

Author's Notes: Many, many thanks to all of you who have made the last six years of being a Jix author so rewarding. We are all blessed to have this little haven on the Internet, both in good times and in bad. Many thanks to Susan for editing a story that was sent to her piece by piece AND at the last minute. Thanks, Susan! I don't always take all of her advice about punctuation because the sentence's flow is in my head, so any mistakes are mine. This is a Jixemetri Valentine's CWP #2.4 Submission. In celebration of my sixth Jixaversary, I present...

Moments Like These

by Dana

"The three-stone eternity ring...tell her you'd marry her all over again."

Mart Belden was sick to death of the constant diamond jewelry commercials this time of the year. Funny, he'd never noticed before how many DeBeers and jewelry store commercials were played during the first half of February. Then again, in years past he'd used them as inspiration. They had been a lot less annoying when he'd had a girlfriend to spoil. Not that he'd had a lot of disposable income to spend on Diana, but nothing had ever been too good for his beloved Di.

Mart had always looked forward to Valentine's Day. He had never needed an excuse to shower Di with love and affection, but he did enjoy the opportunity to be extra extravagant in his display of adoration. Whether it was saving and saving for fantastic seats at a Broadway play that Di was sure to love followed by a fancy meal at a four-star New York City restaurant, or a more simple evening of making out in the balcony of the Cameo—after which he desperately tried to clean the lipstick smudges off of his neck before heading to Wimpy's for a familiar meal of burgers and shakes—Mart enjoyed taking Di out. Valentine's Day, when romance floated in the very air they breathed, was always something to look forward to. And when he was able to augment a Valentine's date with a trinket for Di, so much the better.

But this year, there would be no Valentine's Day spent with Diana Lynch. At least not for Mart Belden. The blond college sophomore imagined that someone would be spending it with the black-haired beauty. Up until a day or so ago, he had been subconsciously hoping that that someone would be him. That, somehow, Di would come to her senses and they would get back together for "their" holiday. But with Valentine's Day only a couple of days away, that hope was evaporating quickly.

As Mart sat in his apartment, frenziedly clicking the remote in an effort to avoid all jewelry commercials, his eyes fell on a piece of red construction paper lying on the floor in front of the television. Grateful for something to do other than exercise his thumb muscles, he set the remote down and crossed the room to pick up the Valentine that Coop, his roommate, had received. He grinned at the lopsided heart shape, the sloppily placed doily lace, and the abundance of red glitter and tiny silver beads. "Will you be my Valentine, Coop?" scrawled across the front in child's handwriting, was the final touch.

Despite his grumpy mood, Mart appreciated the handmade sentiment. Coop's mom ran a daycare out of her house, and apparently one of her young charges, five-year-old Annabelle, had developed a crush on Cooper. The crush had almost run its course after Coop had returned to college, but Belle had gotten a fresh "dose" of the object of her affection during Christmas break. Clearly, the Valentine Mart held indicated that the crush had been renewed.

Staring at the Valentine, a sense of nostalgia swept over Mart as he remembered the Valentine that he had made for Diana in the second grade. He still remembered the incessant teasing that he had received from Lester Mundy, Tad Webster, and Ty Scott when they had realized that he had used the class Valentine project as an excuse to make something for Di. He had been the only boy in his class who did not choose his mother to be the recipient of the class project.

Even then, Mart had loved an excuse to shower Di with proof of his affection.

Bitterly, the 19-year-old Mart thought about how nothing had changed on his part—and everything had changed on Diana's.

He carefully set the Valentine down on Coop's political science textbook, resisting the irrational urge to rip it up, and tried to rein in the sadness and anger threatening to overwhelm him. Of course, just then another jewelry commercial came on the television—the last straw.

He angrily grabbed the remote and turned off the offensive ad with a forceful click. He needed air, needed to get out of the apartment and walk—walk somewhere...anywhere—before the memories of Valentines past threatened to strangle him. His eyes fell on the clock of the hand-me-down VCR as he left the apartment. 5:32 p.m. The sun had already set, but Mart knew he had a little time before darkness descended completely on Ithaca—darkness that could never surpass the darkness he felt in his heart. He stalked out into the gloaming, ignoring the phone ringing in his apartment.

