

## Chapter 23 – Blue Butterfly Day

### Part 1

*“For you see, each day I love you more.  
Today more than yesterday and less than tomorrow.”  
Rosemonde Gerard*

Trixie glanced over at the clock, 12:18 a.m. She was getting married today.

She held a pillow over her face and giggled gleefully. She was already married. Why was she so excited now about this day?

Removing the pillow from her face, she darted a quick glance at Diana, sleeping peacefully in the twin bed next to her, before closing her eyes to take it all in. There was just something magical about summer in Sleepyside. It brought back memories of her happy childhood—new friends and picnics by the lake, sleepovers and horseback rides, clubhouses and diamond thieves.

And although she and Dan both loved the hubbub and excitement of New York, a summer night in the city just couldn't compare to this—the crickets chirping in the shrubbery, the hoot of an owl in the woods, the soft breeze that floated through the half-open window to cool her face, the countless stars that surrounded the watchful moon like sparkling diamonds, a gnarled branch of the old crabapple tree outside her bedroom window scratching against the screen. It seemed to squeak out her name ...Trixie ...Trixie...

“Trixie?”

She opened her eyes and stared with puckered brow at the ceiling. Was the tree actually talking to her?

“Psst, Trix! You awake?”

Turning her head, she looked with delighted surprise at her husband as he clung to a weathered tree branch and leaned out precariously to tap on her window.

Scrambling out of bed, she padded softly to the window and pushed the screen up before kneeling down and resting her arms on the sill. “What on earth are you doing here?” she chided gently.

Dan shifted around, trying to find a comfortable and secure spot in the tree before he answered. “I missed you.”

Trixie smiled, placing her hand over his where it grasped the windowsill for balance. “We were apart for up to seven weeks while I was in training. And I was just in Beijing for a week. How can you possibly be missing me when we saw each other just a few hours ago?”

“That was different. I can't do much about it when you're in another state, or across the ocean. But when I know a short walk through the moonlit woods will bring you back into my arms once more...”

Trixie giggled. “Has my poetic brother been helping you write your vows?”

“How’d you guess?” He grinned at her and she leaned out the window to kiss him.

“If he wakes up and finds you missing, he’s going to think you got cold feet and skipped town. Then he’ll have to hunt you down and kill you, you know.”

“Oh, I think I’ll be all right,” Dan hedged. “It won’t come to that.”

“Are you saying my chivalrous brother *wouldn’t* jump to defend my honor if you left me at the altar?” Trixie asked in mock indignation.

Shifting nervously, Dan gave her a guilty look. “Mart knows.”

“Knows wha—?” Trixie’s blue eyes grew wide. “He knows?” she squawked.

“Shh ... you’ll wake Diana.”

Trixie dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand. “She sleeps like the dead. You and I could have wild animal sex in here and she wouldn’t wake up.” As Dan waggled his eyebrows at her, she stifled a laugh and tried to look stern. “Forget it, mister. You’re trying to change the subject. My brother *knows* we’re already married?”

Dan made a face and nodded.

Trixie shook her head in feigned disgust, hoping the darkness hid her twinkling eyes. “Two beers last night and you spill your guts? Really, Mangan, I expected more from you.”

“It wasn’t last night. It was back in February.”

“February!” Trixie hissed.

“Yes. Remember that disposable camera that Arnold Walker supposedly never touched? Not so much. He got a few pictures of us on the sly and by the way, they’re kind of cute.”

“Are you telling me that my brother has kept this secret since *February*?”

“Pretty impressive, huh?” Dan continued with his hastily abridged explanation. “He couldn’t believe *you* had kept the secret so long. I told him you did better than he *ever* would’ve done. He was insulted that I thought you kept secrets better than he did. I said something to the effect of, ‘I’ll *bet* she could keep *any* secret better than you could,’ and the next thing I know...” He shrugged in embarrassment.

“Are you trying to tell me that you have *two* bets going concerning our secret marriage?”

Even in the dim moonlight, she could see his cheeks turn red. “Yes,” he mumbled. “Apparently, I have a gambling problem.”

His face looked so downcast—like Bobby’s when he was told he couldn’t come on a Bob-White adventure—that Trixie had to cover her mouth momentarily to squelch her laughter. “And what exactly did you bet my brother?”

“My bike.”

Her amusement quickly turned to dismay. “Oh, Dan! You love that bike! What on earth is Mart going to do with a motorcycle? I can practically guarantee he’ll fall off the first time he tries to ride it.”

