

Author's Notes: Beware, there is underage Bob-White drinking in this story. I do not condone or encourage underage drinking, but it happens. This story is rated Yellow Star according to the Jixemitri Story Ratings System as a result of some mild swearing. Mart's not the happiest guy in the world. Many, many, many thanks to Susan for editing this when she is so busy!

Mr. Brightside

by Dana

*I just can't look, it's killing me
And taking control
Jealousy, turning saints into the sea
Turning through sick lullabies
Choking on your alibis
But it's just the price I pay
Destiny is calling me
Open up my eager eyes
'Cause I'm Mr. Brightside
-The Killers, "Mr. Brightside"*

Mart lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling and listening to the most depressing music that he could find—the same as he had done every night for the last four nights, ever since Diana's phone call the previous Monday evening.

"There's something I want to talk to you about."

Diana had hidden her real meaning with those words. Had she said, "We need to talk," Mart might have had some inkling as to what was coming. Those words were always ominous. Instead, Mart had thought that she wanted to discuss their plans for driving home for Thanksgiving or some other equally innocuous topic. He had not expected *The Talk*.

Of course, she had not completely let him down in the cliché department. Nope, she had actually said, "It's not you, it's me," and their whole relationship, to Mart's bitter mind anyway, became a horrible, hackneyed cliché.

"Love sucks," he said out loud.

Sure, he and Diana had hit a rough patch when she first moved to Ithaca to attend Ithaca College. There had been necessary adjustments for both of them. After the last year without a girlfriend on campus, he had forgotten what it was like to add time spent with a significant other into the equation that was his carefully orchestrated work and study schedule. But when he realized that Diana was upset about that, he had factored "Diana time," as he called it, into his schedule. As work and study time could not give, he had sacrificed sleep to do it. But he loved Diana and would do anything to make their relationship work, so he did not see it as a sacrifice.

And after he had made that adjustment, Diana herself had gotten busier with her class schedule and had adjusted to being near him but not being able to see him, and Mart had thought they were home free. They had survived the first rough weeks of adjustment. And if he thought he noticed her pulling away slightly or seeming a little distant, he chalked it up to his imagination. His Johnson genes definitely had an imagination trait, and he, his sister Trixie, and his brother Bobby seemed to have inherited that trait in spades. It was as if the imaginative and adventurous traits were co-located with the blond hair and blue eyes that he, Trixie, and Bobby

had also inherited from their mother. Brian, their older brother, did not have nearly the imagination as his three younger siblings did, nor did he have blond hair and blue eyes. He had the responsible Belden genes and dark hair and dark eyes, same as their father.

So, Mart had decided that his overactive imagination was being just that—overactive. Or maybe he had been in denial. He had wanted Di to be here with him on campus for so long that he could not handle the possibility that it was not all perfect bliss.

“Love sucks,” he said again.

“So does your attitude,” Cooper, Mart’s roommate, said as he entered the room the two shared.

“Bite me,” Mart returned, but there was no humor or even rancor in his voice. His tone was flat, lifeless. Dead. Cooper would never admit it to his roommate, but he was worried about him. He had been hearing Diana’s praises from Mart ever since the beginning of their freshman year together, when they had shared a room in the dorms. Mart was head-over-heels for this girl and had been since he was about six years old.

And now she had unceremoniously dumped him. Coop sighed and decided that his plan of attack would be what some pseudo-psychologist television personality would call “tough love.”

“Listen, Belden, I gotta live in this room, too, and I am not going to listen to ‘In Your Eyes’ by Peter Gabriel one more time,” Cooper said as he crossed the room and turned off the CD player.

“Bite me,” Mart repeated. “I’ll just get my headphones and listen to whatever I want.” But Mart made no move to get up, no move to do anything. He just lay there inert, staring at the ceiling, his blue eyes unblinking and filled with misery.

“Dude, to do that, you would actually have to move,” Coop scoffed, still in tough love mode. “Did you even go to class today?” he asked.

“Actually, I did,” Mart said. “I had a nutrition project due that I had to turn in.”

“You did homework in this state?” Coop asked, surprised.

“No,” Mart continued in that flat, dull voice that was really starting to get to Coop. “I finished it up over the weekend. I knew Di was going to be done with midterms, so I got everything out of the way early so that I could surprise her by spending more time with her. Some surprise.”

Coop was not exactly happy about the bitterness that had crept into Mart’s voice, but at least it was an improvement over the depressing monotone that was generally the only tone heard from Mart these days.

“Well, everything happens for a reason,” Coop said cheerfully. “If you hadn’t gotten it done, then you probably would have failed. Because you’re not acting like you’re in any shape to tackle even the lightest reading, let alone a full-blown project.”

“Yeah, the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” Mart said bitterly.

“You been going into work or calling in sick?” Coop asked.

“What are you? My mother?” Mart said, and this time his voice was ripe with irritation.

Good, thought Coop. Let's get you fired up. I don't care if you do get irritated or annoyed or even angry with me. What kind of a friend would I be to let you wallow in your misery for a fourth straight day?

Coop looked down at himself. "Gosh, not the last time I checked. Why? You want me to call her and tell her what an idiot you're being over some chick? Maybe get her up here to knock some sense into you?"

Mart turned his head away from the ceiling and stared at Coop. "She is *not* just some chick, and you know it," he said through gritted teeth. "And I'll freakin' wallow if I want for as long as I want."

Okay, anger's good, Coop thought. At least you're not dead inside now.

"So, what do you have on the calendar for tomorrow?" Coop asked. "Are you going to work or call in sick again?"

Mart glared at his roommate. "For your information, I have not called in sick all week. I have gotten up and gone to the library and filed books like a good little boy. And because I worked last Saturday *and* Sunday, I happen to have this weekend off. All part of the plan to wow Diana with how much time I had for her."

"Good," Coop said, keeping a matter of fact tone. "Let's go out tonight."

"*What?*" Mart was so shocked that he actually made an effort to sit up. His face indicated that he clearly thought that his roommate had completely lost his mind. "Do I look like someone who wants to go out? Do I look like someone who could possibly have a good time?"