He wasn't in the mood to talk to *anyone* at that moment.

* * *

"Hey, Di," Brooke Callahan said as she entered the small dorm room that she shared with Di at Ithaca College. "I picked up the mail. You got a package from your family." Brooke and Diana had each chosen to sign a roommate-release form, allowing the other to pick up any packages for their room.

Di smiled wide as she put down her pen and jumped from her desk to happily grab the package from her roommate's hands. She tore it open to reveal a heart-shaped box of chocolates, a bag of the little heart candies with all of the "clever" messages, a pink envelope, and several construction paper Valentines that were obviously the work of the twinnies.

Diana immediately ripped the cellophane off of the box of chocolates and eagerly pulled the top off. She selected a chocolate and popped it into her mouth with an exaggerated "Mmmm...", her eyes closing in delight.

"That bad, huh?"

Di's eyes popped open, and she took in her roommate's amused grin.

"Let's just say that I am in desperate need of a chocolate fix," Di explained as she held out the box of chocolates to Brooke, who selected one and sat down on her bed.

"Why?" she asked as she finished chewing her raspberry-filled confection.

Di sighed. "Seller's remorse?"

Brooke looked confused. "Huh?"

Di sighed again. "It's just this time of year..." Her small voice trailed off uncertainly.

“Valentine’s?” Brooke asked softly.

“Yeah. I guess I’m just missing Mart more than I should. More than I deserve anyway.”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “Stop about the deserving crap. You’re entitled to miss him.”

Di did not agree but knew better than to argue with her opinionated and stubborn roommate, so she continued. “Valentine’s Day was ‘our’ holiday. Mart is really romantic and sweet inside, no matter what he would have the rest of the world—or his sister—believe,” she explained. “He always made a big deal about Valentine’s Day.”

Brooke watched as Di’s face took on a dreamy expression. This was such a welcome change from the guilt that always flashed across Di’s Irish pixie features when she thought or spoke of Mart lately.

“One year,” Di continued, “he worked extra hard all summer, taking all sorts of odd jobs to be able to contribute to our club fund and be able to splurge on me. He raked more leaves than I thought humanly possible that fall and shoveled more snow that winter than anyone should ever have to, just so that he could take *me* out. I thought he was saving for college, and all the while he was saving for me. He wanted to take me to *Phantom of the Opera* and to a ‘proper’ dinner afterward.”

Brooke was suitably impressed. “Wow. That’s some forethought for a teenage guy. He started planning for Valentine’s the summer before?”

“That’s a lot of foresight for *any* guy,” Di said tensely.

“Whoa! When did you get so cynical?”

Di shrugged, not sure where the sudden bitterness had come from. “I don’t know. Must be my mood.”

“So call him,” Brooke said, her voice a study in casualness as she reached for another chocolate from the box.

Di blinked. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Not an option.” Di violently shook her head.

“Why not?” Brooke demanded.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not fair.”

“To Mart?”

Di nodded in response. The lump in her throat made it impossible for her to say anything.

“That’s crap and you know it.” One thing about Brooke—she always called it like she saw it.

Diana set her jaw stubbornly and stared at her roommate, Brooke’s straightforwardness all but making her forget the lump in her throat.

“Look,” Brooke began, “didn’t you say you talked and ended as friends?” Di reluctantly nodded, knowing her friend was going to score a point and desperately afraid of the consequences. “And weren’t things relatively okay with you at Christmas?” Di nodded again. “Do you *want* to talk to him?” If she was going to tell the truth, Di could not help but nod again.

“Then call him!”

Di shook her head as vehemently as before.

“What’s the problem, Di?”

The freshman contemplated that for a moment, her brow furrowed in a thoughtful frown.

“I miss Mart,” she finally said, “but I’m still not ready to get back together.”

Brooke did not comment on the fact that her roommate’s statement implied that eventually she *would* be ready to get back together with her high school sweetheart. Instead, she said, “And you think contacting him, especially at this time of year, will send the wrong signal? That he’ll get his hopes up?”

Di gave a little shrug and a small embarrassed smile. “That sounds really egotistical, doesn’t it?”

“No,” Brooke disagreed. “It’s a legitimate worry. Mart may very well still want to get back together. Then again, he may not, and you’re worrying for nothing.”