Dan managed a half-grin as he sorrowfully nodded his agreement.

“Moms will have a cow if he starts riding your motorcycle. Sally will definitely have a cow. Jim will probably have a cow that it’s on his property corrupting his students.”

“Hey! How does a motorcycle corrupt young boys? *I’m* not corrupted.”

Trixie wagged her eyebrows at him. “That’s debatable.”

“Anyway, we’re getting married in... ” He shot a glance over her shoulder at the clock on the bedside table. “...about ten hours, so it looks like I’m out of luck.”

“And since Mart found out *and* he hasn’t told anyone about it, that means you’ve lost *both* bets,” Trixie pointed out with an impish twinkle in her eye.

“Don’t remind me,” Dan grumbled.

“Well, as much as I love the idea of you being my slave for a whole week, I hate the thought of you losing that bike. So we’ll just have to figure out some way to make Mart spill the beans.”

“In ten hours?”

“I’ll think of something,” Trixie promised. “Mart’s a natural born blabbermouth. Besides, he doesn’t know that I know he knows, right?”

Dan creased his forehead as he tried to figure out what she had said. “Right ... I think.”

“You’d better get back to the cabin before he wakes up for a midnight snack or something and discovers you’re missing.” She leaned out to kiss him. “And please be careful. I can’t have my not-so-secret husband falling out of a tree and breaking his neck on our wedding day.”

Dan grinned at her, daring to loosen his grip on the windowsill in order to brush his fingers against her cheek. “You know what? I’m glad we kept this marriage a secret.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. I didn’t realize a big wedding could be so...” He trailed off with a self-conscious shrug.

“Magical?”

Dan’s sheepish smile softened into a lovesick grin. “Yeah.”

“Me either,” Trixie agreed with a quiet laugh. “I’ve even managed to forget the months of agonizing dress fittings, and trying to choose between six shades of blue that all looked the same to me, and taste-testing so many wedding cakes I was afraid I’d fall into a diabetic coma, and having Honey calling me and harassing me ten times a week, and—”

Dan silenced her half-hearted grumblings with another kiss. "I love you," he murmured.

"Will you still love me tonight, when I'm too tired to consummate our marriage?" she teased.

"First of all, we've already done that. Second of all, we've got seven whole days to honeymoon—no work, no obligations, nothing *but* consummation. And thirdly, I can't really imagine *you* being too tired for sex." He clung desperately to the tree branch as Trixie took a cheerful swipe at his head.

"Will you still love me tomorrow when I'm just going to *die* if you don't tell me where we're going on our honeymoon?"

"Trixie, I love you today ... tomorrow ... forever."

She sighed softly and leaned out once more to kiss him goodnight. "Meet me at the lake in ten hours?"

"It's a date." He carefully climbed down the tree and swung from the bottom branch for a moment before dropping lightly to his feet onto the lawn. He looked up and waved at her, then stealthily disappeared into the woods.

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*"It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us fathers and sons."  
Johann Schiller*

"Good morning, Daniel," Edwin Maypenny solemnly intoned. "How nervous are you?"

Dan vigorously massaged his scalp and further disheveled his already mussed hair. "I'm not nervous at all."

"Good," the older man said with a grin. "Then I'll let you have some coffee." He gestured for Dan to take a seat at the kitchen table and placed a steaming mug in front of him. "Do you suppose those two sloths in the attic will rouse themselves in time to stand up for you at your wedding?"

Dan grinned. "Mart and Tad aren't used to the early morning hours we woodsmen keep."

Edwin grunted in contempt. "I thought that Belden boy tended the chickens at Crabapple Farm."

"He did, but only because his parents made him. Having to get up with the hens is what made him change his mind about being a farmer, I think."

"Well, I know the way to Mart's heart, and probably Tad's as well. As soon as I get this bacon crackling, they'll be stirring." With a wink he added, "But maybe you and I will use up all the hot water first."

"And it doesn't last long here, that's for sure," Dan responded. "Lucky for me, I'm used to it. I've been taking a lot of cold showers the last few weeks."

He had told Edwin about Trixie's idea to make their wedding night "special" by abstaining from sex since she had returned from China. Edwin cackled mischievously. "That girl of yours sure does get some funny ideas in her head, doesn't she?"

Dan nodded his agreement. "Most times I figure out why, eventually. I hate to admit it, but this one's got me stumped."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Danny. It's hard to think straight when your boys are in a twist."