Actually, Coop had no intention of taking his friend out. But he had decided that he would shock Mart with a suggestion so outrageous that he would be more likely to agree with what Coop really wanted to do.

"No, but you should get up and get out just to have a change of scenery," Coop argued. *Although just getting you to the living room would give you a change of scenery,* he added to himself.

"Yeah? Where?" Mart's tone was extremely doubtful and cynical.

"Kuma," Coop said casually, knowing all the while that Mart was going to hit the roof. He was not disappointed.

"Kuma? You have *got* to be kidding me!" Mart exclaimed. "You want to take me to a strip club?"

Well, no, but I want you to think I do, Coop thought. Out loud, he said, "Why not? It's what guys do when they break up with a girl."

"I didn't do the breaking up, if you recall," Mart said.

Coop waved his hand airily. "Semantics. It doesn't matter who does the breaking up. Guys always end up in strip clubs after splitting with their significant other."

"Not this guy," Mart muttered.

"Okay, fine, we'll stay in, watch some testosterone-filled action flick and drink beer," Coop said.

"No, thanks," Mart said, lying back down.

“Okay, then the strip club it is,” Coop said.

Mart threw an ominous glare at his roommate.

Coop shrugged. “You know me, dude. You know I don’t give up. Either you get your ass out of bed, take a shower, shave, and come sit in the living room, drink beer, and watch movies, or you get your ass out of bed, shower, shave, and head out to the strip club. You know I won’t let you rest, so which is it?”

Mart glowered at his roommate but knew he had no choice. Coop was a lot of things, and being irritatingly and insistently stubborn was one of his most prominent traits. He also was an amazingly loyal friend, Mart had to grudgingly admit.

“Fine,” he spat out. “But I am so repaying you for this at some point down the line.”

“I hope so, man. I’m such an awesome friend,” Coop said with his infectious grin.

“Whatever,” Mart said as he got up and grabbed his towel off the back of his chair and headed for the bathroom. But he did not argue. He couldn’t.

As Mart stood in the shower and let the hot water run over him, he realized that he was starting to wake up. It actually felt good not to be wallowing in his dark room with depressing music, something that truly surprised Mart, who had come to embrace his misery and the darkness in which he had allowed it to grow.

But Coop was right, Mart decided. He had allowed himself a few days to adjust to life without Di. Now he needed to start living that life.

After a long, hot shower, Mart got dressed and joined his roommate in the living room.

“Hey,” Coop said, handing him a beer. “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

Mart grunted but offered his roommate a small smile. “Thanks,” he said, taking the can of beer and popping it open. He sat down in the blue La-Z Boy recliner and flipped up the foot rest. “Okay, Houghton,” he said. “I’m out here. Bring on the testosterone.”

“That’s my boy!” Coop said as he aimed the remote at the DVD player and hit play. As the opening credits began to roll, Coop was infinitely relieved that Mart had come out of his cave, both literally and figuratively.

* * * * *

“Mart? It’s Trix,” said the familiar female voice on the other end of the phone.

Here we go, Mart thought. Of course, the Bob-White grapevine had done its job, and surely everyone in the club knew that Di had unceremoniously dumped him.

“Hey, Trix,” he said warily. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” she said. “I just wondered when you were going to be back in Sleepside for Thanksgiving.”

“I don’t know,” Mart said. “I was going to catch a ride with Di and her roommate, Brooke, but that’s not so appealing now. Di said I was still welcome to come with them, but...” he trailed off.

“Yeah, I was afraid of that,” Trixie sympathized. “I’m really sorry, Mart.” Mart was about to tell her that he did not want to talk about his recent breakup with his longtime girlfriend, but Trixie was one step ahead of him as she rushed on. “But I didn’t call to talk about that.”

Thank God, Mart thought.

“Mr. Wheeler is sending the Wheeler jet to pick up Jim and me on Tuesday night. Jim and I were thinking of borrowing one of the Wheeler cars and driving up to get you Wednesday. Would that be okay?”

She did not tell him that Matthew Wheeler was sending the jet specifically so that Trixie and Jim would be able to pick Mart up from Ithaca.

On his end, Mart smiled. This was Trixie’s way of showing him that things were not going to be weird between them just because he and one of his sister’s best friends had called it quits.

“Yeah,” he said, and Trixie could hear the smile in his voice. “That’d be okay. Thanks, Trix.”

She was glad that he understood her intentions. But, given how well the two siblings knew each other, that wasn’t really surprising.

Mart had been beginning to think that he would have to take a bus back to Sleepyside, rather than be in the same car with Di. He did not want his dad to take a day off of work to come get him, and he would rather sit in Ithaca all weekend than bother his mother, who needed to spend that Wednesday to prepare for the Thanksgiving open house that the Beldens threw for the whole neighborhood each Thanksgiving. He had even considered going home with Coop for his family’s Thanksgiving, but he really did want to see the rest of the Bob-Whites, despite his sensitivity about his breakup with one of them.

“Good,” Trixie said cheerfully.

“Thanks, Trix,” Mart said again. “That will help me out a lot.”

“Actually, you’re doing *me* the favor,” Trixie admitted. “Don’t let Moms know this, but I’m more than a little glad to be getting out of kitchen duty. I feel a little guilty about that, but she says it’s a relief knowing that Jim and I are going to be picking you up instead of having to worry about you on a bus. Plus, Honey and Dan will be coming in from the City in the early afternoon, and they promised to help her out, too. So, I’m off the hook!” she concluded cheerfully.

Mart laughed. College had not changed his sister one iota. He took great comfort in that—especially seeing how it had changed Diana.

“Well, then I am glad I could be a convenient excuse for you, sis,” Mart said.

“Well, I got Moms’ permission to put this call on her calling card, but I had better wrap it up,” Trixie said. “We’ll see you Wednesday.”

The two confirmed times and locations and said their good-byes.

Mart smiled appreciatively as he put the phone in its cradle. Not only did he have good friends, but his family was pretty great, too.