Di ignored the uncomfortable little niggles that ran through her at the thought that Mart might not want to get back together with her. What kind of a megalomaniac was she anyway? “So, you think it’s worth the risk of calling him,” she concluded.

“Yep!” Brooke responded cheerfully.

“Nope!” Di mimicked her friend’s cheery tone.

Brooke threw up her hands. “I give up! Fine! Be miserable!” She stood up. “But you’re going to have to have to be miserable on your own. I have study group tonight.”

Di watched forlornly as Brooke grabbed her backpack and headed for the door of their room. “Study hard!” she called out, her voice sounding desperate even to her own ears.

Brooke turned and gave a smile and a wave before she departed, and Di relaxed, knowing that her roommate wasn’t upset with her despite all of her wishy-washiness. Her sense of peace lasted all of ten seconds before her thoughts returned to Mart.

Just because she knew she didn’t want to get back together with Mart didn’t mean that it was easy for her to spend Valentine’s Day without him. But she couldn’t call him.

Could she?

Her eyes fell to the package that Brooke had brought in, the one from her family. Di’s thoughts of Mart were pushed aside as she realized that she hadn’t finished looking through the box. She idly grabbed a stack of cards, carefully opening the pink envelope that rested on top. The card was from her parents, as revealed by her mother’s elegant scrawl. She smiled as she stood the card on her desk and then turned her attention to the remainder of the homemade Valentines in her hand.

The first two were constructed of dainty lilac-colored, parchment-like paper that Di recognized as her mother's favorite stationery. She giggled as she realized that Rachel and Cassie must have raided their mother's stock, knowing how much their older sister loved the color purple. She was touched by their efforts and hoped that her mom had sanctioned the use of her delicate paper.

The next two homemade creations were a lot less delicate looking than her sisters' Valentine's wishes. Although the pieces of red construction paper were in the shape of hearts, that was where the romantic theme ended. Instead of the silver glitter and decorative lace that had accompanied her sisters' missives, her brothers had included pictures of what Di could only guess were dinosaurs. Although Cassie and Rachel's cards had wished her a happy Valentine's Day, Terry and Larry's greetings did not contain any words.

So typical, Di thought affectionately.

As she set her siblings' Valentines aside and looked at the next card, the giggle died in her throat. Like Terry and Larry's, the card was made of red construction paper, but that's where the similarities ended.

This red heart was faded from time. It was carefully glued to a larger, heart-shaped doily, so that the white lace made a border around the heart. Red sequins decorated this heart, not dinosaurs, and a little boy's penmanship said, "Please be my Valentine Di, Signed Mart".

Tears sprang unbidden to Di's eyes as she stared at the precious memento from her past. She'd never forget the feeling of wonder and happiness that she had felt when the older, blond-haired boy, brother of her best friend, had shyly given this to her on the playground. She had been even more impressed when the jeers of three of Mart's classmates hadn't seemed to bother him a bit.

Her mother was not playing fair.

Di sighed, and her eyes fell on the photo montage of her and the other Bob-Whites that graced her wall. She had never replaced the largest picture in the montage—a picture of she and Mart at her senior prom. Another sigh escaped her lips, and she looked at the phone. *Could* she call Mart?

Her digital clock read 5:32 p.m. Mart was probably home, she reasoned. Before she had time to think about it even one second more, she realized that her hand was already reaching for the phone. As her trembling fingers dialed the familiar number, her heart pounded in her chest. She tried to reason with her traitorous body, but her hands continued to tremble and her heart continued to beat its wild tattoo.

After eight rings, her heart sank as she realized that Mart was not home. The depth of her disappointment surprised her as she returned the handset to the cradle. But no matter how disappointed she was, Di didn't think that she would be able to summon the courage to call Mart a second time.

* * *

"Happy Valentine's Day, sweetie!" Honey called to her boyfriend as she entered her New York City student apartment. Dan's classes had ended earlier than hers that day, and he had promised to be waiting for her when she got home. Technically, per the rules of the college residence, guests were to be escorted at all times while in the building, but after six months of

living here, the staff knew and trusted Dan and were willing to make an exception for the romantic holiday.

