

## Ugly Move

### Chapter 7

Bella

I watched the clock tick. Tick, tock, and then it chimed eleven times, signaling it was eleven in the night. At that moment, I found myself obsessively stalking Marcus and Ariella. It had been two years since I deleted my \*\* and cut off all social media. I wanted no connections, but as soon as I returned home from school, I created a new account and dove back in.

I scoured Ariella and Marcus's profiles on every platform, trying to piece together their lives over the past two years. What I discovered hit me hard. While I was struggling, they were thriving. Ariella remained the center of attention, and just a year ago, both she and Marcus had enrolled in Westwood High. I sifted through Ariella's 133 posts and Marcus's 98, realizing nothing had changed.

Ariella remained as selfish as ever, and Marcus wasn't the knight in shining armor I once thought. He was no prince charming, no dream guy.

Now that I'd resolved not to run away, I decided to brace myself for what lay ahead. Sooner or later, they would discover I was Bella. And when they did, I'd become their next target. They wouldn't let me slip away easily, especially Ariella, who already saw me as a threat. I can't forget how she scrutinized me every time I spoke with Ace.

Somewhere deep inside, I yearned to see them both brought low. Just hours ago, I trembled at the thought of facing them, reliving past trauma. But when confronted, something shifted. A flame ignited within me—a desire for revenge. Ariella had made me doubt my worth, my very existence. But she was wrong. I refused to let her dictate my life. I belonged in this school, and this time, I wouldn't let history repeat itself.

"As for this presentation," Miss Brenda announced, "you'll need to work in pairs. Decide among yourselves, or I'll assign partners."

One by one, students picked their partners. I didn't know anyone in the class beyond Ace, who sat beside me scribbling in his notebook.

Back at my old school, I was accustomed to doing projects and presentations all on my own, always sharing credit with others. I was an overachiever, and this was no different. I didn't care who my partner would be; all I wanted was an A.

As the students mingled, I stayed silent, making no effort to engage. If someone ended up without a partner, it meant they were either antisocial or uninterested and I would end up with them—either way, a win for me.

So, I waited, observing as Ace was approached by numerous students, all vying to be his partner. His response was consistent: he'd think about it. It wasn't surprising to see Ariella leading the pack, but I noticed some of Marcus's friends, too.

"Hey, Arabella." Marcus's sudden appearance startled me, his face too close for comfort. I instinctively pulled back, bumping into Ace. Ace steadied me, gripping my arms, and I met his gaze, his face inches from mine. I quickly straightened up as Ace released me, my heart racing.

"I got startled, sorry," I told Ace and turned to face Marcus.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's ne," I mumbled.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Marcus asked in a tone much gentler than I remembered. As I scrutinized him, I noticed a newfound politeness, a gentleness that had been absent during our brief time as a couple.

"What's it about?" I inquired.

"About the presentation. Would you like to work together?"

I couldn't bear to hold his gaze for long. He wanted to partner with me? What had changed? Did he suddenly find me more attractive than Ariella? I used to believe he valued personality over appearance, but his actions shattered that illusion. He was just like the other guys, playing games with my emotions. I couldn't help but hate him for it. He made me doubt whether anyone could genuinely like me for who I was.

"I'll think about it," I replied, watching his smile falter. He clearly hadn't expected that. He nodded stiffly and walked away, his other friends bombarding him with questions.

Glancing at Ariella, I caught her eye. She offered a fake smile, and I returned it. Her gaze hardened as she glared at the girls approaching Ace for the presentation. It wasn't just a glare; it was a warning. To my surprise, some of the girls backed off.

As the others gave Ace some space, Ariella remained. I overheard her desperate pleas.

"Ace, I really need to ace this presentation, or I'll fail. You're the top student, and I need your help. Please don't say no. Think about it. If you help me out, I'll owe you a big time," she implored in a sugary tone, the same one she used to manipulate boys into doing her bidding.

I expected Ace to give in, but he surprised me. "I'll think about it," he said firmly.

"Ace, you don't understand how important this is—"

"I heard you, and I said I'll think about it. Maybe talk to some other students too," he interrupted, arms folded across his chest. I feigned interest in my work, but I couldn't help but eavesdrop on their conversation. Ariella must have sensed it because she left, clearly humiliated.

The satisfaction I felt seeing her fail to get her way was undeniable.

A thought crossed my mind. If she could take what I liked, why couldn't I do the same? After all, she was my best friend, yet she deliberately pursued the guy I liked.

Turning to Ace, I found myself admiring his features for a moment before snapping out of it. He caught me watching, and I felt a flush creeping up my cheeks. Unlike yesterday, he didn't ask if I was okay. Our interactions were limited to brief exchanges like "good morning" or when he briefed me on teachers and schedules. Yet, there was an unspoken understanding between us as we sat together in the fifth row of the second line, while Ariella's group sat in the third row of the first line, and Marcus's in the fourth row of the first line.

"What?" he asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Have you decided who you're going to work with on this presentation?" I asked him.

"No, still processing," he replied, glancing at his phone. Then, he looked back at me. "Have you?"

I shook my head. "Ariella said you're a top student. Did you also come here on a scholarship?" I inquired.

He set his phone aside, giving me his full attention. "I scored highest in the last exam, nothing fancy. And no, I'm not here on scholarship," he explained.

"Are you?" he inquired, prompting me to nod.

"I am."

His brows lifted in surprise. "You must be really smart, then."

I seized the opportunity to broach the main topic. "Would you like to partner up with me?"

I half-expected him to respond with "I'll think about it", but instead, he asked me. "Didn't Marcus approach you to be his partner? Did you tell him no?" he asked, showing he had been paying attention.

"I said I'll think about it. What's your answer?" I pressed.

His emerald eyes lingered on me before he replied, "Yes."

I turned to face him, raising my brows. "You sure? I won't let you back out then."

"I won't," he assured, his gaze unwavering.

"Cool. Let's exchange contact numbers," I suggested, and he handed me his phone. After adding my number, he called to confirm, and I received a missed call from him.

As I saved his number, he got up and went to Sherlyn, presumably to list our names for the presentation.

A smirk played on my lips as I noticed Ariella watching as Ace put his name next to mine on the list. I met her gaze and flashed a smile, relishing the unease I could sense from her.

Marcus approached me once again. "Still thinking?" he inquired.

"Nope," I replied firmly. Just then, Ace returned to his seat beside me, interrupting our conversation.

"We need to select the topic for the presentation as soon as possible. Are you willing to come to my place, or should I come to yours?" he proposed, casting a glance at Marcus.

"One moment," I turned back to Marcus. "Ace and I are partners for this presentation. Thanks for the offer though. I appreciate it." This time, Marcus couldn't muster a tight smile and simply nodded before leaving.

Turning back to Ace, I noticed Ariella lingering nearby. I spoke loud enough for her to hear. "How about we work in a café? I'm new to this area and would like to explore some places too."

"Sounds good. I know a café that'll be suitable. I'll send you the details and location," he agreed, and I gave him a thumbs up. A smile crept onto my lips as I observed Ariella's clenched jaw and flushed face as she left the class, her entourage trailing behind. I settled back, feeling a sense of satisfaction. I've set my sight on something she desires, and she won't let it slip away easily. She will inevitably come after me, and that's precisely what I want.