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Mart looked around the living room of his apartment. His duffel bag was full and ready to go. Next to his duffel bag sat his backpack, full of books, notes, and papers that he would need to study while he was in Sleepyside over the long weekend. None of his profs seemed to care that it was a holiday. There was still reading to do and exams to take and end of term projects to complete. Mart knew that he would not be able to get any studying done the next day. There would be last-minute details and projects to be seen to before Crabapple Farm opened its doors to the neighborhood, and then there would be the busy event itself. Mart was guaranteed to be parking cars for a large portion of the afternoon. And then there was the cleanup. Mart cringed just thinking about it.

During Mart's senior year at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High School, his mother had decided not to hold her annual Thanksgiving open house and just have an intimate gathering of family, which included the Wheelers, as they were also considered part of the big Belden family. Moms had wanted to spend a special Thanksgiving together with Brian home from college, before Mart and then Trixie "flew the coop," as she liked to say. But, not only did the neighbors frequently comment to his mother how much they had missed it that year, but Moms apparently really did thrive on entertaining the entire neighborhood on Thanksgiving. So, as much as she and the family had enjoyed the more family-oriented holiday that year, the very next year, Mrs. Belden had gone back to entertaining with her open house.

Mart did not want to begrudge his mother something that made her happy, but it was an awful lot of work, and half the time, he didn't even get to be inside the warm and cozy house.

Of course, there was another reason that he was not thrilled at the prospect of the upcoming open house. Diana and her family would be there. As hurt as he was, Mart realized that Di's family and his were too close to stop associating just because he and Di had broken up.

Mart snorted derisively at the innocuous language his mind seemed to insist on to somehow make the breakup easier.

Who am I kidding? he asked himself. *You and Di didn't 'break up.'* *Di broke up with you.*

Suddenly, the idea of spending the day outside parking cars was not as unpleasant a thought as it had been in years past, Mart decided.

With a last, sweeping glance around the apartment, Mart determined that he had not left anything behind that he could not live without for a few days. A glance at the clock that hung above the television set showed him that Jim and Trixie would be there any minute. And, as if on cue, Mart heard the sound of an engine pulling into the parking spot outside his door. He looked out the window and saw a sedate, black sedan, clearly one of the Wheeler fleet, a vibrant girl with sandy blonde curls hopping out of the front passenger door before the engine was even turned off.

"That's Trixie," Mart said with the ghost of a smile. He had gotten used to not having her around all of the time, but he never got used to missing her. That had been one of the most surprising things about heading to college the previous fall, although it should not have been, if Mart had stopped to take the time to think about it.

There was a staccato pounding on the door, but Mart had already grabbed his duffel bag and backpack and was heading toward the door.

“Hey, Mart!” Trixie cried as Mart opened the door, giving her older brother a hug while he tried not to drop the bags he was carrying.

“Hey, Trix,” he said affectionately, sizing her up. Three months of college had not seemed to change her dramatically, for which he was glad.

Jim was out of the car by this time. He greeted his friend and grabbed Mart’s duffel bag. Trixie grabbed the backpack, Mart locked the deadbolt on his apartment door with his key, and the trio was on their way.

Soon enough, Mart was in the front seat next to Jim—Trixie had insisted that he sit in the front—headed toward Sleepyside. The place where he had fallen in love with Diana Lynch. He wondered if the memories would surround him and choke him.

* * * * *

So far, Mart had managed to avoid Diana with great success. Brian, who was also on parking detail, had recognized the Lynches’ minivan and had hurried over to get the keys from Mr. Lynch and handle the parking of their vehicle. Mart had hurried over to help the Hoyts, who had arrived just behind the Lynches. As they were getting on in age, he was involved with helping them for quite a while. Di had initially waited outside to catch his attention, and Brooke had given him a cheerful wave and smile, but when he had become intensely involved in helping the elderly couple, she had finally given up and followed her family and roommate inside.

But now parking duty was over, and there were no excuses for him to not go inside. As a matter of fact, his stomach had been growling for the last hour, and the hearty farm breakfast he had eaten that morning seemed like it had been consumed days before instead of just a few hours.

Sighing and realizing what he needed to do, he braced himself to face Di. Everyone else had been acting very normal around Mart, which in itself was very abnormal. He wondered what kind of reaction he would get when the whole crowd was gathered en masse. Awkward stares? Stilted conversation? Oh, joy.

He entered the cheery kitchen of Crabapple Farm and ran into Trixie and Honey as they were refilling large, colorful plastic bowls with potato chips and Chex mix.

“Hi, Mart!” Honey greeted him cheerfully. “I bet you’re cold. Would you like me to get you a cup of hot spiced apple cider?”

Well, that seemed pretty normal, Mart decided as he scrutinized Honey’s expression and tone of voice, relieved to find not even a hint of pity or sympathy there. That was a good sign.

“That would be wonderful, Miss Wheeler,” Mart said as he removed his gloves and outer jacket. It was not as cold as it had been for some of their previous Thanksgiving open houses, so Mart had not needed his hat or his scarf. Or even his thick boots like the years when it had actually blizzarded right before the holiday.

“Please, Honey. Like the bottomless pit would ever turn down sustenance of any kind,” Trixie snorted while transferring chips into the bowl.

“Just don’t lose your diamond ring in there, sis, ‘kay?” Mart retorted, referring to the Thanksgiving open house that Trixie had dropped one of Honey’s paste diamond rings into a bowl of chips so that Mr. Lytell, who had as collateral for Brian’s jalopy her real diamond ring

that Jim had given her, would not get suspicious. “I don’t want to have to go looking for a kid with a guilt complex this year.” It was Bobby who had discovered the ring at the bottom of the bowl of chips, and as revenge for Trixie losing his wrist compass, had destroyed her ring. In a fit of guilt, he had run away.

Trixie sniffed. “Bobby has grown up since then. I’m sure even if he found my ring, we wouldn’t have a repeat of that episode.”

Honey grinned. “And Trixie’s grown up a little bit, too, so maybe we’ll actually have a peaceful Thanksgiving vacation!”

Mart laughed out loud as Honey handed him a cup of hot spiced apple cider in Mrs. Belden’s good Limoges china that she always took pride in using each year at her Thanksgiving open house. Trixie looked over at her best friend, completely wounded at Honey’s sudden turn with the enemy.