Dan emerged from the kitchen, a smile playing across his handsome features. “Happy Valentine’s Day,” he said as he crossed the living room toward her. She smiled happily as she threw her backpack down and shrugged off her heavy winter coat. That done, she was soon melting in her boyfriend’s open arms.

Nothing feels as good as this, she reflected as she leaned into him, inhaling his masculine scent. Her smile deepened as he kissed the top of her head in an affectionate but comfortable manner.

“Have a good day?” he asked as he released her so that she could hang up her coat in the tiny closet.

She nodded. “It was okay. You?”

Dan grinned at her. “Better now that you’re here.”

Honey smiled as she picked up her backpack to put in her room. “Something smells good,” she commented, crossing the living room into her room. After placing the backpack next to her desk, she joined Dan, who had returned to the kitchen.

“I thought I’d treat my favorite girl to a home-cooked dinner,” Dan said.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Honey protested, looking at the various pots and pans simmering on the stove. “I thought we were just going to order pizza and snuggle up and watch a movie. Simple.” She wrinkled her nose. “No dishes.”

Dan laughed. “Is that what you’re worried about? And here I thought you were trying to avoid eating something I cooked!”

Honey giggled and swatted him. “You know very well that I like your cooking, Mangan. I just thought we were going to take it easy tonight.”

Both of them had had an extremely busy week, full of several quizzes, exams, papers, and projects due between the two of them. They had decided on a low-key Valentine’s celebration, since the only thing that really mattered was that they were together. As Honey also knew that Dan was carefully watching his budget, she had insisted that no gifts be exchanged. As she was always saying, the best gift that Dan could give her was to not make her worry that he was spending too much of his scarce, hard-earned money on her. She didn’t elaborate that by “too much,” she meant *any*. She didn’t have to; Dan knew her well enough to know exactly what she was thinking.

“I felt like cooking.” Dan shrugged. “And I’ll do the dishes, too.”

“You will not!” Honey exclaimed. “It’s only fair that I do the dishes if you cook.”

“But you weren’t expecting to have to do them, so it’s only fair that I do,” Dan protested. “You expected a simple night with nothing but a pizza box to throw away.”

Honey put her arms around Dan. “But I much prefer eating something that my wonderful boyfriend has cooked, so as a thank you, I am doing the dishes.” Before Dan could protest again, Honey looked at him sternly. “You either listen to me, or I am kicking you out. Got it, mister?”

Dan gave her a slow grin. “You know you turn me on when you get all feisty and domineering,” he said as he moved in to nuzzle her neck. Despite all of her efforts to maintain the stern façade, Honey soon dissolved into giggles as Dan’s soft lips tickled her neck. And as the embrace became more passionately charged and Dan’s mouth found its way toward hers, she let out a soft moan that was cut short as Dan claimed his kiss. Tongues tangled and bodies pressed up against each other until the sound of something sizzling cut the clinch short.

The sound startled Dan, and he smiled apologetically at Honey before regretfully turning his attention back to the stove. “More of that later.”

“Promise?” Honey teased.

Dan turned to look at her, momentarily ignoring sizzling sound. “Do you have to ask?”

Honey could see that Dan’s already dark eyes had become even darker with the desire he felt for her. No, she didn’t have to ask. She swallowed hard.

Dan winked then, and the moment was gone. As he turned his attention back to the potatoes that were boiling over onto the stove, Honey remembered that she had something in her backpack that she wanted to give to Dan. She quickly padded to her bedroom, rummaging through the school supplies in her backpack before locating what she wanted.

She returned to the kitchen with a sheepish look and watched her boyfriend. Dan had just thrown a couple of sirloins on the electric grill that she had gotten for Christmas, and the apartment smelled divine.

“I know that we said that we weren’t going to exchange gifts,” Honey began hesitantly, “but I saw something today and just *had* to get it for you.”

Once again, Dan gave her that slow and easy grin that never failed to send shivers down her spine. “That’s okay, because I got something for you, too.” This time, it was Dan who stopped Honey’s protest. “And if you make a big deal about it, then I’ll kick myself out. Got it, Miss Wheeler?”

Honey grinned. “You know you turn me on when you get all feisty and domineering,” she teased, but she gave in with good grace. She didn’t want to wreck Valentine’s by worrying about Dan spending money on her. There were worse things than a boyfriend who wanted to get you gifts, she decided.

