

Bella's Stork

Beige table cloths shimmered in the July heat as I took my usual seat near the northern side of Bella's Stork. The baby pink tea cups were flipped down, something I had never fully understood. To protect the inside from dirt, perhaps. Matching plates, so small I'm not quite sure they should be considered plates, sat on both sides of the table. Slowly pulling out the wicker chair, I took a seat. I caressed the small pink handle with my forefinger, flipped it rightside, and poured myself some of the tea that had been prepared before my arrival.

Usually Bella's was a quaint, quiet coffee shop. It's visitors consisted mostly of elder women who enjoyed their mornings with their noses stuffed in leather-bound books, or business women who liked the "feel" of the place. From time to time, the preppier of the college girls from across the street would appear in their Colby sweatshirts and birkenstocks, only to order half of a whole wheat bagel with veggie cream cheese.

For a Monday morning, the shop was a tad crowded. The college girls had a larger group in the opposite corner, possibly nursing hangovers from the weekend. The usual old ladies sat sparatically throughout the shop, and two business women sat together near the counter. There were a few unusual groups that I had never seen before; a pregnant woman with what seemed to be a close friend, and a newly married couple cradling a pink blanket and large gray baby seat. You knew they were newly married; they still smiled at each other with young faces, and the sparkle in the man's eyes as he looked upon his wife flashed a thought of Noah and Allie into my mind. The sight of the baby and the pregnant lady made my stomach churn. I drank my tea rather quickly, and my tongue seared as the hot liquid poured down my throat.

That's what you're in for, my conscious blurted out, *a pink blanket that won't hesitate to scream at you in the early morning hours.* I glared over at the blanket; small fingers creeping their way out as the infant awoke. Her mother cooed and kissed her smooth forehead, probably leaving a stain behind of her rouge lipstick. Mother slowly wiped her manicured thumb across the baby's forehead, and outstretched her arms to admire her.

My tea suddenly tasted bitter; the dryness of my mouth escaping all flavor of what was supposed to be settling my now inhabited stomach. The thought only made matters worse, for I could feel the cool sweat caressing my hairline. I wouldn't be like Mother; I didn't feel her joy for the new life I was providing. Embarrassment was more the word my heart was searching for.

The bitter memories of my 21st birthday flooded back to me as I turned my attention from Mother to the pregnant woman two tables over. Her hands sat on her shelf of a stomach, and the image of stretch marks and baby fat made me shudder. My attention was quickly pulled away from the woman as a screeching bell rang at the door. Two dirty cowboy boots crossed the threshold and the familiar dark hair atop a broad-shouldered Daniel searched around the restaurant for me. I hunkered into my seat, half wishing his dark eyes wouldn't find me. I was spotted, and a slight smile appeared on his lips as he turned in my direction.

His large hand grasped the back of the chair and he swung it out, spinning it slightly as to open the space allowing him to sit. A waitress noticed his entry, and her eyes lit as she caught a glimpse of his toned jaw. She stumbled over quickly with a pot of black coffee. Daniel hadn't had much time to adjust as the waitress came to a halt.

"Anything for you, sir?" Her eyes sparkled as she examined the way his rolled flannel sleeves revealed his muscular forearms.

"Uh, coffee would be nice." He fidgeted nervously.

The waitress poured his coffee and he turned his attention towards me. She caught the cold shoulder and sauntered off back to her spot behind the counter. Daniel cleared his throat.

"How are you?" His deep voice had a chime to it, which I knew, deep down, would soon change.

"I'm. . . alright." I mumbled. He caught the shakiness in my voice, and his eyebrows furrowed on his forehead. Metal clinked against glass as Daniel stirred sugar into his coffee.

"No one has heard from you for the past, what? Three weeks now? We're starting to get worried, especially Leia." I looked up shyly through my eye lashes. "You could at least call her, Belle; she's your best friend."

The dryness in my mouth hinted at the tightening in my throat before it occurred. The dark eyes I'd seen enter the cafe stared at me, waiting for some kind of response. The same eyes that had looked into mine the night of my 21st birthday, the same ones that hid behind thick lashes and tanned eyelids as he had leaned in to kiss me; they now searched for answers. My boney hand shakily moved from the cup and towards my stomach. Daniel's face slightly lost its color as he watched my movement.