“Honey Wheeler!” Trixie said, shocked. “I thought you liked the excitement I’ve provided since you moved into the Manor House.”

“Oh yeah, kidnapping, being held at gun point, all fun stuff, Trix,” Honey said with a dangerous glint in her normally placid hazel eyes.

“You said it was exciting the time that we were up in the loft watching Jeff and Al fight. You said it was like a picture show!”

“Okay, okay, you got me,” Honey said with a grin. “I just *love* being kidnapped!”

Trixie shook her head and pretended to be offended, but she could not hide her smirk. “I’m going to remember this, Wheeler.”

“I’m so scared, Belden,” Honey shot back.

Mart laughed. “I never would have been able to predict this particular conversation five years ago!”

“And you never even met Honey when she was all ribbons, frilly lace, and sugar and spice and everything nice,” Trixie said. “By the time you and Brian met her, I had her whipped into shape.”

Honey snorted inelegantly. “Yeah, you had already gotten me involved in helping to put out a fire—literally—almost gotten me kidnapped, implicated me in aiding and abetting jewel thieves, and what else?” She turned serious. “But Trixie’s right, when she met me I was ‘sugar and spice and everything nice.’ Blech!” She raised a nearby cup of spiced apple cider in a toast. “To being kidnapped!” she toasted cheerfully.

Mart laughed and clinked his own mug with hers. “To my harum scarum sister and her hare-brained schemes,” he added.

Trixie grabbed the nearest container, the colorful plastic bowl of potato chips, and clinked it with Honey and Mart’s mugs. “To adventure,” she said.

Mart smiled warmly at the two girls. “Thanks, guys,” he said. Honey and Trixie smiled back at him.

“It’s only hot, spiced apple cider, Mart,” Trixie said with a grin.

Just then, the kitchen door swung open.

“Hey, Trix? Honey?” a familiar voice called. “Are the potato chips and Chex mix ready?” It was then that Diana noticed that Trixie and Honey were not alone.

“Oh, hi, Mart,” Di said with a tentative smile at her ex-boyfriend.

“Hi, Di,” Mart mumbled, feeling his cheeks flaming. Trixie was not the only blonde-haired Belden who blushed at the drop of a hat.

Trixie and Honey exchanged looks. “We’ve got the snacks right here, Di,” Trixie said.

“Yeah, we’ll take them out right now,” Honey agreed. And with apologetic looks at Mart, the two girls carried the bowls out to the living room where the Beldens’ guests were enjoying their stretchy walls and warm hospitality.

“I’ve been hoping to get a chance to talk to you,” Di ventured, breaking the awkward silence.

“Why? What other bomb do you have to drop on me?” If Mart was surprised at the bitterness in his voice, Di was clearly shocked. She even took a step backward, away from him.

Mart ran a hand through his short, sandy hair in frustration. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so angry.”

Di swallowed. “It’s okay. I deserve it. Mart, I know this isn’t easy for you, and if it’s any consolation, it isn’t easy for me, either.”

Mart stared at her, heartbreak clearly showing in his blue eyes. “Then why are you doing this?” his voice came out in a ragged whisper, filled with more raw emotion than Di had ever heard before. It was the pure, unadulterated pain in that baritone that got to her, causing tears to jump unbidden in her violet eyes.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

Mart closed his eyes, trying to keep her answer from washing over him and breaking him. For a week and a half, he had been telling himself that there was a reason for this. That there was some big plan that he could not see or even begin to hope to understand. That there was an explanation for the incredible pain he was going through.

And Diana, the one he loved, the one he had thought would never hurt him, the one who *caused this did not know?*

He opened his eyes and realized that he had hot, salty tears on his cheeks. “If you don’t know...” he began, not even sure what he wanted to say, what he wanted to ask. He didn’t know if he could even begin to make sense of his jumbled thoughts well enough to form a coherent sentence for his tongue to speak.

Di was shaking her head. “I don’t know exactly why, Mart. I just know in my heart that I needed to do this. I needed to be on my own.”

“Did I stifle you? Did I suffocate you?” Mart asked, anguish in his voice.

Di shook her head, violently this time. “Never. Mart, absolutely *never*. You always supported me, always encouraged me without being overbearing.”

“I must have done *something* wrong,” Mart said. “Tell me what I did wrong.” He hated himself for being so pathetic, but he knew he would do anything to get Diana back.

Diana closed her eyes briefly. “You never did anything wrong, Mart. You were the perfect boyfriend.”

Mart laughed derisively. “Right,” he said sarcastically. “That’s why the *perfect* boyfriend became the *ex* boyfriend.”

“Maybe *that* was the problem,” Di cried. “Maybe everything in my life was *too* perfect. Maybe I was tired of being the good little girl. Maybe I needed to take a risk, to be more like Trixie and throw caution to the wind and rush headlong into my life. And maybe I didn’t think it was fair to drag you into my confusion and my mess! *I. Don’t. Know.* Mart, I don’t. I only know that I didn’t want to hurt you. *I never* wanted to hurt you.”

Mart stared at Diana. Maybe she meant it. Hell, she probably did, but all Mart could think was that if Diana had not *wanted* to hurt him, she *would* not have hurt him. And to his broken heart, that’s all that mattered.

“Yeah?” he said, his voice colder than a glacier, his tone cutting through Diana right to the core. “Well, you did.”

With that, he strode past her and through the door and into the living room, leaving her standing alone in the middle of the mockingly cheerful Belden kitchen with tears running down her cheeks and wondering when life had gotten so screwed up.

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Because Honey really wanted all of the Bob-Whites, and Brooke and Lexi, together but at the same time did not want to cause Mart and Di any unnecessary pain and awkwardness, she came up with a plan. She refused to let Mart and Di’s breakup get in the way of Bob-White fun that she had been counting on for months, knowing that all of the Bob-Whites were going to be in town at the same time for the first time in months. Plus, they needed to deal with this situation head on as soon as possible, or there would always be that white elephant in the room with them.

