to stay back.

"I want to leave. Open the gates!" I demanded, desperation creeping into my voice. However, the head guard met my plea with a scowl.

"You can't leave without a pass from the principal," he stated rmlly.

My heart sank. "But I don't have a pass, and I need to go. It's an emergency. Please, open the gates!"

The guard, anked by two female guards, remained unmoved. "A pass is required for emergencies. Otherwise, your guardian can pick you up. You seem new here. Listen, kid, either get a pass or have your guardian fetch you. Otherwise, you're not leaving."

Frustration and helplessness welled up inside me. I didn't have a valid reason for a pass, nor could I lie without getting caught. Calling my mom was out of the question; it was her rst day, and I didn't want to ruin it for her.

What could I do?

Defeated, I turned back towards the school entrance and slumped onto a nearby bench, tears threatening to spill. All the progress I'd made in therapy felt wasted with just one glance from them.

As I wiped my tears, hands clenched with anger, I refused to succumb to despair. No, I wasn't the same Bella as before. I could do better than this.

"I think you need this," a voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked up to see the same boy from before, offering me tissues and a bottle of water. I accepted them silently, murmuring a small thank-you. He sat down beside me, and I took a deep breath, grateful for his silent presence.

"You're new here?" he ventured.

I nodded, avoiding his gaze. I felt uncomfortable sitting there, pouring my heart out to a stranger who had seen me at my lowest. I wished he would stop asking questions and just leave, but he seemed determined to stay and talk.

"Which grade?" he inquired, his gaze xed on me.

"12A," I replied with a frown, feeling uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

"Same as mine. It's class time. If you're feeling better now, I think we should go back to class," he suggested.

"I'm not going," I asserted, surprised by my own candidness, and puzzled why I was engaging in conversation with a guy whose name I didn't know.

"It's your rst day. Are you nervous?" he leaned in, showing concern.

"I'm not," I insisted.

"Do you want to leave? I heard you pleading with the guard to let you go. Why?" he probed further, and irritation bubbled within me.

"Don't you have a class to attend to?" I retorted rudely.

"I do, but you look like you need help," he observed, his expression neutral.

"I don't need your help," I snapped, and he sighed.

Getting up, he brushed imaginary dust off his clothes. "Fine. I'll be leaving then," he said, beginning to walk away, leaving me feeling unsettled.

I couldn't sit there idenitely. If I skipped classes, my mom would receive a call, and I couldn't afford to disturb her. Come on, Bella, you're not the naive girl from before.

"Hey, stop!" I called out suddenly, and he halted, turning back to look at me. My cheeks ushed as I approached him hastily.

In a low tone, I requested, "Take me with you. I'm not familiar with the building right now."

He seemed to consider it for a moment, then nodded. I followed him back into the building, my heart pounding in my chest. The more I tried to escape the past, the more it seemed to catch up with me.

He stopped in front of the classroom and motioned for me to go in. I hesitated, feeling nervous.

"You go rst," I urged him. With a shrug, he opened the door and entered.

"Mr. Ace, you're late," the professor reprimanded as he entered, and I closed my eyes, clenching my sts until my knuckles turned white.

"I was in a meeting with Miss Ana," Ace explained, glancing in my direction. All eyes turned to me, including Marcus and Ariella's.

The professor raised an eyebrow at me. "You're the transfer student?" he asked, and I nodded nervously.

"Why are you late?" he pressed, but before I could respond, Ace spoke up.

"She was with me," he intervened. The professor sighed in exasperation and waved us to our seats.

As we walked, I could feel the curious gazes of the other students on me. No one offered me a seat until Ace gestured to the empty seat beside him, a silent gesture of pity. At that moment, I accepted his offer and sat down.

I made eye contact with Ariella, whose expression soured as she looked at me. I couldn't bear to meet Marcus's gaze and kept my eyes lowered.

From here, everything would change again. Ariella had once acted as my friend, but now it seemed she was far from being friendly. I knew she would try to make my life hell.

But then I noticed something—her gaze wasn't xed on me. It was on the guy sitting beside me, Ace. Now that I recalled it, there was something about her interest in him. What about Marcus? Were they no longer together? She didn't seem to care much about me.

When I glanced at Marcus, I saw him staring at me. My body trembled as he smiled and waved, but it felt distant, like they didn't recognize me. Perhaps my new style and hair color, now brunette instead of blonde, had thrown them off. Was it possible they didn't recognize me?

"New student, please stand up and introduce yourself to the class," the teacher interrupted my chain of thoughts, startling me. "No need to come forward. Just introduce yourself, so we can resume the class."

I stood up nervously. "My name is Arabella Rose. It's nice to meet you all," I said before quickly sitting back down.

"Do you need water?" Ace asked, sensing my unease.

