

Author's Notes: This is a Jixemtri CWP Special Anniversary Edition #5 submission. Just a friendly warning: There is underage drinking in this story. I do not condone underage drinking, but it is a fact of life at many colleges. I am not saying that makes it right, but in trying to realistically portray certain situations, underage drinking occurs. No Bob-Whites, however, participate. Many thanks to Susan (a total Bob-White herself!) for her super fast edit and for announcing this for me! She's an absolute fantastic editor who always knows where to put commas. I actually do, too, but a lot of them were intruding in flow of dialogue so I exercised the "creative" in creative writing and left them out. Don't blame Susan! :)

Closer to Free

by Dana

Everybody wants to live like they wanna live, and everybody wants to love like they wanna love.
—The BoDeans, "Closer to Free"

"What are you doing?" Diana Lynch asked her roommate, Brooke Callahan. The two were studying in their dorm room at Ithaca College one October evening. Clearly, Di knew exactly what Brooke was doing—studying—but Brooke knew that Di had been edgy and restless the last two weeks or so, and so she took Di's question in stride. Brooke had noticed that Di's energy seemed to come in spurts. One minute the raven-haired beauty was practically bursting with untold amounts of energy. The next minute, she was listless and bored. Brooke's younger sister had recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and Brooke knew that Diana Lynch was most definitely *not* a manic-depressive personality. Superficially she appeared to be, but to someone who was intimately familiar with the disorder and its symptoms, Di's behavior didn't come close to the "real thing."

Brooke wondered exactly what was going on with her roommate to make her so moody. She certainly hadn't been this way in the waning days of August when the pair had started their freshman year at Ithaca.

Brooke liked Di. She absolutely, genuinely liked Di. She had been nervous, of course, being so far away from home for the first time and living with a stranger in a fifteen foot by fifteen foot room for nine months. She had been relieved after spending time with her new roommate, realizing that Diana Lynch was definitely someone she would have chosen to be friends with, even if they hadn't been thrown together by the dorm assignment gods.

But with the way Di had been acting lately, like a caged tiger, Brooke was not sure what to think. Brooke herself was a very self-confident person, and she felt lucky to have what she did, but it was hard not to envy Di a little bit.

Di was beautiful. And not just in an empirical way. With her Irish pixie face, luscious blue-black hair, and violet eyes that would make even Elizabeth Taylor envious, Di turned many heads. When you added in the young woman's sense of style, the wealth that allowed her to utilize that style to the fullest, her devoted boyfriend, her talent at her chosen major, and her fairy tale group of high school friends, not to mention her fun-loving family, to the outsider, Diana Marie Lynch had *everything*.

But Brooke Callahan knew better. She knew that her beautiful exterior hid many insecurities. Brooke, a pretty, confident, vivacious teen, knew that she herself had a lot for which to be thankful. But then again, she had planned on entering college with her parents at her side, driving from Thunder Bay, Ontario, to her new life in Ithaca, New York. At the last minute, her sister had had an episode and it was clear that there was no way her parents could

leave Katie to take Brooke to college. Her parents had told her that one would stay with Katie while the other drove their oldest daughter to Ithaca, but Brooke didn't want to put her parents through the separation and her father through the grueling drive home by himself. So she had flown out to Ithaca by herself, smiled bravely, and thrown herself into college life.

So she understood Di's façade; she herself kept one up, trying to be cheerful and studious while she was desperately worried about her little sister back home. But Di's façade appeared to be quickly breaking down. Brooke had seen signs of the breakdown occurring gradually during the last few weeks, but during the last week something had apparently happened that seemed to accelerate the process.

Something was definitely wrong with her roommate.

Brooke had not wanted to press her at first, but it was becoming more apparent that she was going to need to. Di needed help.

"So, what are you doing?" Di repeated.

"Just some science," Brooke said with a deceptively casual air.

"Yeah? How's that going?" Di asked, as if she had not asked that question at least once a day since she had heard that her roommate was taking a science class. Science really seemed to intimidate Di somehow, Brooke noticed.

"The same as it as been," Brooke said noncommittally, hoping that Di would realize by her words and tone that she had asked that question before. If she played her cards right, Brooke thought she knew how to get Di to open up.

Sure enough, Di sighed. "I'm sorry. I've asked that question a gazillion times before," Di apologized. "I'm just...I'm just..."

"You're at loose ends," Brooke supplied, happy for the opening.

Di looked at her roommate as if she were a mind reader. "Yes! Yes, that is *exactly* it. How did you know?"

Brooke shrugged, trying to remain casual despite her own close association with mental illness. "Oh, I don't know. You've just been so..." Brooke searched for the right word so as not to insult or upset her roommate "...restless lately." There. Restless sounded much better than "excitable." And, although her behavior occasionally bordered on it, "hysterical" did not seem appropriate.

Di gave a deep sigh, put her purple highlighter down rather forcefully on her desk, and looked at her roommate.

"I have been lately, haven't I?" she asked earnestly, as if her roommate was privy to some insightful information that she was not.

Brooke smiled inside while maintaining a serious veneer. This was going exactly how she needed it to. "A little bit," she admitted. "What's going on?"