But, ever tactful as always, there was no way she was going to subject Mart or Di to a painful situation. So, she decided that Saturday afternoon would be a Bob-White matinee outing at the Cameo, followed by burgers at Wimpy’s. If everyone was seated in a dark theater with their attention on the screen, no one could feel awkward. And with their numbers grown from seven to nine, there was no booth big enough at Wimpy’s to comfortably seat them anyway, so sitting at two booths would be expected.

Honey shuddered when she thought what might happen to the Bob-Whites if she and Dan or Jim and Trixie—or, heaven forbid, *both* couples—broke up. Would the group survive?

Honey firmly set that thought aside and grabbed her purse. Dan, Jim, and Trixie were downstairs waiting for her so that they could commence their Saturday Bob-White outing. And with a little prayer for a smooth afternoon, she bounded down the stairs of the Manor House and met her friends.

* * * * *

Mart did not know why he let Honey talk him into this. He did not want to be the spoilsport, but he also did not like ripping the scab off of his wound repeatedly. Of course, he

was determined that his breakup with Di would not tear the Bob-Whites apart, so, of course, he would subject himself to an afternoon movie with the rest of his friends.

The small knot of Bob-Whites stood outside the little theater, trying to keep warm. Brian and Lexi went to get the tickets and soon returned. The Bob-Whites were congregated in two distinct groups, one with Mart and one with Di, so Lexi took half of the tickets and Brian the other half, and they distributed the tickets to the two groups. Lexi, who had always had a soft spot for Brian's younger siblings after they had so graciously welcomed her into their home when she had been orphaned, approached Mart's group, which included Honey and Dan. Trixie and Jim stood with Di and Brooke.

"Tickets!" she cheerfully called out. "I've got tickets!"

She handed the tickets to Honey, Dan, and Mart. As the group found its way inside the quaint little theater, she managed to finagle a spot between Brian and Mart. She did not know why, but something told her to stick close to Brian's younger brother. Brian had told her a little bit about Mart's situation, what he could glean from Trixie, anyway, because Mart had not been very verbal or forthcoming about the specific details of the breakup. She did not understand all of what had taken place between the couple, but she thought she may have understood a little bit of where Di was coming from. As someone who had broken her own heart at the same time as breaking a Belden's heart, she thought that maybe she could offer Mart some kind of comfort.

The nine of them settled into a center row of the theater after buying popcorn, candy, and sodas. Trixie had insisted on a large bucket with tons and tons of extra butter, so the rest of them had invested in a tub to split that did not have so much butter.

"I need to be near Mart," Trixie stated after the group was seated. "Mart's the only other one I know who'll eat popcorn with this much butter."

Her words were met with a chorus of objections, as Trixie moving to the end of the row would mean that Jim also had to move and then Honey, Dan, Brooke, and Di would need to move in closer so that two empty seats did not split up the group.

But Trixie, being Trixie, plunged ahead with a cheerful grin. And Jim, being Jim, he happily followed Trixie to where Mart sat. And Honey, Dan, Brooke, and Di scooted over so that the group took up nine seats in a row.

"All in the name of a tub of popcorn with insane amounts of butter," Brian said dryly.

"It's a butter thing," Mart said while stuffing a handful of the buttery treat into his mouth. "Oof ud unnasted."

"Oh, Mart!" Lexi giggled at Mart's antics.

"What?" Brian asked.

"Mart said, 'It's a butter thing. You wouldn't understand,'" Trixie translated before popping a handful into *her* mouth.

Brian snorted. "Well, with his mouth full of popcorn, *of course* I wouldn't understand," he said dryly.

"Methinks our eldest sibling has the illusion that he possesses a superior palate than those of his younger brother and sister, but he is sorely mistaken," Mart said after he had swallowed the popcorn.

“Oh, I agree,” Trixie said, a mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes. “His choice of Raisinettes over the luscious confection known as insanely buttered popcorn, to use his words, clearly shows that his delusions of grandeur, as far as his palate goes anyway, are absolutely that—delusions.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “Did you swallow a dictionary at Michigan State, Trix?”

Trixie grinned. “Nope. Unfortunately, Mart’s vocabulary has rubbed off on me over the years. Sad, but true.”

Mart pretended to look superior. “The only thing sad is that it took you so long to emulate your enviable and mature older brother known as Martin Andrew Belden,” he said loftily.

Everyone laughed, and the teasing banter continued until the lights in the theater dimmed, indicating that the endless rounds of previews, and finally the comedy they had come to see, were about to begin.

And every Bob-White, as well as Brooke and Lexi, who had also come to care and respect this amazing group of friends, gave a sigh of relief and relaxed, realizing that things *could* be normal after all.

Thus relaxed, the group settled in and enjoyed the light-hearted comedy. After the movie, despite filling up on popcorn, candy, and sodas, the gang was ready for Wimpy burgers and malts. The boisterous and high-spirited group headed over from the Cameo to the converted train car diner. All of the Bob-Whites loved the nostalgic diner with its juicy cheeseburgers, hand-cut fries, and thick malts and shakes. Mike the counterman was always friendly and warm to the high school crowd, and the juke box always played lively music.

Fortunately, the Bob-Whites had chosen an off time to visit the diner, so it was not very crowded. The group was able to find two booths next to each other. Brian, Lexi, Jim, Trixie, and Mart crowded into one booth, while Brooke, Di, Honey, and Dan found themselves in the other one. The crowd gave their order to their waitress, who disappeared to begin making nine malts, not an easy task.

Although they were at separate tables, Mart found himself sitting back-to-back with Diana, and, despite his efforts to concentrate on the conversation that was flowing at his own table, he found himself listening to the conversation at Di’s table. The girls were doing most of the talking, and a lot of giggling, but every so often Mart could hear the deep rumble of Dan’s baritone voice.

“And that’s when Mart agreed to do all of my chores every day for the entire summer. Isn’t he sweet?” Trixie’s voice suddenly cut through Mart’s fog.

He looked up to see four pairs of eyes staring at him with various degrees of amusement and concern. “I did what?” he asked, blinking.

“You just proved your mind was a million miles away, bro,” Brian said casually, but Mart did not miss the concern in his brother’s chocolate brown eyes. “You okay?”