She pulled the item she intended to give Dan out from behind her back. “I didn’t have time to wrap it,” she said, presenting him with a stainless steel travel mug engraved with the seal of the NYPD. “I thought you might like to use this for your coffee on the subway.”

Dan took the mug from her. “I love it. It’s perfectly perfect. Thank you.” He gave her a kiss on the forehead and said, “I will thank you properly after dinner, but unfortunately, I really need to mash the potatoes and flip the steaks.”

“Of course,” Honey said. He didn’t need to thank her more, anyway. The look in his eyes had said it all.

After a dinner of grilled-to-perfection, medium-rare steaks, Mart’s now famous “Blinking Eye” mashed potatoes, as the Bob-Whites all called them, and steamed asparagus, Honey did the dishes—with Dan’s help—and the couple finally settled down on the couch to watch a romantic comedy on DVD.

Honey was momentarily confused as Dan leaned over and reached under the couch. She laughed when she saw that he pulled out a big, red, heart-shaped box. “You plan ahead, Mr. Mangan.”

“Always prepared, that’s my motto,” Dan said with a grin as he handed her the box.

She lifted the cover, expecting to see the usual array of chocolates, and found herself laughing out loud again. “You *do* know me well!” she exclaimed as she looked at the small serving bags of trail mix. Honey had taken to carrying trail mix with her in her backpack as a handy snack that not only filled her up but helped her concentrate better during her classes. Dan had taken her favorite trail mix recipe and created a batch that would obviously last for a while.

“I told you not to make a big deal about the fact that I got you something,” Dan said, his smile softening his words, “but I just couldn’t let this day pass without a little something to show you how special you are to me.”

Honey kissed him. “This is perfectly perfect, but Dan...you let me know every day how special I am to you just by the way you look at me and treat me and touch me. I hope you know that I feel the same way about you.”

Dan nodded. “I do, Honey-mine. I do,” he said, as he captured her lips for a sweet Valentine’s kiss.

* * *

“How’s my favorite Valentine?” Jim asked as he stepped out of the swarm of students exiting the classroom and wrapped Trixie into a big hug.

Trixie smiled up at the tall redhead. “I’d better be your *only* Valentine, Jim Frayne.”

“You know you are,” he said, releasing her as the two tried to move to an unoccupied corner of the hallway.

Both Jim and Trixie had classes in Wells Hall three days a week. Jim’s class ended at ten in the morning, and Trixie’s began twenty minutes later, so she always began the trek from her dorm a little early so that she could visit with her boyfriend for as long as possible before her class started.

“How’d those math problems go last night?” Jim asked.

The sandy blonde grimaced. “They went.”

Jim had been busy working on a paper for his psych class the night before and had not been able to come over and help Trix with her math homework, which he liked to do, as it gave him a convenient excuse to spend time with her. He had given her as much help as he could over the phone, but Trixie had tried to bother him as little as possible so that he could finish his paper.

“Do you have any more questions?” Jim asked, concern etched on his freckled face.

Trixie shook her head, her curls dancing. “Nope. I muddled through with the advice you gave me last night, but thanks.”

“I wish I could have come over,” Jim lamented.

Trixie's blue eyes twinkled mischievously. "I wish you could have come over, too," she said. She paused and then waggled her eyebrows suggestively. "But that might have been detrimental to my math."

Jim laughed. "You know what I mean."

"Are you saying I couldn't distract you just a little bit?" Trixie said, moving closer to him so that her body was just lightly touching his. She looked up at him, the look on her face a picture of innocence, but Jim could not mistake the wicked glint in her eyes.

He leaned down and kissed her nose. "Maybe a *little*," he conceded.

The two continued to chat until Trixie realized that she needed to get to class. Jim gave her a quick kiss and promised to pick her up at her dorm at seven o'clock that evening for their Valentine's date.

True to his word, Jim entered the open door of Trixie's dorm room right at seven. Nikki, Trixie's roommate, looked up from the book she was reading. "Hi, Jim!" she greeted him brightly.

"Hey, Nik," he said with a smile.

"Trixie ran down the hall 'real quick' and said she'd be back before you got here." Nikki gave him a knowing smile.

