

Author's Notes: This is the first story in my new *Gethsemane* universe, which starts immediately after *Sapphire Days* ends. With the girls starting at their respective universities and colleges, all of the Bob-Whites are now attending college in this universe. This is a Jixemetri CWP #2.2 Back to School CWP submission. Many, many thanks to poor Susan who had to edit this after I *tried* to clean it up for her. But editing at midnight when you're exhausted and then when you're rushed is not conducive to a thorough cleanup. The next one will be better, Susan. I promise! And, of course, thanks to Cathy for providing me a home at Jix. HAPPY SIXTH BIRTHDAY, JIX!

Closing Time

by Dana

Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.

–Semisonic, “Closing Time”

Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan

Trixie Belden looked around the small room in awe. The bunk beds were not particularly awe-inspiring. Nor was the floor—ugly, brown tiles specked with gray, a pink so pale it was practically white, and a pale greenish-blue (carpet would *definitely* need to be laid down!). The two battered, wooden desks, placed side-by-side in front of the window, certainly would not inspire awe in the average person.

No, it wasn't the décor, but the fact that this was *her* room. And it was not housed in Crabapple Farm, but almost a thousand miles away from her childhood home near Sleepyside-on-Hudson, New York. On the campus of Michigan State University, to be exact.

Trixie's new room was not much farther away from Jim Frayne's college residence than her room at Crabapple Farm was to Jim's room at the Manor House.

And Trixie could not be happier.

“Is this it?” Helen Belden asked as she stepped inside the room.

Trixie turned toward the blonde woman to whom she looked so similar. “Gleeps, Moms! It is! I can't believe that this is going to be my home for the next nine months!”

Helen took in the stark white walls, plain furniture, and closets with no doors and tried hard to understand Trixie's excitement. Trixie was her third child to head off to college, but she was her only daughter. And Trixie's older brothers had both chosen to remain in New York to go to school. Michigan had beckoned Trixie, who reasoned that Michigan State University had one of the top criminal justice programs in the entire nation.

And it also has Jim Frayne, Helen's reminded herself. What were we thinking, letting Trixie come halfway across the country?

Suddenly, the legendary honorableness that was Jim's most apparent trait, other than his red hair, did not matter. Her baby girl was too far from home and in the clutches of *that boy*.

The most wonderful boy in the world.

Helen sighed at the memory of her thirteen-year-old daughter bestowing that title upon the boy next door.

Out loud she said, “You know, Trixie, it’s not too late. If you think you might be homesick, I’m sure you could still attend Westchester Community College and then transfer to NYU next year. You’d be so close to Honey. Wouldn’t that be nice?” Helen asked hopefully.

Trixie turned to her mother, her mouth open in shock. “Are you having second thoughts, Moms?”

As Helen flushed guiltily, looking more like Trixie’s older sister than her mother, and Trixie felt a sudden wave of sympathy for her. Impulsively, she threw her arms around Helen’s shoulders.

“Oh, Moms! It’ll be all right. I promise! I know I can look after myself, and Jim is here to look after me, too.”

That’s what I’m afraid of! Helen’s mind screamed. She tried to smile as she said, “I know that Jim would never let anything happen to you. And, I *am* glad—on one hand—that he’s here to look after you, Trixie, but—”

Trixie looked at her mother expectantly. “But what, Moms?” she prompted her.

“Well, it’s just that...”

Trixie’s mother looked more flustered than ever, and Trixie had a sudden, horrible realization of exactly what it was that her mother was afraid. And, suddenly, Trixie found herself as red as her mother.

“Moms!” she squeaked. “You don’t have to worry about *that*. Jim and I aren’t ready for, uh, that.”

Helen Belden looked at Trixie earnestly. “I know that when we talked about this earlier, when you were looking at possible colleges and deciding on them, you assured me of that fact. To the point that I went to bat for you with your father and convinced him that letting you go out of state and living near Jim—unsupervised—was okay, because Jim is responsible, and this truly is a great opportunity for you at a school with a good reputation for your major, and MSU was offering you a small scholarship and a place in their work study program.” Trixie couldn’t help but smile. Honey-speak had definitely rubbed off on Moms. She listened as her mother continued, “I know I was convinced then—mostly. But now that the time has come to actually leave you here...” Helen’s voice trailed off, and her blue eyes were unusually bright.

Trixie hugged her mother again. “Moms, I know this must be hard for you. I’m your only daughter, and I am going to be a lot further away than Mart and Brian, but I can feel it in my bones that this is the right place for me at the right time. It really is. Jim will take good care of me and—” Trixie took a deep breath. “And, yes, Jim and I have talked about it, Moms. Very recently, in fact. And Jim and I aren’t ready for...for...*that*. Not yet. Maybe not ‘til...” She suddenly stopped, not wanting her to upset her mother even more with the knowledge of how serious she was in her feelings for Jim.

Helen looked at her with knowing eyes. “Not until you’re married?” she asked gently.

Trixie paused and then nodded. “We’ve talked about the...the...physical stuff, but we’ve never talked about the marriage stuff except in the abstract.”

Mrs. Belden could not help but smile at the fact that Trixie sounded a little like Mart. Her little girl was growing up! No, her little girl already *had* grown up.

“...But I know how I feel Moms. I *know* he’s the one. And when you know you’re going to spend the rest of your life with someone, well, you don’t feel the need to rush into something stupid. Something you’re not ready for.”

Trixie sounded so confident and so sure of herself, as she had even as a small child, that most of Helen’s concerns evaporated into nothingness. There was a lingering hesitation that remained lodged in the back of her mind, but that was because she was a mother, and her only daughter was going to be living on her own for the first time. That feeling would never go away, not now, not even when Trixie was thirty-five and possibly a mother herself. That feeling joined the feelings she had about Mart and Brian leaving her nest, where a similar feeling for Bobby, her youngest, would be placed some day. That was what being a mother was all about. An invisible bond that she would always feel for her children, no matter where in the world they were.

She hugged her daughter tightly, and images of herself at Trixie’s age filled her mind. She remembered exactly how she had felt about Peter during her one and only year of college and knew that Trixie was right. When you found that person who was your soul mate, who you knew you would spend the rest of your life with, you didn’t rush things. She had often worried about Trixie’s impulsiveness and recklessness, wondering if her daughter’s traits would cancel out Jim’s honorableness when it came to their physical relationship, but now she knew she really had nothing about which to worry. In love, Trixie was not impulsive or reckless. No, her daughter had blossomed under Jim’s love, and a confident woman had emerged.

A confident woman who would be just fine in East Lansing, Michigan.

“I’m not worried anymore,” she told her daughter truthfully, tears brimming in her blue eyes.

“Really?” Trixie said in disbelief.

“Well, no more than a normal mother hen worries about her chicks.”

“That’s the Moms I know and love!” Trixie laughed as she squeezed her mother one more time.

“Am I interrupting something?” Dark and handsome Peter Belden stuck his head in the room.

“Not at all!” Trixie cried. “What took you so long?”

“It’s a zoo down there, Trixie. It took quite a while to find a parking space. I had to circle around several times before I found a spot that wouldn’t be too far to carry in your belongings.” He looked around the room. “It’s rather bare, but I think you can make it look like home in no time. I take it your roommate has not shown up yet?”

Trixie shook her head. “It doesn’t look like it. Her last email said that she probably wasn’t going to show up until tomorrow.”

The Michigan State dormitory assignment office had paired Trixie with a girl named Nikki Kendall, also a freshman. Trixie had received notice of her assignment almost a month before and had immediately utilized the enclosed email address of her new roommate to introduce herself. She had found out that Nikki had grown up in Michigan, in a town called Grandville, about an hour-and-a-half west of East Lansing. Their email exchanges over the

previous three-and-a-half weeks had been lighthearted and fun, and Trixie thought she was really going to like her new roommate.

“Well, let’s go back downstairs and start getting your belongings,” Peter said. “Mart’s waiting downstairs.”

Classes at Cornell had not started yet, so Mart had decided to accompany Trixie and her parents to Michigan State to help her get moved in. Brian had opted not to come along, as it would have been cramped with five adults and all of Trixie’s boxes in the Belden station wagon. Bobby was staying with the Lynches until Helen and Peter returned to New York the following day.

The trio headed out of Trixie’s dorm, Bryan Hall, which was in the Brody dormitory complex. The complex was farther away from the center of campus and most classroom buildings than any other dormitory complex, and, therefore, it was mostly freshman who lived in the complex. Upperclassman used the university’s dormitory preference system to their advantage and requested dorms closer to the middle of campus. As Michigan State was the largest contiguous college campus in the world, being closer to the classroom buildings was no small advantage. Trixie already knew from Jim that she would have at least a 25-minute walk from Brody to most of her classes. Ouch. Then again, how many times had she decided that she needed to solve a mystery and headed on foot along their small country lane into Sleepyside proper? Getting to class would be a breeze, she reassured herself.

The three Beldens found Mart standing near the station wagon with the back hatch open, a few of Trixie’s smaller boxes on the ground near his feet. When he saw Trixie and his parents coming, he yelled, “What the heck did you pack in these boxes, Trixie? Boulders?”

Trixie felt herself flush as several people glanced their way and smiled. “No,” she said defiantly, but she did not elaborate as to what she had packed in the boxes. She simply smiled sweetly at her “almost twin” and picked up one of the boxes off the ground. Helen, Mart, and Peter also grabbed a box and followed Trixie back into the building.

At the top of the fourth flight of stairs, Mart groaned. “You *would* get a floor on the fourth floor in a dorm that has no elevator!”

“I know,” Trixie panted. “I guess I’ll stay in shape this year, just from going up and down the stairs every time I come and go!”

The six four-story dormitory buildings that made up Brody Complex were the only dorms on campus that did not have passenger elevators. There was a sole freight elevator in each building, but, with all of the moving activity going on, it was already in heavy use. Trixie did not have anything so heavy that she, her brother, and her parents could not handle it on the stairs, so Trixie was not too concerned.

She passed a cute boy in a plaid shirt who smiled at her on her way to her room. She gave him a friendly smile in return and continued on to her new room.

An hour later, Trixie looked around her room, now filled with boxes and bags heaving with all of the things from Sleepyside that she “couldn’t live without,” as she had exclaimed while cramming things from her room at Crabapple Farm into the boxes.

“I don’t really want to unpack a lot before Nikki gets here. I don’t know what desk she wants, or if she wants the bottom or the top bunk or which half of the closet she’ll want. There’s

only one dresser, so we'll have to decide who gets the top three drawers and who gets the bottom." Suddenly, these decisions seemed to be of life and death importance to the teenage girl.

"I don't think she'll care, Trix," Mart said. "Just pick."

