

This is a Jixemetri CWP Special Anniversary #4 submission. The title comes from the Rembrandts' song of the same name. Many, many thanks to the wonderful Susan, who cheerfully edited for me when I sent her THREE stories at the same time! You rock, my friend!

I'll Be There for You

by Dana

Honey Wheeler giggled at the look on her friend Trixie's face as the senior class sang the Sleepyside High alma mater. It was the Friday morning before Sleepyside High's graduation, which was to be held the following Wednesday night, and the senior class was finishing up its graduation rehearsal. At Principal Stratton's request, the students were singing Sleepyside High's slow alma mater to end the rehearsal, instead of the rousing fight song that people much preferred. Trixie, however, did not want to sing the slow song and looked absolutely mutinous.

Honey leaned over to her friend and whispered, "We're almost done. And it's not like we have to sing this on graduation night. Humor the poor guy."

Trixie rolled her eyes and continued to sing, but Honey noted that she didn't look quite so irritable.

After the song ended, Mr. Stratton beamed at the class. "That was beautiful, ladies and gentleman. I want you to remember those words as you journey beyond Sleepyside High and out into the world. We're very proud of this particular senior class."

Honey, Trixie, and Di all rolled their eyes at this statement, as they knew he said that phrase each and every year to each and every graduating class.

"Now, that letter we gave each of you to give to your parents is very important. Please remember to give it to them. You're adults now, and we expect you to act as such. Rehearsal is officially over. You're released for the day, but please don't get into *too* much mischief," he said. Honey could have sworn she saw a twinkle in his eye.

It was 11 a.m. and, although the teachers tried half-heartedly to tell the seniors to use this extra time for studying for their finals next week, they all knew that it was a hopeless cause. Most of the seniors had been having attacks of senioritis since spring break, and the three Bob-White girls were no exception.

Trixie, Honey, and Di grinned at each other. The three had plans to have lunch together at the country club, a small graduation token from Di's father, and an afternoon of giggling and gabbing. The three friends would soon go their separate ways: Trixie to Michigan State University, Honey to John Jay College, and Diana to Ithaca College. The full complement of Bob-Whites had wonderful plans for the summer, but the Bob-White girls wanted to take this opportunity to have a "just us girls" afternoon.

Honey had driven the Bob-White station wagon to school that morning, and the girls crossed the parking lot toward the car. As they walked by, the bus driver waved at them from the yellow school bus clearly marked "Sleepyside Consolidated Schools." The girls waved back cheerfully, and then all three slid into the bench front seat and headed to the country club. On the short drive, they discussed their upcoming graduation.

"I can't believe that they made Mark Nixon Grand High Poobah of our class," Trixie commented.

Honey and Di raised their eyebrows.

"I believe valedictorian is the word you're looking for," Honey said dryly.

"Why does Mark being chosen surprise you?" Di wanted to know.

"I thought Jamie Kenworthy had the highest grade point average in the class. Plus, he's really active in the drama and debate clubs. I just always thought he'd be valedictorian."

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"Don't you mean Grand High Poobah?" Honey teased with a wicked grin as she maneuvered the Bob-White wagon into a parking spot in the country club lot.

The trio exited the parked car and entered the luxury of the country club. They were immediately seated at a cozy table by a large window that overlooked the green expanses of the country club's manicured lawns and the tennis courts.

After the girls had ordered their lunches and were sipping Cokes, Trixie looked at her two friends.

"Anything exciting happening after graduation?"

"Well, I certainly don't think it's going to be the two-week celebration extravaganza that Mart and Dan's class indulged in last year," Honey commented. "I can't believe how many parties and quasi-organized field trips to the City and amusement parks and whatnot there were last year."

"Yeah, I think our class is a lot more laid back than last year's," Trixie agreed. "Other than Jane Morgan's party after graduation and the bash that Jerry Vanderhoef is throwing next weekend, I can't think of a single other thing that is planned."

"Do *you* have any special plans with Jim after graduation, Trix?" Honey asked.

"I don't think so. We haven't discussed anything, and I don't think Jim has any special plans up his sleeve, or he would have mentioned them by now. I thought maybe the six of us could hang out together?" she ended in a question, raising her eyebrows at her friends.

"Mart and I already have plans that night," Di said, a blush creeping across her cheeks.

Honey and Trixie probably would have dismissed her comment as no big deal, but they both immediately noticed how flushed and nervous their friend suddenly was.

"*Special* plans?" Honey asked, her delicate eyebrow arched.