Jim laughed. "Well, we've got time before our reservations so I can wait a bit before I need to send out a search-and-rescue team."

"You won't have to," a voice behind him informed him pertly. "I'm right here."

Jim turned, and his heart caught in his throat. Gone were Trixie's patched and faded jeans and loose sweatshirts that she favored when hiking to and from class during the cold and snowy winter months. Instead, she wore a form-fitting sweater in the shade of blue Jim loved so much because it matched her eyes. The V of the neck was just low enough to get his heart pumping, and the black pencil skirt that she wore managed to be classy and sexy all at the same time as it followed the curve of her hips and narrowed as it approached her knees.

"You look fantastic, Trix," was all he could manage to say. He was rewarded with the million-watt smile that always took his breath away with the intensity of its happiness.

"Thanks, Jim," Trixie said almost shyly. The truth was, she had had to borrow the skirt from one of her floormates, and despite the fact that she had been reassured over and over by her roommate that she looked incredible, Trixie found that hard to believe. But the look on Jim's face and the star-struck quality to his emerald eyes made Trixie a believer.

Jim took the black pea coat hanging over the back of Trixie's chair and helped her on with it. With a smile and wave to Nikki, the couple departed for Dusty's Cellar, a romantic restaurant in the next town over from East Lansing. Neither Jim nor Trixie had been there, but both had heard raves about the place from a few students who had been there for special occasions with their parents or a special someone.

As they entered into the restaurant, which also served as a bakery and wine cellar, they were both impressed with the sophisticated yet inviting décor. They removed their winter jackets and placed them in the self-serve coat room. Once the maître d' had confirmed their reservation, he showed them to a table near the center of the room. An elegant ceramic olive oil

bottle decorated the center of the table, as well as a slim clear glass vase flaunting a single orchid and a small glass bottle oil lamp, which was lit with a single glowing flame. It was a simple presentation, but Trixie found that the effect was very stunning.

Of course, I am partial to orchids, Trixie thought with an inner giggle.

After they were seated and handed the menu, which included three pages devoted to food and more than fifty pages devoted to wines, Trixie quickly scanned the room. There were a few couples their age dining, but most of the clientele were in their thirties and forties. The tables were full, and Trixie remembered Jim asking her for a Valentine's date more than a month before. Dusty's was a popular place, especially after being named one of the six best bistros in the country by a magazine devoted to dining, and Trixie imagined that with its romantic atmosphere, reservations on Valentine's Day were hard to come by.

As she turned her attention to the menu, a smartly uniformed waiter arrived at their table with a pitcher of water and filled their water glasses.

"Welcome to Dusty's," he said smoothly. "We have several specials tonight in addition to our regular menu," he explained and described four mouth-watering dishes. "Would you care to start this evening off with a bottle of wine from our extensive wine list?"

Trixie looked at Jim, who she now realized had been studying the wine list while she had been surveying the room and its occupants. The redhead ordered a bottle of sparkling apple cider from one of Michigan's wineries, and the waiter bowed and left the table.

"Perfectly perfect choice, Jim," Trixie said with a grin.

"Glad you approve," Jim returned with a grin of his own.

The two returned to studying their menu, and each had decided what to order by the time the waiter returned with the bottle of sparkling cider and two champagne glasses. The bottle that Jim had ordered was even corked, and the waiter pulled it out with a loud pop. He carefully poured them each a glass and asked if they were ready to order. Upon receiving Trixie's request for smokehouse chicken linguine and Jim's order for almond-crust Great Lakes whitefish, the waiter discreetly disappeared into the kitchen.

"This is really nice, Jim," Trixie said. "You really didn't have to do anything all this fancy, though. I would have been just as happy going to Crunchy's for a burger, as long as I was with you."

"I know, but we do that all the time. I wanted to do something special for my special girl," Jim explained.

Trixie smiled. "You're just as special to me. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do." Jim lifted his champagne glass, and Trixie followed suit. "To my favorite schoolgirl shamus. May we have many more of these romantic moments to come."

With happy smiles, the couple clinked their glasses together.

Jim's toast was perfect, Trixie reflected as she sipped the sweet liquid, but we don't have to wish for more romantic moments. I just know we have a lifetime of them.

