

Author Notes: This story was inspired by one of my favoritest songs ever, “Hate Me” by Blue October. The day I saw them perform this song live is a day I’ll never forget, and I had no idea so many years ago how much this song would mean to my beloved Trixie characters. The more I listened to the song, and the more I began to think about the story, I realized that I would just have to include some of the lyrics within the story itself, cheesy though that is. Normally, I just put a few of the lyrics that inspired the story at the top, but I realized that I was inspired by many lines instead of just a few this time, and I wanted them all to be included at the appropriate parts of the story. Please forgive the cheesiness! :)

Many thanks to Susan for her spur-of-the-moment edit when I realized just how fast my Jixaversary was approaching! She’s a true Bob-White, and she makes not only my writing better, but my life, too—as do Mary and Sue! Also, many thanks to Misty for whole-heartedly welcoming me to Jix, Cathy for welcoming me as an author, my fellow owners and admins and team members who inspire me, and, most of all, many thanks to *everyone* in the Jix community for being such special people and making Jix what it is—y’all are the best, and Jix would not be what it is without *you!* {{HUGS}}

Hate Me

by Dana

*I have to block out thoughts of you, so I don't lose my head
They crawl in like a cockroach leaving babies in my bed
Dropping little reels of tape, to remind me that I'm alone
Playing movies in my head that make a porno feel like home
There's a burning in my pride, a nervous bleeding in my brain
An ounce of peace is all I want for you, will you never call again?
And will you never say that you loved me, just to put it in my face?
And will you never try to reach me, it is I that wanted space*
—Blue October, “Hate Me”

Diana sat in front of her easel. The pastel chalk drawing that she was roughly, almost abstractly, sketching was not an assignment for one of her art classes. As a matter of fact, she had completed all of the homework that her art professors had given her. She had a paper to complete for art history and various tasks related to the general education classes she was taking, but she had completed all of her assigned art work several days before.

Diana was working on this particular project because she needed the release. Sitting in front of her easel—drawing, painting, *creating*—always made her feel more relaxed and calm, no matter what chaos was occurring in the rest of her life. The simple act of just holding a pencil, a pastel chalk, or a brush in her hand went a long way toward relaxing her, but once she began to apply the strokes to the canvas or the paper, Di felt a calm that penetrated to her very soul. There was something so lovely and soothing just in creating the strokes, aside from whatever picture or image that she was creating. The calm that she felt with just the sensation of the artistic utensil pressing against the soft flesh of her finger was intensified by the movement of her hands over the canvas. Everything came together as she was creating. There was something visceral about creating that fed Diana Lynch’s artistic soul.

Di still could not believe the avenues that had been opened to her when she had entered college in the fall. Before, art was something she did as a hobby—an escape. Now, it was her world. Her future now

depended on her art, or at least the effort that she put in to it, because her grades depended on it...and her future depended on her grades. Diana loved the thought of supporting herself solely on her art, but she knew that the odds were against that, so she had to keep her grades up in case she needed to fall back on her alternate plan, which was to become an art professor. In that case, she would need to go to grad school, where it was not just her art portfolio that would carry her, but also her grade point average.

Given how focused she had been on her studies throughout the past school year, it was rare that she indulged in creating for creating's sake, even though she knew that was what would make her a successful artist. Now that she was in college, she reveled in completing art projects that fulfilled homework assignments, but she also studied more than she had in the past. Time that had once been spent dreamily sketching was now spent reading her art history textbooks. Di's biggest fear was reliving her elementary days when she had mixed up words in front of an audience—like calling Benedict Arnold, Arnold Benedict from start to finish and turning a serious play into a comedy. Di didn't just want to just get good grades—she wanted to truly know the material in case she had to teach it someday.

Ultimately, though, Di's goal was to become an artist. And for that she needed a healthy dose of creativity. If she allowed her craft to fall by the wayside, or she began to concentrate on the more cerebral aspects of art and art history, she would lose sight of her true goal. It was a tight rope that Diana constantly walked, trying to stay creative enough to succeed at her dream while learning enough to forge a career that would support her, if need be.

And so, here she was, deftly laying bold strokes to paper in soft colors, practicing the artistic side that she knew that she had to nourish to ultimately be successful. Not because she had to for class, but because she wanted to, needed to, to soothe her aching soul.

So much had changed so quickly once Diana left for college. After all of the fears and insecurities that she faced when Mart left for college, fearing he would outgrow her, it was *she* who had changed when she arrived at college. The irony of the situation never failed to escape her. Mart Belden had been loving and true, even from hundreds of miles away. It was she herself, placed in new situations, who realized that she could not be the girlfriend that Mart deserved. As painful as it had been, she knew that it was the right thing to do. And still, the restlessness she felt continued.

Di didn't understand the restlessness. She was finally able to focus on her art for the first time, which should have calmed her. She was finally more than Trixie Belden's friend, or Mart Belden's girlfriend, or Edward Lynch's oldest. Di wondered if that was the problem—for the first time in her life, she was defined on her own terms, and that independence somehow caused the restless feeling inside her. Whatever the reason, Di had decided to apply for Ithaca College's semester abroad program. Right now, she was waiting to hear whether or not she had been accepted.