"No, I really want to wait. Plus, she said that she got a carpet remnant cheap from a carpet store near her house. I think she said she called the housing office and got the size of the room from them. The carpet remnant should cover most of the floor, so we may need to move some furniture around. It'll be easier to move if I don't have all of my stuff in the drawers and whatnot."

"Well, then it's definitely a good time to eat!" Mart exclaimed.

Trixie giggled. "Mart, you always think it's a good time to eat!"

"Yes, but after lugging all of your stuff up four flights of stairs, it's an *exceptionally* good time to eat!"

"Do I hear Mart complaining of hunger pains?" a familiar voice asked from the door. "Some things never change!"

"Jim!" Trixie fairly screeched and launched herself into her boyfriend's arms.

"Happy to see me, Trix?" Jim laughed, but he wrapped his arms around his girlfriend in such a way that showed clearly that he was just as happy to see her.

"Yes!" she shouted gleefully.

Jim had moved into his off campus house the week before, so the couple had not seen each other since Jim had left New York. This time had been a much happier good-bye than it had been in the past, each thrilled with the knowledge that they would no longer have to be apart during the long school year.

Jim broke apart from Trixie and shook Mr. Belden's hand and gave Mrs. Belden a hug.

"Did you all have a good trip?" he asked, his manners as impeccable as always.

"We did. We left at five this morning, so traffic was light when we started out. And we were miles away from any city when rush hour hit. It was pretty uneventful," Peter said, a little warily as he realized the implications of leaving his daughter, his baby girl, hundreds of miles of home and with this...this...male.

Honorable, my eye, Peter thought cynically. *I was a twenty-year-old once. I know.*

"So, Jim," Mart was saying, "where is a good place to eat around here?"

"How about Crunchy's?" Trixie suggested. "They're not as good as Moms' burgers or Wimpy's burgers, but they are a very close third!"

"You said the magic words, dear sis! Burgers! Lead on!" Mart said.

"Where is this place?" Peter wanted to know, still eyeing Jim suspiciously, as only a father can.

“It’s only about a ten minute walk from here,” Jim explained. “We could walk, but if you’re done loading Trixie’s things, it might be nice to let someone else have the spot so that they can unload.”

The group agreed—Peter having to grudgingly acknowledge Jim’s thoughtfulness—and headed down to where the Belden station wagon was parked. Within minutes, the group was entering the pub, which was jumping with back-to-school activity but was not too crowded, because it was too late for lunch and too early for dinner. The daily specials were written on a slate near the door. It was a “seat yourself” kind of place, so Trixie and Jim led the way to the only empty booth in the small pub. The wooden tables and benches were charmingly scarred with the carvings of the initials of many a love-struck college student or phrases such as “MSU ’93 Rocks.” The walls were filled with Michigan State paraphernalia—framed jerseys from the MSU hockey and basketball teams, posters commemorating the national champion basketball and hockey teams MSU had produced over the years, and pictures of Sparty, the beloved Spartan mascot. The ever-present green and white from the paraphernalia brightened up the dark wood interior. Two television screens suspended from the ceiling broadcast a preseason MSU football game.

Peter and Helen looked around the small pub, so different from Wimpy’s diner in Sleepyside, and yet somehow it seemed a kindred spirit to their favorite burger joint back home. The group enjoyed their burgers, and then Jim offered to give Trixie’s parents and brother a tour of the campus, often described one of the most beautiful college campuses in the United States.

Peter navigated the narrow and windy streets of the campus with Jim’s expert direction, while the redhead gave a narrative about the buildings they were passing. With the sheer size of the campus and the heavy back-to-school traffic, the tour lasted some time. Jim apologized for the length of time it was taking, but Helen and Peter assured him that they wanted to see the whole campus, from the ivy-covered nineteenth-century buildings of the north campus to the brand-new, modern science facilities on the south campus. If their daughter was going to spend the next four years here, they wanted to see every inch, no matter how long it took. And even Mart was extremely interested in the vast agricultural lands and buildings. He was surprised to learn that MSU was the nation’s first land grant university, and its school calendar had coincided with the harvesting season until very recently.

“Maybe you’ll want to come here yourself next year, Mart,” Trixie teased.

“Michigan State does have excellent programs in teaching, agriculture, and journalism, all things you’re interested in,” Jim added.

“I am extremely happy at Cornell, thank you very much. But it doesn’t sound like a bad place to check out for grad school, no matter what I decide I want to do,” Mart stated.

Mart had always wanted to major in agriculture, even as a child, and when he had met Jim and found out about his friend’s plan to open a year-round residence school for underprivileged and orphaned boys, he decided he wanted to be the resident agriculturalist and part-time science teacher. He had been very idealistic then, thinking that he could sustain the school with the crops that he would grow. Now that he had taken some classes in agricultural sustainability at Cornell, he was not so sure. Plus, he had also discovered an interest in journalism when he had begun working on the Sleepyside Junior-Senior High School newspaper, the *Campus Clarion*.

Currently, his declared major was officially “nutrition, food, and agriculture,” but he was also minoring in communication, and he really was not all that sure that he wanted to be a farmer anymore. Not as sure as Trixie and Honey were that they wanted to be detectives, or as Dan Mangan was about being a cop. And Brian was well on his way to becoming the doctor that he had always wanted to be. Could he, Mart Belden, really have a future as an agriculturist at Jim’s school? What if Jim, for whatever reason, was not able to follow his dream and open up his school for underprivileged and orphaned boys? What would he do then?

Mart’s thoughts of his future career plans were cut short when he heard Jim say, “The next left at that light up ahead is Trixie’s dorm.”

“Maybe I should go and check if Nikki has arrived yet,” Trixie said. “If not, you can drop Mart and me off at Jim’s, and then head back to your hotel, Moms and Dad.”

Helen and Peter were staying at the Holiday Inn in downtown East Lansing, only a mile or so away from Trixie’s dorm, whereas Mart was going to stay at Jim’s off campus house that night. Jim, Trixie, and Mart were planning on reveling in college night life while Helen and Peter retired to a quiet evening in their hotel. Then Mart and his parents would begin the journey back to New York early the next morning.

When Trixie checked her room, she found that Nikki had not yet shown up, so she left her roommate a note and hurried back down to where everyone waited outside.

“She’s not there,” Trixie reported.

“Well, it’s not too far of a walk to my house, so we can walk back there, if that’s what you want. Do you know how to get to the hotel, Mr. Belden?”

Soon, Mr. and Mrs. Belden were on their way, after receiving impeccable directions from Jim and giving Trixie crushing hugs and admonishing her to be careful. Each of them tried to quell the rising feelings of loss welling inside them, knowing they were being silly. Trixie would always be their daughter, no matter what. College would not change that.

The remaining trio then headed toward Jim’s small bungalow house just north of campus, passing several bus stops along the way.

When they arrived at the quaint little house, built sometime during the gilded age of the ‘20s, they found that Jeff Shaw, Jim’s roommate since his sophomore year, was hanging out, playing Nintendo. He reported that Matt Curtiss, the third roommate, was in his room, and Justin Hargrove, the fourth and final roommate, had just left about ten minutes before and was on his way home for the weekend.

“So, you’re here to stay this time, Trix?” Jeff, who had met Trixie several times before, asked.

Trixie’s dimples appeared instantly, and her face glowed with happiness. “Yes! Can you believe it?”

Jeff chuckled. “After seeing the two of you together, yeah, I can believe it.” He turned to Mart. “And you have *got* to be the famous Mart that I have heard so much about. You really *do* look like Trixie’s twin.”

“Good to meet you, Jeff. I’ve heard about you, too,” Mart said as he shook the hand offered to him.

“Uh oh. I did *not* pull all of those pranks and practical jokes that Jim thinks I did sophomore year. It was Andy, I swear,” Jeff protested good-naturedly, but the mischievous sparkle in his brown eyes gave him away. Mart and Trixie had no more doubts than Jim did that Jeff had indeed orchestrated all of the dorm pranks during Jim and Jeff’s sophomore year.

The laughing and teasing continued, and Mart, who was feeling almost as worried and uptight as his parents at the thought of leaving his little sister here in this foreign state for the next nine months, felt his worry slip away as he realized that she already had made connections on this far-away campus. As he watched the playful interaction between Trixie and Jeff, he realized that this roommate of Jim’s acted as though he were Trixie’s surrogate big brother, and he had no doubt that Jeff would look after his little sister.

“So, what are your plans for tonight?” Jeff wanted to know.

“We planned on heading down Grand River to see what’s happening,” Jim explained. “Trixie can get into the eighteen and over places now, so we can check them out.”

“The Pi Lams are having a party tonight. Matt wanted to know if we wanted to go,” Jeff volunteered. The “Pi Lams” were Pi Lambda Phi, a very laid-back fraternity that was nowhere near as stuffy or preppy as a lot of the other fraternities on campus. Their house was very close to Jim’s house.

“That’s a possibility,” Jim agreed. Jim knew a lot of the brothers, and they were very laid-back and cool. He had no problems taking Trixie to one of their parties, whereas he would have reservations taking her to some of the other frat parties on campus.

“I don’t know if I want to go to a frat party,” Mart put in, thinking of the frat parties he had attended at Cornell the previous year. He had not been impressed.

Jim and Jeff involuntarily glanced down the hallway toward Matt’s room and then both looked at Mart.

“Please do *not* call it a frat in front of Matt,” Jim cautioned.

Mart rolled his eyes. “So, I’ve heard. It’s a fraternity. After all...” He suddenly stopped and looked at his sister. Jim held his breath, hoping that his girlfriend had not picked up on her brother’s slip, while Jeff grinned knowingly.

Trixie, of course, had picked up on all three boys’ reactions. “What?” she asked, somehow able to stare effectively at all three of them at once.

Jim sighed and looked heavenward. *Of course, she would notice.*

When no one said anything, Trixie persisted. “What?”

“You just never call a fraternity a frat to someone who’s actually *in* a fraternity. For whatever reason, none of them can stand it.”

“What’s the big deal about *that*?” Trixie demanded.

“Well, they all have this vulgar analogy that they feel the need to say *every time* you say ‘frat,’” Jim said.

Trixie rolled her eyes. “Say no more. I don’t even want to know!”

The conversation continued in a very easy manner, and the group continued to laugh and tease. Trixie had to keep reminding herself that the day that she had waited for for so long was finally here. She was no longer Brian or Mart Belden's little sister. Or Honey Wheeler and Di Lynch's frumpy friend. She was not even that "harum scarum Belden girl." Here, she was just Trixie Belden, college freshman.

And what could be better than that?

* * *

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York City, New York

Honey Wheeler looked around the furnished apartment in the new high rise in Midtown Manhattan. As of that morning, Honey's residence was now the Marymount Manhattan College Residence, built for students whose New York City colleges did not have their own on-campus housing. Honey had discussed the possibility of living in the Wheeler penthouse on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It was only a few miles from Honey's college, John Jay, but her parents and she had mutually agreed that Honey needed to live a more "student" life than she would have if she had stayed in the luxurious West Side penthouse that her parents kept. Plus, her parents often spent the night in the apartment, or sometimes even entertained there, and that would be a cumbersome situation for all.