Di looked at her, her pretty face displaying an emotion akin to dismay. "I don't know!" she exploded. "I don't get it. I have *everything*! Everything I have ever wanted. And suddenly I'm...I'm just...I don't even know what I am!" she finished emphatically, waving her perfectly manicured hands in the air.

“And that makes it worse,” Brooke sympathized, setting down her pen in a much gentler manner than her roommate just had. “You feel guilty for feeling this way when—in theory—your life looks perfect.”

Di once again looked at Brooke stunned, as if she had a crystal ball. “Yes! That’s *exactly* it. How did you *know*?”

Brooke had to smile at Diana’s reaction, even though she knew this was a serious subject. “Honestly, I recognized it. It was how I was starting to feel before I left Thunder Bay to come here to Ithaca. On the surface, everything was good—great, even—but I just had this restlessness that followed me everywhere. And then I would look at my sister—” Brooke broke off, remembering that she had not mentioned her sister or her sister’s mental health to anyone at college, including her roommate. “Anyway, I saw that there were people who were worse off than I was, and then the guilt would set in. Why was I feeling this way? What was going on in my head? Why couldn’t I appreciate what I had?”

Diana nodded, understanding alight in her violet eyes. “Exactly,” she whispered. Then she paused for a moment, considering her next question. Diana was not the type to pry, even if she did have a reputation for doing a little meddling of the matchmaking variety, but she had detected something when Brooke mentioned her sister. She decided to ask her question, but in a way that would make her friend Honey, keeper of legendary tact, proud.

“Brooke,” she started somewhat hesitantly, “you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but...is your sister okay? You mentioned her, and then you mentioned people who were worse off. I don’t mean to pry, but if you ever want to talk...” Di trailed off.

“I hope my sister will be fine,” Brooke said matter-of-factly. “I don’t think I really told you this, but my parents were supposed to drive me to Ithaca, but they couldn’t at the last minute.”

“You did mention that the first time we met. When my mom was being all nosy about you flying here by yourself.” Di rolled her eyes in that patented, exasperated way that teens have when talking about their parents’ shortcomings. “You said your sister was sick. I wanted to ask about it, but I didn’t want to pry.”

“It’s okay. You may as well know. My little sister was recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder. You may know it as manic-depressive disorder. She’s only fifteen, so it went undetected for a while. Everyone just thought she was a typical, hormonal teenager. But her symptoms kept getting worse.” A pained expression crossed Brooke’s face, and Diana could see the anguish that Brooke was feeling, worrying about her little sister.

Brooke took a deep breath, as if for strength. “Basically, my parents were on suicide watch before I left. I wasn’t going to come out here at first, but Katie said that she would feel even worse if she caused me to stay home from college. She said she couldn’t handle the guilt on top of everything else. Her psychiatrist urged me to go on as normal so that Katie wouldn’t have to deal with feelings of guilt in addition to dealing with the symptoms of her mental illness, which already include inappropriate feelings of guilt. How could I add to that?” Brooke asked rhetorically, her eyes filled with anguish. “So, despite how hard it was, I did. I came out here. My parents wanted to come with me, and one of them offered to stay with Katie while one came with me, but I couldn’t let them do that. So, I flew out here by myself instead,” Brooke finished.

Di looked at her new friend with sympathy. “Gosh, I’m so sorry, Brooke. I can’t even imagine having to go through that with Cassie or Rachel. They’re only nine right now, but I

know time is going to fly by and they're going to be teenagers before I know it. Actually, they *will* be teenagers by the time I graduate." Di didn't even want to think about any of her kid brothers and sisters thinking such dire thoughts as Brooke's sister. "Is Katie going to be okay? Is her psychiatrist helping her?"

"Just having someone listen to her and tell her that it's not all in her head is helping her. I think hearing over and over again that it was just growing pains was really getting to her. Since she's so young, they don't want to put her on medications just yet. Right now, she's in the depressive phase, and most of the medications used to treat bipolar disorder are really aimed at the manic phase. They're afraid that if they give her antidepressants, it will just swing her into a manic phase. So, she's just doing a lot of supportive therapy and family therapy with my parents. My brother, he's sixteen, is actually being really supportive, too. He's at the same school as she is, so he's looking out for her there. When she swings into the manic phase, they'll look more into medications then."

"Wow. I don't know how you're handling this so well. If it were one of the twinnies, I would be freaking out that I was so far away!" Diana exclaimed.

"I do feel that way on some levels, but Katie really wanted me to carry on like normal, so I'm trying to do that for her," Brooke said with a brave smile.

"I can see why you felt guilty for feeling restless when your little sister is going through that. Heck, I feel guiltier now, too!"

Brooke shook her head vigorously. "Please don't. I didn't tell you that to make you feel guilty. I've just been keeping it inside since I didn't really know anybody here, but I feel like I can trust you. Plus, you should probably know what's up in case I get some weird phone calls or something."

"Weird phone calls?" Di asked, clearly confused.

"Like my sister calling me in the middle of the night, needing me to talk her down. Either talk her down from her manic phase or try to help her if she's feeling really low. That kind of thing," Brooke explained.

Di nodded. "That makes sense. Hopefully, the therapy will help her, and she won't have to go through those ups and downs very much anymore."

