

# Quiet Girl

By J.L. Frederick

She was always the quiet girl who sat at the back, rarely interacting with anyone unless absolutely necessary. She appeared not to pay attention during class, spending more time gazing at nothing in particular or doodling in her notebook. Her teachers were aware of this. I'm decently certain that's why they would call her out seemingly at random, asking her questions related to the course.

Thus addressed, the girl would bring her gaze to the teacher, looking distracted as she answered the question correctly, without faltering. Every time.

One teacher in particular, Mr. Brown, clearly resented this. He would call her out frequently during class, asking her questions and demanding to know what was more important than the material he was teaching. The girl—Bella, her name was—always talked around the last question, answering without truly giving an answer.

I admit I felt bad for her when Mr. Brown ripped Bella's notebook away from her. He shouted something about the importance of education and respecting teachers, and so on.

Personally, I thought he went a little overboard. When Bella was sent to the principal's office, however, she simply packed up her things and left the classroom without ceremony.

Despite her inattention during class time, whenever I saw Bella outside of the classroom, she was always busy. Reading the textbook, flipping through her binder or reading a book.

It was a bit perplexing, but even still, none of my business. Not until my second week of school, anyway.

I suppose you could say I felt a certain kinship with her: the new girl at school who is still learning how to fit in, and the girl who never fit in anyway.

That was why, on Monday of my second week at my new school, I approached her.

It was lunchtime, and Bella was sitting alone, as usual. "Alone" was a bit of a relative term, of course, as the cafeteria wasn't big enough for any table to truly be empty. Despite this, the chairs beside and around Bella were empty, leaving her in her own personal little bubble.

She was once again hard at work, bent over a notebook, her pencil darting across the page as she looked between her textbook and notebook. The sandwich in front lay forgotten, with one or two bites taken out of it.

"Hello," I said.

Bella continued writing for another moment, and then, evidently realizing I was talking to her, looked up. Surprised blue eyes met mine. I gave her an awkward smile.

Blinking slowly, she said, "Hi," as if still uncertain that she was the one being addressed.

I gestured to the chair across from her. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

Still appearing bewildered, Bella looked at me for a moment, and then at the chair. "No."

I frowned, wondering if she had meant "No, I don't mind," or "No, go away."

Bella moved her textbook, clearing a space on the table, thus answering my question. I smiled again, taking a seat. The girl across from me went back to writing in her notebook.

Seeing as Bella had no plans to make conversation, I took this as an opportunity to observe her while I removed my soup from my lunch kit.

The first thing that struck me was her eyes. Well, not her eyes, per se, but rather the hint of bags underneath them. I had never been this close to Bella, but now, as I sat across from her, I realized she looked...tired. Exhausted even, as if she had suffered many sleepless nights.

Her hair, on the other hand, was flawless. Glossy black bangs covered her forehead, while the rest of her hair fell about her shoulders in a near perfect sheet. She had obviously taken a straightener to it.

Taking a bite of my soup, I allowed the silence to stretch for another moment before saying, "You're Bella, right?" Her eyes lifted to my face. "I'm Tess." I offered my hand. After a brief hesitation, Bella took it, muttering what sounded like "Nice to meet you."

I smiled a little too brightly. "You too!"

Bella gave me an odd look and went back to her notes.

The silence that fell became awkward. Now, to be fair, I'm not the type of person who needs to fill every silence. If I know a person well, I am perfectly content to be in the same room with them, each of us doing our own thing as we nonetheless enjoyed each other's company.

I didn't know Bella yet, though, apart from what I learned seeing her around the school. And so, with a glance at her barely touched sandwich, I asked, "You're not hungry?"

Looking up at me once more, Bella frowned before she, too, looked at her sandwich. She reached for it.

"Sometimes I forget," she answered quietly, dropping her gaze. She took a bite, still writing with her free hand.

Sensing I wasn't going to get much out of her, I refrained from talking any more, for fear of becoming annoying.

Nonetheless, when I left to go to class, I said a cheerful, "See you later!" before leaving the cafeteria.

Bella's eyes pierced into my back.