Notifications of acceptance were supposed to be sent out within two weeks of the application due date, but almost three weeks had passed, and Di had not heard anything. She was not sure whether that meant that she might be added to a wait list or that everyone was experiencing delays or that they were scrutinizing her application more thoroughly. She figured that she had less of a chance of attending because of her freshman status. She was sure that they gave preference to upperclassmen.

Diana knew that traveling to Europe and studying abroad wouldn't be a panacea, but she knew that she would be a step closer to answering that all important question that Trixie and her cousin Hallie had asked before her... *Who am I?*

Diana finished the portrait she was working on, but instead of feeling at peace, like she usually did when completing a drawing, an unease settled over her. She stared at piercing blue eyes, wondering if she did get in, what would Mart think?

* * *

It was the next day that Brooke, Di's roommate, arrived in their room to see Di staring fixatedly at an envelope.

"You okay?" she asked as she threw her backpack down on the ground and headed for the tiny dorm refrigerator to grab a Coke.

Di looked up, and Brooke's curiosity was piqued when she saw the flash of guilt cross Diana's face before she forced a smile. "I'm fine."

Brooke popped the tab on the can she held and took a long swallow, her eyes never leaving her friend.

Di saw the look. "Really, I'm fine," she repeated.

"Whatcha got there?" Brooke asked, motioning toward the letter with the hand that held the Coke.

Di's smile turned genuine, and her eyes flashed mischievously. "An envelope."

Brooke snorted. "Yeah? Thanks for that explanation, Miss Obvious."

"It's from the study abroad program," Di confessed.

Brooke looked confused. "The study abroad...did you apply?"

Di hated the hurt look that flashed across her roommate's face. "I did," she admitted with a nod. "I wasn't going to tell anyone unless I got in. I...I hope you understand, Brooke."

Brooke, knowing what her roommate needed, smiled and said, "I understand." She then tried to push aside her hurt and maintain a cheerful attitude. "And you got in, I take it?"

"I don't know!" Di fairly wailed. "I can't make myself open the envelope!"

Brooke laughed and set her Coke down on Di's desk, which happened to be closest. Then, the very pragmatic, matter-of-fact Brooke decisively took the envelope out of Di's hands and unceremoniously opened it. Brooke knew that she would miss Di desperately if she had indeed gotten into the program, but at the same time, she was incapable of doing anything but wishing her roommate the best. So, even though it would mean a personal loss for her, Brooke fervently hoped that it was an acceptance letter that she was tearing into. She pulled the letter out, read a few lines, and then grinned at Di, her heart experiencing a curious flutter of emotions that ranged from disappointment and sorrow for herself and genuine and true excitement and happiness for her friend.

“Di!” she exclaimed as she gave in to the selfless part of her soul and threw her hands around her friend’s neck in true delight and happiness. “You are *in!*”

Di stood uncomprehending for a long moment. “What?” she asked dazedly.

“You’re in!” Brooke repeated, jumping up and down, even as she still hugged her friend. “You’re going! You’re going to Europe!”

Comprehension finally broke over Diana, and after a moment of stunned silence, she actually screamed. It was that visceral scream of happiness that tore from her gut that made Diana realize just how much she had needed this.

The two did an impromptu dance in their dorm room, and Di thought how lucky she was to have been assigned Brooke as her roommate. So many people had such horrible experiences with their roommates, but after feeling like the third wheel for so long with Trixie and Honey, Diana finally felt like she had met her puzzle piece, someone who connected with her seamlessly. Suddenly, Di realized how much she was going to miss her friend, and before she knew it, she was crying.

“Brooke! I’m going to miss you,” she said through her tears.

“I know, sweetie,” Brooke responded. “And I’m going to miss you, too. But this is going to be *so great* for you.”

With that, she tenderly dried Diana Lynch’s tears with her thumb, a gesture that Di found comforting and strange at the same time. Brooke’s blue eyes stared in to Di Lynch’s violet ones for a long moment.

“C’mon,” Brooke said suddenly, breaking the spell. “Let’s go share the good news with the dorm! They’ll be so excited.”

Di smiled. “I haven’t even shared with the Bob-Whites,” she protested. “I should share it with them first!”

“But they’re not here,” Brooke said, grabbing Di by the arm and heading toward the hall. “They’ll never know they weren’t the first to know. We need to celebrate right now!”

Di laughed and let herself be led down the hall as Brooke shouted the news to anyone who would listen.

* * *

“You’re going where?” Trixie screeched. Di held the phone away from her ear, knowing that she could always count on Trixie to react just as Di expected.

“It’s not that big of a deal, Trixie,” Di said, trying to keep calm to counteract some of Trixie’s predictable excitability. “It’s not like it’s Asia or something. Actually, England is a heck of a lot closer than Hawaii, and that’s a state! This is not a big deal,” she repeated.

“Di!” Trixie continued to squeal. “Hawaii may be farther, but it’s still a state. England is a foreign country! What the heck are you thinking?”

