

# *Belle*

He opens the microwave door and carefully takes out a warm pizza, heat emanating from it in wisps of steam. The time on the microwave is glowing a dim green 8:32 and it is dark outside. Simon hums to himself absentmindedly as he wanders into the living room with the pizza in hand.

He is alone, and he is not sure if this is a good thing. Simon is not supposed to be alone. He plops down on the dark navy couch, sets the food on the coffee table in front of him, and grabs for the remote control. The big, shiny television screen hanging on the wall turns on, the television he and Belle had bought when the Red Sox made it to the World Series, when they finally won.

Simon checks his cell phone. It isn't like Belle to not call or check in yet by this time. She normally has a routine: leave work around 7:30, arrive home by 8. It is a Thursday night, and they are supposed to be watching one of their

favorites together, last year's summer blockbuster. That's one of the things Simon likes about Belle; unlike other girls in his past, she actually enjoys watching films where cars and semis explode left and right.

Simon relaxes on the couch for a little bit and tries to convince himself that Belle is probably just running late tonight. He is chewing through pizza and flipping through channels aimlessly when his phone finally rings. But the caller is not Belle. Instead, it is an unknown number, and he flips open his phone curiously. The voice on the other line sounds female, and her tone is brisk and professional.

"Is this Simon Evans?"

"Yeah," he answers automatically.

"Evening, sir. Your name and number was listed as the emergency contact for Ms. Isabelle Brown. I'm calling to inform you that Ms. Brown was admitted to Silver Heart Medical Center this evening."

Simon's heart skips a beat. The woman's words soar right over his head, and he struggles to compose himself, to

make himself understand those words correctly. He mutes the sound on the television, and tries to maintain an equally professional tone. “She’s...she’s at the hospital?” he asks, wanting to make sure.

“Yes, sir, she is currently—”

The hospital receptionist doesn’t get to finish her sentence, because Simon has hung up on her. He’s already digging through the drawers in the kitchen for his keys, his phone tucked away into his left pocket. Now Simon knows something has gone wrong. He finds his car keys, and dashes out the door.

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It is early morning, and Simon is lying in bed, back home in their apartment. His jeans and coat are scattered somewhere on the floor, and the bedroom door is slammed shut. He stares blankly at the ceiling, rubbing his arm in wide circular patterns, a nervous habit he picked up as a child.

Belle is safe, for now, at the hospital. Her doctors had advised that she stay overnight for observation. Belle tried to argue with Simon about this, repeating that all she wanted was to go home, but Simon remained adamant. He said it would do her no harm to stay at Silver Heart for one night.

The room is quiet, and he glances at the alarm clock beside him. It is now 4:19 in the morning. Cold and alone, Simon feels as if he just does not know how to deal with this. He is used to Belle being tenacious and fierce. Seeing her strength diminished as she lay there in the hospital, bruised and beaten, has frightened Simon. The curtains flutter as cold air breezes into the room through the open window. Through it, the silence of the city seems almost deafening.

Simon wonders where Belle's attacker is now. Is he still roaming the streets, searching for more victims to take advantage of? This sickens him, and he is horrified at the thought. Would there be more women like Belle, left

unconscious and beaten in deserted places as night comes to take over the city? Belle had been discovered in the parking garage by her office, found unconscious, beaten, and with her usually neat black skirt torn away in tatters on the ground. The police at the hospital had explained to him that Belle was the victim of a random sexual assault, and a rather brutal one at that. When Simon saw that her fists were heavily bruised and her nose was broken, he knew that Belle had fought back. There was no way she would go down without a fight.

And now Simon is extremely livid that this has happened. He is used to reading about rape and assault in the newspaper, but to have his girlfriend become a victim, another statistic, is too surreal to accept. Intense fury starts to flow throughout Simon's veins, and he lets a punch fly into the headboard of the bed. The wood cracks and breaks into two but it doesn't matter because the pain in his knuckles feels good. Simon imagines doing this again but to something – or rather, someone – else. He sighs and

turns over, burying his face into a pillow, very aware of the emptiness beside him, in the space where Belle should be.

A feeling of helplessness adds to the anger. Simon does not know what to do when Belle comes home tomorrow because he is not equipped to dealing with situations in which your girlfriend gets raped and attacked by a complete stranger while coming home from work. Simon thought he knew their relationship inside and out, thought that they could weather anything, but he has a feeling that this very well could change everything.

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Belle is lying on their couch, half-asleep, when Simon walks through the door after a Sunday afternoon jog. The television is on, the lights are dim, and there is a sort of somber air to the place. He saunters up to her, and after lightly brushing away her dark brown hair from her face, kisses her softly on the forehead. She stirs from her doze, looks up at Simon with her tired honey-colored eyes

and smiles faintly. It is the same difficult smile she has been using for the past month and a half, a reserved smile that makes Simon a little uneasy.

“How was your day?” she asks him, shifting herself into a more comfortable sitting position. Belle was still asleep when Simon had left earlier that morning to run errands and jog through the city. Her nose is still encased in a protective cast, and although the bruises on her neck have faded away, Simon can still see the dark purple marks in his head, a handprint left behind cruelly and harshly.

Simon shrugs nonchalantly, and sets his hooded sweatshirt on a chair in the kitchen. “It was fine,” he responds. Immediately he turns to the fridge, opening it and taking a whiff of the contents inside. He considers taking them out for dinner, not wanting to bother with cooking tonight. Belle gets up from her place on the couch and follows Simon into the kitchen, resting her head on his shoulder. “Hungry? I can make us something,” she offers.

He grins at her. “Are you sure?” he teases. “I’m not sure if I can stand another one of your ‘special surprises.’”

Belle lightly punches his arm, making a face. “Fine. You can starve for the night,” she says playfully.