Of course, Matthew Wheeler had insisted on finding a safe place for Honey to stay, no matter what the cost. When he had found the independent student housing system in New York City, he had been thrilled. He, Madeleine, and Honey had sat down with the brochures and had decided that, of the six possible residences, the Marymount Manhattan College Residence, located on East 55th Street between Second and Third Avenues and just over a half mile from John Jay, would be the perfect solution.

Honey had to admit that she felt a little pretentious in her surroundings. Marymount was a brand-new, 48-story, gleaming high rise, complete with a doorman on duty twenty-four hours a day, high-speed Internet access, and furnished two bedroom apartments. Honey did not need a two bedroom apartment, but her father had his heart set on this particular residence, and it only offered two bedroom domiciles. Honey wondered exactly how obvious it would be that she came from money when people realized that she was living in this spectacular complex with no roommate.

She had wanted to suggest that Dan take the other room in the apartment so that he did not have to commute so far from the tiny apartment he shared with two other John Jay students, but she had not dared. Dan assured her that he was perfectly fine living in his neighborhood, but Honey thought the location was shady at best. But Dan was already going into debt with student loans to pay for his tuition, and he did not want to increase that debt just so he could live closer to the college or in a "swanky" neighborhood, as he said. But Honey did not care if he lived in a swanky neighborhood or not. She wanted him in a *safe* neighborhood, and she was not convinced the one in which he lived was all that safe.

She had learned not to bring it up, though. The first time she had broached the subject, his dark eyes had hardened just the slightest bit as he reminded her that he had lived in worse

neighborhoods. Honey knew that he did not like to discuss his days as a New York City gang member, so she did not press the subject.

Honey wandered over to the window of her twenty-third-floor apartment and looked out at the amazing view spread out before her. Logically, she knew that she was not quite ready to live with Dan, but it would have been so convenient—and so much easier on Dan’s wallet—if he had been able to just use the extra bedroom that she had available. He would also save on transportation costs, as he would be able to walk to class instead of riding the subway everyday. But she did not have the courage to bring up the idea with her father, and she knew that Dan would have declined the invitation even if her father had been amenable to the plan.

Oh well, maybe next year, she thought. A year’s independence could make all the difference, she had reasoned to herself every time her mind had struck the plan down on the principle that her father and boyfriend would strike it down anyway.

There was a knock on the door, and Honey hurried to open it, knowing that it was her boyfriend. Sure enough, she was treated to Dan’s handsomely chiseled face and slow grin as she opened the door.

“Hi,” she said, pulling him through the door and giving him a hug as if she had not seen him in a month, when, in reality, she had seen him just a few days ago. He gave her a long kiss and then pulled away.

“How’s my favorite freshman?” Dan asked.

Honey smiled. “Nervous. Excited. Scared. Exhilarated. Even a little numb.”

Dan looked around the furnished apartment. “This is pretty swanky, Miss Wheeler,” he commented, his eyes taking in the tastefully decorated living room, neat kitchen, and magnificent views.

Honey looked slightly uncomfortable. “I know. I’m a little worried about what people are going to think of me when they realize I live in this building and don’t even have a roommate.”

Dan looked immediately sorry. He knew that, for the most part, Honey was comfortable with her wealth, but she did not like flaunting it. “Hey, I’m sorry, sweetie. I was just kidding. I bet there are a lot of people who live here without roommates. This is Manhattan, Honey. Lots of people have money. And anyway, once everyone gets to know you, they’re going to adore you for *you*, because you’re sweet, kind, generous, loyal, and a good friend. It’s not going to matter that your dad is owner, president, and CEO of Wheeler Industries. And if people do care, well, then they’re not worth it,” he ended emphatically.

Honey smiled at Dan, feeling much better. “You’re so smart, my upperclassman man. What would I do without you?”

“You’re never going to have to find out,” Dan said as he leaned in for another soul-searching kiss. He never got tired of kissing Honey Wheeler.

Eventually though, as his hormones threatened to overwhelm him and make him more than aware of the bedrooms in close proximity and the lack of parental supervision, he pulled away. “You’re killing me, Honey.” He groaned. Then, changing the subject, he tried to keep his voice steady. “What do you say we go and get our books for our classes? There’s got to be

some good sales on school supplies and stuff. And, if I want to get used textbooks, I need to beat the rush before they're all gone."

It was on the tip of Honey's tongue to offer to buy Dan's books for him, but she knew just how well that gesture would go over. As much as she wanted to exercise her generous nature and provide for him, she would *not* insult his pride. Instead, she smiled warmly.

"Sure. You can give me a tour of campus, too."

Dan looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "You got a tour of the campus when you visited last spring."

Honey smiled at him, that smile she reserved for him and only him. "But *you* didn't give me the tour. I was hoping for a more...intimate tour this time."

A slow grin spread across Dan's face. "I think I can arrange that, Miss Wheeler."

"Wonderful," she said in what she hoped was a seductive voice. And then she remembered something, and her voice suddenly reflected her usual excited tone. "Oh! I almost forgot! Mother and Daddy wanted to take us out to dinner tonight to celebrate the coming year. Are you up for it?"

"Absolutely," Dan agreed as Honey grabbed her purse, and the two headed out of the apartment.

Dan was eager to head to the bookstore before the supply of decent used books was sold out, so that was their first stop. Honey looked at the prices of some of the textbooks and nearly gasped out loud. She knew that college textbooks were expensive, but she had had no idea that some of them ran what they did. How did other kids afford them? Students like Dan and Trixie and Mart and Brian? Honey wondered if it would be out of line to get Dan's second semester book list before Christmas and give him the books as a second Christmas present, in addition to whatever sentimental gift she gave him, as was now their tradition.

Honey looked at her boyfriend as he looked through a stack of *Gangs and Society*, one of the books required for his Puerto Rican sociology course on Latino gangs, for the best used copy. She admired his look of determination—as well as his chiseled cheekbones—and realized that he would not appreciate that particular gift anymore than Trixie or Brian or Mart would.

You need to stop worrying, she told herself sternly, remembering that day so many years ago when they had decided that everyone in the club would *earn* their own money. College would not change that.

Logically, she knew that Dan was doing just fine with his dad's GI educational benefits, his part-time job, some money that his uncle had set aside for him, and student loans. Even Mr. Maypenny had surprised Dan with a savings account that he had set aside for Dan, donating a fixed amount of money per hour for every hour Dan had worked on the Wheeler Game Preserve chopping wood and performing other tasks. But, as she had an excess of money, it was hard not to want to spend some of it on Dan so that he did not have to work so hard and scrimp so much. Of course, his dedication and determination to work hard and make a good life for himself was one of the things she loved most about her boyfriend, so she really could not complain.

Honey wandered over to the chemistry section where she found her *In Preparation for College Chemistry* book. Aptly named as it was for her "Preparation for Chemistry" course.

Honey still was not sure she would *ever* be prepared for college chemistry, but she optimistically added it to her green plastic shopping basket. Her next stop was for the *College Algebra* text for her Modern Math 3 course and then on to pick up her *Natural Science* book with accompanying lab manual, as well as her laboratory safety goggles, for her Introduction to Natural Science class.

Not very original names, Honey thought. *Gangs and Society sounds so much more interesting.*

But Honey knew that she needed a firm foundation of math, physical and natural science, and chemistry before she would be ready for the more exciting classes like “Introduction to Criminalistics for Forensic Science.” Honey was really looking forward to that class, as it promised to provide the foundation for being a forensic criminologist. Honey was looking forward to the laboratory exercises, which would include forensic photography as well as analysis of fingerprints, hair, gunshot residue, and footwear outsole patterns. She remembered how smart she and Trixie had thought they were when they examined the footprints in the gatehouse and the tire prints near the road after they had found the diamond and decided that thieves had spent the night in the gatehouse.

That thought made her feel more encouraged about the coming year. After all, could any of the other incoming students say they had solved thirty-nine mysteries all before their fifteenth birthdays?

Honey continued to wander the aisles, picking up notebooks that caught her eye and pens that looked like they would be great for notetaking. Soon, Dan joined her.

“All set?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” she smiled as she placed a purple pen that reminded her of Di into her basket.

The two of them headed toward the cash registers, which were filled with long lines of students. They waited patiently in line, and, just before they got to the counter, someone Dan knew from one of his freshmen classes saw him and came over to talk. Dan introduced Honey. She smiled politely but did not have a chance to say anything because just then it was her turn at the cash register. As she pulled the books out of her basket and set them on the counter in front of the cashier, a plan began to form in her mind. Dan was animatedly talking to his acquaintance and barely aware of Honey checking out. She adeptly began taking the books out of Dan’s basket and placing them with hers to be rung up.

Eventually, Dan noticed that his basket was a lot lighter, but Honey had already managed to sneak three books of his in with hers.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Honey smiled sweetly. “I just thought it would be easier to ring them up together since you were chatting. We can look at the receipt later and figure out what you owe me,” she said, intending to do no such thing.

Dan looked slightly suspicious, but he finally nodded. “Okay, but don’t you dare forget to hang on to that receipt so that we can figure it out later.”

“Of course,” Honey said, her air of innocence belying the cunning plan forming in her devious mind.

Dan returned briefly to his conversation but said his good-byes when he realized that Honey was signing the charge slip for the book purchases. For one envious second, he realized that Honey would never see that bill because it would go straight to her father. But he also knew that Honey was determined not to freeload off of her wealthy father and would only put school-related purchases on the credit card. That was one of the things that he loved most about Honey Wheeler. She could have had anything that money could buy, but all she wanted was to live like an average person.

He smiled at her as they gathered their bags and headed out the door and into the late August sunshine.

“Well, now we have to carry around these bags on our tour,” Honey said as she looked down at the plastic bags emblazoned with the John Jay logo and full of their purchases.

“Will we have time to go back to your apartment before we have to meet your parents?” Dan wanted to know.

Honey looked at her watch. “I don’t think so. I guess we’ll just have to carry these with us.”

Dan shook his head. “I have a locker in the athletic facility that we can stuff these in. We can always get them tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan, Dan the Man,” Honey rhymed, causing Dan to groan.

“Why do I put up with you again?” he asked rhetorically.

“Because you love me,” she replied with a cheeky grin.

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” It was a game they often played, and the familiarity of their teasing routine comforted Honey as they headed toward one of the four buildings that made up the John Jay campus, the West 59th Street Building, sometimes called North Hall.