"Daniel, I'm pregnant."

My words came out in a whisper; tears quietly slid down my face as the rest of the blush filtered out of Daniel's cheeks. Anger and embarrassment flushed over me as I recapped my plan in my head. This was supposed to be a calm and collected conversation, and I was crying like a fool. I looked at Daniel, whose face was now buried in his hands. His fingers caressed their way through his hair and he pushed his face deeper into his palms.

"I didn't know how to tell you." I mumbled just loud enough for the two of us. The tears rushed out faster; harder. I went for a napkin, but my wrist was grabbed out of the air.

He slowly brought my hand back down to the table, and reached for my face with the other. Soft fingers brushed away the racing tears, and I held my breath as to try and steady my breathing. His image became blurred through the mask of water escaping my eyes.

"You're telling me this now?" He rubbed the back of my hand with his fingers as he attempted to settle the conversation. "Why did you wait so long?"

Hiccups escaped my lips as I calmed my breathing. I took four long, deep breaths as Daniel patiently waited for words to find their way out of my mouth.

"I've only known for a few days. Morning sickness kicked in about six days ago. I bought the pregnancy test the day of, and when the pink lines appeared I wasn't thinking rationally." My lip trembled feverishly, but I continued. "I didn't know how to say anything, to anyone. No one knows that we slept together besides, well, us."

Daniel flinched, as if my words stung him. I guess that would be a reaction from any boyfriend of 3 years; a boyfriend who cheated on his significant other with one of her best friends. Although the memories were blurred by the amount of tequila and jello shots that had been in our systems the night of, we both remembered the incident quite clearly.

Black linen sheets and dim table lamps rushed back into my mind as I remembered the feel of his smooth skin against mine. The pounding bass from the speakers the level below us made the memory all the more surreal. I remembered feeling light-headed and as close to numb as a body could feel without being unable to move. Daniel cleared his throat and ripped me from the memory.

"So, what is your intention? I know you've invited Leia and Leslie to have lunch with us. Do you think telling them is a smart idea?" There was a slight tension to his last question, and I gently pushed back into my seat.

"Yes, there isn't a way out of this, and Leslie deserves to know. I know that telling her means risking my friendship with her and possibly ruining your relationship with her, but we need to be able to take care of this." He slightly narrowed his eyes.

"Then why don't you take care of *that*." He threw his hand in the direction of my stomach. My lip trembled as I failed to glare at him, and the cloudiness returned to my already throbbing eyes.

The dark eyes met mine again as I attempted to hold back the waterworks. The sight of more tears softened his gaze, and his frustration seemed overcome with worry. A deep sigh escaped his throat, and he ran his thick fingers through his mangled hair once again.

"I love Leslie, Belle. I love her so much. You know that you've always been one of my closest friends, and I don't understand what happened between us the night of your party. But I'm not ready for this. I'm not ready to be a dad." He realized he was leaning practically over the table, pushed back into his chair, and glanced around the restaurant.

My eyes wandered back over to the newlyweds, and the disgust that had filled me earlier was now overcome with jealousy. Mother had her Prince Charming; she had her lovely baby girl. From the outside, her life appeared to be a fairytale; everything was perfect. And here I was, contemplating ending the life that hadn't begun, with a man who didn't belong to me.

We sat in silence for what seemed like forever and I poured myself another cup of tea. No nerves were being calmed by the Twinings English Breakfast, but as soon as my stomach growled, I began to feel a bit uneasy. *You don't want this either, Belle*, my conscience whispered. *Keeping this baby won't bring you any good.*

"If you want the abortion, I'll get it." The words escaped my lips before I processed them. A look of complete shock overtook Daniel's tan face.

"You're serious?" I nodded, again before processing my action. "Will Leslie still need to know?"

Almost every instinct in my body was screaming at me, telling me to take back what I had just said, to put more thought into my actions, and to answer *Yes!* to Daniel's question. But another part of myself, the part still aching to be Mother and have her picture perfect life, overruled every sensible judgment in my mind. I sighed and looked at Daniel's hopeful face.