"We decided to celebrate my graduation just the two of us." Di tried to sound non-chalant, but her cheeks were now crimson.

"Diana Lynch!" Honey grinned, pretending to be shocked. "I'm shocked!"

Trixie grimaced. "TMI! I do *not* want to know what your plans are. Ick!"

Di managed an embarrassed smile. "Okay, then. Trixie and I are in complete agreement. We don't want to talk about this."

But Honey was enjoying herself too much and persisted. "You're off the hook now, Di, but the next time I get you when Trixie's not around..." she threatened playfully.

Di was saved from replying by the arrival of their food. Silence reigned as the three enjoyed the delicious cuisine for which the country club was known.

"No one can beat Moms' cooking," Trixie commented, "but it *is* fun to have something different once in a while."

"Mmm, definitely," Honey and Di agreed on both counts.

"Like all of the neat vegetarian food we all got to try at the Purple Turnip in Vermont," Honey added.

The memories of Vermont triggered memories of other trips the girls had shared. After reminiscing about adventures on Cobbett's Island and in Williamsburg, New York City, and Idaho, Trixie sighed and looked at her two best friends.

"I'm going to miss you guys next year," she said, looking almost forlorn.

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Honey and Di turned solemn and agreed.

"But you know there will always be room on my futon in East Lansing—or on Jim's sofa bed. I expect you both to come visit!" she stated.

"Ditto for me in Ithaca," Di chimed in.

"Me, too!" Honey added. "Imagine all the fun we could have if you stayed in New York City with me."

"Sure," Diana giggled. "Trixie could find some more international jewel thieves to hunt down."

The three girls shared another giggle, and, feeling better about their upcoming separation, Diana signed her family's account number on the check their server brought to them. Soon, the three girls headed back out into the June sunshine.

"What next?" Honey asked as she pulled the car keys out of her purse.

"Let's drive out to the bluffs overlooking the Hudson," Trixie suggested.

The three girls once again slid into the front seat of the car and were on their way. Soon, Honey pulled into the gravel roadside pull-off for cars. It was a scenic vantage point that often drew tourists. A young couple had just finished taking pictures of the incredible view of the Hudson River and was leaving as the girls exited the station wagon and headed for the grassy area where they could sit and enjoy the view.

The three girls sat on the bluffs overlooking the Hudson, and each got lost in her own thoughts. Di was thinking of her plans with Mart after graduation, Trixie was thinking of the fun times she and Jim would have at Michigan State, and Honey was thinking about Dan.

Even after a year with Dan Mangan, Honey could not believe how lucky she was to have found someone who suited her so well. It was hard to believe that that the sullen teenager who had been sent to Sleepyside as a last resort and the poor little rich girl who had been brought to Sleepyside to try to regain her health had found in each other a kindred spirit. On the surface, it seemed as though they had little in common, but common feelings of being the outsider at one time or another had allowed them to understand each other and form a very special bond.

Both of them knew what it was like to be on the outside looking in, to want to belong to a group so badly that you were willing to do almost anything. Honey, who had been estranged from her mother for much of her childhood, and still didn't see her as often as a "normal" parent, could empathize with Dan's feelings of loss regarding his mother.

Both of them were especially grateful that they had come to Sleepyside and rediscovered family: Honey had reconnected with her mother and father, and Dan found the uncle that he had never known. Each of them had also found something else that they had never experienced before: complete acceptance from other teenagers their age. Honey had always been on the fringes at boarding school, and Dan was only welcomed as part of the Cowhands as long as he continued to do things for the other members. He had never been accepted for himself.

But he and Honey had found what they had been seeking in the Bob-Whites of the Glen. And, as if that was not enough, they had found further serendipity in the love they discovered in each other.

"Earth to Honey, come in Honey," Trixie was saying.

Honey left her daydream with a start. "Yes?"

Di and Trixie were grinning at her. "What were you thinking about?" Diana wondered.

Honey didn't have a chance to answer.

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"Dan, of course," Trixie said with a smile.

Honey nodded and gave a Mona Lisa smile. "Guilty as charged."

"Dare I ask if you were thinking of something specific?" Di wanted to know.

"Like wicked after-graduation plans?" Honey teased. "No. I know how corny it sounds, but I was just thinking how lucky I am to have someone like Dan."

"Awwwww," Trixie and Di said teasingly, yet not without affection.

"Oh, stop being so jibbooskery," Honey shot back, a twinkle lighting up her hazel eyes.