As her blue eyes met Jim's green ones, she also just *knew* that he was thinking the same thing. And they both knew that they were right.

* * *

Meanwhile, in a dorm room nearly 600 miles away, Trixie's brother Brian sat with his arm around his girlfriend, Lexi. Exactly two years had passed since their first date. After weeks of study dates, Brian had finally gotten the nerve to ask Lexi out on a real date, not even realizing that the night he asked her out for was Valentine's Day.

It had been a pleasant evening of dinner at a simple but nice restaurant, followed by an evening spent curled up watching a movie together in the dorm. *Armageddon* wouldn't have been Brian's choice of a movie to watch on their first official date, but Lexi had selected it from his meager movie collection because she hadn't seen it.

It had turned out to be a much more romantic viewing that Brian would have thought possible, with the love of Ben Affleck's and Liv Tyler's characters providing an inspiring ending. And the song from the movie had become their song.

This year, Lexi and Brian, both having busy mid-term schedules, had decided on a simple evening that recreated their first Valentine's together. They had had a lovely, relaxed dinner at the Pertutti Café. With both of them in light-hearted moods, the walk back from the café had been full of laughter and teasing, especially when Brian caught sight of a particularly risqué billboard ad, his eyes practically popping out of his head. Lexi was still giggling at the memory of the look on his face even as they were back in his dorm room watching *Armageddon*.

All of the pain and separation that the two had endured had melted away upon Lexi's return to New York from California, but Brian sometimes found it hard to believe that she was back and that he had been given a glorious second chance.

He squeezed her more tightly to him, and she looked up at him, somehow sensing his change in mood.

"You look so serious," she said, her blue eyes fixed on his brown ones. "Are you okay?"

Brian smiled and kissed her forehead. "More than okay. I was just thinking about our first date and how happy I was and then how I almost lost you."

Lexi turned so that her whole body was facing him. "No, I was the one who almost lost you." She smiled softly. "But, fortunately, I fell in love with a man who had the good sense to come looking for me. I love you, Brian. And you're never going to lose me again. I promise."

Brian felt a strong rush of emotion and crushed her tightly to him. "I love you, too, Lexi-girl. I love you, too." He then loosened his grip on her so that he could give her a tender kiss.

* * *

Mart stood outside the restaurant, waiting. Even the frigid air of an Ithaca winter could not make him enter into the warmth of the building behind him. He had told Di that he would be waiting for her outside of the restaurant, and wait he would. Mart told himself that it didn't matter that as he stood there, exposed, he felt like a sacrificial lamb about to be slaughtered in some sort of twisted St. Valentine's Day massacre.

But it did matter. It mattered a lot.

Why did I agree to this? Mart thought, not for the first time. He knew the answer, of course. How could he refuse Di anything? Especially a date for Valentine's Day.

He had been shocked when Di had called him the day before; little did he know that she had called more than once, and summoning her courage each time that she had had to dial his number had been a test of her fortitude. When she had suggested that the two of them get together, he had been flabbergasted but happy. His hopes had been allowed to soar for a brief moment, until Di had rushed on, her voice reflecting her obvious nervousness, explaining that she didn't want to get back together. She described how she still needed time to be on her own, but she still cherished his friendship, and there was still no one that she would rather spend February 14th with more than Mart.

February 14th. That was how she had phrased it. As if saying "Valentine's Day" was too painful. Well, he certainly couldn't blame her for that. Despite the fact that Mart hated feeling as though he was on the end of a yo-yo, he had to admit that Di had done the decent thing and explained her feelings up front. And he had found himself agreeing to this non-date.

In the past, Mart would have eagerly picked up Diana for the date, but in the spirit of her new-found independence, Di had insisted on meeting him at the restaurant. He had been ten minutes early, but between the cold temperatures and his nervous state, the eight minutes that had passed felt more like eight hours.

Suddenly, Mart saw Di getting out of a car. She had obviously borrowed the vehicle to meet him, and Mart was glad that her insistence on "doing things herself" hadn't included walking or taking a bus in this weather. When Di saw him, she smiled, and Mart felt his insides relax a bit and smiled back. When she reached him, she gave him an awkward hug, which he returned.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he said shyly. "Friends can say that to each other, you know," he added quickly.

Di smiled. "I know."