Mart nodded matter-of-factly. “Absolutely. I was just trying to figure out if I remembered to pack one of my ag books for some reading I need to do this weekend,” he fibbed smoothly. Nobody at the table bought the untruth, but all pretended that they believed it and went along with the pretense.

“Your backpack was heavy enough,” Trixie commented. “I thought you brought every book you owned! That ag book must be in there somewhere!” she laughed.

Mart smiled. “Yeah, the classes I choose always seem to have the thickest books imaginable.”

Both Brian and Lexi groaned at this statement. Mart looked surprised.

“What? What did I say?” he wondered.

“If you think your ag books are bad,” Lexi began, “you should see the monstrosities premed students have to lug around. Physiology, anatomy, microbiology, the list goes on. Ugh. They’re all absolute tomes filled with every detail that has ever been learned about the human body or human health since the very dawn of time.” She slowly dragged out her last words, emphasizing “the very dawn of time” so that it sounded like a very big deal indeed.

“No to mention all of the MCAT study guides,” Brian said. “Every fact that you ever learned in three years of a scientific curriculum all shoved into one book. Try topping that.” The MCAT was the entrance exam to medical school that all students preparing for a career in medicine dreaded. It was a brutal test and was weighted just as important as grades to medical schools. Interviews and hospital and clinical volunteer work, as well as extracurricular activities, also weighed in.

Trixie grinned. “I’ll top it. All of my books are paperbacks, portable, and all about criminals and crime. They’re great!”

“Lucky you,” Lexi said, her eyes lighting up as she noticed the cute, brunette waitress coming their way with a tray full of malts in various flavors.

As the waitress passed out the delicious ice cream concoctions to the group, she promised, “I’ll be back soon with your burgers and fries.”

Conversation at both tables ceased as the hungry young people inserted their straws in the thick, creamy malts and began to sip.

“Moms may make the best burgers,” Trixie finally commented after slurping a good portion of her chocolate malt, “but Wimpy’s definitely has the best malts of any where in the entire world.”

Brian agreed as he took one of the tall spoons and scooped up a healthy portion of his own chocolate malt.

“There is nothing like diner malts,” Mart agreed. “There’s a good diner in Ithaca that’s a great place to go with a textbook. I could sit and order a chocolate malt and coffee all night.” He suddenly looked a little sheepish. “Actually, I have.”

Trixie nodded. “There’s a really great place in Lansing that most of the students haven’t discovered yet that’s great, too. It’s actually a truck stop, and it’s generally pretty busy with truck drivers and locals, but not so many students. I love that place.”

“If it’s not known to the students, how did you find it?” Brian wanted to know.

Trixie grinned. “It helps when you’re dating a man who happens to be a font of information about any place he’s ever lived. Jim always gets the lay of the land whether it’s Rochester or Sleepside or his college town,” she said with obvious pride.

Jim waved her off. “One of my roommates from my freshman year was from a little town near Lansing called Dewitt. He and his family often went there for Sunday brunch when he was growing up. He took me there a few times. It’s just another one of those small town restaurants that caters to the locals and people passing through alike, with down-home hospitality and good, comfort food. I remembered it, and I’ve taken Trixie there a few times. It’s relatively far from campus, especially if you’re dependent on walking or bus routes, so that’s why it’s pretty unknown to the college crowd,” Jim explained. He turned and gave Trixie a loving smile. “But I like to take my special girl out to a special brunch every so often.”

Trixie returned his smile, and Mart suddenly felt a gnawing sensation in his gut. Happy couples. He was surrounded by happy couples. He suddenly pushed his glass away, unaware that Lexi had watched the look on his face and his sudden, sharp movement. She discreetly kicked Trixie under the table to get her attention, and in a smooth move while leaning over and pretending to sip her malt, she moved her eyes in Mart’s direction.

Trixie immediately got the hint, and her body language immediately changed. She turned her body slightly away from Jim and more toward Mart, and her smile changed from soft and romantic to bright and cheery in an instant.

“You know,” she said, groping for a change of subject and wishing that she possessed even a small fraction of Honey’s tact and diplomacy. *Honey* would not have needed Lexi to kick her under the table to let her know she was acting too “kissy-face” in front of Mart. She said the first thing that came out of her mouth, hoping it was an okay topic. “I wish that I had visited you more last year, Mart. Ithaca seems like a really quaint place.”

Mart nodded. “It is. It’s a lot like Sleepyside. And it also reminds me of some parts of East Lansing that I saw when we took you up there.”

“Yeah, I’m really glad that a lot of things about Michigan and East Lansing remind of Sleepyside,” Trixie said. “I can’t imagine going to school in the City. But Honey and Dan really seem to like it.” She nodded toward Brian and Lexi. “And you guys seem to have survived.”

“It was an adjustment at first,” Brian admitted. “Visiting New York or even staying there for a week in Honey’s parents’ penthouse like we did that one time still doesn’t prepare you for living there all the time. The pace is insane.”

Lexi agreed. “The East Coast pace was shock to this West Coast girl’s laid-back upbringing. It seems like everyone, or most everyone anyway, is so frantic and in a hurry to do *everything*. You guys even talk way faster than us.” She grinned and looked up at Brian. “This drives Brian nuts every time he hears me say this, but ‘Dude, I totally flaked’ is a valid excuse in California for missing something or being late. And people accept that. They don’t even question it. They just go on.”

Trixie, Mart, and Jim looked at Lexi in disbelief.

“‘Dude, I totally flaked’?” Mart repeated.

Lexi nodded, glad to note that Mart was looking a lot better than he had a few moments before. She had counted on the ‘Dude, I totally flaked’ story to make him forget that Diana was at the next table and that Jim and Trixie were being, well, Jim and Trixie—undeniably cute and in love and in perfect sync with each other.

“I’m really trying to think of a situation where I would even think of using that excuse, and I can’t!” Jim said, shaking his head in amazement.

“I know!” Brian said rather explosively, as though he had been suffering from this knowledge in silence for a long time and was happy to find a group of kindred spirits with whom he could bond over the horrendousness of “Dude, I totally flaked” as a valid excuse that adults actually used and accepted.