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It was a few days before I talked to Bella again. A few of the students in my new school had made it their mission to make feel welcome in this new territory. I met a girl named Jessica, who always gave me a kind smile and offered to help me find my way around the school, should I find myself lost. Alongside Jessica, I met Nick, who was a bookish guy, despite his athletic appearance. It seemed as though he lived his life for the sole purpose of defying stereotypes, as

he was a basketball player who also took dance classes. On top of that, Nick enjoyed reading books like *The Great Gatsby* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

They did, indeed, show me around the school. Jessica hugged her textbook to her stomach as she pointed out which classroom belonged to which teacher, wagging her eyebrows as she playfully complained about the teachers she disliked.

Nick, on the other hand, took me to each of the gyms and exercise rooms, explaining the rules for using the various pieces of equipment. When he invited me to watch one of his basketball practices, I readily agreed. Jessica joined me for a time, before darting onto the field and challenging Nick to a one on one match. She won.

Seeing as Nick's practice took place after school, I found myself with no ride home. My parents had both offered to pick me up, but I declined. Rocksville was a small town, and the walk to my house was a mere half hour, if that.

Besides, it gave me ample time to stop by the library, I told them. I'd been meaning to get a membership there.

It was at the library that I talked to Bella again. After stopping by the front desk and getting my new library card from the nice woman named Sherry, I wandered through the shelves, searching for something to read. My high school did, of course, have its own library, but I found it rather limited in its selection. And so I wandered around, choosing two books to take home—one of which I intended to do a book report on for English class.

Coming out from between the shelves, I spotted three small tables situated at the back of the library, round in shape. The one closest to me was occupied by a middle-aged man typing rather vigorously at his laptop, while the table next to him remained empty. In the one in the corner, however, was Bella.

She sat her head bent low, glossy black hair creating a curtain around her face. Two textbooks lay opened before her, while Bella herself scribbled in her notebook almost frantically. Shoving the notebook away, Bella pulled another one closer to her, which was filled with math equations. Placing her finger on one of the textbooks, Bella read it for a moment, before writing something in her notebook and exchanging it for the first one.

Just thinking of how much work she must be doing was enough to give me a headache.

"Bella. Hi," I greeted, stepping forward. The man at his laptop shot me a brief, disgruntled look.

Bella's head snapped up; I found myself wondering if she had given herself whiplash. She gave me a blank stare, looking surprised by my presence.

"Hi," she said after a pause.

Taking a seat, I smiled at her, feeling a bit moronic. Call me an idiot, but I suddenly felt a bit guilty for not talking to Bella over the past few days. She was by herself at school, never talking to anyone or even trying to join in on people's conversations. In fact, now that I thought about it, the only time I could remember seeing her address anyone was when she stayed behind after class to talk with one of our teachers. Other than that, she was always alone.

“What are you up to?” I asked, for lack of anything better to say.

“Homework” was Bella’s short, clipped answer. She began to write again.

“Oh.” I fell silent for a moment, wondering if I should leave her be. Bella wasn’t exactly giving off the impression that she was thrilled by my presence.

But she always looked so lonely...

“Do you come here often?” I persisted.

Bella looked up at me. In fact, she stopped writing altogether, straightened her posture, and met my eyes.

Had I imagined it, or did she grimace? Was I bothering her that much?

Touching her fingers to her wrist, Bella frowned at me. I couldn’t help but note she was wearing a one sleeve top, her right arm covered by purple fabric.

“Every day after school,” she answered eventually, startling me into meeting her eyes once more. “Unless I’m working.”

Nodding in response, I said, “The library’s a pretty cool place. Your parents don’t mind?”

I must have said something wrong, because, at the mention of her parents, Bella tensed. Her fingers clenched the pencil in her hand to the point I worried it would break. She rotated her right wrist, lips pursed.

The moment passed, and Bella’s face became carefully blank.

“No. My dad doesn’t mind.” She didn’t elaborate any further and made no mention of her mother.

Once more, I felt guilty. Had she lost her mother somehow? I thought of my own parents and suppressed a horrified shudder. That type of pain was almost unimaginable.

