

Ugly Fights

Chapter 9

Bella

My attention was locked onto Ariella and her crew, especially Meera, whom Ariella had apparently designated to give me a hard time. The vibe was ominous, and I had a sinking feeling I wasn't their first target.

Ace breezed into the classroom and took the seat next to mine, already surrounded by his posse. In the short time I'd known him, it was clear he was more than just good-looking. He was the basketball team's star player, coming from a wealthy background. Basically, he was the school's heartthrob. But my focus shifted back to Meera as I brainstormed ways to dodge the impending trouble.

"Bella," Ace called, pulling me back to reality.

"Arabella," I corrected automatically.

He nodded, lips grazing with a hint of a smile, "I pitched the topic, and Miss Brenda signed off on it. Also, I started reading the book last night—"

But his voice faded as I noticed Nancy and Meera shooting daggers in my direction, making sure Ariella caught their disapproval.

"Is your offer still on the table?" I interjected, halting Ace mid-sentence, and he looked at me with confusion.

"What offer?" he inquired.

"To show me around, the school building, I mean. Can you?" I pressed, feeling the weight of their glares.

After a moment, Ace replied, "Well, I've got basketball practice, but I can squeeze out some time. How about you come watch practice, and afterward, I'll give you the grand tour?"

I hesitated. Could I trust his kindness, or was he another Marcus in disguise? But it didn't matter. I wasn't about to get emotionally invested. He was just my ticket to rue Ariella's feathers, nothing more.

I don't trust him. I won't give Ace a chance to hurt me. I reminded myself silently.

"Works for me," I agreed aloud, met with Ace's smile and my guarded acceptance. With the bell signaling the start of class, we got busy with the day's agenda.

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Finally, a break arrived, and Meera wasted no time approaching me, trailed by Nancy. I felt a rush of relief as Ace motioned for us to leave.

Nancy and Meera watched our exit, halting in their tracks. Following Ace, we made our way to the basketball court, where, as expected, Ariella was present.

"Grab a spot on the bleachers; I'll be back after changing," Ace instructed, nudging me towards where Ariella and another girl were engrossed in conversation.

"Hurry back," I urged him, and he nodded before taking off.

My nerves tingled as Meera and Nancy closed in on me.

"Why are you here?" Nancy's tone was dripping with irritation.

"Why not?" I countered, feeling Nancy's disapproving glare.

"Did Ace invite you?" she prodded.

"Do I need an invitation? It's a public space, and I've got free time. Plus, what's with the attitude? Last I checked, we were cool," I shot back, earning a bewildered look from Nancy.

"Don't misunderstand her, Arabella. Usually, the basketball court is reserved for team members, their friends, significant others, and cheerleaders. As you don't fall into any of those categories, Nancy was merely curious," Meera interjected with a saccharine smile. It dawned on me then why she and Ariella were such close companions—they were cut from the same cloth.

"That still doesn't mean I can't be here. If you'll excuse me," I said, attempting to leave, but Meera's grip on my arm tightened, her imposing stature and strength making me feel utterly vulnerable.

She stood at 5'9, a tall black girl with a formidable physique, deliberately exerting her strength to intimidate me, and frankly, it worked. I was terrified.

"Miss Brenda wants to see you. She needs to talk about the project you submitted," Meera announced, her tone sharp. It seemed like this was the ploy they were using to lure me in.

"Ace already spoke to Miss Brenda, and it's been approved," I countered.

"Yet, she still asked for you," Nancy retorted with a hint of deance. Glancing back at the court, I spotted Ariella watching us with a smug grin.

With no escape or excuses, I found myself being led away by Nancy and Meera.

"You can ease up on the grip, Meera," I told her as they dragged me, knowing exactly where we were headed wasn't Miss Brenda's ope.

"Shut up," Meera snapped.

"Excuse me—"

"I said shut up," she cut me off, and the next moment, I was shoved into the girls' changing room. Nancy slammed the door shut, and Meera cracked her knuckles.

So, violence was their solution? They could have handled this better.

"Listen, Arabella, you're new here, so you might not know, but don't try to cross Ariella and us. You'll only dig your own grave." Nancy threatened, poking her finger into my chest, backing me against the wall.

"Are you both out of your minds? What kind of nonsense is this?" I questioned their outrageous behavior. Was this really happening? And did they treat other girls like that? Perhaps that was why so many girls avoided Ace, despite liking him.

Meera stepped in front of me, attempting to intimidate me. "Stay away from Ace. It's that simple," she stated, tapping her fingers against my cheek and forcefully turning my face away.

I slapped her fingers away. "I'll report both of you," I declared, but they just laughed.

"Go ahead. We'll just deny it. Consider this your first and last warning. Withdraw your name from the project, change your seat, and don't try to contact him. The farther you stay away from him, the better off you'll be. Understand?" Nancy demanded.

My jaw tightened. "Shove your warning where the sun doesn't shine," I retorted, and their eyes widened. Pushing them away, I attempted to ee, but Meera grabbed my hair and yanked me back.

"Look at this little rabbit, Meera. Seems like she needs a lesson," Nancy remarked.

Damn. These girls were unhinged. Utterly unhinged.

Meera made a move to slap me, but I shoved her once more and attempted to run, only for Nancy to grab hold of me, while Meera pinned me down.

Nancy pinched my face between her fingers. "We tried to warn you, new girl, but you just wouldn't listen."