Diana sighed. She had purposely called Trixie first because she knew that Trixie's reaction would be the most dramatic and difficult. She figured that if she could survive telling Trixie, with all of the inherent drama that would entail, she could survive anything.

Even telling Mart Belden.

But, even knowing how her friend would react, Di found herself feeling a little impatient at her friend's reaction. Hadn't Trixie decided to go to college in Michigan? Wasn't Michigan practically as far as England when it really came right down to it? Trixie didn't come home all that often, so what the heck was the difference, really?

"Trixie," she said, with more patience than she felt, "what I'm thinking is that I need to do this. Just like you needed to go to Michigan. I supported you when you moved halfway across the country because, as you were so quick to point out, Michigan State has one of the top two ranked criminal justice programs in the country. I supported you without question, because I love you enough to know that it was what you needed. And that it would be good for you. And, to top it all off, that it was what you wanted. Can you please do the same for me?"

There was silence on the other end of the line, and then Trixie responded, sounding very contrite. "I'm sorry, Di. You're right. I was too busy being selfish without stopping to think." There was a pause, and Diana knew exactly the expression passing over her oldest friend's face and the words that were about to follow. "It's my old standby excuse. I just didn't think."

Di laughed, happy that her friend was not mad at her and that she was so comfortingly predictable. "It's okay, Trix," she said. "I know this is rather drastic and unexpected, but it's only for a year."

"Thanks for being so understanding, Di," Trixie said, her tone changing to excitement. "Actually, now that I think about it, I'm really excited for you to go abroad. Now that I've gotten over my selfishness, I really think that it is the most perfectly perfect thing for you. You finally get to go to England, like Honey and I got to, and you'll really be able to explore your art. Plus, you'll be able to get some distance from..." Trixie stopped talking and then jumped in to the awkward pause that followed. "I'm sorry, Di," she said again for the second time in as many minutes. "I put my foot into it again, didn't I?"

Trixie sighed and then rushed on before Di could respond. "I know that you don't like to talk about it with me, Di, because Mart's my brother, and I don't blame you, but I want you to know that I understand. I really do. I kind of feel like that sometimes, too," Trixie admitted, barely pausing to take a breath before she continued. "College is fun, and being with Jim again is fun, but... Jim knows his way around. He doesn't need to explore because he's been here so long, and he has his routine. But I want to explore. And you know me, Di," Trixie gushed, as if a dam had burst. "I need to explore, and I never really get a chance to. I love Jim, but sometimes I feel like I'm suffocating a little. Nothing major or anything, but I think I know a little bit of what you're going through."

Di was surprised at this revelation and fervently wished that she had known all of this sooner. She had been afraid to talk to Trixie because she was Mart's sister, and it would have been nice to talk to someone who understood. Then again, Diana knew that this knowledge would not change anything. She knew that she had to take the path that she was on, the one that had led her away from Mart.

“I’m glad you told me,” she confided. “I just wish that I had known sooner.”

“Would it have changed things?” Trixie asked.

“No, but it would have been nice to have been able to talk to you instead of thinking I couldn’t because you wouldn’t understand or because you’re Mart’s sister.”

“We were friends before you and Mart started dating,” Trixie pointed out.

“Yes,” Di countered, “but you and Mart were siblings before you and I were friends. And you’re the almost-twins. You can fight all you want, but you and Mart are each other’s staunchest supporters. No outsider can even touch that, not even the Bob-Whites can.”

“You’re right, but I would never forget that you’re my friend, too, Di. No matter what.”

“I know, Trix, and I appreciate that,” Di said. “You’re the first Bob-White I told, you know.”

Di could picture the smile crossing her friend’s face. “Really? Not even Honey?”

“Not even Honey,” Di confirmed. “I know we’ve been talking a lot because of things going on with your brothers, and we haven’t meant to leave you out, Trix. It’s just worked out that way. But when it comes right down to it, you’re the one I wanted to tell first.”

Di knew Trixie wore a warm smile on her face because it was reflected in her voice. “Thanks, Di. I appreciate that.”

After that, the two friends giggled and gabbed about Diana’s upcoming trip— who she would meet, what she would see, the things she would experience. There was a wishful discussion about Trixie being able to visit at some point during the year, but both of the girls knew that this would probably be an unlikely event, as nice as it sounded.

By the time that the two old friends said their good-byes, Di felt much better about her next task. It had been rocky with Trixie at first, but it had turned out okay. Mart was a lot like Trixie, and even if his issues were not quite the same as Trixie’s had been, there was no reason to believe that the conversation that he and Diana had would not go somewhat similarly. At least, that is what Diana hoped.

She thought about putting the conversation off, but she knew that she needed to do it quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid. With a deep, fortifying sigh, Di began to dial Mart’s number.