"Jibb-what-ery?" Di demanded good-naturedly.

"Jibbooskery," Honey said loftily with a toss of her honey brown hair.

"I probably don't even want to know what that means or where you picked that choice word up at!" Trixie said with a chuckle. She checked her watch. "Oh, whoa! Where did the afternoon go? I should get back to help Moms with the preparations for tonight."

"And I need to get home so I can make my fabulous cupcakes," Di said.

"I should get home, too. I've been meaning to study for finals every night this week, but I've been procrastinating. Maybe I can get some done this afternoon so that I can have *some* fun this weekend."

Di and Trixie exchanged glances. "Procrastinating, Miss Wheeler?" Trixie said.

"Is that what you're calling it these days?" Di put in with a smile and a wicked gleam in her violet eyes.

Honey looked at her friends, the picture of innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Trixie snorted, while Di laughed.

"We're talking about the fact that Dan returned to Sleepyside this week, and you've been rather *occupied* ever since," Di said sweetly.

"Yeah, like I said, I've been procrastinating," Honey said, her lips twitching.

The three girls continued to laugh and tease each other as they returned to the car and drove home.

After Honey had dropped Trixie and Di off at their houses, she headed up the long drive to Manor House and parked the station wagon next to Jim's Jeep Wrangler.

Determined to get some homework done, she resisted the urge to stop by Jim's room and hang out with her brother. Instead, she headed straight to her room and shut her door, determinedly attacking her calculus book with a vengeance. After a few initial distractions, she was able to concentrate fully on going over the sample problems that her teacher had given the class. She became so absorbed that Jim's knock on the door startled her.

"Come in," she called as she looked up from her book.

Jim popped his red head in. "You ready to go to the picnic, sis?"

Honey looked at her clock in surprise. "Already? Can you give me five minutes?"

"Sure. I'll be downstairs," Jim said before disappearing.

Honey decided that what she was wearing was appropriate for the barbecue and simply headed to her bathroom to lightly freshen up her make-up and comb her hair.

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As promised, she was at the bottom of the stairs within five minutes. Jim was just coming out of the kitchen carrying the fried chicken and rolls the Wheelers were contributing to the picnic.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Sure am," Honey said, taking the rolls from Jim.

As the two headed down the path to Crabapple Farm, Honey remarked, "It's going to be pretty weird next year, huh?"

"Yep," Jim responded. "All of us Bob-Whites will be really scattered."

Honey grinned up at her brother. "I guess I don't have to ask if you're looking forward to having Trixie at Michigan State next year."

Jim smiled, and his green eyes softened as he thought of his girlfriend. "Yeah, I think it's going to be a lot of fun. The last two years have been pretty tough."

"I can imagine," Honey said. "It's been weird not having Dan around, and we managed to see each other at least two weekends a month. The only time we didn't was if he had a big exam or I did. Even Di got to see Mart more often than you and Trixie got to see each other."

"Sometimes, it was really hard," Jim admitted. "But, sometimes I think it was good. Trixie and I could concentrate on our homework, and it really made us appreciate the times that we were able to be together. And—" Suddenly, Jim stopped.

Honey looked at him curiously, but, ever the tactful soul, did not press him to continue.

After a moment, Jim did decide to finish his thought. He trusted Honey, after all.

"And the distance has proven to me something I've always known. I know with absolute certainty that I'd rather be alone than be with anyone other than Trixie. I know she's the one."

Honey looked at her brother, her eyes suddenly tearing up as she saw the love her brother had for her best friend written all over his face.

"That's beautiful, Jim," she said with a smile.

Jim smiled down at his sister. "Thanks," he said huskily and then cleared his throat.

Honey tactfully changed the subject. "I can't wait to celebrate tonight with all the Bob-Whites. It will be the first time we've all been together in absolutely ages."

"I know. It should be a good time," Jim said as they arrived at the Belden farm. Reddy and Bobby came running out the door to greet them.

Jim and Honey immediately set about helping the Beldens with last minute picnic tasks. Soon, everyone had arrived, and the fun began.

The picnic was turning out to be a great success. The Bob-Whites and Peter, Helen, and Bobby had a grand time as they laughed and joked and teased their way through Moms' famous burgers, potato salad, and corn-on-the-cob, the Wheeler cook's unbeatable fried chicken and fresh-baked rolls, and Di's delicious pasta salad. Dan had even surprised everybody with a mean guacamole.