Dan nearly spit his coffee out as he burst into laughter. Edwin turned to the counter to begin preparations for breakfast. Dan sipped his coffee and watched the man who had been his guardian until he turned eighteen, but more than that, was his surrogate father, grandfather, and brother all in one, not to mention his friend.

Eight and a half years ago, Edwin Maypenny had taken him in, sight unseen. He didn't even know Bill Regan all that well when he'd agreed to take his nephew into his home. He was used to being alone and didn't know how to relate to teenage boys. All he had known about Dan was that he was an orphan, a street kid, in trouble with the law. He had known he was rebellious and uncooperative and not the least bit happy about living in the middle of nowhere with a reclusive old man he didn't know. But there hadn't been a moment's hesitation from what Uncle Bill had told him. He had asked and Edwin had said yes, simple as that.

Thank God for his faith and trust.

Impulsively, Dan got up and went to the counter, putting his arm around the old man's shoulders. "Thank you..." he said seriously, "...for everything."

"It's just bacon and eggs," Edwin grunted in embarrassment.

Dan chuckled under his breath and shook his head resignedly. He set down his coffee cup and said, "I'm going to get my shower in before breakfast." He patted Edwin on the back and turned toward the bathroom, which wasn't far from the kitchen in the tiny cabin.

He was almost there when he heard a quiet murmur behind him.

"You're welcome, son."

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*"Mothers are the most instinctive philosophers."  
Harriet Beecher Stowe*

"Good morning, Moms," Trixie greeted with a bright smile as she walked down the stairs into the kitchen.

"Trixie, what's wrong? Are you sick?" her mother asked immediately.

Brow furrowed, Trixie replied, "No, I'm fine. Why?"

Helen Belden shook her head and chuckled under her breath. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm just trying to remember the last time I saw you *walking* down those stairs."

Trixie laughed gaily and gave her mother a warm hug. “I was about to come downstairs in my usual stampeding buffalo style when I suddenly had this vision of me falling down the steps and breaking my ankle, so I thought a little caution might be prudent. I’m already worried about getting down that hill to the lake in my heels. Crutches would be out of the question!”

“You know your father won’t let you fall, Trixie,” Moms said, caressing her only daughter’s cheek affectionately. “Now, sit down and I’ll fix you some breakfast.”

“Oh, Moms, I couldn’t possibly eat!”

Pointing to the table, Helen said firmly, “Sit. You won’t be eating for several more hours and you certainly don’t want to pass out at the altar now, do you?”

“Yes, Moms,” Trixie said and obediently sat down. “I mean, yes, I’ll eat, not yes, I want to pass out in Dan’s arms.” She grinned teasingly at her mother as she took the juice glass that was offered to her. Silently, she watched her mother carefully slice a bagel in half and pop it in the toaster oven as she updated her daughter on the morning’s activities.

“Sally’s already had her shower and she’s going to finish getting ready upstairs, so the guest room is all yours. She and Diana will be down to help you with your hair and makeup in a little while.”

“Moms?”

Helen turned to face her daughter and tilted her head in question. “Yes?”

Trixie thought a moment, then shrugged and grinned sheepishly. “I don’t know. Aren’t you supposed to give me some motherly advice on my wedding day?”

Helen took a glance at the bagel, turned down the heating element a bit and came to join Trixie at the table. “It used to be that these mother-daughter talks were about the wedding night, but I guess in this day and age, that kind of insight isn’t often needed.”

Trixie’s cheeks turned pink as she asked softly, “Were you disappointed when Dan and I decided to live together before we got married?”

“You could never disappoint me, Trixie. I raised my children to think for themselves.”

“But you also taught us to think *about* others.”

Placing her hand over Trixie’s, Helen smiled and said, “You always do.”

“Come on, Moms. Surely you have some wisdom to pass along? How can I possibly get married without my mother’s sage advice?”

Her mother thought carefully before answering, “Be true to your heart. It’s always wise to ask for advice and to listen to what other people have to offer you—your family, your friends, the people you work with—but in the end, you have to listen to your heart.”

“Did you?”

She nodded and smiled. “That’s why I have a wonderful husband and four wonderful children. Your father’s parents tried to dissuade us from getting married. They thought we were too young. And my parents thought I wouldn’t be happy living on a farm in the country. But I listened to my heart, and my heart knew that I loved your father and nothing else mattered.”

“Are you sorry you quit school? Or gave up your painting?”