*You made me compliment myself when it was way too hard to take
So I’ll drive so [expletive] far away that I’ll never cross your mind
And do whatever it takes in your heart to leave me behind*

*Hate me today
Hate me tomorrow
Hate me for all the things I didn’t do for you
Hate me in ways, yeah, ways hard to swallow
Hate me so you can finally see what’s good for you*

* * *

Di lay on her bed, nestled among her pillows. Brooke was out for the evening, celebrating the birthday of one of the people in her biology study group, so Diana knew that she would have the dorm room all to herself that evening. Not that she wanted it. Truth be told, she would have welcomed Brooke's company. She did not really want to be alone, left to replay the disastrous phone conversation with Mart over and over in her mind.

"Mart? It's Di," Diana had said when she heard Mart Belden's familiar voice answer the phone, hating how timid and apologetic she had sounded.

"Hi, Di." There was a long, awkward pause before Mart had asked, "What's up?"

"Nothing much," Di had replied, hating herself for delaying, for not ripping off the Band-Aid as she had planned. "How're you doing? How's Coop?"

"We're good," Mart Belden had answered, referring to himself and one of his roommates, the one with whom he shared a room. "Coop has a new girlfriend, so he stays over there a lot. I don't see him very much."

Diana had not been able to mistake the catch in Mart's voice. Another person might have appreciated the increased privacy this would afford—Coop and Mart shared a room—but Coop was a good friend to Mart, and Mart really liked hanging out with him. Now that he wasn't hanging out with her, Diana suspected that he felt the loss of his friend even more acutely. Especially now that Coop was apparently in love...and Mart Belden was alone.

Di had tried to swallow her guilt as she tried to bring up happy times and asked, "Remember when I tried to get Brooke and Coop together?"

In spite of himself, Mart had smiled. "Yeah. You know, I think you were right. Brooke and Coop would have made a great couple. I still don't understand why they didn't get together. They seemed to have a real connection going."

Di had explained, "They did have a connection. Brooke really liked Coop. A lot. But she's the first person ever in her family to go to college so she feels a lot of pressure to succeed. And because it cost them a lot to send her out of the country to go to school, she feels even more pressure. Add to that her sister's medical condition and the worry and stress she feels over that, and, well, she didn't think it was a good idea to date, at least not her first year. She was kind of hoping that maybe they could date when she really felt like she had a handle on college, but it looks like Coop's moved on."

"I wish she had told him that! Coop was all excited that he had met this great girl and that he had gotten all of these great vibes off of her, but then he said that all of a sudden she pushed away from him. And he didn't know what to think. He was actually pretty hurt. So then he kind of moped for a while and then moved on. If he had just known, he would have waited. Why couldn't Brooke have just been honest with them when they first met?"

Di agreed. She had urged Brooke to tell him all of that, but Brooke had been strangely reluctant to do so, and Diana had finally dropped the subject out of respect for her roommate. She absolutely agreed with Mart. Brooke should have been honest.

Which reminded her that she needed to be honest, too. Rip off the Band-Aid, she had told herself.

“Brooke had her reasons, Mart Belden,” Di said out of loyalty to her roommate, “but I called to tell you—”

Mart had interrupted with a derisive laugh. “Of course she had her reasons. And she hurt one of my best friends. And now you’re telling me you have an ulterior motive for calling. Why am I not surprised?”

Di had winced. This was already not going well, and she hadn’t even shared her news. Unfortunately, there was nothing left to do except plunge forward. “Well, I have some news, and I wanted to tell you before you heard it from anyone else.”

Diana had heard Mart’s sharp intake of breath, and she could only imagine what he was thinking, so she had plunged quickly on. “I’m really serious about finding myself, so I applied to the overseas program, and I just found out today that I was accepted. I’m spending next year in London, Mart.”

As Di had expected, there was a long silence on the other end. As she had chewed her lip nervously, Di had almost wished for Trixie’s explosive reaction. It would be better than this pregnant silence.

“Mart?” she had finally said when she had been unable to tolerate the silence any longer. “Are you there?”

“I’m here,” Mart Belden had responded, and Di’s heart had plummeted at the coldness that she heard. It had broken her heart to hear the discouragement in his voice and to know that she had put it there. “Apparently, you won’t be soon, though.”

“There’s a lot of time until I leave,” Di had tried to explain. “But—”

Mart gave a hollow laugh, silencing Diana. “But, Mart, I need to do this,” he had mimicked in a high-pitched voice. “I need my space. I need to get away from everything and everyone who’ve ever loved me. I’m so selfish.”

Di had swallowed hard, Mart’s unflattering imitation and cruel words cutting her to the quick.

“Mart, I know you’re—” Di had tried once again to reason with him, to explain her side. She knew that Mart was not really like this, that he was only reacting out of hurt and anger.

“You don’t know what I am,” Mart Belden had spat out, and the venom in his voice had caused Diana to recoil. “Go! Go to Europe! Go to Timbuktu! Go to hell, for all I care. Just go, and get the hell out of my life!”

Di had cringed at the horribly final sound of Mart Belden slamming down the phone.

She had lost him forever. She was sure of it...