"From your lips to God's ears," Brooke said in a concerted effort at cheerfulness. "But we were talking about you and your feelings. Not my sister's mental health. I wanted to help you feel better, not worse!"

"You didn't, so don't worry," Di assured her roommate. "It just gives me food for thought. I am actually feeling pretty grateful that all I am feeling is a little restlessness. I can't even imagine what it would be like to feel...as low as your sister does." For some reason, Di could not bring herself to say the word suicide in connection with Katie Callahan. She did not want to think of anyone feeling that way, let alone the little sister that her roommate clearly adored.

"It does put things into perspective," Brooke agreed, "but we need to figure out how to get you over your restlessness. I'm almost done with my homework, but how is yours looking? You at least need to calm down and finish that, if nothing else."

Diana looked down at her book. "Actually, all I have is some reading to do, but I just cannot concentrate on it at all. I *hate* this edgy feeling."

“You should invest in some chamomile tea or some lavender aromatherapy. It’s very calming,” Brooke suggested. “Maybe take a yoga or a meditation class.”

Di looked somewhat doubtful. “Maybe. I mean, it would be great to be able to calm myself down when I feel myself losing control, but I really want to understand *why* I’m like this in the first place, not just treat the symptoms.”

“Maybe it’s just a reaction to being at college. Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe it will go away by itself,” Brooke hypothesized.

“May-be,” Di said, drawing out the word, illustrating her uncertainty. “But what do I do in the meantime? Or what if doesn’t go away?” A stricken look suddenly crossed Di’s features. “Or gets even worse?” she asked in a horrified voice.

“Well, just take it one step at a time. Let’s act like the analytical and logical college students we are and analyze this. I’m sure a logical analysis of the situation will help. When do you feel this way? Any particular situation?” Brooke probed.

Diana giggled in spite of herself. “Now you sound like Mart!” She sobered and then thought for several moments. “I definitely don’t feel it in my art classes,” she said in a confident tone. “I’m pretty content and absorbed in them. I love what I’m studying, so I’m sure that’s not it.”

“Okay...does it happen after you get off the phone with your parents?” Brooke asked.

Di shook her head. “No, not really. They’re not being anywhere near as stifling as I thought they would be. I honestly expected my mother to call every night to check on me!”

Brooke laughed. “That would make *anyone* crazy! I’m glad she’s not doing that either. Okay, what about your other classes?”

“No particular feeling. They’re just classes to me,” Diana stated. “But you know what? Just talking about this with someone who understands has helped me immensely. I’m not feeling restless and yucky anymore, so how about I let you finish up your science homework, and I finish up my reading, and we’ll talk about this some other time? I’ll think about it more and see if I can figure out when I am feeling this way, and maybe, if we put our heads together, we can come up with something. Deal?”

Brooke smiled, happy that Diana seemed to feel better. At least, she hoped that Di was feeling better and wasn’t just saying so to change the subject. “Deal,” she stated, giving her roommate the benefit of the doubt. “After you’re done reading, do you want to go out and get some ice cream or something? I feel like junk food.”

Di grinned. “That sounds perfectly perfect!”

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“Hey, Di!” someone called from across the quad. Diana, on her way back to her dorm after her afternoon classes, turned toward the sound of her name. She stopped and smiled as she saw a tall, willowy brunette waving her arms enthusiastically and rushing toward her.

“Hi, Liz!” she called as the sophomore drew closer. “What’s up?”

“A bunch of us are going to The Haunt tonight to see Jason’s band,” Liz explained.

Jason, a good friend of theirs, was an art major who dabbled in music. He played in a band called Groov Spoon. The band members all were like Jason—they all enjoyed playing in the band, but none of them had a burning desire to be a musician following graduation. Mostly, they just played cover tunes every so often at The Haunt or other bars that offered live music from local bands. The band was not as popular as Big Blue Couch, but people enjoyed listening to them while they socialized at the various bars.

“Do you want to go?” Liz asked.

Di thought for a moment, mentally cataloging what she had to do that evening. She had finished several drawings in various media for one of her classes, and her essay on ancient Greek architecture had been completed the night before. All she had was some reading to do for her art history class, but she could easily finish that before her class the next day.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I can do that.”

“Great!” Liz said enthusiastically. “Meet in my room at about eight, okay?”

“Sure. Who’s going?”

“Oh, the usual suspects,” Liz explained. “Sam, of course, Heather, Mary Beth, Josh, Kelly, Brian, and I think that Lara and Kevin will probably meet up with us at the bar,” Liz said, naming the group of art, art history, or art education sophomores and juniors that had adopted Diana immediately into their clique. Although she was the only freshman who regularly hung out with them, Di never felt out of place. She loved the feeling of acceptance that she had found away from Sleepside. It was almost as good as being a Bob-White.

“Do you mind if I ask Mart and Brooke if they want to go?” Di requested.

“Of course not! The more the merrier. I’m sure that Jason and the rest of the guys would love the support. If Mart’s going to meet us there, let him know we’ll probably show up around nine.”

“Okay, I’ll do that,” Di said.