Upon listening to the Bob-Whites' groaning about eating too much, Peter Belden suggested the teens go for a walk to help digest their food before they tackled dessert.

The Bob-Whites agreed this was a superb idea and immediately paired off and headed in various directions. For once, Brian didn't feel like the seventh wheel because it was time for him to go pick Lexi

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up from the train station for her weekend visit. As Peter noticed his daughter going off in one direction with Jim, his second son heading off in the opposite direction with Di, and Honey and Dan heading off in yet a third direction, he wore a chagrined look, as if he hadn't expected the younger generation to take *separate* walks. Helen laughed aloud at the comical look on his face.

As they walked away, Dan and Honey looked at each other in surprise as they heard Bob's voice carry over to them.

"Did I just hear Bobby Belden ask his dad about *Viagra*?" Dan asked incredulously.

Honey shook her head in disbelief. "We *must* have heard him wrong!"

The couple soon found themselves in their special place: the old schoolhouse that Trixie, Brian, and Jim had once spent the night in when they were caught in a blizzard.

It was here that Dan had first confessed his feelings to Honey, and Honey had realized the true depth of her feelings for Dan. Often, when they were riding in the game preserve together or Honey was helping Dan patrol before he had left for college, the couple would somehow find themselves here, and they would while away the hours talking or kissing.

So, it was no surprise when, by unspoken agreement, they both found themselves here once again.

"We haven't been here in a while," Dan said as they entered the one-room schoolhouse that Mr. Maypenny had attended many, many years before.

"Not since last summer—right before you moved to the city," Honey murmured.

"I don't suppose we have time to build a fire in the fireplace and roast s'mores."

"Nope, I don't suppose we do," Honey said with a smile.

"What *do* you suppose we have time for?"

"This," Honey said as she pulled Dan in close for a long, slow kiss.

Dan responded immediately, loving the feel of Honey's soft lips on his own, enjoying the sweet taste of his girlfriend as their tongues danced.

Honey finally pulled back and smiled wickedly at him. "I can never get enough of that."

"Me, either," Dan said as he pulled her in for another kiss. This time, he pulled away and stared at her.

"Honey Wheeler, you are a long, slow drink of whiskey. And I mean that as a compliment."

Honey smiled. "I don't know what that means, but I like the sound of it."

"Have I told you lately how thrilled I am that you decided that you wanted to major in forensic science?" Dan asked.

"Have I told you how happy I am that your college has a great program in forensic science?" Honey said with a smile.

"You know, I just can't believe that you're actually going to be with me at college next year. We'll both be on our own—no curfews, no parents."

"Ahh, yes, 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times'," Honey quoted lightly, in an attempt to change the subject to a "safer" topic.

Her thoughts shifted to Mart and Di's plans for after the graduation ceremony and of the freedom that she would have next year. Suddenly, she wasn't sure that she was ready for all that freedom and what it implied.

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Her doubts must have shown on her face, because Dan looked at her and said, "Honey? Are you okay?"

Honey smiled up at her boyfriend. "I am. I just..."

"Freedom can be pretty frightening," Dan finished for her. He moved her to sit on one of the wooden benches. "You do know that, just because we're both at college and your parents aren't around, nothing is going to change, right? We'll still take everything at your pace."

Honey smiled up at him gratefully. "I know you'd never do anything to pressure me. It's just that, well, sometimes I feel like the least experienced of the Bob-Whites. I mean, I know Di and Mart plan to, you know, on graduation night, and although Trixie and I have never talked about it, she *has* spent the weekend with Jim, and Brian, well, Brian has been on his own for three years now."

"Not that it matters, but maybe you'll feel better if you know that I happen to know that Trixie and Jim have never done it."

"How do you know that?" Honey demanded, surprised that Dan knew something about her best friend that she didn't.

"After you got accepted to John Jay, Jim and I had a talk. He was worried about me pushing you too fast. He assured me that he wasn't being a hypocrite and that he and Trixie haven't either. Now, don't get mad," Dan interjected, seeing the look on Honey's face. "Jim was really cool about it, and, honestly, if he *hadn't* said something as your big brother, I would have thought a lot less of him. It was no big deal. I wasn't going to tell you at all, but, since you seem to have some delusion that you're behind everyone—or that that even matters—I just wanted to set you straight."

"Honey, I don't expect anything to change just because we'll be in the city together next year. I know how you feel about pre-marital sex, and I can totally respect that. It's part of why I love you so much. So, please don't worry, okay?"