* * *

Meanwhile, Mart was also lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. Di was leaving him. Why couldn't she "discover herself" here in Ithaca? Why did she have to run away to the other side of the Atlantic, halfway across the world to find out who she was? Mart could tell her who she was. She was a sweet girl from a small town who was loved and adored by nearly everyone she met. She was sweet, funny, caring, and much smarter than she or almost anyone else gave her credit for. She was loyal and genuine and wonderful. Di was so many things. Why couldn't she see that? Why couldn't she see herself as he saw her? Didn't she know that there was so much more to her than her looks? What made her feel so broken inside that she felt she needed to run off to Europe?

Mart heard the door to his room open, and he looked up, surprised, as Coop walked through the door.

"What're you doing home?" Mart wondered, sitting up. "Is Emily here?"

Coop shook his head. "Nope, I decided that to preserve our relationship it would be in our best interest for me to leave."

"Ouch," Mart said. "That doesn't sound good. What happened? Or do you not want to talk about it?"

Coop shrugged, threw his backpack down near his desk, and sank down onto his bed. "It's not that big of a deal." He looked at his roommate thoughtfully. "But maybe it's more important to talk about you. The last time I saw you laying in the bed staring mournfully at the ceiling was when you and Di broke up. At the risk of regretting it, I'll ask anyway. Did something else happen?"

Mart sighed. "Yeah, something happened."

"What?" Coop asked. "Or do you not want to talk about it?"

"No, it's fine," Mart Belden said. He correctly guessed that Coop suspected that Diana was dating someone new. In many ways, Mart Belden actually wished that was the case. At least she'd still be here in Ithaca, and he might be able to see her every so often...or maybe even run in to her back in Sleepyside during breaks. Would she come home for the holidays when she was in Europe? What if she fell in love with Europe so much that she never came back? What if she fell in love with someone there and never came back? Mart knew he had to stop these thoughts.

Coop stared at his blond-haired roommate. "Wow. It must be really bad if you're taking this long to respond."

"Diana called, as I'm sure you've guessed." At Coop's nod, Mart continued. "She has decided to take this finding herself quest even farther. She's going to Europe in the study abroad program."

Coop was silent for a beat, and then he whistled. "Really? For the whole year or just a semester?"

"A year," Mart replied glumly.

"At the London Center, I assume?"

Again, Mart nodded. “She said she’d be spending it in London, so I’m assuming it’s at the London Center. Honestly, it wasn’t a very long conversation. As a matter of fact, you could say that in the interest of preserving what relationship we have left, I decided that it was in our best interest to terminate the conversation early.”

“You hung up on her?” Coop translated, his eyebrows raised.

Mart looked shamefaced. “I’m not really proud of it, but yeah, I did,” he admitted.

Coop decided that he needed to be matter-of-fact and upbeat with his roommate, who was clearly beating himself up. “Well, I’m sure once you get over the shock, you’ll be fine, and you’ll feel like talking to Diana about it again. In the meantime, I’m sure that Di understands and isn’t holding it against you.”

“We’ll see.” Mart sighed. “I might have also said a few mean things that I probably shouldn’t have.”

Coop shook his head. “You and that temper of yours. What did you say to her?”

“I might have been really sarcastic and mean about her need to find herself. I might have used an unflattering, mimicky voice. I might have also used the word selfish.”

“Holy crap, Mart Belden!” Coop said. “You didn’t!”

Mart nodded, misery etched on his handsome face. “Unfortunately, I did. Like I said, it was not one of my most proud moments.”

Coop shook his head. “Forget what I said earlier. You need to call Di and apologize right away. You don’t need to talk long or about it, but you can’t let that poor girl feel as miserable as you do right now. And I guarantee she does. You know she had to have been scared to approach you about this to begin with, and this has got to be devastating to her. Di’s a good girl, which I know you know,” Coop scolded. “And you also know that she’s an art major, so it’s not unusual that she would want to go to Europe and study her craft further, at the epicenter of art and culture. She really will learn a lot there.”

“You’re right,” Mart said, reaching for the phone.

Coop stood up. “You’re a good man, Charlie Brown. I’ll give you some privacy.” Just before Coop pulled the door shut behind him with a soft click, he heard Mart say, “Di? It’s me. Look, I’m really sorry about before. I was a total ass. Forgive me?”

* * *

Diana smiled when she heard Mart Belden’s voice. She smiled even wider when she heard his words. “Of course, I forgive you, Mart Belden,” she assured him. “I know that I probably didn’t break it to you in the right way, and I know what I am doing probably seems pretty drastic to you, but...” Di trailed off. She had started to say that she really needed to do this, and then she remembered Mart Belden’s cruel tone and words from earlier.

On his end, Mart kicked himself over her silence. “Di, I know you need to do this, and what I said before was awful. You are not selfish. As a matter of fact, you’re one of the most unselfish people I know. *I was*

the one who was selfish. Not you. And if you need to do this, then, well, then...I support you," he said, swallowing hard.

Di knew what it had just cost Mart Belden to say that. That he was willing to support her even in something that was giving him this much pain warmed her heart. She wondered for the millionth time why she had broken up with him. "Thank you," she said softly. "I know how hard that was for you to say, and I truly do appreciate it. I appreciate you more than you think, Mart Belden."