At a loss, I fell silent for a moment. What was I supposed to say?

Nothing, I decided. I didn’t know Bella yet and didn’t know what kind of life she had. For all I knew, the absence of her mother might be a good thing.

I decided to change the subject. “You doing anything this weekend?”

Once again, Bella frowned at me. She did that an awful lot—more than was healthy, in my opinion.

“Working.”

“Oh.” I shifted in my seat, feeling awkward. “No rest for the wicked, and all that?”

Bella’s lips twitched, and for a moment, I could have sworn she came close to smiling.

“Suppose not.”

I felt absurdly pleased. At least now it didn’t seem like I was a mere nuisance in Bella’s eyes.

“No free time at all, huh?”

And there was the frown again. Hastily, I said, “I only ask because...” I paused, considering my next words, before continuing, “I was wondering if you’d like to hang out sometime.”

Now Bella looked bewildered. “With you?” she asked, as if she needed the clarification.

“Uh, yeah?” I said, a bit confused myself.

Bella relaxed against the back of her chair, eyeing me as if I was somehow interesting to her all of a sudden. Her eyes roved over my face, almost as if searching for a hint of a lie. She crossed her arms, staring at me without blinking.

I shifted uneasily.

“Why not?” Bella said finally.

I resisted the urge to sag in relief, instead pulling out my phone and opening up my contacts. Handing it over to Bella, I said, “Why don’t you give me your number, and I can text you sometime.”

Bella accepted my phone, holding it with care, as though she was afraid of damaging it. After a moment, she began to type, her thumbs flying over the screen with incredible speed. She handed it back.

Bella Pike, she had listed herself as. Interesting. I’d never learned her surname until now.

Without delay, I sent Bella a smiley face and looked up at her expectantly. A faint vibration could be heard from her side of the table. Bella pulled out her phone and, after glancing at it, showed me the very message I’d sent her.

“Good.” Glancing at my own phone, I began to stand. “I should get going now, but I’ll text you some time, okay?”

“If you want,” Bella replied noncommittally. Despite this, I was almost certain I heard a quiver of excitement in her voice.

“See you later, Bella,” I bid her, turning to leave.

“See you,” she called after me, her voice soft.

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Text her I did, and on Saturday we went to a movie. Bella looked surprised when I picked her up, as though she had expected me to back out of our plans. Nonetheless, she got in the car.

A half hour later, I clutched my stomach, tears escaping from my eyes as I laughed.

I could have sworn Bella watched me more than the movie. For some reason, she looked intrigued.

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We became friends over time. Not in so many words; Bella never called me her friend, as far as I knew. When it came to spending time with her, more often than not, I had to take the initiative. I’d alternate between sitting with Nick and Jessica during lunch break, and Bella, generally on a day to day basis.

Really, it would have been easier if the four of us sat together. The first time I suggested it, however, Bella glanced over my shoulder to the people in question and said, “I doubt they’d like me all that much. I’m not holding you hostage, though. Go sit with them if you want.” That said, she went back to taking notes, almost as if she expected me to leave then and there.

Well, then. I’d have to prove her wrong.

Reaching across the table, I lightly grasped Bella’s covered wrist in a comforting gesture, saying—

Bella jerked her hand back, letting out a quiet gasp as pain flashed in her eyes.

I froze. "Are you okay, Bella?" I asked.

Ducking her head so that her hair formed a curtain around her face, Bella murmured, "Fine." She looked at me through her black bangs.

"Fine," she said again.

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I learned plenty about Bella over the next couple of weeks. On two occasions, she came over to my house after school, and we spent the next couple hours "doing homework" together (read: watching TV and goofing around).

The first time Bella accompanied me home, a sudden thought occurred to me about halfway there. Casting a sidelong glance at the quiet girl beside me, I said, "Hey, don't you want to text your dad or something? Let him know where you are?"

"Hmm?" Bella hummed, as though I had pulled her out of a daydream. Bella was looking rather pretty with her dark hair in a ponytail, complemented by a shoulderless, long-sleeved blue shirt. Paired with the shirt were simple jeans and flip flops.