After putting their books in Dan’s locker, he gave Honey a tour of the gym, where women’s volleyball tryouts were being held. As promised, it was a more intimate tour than the one she had received with about thirty-or-so other incoming and prospective students. Dan gave her a tour of the rest of the building in which the athletic facilities were housed, which also included a theater, the president’s office, conference rooms, the Lloyd Sealy library, considered the world’s leading criminal justice library, the “Bridge” as it was known, a glass-enclosed area that overlooked the impressive atrium and stream of international flags, and even a newly constructed courtroom and jury deliberation room. Honey knew that the lecture halls, classrooms, and science labs with which she would be so intimately familiar by the end of her four years here were also in the same building.

She looked at her watch and realized that the tour that she had previously had through North Hall would have to suffice, as it was almost time to meet her parents at the restaurant for dinner. But the athletic facilities and library and atrium had been so impressive that they had lingered in each place, mostly admiring the facilities, but other times stopping for a few stolen kisses behind the study carrels or hidden among the cardiovascular equipment.

Honey did not regret one second, but she also did not want to be late to meet her parents, so the couple hurried north toward Central Park. The restaurant was a favorite of her mother's and was located north of Honey's new school and west of Central Park. Honey liked it because it was rather relaxed, and the summery skirt and blouse that she was wearing and the khaki pants and golf shirt that Dan was wearing would not be too casual for the restaurant. Madeleine and Matthew Wheeler knew that an elaborate and extravagant meal for the couple would not be as appreciated as much as a simple, but appetizing, dinner would be.

Honey and Dan arrived at the French restaurant just as Matthew and Madeleine were stepping out of a cab.

"Honey!" her mother called to get her attention as Matthew paid the cabbie the fare.

Honey and Dan turned and saw Madeleine waving happily at them, and they hurried over to greet her. Madeleine, once so reserved before moving to Sleepyside and realizing how distant she and her only daughter had become, gave both of them hugs in greeting.

"Are you all settled in? Are you sure you didn't want more help this morning?"

Tom Delanoy, the Wheelers' chauffeur, had driven Honey's parents and Honey in from Sleepyside that morning with all of Honey's belongings. The four of them had moved Honey's boxes and suitcases into her apartment, but Honey had insisted that she could unpack herself. So, Tom had returned home to Sleepyside to be with his pregnant wife, and Matt and Madeleine had headed across Manhattan to their own apartment.

"I was fine, Mother," Honey assured her. "Even without Miss Trask there to supervise, I managed to set up the new apartment just fine." As she said her former governess' name, Honey felt a slight pang as she realized that not only would she not see her friends on a daily basis, but neither would she see the woman who had been such an integral part of her life for so many years.

Honey's mother seemed to read her mind. "I'm sure Miss Trask will be in the City to visit her sister, and she would love to stop in and visit with you, too."

Honey brightened and then greeted her handsome father as he joined them.

"How is the most beautiful college freshman in all of New York today?" he asked in a hearty voice as he hugged his daughter. "Did you get settled in this morning?"

"I did, Daddy," Honey said, returning his hug.

Matthew turned to Dan and offered his hand. "Dan," he said by way of greeting. "Ready to be an upperclassman this year?"

Dan nodded as the foursome headed inside the restaurant. "I am. I got all of the prerequisite courses out of the way last year, which were interesting in their own right, I guess, but now I am starting to get into the meaty part of my major."

"That's always a nice feeling," Matt acknowledged. "I remember how excited I was to put those art and humanity and philosophy credits to rest and tackle the business courses."

"Exactly," Dan said as the maître d' led the group to a table near the back of the dining room. It was rather secluded and offered a good deal of privacy for them to enjoy their meal. The Wheelers were frequent and generous patrons of the restaurant, and the staff always tried to

accommodate them by giving them their favorite table. When the manager had discovered that this was a celebration of Honey's entrance into college, he also provided a complimentary bottle of non-alcoholic, sparkling white grape juice.

"How sweet of Antoine," Madeleine said. "Just one of the many reasons I love this place. The personal touch!"

The group agreed, and, after a satisfying meal full of pleasant and entertaining talk and generous helpings of laughter, Honey was very glad that she had celebrated this milestone in her life with the wonderful staff at this restaurant. She would have to make it a habit to visit this place often while she was at John Jay. It was just a healthy walk from campus, and she imagined all of the romantic dinners that she and Dan could have here.

As Honey listened to the talk between her father and Dan swirl around her, she thought of Trixie's family. Trixie had left two days before for Michigan State and had arrived yesterday. Trixie had called her briefly the previous night, before she had left to go out with Mart, Jim, and Jim's roommate, to tell her that she had arrived safely in East Lansing and loved Michigan State so far and to wish Honey good luck on her own move the next day. Honey knew that the Beldens were leaving that morning to return to New York and imagined what that good-bye scene must have been like.

Certainly nothing like this, Honey mused. Honey knew her parents loved her, but most of the time she did not see them on a daily basis even after she had stopped attending boarding school and lived at the Manor House. And her college was only about a mile-and-a-half from her parents' elegant Manhattan apartment, in which they frequently stayed. This felt more like a regular dinner than a send off to Honey. Not that she was complaining. She had learned long ago that her family was different from Trixie's, but that did not make her family any less special than Trixie's...just different. And different was good. After all, here she was about to embrace a different life than she had ever experienced thus far, and she was more excited than she had been in a long time.

If ever, she thought, smiling at Dan.

* * *

Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York

"Diana, are you sure you want to have a roommate?" Veronica Lynch asked her daughter as she looked around the small dorm room Diana would call home for the next nine months. "We can always pay extra to get you a single room."

Diana smiled patiently at her mother, reminding herself that her mother loved her and meant well. "I'm sure, Mom. It's small, for sure, but I want to be a normal freshman and have normal college experiences. And that means a freshman roommate. One who I will become lifelong friends with and get together every so often and reminisce about those crazy college days," Di said, a mischievous grin alighting her beautiful face, her lavender eyes twinkling.

Veronica smiled indulgently at her daughter. "You're right, sweetie. I guess I've just gotten so used to that palatial house of ours, that I forgot what it was like to live in more compact quarters."

“Like our cramped apartment on Main Street?” Di asked.

“Exactly. You know, I still have fond memories of that little place. It’s where we were living when all of you kids were born,” Veronica said, a nostalgic look on her face. “And now my oldest baby is leaving the nest and going to college.”

Di saw that her mother was about to cry—for about the seventh time that day—so she quickly changed the subject. “I wonder when my roommate will show up. I’m anxious to meet her.”

“I hope she shows up while we’re here,” Di’s mother commented. “I’d really like to meet her, too.”

“That would be nice, but I am sure that if she doesn’t show up until after you leave, there will be plenty of other chances for you to meet her,” Diana assured her mother.

“What’s her name again?” Veronica said, glancing out in the hallway, wondering when Di’s father would find a parking space and be able to join them.

“Brooke. Brooke Callahan,” Di answered, looking around the spartan room and wondering what sort of dramas and comedies would unfold over the coming school year in this very room. Would she like her roommate? Would her roommate like her? Would her classes be too hard for her? What if she ended up hating her classes and failed out and wound up a stewardess or flight attendant or whatever PC term they were called these days?

Di took a deep breath and tried to calm herself down. *Positive thoughts, Diana Lynch*, she silently scolded herself. *Only positive thoughts.*

“So this is where my little girl is going to hang her hat for the next year, eh?” Jolly Mr. Lynch joined his wife and daughter in the tiny dorm room. “It’s not bad, Diana. As a matter of fact, this is a really nice building.”

“It’s a beautiful campus,” Veronica Lynch agreed. “I was just saying that it would be nice if Di’s new roommate showed up before we leave to go back to Sleepyside tonight so that we could meet her.”

“Well, if she doesn’t show up, maybe I can invite her back to Sleepyside for Thanksgiving. She’s all the way from Thunder Bay, Ontario, so I don’t know if she’ll be traveling back home for the break or not. And maybe she’d like to experience a real American Thanksgiving,” Di said.

Veronica brightened. “That would be lovely! Please be sure you ask her, Di. I’d love to have her stay with us!”

Di smiled. Her mother was a social creature who loved to entertain. “Well, now that we’ve planned for an event over three months away, how about we make a plan for getting my things to my room?”

Edward Lynch laughed. “That sounds like a plan. I hate to take up a parking spot for very long. They’re at a premium right now.”

The trio headed outside toward where the sleek, black Lynch sedan was parked quite a ways from the dormitory building. Fortunately, Di’s room assignment had been for the first floor, so that would make the move somewhat easier. Her father grabbed a heavy box, while Di

grabbed a giant suitcase with rollers, filled with a portion of her enviable wardrobe. Di had always had a flair with style, even before her parents had become wealthy, and Di was able to indulge in shopping sprees at Macy's and Bloomingdale's. Her mother grabbed a bag with Di's lavender bedding, and the freshman moving process began.

Some time later, when Veronica and Edward Lynch had helped their daughter move all of the belongings that she had brought into her new room, a petite blonde girl with her straight hair in a shoulder-length bob entered the room.

"You must be Diana Lynch, eh?" She smiled brightly. "I'm Brooke Callahan. Your new roomie."

Diana hurried over to greet her new roommate. "Hi, Brooke! It's so nice to finally meet you after all of the emailing we did."

Brooke turned to Mr. and Mrs. Lynch. "You must be Diana's parents. I am so glad that I arrived while you were still here."

"Me, too," Veronica Lynch said, offering her hand to the young woman. "I was really hoping that I would get to meet you. Of course, you're welcome to come home with Diana any weekend you want. I understand that your home in Canada is quite a ways from here."

"Over a thousand miles. And there are no good flights between Thunder Bay and here. I'd have to make at least two stops, and it would take fourteen hours." Brooke gave a sardonic smile. "Somehow, I don't think I'll be making it home for the odd weekend. My folks are already resigned to the fact that they won't see me until Christmas break."

"You're very brave to travel so far away for school. To a new country and everything," Di's mom remarked. "And I know how your mom feels. I'm already worried about not having Diana tucked into her room at our house in Sleepyside every night, and she's only a few hours away."

Diana looked embarrassed at her mother's coddling and hurriedly jumped into the conversation. "Do you need help moving your things, Brooke?"

"Actually, all I have for now are these two humongous suitcases and my backpack. My mum is sending some more things parcel post, but, for now, it's pretty much just some clothes and bedding and small stuff."

"Did you fly here?" Di's mother sounded surprised. "Your parents didn't bring you?"

Brooke shook her head. "It would have been several days of travel for them, and one of my younger sisters is really sick. My mom and dad didn't feel as though they could leave her right now."

"Well, how about we put your things in here, and we take you two beautiful college girls out for dinner?" Mr. Lynch jumped in, seeing that Brooke looked a little uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Mr. Lynch," Brooke protested. "I don't want to intrude on your family dinner."