"Thanks, Di," Mart said. "Listen, I'm really not ready to talk about this yet, but I did want to apologize for being so rotten to you before. What I said was mean, but most of all, it was untrue. I really am sorry."

"All is forgiven, Mart," Di said, trying to swallow the disappointment that Mart didn't want to talk to her further. "Please don't worry about it."

"Thanks," Mart Belden said again. "Well, Coop came back home tonight. He and Emily had a fight, and I feel like I should make sure he's okay."

Di felt mollified knowing that the reason Mart didn't want to talk, at least one of the reasons anyway, was that he wanted to be a good friend to his roommate. "I understand," Di said. "Go hang out with Coop. Make sure everything's okay. Tell him I said hi."

"I will, Di," Mart promised, and the two said their good-byes.

* * *

After he had spoken to Di, Mart headed to the living room. Coop was watching a cheesy movie from the 80s, and Mart lay down on the couch, ready to revel in the cheesiness. Coop looked up from his comfortable position in the room's only reclining chair.

"Everything good?" Coop asked.

Mart Belden nodded. "She was really nice and accepted my apology. She says hi, by the way."

The two sat in silence, watching the movie, until it was interrupted by a commercial.

"Thanks," Mart said.

"No problem," Coop said.

"Can I return the favor?"

Coop sighed and looked at Mart. "You really want to hear about it?"

Mart nodded. "Yeah, I do. Especially after all that you've had to listen to over the last year."

"Well, it was just one of those stupid arguments that starts about something so small and minuscule that when you look back you can't believe that it would ever have the potential to start an argument at all, and then the next thing you know, not only are you arguing about that small, insignificant, stupid thing, you're arguing about the really important things, as well."

Coop paused and then continued. “I mean, it was *literally* over spilled milk.”

Mart tried to hold back his grin, but could not. “You fought over spilled milk? Seriously? Well, at least you didn’t cry over it, right?”

Coop chuckled ruefully. “Right. I went to the vending machine at her dorm and decided to get milk instead of a soda. I was sitting on her bed when I finally opened it, and it splashed a little. And she freaks out because it’s on her bed, and I’m all apologizing, and next thing I know we’re fighting about how inconsiderate I am, apparently, because I don’t take care of her stuff. I honestly have no idea what she’s talking about, because I don’t use her stuff, but whatever. And then I’m telling her what a nag she can be.” He shook his head again. “I know I shouldn’t have said it, but man, did she push my buttons. And it’s not like it’s completely untrue.” He sighed. “You should have seen the look on her face when that came out of my mouth. It was then that I realized that I needed to leave or really put my foot in it. We’ve had a couple of fights in the past, but I don’t think I have *ever* seen Emily look so furious.”

Mart said, “You were probably right to leave then. Dude, Emily’s a nice girl, but the thought of her angry scares me.”

Coop blew out a surprised guffaw. “I know, right?” He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, resting his bottle on his knee. “I like Emily, but sometimes I wonder if having a girlfriend is worth it.”

“It is if she’s the right one.” Mart’s answer was immediate and heartfelt.

Coop sat up and tried to turn the conversation to a lighter subject. “Well, maybe I just haven’t met the right one yet.” He turned his attention back to the television. “I’m sick of this. Let’s watch a DVD.”

“Sure,” Mart said, wondering if he should mention Brooke’s interest in Coop, but he decided to let sleeping dogs lie for the moment.

* * *

The next day, Di called Honey and told her the news, as well as about Mart’s initial reaction and his subsequent apologetic phone call. As Di had expected, Honey was surprised—but not shocked—at the news, and she was very supportive. Given what she was currently going through with her own feelings, Di was not surprised that Honey would be completely empathetic.

“Maybe I should come with you,” Honey joked. “Maybe John Jay has a study abroad program.”

Di laughed. “Sure, you can probably come study with Scotland Yard.”

“Wouldn’t that be fantastic?” Honey asked with a chuckle. “Maybe I will look into it!” Di thought that Honey was kidding, but she was not entirely sure.

“Can you imagine us both together over in London?” Honey continued. “It would be so fun. Michigan State must have a study abroad program. We should totally convince Trix to come, too!”

“Actually, when I was talking to Trixie, she told me that Michigan State has the largest study abroad program in the entire nation,” Di said.

“So it should be a cinch to get her to come with us!”

Di snorted inelegantly. “From a program standpoint, sure, but we’d need a crow bar to pry her away from that brother of yours.”

Honey chuckled. “You’re right on that count.”

After the giggles subsided, Di asked, “Are you serious, Honey? Do you want to do a year abroad?”

“I think it would be a fantastic experience,” Honey said. “But no, I’m not serious. I need to stay here and work this out.”

Diana wondered if there was an unspoken admonishment in that statement—an implication that Di should stay in New York and work out her own problems. As if reading her mind, Honey continued, “I definitely think you need to go and do this and get everything sorted out that you need to. But I won’t be able to sort anything out from overseas. I need to stay here and spend time with Brian and Dan. That’s the only way that this will ever get resolved.”