“That’s really been bothering you, Brian, huh?” Trixie said, clearly amused as she took another sip from her chocolate malt.

“You have no idea,” Brian confirmed. It was not surprising that punctual Brian, generally regarded as the most responsible Bob-White, was particularly affronted by this shocking excuse.

Lexi laughed. “Just for the record, and maybe it was my East Coast roots”—Lexi’s mom had originally been from New York, and her parents had met at Columbia University—“but I never, *ever* considered that a valid excuse.”

“It could just be that you have common sense,” Trixie observed dryly as the waitress passed by their table with a tray loaded with hot and juicy Wimpy burgers and crispy fries. As she had served Mart’s table the malts first, she handed out the platters of food to Diana’s table first this time. As she emptied her tray, she looked at Mart’s table. “I’ll be right back. Promise!”

Mart looked rather put out. “I hope so,” he grumbled good-naturedly.

Trixie laughed. “After all of that popcorn you ate at the Cameo, I would think you could wait an extra thirty seconds for your burger!”

Mart shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a growing boy,” he quipped.

The people at his table groaned and rolled their eyes.

“What?” he asked. “I am!” he insisted.

“Yeah, growing *out*,” Trixie grumbled, somewhat jealous because that was, in fact, not true.

Mart was saved from coming up with a retort as the waitress arrived at their table then. As the group at Mart’s table dug hungrily into their burgers, the table behind them resumed their conversation as the initial chomping on juicy burgers faded.

With the silence at Mart’s table, it was easy to hear the bits and pieces of conversation drifting over the booth.

“...name is Jason,” Di was saying. “In addition to being a really talented musician, he has these insanely blue eyes. They’re just so piercing you can see them from across the room, even in the dark little bars he and his band play in.”

Mart knew who Jason was. He was one of Di’s art friends who also happened to play in a cover band for fun. Mart had met him a few times when he was hanging out with Di and her friends. One thing that stood out to Mart was that he smoked, unlike most of the people Mart and Diana hung out with, both separately or together. Diana had tried to get Mart to come see his band play one week night. Mart had not been able to because he had to study. He remembered how upset Di had seemed over that at the time and began to wonder if that had been the beginning of the end.

And he couldn't help but wonder if Di had fallen for Jason as a result. What had happened that night? Di normally was turned off by people who smoked, but that was the old Di. Who knew about this new Di who wanted to spread her wings and try new things? Could one of those new things be a new guy?

Suddenly, Mart found that he had lost his appetite.

* * * * *

Once again, Mart found himself lying in bed in his small Ithaca apartment staring at the ceiling. Except, this time instead of wondering what he did or did not do to make Diana leave him, he was wondering if Diana had left him for another guy. The thought was extremely disturbing, and Mart didn't even know if he could handle it.

The rest of the meal at Wimpy's that evening had been uneventful. Trixie had suddenly launched into a cheerful discussion of the movie they had just seen. Mart did not know if Trixie had heard Diana speaking of Jason at the next table and had decided to cover it up because she knew Mart might be sensitive or because she knew something about Diana and Jason that she didn't want Mart to know. Of course, she *was* Trixie, so she could have just suddenly launched into an analysis of the comedy that they had seen simply because she had just thought of it and wanted to talk about it. With Trixie you never knew, and all three explanations were plausible. Mart had tried to get up the courage to ask Trixie if she knew something about Jason and Di, but every time he had tried, he had not been able to get the words out of his mouth.

Now, back here at Cornell, the not knowing was killing him, and he wished more than ever that he had sucked it up and just asked his sister what was going on with Jason and Diana. Getting the words out and hearing the answer, no matter what the answer might have been, could not have been nearly as painful as laying here wondering.

So, why don't you just pick up the phone and call Trixie and ask her? Mart wondered. He glanced over at the digital clock next to him. It was rather late, but Trixie was in the air right now, returning to East Lansing, Jim at her side. Mr. Wheeler had business in St. Paul, Minnesota, the following day so he had offered to fly Jim and Trixie home for the Thanksgiving weekend and accompany them back to Michigan before flying into the Twin Cities.

There was a part of Mart that was frustrated that he could not act on impulse and just call Trixie and ask her, quickly ripping off the Band-Aid, so to speak. But there was the half of him—he was annoyed to find—that was actually relieved he was unable to make the phone call.

His thoughts drifted to a conversation he had had with Lexi that morning before Brian drove him back to Ithaca. Mart had been sitting in his room on his bed, reading one of his textbooks, when there had been a rather timid knock on his door.

"Come in," Mart called out, somewhat distracted by the soil science book he was reading.

The door opened, and Lexi popped her head in.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. Are you really into your studying?" she asked.

Actually, Mart was, but if Lexi, who had never knocked on his door once in the eleven months that she had been unofficially calling Crabapple Farm home, wanted to talk, it must be important.

"No, not at all," he said, closing his book as if to emphasize his words. "What's up?"

Lexi slipped inside and closed the door behind her.

“You can tell me to mind my own business if you want, and it is none of my business,” she said as she took a seat at Mart’s desk and faced him. Mart’s textbook was forgotten in his curiosity as to what Lexi could possibly have to say to him that was none of her business. “But I wondered if there was maybe something I could do to help you understand a little bit and maybe ease your pain a little,” she continued.

“How?” Mart asked, a little hopeful that maybe she could help him.

“Has Brian ever told you the details of our relationship? The beginning, I mean.” Lexi asked, assuming that Brian was a typical guy and probably had not shared many details with his younger brother. Her hunch was confirmed when Mart shook his head.

“No,” he stated.

Lexi nodded. “Brian and I started dating two Januarys ago,” Lexi said.

“Two?” Mart said, surprised. He had not realized that Brian and Lexi had started dating so long ago.

Lexi smiled at his surprise. “Now how did I know that Brian probably didn’t talk a lot about this kind of thing with you?” she asked rhetorically. “Anyway, we met in January. I guess technically, we didn’t officially start dating until February, Valentine’s Day to be exact, but I knew from the moment I met him that he was the one for me. And he seemed to feel the same way. We had a lot of study dates that January.” Lexi smiled reminiscently.