“Nonsense, dear,” Edward said heartily. “You wouldn’t be intruding at all. Mrs. Lynch and I would love to have you join us. There’s absolutely no reason why you should sit here alone in this dorm room instead of having dinner with us.”

“Please, Brooke,” Diana added a plea of her own. “We would really love to have you along.”

The petite blonde girl looked torn but interested. “If you’re sure I’m not intruding,” she finally said.

“Of course not!” All three Lynches chorused, and everyone laughed.

“Okay, I would love to have dinner with you all,” Brooke said with a genuine smile.

“Perfect,” Mr. Lynch said in his usual jolly manner. “We’d love to hear all about the Great White North, eh.”

Diana looked scandalized at her father’s imitation of a Canadian accent. “Daddy!”

But Brooke just laughed, her blue eyes sparkling with mirth. “I’d love to tell you all about Canada.”

And, in that instant, Diana knew that she was going to adore her new roommate.

* * *

Michigan State University

As Trixie hurried to her math class, the first class of her college career, she could not believe that time had flown so quickly. One minute, her parents were saying their good-byes, and the next minute, or so it seemed, she was walking toward Wells Hall, her backpack filled with the books she had paid an arm and a leg for and the school supplies she had purchased during the back-to-school sales back in Sleepyside.

As Trixie walked down tree-lined paths toward the center of campus, she could not help but replay her good-byes with her family.

Trixie stood in her room with her family and Jim, excited for the independence she was about to acquire and sad for the distance that now would be between her and her family. Suddenly, she was not so sure that she wanted to be halfway across the country from the warm coziness of Crabapple Farm. Tears jumped, unbidden, into her eyes as her father wrapped his strong arms around her.

“Please take care of yourself, Trixie,” he murmured, his voiced choked with emotion. Trixie had never heard her level-headed and sensible father sound so emotional before, not even the night that she had gone over the cliff to rescue Janie, who turned out to be Juliana, Jim’s cousin from Holland. “I know that you’re a strong girl, and that you’ll be fine, but you’ll always be my little girl. And that means that I’m going to worry about you.”

“I’ll take care, Dad,” Trixie promised her father.

“And maybe more studying than mysteries?” Peter Belden said hopefully.

Trixie grinned up at the man who had raised her. "More studying than mysteries. Got it."

Peter gave her one more squeeze and then released her. Her mother quickly claimed her for her hug.

"I can't believe my little girl is old enough to be going to college," she said. "When did I get so old?"

Trixie laughed, despite the tears that were freely flowing down her cheeks. "You're not old, Moms. Promise!"

"You'll call home every so often to let us know how you are?" Helen asked anxiously.

"I'll call often, Moms. I promise," Trixie said, extracting herself from the hug to wipe her eyes. "I know it was my choice to move so far away, but I miss you already."

Helen kissed the top of Trixie's sandy curls. "I miss you, too. But you'll be back home for Thanksgiving before you know it."

Trixie swallowed. Thanksgiving suddenly sounded so very far away.

Mart tugged one of her curls. "You're going to love college, Trix. I just know it. And Michigan State seems really great." He gave his sister a quick hug, his eyes suspiciously misty.

"Thanks, Mart," Trixie said, sniffing. "You really think I am going to be okay?"

"You're going to be better than okay, sis. You're going to be fantastic," Mart assured her, meaning every word. When his sister put her mind to it, there wasn't anything she couldn't do.

Trixie's smile was brilliant. "Thanks."

Soon, it was time for the Beldens to get on the road, and there was a final flurry of hugs and good-byes. As Trixie received one last hug from her mother, she heard Mart tell Jim in a low voice that if he didn't take care of her, Jim would have the Belden brothers to answer to. Jim solemnly promised that he would.

The initial irritation that Trixie felt at Mart's heavy-handedness was immediately quenched with the realization that she was lucky to have so many people who cared about her.

And with a final series of waves and promises to take care and keep in touch, Trixie was on her own.

It was nice to know that no matter how far away that she was from home, she was loved by some very special people.

She thought of Di and Honey, off at their respective campuses now. It was so weird that for the first time in ages they would not be starting school together. There would be no giggling and gabbing on the bus in the morning, gossiping together at the lunch table in the Sleepyside Junior-Senior High cafeteria, or groaning during long horseback rides in the Wheeler game preserve about all of the homework the teachers had piled on them. And no plotting about their next fundraiser or puzzling over their latest mystery.

She had talked to both Di and Honey at length on the telephone the night before. They all compared notes about what it was like to be away from home and shared stories about their new schools, describing everything in detail to each other so that they could each picture the experiences of the others, but it still was not the same as knowing what Honey's poetry teacher at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High looked and sounded like, or being able to see the lovely colors and lines of Di's art assignment.

Trixie took comfort in knowing that she was exactly where she was supposed to be and in the fact that she knew that Di and Honey felt the same way about where they had ended up at school. And they would all see each other at Thanksgiving time. That was only a few months away. Plus, email and telephone would keep them as close as ever.

Trixie arrived at Wells Hall, found the right lecture hall, and slid into an empty seat. She looked around in awe at the size of the room. It was bigger than the Cameo movie theater back home! Would all of these seats really fill up? Jim had warned her about the large class size of some of the more popular and uniformly required classes, but this was amazing!

Sure enough, more students began to pour into the classroom, and, soon, an intelligent looking man introduced himself as their math professor.

Trixie's college career had officially begun.

* * *

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Honey looked up at the intimidating building, suddenly nervous about entering into the "hallowed halls of collegiate academia," as Mart would say. What if she could not handle her science classes? She had looked into a lot of majors at John Jay, narrowing them down to criminology, forensic psychology, and forensic science, finally settling on forensic science. Although all three majors sounded fascinating and would all be more than sufficient in preparing her for a career as a detective, forensic science held the most appeal for her. It was, however, the most scientific of all of them, based on chemistry of all things.

Several students jostled her as she stood there, and she realized that she should probably suck it up and enter the classroom building. She took a deep breath and tried to remember the pep talk that Dan had given her the night before. He was always so sure that she could do anything she set her mind to, but Honey was suddenly afraid of failing. And not necessarily at just the academic aspects of college.

She had been unpopular at her boarding schools, and, if it had not been for Trixie, she was sure she would have been unpopular at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High School, too. It was true that she was not that sickly, shy girl she used to be, but Trixie was not here, either. Trixie made things happen, and Honey loved being swept along in the exciting tide of Trixie's wake—most of the time, anyway. Would Honey revert back to her introverted shell in Trixie's absence? Or would she be able to hold her own?

With one last deep breath, Honey screwed up her courage and entered the building. It was time to stop worrying about the past and embrace the future. And her future included the education that the John Jay College of Criminal Justice could provide her.

As she took a seat in the lecture hall and pulled out her notebook and a pen, a cute girl with long, curly, red hair and sparkling green eyes sat next to her and gave her a friendly smile. Honey smiled back.

"Hi," the girl said, her voice energetic and pleasant. "I'm Angela."

“Hi,” Honey returned. “My name is Madeleine, but everyone has called me Honey for as long as I can remember.”

Angela seemed to consider this as she studied Honey with a critical eye. “You look more like a Honey than a Madeleine. Your nickname really suits you.”

“Thanks. I was named after my mother, and it always seemed more like her name than mine, you know?”

Angela nodded. “So, are you from around here?”

“My parents lived in New York City while I was growing up,” Honey said truthfully, but avoiding the mention of boarding schools, “but when I was thirteen, we moved to a small town north of here called Sleepyside. So, I’ve been there the last five years. It’s weird being back in the City. What about you?”

“Born and raised right here in New York City. In Brooklyn, actually. Part of me really wanted to get away once I graduated, maybe go to one of the state universities upstate, see something new, but I’ve also always wanted to be a forensic scientist, and, with this great school right here in New York, it would have been foolish to choose a lesser school just because I’ve got a little bit of wanderlust, you know?”

Honey nodded soberly. “My best friend has the wanderlust. She headed off to Michigan State University.”

“I looked into MSU. They’ve got a really good CJ program. I couldn’t afford to go out of state, though. Your friend’s lucky she could afford it.”

Honey smiled and immediately defended her friend. “Well, between a small scholarship that will cover her books, work study, a little parental help, and some college loans, she could, anyway.”

“Wow. She must have really wanted to go out of state!” Angela said with a low whistle.

“My brother, her boyfriend, is a senior there,” Honey explained. “Between Jim and the excellent criminal justice program and her impulsiveness and determination, she was just fanatical enough to make it work.”

Angela smiled. “Well, that explains a lot.”

The two chatted some more before the professor entered the room and called the class to order. As he spoke about his expectations of during the upcoming semester and told stories about the applications of chemistry to criminal justice, Honey began to feel energized and excited for the coming year. The fear and trepidation that she had felt earlier began to recede, and a quiet confidence took its place. She had already made a friend, and she knew she was a hard worker.

Dan was right. She could do anything that she set her mind to. Suddenly, the year ahead did not seem so intimidating after all.

* * *

Diana hefted her backpack full of her books on her back and was infinitely glad that the distance from her dorm, known as East Tower, was not very far from her classroom. She could not believe the number and weight of the books and art supplies needed for a simple art education major with an art history minor. Of course, a few of her classes were dull ones that she needed to get out of the way, like philosophy, political science, and English literature, but she still did not think that the books needed to be so darn *heavy*.

She grabbed the campus map off of her desk, hating to look like, well, like a freshman, but she knew that it was more important to be on time and in the right building than it was for her to look all-knowing and hip, so she tucked it away in a small pocket in her backpack. Ithaca was not a large campus, and she was fairly sure that she could find her buildings okay, especially since her first class was in Gannett Center, just a very short distance from her dorm. But the class that followed was in the main Academic Concourse, as it was called, in a building called Friends. Diana hoped that she would be able to find that easily, as well.

She took one last look of the photo montage of various pictures of the Bob-Whites on her wall, wishing her own friends were here to give her strength, and, with a deep breath, she was off, headed to the first class of her college career.

As Diana left her dormitory building and headed across the lawn in the general direction of her classroom building, she was not so preoccupied that she did not notice and appreciate the lovely green foliage surrounding her. She thought of Honey in her big city campus and was glad that the program she wanted could be found in a rural setting similar to the one in which she had grown up.

Of course, all three girls had really lucked out on their college choices. How convenient was it that the university that had one of the best programs in Trixie's chosen major happened to be one with one of the best programs for Jim's chosen major? Or that Honey and Dan both wanted to pursue similar careers and the perfect college for said careers happened to be right in New York City where they could both attend together? Or that a good in-state liberal arts college for Diana herself was practically across the street from the one of the best agricultural colleges for Mart?

None of this was lost on Diana. "Fate," she whispered to herself as she walked along the sidewalk, passing other students hurrying to and from class. "It's fate, and it means that we're all meant to be together."