Di agreed and told her friend so. After that, the two chatted about Di’s opportunities in London. Because Diana had been unable to join them on the Bob-White trip to London when they were fourteen, Honey told her what her favorite sights were, and the ones that Diana probably could miss.

“Like the Chamber of Horrors in Madame Tussauds Wax Museum!” Honey said emphatically. “You must see Madame Tussauds. Just don’t go into the basement!”

Honey urged her friend to leave London and see the British countryside, and Di explained that she definitely would because there were field trips outside of London. She also mentioned that she wanted to visit Ireland, the land of her ancestors. It wasn’t until Honey mentioned that she really needed to study for a chemistry test that the two girls said their good-byes.

With her calls to Trixie, Honey, and Mart out of the way, Di felt much better. Trixie would tell Jim, and possibly Brian, too. Honey would definitely tell Dan, but she might also get to tell Brian before Trixie did. Either way, the Bob-White grapevine would do its business. Brooke already knew, as did Di’s parents. Now, Di could concentrate on her art history.

Di gave a happy sigh, feeling thankful that she could concentrate on her art history paper. Instead of the nervous, pent-up energy that she had been carrying around for so many months, she felt a strange sense of peace and an underlying excitement at the adventure that she knew lay ahead of her.

Finally, Di thought. Finally, I feel like I may be on the right track.

Epilogue

The Middle of August of the Same Year

*And with a sad heart I say bye to you and wave
Kicking shadows on the street for every mistake that I had made
And like a baby [girl] I never was a [woman]
Until I saw your blue eyes crying and I held your face in my hand
And then I fell down yelling "Make it go away!"
Just make a smile come back and shine just like it used to be
And then [he] whispered, "How can you do this to me?"
—paraphrased from Blue October, "Hate Me"*

Diana sat inside John F. Kennedy Airport, surrounded by her friends and family. There were many other students from Ithaca College, also about to leave for either a semester or a full year at the London Center. All of the students were required to fly together, except in extenuating circumstances, and Di figured that they would take up at least half of the large plane carrying them across the Atlantic Ocean to the adventure that lay ahead.

Di looked around at her fellow students, knowing that the unique mix of excitement, fear, sadness, and pleasure that she saw on their faces matched her own. Diana even felt a little regret mixed in that she wouldn't be able to participate in the Bob-White Thanksgiving traditions or simply just pick up the phone and call her friends. She also worried a little bit about Brooke and her sister. She had been Brooke's support the previous year when Brooke was so worried about Katie. It was true that Katie was doing a lot better now and that the medications had stabilized her bipolar disorder remarkably well, but Brooke still worried about her little sister, understandably, and Diana worried about her roommate. She loved all of her friends so much, and here she was leaving to go to a very foreign place. In that moment, she couldn't even remember why she had ever felt the need to leave in the first place.

What the hell was I thinking? Di suddenly wondered.

She looked at Brooke, and her friend's blue eyes said that she knew exactly what Diana was thinking. Brooke moved forward and gave her a hug. "I'll be okay. Katie will be okay. But most of all, *you* will be okay."

"You promise?" Diana asked forlornly as she tightly hugged her back and tears sprang unbidden to her eyes.

"I promise," Brooke answered.

Trixie and Honey exchanged glances. They had been so worried about Di during the previous year, but now both of them truly realized that Di had someone who had her back just as fervently and lovingly as Trixie and Honey each did. Honey made a mental note to invite Brooke to New York City and Sleepyside for weekends this year, knowing that she didn't get to go home very often and so that she would not feel Diana's absence quite so much. It wouldn't be the same as having Di on campus with her, but it was something that Honey could do, and she felt better having thought of it. Meanwhile, Trixie was scheming

how to convince Brooke and Honey that they needed to take a road trip to Michigan State, perhaps for a long weekend.

Anything to keep Brooke's mind off of Di's absence, Trixie vowed to herself.

Meanwhile, Dan and Jim stood off to the side, watching Trixie and Honey exchange glances and knowing exactly what the two girls were thinking. Jim expected that Honey and Brooke would be road tripping out to Michigan State. He chuckled out loud, and Dan smiled at him.

"We're both probably going to be seeing a lot of Brooke this upcoming year, huh?" Dan asked him with a knowing smile.

"I'd expect so, knowing those two," Jim replied with his lopsided grin.

"Yeah, that's for sure," Dan said. "But they wouldn't be them if they weren't like that, and we wouldn't love them nearly as much as we do."

"You've got that right," Jim said.

Dan snorted. "Hey, it's good to hear I'm right about something."

"When have you ever worried about being right?" Jim asked, surprised.

Dan sneaked a look at Honey. "I don't know. Sometimes it feels like I can't do anything right."

Jim glanced over at his sister and then back at Dan. "She loves you, Dan. This'll pass."

"I hope so," Dan said with a resigned sigh. "She loves Brian, too, you know."

Jim nodded, suddenly serious. "I know, Dan. But things will work out the way they should."

"You promise?" Dan asked, an anxious look in his dark eyes.

"I promise," Jim said solemnly.

