

## Ugly Schemes

### Chapter 8

#### Bella

I double-checked the location of the café before stepping inside. Ace had texted me to meet him sharp at 6 p.m. to discuss our project. As the bell chimed at my entrance, I spotted him sitting around the corner, engrossed in his MacBook and wearing glasses.

To needle Ariella, I teasingly asked him to be my partner, though inwardly, I preferred to work solo. Collaborating wasn't my forte, but having initiated this little game, I had to see it through.

I approached him with a casual "hi" to grab his attention. He looked up, removing his glasses, and glanced at his watch before remarking, "Right on time. I suppose you had no trouble finding the place."

"Yeah, not too bad. Any ideas on the topic?" I inquired, already prepared with a list.

He replaced his glasses and accepted my list, scanning it briefly before passing it back. "Here's what I came up with," he said, indicating his MacBook. As I glanced over his selections, he unexpectedly moved to the seat next to mine, so close that I had to adjust my chair. He noticed but remained silent.

"These are some novels I thought of. Which one catches your eye?" he asked, and I noticed historical literature on the list.

"Wuthering Heights seems fitting. It was on my list, along with Pride and Prejudice. Have you read it?" I asked, surprised when he shook his head.

My eyebrows raised. "Then which one have you read? We can work with that," I suggested, scrolling through the list.

"I don't read novels. These were just popular choices, so I marked them," he replied casually, leaning back in his seat.

As anticipated, I closed his MacBook, turning to him. "That's okay. I can handle the presentation for both of us, and I'll credit you," I offered, slinging my bag over my shoulder, ready to leave.

Before I could make my exit, Ace caught my wrist, halting my steps. "What?" I asked, noticing his furrowed brows and apparent annoyance.

"Why would you do all the work when my name is involved? Just because I haven't read the novel yet doesn't mean I can't contribute. Sit down; we need to discuss this," he said firmly, indicating to me to take my seat.

Feeling slightly chastised, I complied. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine. Let's focus on the presentation," he interjected, reopening his MacBook. "Wuthering Heights it is. Give me a day or two to read it, and in the meantime, we can plan our approach."

Ace proved himself serious about the project, brimming with ideas and dedication. I briefed him on the novel's details, and he listened attentively, his unwavering gaze making me slightly uncomfortable. I hoped he'd break eye contact, but he remained fixed on me.

Over snacks, we spent the next two hours discussing the project's intricacies. Working with him wasn't as challenging as I'd anticipated; in fact, it was surprisingly smooth sailing.

As our meeting concluded, Ace offered to cover the bill, already having paid it without my knowledge. "You didn't have to pay for me," I protested as we left the café.

"It's fine," he shrugged, but I couldn't shake off the feeling of obligation.

"No, it's not," I insisted, reaching for my wallet.

"Didn't sit well with you, huh? Want to settle the score?" he asked, hands in his pockets, eyes fixed on mine.

I hesitated, feeling the need to reciprocate the gesture, and eventually relented, "I guess so."

"Let's go to the bookstore, and you buy me the book," he suggested.

"You could get the book from the library," I replied.

"Are you finding excuses not to pay?" he teased, leaning in slightly with a small smile.

Glancing at the time, I realized it was already 8 p.m. with school looming the next day. I sighed audibly and quickly texted my mom to let her know where I was before turning back to Ace.

"Let's go," I said, starting to walk. Ace fell into step beside me, and we made our way in silence.

"Do you like it at Westwood?" Ace finally broke the silence.

"It's okay. It's only my second day, so I can't really say much," I replied.

"You haven't even seen the whole school properly yet."

"Haven't had the time," I replied.

As a car zoomed past, Ace instinctively grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. Once he released me, that strange feeling returned. I should've been home by now, working on the presentation, but instead, I found myself walking with a schoolmate I barely knew. My social battery was draining fast.

"If you want, I can show you around tomorrow," Ace offered.

"I'm fine, but thanks for the offer," I declined as we crossed the road.

"How much further?" I asked him.

"Just a few more blocks," he replied in his deep voice, and we continued in comfortable silence.