"I promise," Honey said as she snuggled closer to Dan. "I'm being silly. I *do* know that you'd never pressure me. Have I told you how much I love you?"

"You have, but I always love hearing it again," Dan said as he kissed her forehead.

"I love you, Dan Mangan," Honey said.

"And I love you, Honey Wheeler," Dan said as he leaned in to give her another long kiss.

He regretfully pulled away. "We should probably head back now," he sighed.

Honey stood up, pulling Dan with her. "I guess we should before Mart auctions off our dessert."

"Yeah—to himself," Dan chuckled.

Honey laughed, and the two headed back to Crabapple Farm. Honey realized that she felt much more lighthearted than she had since Di had shared her graduation plans that afternoon. Honey hadn't realized it at the time, but, deep down, Di's news had made her feel like she was being left behind, because she wasn't ready for that next step, and she knew it. But now, she realized that Trixie wasn't as experienced as she had thought, either. And, although she had known that Dan would never pressure her, sometimes she felt as though she wasn't giving enough, that he would get bored with her, but he had just reassured her that was not the case.

And so, as the couple retraced their steps through the game preserve to return to the picnic, Honey felt like nothing more than the lighthearted teenager in love that she was.

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The two strode back to the Beldens' yard, arriving just as Trixie and Jim, hand-in-hand, appeared from the general direction of the clubhouse, and Mart and Di materialized from the direction of the crabapple orchard.

"We were just about to send a search party out for all of you," Mr. Belden said sternly, but nobody missed the twinkle in his eye. "Are you all ready for dessert?"

The group agreed that they were. After indulging themselves with Moms' apple pie, Di's cupcakes, and Mr. Maypenny's donuts, the group was absolutely decimated and decided to call it a night.

There was much laughter as the party broke up and promises were made to call each other the next day. Dan gave Honey's hand a quick squeeze, and, with a reassuring smile, he headed off with Mr. Maypenny to their cabin in the woods.

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It was Saturday afternoon and, instead of studying, Honey was looking through her old yearbooks, completely oblivious to the blond Russian spy getting his butt kicked by MacGyver on a television rerun. Honey couldn't believe that her years at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High were going to be over in a matter of days. It seemed like just yesterday that she had moved into the Manor House and met Trixie and then Jim and then headed off in the *Silver Swan* on the first of many adventures.

How could five years pass so quickly? Honey wondered as she turned the page of her yearbook and saw a picture of Di dressed as Juliet in the freshman class play. Her thoughts drifted to the exciting case of missing jewels and kidnapped diplomats that had surrounded that play.

After happily reliving some wonderful memories of high school, Honey realized that she was no closer to finding the missing homework assignment she had been looking for when she had been sidetracked by her discovery of her yearbooks. She returned the books to their place on her closet shelf next to her Mr. Potato Head, a gag gift from Dan the previous Christmas.

Where could that calculus assignment have gotten itself? Honey asked herself as she continued to look through the files that held her past homework. She was trying to study for her upcoming calculus final and wanted to review integrals, except that she couldn't find one of her old homework assignments that she really wanted to review.

After another fruitless fifteen minutes of searching, Honey realized that she would be better off reviewing the old assignments that she *could* locate than wasting any more time trying to find a paper that was obviously gone.

She sat back down at her desk and had really gotten into the groove of integrals and moved on to differential equations, when someone knocked on her door.

"Come in," she called absent-mindedly as her pencil furiously scribbled across the page.

"Studying hard?" Jim popped his red head into her room.

"Calculus," Honey groaned. "It's hard to believe I'll ever use this stuff in the real world."

"You won't," Jim assured her. "But you will see a lot of it in college, so have fun!"

"Easy for you to say. You've already gotten it out of the way," Honey retorted. "And you never had a problem with it to begin with!"

"Do you want to take a break, or am I interrupting you at a bad time?" Jim asked.

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Honey looked at her paper. "Actually, I was just about to come looking for you. I've got integrals down, I think, but I might need some help on differential equations, oh intelligent and handsome big brother," Honey grinned.

Jim laughed in response. "You don't need to butter me up. I'll help you with your calc, if you help me with a problem."

"Sure, what is it, Jim?" Honey said, motioning her brother to come in and sit on her bed. She also moved from her desk to sit cross-legged on the bed.

"Do you and Dan know what you're doing after graduation?" Jim wondered.

Honey shook her head. "We, that is Trixie and I, thought all three of us couples could go out after graduation, but Mart and Di already have other plans."