“Sometimes I think about maybe going back to school, or at least taking some art classes and picking up my painting again, but I wouldn’t say I regret giving them up. I’d only regret it if nothing good came from my choices. But I got Brian and Mart and you and Bobby, so I’d say four very wonderful somethings came from my choice to be a wife and a mother instead of a Philadelphia socialite or career woman.”

“Do you think I’m making the right decision by putting my career first?”

Simply and directly, Moms asked, “Are you happy?”

Trixie’s eyes lit up and a smile complete with dimples spread across her face. “Oh, yes! I love my job. And I love being Dan’s wife. I mean—I *will* love being Dan’s wife.” Her face pinked up slightly and she jumped from her seat to retrieve her bagel as the bell on the toaster oven rescued her.

Thankfully, Moms didn’t seem to notice her slip. “You’ve been together for several years now. You’re already married in your hearts. Today just makes it legal.”

Trixie never thought the last few hours would be the hardest part of keeping their secret. She glanced at the clock over the sink and silently willed it to move faster.

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*“A brother is a friend God gave you; a friend is a brother your heart chose.”  
Proverb*

“Garrghh!” Dan growled, undoing his bowtie for the fifth time. “Why didn’t I get a clip-on?”

“Because clip-ons are for losers,” Tad said as he patted his perfectly knotted tie proudly.

“Then help me!” Dan demanded, dropping his hands uselessly at his sides.

“Sorry, no can do. Jim is on his way over to drive you and Mart down to the lake. I’ve been ordered to the farm to escort Diana and Sally.”

Mart scowled. “So now you get Diana *and* Sally?”

Tad shrugged and flashed a lopsided grin. “That’s what you get for blackmailing Dan into choosing *you* to be his best man.”

Mart narrowed his eyes at Tad, then closed them and groaned.

When he opened them, Dan was shooting him the evil eye. “You told Tad?”

Red-faced, Mart muttered, “Maybe.”

Suddenly, Dan grinned broadly and Mart nervously grinned back, obviously not expecting that reaction.

“That means I get to hang onto my motorcycle.”

The smile slid off Mart’s face and he glowered at Tad. “Thanks a lot. If you’d kept your big mouth shut, that bike would’ve been mine in less than an hour.”

“*My* big mouth? You’re the one who told me in the first place, big mouth!”

“I told you it was a *secret*, didn’t I? Big mouth!”

“All right, Mo and Curly, knock it off,” Dan chuckled. “Mart spilled the beans, just as Trixie predicted, and I’m off the hook. You two can play the blame game later.”

“Wait, wait, wait, *wait!*” Mart yelped. “What do you mean, ‘just as Trixie predicted’? You *told* her?”

Dan was suddenly concentrating very hard on attempting to tie his tie correctly.

“Mangan?”

The groom shrugged and grinned. “Yeah, I told her. There was nothing in our bet about telling or not telling *Trixie*. I needed some help to thwart your dastardly plans. She’s probably plotting her next move even as we speak.”

Tad visibly shuddered. “Trixie’s professionally trained in interrogation now. She’s probably had some covert training on torture tactics, too. You dodged the bullet on that, Belden.”

“Tad, you’re not helping,” Dan said. “I thought you were going to get the girls?” And with a wink and a grin, Tad departed.

When Dan turned to look at Mart, his best man looked thoughtful and ... mischievous. Dan growled, untied his sloppy tie yet again, and asked, “What’re you up to, Mart?”

Mart paused, as if still considering his options, then asked, “Trixie doesn’t know that I know she knows I know, right?”

Dan’s eyes fluttered half-closed as he let out a tortured moan. “Seriously, Mart, I’m about ten seconds away from blowing my brains out.” He yanked the tie from around his neck and threw it onto the dresser in frustration.

“I’m just saying ... this might be fun.” Mart picked up the tie, turned Dan to face him and helped him get it knotted around his neck.

They heard a knock on the front door and Dan quickly waved Mart into silence. “Whatever you’re thinking about doing, forget it! I’m getting married—again—in...” he checked his watch, “...48 minutes and I don’t need you wrecking Trixie’s day for her. Don’t say a word.”

“Don’t say a word about what?” Jim asked as he came into the room.

“About Dan and Trixie already being married,” Mart blurted out, followed up with an injured “Ow!” as Dan smacked him in the head.

“You’re a worse secret-keeper than Bobby!”

“You and Trixie are already married?”

“I haven’t told Bobby! I promise!”

“Let’s see if you can manage to keep it that way for another hour, bonehead.”