“Well, I’m off to my psych class. I’ll see you tonight at eight!” Liz waved good-bye as she hurried away toward her classroom building.

Di waved back and continued toward her dorm. When she arrived at her room, Brooke was out, but a note in her roommate’s casual scrawl told Di that she’d be at the cafeteria at six if Di wanted to meet her for dinner. Diana looked at the clock and realized that she had about a half-hour before she would have to leave to meet Brooke, so she picked up the phone and called Mart. He didn’t have class right then but, as he spent a lot of time in the library studying, Di wasn’t sure if he’d be home. But, to Di’s delight, Mart answered the phone.

“Hi, sweetie,” she gushed. “How are you?”

“Just fine now that I am listening to the intonation of the most pulchritudinous woman on the planet,” Mart said, his smile seeping into his voice.

“You’re so sweet. And, speaking of music...” Di trailed off, a sudden, inexplicable knot forming in her stomach. Why did she suddenly feel tense? Why was it so important that Mart not refuse her?

“Yes?” Mart prompted her in the silence.

“Would you be interested in joining me tonight at The Haunt to see Jason’s band play?” Di asked hopefully.

“I wish I could,” Mart said, and the disappointment was evident in his voice, “but I have that huge exam on Friday. It’s in my organic chem class, which I’m really worried about, and I really need to study tonight.”

“But it’s only Tuesday,” Di blurted out before she realized that she was not exactly playing the role of “supportive girlfriend.”

Mart sighed. “I know that, Di, but it’s a really tough course, and I really need to study every night this week.”

“Every night this week?” she repeated, hating herself for the disappointment and whininess she heard creeping into her voice.

Supportive girlfriend, remember? a niggling little voice inside her head taunted her.

“I’m sorry, Di,” Mart said, frustration in *his* voice. This had been a common theme the last few weeks. Di’s drawings and essays on art seemed to be second nature to her, and she finished them easily. But Mart’s science-based classes did not come as easily to him, and they required a lot of studying on his part. As a result, Diana had a lot more free time than Mart. She enjoyed going out with her friends, but she really wanted her boyfriend there, too. “But I really need to study,” he finished quietly.

Di swallowed, and her eyes drifted from the floral calendar on the wall to the photo montage of the Bob-Whites, including a picture of Mart and her from her senior prom. “I know,” she said, literally trying to swallow her disappointment. “I’m sorry that I am not being more understanding. I just really want to be with you.”

“I know you do,” Mart said. “And I want to be with you, too. But if I fail out of school, then we’ll never be together because I’ll just be some homeless bum somewhere, begging for handouts.”

Di laughed despite the knot in her stomach. “You know that’s never going to happen, Mart Belden,” she scolded playfully, a bit of her good humor returning. “You’ll do fine, and you’ll graduate with honors, and everyone will be there, and Trixie will pretend to be so jealous over her *magna cum laude* brother but she’ll not-so-secretly be proud of you.” Di swallowed. “You study, and we’ll celebrate your A-plus performance on your exam on Friday night, okay?”

“That sounds like a plan,” Mart agreed. “You’ve got a date for Friday night, Miss Lynch.”

“Yes, I do,” she said. “Study hard, sweetie.”

“I will. You have fun,” Mart said.

“I will. Talk to you tomorrow,” Di said. After the couple had hung up, Di realized that she felt it again. That inexplicable restlessness that had been plaguing her for the last several weeks.

In a flash, Diana knew exactly what that restlessness was, and she was horrified now that she had figured it out.

Diana was feeling restless about *Mart*.

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“Are you sure?” Brooke asked Di as she took a bite of her stromboli in the dorm cafeteria.

Before answering, Di looked down at her plate. “What is this again?”

“It’s stromboli. You haven’t had it yet? They serve it practically every night!” Brooke asked incredulously.

“I know, but it never looked very appealing, so I’ve never gotten it before. But those horrible-looking, dried-up pork chops looked even less appealing,” Di confessed, cautiously poking at her stromboli with her fork.

“It’s kinda like a calzone. Try it. It’s good,” Brooke encouraged as she put another bite in her mouth as if to emphasize her point.

Di warily put a bite in her mouth and was pleasantly surprised. “Hey, this tastes a heck of a lot better than it looks!” she exclaimed.

“I know!” Brooke exclaimed with a laugh. “Anyway, now that we’ve gotten that out of the way and broadened your taste buds’ experience, can we talk about your breakthrough now?”

Diana’s excitement over discovering a new meal in the cafeteria that she actually liked faded instantly as she thought about her earlier realization.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” she answered glumly.

“Well, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. I mean, you spent a lot of time with Mart in high school, and then you were separated for the last year, and then you come up to Ithaca thinking that you were going to be together again, just like you were in high school. That expectation is not working out because college is not high school, so you’re disappointed. That’s normal,” Brooke tried to reassure her friend.

Diana shrugged. “I guess so,” she said, but she did not sound convinced. She sighed and pushed her stromboli around her plate unseeingly. “But why can’t I be more understanding? I feel like an awful girlfriend right now.”

“You are *not* an awful girlfriend,” Brooke stated emphatically, putting down her fork and looking directly into Di’s violet eyes. “You just want to spend time with your boyfriend. You’re hardly the first girlfriend on the planet to feel that way. And, once you adjust to seeing him the amount that both of your schedules will allow, you’ll be fine.”