Arriving at the bookstore, we scanned the aisles for the book. I heard Ace's voice, "Bella, I found it." He plucked the book from the top shelf and headed to the checkout. His use of the nickname caught me off guard, but I strangely didn't mind. It felt like someone actually recognized a part of my past self.

"Great, let's pay for it and head out. It's getting late," I urged. We approached the cash register, and I settled the bill. Exiting the store, I was about to bid Ace farewell when I spotted Ariella and Marcus.

"Ace, you're here too. What a coincidence!" Ariella exclaimed, Marcus nodding beside her.

I couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't a coincidence at all.

"Arabella, nice to see you again," Marcus greeted, his presence tightening my jaw.

"You must be here for books too. Marcus and I were just browsing. Have you guys already selected a topic?" Ariella chirped, her eyes drifting to the bag in Ace's hand.

Before Ace could respond, I interjected, deliberately grabbing his arm. "We're still deciding," I announced, feeling Ace's gaze on me.

Ariella never saw me as competition before, always underestimating me. But things were different now.

"Well, since we're all here, why don't we discuss it together?" Ariella suggested, Marcus agreeing.

"I'm sorry, but Ace and I are in a hurry. We have things to do," I blurted out, going further off-script. What things? What rush? What was I even saying?

I couldn't let Ace be ensnared by her. I couldn't let her get what she wanted all the damn time.

"Bye, guys," I said, grabbing Ace's arm, and he followed me without any resistance as we walked away from them.

We walked in silence for a while, my hand still holding his forearm as I guided him away.

"Am I imagining things, or do you become nicer to me when people from school are around?" he asked, causing me to halt my steps.

"Why would you think that?" I asked, wondering if I was being too obvious or if he was just observant.

I immediately released my grip on his forearm as he casually shrugged. "Well, you don't talk much when I try to start a conversation, and your behavior is cold when we're alone, but in front of anyone from school, you act... different."

Crap! So, he noticed, and I had been too obvious. And it was only day two.

Trying to play it cool, I casually replied, "You're overthinking it. Honestly, I didn't want to disclose our selected topic to anyone until we submitted it to Miss Brenda. Can't trust anyone; what if they try to steal our idea?" I reasoned with him.

As we walked back to the café, Ace offered, "I have my car. I can drive you home."

My eyebrows shot up. He had a car?

"No, I'll manage," I declined, bidding him goodbye and walking away.

Heading to the bus stop, I realized I had been talking to Ace way too casually. I can't remember the last time I went to a café without Mom or Mimi by my side or had a conversation about school with a peer.

Heck, I hadn't had a real conversation with anyone besides Mom, Mimi, or Linda. Ace and I weren't friends, and we never would be. Not that he seemed interested in being my friend. I reminded myself not to let my guard down.

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The next day, as I walked past the corridor, voices drifted from the common room.

Curiosity piqued, I peeked inside and recognized the familiar voices of Ariella and some of her friends: Fiona, Nancy, and Meera.

"That girl is going too far," Nancy remarked.

"Relax, she's new here. Maybe that's why she's overstepping. Let me have a word with her, and she'll understand," Meera suggested, cracking her knuckles.

Were they talking about me?

Ariella turned towards them, and I quickly hid behind the door, eavesdropping. "Is she prettier than me?" Ariella demanded, her voice laced with tension. Her friends fell silent for a moment. "Tell me, Fiona, do you think she's prettier than me? If not, why is Ace giving her attention? You're a Christian; you don't lie. Give me an honest answer."

Fiona stumbled over her words. "She's pretty... but not more than you, Ari. And it's not a competition. I don't think Ace is interested in her. They're just project partners who will work together for a while and then go their separate ways."

"I disagree. I think she's after Ace. Have you not noticed how she's always hanging around him? And I don't understand why Ace is giving her attention. There's clearly some awkwardness between them; they don't seem to know each other from before. That girl, Arabella, is definitely interested in him. We need to put her in her place, Ari," Nancy insisted.

"Let's give her a warning first. Meera, you know what to do," Ariella said in a sinister tone, sending a chill down my spine. I knew I had to be on high alert.