"No, Leslie doesn't need to know." Daniel's hands flew across the table and held my face in his palms. His soft lips pecked my forehead and flashed a grin at me.

"Leslie doesn't need to know what?"

My heart dropped through the floor and tore through the foundation of Bella's Stork. Both Daniel and I recognized the high pitched voice, and didn't need to glance up at the tall platinum blonde sauntering towards our table to know that the past three phrases we'd spoken to each other were not going to mean a thing in a matter of seconds.

"What the fuck is this?!" Leslie's shocking blue eyes shot down at Daniel's hands, which had grabbed ahold of mine moments before she entered through the door. Daniel ripped his hands away and stood.

"This isn't what it looks like." he cried.

"Yeah? Then tell me, Daniel, what *is* going on?"

The beating of my heart pounded in my ears and drowned out their conversation. I pushed my chair back slightly, but felt the throbbing travel from my ears to my forehead as I attempted to stand. Leia, who had trailed Leslie into the diner, raced over to me, worry plastered over her freckled face. The pounding continued, and Leia's words were muffled.

"Belle, what's going on? You're pale, are you alright?" My head felt heavy as Leia

squatted next to me. She unwrapped her scarf from her neck and dabbed my forehead with it, erasing the beads of sweat that I hadn't noticed developing. Daniel pulled out of the quiet yet heated conversation with Leslie when he saw Leia leaning close to me.

"You need to back up Leia." he quietly exclaimed. He shouldered Leslie out of the way and protectively lifted me out of the chair. His eyes examined my face as I felt my stomach turn over. I was leaning against his broad chest as he turned his back to the corner. I faced out to the diner, where all of the women and couples surrounding us were completely oblivious to what was happening less than 5 yards away from them.

"What's wrong with her Daniel? Why does she look so sick?" Leia hammered the questions at him as she tried getting closer to me a second time.

"I'm pregnant."

The words fell out of my mouth for a second time. Sitting on my lips with the weight of bricks, I could not hold them any longer. Shock appeared on all three faces as I wearily leaned back onto Daniel's chest. Leslie looked at Leia, then to me, and finally to Daniel's grip on my arms. Her eyes lit as she pieced together what had been conversed moments before she arrived, and her thin hand flew through the air. My cheek took the blow and the imprint her claw had made on my face began to sting.

"What is wrong with you?!" Leia growled, grabbing Leslie's arm and pulling her away from me.

Daniel set me back down in the chair and walked over to Leia, taking over with Leslie. The couple managed their way out of the diner, but not before Leslie shot dark glares in my direction. I shuttered as her gentle face grimaced, and tears began to form in her bright eyes. Leia took the seat across from me; her expression giving away her shock and disappointment.

"I don't know what to say about all of this." she put her face in her palms, just as Daniel had moments before. "You're, *pregnant?* I thought we were supposed to tell each other everything, no matter how horrible the situation."

A horrible feeling rushed over me as I realized how much this had hurt Leia. I'd been so overwhelmed with what Leslie and Daniel would think, that I figured she would instantly take my side on the situation. I explained exactly this to her, and apologized. I reached my hands out over the table, and she sighed. Her warm fingers wrapped around mine and she warily smiled.

"I don't know what you thought Bella's would do to help the situation, but you have a lot of figuring out to do." I nodded. "Let's get you out of here before you pass out; you look horrid."

Leia stood and helped lift me out of the chair; the throbbing in my head subsiding minimally. We walked over to the door and I looked back at the north corner, taking in the peacefulness that had not so swiftly been overtaken. I watched the young waitress that had served Daniel coffee through the window as we walked outside. She quickly rushed to the table to replace the pink cups with clean ones. And as they had appeared earlier, the cups were flipped upside down, and the chairs pushed back into their places. A hot pot of tea was placed in the middle of the table, and a pang of hurt rushed through me.

There sat my regular table; the same cups, the same chairs, the same small plates. The same seat that I had sat in every morning for the past two years, in the same diner that had been in this town for the past 25. I quickly realized that I was the only aspect of that diner that was going to change, and I'd give anything to change that back.