“But don’t you see?” Di asked, her emotions obviously bubbling to the surface, her glum indifference of a few moments before vanishing completely. “That makes me feel worse. I see him a lot more now than I did last year. Why am I so selfish?”

“Diana Lynch,” Brooke began in a stern voice, “you are about the least selfish person I have ever met. You’re not selfish for wanting to spend time with the person you love. You expected to be able to see him more than you have. That’s all.”

Di picked her fork back up and took another bite of stromboli as she considered Brooke’s words. “Okay,” she said after she had swallowed the doughy bite. “I’ll try to remember that, and I won’t freak out because all of a sudden I feel like the worst girlfriend on the planet.”

“Good for you,” Brooke said as she took a drink of her soda.

“Now, will *you* be able to come out with me tonight?” Di asked.

Brooke looked sorry. “I’m sorry, Di, but I really need to work on my analysis of the symbolism in *The Wizard of Oz*. It’s a lot harder than I thought it would be, and it’s due on Thursday.”

Di smiled understandingly. “Yeah, I can see how that might not be the easiest analysis ever.”

“Tell me about it,” Brooke snorted. “But have fun with Liz and Sam and everybody. I’ll catch Jason and his band the next time they play,” she promised.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Di told her.

The two turned to small talk for the rest of the meal, and then they headed back to their room so that Di could get ready to go out and Brooke could finish her analysis for her English class.

As Di got dressed for the bar, she could not help but feel a little...empty. She sighed and felt that now-familiar tension overwhelm her once again.

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“So, Brooke couldn’t make it?” Liz said as Di entered her room alone.

“Nope. An analysis of the symbolism in *The Wizard of Oz* was calling her name,” Di answered lightly.

“I had to write an essay on that last year,” Kelly, an art major who expressed her love of colors using her hair as an ever-changing palette, said from the bean bag chair in which she sat. This week, her pale blonde hair was streaked with fuchsia. Di had to admit that it did seem to suit the effervescent girl.

“Well, then remind me never to take that class if it’s a common exercise,” Di laughed. “Hearing about it from Brooke has been bad enough. I’d hate to have to live through it myself.”

“Is Mart going to be able to meet up with us?” Sam asked from her position atop Liz’s bunk.

Di had been dreading that question, but, now that it was here, she realized that she was not feeling as bad as she had been earlier. *Brooke’s pep talk must have done some good and sunk in*, she thought. Out loud she said, “He has a huge exam that he needs to study for. I won’t get to see him until Friday night.”

“That’s a bummer,” Brian, an art education junior, commiserated. “That’s what happens when you date those driven scientist types from Cornell.” His girlfriend was a microbiology major in the premed program at Cornell, and she studied even more than Mart did, especially as she was now beginning to think ahead to her MCATs, the medical school admissions test.

“Tell me about it, Brian,” she lamented. It was weird for Diana to know someone named Brian who was an artistic and creative type and dating a premed student, instead of actually *being* the premed student.

“Hey, you two!” Liz scolded. “Tonight is about having fun, so cheer up! Here,” she said, opening her small dorm-sized refrigerator. “Have a beer,” she offered as she took out a few

cans. She gently tossed one to Brian and Kelly and started to toss one to Diana, but the freshman quickly shook her head, declining the offered beverage.

“No, thanks,” she said politely.

“Are you sure?” Liz asked.

Di wrinkled her nose. “I’ve tried it. I don’t like the taste.”

Kelly laughed as she popped the top of her can. “I used to be the same way. When I started college, I hated coffee, beer, and milk. Now that’s all I drink. Especially the coffee,” she stated.

Before she left for college, Di did not drink coffee either, but she was now regularly going out for coffee with her friends, and she was actually learning to enjoy drinking the pungent brew. Of course, she only drank the flavored coffees, not the regular stuff. Di looked at the cans of beer that Liz, Kelly, and Brian were drinking and wondered if she would one day like the taste of beer, just as she was slowly growing to like coffee.

“Have a seat, Di,” Liz said as she herself settled on the floor in front of her bed. “Everyone will be meeting here, but Mary Beth has a late lab class so we’re going to wait for her before we head over to The Haunt.”

Di also settled on the floor next to Liz, leaning her back against Liz’s standard dorm mattress, which was held off the floor by the ubiquitous, thin, iron frame.

Di listened as Brian, Kelly, and Liz traded stories about something that had happened in their sculpture class that day. Di would not be taking the Introduction to Sculpture class until the following semester, so she did not have much to say. She enjoyed listening to the upperclassmen talk about their classes, though. She always learned so much.

Only a few minutes had gone by when their friend Josh entered the room, followed by Heather. “Let’s get the party started,” the always lively Heather exclaimed. “The party duo has arrived. And Josh brought reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements. Cool!” Liz said as she stood up and accepted a six-pack of beer from Josh and tried to fit the cans into the already-crowded refrigerator. “They don’t all fit. I guess you’ll just have to drink some,” Liz said.

Heather noticed Di then. “Hey, Di! I’m so glad you could make it. Is Mart going to meet us there?”