Both of the young men then turned their attention to the young women, who were gushing over all of the things that Diana was going to see and experience in Europe, trying to keep her mind off of what she would miss. Mart and Brian stood off to the other side, also watching the girls. Dan glanced at Brian, hating the awkwardness that he felt between them. And he also felt Lexi's absence. Diana and Lexi had become rather close during the time that Lexi was living at Crabapple Farm. She should be there. He understood why she was not, but he still wished that she had been there to see Diana off.

Oh well, Dan reflected. Like Jim said, things will work out how they're supposed to.

Dan's dark eyes moved to Mart Belden, and he saw absolute misery sketched on his friend's face. He was trying to plant a smile on his face, trying to be supportive of Di, because that's who Mart Belden was, but it was clear that he was not happy about this trip of hers, and the stiff smile on his lips only emphasized it all the more.

Dan thought about making his way over to Mart to try to offer him words of comfort or crack a joke to make him truly smile, but at that moment, Di freed herself from the other young women and moved toward the spot where he and Jim were standing.

Diana gave both young men a hug. "I'm so glad that you could be here," she said. She looked at Jim. "Especially you, Jim. I know that with grad school orientation and all that that it was more difficult for you to be in New York this week, but I really, really appreciate it."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world, Di," Jim said easily, with a casual grin gracing his lips. "You needed the full complement of Bob-Whites to send you off on a journey of this magnitude."

Di smiled rather shyly. "I really appreciate that, Jim. I know it was hard for more than one of you to be here," Di said, her violet eyes flicking over to Mart seemingly involuntarily and then quickly back to Jim and Dan.

Impulsively, Dan reached out and grabbed Di's hand. "He does support you, you know, with all of his heart—even if this is hard for him right now."

Once again, tears sprang to Di's eyes. "I know. And I know how hard this is for him. And I hate that I'm the one causing him so much pain," she said, gripping Dan's hand.

With his free hand, Dan reached up and wiped the tears off Di Lynch's cheeks. "Shh," he said. "Deep down, he knows that. Now stop worrying. You've got a lot of good times ahead of you...in Europe and when you get home. Think about those, okay? Because no one wants to remember you crying today. We want to remember you happy and excited about your adventure ahead."

Di nodded and smiled through her tears. "Thanks, Dan."

"Anything for you, schweet-haht," Dan said in what was his best attempt at a Humphrey Bogart voice. But since Dan's best attempt was barely even passable, Di genuinely laughed. She let go of Dan's hand and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand at the same time Jim gave her a shoulder a quick hug in a show of support.

Di pulled Jim and Dan over to where Trixie and Honey were standing talking to Brooke and the Lynches. Di reached over and pulled Brian and Mart into the group as well. Di looked at Mart, a question in her violet eyes. Mart smiled at her, a genuine smile, and she smiled back. After several more minutes of conversation, Di realized that there were only a few minutes left before the group of Ithaca College overseas studies students would gather together and go through the security checkpoint. She wanted to spend a few minutes alone with Mart before she had to go, so she excused herself from the group and pulled him along with her to a relatively quiet spot in the bustling air terminal.

"Mart, I—" Di broke off and simply stared into Mart's blue eyes. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry. I am."

Mart, like Dan had, took Diana's hands in his. "Di, it's okay. I'm the one who's sorry. Sorry for being so selfish."

Di shook her head. "You're not the one who's selfish, Mart. I am. I'm deserting Brooke, and you, and my family all because of some stupid thing inside me that I don't even understand."

“It’s allowed, Di,” Mart said in an attempt to comfort her. “Brooke will be fine. Coop and I will look after her.” He grinned wickedly. “Especially now that Coop and Emily broke up.” Di smiled at that as Mart continued, “Your family will be fine, too. And, believe it or not, I also will be.”

“I know you will be,” she said. “But will I?”

“You will be, Di,” Mart said fervently. “I hope you find what you’re looking for in England, I really do. Everyone who knows you already knows how special and wonderful you are, and I know I, for one, will be happy when you realize that, too.”

Di looked down for a moment at their hands, still intertwined, and then looked back up into Mart’s eyes. “You’re too good to me,” she said, her heart breaking at all of the emotions that she saw in those bright blue eyes. But it was the pain and the unshed tears that broke her heart the most.

How could she do this to him?

She freed her hands and placed them on his face. She didn’t want to see the pain or the tears. *Just make it go away!* her mind screamed.

“I love you, Mart Belden,” she said out loud. “*So much.*”

Mart reached up and gripped her wrists. “I know you do, Di. I love you, too.”

The two stayed like that for several long moments before Mart gently pulled her hands away from his face, and they strolled back to the group, surreptitiously wiping their eyes with one hand, their other hands entwined.

There was a flurry of hugs and good-byes, and the next thing Di knew, she was being whisked away with her fellow students, moving closer to the plane that would carry her away from everyone that she loved, everyone who was standing there waving at her, wishing her well as she embarked on this journey.

Her violet eyes locked with Mart’s for a long moment, and then she rounded the corner and disappeared.

Mart stood there, whispering, “If you love me, how can you do this to me?”