With that happy thought, Diana realized that she was already approaching the entrance to Gannett Hall, where the Art History Department was housed. Her first official college class was her Practicing Art History course, which was for her minor and not her major. Her second class, Introduction to Drawing, would be her first class within her major. Diana was very excited to be able to begin her core classes right away. She knew from talking to Trixie and Honey that a lot of their schedules were taken up with math and chemistry. Not exactly what she pictured when she thought of detectives and criminal justice and solving mysteries. Of course, math had always been a mystery to her, and she had not even wanted to tackle the mystery of chemistry, so she had never taken it in high school. And she did not feel particularly lacking for not having had it, either.

As she checked the slip of paper that she carried with her class schedule to see what room she was supposed to be in, she hoped that Honey's chemistry classes were going okay and thanked the heavens once again that she was good at art, and art majors required no in-depth science classes whatsoever. She planned on taking a natural science course here or there as part of her electives, just so that she had a well rounded education, but there were no requirements that every student, no matter what their major, take science classes, as there were at Trixie's university.

After navigating the confusing halls of Gannett Center, Di finally found her classroom and slipped inside with about five minutes to spare before the class officially started. She saw several students picking up handouts, so she headed over to the table that contained the stacks of papers and took a stapled set from each pile.

She then found an empty seat near the middle of the room and gladly threw her heavy backpack down on the floor next to her. She took out a pen and a spiral-bound notebook and then, satisfied that she was ready for the start of class, she looked at the printed materials that she had picked up when she entered the modern classroom.

The first was a course syllabus, listing the lecture topics and exam schedule for the entire semester. Di looked at the informative little paper and wished that she had been given these for all of her classes in high school. How convenient would it have been to have the dates of all upcoming tests at the beginning of the semester? Then, when Trixie and the rest of the Bob-Whites had planned a fundraiser, tests would never have gotten in the way.

Of course, Diana reflected ruefully, Trixie's mystery solving couldn't be scheduled around school timetables!

Diana noted that there would be three exams and a final scattered throughout the semester, as well as several writing assignments intended to get the students to perform formal analysis of historical texts. Suddenly, Di felt a bit worried about this class. Technically, she had to have a humanities class under her belt as a prerequisite before she took this class, but she had sought and received permission to take her humanities class concurrently with this one. She had concentrated on arts and humanities classes during her junior and senior years at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High once she had realized that a career in art was what she wished to pursue. She had done exceptionally well in these classes, and, with this strong background, both her college advisor and the chair of art history program at Ithaca College had agreed to let her take the course her first semester.

Now, sitting here staring at the requirements to pass the class, Diana felt a wave of nervousness wash over her. Looking around at a lot of her other classmates animatedly chatting about their summers, she also realized that, by accelerating her path to take this course, she was probably the only freshman in the entire class.

Why did I think that this sounded like such a good idea? Di groaned inwardly.

She determinedly pushed the thought aside and looked at the other stapled set of papers that she had picked up. This was a glossary of terms, a list of suggested reading in addition to the assigned reading, a list of suggested websites, and other information that the professor thought his students would find helpful as the course progressed.

Diana was still studying the information when the professor called the class to order. When she looked up, she felt a small jolt.

Why, he's exactly what I would expect an art history professor at a college to look like, she thought in surprise. It had never occurred to her that her expectations of collegiate details would be met in the reality of the situation.

Her professor looked scholarly, with a large, husky, and somewhat soft frame. His brown hair was peppered with streaks of gray, and he sported a thick, mature goatee, and not the wimpy kind that teenagers often tried to grow. His rectangular-framed glasses held the slightest yellow tint to them. He just looked *collegiate*, and, for some reason, that fact tickled Diana's fancy very much.

Di then scolded herself for not concentrating and settled down to pay attention to what her professor was saying.

An hour-and-a half later, Di could not believe that the class was over already. It only met two days a week and was longer than classes that met more often. Di had been afraid that she would become bored or restless during such a long class period, but the professor was so interesting and spoke so engagingly, that Di had never had a chance to be bored. The class passed entirely too quickly, and Di was eager to return for the next class session and disappointed that it would not be the next day.

As she gathered up her belongings, she reflected that, so far, she was finding college to be everything she had dreamed it would be. Her roommate was fantastic, her first class had been engaging, and being on her own was so unbelievably liberating that Di was actually frightened sometimes. Not about being on her own, but because she was afraid that the intoxicating headiness could be detrimental to her somehow.

As she headed out of the classroom, one of her classmates approached her.

"Hi," she greeted Diana. "I don't recognize you. The art history program at Ithaca is relatively large, but you still kind of begin to recognize faces as you cycle through the required classes. Are you a transfer student? Oh, and I'm Samantha, but everybody calls me Sam."

Diana smiled. "Hi, Sam. I'm Diana, but I generally go by Di. I'm not a transfer student. I'm a freshman," she admitted.

Sam looked surprised by this. "Really? How did you get out of the hum prereq?"

Diana stared at Sam for a moment, confused, and then realized what she was asking her. "I really wanted to take this class. When I read the description, I got all excited and then read that you needed to take a humanities class first, but, since it's only offered during the fall semester, that meant that I'd have to wait a whole year. So, I asked my advisor if there was a way to take the humanities class at the same time. She looked at my high school transcripts, got permission from the art history chair, and here I am. I figured the worst they could say was no, so I had to try. And it worked out."

Sam looked at her, impressed. "Wow. I never would have thought of that. I've been dying to take this class since I got here last year, too. And the more I heard about the prof, the more I wanted to take it. Isn't he great?"

Diana's violet eyes sparkled at the memory of her first lecture. "Yeah. I couldn't believe it when class was over!"

"I know! Me, too!" Sam cried enthusiastically.

The girls had now exited the Gannett Center, and they hesitated at the top of the steps.

“Where are you headed now?” Sam wanted to know.

“I have an Introduction to Drawing class in about fifteen minutes,” Di said.

“Darn, I was hoping we could get a cup of coffee or something. Do you drink coffee?”

Di shook her head. “No, not really,” she admitted, feeling young and silly and like, well, like a freshman.

Sam smiled. “You will by the end of exams, if not before. Maybe even by mid-terms!”

Di smiled back politely, sure that she would never like the bitter taste of coffee. “Maybe,” she said noncommittally.

“Hey, listen, if you want to get together and study for our class together and meet some of the other art history majors, give me a call sometime.” Sam swung her backpack gracefully from her shoulder and dug through it until she retrieved a small notebook and a pen. She hurriedly scribbled the name Sam Nelson and her dorm address and campus phone number, tore the sheet out of her notebook, and handed the piece of paper to Di.

“Thanks, Sam,” Di said, grateful that she was making friends so quickly. “I can give you my info if you like.”

“Absolutely,” Sam said, handing Di the pen and the notebook. Di wrote down her info and handed it back to Sam, who looked at it curiously.

“Oh wow. My best friend lives on the first floor of East Tower. Liz Williams. Have you met her yet?”

Di shook her head. “I don’t think so. At least, I haven’t been introduced to anyone by that name. How come you didn’t want to room with her if she’s your best friend?” Di was curious.

Sam laughed, a jovial, wholehearted sound. “Because I want to keep her as my best friend.”

Di smiled and briefly wondered if her friendships with Trixie and Honey would survive if she had to share a ten foot by ten foot room with one of them for nine whole months.

“Yeah, I guess better safe than sorry,” she said.

“Well, you’d better get off to your drawing class. It was nice meeting you, Di. Maybe we can even get together this weekend!”

Di smiled warmly at her new friend. “That would be great!”

With another friendly smile and a wave, Sam headed toward the direction of a group of dorms called the Upper Quad, while Di headed in the opposite direction toward Friends Hall and her drawing class.

That heady, intoxicating feeling began to overtake her again, and she smiled. College was *so cool!*

* * *

Michigan State University

“I hated math in high school. And I don’t like it any better now,” Nikki said defiantly as she stared down at her wretched math book.

Trixie and her roommate had already bonded over their shared loathing of math, but it was a necessary evil for both of them if they wanted to pursue their chosen careers. Nikki, a vivacious and headstrong girl from the west side of Michigan, wanted to be a marine biologist. Unfortunately for Nikki, all science majors had to have a healthy amount of math to graduate, even if it only tangentially related to their major.

Trixie looked up from the essay she was writing for her American Thought and Language class, Michigan State’s English requirement for all freshmen. “I know, it sucks,” she said unceremoniously. “Anything in particular?”

“Nope.” Nikki shook her head. “Just general math suckiness.”

Trixie nodded in sympathy and returned to her writing assignment. Silence permeated the room, broken only by the occasional giggles of other freshman girls as they passed by on their way down the hallway or the rowdy chorus of male voices belonging to members of their brother floor as they cruised the corridor looking for females willing to head to the bar with them.

Nikki and Trixie often passed up invitations on school nights, instead determined to do as best they could in their classes. Trixie also had a serious boyfriend, so she was not on the prowl, as so many of her fellow dormmates were. Nikki had broken up with her high school boyfriend before they had both headed toward different schools and was free, but she also chose to study instead of party or “prowl.”

Trixie realized that it was too soon to tell if she and Nikki would be the kind of life long college buddies that “they” always touted (as Trixie had mentioned to Honey once, she always wanted to meet a certified, bona fide “they”), but Nikki had the kind of spunk that Trixie always admired. She was serious and studious when the time was right, but also knew how to have fun. Trixie was sure that even if they did not become life long buddies, they would survive the year as roommates.

Trixie sat at the laptop that had been a high school graduation gift from Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler—a gift that she had thought was too extravagant but knew that she had no chance of resisting, as Honey and Jim’s parents had gifted each and every graduating Bob-White with a similar laptop—and concentrated on crafting words together in a cohesive string. Nikki continued to frown over her math problems. Both girls jumped at the unexpected knock on their door, each looking at the other in surprise.

“Yeah?” Trixie called.

“It’s your favorite redhead,” a teasing voice called.

“Jim!” Her essay forgotten, Trixie leaped out of her chair and ran for the door, eliciting a smile and a shake of the head from her roommate.

A few minutes later, Jim and Jeff were seated on the lower bunk, which happened to be Nikki’s, facing the two girls.

“How’s everything going?” Jim asked, truly concerned for both girls’ academic well being.

“Math bites the big one,” Nikki returned cheerfully. “But Trixie tells me you’re a math whiz and that you’ll help us out before our tests.”

Nikki and Trixie did not have math at the same time, but they did both have the same math class with the same math professor, along with about twelve hundred other freshmen. Their tests would be on the same day and cover the same material. Trixie had already begged Jim to help her study for tests, and, of course, Nikki would be included in the study sessions.

“Absolutely. And you know Jeff here is an actual math major, so he can help, too.”