"It can't be that both of you are interested in Ace," I challenged, and they both seemed taken aback. "Who's so desperate to be with him that you had to resort to this?"

"Shut up!" Meera yelled. "Just do as you're told. Stay away from him. I mean it, Arabella, or next time, it'll be ten times worse."

She stood up from where she and Nancy had pinned me down. "Come on, Meera, not even a slap?" She pouted.

"I think she got it," Meera smirked, while Nancy burst into laughter. Anger surged through me. I wanted nothing more than to slam their heads against the wall, but seeing them laughing at me left me seething.

They were about to leave when the doors swung open, and Fiona walked in. Her eyes widened in horror as she looked at me.

"You're late, and it's a good thing. You were no help, just a liability to the group. I really don't understand why Ariella keeps you around," Nancy spat, pushing Fiona before leaving the room, leaving just Fiona and me.

Fiona approached me, offering to help me up. I harshly shrugged off her grip. "I don't want sympathy from someone who's part of a bully group. Is this your plan? One hurts, and the other consoles?" I snapped, ready to storm off when her next words stopped me in my tracks.

"I don't want to be friends with them. I only talk to them because of Ariella. Ari is my best friend, and because of her, I put up with them too," Fiona confessed in a low tone.

My brows furrowed. "Your 'Ari' is a bully. They do her bidding."

"Ari is just protective of the people she cares about. She has feelings for Ace, Arabella. I know her; she didn't want to hurt you, I can assure you of that," Fiona pleaded.

"Then what was all this? Didn't she send them to scare me off?" I retorted angrily.

Fiona pushed her glasses up her nose, making excuses for her so-called best friend. "Nancy manipulated her. Ari isn't like that. She supported me when nobody else did, just because I didn't belong to an upper-class society. She fought for me, and now, because of her, everyone is friends with me, and I don't feel lonely anymore. She's just a little possessive of her friends."

Listening to Fiona, my brows knit together. I observed her attire—the orange hair, the poorly applied makeup, the questionable fashion choices. It was like looking at a reaction of myself from two years ago.

And then it hit me.

Fiona was my substitute for Ariella.

"Your hair is naturally blonde. Who suggested you dye it?" I inquired.

She smiled and touched her hair, it braided it into an orange hue. "Ari suggested I go red. She said it would suit me, like Fiona from Shrek, the human version. She dyed it for me, but the color turned out a bit off, giving me this orange shade instead of red. Still, she assured me it looked nice."

I needed to sit down. God! Was this how I sounded and acted when I was friends with Ariella? Completely blind to her manipulations, trusting her blindly?

I was a natural brunette, but Ari suggested I go blonde, saying it would complement my complexion and green eyes. She even offered to dye it for me, and somehow, the shade ended up light and off-tone, looking completely wrong on me. Yet, I trusted her words blindly, just like Fiona was doing now.

Ariella hadn't changed.

"I suggest you let it go, Arabella," Fiona patted my shoulder and left.

I needed a moment to process this. What was I doing two years ago? How could I have been so naive? Or was Ari truly the greatest manipulator I've ever met? How could someone stoop so low?

I was angry, furious, and itching to confront her and her minions. Who did she think she was?

Just then, the door swung open again, and Ace entered with a tense expression. His brows furrowed as he approached me.

"Where were you? I looked everywhere for you. And why is your phone off?"

They wanted me to leave Ace, so Ariella could get to him easily. It was obvious they considered me a big threat, and I was, and I would show them.

"Ace, do you think I can be a cheerleader?" I asked, standing up.

His brows furrowed in confusion. "What?"

"Tell me. Do you think I can make it onto the cheerleading team?" I persisted.

"Yeah, why not," he said, massaging his temples. "How did you end up here? I told you to wait for me on the court."

"Just a few classmates wanted to talk to me," I lied.

"Here? Who?" he inquired.

Man, he did ask a lot of questions.

"Just random people. Let's go now," I said, leaving the room, and he followed.

"How did you know I was here?" I questioned him.

"The boys' room is just around the corner," he explained, pointing. "When I came to the court, I didn't find you. At first, I thought you had left, so I called, and your phone was off. On the way, I found Fiona, and she told me you were here."

I nodded. "Aren't you late for practice?" I asked.

"I guess I'll skip today. Are you still up for the tour?" he asked.

I stopped and looked him straight in the eye. "Don't skip."

"It's ne, really. It's just a free practice period. Let me go change, and then I can show you around," he said, heading towards the locker room. But I grabbed his forearm, stopping him.

"No, don't skip. I want to watch," I told him, feeling my cheeks flush.

His eyes widened a little. "You want to watch me play?"

"No! I want to watch the team play, and I might get some information about joining the cheerleading team," I clarified, still feeling embarrassed.

He shrugged. "Fine, if you say so. Let's go," he said, placing his hand on my lower back and leading me to the seating area.

Ariella, Nancy, and Meera were part of the cheerleading team, laughing and practicing in front of the players. A smile crept onto my lips as I noticed their shocked expressions, particularly Ariella's death glare towards Meera and Nancy.

"Sit here," Ace instructed, and I took a seat two rows away from Fiona. "You know Sally from class, right?" he asked, and I nodded.

"She's in charge of selecting girls for the team. I'll tell her to contact you, so you can discuss it with her," Ace said, and I genuinely smiled at him for the first time. "That would be a great help, thank you," I said as he left.

I stared straight at Ariella, challenging her, letting her know that she could do her worst, but I wasn't backing down, especially after all she had done to me.