Di shook her head. “He’s got a big exam, so he’s stuck in the library tonight.”

“Bummer,” Josh said. “Hey, do you need a beer?”

Di once again shook her head. “No, I’m good. But thanks.”

“Let me know if you change your mind,” Josh said as he took a beer for himself and held one out to Heather, who declined, as she was driving them all to the bar.

“Okay, I will,” Di responded. She knew that people drank at college, but it still seemed weird to Diana for a bunch of teenagers to be drinking on a Tuesday night, a school night. Although college was exactly what she had expected in some ways, it was also very different in others.

After everyone, except Diana and Heather, had finished the supply of beer and Mary Beth arrived from her late class, the group headed out to Heather and Mary Beth's cars. Di found herself in the front seat of Mary Beth's car next to its owner, whom she barely knew. The ambitious junior was taking an extremely full course load this semester so that she could graduate early and, as a result, was rarely around when the group got together. She was a very plain-looking girl, and very intense, Diana thought, but she seemed nice enough.

"You're lucky to be able to get out on a Tuesday night with all of your classes, I bet," Di said to make conversation. Liz, Sam, and Brian were loudly teasing each other in the back seat and barely seemed to notice Mary Beth and Di in the front seat, .

"Well, I actually have a lot of homework that I need to be doing, but I just couldn't pass up a chance to see Jason's band. They only get to play every so often, so I figured I needed to juggle my priorities a little bit and make time," Mary Beth explained.

Diana nodded. "Plus, all work and no play must get pretty exhausting," she commented.

"It does," Mary Beth confirmed. "I mentally geared up to have so many credits, and in some ways it's about what I expected...but in other ways, not so much. I truly never thought I'd be *this* exhausted."

"Well, maybe a relaxing night out with friends will recharge your batteries and you won't be so exhausted," Di said in an attempt at cheerfulness.

"Relaxing? The Haunt?" Mary Beth laughed. Di joined in, feeling so...*young* next to this put-together and impressive woman.

"Okay, maybe relaxing wasn't *quite* the word I wanted to use," Di admitted good-naturedly. "But maybe your batteries will still get recharged."

"That's what I'm hoping for," Mary Beth declared. There was a pause in the front seat conversation, but the noise from the back seat was as loud as ever.

"Don't you have a boyfriend from back home or something?" Mary Beth asked after a few minutes of listening to the giggling and shrieking coming from the back seat. Brian was really on a roll teasing the two girls on either side of him.

Diana nodded. "I do," she confirmed. "He goes to Cornell. There's a big exam on Friday that he's already holed himself away studying for, so I won't get to see him until this weekend," Di explained for what seemed like the thousandth time that day. *Leave it to Murphy*, she thought rather grumpily. *The one topic I don't want to talk about is the only one that keeps coming up!*

"High school sweetheart?" Mary Beth was asking as she maneuvered the streets of Ithaca looking for an empty parking meter, a feat in and of itself. Although, as it was a Tuesday night and Groov Spooone did not get the draw that other bands did, Diana was optimistic that both Mary Beth and Heather would be able to find relatively close parking spots for their cars.

"Yeah. We met when I was in kindergarten, actually. He was in the first grade. But we didn't really become friends until I was in the eighth grade. And we didn't start dating until the very end of my sophomore year. He asked me to the end-of-the-year dance, and we've been together ever since."

"That's really nice," Mary Beth said as she maneuvered her car into a parking space. Di absolutely hated parallel parking, and she was impressed with Mary Beth's ability to glide right

into the parking spot as if it were second nature. "It must be nice being here in Ithaca this year so that you can see him more often."

Mary Beth was busy concentrating on parking the car and did not see Di's face cloud over. "When I get to see him," Di muttered, a little bit more emotionally than she had intended.

Mary Beth threw the gearshift into park and looked at her front seat passenger. "Sore subject?" she asked lightly.

Di looked a bit uncomfortable. "I just expected to see him more this year now that I'm here, but he always has to study."

The group in the back seat had already vacated the car and was calling out to the members of Heather's carload, who had found parking at a nearby meter.

"I'm sure that will change," Mary Beth said encouragingly as the two exited the car and joined the others on the sidewalk.

How she managed a genuine smile when she was feeling somewhat discombobulated about her feelings, Di did not know, but she did as she looked at Mary Beth. "You're right. I'm just being grumpy for no good reason."

"Maybe a *relaxing* night at The Haunt will do us both good," the older girl said with a smile.

Di laughed. "Maybe," she agreed.

"C'mon, you guys!" Brian called. "Let's get the show on the road."

Di's talk with Mary Beth had made her feel oddly better somehow, so she smiled genuinely as she joined the group heading toward the bar.

I'm just being silly to be so worried about this, Di told herself, even though she could not quite shake the feeling that some very hard times lay ahead for her and Mart.

The group found a scarred wood table not too far from the stage and immediately claimed it. They had to pull over some extra chairs to accommodate everyone and really squeeze around the large circular piece of furniture, but, somehow, they all managed to fit.