“But anyway,” she continued, “my dad had a stroke, and I left Columbia to go home and take care of him. And, as much as I loved Brian, I pushed him away and broke up with him.”

Mart looked surprised at this revelation.

“I hurt him. I know I did,” Lexi said, her eyes reflecting the sorrow that she still felt over the pain she had caused, both hers and Brian’s. “And I was hurting, too. But I honestly felt that I was doing what I needed to do. I honestly believed that I was protecting Brian from my messed-up life.

“Fortunately, Brian didn’t give up on me, and eventually, I came to my senses and realized that I did not need to protect Brian. Brian didn’t care that I was three thousand miles away from him. He did not care that my life was not my own any more, but my father’s. And he didn’t care that I might not be able to come back to Columbia and to New York any time soon. And once I realized that all I was doing was causing myself and Brian a lot of pain, I got over myself, quit being so stubborn, and Brian and I were able to get on with our lives. Together.”

Mart stared at Lexi, wondering how this related to him and what he was going through with Diana.

“All I’m saying, Mart, is that despite the fact that I hurt Brian, I was hurting, too. And even though I knew I was hurting Brian, I also thought I was protecting him from even more hurt. And I don’t know Diana very well, and I don’t know what her motives are, but watching her, I can tell that she’s confused and hurting, too.”

Mart could not help but roll his eyes at that.

“She is, Mart,” Lexi insisted. “Going away to college is a momentous thing, especially for someone like Di, who has always felt a sense of responsibility. She’s got two sets of younger siblings that I know she feels very protective about. Suddenly being away from that sort of responsibility and suddenly having the freedom to be responsible for no one but yourself can be overwhelming. And she may have felt the need to explore that. And she may even be thinking that she’s doing the best thing for your relationship.”

Mart snorted.

“If she’s trying to find herself, she needs to do that alone, Mart. And she may be trying to be a better person so that she can be someone that she feels like you deserve. Or she may be so confused that she doesn’t want you to be dragged down by what she’s going through, so she distanced herself so that you didn’t have to see it.”

“But she’s already good enough for me,” Mart protested. “And she should know that. I’ve told her that and shown her that a hundred ways.”

“I know, Mart. But she has to feel it. And she’s going through an overwhelming time in her life, and maybe she needs to learn how to truly feel it and believe it within herself.”

“She can be who she wants with me. She can explore who she is with me. I would never judge her,” Mart insisted.

“I know you wouldn’t, but it’s not like that. Sometimes you just need to sort these things through in your head, and no one else can help you. It’s something internal, Mart,” Lexi explained.

“Why didn’t she tell me any of this herself?” Mart wondered.

“I’m just conjecturing, and I could be completely wrong. But given what I’ve seen, and what I know about you and Di, this is my educated guess. And Di may not even know these things. She may just be overwhelmed by her feelings and just reacting,” Lexi concluded.

“Then how do you know?” Mart asked.

“Because I’ve been there, and now, looking back, hindsight really is twenty-twenty. But while you’re going through it, you can’t even see that. You don’t know.”

Mart nodded. “Thanks, Lexi. I appreciate you trying to explain things from Di’s side.”

“I just want to help. I hate seeing you hurt. And I can tell that Di is hurting, too.”

Mart smiled at his brother’s girlfriend. “I’m glad that you and Brian worked through everything, and I’ve gotten to know you.”

Lexi returned his smile. “Thanks. Me, too. And remember, no matter how stubborn I was, your brother never gave up on me.”

Food for thought, Mart thought as he reflected on the conversation. It had helped to know about what Lexi and Brian had gone through. He now understood that Lexi had been hurting herself while hurting his brother, and he could finally accept that maybe Diana was hurting, too.

Until his mind wandered to the thought of Jason. If Di had dumped him for another man, then she couldn’t be hurting *too* much, right?

Again, the not knowing began gnawing at him. He became frustrated again that he could not call Trixie and be put out of his misery.

You could just call Di and flat out ask her, his conscience niggled at him.

That was a scarier proposition than calling his sister, and Mart wondered where that thought had come from. Plus, there was no guarantee that Di would even tell him the truth, either out of guilt, a desire to hide any illicit actions, or a misguided notion that she wanted to save him from any more pain.

Mart let out a shuddery breath at that thought. Diana, for all of her good intentions, had hurt him more than anyone had ever hurt him before. Mart honestly felt that he had been hurt more than anyone on the planet had ever been hurt or ever would be hurt.

Logically, he knew that was not true. He had not lost a parent or a friend or a child, which he had heard was the worst pain imaginable, but Mart could not imagine hurting any more than he was hurting now. It was bad enough that Diana had broken up with him before he really understood that there was anything wrong with their relationship, but now to wonder if she had found someone else whom she thought could make her happier...Mart was going nearly crazy with the thought. He did not care how piercing or amazing the guy's eyes were. No one—*no one*—would *ever* love Diana Marie Lynch as much as he, Martin Andrew Belden, did.

Ever.

And with that thought, Mart closed his eyes, and prayed that sleep would come that night. Instead, images of Diana and Jason being intimate played through his head, and as the night wore on and the early morning sunlight finally filtered through the vertical blinds on his window, Mart wondered if he would ever be able to sleep again.

*It started out with a kiss
How did it end up like this?
It was only a kiss
Now I'm falling asleep and she's calling a cab
While he's having a smoke and she's taking a drag
Now they're going to bed and my stomach is sick and it's all in my head
But she's touching his chest now,
He takes off her dress now,
Let me go.
I just can't look, it's killing me,
They're taking control.*

More Author's Notes: I've never been to Ithaca and could be completely wrong, but from what I have read, Cornell and Ithaca are similar to Michigan State University and East Lansing, respectively, so I decided to write like I knew what the hell I was talking about (or—that I knew about which I was speaking, lol) and compare the two. If they're not alike, and you happen to know it, please willfully suspend disbelief. :)

The books are inconsistent as to whether Brian or Mart have their own rooms or not, but the Julie Campbell books imply that they do, and it's always worked for my purposes for them to have separate rooms, so in this *Gethsemane* universe, as well as in the *Sapphire Days* universe, they do have their own rooms.

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