They continue making jokes, and Simon feels better. They haven’t had this kind of camaraderie in a while, and he wonders if this is a positive sign, if this is improvement. For the past six weeks since Belle came home, things have been different. She is more irritable and agitated. Her silences also disturb Simons. The Belle he knew was a sociable person. But now she keeps to herself, and they don’t talk or laugh like they used to. Simon tries to keep things normal like her psychiatrist suggested, but Belle is definitely not the same. That helpless feeling inside of him has ballooned, and now Simon feels even more uncertain. He is sure that if sweeping Belle into his arms and reassuring her that no form of harm could ever come her way again would do the trick, he would do it a thousand times a day. But he fears making things even



more uncomfortable for her, because he isn't sure this is a problem he's supposed to solve, and so he does nothing but try to push their routines back to a normal cycle.

After taking a refreshing shower nearly an hour later, they are sharing a meal in the kitchen. Belle has somehow managed to cook up a tasty chicken fettuccine alfredo, and they talk about Belle's cooking experiments in the past, which weren't quite as appetizing. Things seem normal until Belle's facial expression changes and she looks sick. Alarmed, Simon grabs hold of her hand, asking, "What's wrong?"

She sits still for a few seconds, then bolts up from the table and runs into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. "Nothing!" she shouts from behind the door, and Simon is still sitting at the kitchen table, weary. This isn't the first time Belle has rushed to the bathroom like this. He thinks maybe she caught a bug or something, but he also knows there is something else he isn't ready to

think about yet. Simon is afraid to put it to words, scared of admitting it to himself.

Simon walks up to the bathroom door, pressing his ear against it. He hears retching sounds and is about to knock on the door when finally they stop. Belle opens the door and stares at him, her eyes hollow and weak. He looks at her blankly, but she simply shrugs and turns away.

He is still trying to shake off that awkward moment an hour later, when they are both sitting on the couch, their eyes on the basketball game playing on the screen. Simon isn't paying attention, and neither is she. "Is everything okay?" he asks.

Belle rises, a look of annoyance on her face. She thinks I'm accusing, Simon muses to himself. He begins to feel annoyed as well. "For the umpteenth time, Simon, I am perfectly fine. Now please, leave me alone." She storms into the bedroom and, though she does not shut the door, the ensuing silence creeps over Simon. For the first time in a long time, a tear sheds slowly down his cheek.

Simon turns the television off and sits there for a few moments. And Simon truly does feel helpless now. He used to be able to read her so well. She was easy to be with, friendly and charming. Simon is more familiar with the Belle who takes care of herself instead of the one who always looks so forlorn.

He lies down on the sofa, pushing these thousands of thoughts away from his mind. Several minutes later, he falls asleep. Alone, again.

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The café is warm and bustling with people in the late afternoon when Simon walks in, narrowly avoiding the gangs of little children running about by the door. He scans the area of the shop when he sees Belle, her back to him.

Simon hasn't seen Belle in a few weeks. A month earlier, she suggested that they take a break to figure out things. He didn't agree. He didn't know what things she was talking about in the first place, but Simon wanted to

respect her wishes as she temporarily moved out to live with a friend. Her call to him this morning surprised Simon, and though he agreed to meet with her for a cup of coffee, privately he did not feel he was up to it yet.

“Hey,” he greets her as he approaches her. Belle turns around and Simon is taken aback when he sees Belle’s face, red and puffy from crying. This is a sight he has not prepared for. He hesitates, embraces her quickly, and sits down in the chair across from her.

Belle pulls her hair back into a ponytail and looks into his eyes seriously. She does not know where to start, and Simon is confused.

“I had a miscarriage today,” she explains quietly, a few tears streaming down her face. “A spontaneous abortion, the doctor called it. He said it wasn’t surprising for a miscarriage to happen in the first trimester.” She pauses a little. “I didn’t know that.”

Simon’s expression is blank and empty. He is not quite sure if he’s shocked or if the news just hasn’t struck

him yet. It has been two and a half months since Belle's assault, and a horrible thought is creeping into his mind. "Oh, Simon, I'm so sorry."

Belle looks like she's on the verge of more tears, but he can see that she's holding them back. He folds his hands together, staring down at the wooden table. "Why are you sorry?" he asks seriously, the curiosity in him burning now.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Belle looks away from Simon. "When I realized I was pregnant and it wasn't yours, I was so scared. I didn't know what to do." Her voice trails away, and it is the first time she has mentioned anything remotely close to her rape since she came home.

He muses about this piece of information as Belle continues, struggling to maintain her composure. "I wanted to do an abortion. Because I knew it would just be a reminder of what...happened to me. Whatever it was, it made me feel dirty inside.

"But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I just couldn't."

She continues to cry, and the emotions are stirring inside of Simon now, and he wishes so desperately to pull a miracle out of the air to reassure Belle, to make everything go back to the way it was. But part of him is still angry at the situation, and he can't help but say, "I tried to be there for you. I wanted to." The past tense he uses surprises even him.

"But this wasn't a problem you could solve, Simon! I wanted to deal with it on my own! And you know what I felt today? Relieved, because I didn't have to anymore!" she almost shouts.

Simon does not have a reply to this. They do not say a word for several minutes, and Simon thinks about everything that has happened since that call from the hospital. He has tried to make things better, even though he didn't know how. All he has ever wanted to do was to make Belle happy again, to make her smile that bright sunny smile that made him fall in love with her in the first place. And even though right now, Belle is not smiling –

she looks downright depressed – Simon has a feeling that there is nothing more he can do. He is tired, and though he cannot forget those awkward conversations and lonely nights on the couch, he thinks it’s time they talk everything through. Thinking this, Simon stands up and tells her, “I’m going to need some coffee.”