Jim raised a ginger eyebrow. "A romantic evening for two? I would have thought that you girls would all want to celebrate together."

Honey shrugged, trying to fight the blush she knew was rising to her cheeks. "Mart wanted to celebrate Di's graduation just the two of them," she said as nonchalantly as possible. "But Trixie and I would love to celebrate together if you don't have plans for an, uh, private celebration."

Jim shook his head. "Nope. I think the four of us should go out. We all had a really fun time when you three came to visit me at State, so I think it's 'perfectly perfect' for the four of us to all celebrate together, to steal your phrase."

Honey grinned at her brother. "That sounds perfectly perfect to me. Now, what should we do?"

"The country club?" Jim asked.

Honey shook her head. "Nah. We girls just ate there yesterday. Wimpy's sounds good, even though it's not fancy, but I suppose half of the underclassman will be there hanging out celebrating the end of the school year. Maybe some place in White Plains?"

Jim thought for a moment. "How about we go all out and go to the City afterward? A late, candlelit dinner perhaps? We could stay in Mother and Dad's apartment. I'm sure Miss Trask would love to chaperone. What do you think?"

Honey smiled. "It could work. I'll clear it by Dan, and you run it by Trixie. But first, how about those differential equations, dear big brother?"

Jim smiled at his sister and set about showing her a trick he had learned to simplify the calculus equations that Honey loathed so much.

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Dan sat in the old schoolhouse, nervously waiting for Honey. He knew she had to be at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High in just over an hour for graduation, but since they were heading to New York afterward with Trixie and Jim, Dan wanted to give Honey her graduation gift beforehand, in private.

He checked to make sure the portable CD player with mini-speakers was all set up. When he realized that the CD was already to go, he briefly wondered if he was going to look colossally stupid or if Honey would look past his corniness and realize just how deep his feelings for her ran.

The door to the schoolhouse opened then, and Honey entered wearing an emerald green silk dress she had bought for graduation. Dan loved it when Honey wore green, thinking that it absolutely emphasized her golden loveliness.

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"You look incredible, Honey," he said as he gave her a hug and a light kiss.

"You look pretty nice yourself," Honey said, admiring his muscles beneath the black golf shirt he wore with khakis. His black leather jacket, a gift from Honey that was much more stylish than his old Cowhands jacket, was strewn across a nearby bench.

"I know we need to get to Crabapple Farm to take pictures soon, but I did want you to have this before you graduate," Dan said, placing a large box with green wrapping paper and a shiny golden bow into Honey's hands. He hit play on the CD player and "I'll Be There for You" by The Rembrandts filled the air.

Honey took the box with a shy smile and began to undo the bow. She carefully unwrapped the box only to discover a smaller box inside, wrapped identically. She laughed at Dan and his mischievousness and unwrapped the second box.

Inside was a jeweler's box, and, all of a sudden, Honey felt lightheaded. She suddenly had a hunch what this was going to be. With a slightly trembling hand, she started to open the box, when Dan stopped her.

"Listen to the words," was all he said. Honey paid attention to the music for the first time since she had started to tear open the wrapping paper on her gift.

*No one could ever know me
No one could ever see me
Seems you're the only one who knows
What it's like to be me*

*Someone to face the day with
Make it through all the rest with
Someone I'll always laugh with
Even at my worst I'm best with you*

"That's how I feel about you, Honey Wheeler," Dan said. "You know me better than anyone else ever has. You were the first one to see past the leather jacket and those awful cowboy boots I wore. And that last line sums it up better than I ever could – even at my worst, I'm best with you. I love you, Madeleine Grace Wheeler. This gift is just a way to show you tangibly. Go ahead; open it."

Honey felt tears of love and happiness welling up in her eyes as she listened to Dan's speech. She knew exactly what he meant, because she felt the same way. She opened the jeweler's box and gasped as an emerald ring in a delicate and intricate setting lay revealed in her hands.

"When I saw it, it reminded me of you. All golden and intricate, delicate yet strong, with that beautiful emerald color that I always love to see you in. I did some research, and the emerald is the sacred stone of Venus, the goddess of love, and is said to preserve love and symbolize hope and faith. So, I give this to you out of love and in hope and faith that someday, I'll be giving you another ring," Dan finished, hoping that she couldn't see just how nervous he was.

"Dan," Honey breathed, "it's absolutely beautiful. I will always wear it. It'll be our symbol of our faith, hope, and love."