I couldn't help but wonder if she was too hot, but she was hardly the only person to dress like this when the sun was beating down upon our heads.

Seeming to process my question, Bella frowned for a moment before her brow smoothed out. "No, it's fine. He won't be too worried."

I found myself frowning as well. Bella's voice had been almost too casual when answering. I'd never met Bella's father before, and in truth, knew next to nothing about him. Bella was far from the most talkative person, content to let me carry the conversation. I didn't mind, for the most part, but talking about myself could get tiring, at times. It wasn't as though I lived an eventful life. Eventually, I would run out of things to talk about.

I didn't like to pry, either, which is why it took me some time to learn more about my new friend.

But even still...

"Did you two have a fight or something?"

Bella gave me a sharp look, blue eyes flaring as her pace slowed somewhat. "What makes you think that?"

I took a moment to answer, taken aback by the sudden defensive tension in Bella's frame.

"Well, it's just," I stuttered, "my parents would freak out if I showed up hours after school without telling them where I was. I thought your dad might get worried." I paused, glancing over at a tree to my left for lack of anything better to look at. "Sorry if I'm prying."

Bella was silent for a moment. I could feel her eyes piercing into my skull. When I looked at her again, she looked more relaxed, tension seeping out of her frame.

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped like that."

Bella said nothing more until we reached my house. I was fumbling with the lock in order to let us in (my older sister was a jerk, who couldn't be bothered to leave the door unlocked for me) when she spoke again.

"We did have a fight, but we'll get through it."

She didn't sound convinced.

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The second time Bella came to my house, it went a lot better. We had spread out our homework across my bedroom floor, for all the good it did us. In truth, although we did get a bit done, Bella and I spent more time showing each other videos on our phones and, on a few occasions, tossing pencils at each other. I even smacked Bella lightly over the head with my binder once, only to start when she jerked, a hand flying to her head as she grimaced.

"Oh, sorry," I apologized, feeling more than a little guilty. I hadn't meant to give her more than a playful tap, but appeared I'd gone overboard.

Bella gave me a reassuring smile. "It's fine. No big deal."

That made me feel a bit better.

Ten minutes later, we were sprawled on our stomachs, putting an honest effort into getting our homework done. I had an assignment due next week that I wanted to get a head start on, and Bella, from what I had seen, found homework satisfying. For some reason. I didn't pretend to understand.

When I looked up, however, it became apparent that Bella was not doing homework. She lay with her head bent over her notebook—the one I had deduced she used for purposes other than school. Her brow was furrowed, a look of intense concentration on her face. I glanced at the notebook curiously.

"What are you working on?" I ventured, not wanting to pry, but intrigued nonetheless.

Bella glanced up at me and winced a bit, pressing a hand to her forehead. Headache? I wondered. Perhaps I should offer her some Tylenol.

"Just some poems," Bella said haltingly, after giving me a considering look.

I perked up. "You write poetry?" I asked, leaning forward to see what she had been writing. "I didn't know that."

The spell was broken when Bella drew her notebook toward her. She frowned at me (she didn't do that as often these days. Not with me, anyway).

"Sorry," I said, sitting up. I plucked at a rip in the knee of my jeans. "I've always liked poetry. Can't write it, though."

Visibly relaxing, Bella gave me a sheepish smile, her eyes soft. "No, it's fine." She hesitated a moment before sitting up and offering the notebook for me. "Would you like to see?"

"Of course!" I agreed. "But only if you're comfortable with it."

Nodding firmly, Bella held the notebook out further. "I am."

"Although," she added, as I accepted the offering, "some of it's a bit embarrassing."

"I'm sure it's fine," I said, shooting her a reassuring smile.

It was a well-used notebook. There was evidence of water having been spilled on it once, smudging the doodles in the margins and a few words here and there. I read through the content hungrily, amazed at the detail Bella put into her poems. It was as though she was painting a picture in my mind, of dark forests and creatures in the night. They were all rather morbid, except for one.