"Yeah," I replied, accepting his bottle and taking a gulp before handing it back with a mumbled, thank you.

After hearing my name, surely they would recognize me. I closed my eyes and made a decision. There was no need to fear them. I was not naive anymore, and I refused to let them control my life. If they tried to harm me again, I wouldn't stay silent. I had endured enough trauma because of them, and now that fate had brought us together once again, I refused to freak out.

My fear turned into anger as I remembered all the times Ariella had pretended to be my friend, only to belittle, manipulate, and gaslight me.

"You okay, right?" Ace's question annoyed me. Why did he care? I wanted to snap at him, but I held my tongue. "Yeah," I replied, attempting to focus on the lecture.

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. Ace left his seat, and my breath hitched as I saw Ariella and Marcus getting up.

I couldn't avoid them forever, but what surprised me was when Ariella left the class without even acknowledging me. Did she not recognize me? I laughed bitterly at the thought. How could she forget me, forget my name? My jaw clenched with anger.

I was not important enough for her to remember. Here I was, having gone through therapy, nightmares, seeking help to overcome trauma, yet she didn't even recognize me. My jaw and ngers clenched, fury coursing through me.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but they weren't tears of sadness; they were tears of fury and rage.

"Arabella, right?" I looked up, and my eyes widened at Marcus's smile.

"My name is Marcus. Nice to meet you." I couldn't nd the words to respond, just stared at him. With him stood a group of boys.

I glanced at his outstretched hand, then back at his face. Back then, I would've cherished this interaction, him coming to me, talking to me. But I reminded myself—he was good for nothing.

He sensed the awkwardness as I hesitated to shake his hand and just stared at him. "Hello, I'm talking to you," Marcus said, his hand still extended.

I met his gaze squarely and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, too," I said with a tight smile.

Ace entered the class again, and Ariella followed him. He took his seat beside me, Ariella standing close to him. "So, new girl. Where are you from?" she asked.

I wanted to slap her for her insolence but suppressed my anger. "Crestwood Academy," I uttered, ironically attracting the people I most wanted to avoid.

"I've never heard of it," Ariella remarked.

"Because it's not in the city," Ace answered for me, and Ariella's brows raised at his contribution. "Marcus, do you want to talk about something?" Ace asked him, and I felt Marcus's gaze on me.

"Not really."

"Coach was looking for you," Ace said coolly, and Marcus left the class with his group. I felt relieved to nally have some space.

"Do you guys know each other? I saw you both coming together. What was her role in the meeting? It's just her rst day," Ariella inquired.

I couldn't believe they really didn't recognize me. Ariella and I'd been together since we were three, and yet she didn't even know my real name? It was that hard to believe, knowing that she never showed interest in my life. For her, I was always Bella Harrington and the girl sitting in front of her was Arabella Rose Harrington.

I saw Ace staring at me, and I met his gaze. "Are you friends with her?" I asked, fueled by anger. I didn't trust anyone associated with Marcus and Ariella. "No," he answered simply, and I saw Ariella clench her jaw, humiliated.

I looked directly at Ariella. "Then I don't understand why I need to tell you anything. After all, we're not friends," I stated rmlly.

Her lips twitched in shock, but then she smiled and walked over to my side. "But it's not like we can't be friends in the future. Hi, my name is Ariella Blanchard. What was your name again? Isabella?"

My jaw clenched at her fake tone and smile. Everything about her was so fake. How had I ever believed her deceitful nature in the rst place? "Arabella Rose," I told her, focusing on my books.

Ariella got the hint, but I could feel her annoyance. She cleared her throat to get my attention again. "You can sit with me and my group. I'm sure we can nd a seat for you," she offered, but I smirked. I could tell she didn't want me to sit with Ace.

I looked at Ace, busy talking with some boys, good as his other friends. Then I turned back to Ariella, fixing her my fakest smile. "I'm good here. Thanks for the offer, though," I said, watching her jaw clench before she smiled brightly at me, attempting to cover her annoyance. She nodded and nally left.

If I didn't know what type of girl she was, I would have believed her smile.

I felt Ace's gaze on me once again, and I looked at him. He was indeed very handsome, no wonder he was Ariella's next target. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, I cut him off. "I'm ne," I stated rmlly.

He smiled a little and asked, "How did you know I was going to ask you this?"

"I don't know, lucky guess," I shrugged and looked forward to the next class.

Ariella went and sat with her group. I could see her and her friends watching me. Behind their pretty faces and fake smiles, they were already planning my downfall. But now that I had actually faced them, I wasn't scared anymore.

Linda was wrong. Dealing with my trauma wasn't about making friends, but confronting those who caused it. Life couldn't have given me a better chance than this. I wouldn't run away and let them do to me what they had done before.

It was time for me to strike back.