Dan took the ring from her and placed it on her finger. "That's a promise ring, Honey. I promise that I could never love anyone like I love you."

"I love you, too, Dan," Honey said before she kissed Dan, long and slow and lovingly.

"We'd better get going," Dan said after a few minutes of blissful kissing. "Wouldn't want you late for your own graduation."

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"No, we wouldn't want that," Honey said as she smiled and gave him another kiss, wondering what in the world she had ever done to deserve someone as wonderful as Daniel Timothy Mangan.

Hand in hand, the two headed toward Crabapple Farm.

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As the three girls crossed the parking lot and headed inside the school, Honey glanced out toward the football field where commencement would soon be commencing. A few students were decorating the goal posts with maroon and white crepe paper. Honey smiled at the sight.

She waved hello to Mr. Stratton, who was thanking a parent for the fruit basket she had just handed him. Mr. Stratton distractedly returned Honey's wave, and it was clear that his mind was on 6,942 more pressing things, but the parent continued to talk, and he was too polite to take his leave. Honey giggled.

The three girls wove their way through the crowd of gathered seniors. They watched with amusement as Miss Bennett, the botany teacher, chased down Jerry Vanderhoef and demand that he replace the candy cane that dangled from his cap instead of the traditional tassel. Jerry laughed good-naturedly and immediately pulled the tassel from his pocket.

Amy Morrissey was looking at Jamie Kenworthy skeptically, refusing to believe his announcement that he was wearing nothing under his maroon cap and gown except a bow tie. Mr. Stratton, apparently having finally extracted himself from the persistent parent, had stashed the fruit basket elsewhere and was weaving through the crowd of chattering teenagers, resplendent in their maroon and white graduation uniforms.

Trixie turned to Honey. "I can't believe we're celebrating graduation in New York City!"

Honey nodded excitedly. "Wasn't Miss Trask a dear to agree to chaperone? Especially what we put her through when you bought that ugly little idol."

Trixie grinned ruefully. "She always is a good sport."

"She'll get to spend tomorrow visiting her sister while we explore the city a bit, so I don't feel *too* guilty for dragging her!" Honey chuckled.

"We've all got exciting evenings planned, eh, Di?" Trixie said with a wicked grin for her dark-haired friend.

Di, staring off into space with a dreamy look, didn't respond. It was clear that she was miles away from Sleepyside Junior-Senior High School.

"Di?" Trixie said.

"Earth to Di!" Honey chimed in.

"Sorry," Di said with a guilty smile. "I was just thinking that I can't believe this day is here already!"

Trixie smile knowingly. "You didn't look that dreamy about graduation. You were thinking about my brother!"

"Guilty as charged," Di said, not looking guilty at all.

Just then, Mr. Stratton called for attention, and the crowd quieted. "It is time for you to line up in your rows to walk out to the football field. Please try to remember your position from rehearsal the other morning."

There was happy confusion as the members of Sleepyside's latest graduating class scurried about, trying to remember to which row they had been assigned and between whom they had been seated. Honey

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had a very easy time of it, as she had been assigned to the back row. She headed to the back of the crowd to find her place between Jerry Vanderhoef and Bill Wright.

Trixie also had no difficulty finding her place, as she was in the very front row between Chuck Altemus' younger sister, Allison, and Mary Brendan. Diana headed to the middle of the crowd, and eventually found her place between Ruthie Kettner and Jane Morgan.

Once the seniors had organized themselves, Mr. Stratton and Miss Bennett released them, row by row, to march out to the football field. Once the first row of students stepped onto the field at the back of the end zone, the student band began to play "Pomp and Circumstance."

At the first strains of the traditional song, an inexplicable, but thoroughly delicious, feeling ran through Honey's body. It was excitement, and nervousness, and a bittersweet mixture of happiness and sadness, all combined with pride and a sense of peace. It was as though this moment was the truly beginning of her life, the preceding eighteen years merely a dress rehearsal for what was to come. If she thought about it, she had experienced a similar feeling five years before when Trixie and she had found Jim at the Smiths' farm, and her parents had agreed to adopt Jim. The same sense of anticipation for the times to come had nearly overwhelmed her then, just as now she was swept up in a tidal wave of emotion.

She took her seat in the final row of chairs set up on the football field and settled herself in for the speeches ahead.

Poor Bill Wright, next to her, was sniffing, sneezing, and constantly blowing his nose on a thoroughly used tissue. He looked at Honey apologetically.