This particular poem described a girl who was as compassionate as she was beautiful, taking the “wretched” narrator in her arms and shielding them from the outside world for a time. It spoke of gentle eyes and a soft voice, and brief snippets of safety the narrator felt with this girl.

When I saw my name in the last line, a blush warmed my cheeks. I glanced up at Bella shyly, who looked equally abashed.

“Told you it was embarrassing,” she muttered, staring down at her lap.

With a smile, I reached for one of her hands. “I don’t mind,” I assured her.

Clearly uncomfortable, Bella glanced away, her eyes shadowed. Looking back at me, she made a vague gesture at the notebook, encouraging me to keep reading.

I did so, albeit with some reluctance.

The next poem my eyes landed on disconcerted me, for reasons I was unsure of:

*Always it is there  
Malicious and vindictive  
As it drags her back*

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It would be months before I would be able to look at myself in the mirror without thinking *Oh, you stupid girl.*

My friendship with Bella had flourished to the point where it was not unusual to see us walking together in the hallways, or waiting by each other’s lockers. We were in near constant contact, texting each other throughout the day and studying together in the library. Sometimes, Bella would even write poems for me, which I would read and tape to my bedroom wall. The first time Bella saw this, she blushed, ducking her head as she shyly looked at me.

All in all, I could safely say that Bella Pike had become my best friend.

This did not, however, mean I didn’t wonder why Bella never wanted to hang out at her place. Nor did she ever suggest introducing me to her father.

The first time I dared to bring it up, Bella stared at me for a moment before muttering that her house was rather boring, and her father busy with work. I didn’t bring it up again.

Bella, I learned, was a good student. She never missed one class, despite ignoring the teachers. She didn’t skip, run off on the pretense of going to the ladies’ room, or find a safe place to smoke.

So it was understandable that, on a Friday, when Bella didn’t show up to our shared class, I was concerned. That was the first time I ever texted during class, which I knew for a fact that Mr. Brown hated.

*Hey, where are you?* I sent.



I received no reply.

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Bella wasn't at school on Monday.

I texted her to see how she was doing. She didn't reply.

She wasn't at school on Tuesday, either. Still, she didn't reply to my texts or calls.

During this time, my concern moved on to panic. When lunch break began on Wednesday, I attempted to call her again, pacing in front of my locker in agitation.

Like the last eight times, my call was directed to Bella's automatic voice message. I waited for the beep before saying, "Hey, I'm worried about you. Call me."

Dropping my phone with a sigh, I stared at it intently, willing the damn thing to *ring* already. I needed to know Bella was okay.

Because I knew without a doubt that if Bella wasn't answering me, something was wrong. She wasn't an inconsiderate person, always replying to my texts within a half hour at most, and cleaning up any mess, however small, she made at my house.

Never mind the time she met my parents. I would have thought she was attending a job interview if I hadn't known better.

*Call me*, I texted one last time, before heading off to the cafeteria.

Maybe I could stop by her house, I thought desperately. I knew she didn't want me there for whatever reason, but—

I stopped abruptly, feeling as though a bucket of ice water had been dumped over my head.

I didn't even know where Bella lived. She'd never told me.

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In retrospect, all the signs were quite obvious.

This was what I thought as the principal, Ms. Glass, stood in front of our class, solemnly telling us that Bella Pike had been hospitalized on Sunday evening.

She didn't go into much detail, but she didn't need to. The suspicion had already taken root in my mind.

Bella rarely, if ever, talked about her father. If she did, she would immediately be on defense, her body coiled with tension. If not defensive, Bella would speak of her father with caution, as though she would rather not discuss him at all.

We always hung out at my house, if not at the school or somewhere in town. Bella never offered to take me to her house, and the one time I suggested it, she shut me down.

All those times she had winced as though in pain, those times she had kept at least one of her arms covered. When she had come to school wearing makeup one day, something she did rarely...

Maybe I didn't notice because she didn't constantly cover both arms. She didn't wear long sleeve shirts on a day to day basis like people did in the movies to cover the bruises

Bella's father had been abusing her, and I had been completely ignorant.