Nikki stared at Jim’s roommate in what could only be described as shock and horror. “A *math* major? *What* possessed you?”

Jeff smiled in a self-effacing manner at Nikki’s reaction. “Sometimes I wonder that myself. But the simple logic of math somehow calls to me. What I will do with such a useless degree, who knows, though.”

“Well, better you than me,” Nikki stated matter-of-factly, then grinned—her patented Cheshire cat grin. “It’s good to know that I have *two* math whizzes at my beck and call when I need them.”

Trixie could not help but notice Jeff’s slight blush at Nikki’s words and hid a grin. Honey and Di were known as the matchmakers, not Trixie, but the blonde freshman wondered if some of their wisdom and experience had rubbed off, because suddenly she could see that Nikki and Jeff would make a great couple. Worse yet, she wanted to scheme and make sure that Nikki and Jeff became that great couple. Intuition told her that Jeff wanted that, too. Trixie vowed to ask for Honey or Di’s advice the next time she talked to them.

“So, what brings you guys here?” Trixie asked, changing the subject.

“Well, it *is* Thursday,” Jim said.

“Ahh, yes, Thursday,” Trixie echoed.

“What’s the big deal with Thursday?” Nikki demanded in her straightforward way.

“Thursday’s the big night out on campus,” Jeff explained. “Since a lot of people go home to visit on the weekends, Thursday has kind of become the night to go out with friends.”

Nikki glanced at the digital clock across the room. “But it’s already ten-thirty!” she protested.

Jim and Jeff grinned. “No one leaves to go out before eleven.”

“Really?”

Trixie smiled at her new friend’s incredulity. She had felt the same way when she had visited Jim at Michigan State the few times that her parents had relaxed enough to let her visit for the weekend. Trixie to this day could not believe that her fairly strict parents had allowed her to visit her boyfriend at his campus. But Brian had persuaded her parents, and Jim’s reputation for honorableness had gone a long way in convincing them that Trixie would be okay visiting the redhead.

“It’s freaky, isn’t it?” Trixie asked. “Thursday is such a bizarre night to party. And my curfew back home was earlier than people leave to go out!”

“Well, I have an eight o’clock biology class tomorrow, but I am so sick of math that a little break sounds pretty appealing,” Nikki decided, closing her math book for emphasis. “How’s your essay coming, roomie?”

“I think I’ve nailed the theme and motif behind Edgar Lee Masters’ poems as much as I am going to tonight. I say we accept the kind offer of these noble gentlemen and partake in a study break,” Trixie concurred, closing her notebook in a manner similar to Nikki’s dismissal of her math book. “Where to, boys?” Trixie looked at Jim and Jeff expectantly.

“We were thinking Harrison Roadhouse. It’s close, and you guys can get in,” Jeff suggested.

“Always a bonus when two of the people you’re with can actually enter an establishment,” Nikki said dryly.

“I’ve always found that to be a good plan,” Jim agreed with an easy smile. “You guys ready?”

Trixie looked down at her gray Michigan State t-shirt and denim shorts. “I don’t know. What’s the Roadhouse like? Is this good?”

“You look fantastic, Trix,” Jim said.

Nikki and Jeff snorted.

“What?” Jim asked, surprised.

“You’d say Trixie looked fantastic if her hair was standing on end and she was bleeding out of her eyeballs,” Jeff said. He had witnessed Jim and Trixie’s relationship over the last two years and had often seen how darn sappy Jim was over his girlfriend. Just like he himself used to be over Mandy, his high school sweetheart. The couple had gradually grown apart at separate colleges and had mutually decided to end things during Christmas break of the previous school year. Fortunately, they had parted good friends, and Jeff was extremely happy that he had not lost his best friend.

“If Trixie was bleeding out her eyeballs, I would hope that I would be too busy trying to administer first aid and get her help than anything else,” Jim retorted haughtily, but he did not deny that he did think she looked fantastic no matter what.

Trixie’s dimple showed as she gave Jim a happy grin. She remembered how she had always felt like the frumpy, stout, scruffy friend compared to the trim and neat Honey and the elegantly gorgeous Di, but now Jim always made her feel pretty.

Nikki assessed her own t-shirt and denim shorts and decided that she would not change her clothes, either.

Laughing and talking, the foursome headed out of the dorm and toward the Roadhouse. As the group walked the short walk across Michigan Avenue toward the eclectic pub, Trixie’s hand firmly ensconced in Jim’s larger one, the blonde looked at her friends and around at the collegiate buildings behind her, and, suddenly, she knew with absolute certainty that what she

had told her mother was true. She was in the right place at the right time, and her four years at Michigan State University promised to be an incredible time in her life.

* * *

Marymount Manhattan College Residence

Honey had attended four days worth of classes, and already she had her favorites and her least favorites. Despite the fact that science had never been a favorite of hers in high school, and she had worried that choosing such a science-based major might have been a mistake, Honey was actually enjoying her chemistry class, which she considered a good sign for things to come. She was not enjoying her humanities class, however. But you were never supposed to enjoy your general credit classes as much as those in your major, or so everyone told her, so she just decided to plug ahead and get a good grade and not worry about how dull she found the subject.

She was sitting at her kitchen table with Dan, both of them engrossed in their homework. Finally, Dan put his pencil down and stretched.

“Pizza?” he asked.

Honey nodded without looking up from the book she was studiously reading. “Sounds good. I only have about three more pages of this assigned reading to go. Why don’t you order while I finish up?”

“Know any good places around here?” Dan asked.

“I grabbed a bunch of different coupons that were downstairs in the lobby. I put them in the drawer nearest the fridge. I don’t know if they’re good or not, but maybe you’ve heard of the places and know what they’re like.”

Dan went through the coupons and chose one he liked, ordering a large pizza with his toppings on one half and Honey’s favorite toppings on the other. As compatible as they were in so many ways, how they liked their pizza was not one of them.

After the pizza had arrived, and Honey and Dan had demolished it, they settled in on the couch in the living room to watch a movie on the television. Honey curled up next to Dan and sighed happily.

“I think this is my favorite part of college,” she said.

Dan smiled and kissed her forehead. “It is pretty nice, isn’t it? Ever since you got accepted here, I’ve been dying for you to start. I know I got to see you most weekends last year, but here it is, a Thursday night, and we’re all snuggled up together. Have I mentioned how glad I am that you want to be a detective so that we can go to the same school?”

Honey laughed. “I think you’ve mentioned it a couple of times. Have you thanked Trixie as well? It’s partly her fault, you know.”

“Actually, I *have* thanked Trixie a couple of times, but I wouldn’t give all of the credit to Trixie. If you didn’t really want to be a detective, she wouldn’t have been able to get you all excited about it.”

“I know,” Honey agreed. “It’s just that we had so much fun looking for Jim that summer in the *Silver Swan*. And Trixie was very smart about finding clues. I’ll never forget the excitement of hiding in the dusty, old loft of that run down barn in the Smiths’ apple orchard! Trixie and I became so engrossed in watching the drama unfold, that we completely forgot how scared and petrified we were just a few minutes before.”

Dan laughed. “And, from what I hear, you decided that you needed to act like a hardboiled trailer thief. I wish I had been there!”

Honey joined in his laughter. “I just remember being slightly hysterical when he looked up and saw us there, and then when he accused us of stealing the *Robin*, well, that’s what came out of my mouth! But I knew right after that that I wanted to be a detective like Trixie. I guess I was just an adrenaline junkie at heart and never knew it!”

“Adrenaline junkie, huh? So, when are we going sky diving? Or bungee jumping?” Dan teased his girlfriend.

“Hmmm, that *does* sound like fun. Maybe that’s how we’ll have to celebrate our finals at the end of the school year,” Honey said, taking the bait. “But, in the meantime, there are other ways to find excitement.”

“There are?” Dan said, raising his eyebrows in mock confusion.

“There are,” Honey stated as she leaned in for a passionate kiss.

“I like the way you think, Honey Wheeler,” Dan murmured before losing himself in their kiss.

Suddenly, all that mattered to Honey in that moment in time was that she was starting a new chapter of her life, a life that would be completely her own, on her own terms. She had already begun making friends in her classes, including Angela, whom she adored. She knew that she was not ever going to be that unpopular, sickly, pale, lonely girl again. And she had proven to herself that she could make friends without Trixie by her side. People accepted her for her, not for who her friends were, not for who her father was, or how much money he made. Just her. Honey Wheeler. That Daniel Timothy Mangan was going to be at her side for the ride ahead only made the journey that much sweeter.

I think I’m going to like college, Honey thought as she surrendered to Dan’s ardent kisses.

And then all other thoughts were totally, completely, and satisfyingly forgotten.

* * *

Diana happily snuggled up next to Mart. She and Brooke had headed over to Mart’s off-campus apartment Thursday night after dinner to rest, relax, and blow off some steam. Although Mart had early classes the next day, Diana and Brooke did not, and they were eager to enjoy the college nightlife of Ithaca. They had been slowly adjusting to college life and immersing themselves in their homework in an effort not to fall behind, and now they wanted to see the non-academic side of the college experience. Having an upperclassman boyfriend who knew the best places to go had its upsides, Diana had decided.

It was still relatively early, only eight-thirty, so the trio had decided to catch the Thursday night comedy line-up on one of the popular network television stations. Diana had popped some microwave popcorn that Mart indicated was his and not one of his roommates', and the three settled in on the couch. As they sat laughing at the light-hearted comedy on the television, Mart's roommate, Cooper Houghton, returned from a late lab class.

"Hey, Coop!" Mart greeted him. "Coop, you've met my girlfriend, Di Lynch, before. This is her roommate from the dorms, Brooke Callahan."

"Hi, Di. Hi, Brooke. It's nice to meet you," Coop said with a friendly smile. "What are you guys up to tonight?"

"Just watching the Thursday night comedy line up on T.V. right now, but, later, we were going to head into Ithaca proper and check out the action," Mart explained.

"That sounds cool. Mind if I tag along?" Coop asked hopefully.

"Not at all," Mart assured him.

"The more the merrier," Di added, a gleam in her violet eyes.

Mart noted the cat-that-caught-the-canary tone to her voice and turned to look at her. Diana Lynch was a notorious matchmaker, and it appeared that she had just set her sights on getting Brooke and Cooper together.

Di saw out of the corner of her eye that Mart had turned to look at her. She glanced over at him, her face a mask of angelic innocence, but the slight smile on her full, red lips and the dangerous glimmer in her eyes told Mart everything he needed to know. He rolled his eyes, but also smiled in amusement. If Di wanted to hook up her roommate with his roommate, who was he to stop her?