"Can you believe I got a cold for graduation? Who comes down with a cold? In *June!*" he said exasperatedly.

Honey smiled sympathetically and turned her attention to Mark's valedictorian speech. Despite the fact that she had a heartfelt understanding of and belief in the words of Mark's speech, her attention soon waned.

She looked down and twisted the emerald ring that Dan had just given her around on her finger. She wasn't sure why she had turned the beautiful green stone to the inside of her palm as she and Dan had approached Crabapple Farm before the graduation ceremony, but she hadn't wanted her friends to see Dan's incredible gift just yet. Like a delicious secret, she wanted to savor it, just herself, until she was ready to share it with her friends.

She smiled as she fingered the rich green of the gemstone, remembering Dan's sweet words. Honey knew that Dan loved her, but for Dan, usually so simple of gesture, to give her such a relatively extravagant symbol of his feelings for her...Honey was just speechless.

More than ever, Honey couldn't wait for college to begin. Being on campus with Dan was sure to be an adventure. Everything was always so much better with him at her side.

She knew she would miss Trixie and Di, and she hoped that three of them would be able to see each other as much as possible during the next four years, but she also knew that she had chosen the right college for her. Not because Dan was enrolled there, but because this truly was the best place for her to study forensic science. And she didn't worry about growing apart from Trixie and Di because of something silly like mere distance. They were too good of friends and held too strong of a bond to ever grow truly far apart. Of that, she was sure.

She was just as sure that, no matter what the future held, she and Dan would always be at least friends. Even if they didn't end up together, Dan was someone too special for her to ever let out of her life completely.

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Honey sighed in pure contentment and then realized that she had not heard a word of the second graduation speech as she watched the Sleepyside alumnus leaving the stage.

Mr. Stratton took the podium again and announced that it was time for the graduating seniors to have their moment in the sun. He motioned the first row to stand and approach the stage and then started calling out seniors' names as, one by one, each senior crossed the stage and received his or her diploma. Honey cheered as she watched Trixie, petite and blonde and vivacious as ever, cross the stage and receive her diploma. She cheered again as Diana, in all of her dark beauty, accepted hers. And, soon, her row was standing and walking toward the stage.

"Madeleine Grace Wheeler."

And then it was *her* name called, and she was crossing the stage and receiving her high school diploma while smiling like a maniac. Honey thanked her lucky stars, not for the first time, that she had been allowed to attend Sleepyside High School, to grow here, to make friends here, to graduate from here.

Yet, as wonderful as things had been since the day that the Wheelers moved to Manor House, Honey knew that the best was yet to come.

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Final notes: Ossining High School's colors are maroon and white. According to the 2005 Ossining High School online graduation picture album (no longer available), the men wear maroon caps and gowns, while the women's are white. I decided to use this for Sleepyside High's graduation ceremony. (2020 update: According to current OHS pictures at SmugMug, beginning in 2016, all students wear maroon.)

Dan's phrase "You're a long, slow drink of whiskey" is actually paraphrased from one of my all-time favorite television shows, *Sports Night*. Jeremy says it to Natalie in episode #113, "Smoky." Honey's response is also from *Sports Night*. It's what Dana says to Casey after he calls her smoky in the same episode. Yes, I used these phrases without permission, but I would like Aaron Sorkin (creator and producer of the series and writer of the "Smoky" episode) to know that I included the phrases here as a homage to his wonderful show and he really shouldn't sue me.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..." is the beginning of Charles Dickens' book *A Tale of Two Cities*. I really hated that book, but I've always loved the first sentence.

Carryovers were: #1 – very important letter (letters from SJSHS to graduating seniors' parents); #2 – special occasion (graduation); #3 – picture taking tourist; SA#1 – blonde getting his/her butt kicked; #4 – people putting up decorations (maroon and white goal posts); #5 – auction (the possibility of Mart auctioning off Honey and Dan's desserts); SA#2 – someone driving a bus; #6 – BWG singing against their will; #7 – Mr. Potato Head; SA#3 – offer of a long-distance sofa bed; #8 – bus name; #9 – a cold; #10 – missing homework assignment; #11 – a bow (on Dan's gift to Honey).

Jerry Vanderhoef, Ruthie Kettner, Jane Morgan, Patty Morris, Amy Morrissey, Jamie Kenworthy, Chuck Altemus, Bill Wright, Mr. Stratton, and Miss Bennett are the creation of various KK's and, like the Bob-Whites, used without permission. Mark Nixon is my creation.

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