*Oh, you stupid girl*, I thought later that day, as I caught my reflection in the mirror.

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It was another two days before I could convince anyone to let me see Bella. Never before had the “only family” rule seemed more stupid to me. Really, all I knew was Bella was in the hospital. I didn’t know which room, how serious it was, or how Bella herself was dealing with everything. It was unbearable.

“How are you doing?” Jessica asked, her arm resting on my shoulders as I sat with my back against the lockers, head in my hands. Nick sat on my other side, his hand gripping my knee.

“I’m not the one in the hospital,” I muttered, squeezing my eyes shut. “I’m such an idiot,” I added, for the umpteenth time.

“No, Tess,” Nick said earnestly, ducking his head so he could meet my eyes. “You’re not.”

I glared at him, staying silent. He didn’t get it. I spent more time with Bella than anyone. All the signs had been there. I should have seen it—should have *done something*.

“None of us saw it,” Jessica murmured. I knew she was trying to be comforting, but all it did was incense me.

“That’s because no one ever bothered to pay attention to her,” I snapped, standing up. Both my friends scrambled to their feet, following me as I sped through the hallway.

“Where are you going?” Jessica called, her voice desperate.

I didn’t even glance over my shoulder before replying.

“The hospital.”

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I stared sullenly at my phone as I scrolled through some pictures online. Vaguely, I was aware of well-done drawings passing my eyes, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. All I could think of was Bella.

Once again, I had tried to convince the nurses to allow me to see her, and once again, I’d been met with firm denial. Only family, they said. What kind of crap was that?

With a groan, I dropped my head into my hands, phone falling into my lap. My eyes squeezed shut as I tried to banish thoughts of Bella from my mind.

*Bella lying on the ground, her arm twisted unnaturally. Bella being dragged up by her hair and slammed into a wall. Bella in pain, terrified for her life—*

*Bella, Bella, Bella, Bella.*

I should have done something. I could have—

“Excuse me?” a voice said, breaking me out of my torrent of self-hate.

I lifted my head, blinking in bewilderment at the man standing before me. Saying nothing, I stared at him dumbly.

The man’s eyes were soft with grief as he said, “Do you happen to know Bella Pike?”

“Um,” I stuttered, thrown by the man’s presence. “She’s my friend. How did you—”

“I heard you asking about her a few times,” the man interrupted. He gestured to the seat next to me. “Mind if I sit?”

Still a bit confused, I nodded.

The man took sat in the seat beside me, letting out a weary sigh as he did so. Pressing a hand to his face, he was still for a moment. And then, lifting head, his brown eyes pierced into mine.

"I'm Aaron Pike," he said, offering his hand. "Mark's brother."

I was confused for all of five seconds as I shook the man's hand. Mark? Who was—Oh. *Oh*. Bella had never even told me her father's name. Why hadn't I taken that as the warning bell it was?

Now that I knew the man's connection to Bella, I could see the resemblance. He didn't have the same hair colour as Bella, but their features looked similar. Mr. Pike had the same chin as Bella, soft and not at all pointed. The despairing look in his eyes looked all too much like Bella when I'd caught her alone once, a distant look on her face that I hadn't been able to decipher at the time. It took all my willpower to not to look away from that pained gaze.

"Tess Johns," I said hastily, almost tangling my words together in my haste to get them out. "Is Bella—"

I'm not sure what I was going to ask. *Is Bella all right?* Well, that was a stupid question. *Is Bella dead?* God, I hoped not.

Either way, Mr. Pike interrupted me, saving me from having to decide.

"She's—" He paused, and seemed to consider his next words. "She's breathing on her own, so that's something, at least."

That wasn't at all reassuring. I stared at him, hoping he would tell me more. I *needed* to know.

"You are her friend, right?" Mr. Pike asked, looking at me tiredly. His eyes were red, I realized. As though he'd been crying recently.

"I honestly think she's my best friend," I assured him, trying not to sound impatient.