The two entered the friendly warmth of the natural foods restaurant. It was a popular restaurant, and tonight was no exception, but Mart and Di had decided to meet at a later time to miss the earlier dinner crowd. The restaurant closed relatively early, at nine, so by eight-thirty, the crowd had thinned out. The couple lucked out and were seated at a recently vacated table right in front of the large brick fireplace that was the focal point of the room. It wasn't a romantic restaurant, but the cheerful atmosphere felt right to both Di and Mart. It was a welcoming place, a place to come with friends.

At first, an awkward silence stretched between them, but after they had received the hot chocolates they had requested and ordered their meals, some of the old comfortableness that the two had once shared returned. Di chatted about her art projects, and Mart loved the way her violet eyes lit with a kind of fire as she described her work. He was happy that she was finally able to concentrate on something she loved, instead of suffering through the math and science classes that she had hated so much in high school.

Di finished a story about a sculpture she had created for one of her classes just as their entrees—lasagna trecolore for Mart and Thai curry for Diana—arrived. As they started to eat their delicious meals, Di asked Mart what was new with him.

Mart described his upcoming summer internship. Like all agricultural science majors at Cornell, Mart was required to participate in an internship for credit at some point during his college career. He had decided to complete the internship during the summer between his

sophomore and junior years, and he had recently found out that he had been accepted as a small farm intern at a Cornell cooperative extension location in Delaware County, about 100 miles east of Ithaca. The location was about two-and-a-half hours northwest of Sleepyside.

It was Mart's turn to talk animatedly and passionately about his own work. Di smiled and happily listened as Mart described what his internship would entail. He had signed on to assist with the organization, planning, and start up of a small scale educational alternative farm practices demonstration site, and Diana thought that this was the perfect type of internship for Mart. His excitement was obvious as he talked about executing small scale farming practices on a scenic rural start up farm. Di giggled at Mart's narrative, obviously an almost word-for-word recount from the job description. But there was no denying that the opportunity to choose what crops would be planted, prepare the land and cultivate a large variety of crops, and learn about the entrepreneurial aspects of land use and acquisition planning was a perfect way for Mart to prepare himself if he decided to be the agriculturalist at Jim's school.

The conversation was so pleasant that Mart and Di decided to order a dessert to share so that they could talk some more. The "Pretty in Pink" strawberry lemon chiffon cake, made just for Valentine's Day, beckoned them, and the two shared a warm conviviality as they shared the cake.

Finally realizing that they were one of only a few couples still seated in the cheery dining room, and knowing that the staff probably wanted to get on with their own Valentine's plans, Mart and Di left the restaurant just before nine-thirty.

"I had a good time, Mart," Di said.

Mart grinned. "Don't sound so surprised," he teased, "I did read *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* just so I wouldn't screw up tonight."

Di smiled. "I don't think you ever have to worry about screwing up, Mart. You're fine just the way you are." Her smile faltered, and she looked down at the ground. "I'm the one who's broken."

In that moment, Mart suddenly had a feel for what Diana had been going through since arriving in Ithaca six months before. It was a flash of understanding that had eluded him for so many months, and he latched onto it like a lifeline. He immediately drew Diana close to him and lifted her chin with his finger. His honest blue eyes bore into her confused violet ones.

"You're not broken," he said firmly. "You never were. You're doing what you need to do. I admire you for that, Di."

Tears glistened in Di's eyes. "You're too good to me, Mart. I don't deserve you."

Mart shook his head. "No, Diana, it's I who does not deserve you. Instead of being understanding about what you needed, I acted like a jerk. I'm sorry."

Di wiped at her eyes. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I'm the jerk."

Mart laughed softly. "We could probably stand here arguing all night about who's the bigger jerk, but we'd freeze to death. Let's just call it a learning experience and move on, okay?"

Di nodded. "Mart, I've missed you," she admitted in a whisper.

“I’ve missed you, too. And once you find what you’re looking for, we’ll be together again,” Mart assured her.

“You sound so sure,” Diana said, wonder in her voice.

“I am,” Mart replied, and suddenly, in his heart, he *was* sure.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Mart.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Diana.”

My carryover items were: a new outfit (#2.1), a photo montage (SA#5), school supplies (#2.2), lipstick smudges (#2.3).