"Oh look, there's Staci," Sam said with a head gesture toward a girl standing near the elevated platform that served as the stage for the bar. Heads all over the table swiveled toward the girl with long, curly hair that was somewhere between red and blonde. She was extremely tall, and Di guessed the girl measured in at least six feet. She was also exceptionally skinny. And on her skinny frame were very tight and revealing clothes.

"Who is she?" Di wanted to know. Judging by the smirks and snickers emitted by her companions around the table, the girl was not held in high regard.

"Her name is Staci," Liz volunteered. "She's college aged, but I don't think she goes to either Ithaca or Cornell. She's always hanging out by the stage for every show here at The Haunt."

"And every other bar," Josh muttered.

"She collects musicians," Brian supplied with a wry smile.

"Interesting." Diana knew she sounded pretty dumb, but it was all she could think to say. She had been the source of gossip when her father had made his fortune, and she had been very

lonely as a result. Knowing the pain of being the subject of gossip, Diana tried never to indulge in it herself, no matter what. She still remembered the sting of Jane Morgan's gossipy attitude when she had wanted to be Juliet in the Sleepyside Junior-Senior High freshman class production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and Diana had been selected instead. It did not matter that Jane had realized that her attitude was wrong and subsequently apologized. The girl's animosity had cut Diana to the quick, and the pain had taken a long time to fade.

"Remember when Cuttin' Heads played last April?" Kelly said with a laugh.

"Wasn't that when someone set up the girls' bathroom door to dump flour over anyone unfortunate enough to open the bathroom door?" Brian asked.

"Yeah. Some April Fool's Day joke that was," Josh said. "No one ever 'fessed up to that, did they?"

Kelly shook her head. "Nope. It's still a mystery."

"Let me guess," Diana put in. "Staci was the one who got hit?"

Josh nodded his head, while Kelly piped up, "She sure did. And she has a *really* big thing for Mike, the lead singer of Cuttin' Heads, so she was done up all extra special that night and had on a brand new, very expensive outfit. Or so she was shrieking when the flour got dumped all over her head."

"That's really awful," Di said, imagining herself in Staci's shoes and being the laughing stock of an entire crowd of college kids at a bar. It was not a pleasant thought.

Fortunately, the spotlight lit up the stage just then, illuminating Jason's band, so there could be no further discussion about Staci and the April Fool's Day prank that had claimed her as its victim. For some reason, the whole discussion had left Di feeling rather disturbed.

My God, Diana Marie Lynch, she scolded herself. Everything is getting to you lately. Stop it! Stop it and enjoy the show.

As Jason stepped up to the microphone to greet the crowd and introduce the first song, Diana turned her attention to the black-haired, blue-eyed singer. As she took in his chiseled cheek bones and eyes so startlingly blue that she could see their bright color all the way from where she was sitting, Di felt a small, unexpected jolt of electricity.

As Jason strummed his guitar and sang a well-known song, Diana's eyes were drawn to his muscled arms. Suddenly, she had the urge to smile, and she felt her face growing warm. Diana realized that, even though she had met Jason on campus and never really felt anything, watching him up on stage singing his heart out, she was actually attracted to him.

Behind the surprise of this revelation came the guilt. What was she doing? She loved Mart. And dark-haired guys had never been her thing. What was *wrong* with her lately?

As she sat staring at the handsome man on stage, the now-familiar uneasiness returned ten-fold, and she instinctively knew that it was not going to go away any time soon.

* * * * *

Di threw her arms around Mart and gave him a huge kiss.

“I take it you missed me,” he said with a smile as he finally pulled back from the passionate kiss.

“Of course,” Diana said. “Or, as Regan would say, natch! So, how did your test go?”

“I think the studying paid off. I don’t think I aced it by any means, but I think I was able to hold my own against the questions,” Mart said.

“That’s wonderful!” Di exclaimed. “I’m glad that all that time away from me helped and that it was worth my sacrifice.”

Di had meant her words as a joke, but her voice sounded harsh, even to her own ears. From the hurt look on Mart’s face, he obviously thought so too.

“Di—” Mart began, but Di rushed to stop him.

“Mart, I was joking, I swear. I don’t know why I sounded so cranky just then. I really am sorry. Please forgive me?”

Di held her breath as Mart stared at her with earnest blue eyes. Eyes that held love and adoration. And hurt. And Di wanted to kick herself for causing that hurt.

“I know that I’m not living up to your expectations as a boyfriend, and I really am sorry for that,” Mart said.

Again, Di couldn’t bear for him to continue and she cried, “But Mart, that’s not true. You’re a wonderful boyfriend, and I’m the luckiest girl in the world. I’m sorry I’m acting like such a brat. I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately. But you are in *no way* a disappointment. If anyone is the disappointment, it’s me. And I’m sorry, Mart. Honestly.”

Mart’s face relaxed as he pulled his girlfriend into a big hug. “We just need to adjust. That’s all. We adjusted to being separated last year, so I know that we can adjust to this. I just got so used to being able to study whenever I wanted last year without having to consider anyone else. But I’ll try to manage my time better so that I can spend more time with you and still manage to study.”