Mr. Pike searched my face, his gaze intent, as though he was searching for any signs of deception. And then, with a sigh, he looked away for a moment. "I'm not gonna lie, it's bad. Do you really—"

"I'd like to know whatever you're willing to tell me," I said firmly.

Mr. Pike was silent for so long that I feared he may decide not to tell me anything after all. And then, haltingly, he began.

It was worse than I could have imagined. Bella's leg had been broken, her opposite ankle sprained, and on top of that, her arm had been broken as well. She had various bruises, more than anyone could count, and had, according to the doctors, suffered more than a few blows to the head. Brain damage was a definite possibility.

According to Mr. Pike, the doctors had said Bella was severely beaten, and then possibly thrown down a flight of stairs.

She was also in a coma.

I felt like I was going to be sick.

When Mr. Pike stopped talking, falling into a sullen silence, I dared to ask one more question.

“Bella’s father.” Not that he deserved such a title. “What will happen to him?”

Mr. Pike’s face darkened. “Believe me, I’m going to do everything I can to make sure he never gets out of jail.”

“Good,” I said. I’d never met Bella’s father, but I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I hated him. I didn’t care about what type of tragic backstory he might have had. He’d hurt Bella. I would never forgive that.

Mr. Pike didn’t say anything for a minute, and I fell silent as well, not knowing what to say anymore. Well, that wasn’t true; I knew exactly what I wanted to say, but pressuring Mr. Pike to allow me to see Bella seemed more than a little inappropriate, no matter how much I wanted to.

Luckily, and to my surprise, he solved that dilemma for me. “Would you like to see her?”

I must have looked startled, because Mr. Pike smiled wryly and said, “I’ve seen you here before, asking about Bella. You’re obviously worried about her.”

I was already nodding before he had even finished talking. “I’d like to see her. I really would.”

Mr. Pike looked at me for another moment. And then, with a nod, he stood. “Alright, then. I’ll take you to her.”

For once, I wasn’t waylaid in my mission to see Bella, and for that, I was infinitely grateful. The nurses who had denied me the chance to see my friend were fended off by Mr. Pike. In fact, when we finally entered Bella’s room, he even went so far as to ask his family to give us a moment. There was an unhappy grumble from the other man in the room, but the woman standing in the far corner, staring stoically at Bella, simply nodded. Before exiting the room, she pressed her hand to Mr. Pike’s shoulder in a comforting gesture. I wondered if they married.

Turning to look at me, the woman’s face softened, if only somewhat. “I’m glad Bella has a friend. God knows she needs them.”

With that, both the man and woman left. As the door shut, I could hear them arguing fiercely. I caught the words “How could we not have seen this?” before they were cut off.

I barely had time to walk closer to Bella’s bed before Mr. Pike awkwardly announced, “I’ll, er, give you a few minutes.”

I nodded, never taking my eyes off Bella’s still form.

The door opened and closed.

I stepped closer.

“Oh, God, Bella,” I said, my voice coming out in an anguished moan.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw in that hospital bed. Both of Bella’s eyes had been blackened by bruises, making it look as though she had been in a fight. Her left arm was encased in a pure white cast, while her right leg also sported a cast. As I crept closer, I could see purple bruises adorning Bella’s collarbone and upper chest. Similar bruises littered the uncovered parts of her arms, and I felt bile rise in my throat as I realized they looked like hand marks.

Bella was wearing a hospital gown, so I couldn't see much more, but I had no doubt the bruises extended to most of her body.

There was a hand print on her right cheek, coloured a dark purple that sickened me.

Shakily, I sat down in a chair that had been left next to the bed. I hesitantly reached for Bella's uncovered hand, finding I was afraid to touch her. There was yet another handprint wrapped around her wrist.

"Bella..."

Mr. Pike had been right about one thing: Bella was breathing on her own, her chest rising and slowly. That was a small comfort.

*How did I not see this?* I thought, tears filling my eyes as I stroked Bella's hand.

"Time to wake up, Bella," I choked out, feeling a tear fall down my cheek.

She was always the quiet girl who sat at the back.

Now, I feared she would always be quiet.

"You need to wake up."

J.L. Frederick, 2019.

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