"So, where specifically are we going to go?" Coop wanted to know as he dropped his backpack on the floor and carried his insulated, soft-side lunch box into the kitchen. Coop was at Cornell on scholarship and, like Mart, tried to save as much money as he could, so he packed a lunch every day instead of paying for a cafeteria meal plan or eating at fast food restaurants. To further save money, he and Mart shared a room in the apartment, while their third roommate, John, had his own room. But every penny that he and Mart saved by sharing a room was worth the lack of privacy to both college men.

"I don't know," Mart admitted. "I thought maybe the Chapter House. Or even the Haunt. I know it's crowded, but I really could go for one of their sandwiches."

"When *can't* you go for food, Mart?" both Diana and Coop asked at the same time and then laughed.

Di turned to her roommate. "Brooke, you will soon learn that Mart's appetite is legendary," she explained.

Brooke laughed. "It would appear so the way you both spoke up about it."

Diana grinned. "His little brother, Bobby, always says that Mart must have hollow toes and legs to eat the way he does. When Bobby was little, he truly believed that. It was so cute."

Coop returned from the kitchen. "I can just imagine a little Mart running around."

"Bobby is *not* a little me," Mart said emphatically, shuddering at the mere thought.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Di piped up. “He’s blond-haired, blue-eyed, cute, loves to talk, loves to annoy Trixie...”

Di looked as though she was on a roll and could keep listing Mart and his little brother’s similarities indefinitely, but Brooke interrupted.

“Trixie? Isn’t she one of your best friends?” she questioned.

“Yep, she is,” Di confirmed. “I never told you that she was Mart’s sister?”

Brooke shook her head. “Nope, you didn’t.”

“That’s weird,” Di said, looking surprised. “I guess I just take it for granted that I’m dating one of my best friend’s brothers.”

“Or, alternatively, your boyfriend’s sister just happens to be one of your best friends,” Mart said, kissing Diana. “That way, I sound like the most important one in your life. Which I am,” he said with a smile.

Diana kissed her boyfriend. “Yes, you are.”

“Do they get like this a lot?” Brooke asked Coop, a teasing glint in her blue eyes.

Coop returned her grin, his own dark blue eyes reflecting mischief. “Yeah, it’s pretty bad. I need a glucose tolerance test just to be around them most of the time,” Coop said.

Di pulled away from Mart with a laugh. “Stop! We’re not *that* bad,” she protested.

Mart leaned over and jokingly nibbled on Di’s neck, causing her to shriek in surprise and sending her into a massive giggle fit. “No,” he declared between nibbles. “We’re not that bad at all.”

Coop rolled his eyes. “I’m going to take a shower now. I’ll be ready to go out in a bit.” With one last friendly smile, he exited the room.

“He seems nice,” Brooke commented casually as the trio’s attention returned to the television screen.

Di smiled knowingly at Mart. “He’s very sweet. And cute, too,” she added for good measure.

“Hey!” Mart protested. “What am I? Chopped liver?”

“Not at all,” Di assured him. “But just because I think you’re cute doesn’t mean that I can’t find other guys cute,” she reasoned.

Mart pretended to grumble. “As long as you don’t find them cuter than me.”

“Never,” Di promised and sealed her promise with a kiss.

“Yep,” Brooke said, pretending to be aggrieved by their behavior. “A glucose tolerance test is definitely in order.” She shot her roommate and her roommate’s boyfriend a teasing smile to let them know that she was kidding.

Di laughed. “We’ll be good.”

“Oh, be all kissy face with each other. I don’t really care,” Brooke assured them. “You’re together after a year apart. I understand completely.”

“Have I mentioned how much I like your roommate?” Mart asked. “Now we can make out all we want.”

Both Brooke and Diana laughed at Mart’s leer as he made his joke.

The teasing continued intermittently as the threesome watched the television show, waiting for Coop to reappear.

“So, what’s John up to tonight?” Coop, freshly showered and dressed, asked as he came in and sat down on the edge of the couch and pulled his boat shoes on.

“I don’t know,” Mart said. “He wasn’t here when I got back from class. Does he have a late class tonight?”

Coop shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he went over to Marissa's or something."

"Do we want to wait for him?" Di asked.

Mart and Coop seemed to consider this. Coop shrugged, indicating that it was up to Mart and the girls.

"How about we wait until the end of the next show? If he's not home by then, we'll go. Sound like a plan?" Mart asked.

"Sounds like a plan," Di agreed, and Coop and Brooke echoed her sentiment.

By ten o'clock, John still had not returned to the apartment, so the group of four decided to head out to downtown Ithaca without him. The nighttime air was still balmy, even though the sun had set some time ago. Di loved late August evenings in New York. It was nowhere near as humid as July and the beginning of August, but the air was still warm and pleasant even late into the evening. Soon, fall would be upon them. Di loved the crisp air after the wilting heat and humidity of a Hudson River Valley summer, which she had just experienced before moving to Ithaca, and the gorgeous fall colors, the brilliant reds, the radiant yellows, and dazzling oranges that adorned the trees. But fall also meant that winter was coming, and winter was not a season that Di particularly liked. So, each and every year at this time, Di met the approaching autumn season with a conflicting mixture of wonder and dismay.

Di decided to live in the here and now and not worry about the snow and the cold and the short, dark days that were coming up. She banished thoughts of winter and turned her mind back to the conversation that was flowing around her.

"You know, I just remembered. I think that I heard Big Blue Couch was playing at The Haunt," Coop was saying.

"They're great!" Mart exclaimed. "That's so cool."

"Yeah, except I think that they were going on at nine-thirty, so I guarantee that we won't be able to get through the door," Coop reasoned.

Mart looked disappointed. "Yeah, I guess you're right. That's too bad."

"What is a Big Blue Couch?" Brooke asked.

"They're a local band. Three of the guys are fifth-year seniors at Ithaca, one's starting his third year at Cornell, and the fifth guy, the one who started the band, just graduated from Cornell in the spring. They're really popular here. Not just because they're local, but because they're good," Mart explained. "The Haunt features a lot of live music and local bands; it's pretty much what they're known for, but Big Blue Couch is probably the most popular. They always draw a big crowd."

"They even cut a CD. It's only available in area music stores, not nationally or anything, but they're hoping that someone will notice and sign them," Coop added.

"That sounds cool," Di said. "I suppose a lot of the Ithaca and Cornell students buy their stuff."

"Yeah, they're pretty popular," Coop confirmed.

"Well, it sounds as if The Haunt is out of the question," Brooke put in. "So, where to instead, oh upperclassmen?"

"The Chapter House, I think," Mart decided. "Sound good to you, Coop?"

“Sounds good to me,” Coop agreed.

“What’s the Chapter House like?” Brooked wanted to know.

Di was beginning to think that her new roommate was almost as curious as Trixie. She was very straightforward and direct, and she always asked a question if she had one. Unlike Di, who was sometimes afraid of asking questions for fear of looking stupid. A lot of people looked at her long, blue-black hair, violet eyes, full red lips, flawless porcelain skin, and beautiful face and decided that there was nothing behind the looks except a vapid interior. Di’s tendency to get nervous and mix up words, even when she knew better, did not help. So, a lot of times, Di did not open her mouth for fear of confirming people’s suspicions about her intelligence, or her imagined lack thereof.

“It’s just your typical college pub,” Coop answered her. “Scarred wood tables, good burgers, lots of happy people cutting loose.”

Di realized that they were walking along, heading into town, with no definite plan in mind. If they felt like it, they would go to the Chapter House, if not, there was bound to be something else to do. This was college after all! Unlike back home, when the Bob-Whites planned their outings and parties down to the last detail. Di loved the Bob-Whites and their planning and all of the good things that they had accomplished, but this idea of wandering into town at ten o’clock at night with no plan was very appealing to her all of a sudden. Again, she felt that headiness that had been her companion as of late.

“Cool. Sounds a lot like the pubs back home,” Brooke was commenting.

“Where is home?” Coop asked.

“Thunder Bay, Ontario,” Brooke proudly told him.

He looked impressed. “Wow. That’s a ways from here. I grew up in a little town called Fishers Landing. It’s across the St. Lawrence River from Ontario.”

“Really? Why, you’re practically Canadian,” Brooke teased him. “Did you go over the river and into Canada a lot?”

“All the time. My grandparents had a cottage on Gananoque Lake, so we went there a lot as kids during the summer. They decided to move to Florida when they got older. The New York winters really got to them, so they sold the cottage to my parents. I loved that cottage,” Coop said reminiscently.

“See? You really *are* Canadian,” Brooke declared.

Mart and Di, casually walking along and holding hands, looked at each other, and Di grinned. Mart tried to look stern, but he ended up grinning, too. As the two exchanged their secret, knowing smiles, Coop and Brooke were oblivious as they began animatedly talking about Canada, ice hockey, Bob and Doug McKenzie, SCTV, and other wonders of the Great White North.

Di had a thought and turned to Mart as their respective roommates carried on their enthusiastic and spirited conversation. “And you’re really okay heading out this late when you have an early class tomorrow?”

“Sure, why not?” he said flippantly. “Maybe I won’t even go,” he said, more to see what Di would say than because he really meant it.

“Not go? Mart Belden!” Di asked, shocked.

Mart adopted a carefree attitude. “Class? I don’t need no stinkin’ class,” he joked. “All I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten.”

Di laughed. “Ha ha. Very funny.”

Mart suddenly turned serious. “Okay, all I really needed to know I learned when *you* were in Kindergarten.”

“Is that so?” Di asked carefully, not allowing herself to read anything into Mart’s suddenly intense look and enigmatic statement.

“It is so. I think that I realized back then that you were all I needed,” Mart said.

Di looked up into Mart’s clear blue eyes and saw the absolute, unconditional love and adoration there, but, instead of the warmth and love that always flooded through her at the realization that he loved her and that they would probably spend the rest of their lives together, suddenly it was as though a goose walked over her grave.

She forced herself to smile up at Mart, not just to convince him that nothing was wrong, but to convince herself. Because, suddenly, thinking of the year ahead, she did not know how, but Diana just *knew* that the fear that she had been feeling mixed that strange headiness was a warning. And, despite the balmy August warmth, a sudden chill went through Diana.

Winter was coming.

Additional Author’s Notes: I did a lot of research about Ithaca, Ithaca College, Cornell University, New York City, Honey’s college residence (Marymount), and John Jay College, but, as I have never attended or visited these places, there are bound to be inaccuracies. I am sorry if you happen to be familiar with these places and/or universities and saw a glaring error. Let me know if that is the case, and I will fix it pronto! As it has been more than 12 years since I attended Michigan State University and things change, it’s possible that I have some errors there, too. Again, I apologize.

Big Blue Couch was a popular local band while I was at MSU. Hopefully, they don’t sue me for using their name. It is in tribute!

My carryover items were: new construction (the Bridge at John Jay) or a new neighbor (Liz Williams is Di’s neighbor on her floor in her dorm) (take your pick from #2.1), a photo montage (SA#5).

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