Di felt horribly selfish and small at that moment. “But you shouldn’t have to, Mart. You’re here to study, and your parents have sacrificed a lot to help you guys out with college, and you work hard on work-study, and you’re mounting up student loans. The last thing I want you to do is waste all of that. Your studies come first. I just have to remind myself that this isn’t high school, and I can’t spend as much time with you as I used to.”

“You know that as important as school is to me, *you’re* the most important thing on the planet to me, right?” Mart looked at her earnestly.

Di smiled. “I know that, Mart. And you’re the most important person to me, as well.”

“I know. Now, come on in here so that we can cuddle and watch a movie. I bribed Coop and John so that we could have the place all to ourselves,” Mart said as he took her hand and led her to the couch.

“We’re not going out?” Di asked, surprised.

Mart looked at her, confused. “Well, no. I’m kinda tired from studying all week, and all I really want to do is cuddle with my best girl and watch a movie. I even rented a bunch of chick flicks that I thought you might want to see. Is that okay?”

Di smiled gamely at Mart, ignoring the disappointment welling up inside of her. “Of course, it’s okay,” she fibbed. “A night cuddling with you with the apartment all to ourselves sounds heavenly.”

Mart looked so relieved and happy that Di was glad that she had hid the truth. Of course, she *had* been looking forward to actually going *out* with him. Back in high school, they always went out every Friday and Saturday night. It was just assumed. And, after not seeing him all week, Diana really wanted to go out. Over the past couple of months, she had discovered that she really enjoyed Ithaca’s nightlife, and she wanted to be experiencing it right then with Mart.

But Mart just wanted to stay in.

What is wrong with you? Di scolded herself once again, something that was becoming a very annoying and very regular habit. *What other man would rent a lot of romantic movies for his girlfriend after making sure that they would have the apartment to themselves to kiss and cuddle?*

Di firmly told herself that she was being ridiculous to wish that she and Mart were heading into Ithaca, especially when she could spend much more quality time with him here than she could in any bar.

So why did she still want to go out?

Unaware of Di’s inner turmoil, Mart was enthusiastically showing her the three romantic comedies that he had picked out to please her. All three choices were movies that Di had been wanting to see, but, for one reason or another, had not had a chance yet. Mart knew her well enough to know what to pick out. She gave her boyfriend genuine smile and told Mart which movie she wanted to see first. As Mart moved to put the DVD into the player, Di settled down on the couch. Her violet eyes fell on a piece of paper sitting on the glass-topped coffee table. She idly picked it up and tried to decipher the scribbles, which she recognized as Mart’s handwriting.

“Ravines, yarn, fable, chef, trite,” she read out loud. Mart turned, surprised at her words. Seeing the paper Di was holding, he actually began to look a little sheepish.

“What’s this?” Di wanted to know.

“It was something that I was trying out,” Mart said. “It’s stupid.”

“I doubt that,” Di said. “What is it?” she asked again.

“I was trying out something,” Mart finally admitted, the DVD in his hand temporarily forgotten. “You may not know the significance of this date, but it happens to be the fifth anniversary of the day that you became a Bob-White. And the day I fell even more in love with you than I had been in the first grade. So, I was trying to do some clever word plays to give you something that said I was thinking about you. I couldn’t come up with anything good though.”

Di was unbelievably floored. Mart really was the sweetest, most romantic man anywhere. “Mart, that’s so sweet,” she said. “I guess I should know the anniversary of the date I became a Bob-White, and I think it’s so wonderful that you actually remember it and wanted to commemorate it this year.” She looked down at the paper again and was confused. “But what do ravines and trite chefs have to do with me becoming a Bob-White five years ago?”

Mart grinned. “Well, like I said, I was trying out some word games. Even though I don’t often flex my vocabulary like I did when I was a dumb, insecure kid, I still enjoy words.”

“You were never, *ever* a dumb kid,” Di assured him. “And you certainly never seemed insecure.”

“I think the fact that I always sounded like I swallowed a dictionary should have been enough evidence of that, but thanks. Anyway, I was trying out silly things during study breaks, and I decided to do an anagram of ‘celebrate fifth anniversary.’ Those words were the result of that particular failed attempt.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s a failed attempt at all,” Di stated. “I think it’s wonderful. And I think *you’re* wonderful.”

“Yeah?” Mart asked, a smile on his face.

“Yeah,” Di said as she leaned in to kiss Mart.

He really is the man of your dreams, she thought as she lost herself in his kiss. And then she was not thinking anymore. She was just enjoying being in Mart’s arms, and the doubts that had been plaguing her as of late were held at bay.

If only for the time being.

Additional Author’s Notes: My carryover item (yeah, I know it’s not necessary for the Anniversary CWP’s, but I always do anyway, lol) from CWP #2.1 is a food new to a character (Di tries stromboli).

Cuttin’ Heads, Big Blue Couch, and Groove Spoon (the spelling of which I changed above) were popular bar bands back when I was at Michigan State. No money is being made from their mention, yadda, yadda, yadda. There was another band that was really popular at MSU when I was there but I decided not to use them in my story—The Verve Pipe. They had a huge hit with the song “Freshman” back in the mid-90s or so. That song was huge at Michigan State when I was there, and I freaked out a few years later when I was driving down I-64 in Norfolk, Virginia, and heard the song on the radio. Very cool. But I digress. :)

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