“You and Trixie are already married?”

“Come on, Dan. I only told two people, and Jim was by accident.”

“That’s two more people than I told, or Trixie told. When did you get to be such a tattletale? You’re like a little girl.”

“You and Trixie are already married?” Jim asked a third time, finally getting Dan and Mart to look his way.

Dan scowled at Mart and mumbled, “Yes.”

Jim’s tentative smile was full of bewildered amusement. “When did this happen?”

“Last summer. Atlantic City.”

Jim chuckled under his breath. “I don’t know why I’m surprised. Trixie could talk Regan into taking a job at a glue factory.”

“She didn’t have to twist my arm, Jim,” Dan insisted. “I wanted to do it as much as she did.”

“I meant about keeping it a secret.” Jim’s grin widened. “Did you have fun?”

“Getting married? Or keeping it a secret?”

“Both.”

“Yes to the first, and yes—until Mart began blackmailing me—on the second.”

“Hey!” Mart protested. “I was willing to let the feline out of the rucksack, but you were trying to win a bet.”

“You and Trixie *bet* on it?” Jim shook his head and tried unsuccessfully to quash his laughter. “I don’t how I’m going to keep a straight face through this ceremony.”

“Well, try,” Dan implored. “For Trixie’s sake, if not for mine.”

Jim nodded, still grinning broadly. Changing the subject, he asked, “What the heck is going on with your tie?”

“Why?” Dan asked, clutching self-consciously at his throat. “Mart helped me with it.”

“Well, it *looks* like Mart helped you with it.” Jim reached out, gave it a yank and started over.

Dan shot Mart a withering glance.

“What? Can I help it if Brian always helped me with my ties before?”

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*“Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.”  
Old English Rhyme*

“Trixie, you’re as pretty as a picture!” Sally exclaimed, so giddy with wedding day joy that she couldn’t think of any way to express herself other than using the silly cliché.

“You’re positively glowing,” Diana agreed, as she carefully threaded another miniature daisy into Trixie’s hair. Trixie had sat with uncommon patience while Diana had painstakingly swept her hair up into a stylish French knot, allowing several of her natural curls to hang freely and frame her face and trail down her bare neck. The effect was both elegant and playful and was totally Trixie.

“Do you have everything you need?” Sally inquired. “All your old and new and borrowed and blue?”

Diana sniffed. “Trixie is shunning all things traditional. I’m surprised she and Dan didn’t have breakfast in bed this morning.”

Sally looked aghast. “He can’t see you before the wedding! And having those items is good luck. Everybody can use some good luck.”

“I did think about getting her something old, something new, something borrowed, and something ecru, just to be different,” Diana teased. “But how could you not have something blue, Trix? It’s your signature color.”

“Well, you all look wonderful in it,” Trixie said. “Or rather, you all look wonderful in *Oasis*,” she breathed in hushed awe as she teasingly tugged on the hem of Diana’s bridesmaid dress, a wispy chiffon in a soft blue that looked cool and summery.

“Trixie, this color is Riviera Sky, not Oasis.”

Trixie threw up her hands in exasperation. “Whatever! Gleeps, it’s a good thing I’m only getting married once!”

Diana gasped and when Trixie looked up at her, her violet eyes were bright and wide. “What is it, Di?” she asked. “Is my hair falling apart already?”

She reached up self-consciously to touch it, but Diana automatically stopped her, blurting out, “No, no. It’s fine. Don’t touch it. It’s just that—I forgot your present! I mean, I didn’t forget it. It’s here. It’s just not *here* here. It’s upstairs. I’ll go get it.”

She fled the room, leaving Trixie staring at the empty doorway in bewilderment. “What was that all about?”

Sally giggled. “She’s more jittery than the bride. Really, Trixie, I’ve never seen a bride so cool and collected as you. Aren’t you nervous at all?”

Trixie shrugged. “Why should I be?”

“Why indeed?” Sally replied mysteriously. When Trixie turned to stare at her, she smiled mischievously, darted a glance at the still-empty doorway, and whispered, “It’s not like you haven’t done this before ... right?”

Trixie’s face turned red and her eyes widened. With a gasp, she exclaimed, “Mart *told* you?”

“Kind of. I mean—” Sally’s cheeks began to look much like Trixie’s as she flushed and mumbled, “Did you know your brother talks in his sleep?”

There was a pause before both girls burst into nervous laughter. Trixie grasped Sally’s hands and asked, “So Mart doesn’t know that you know?”

Sally shook her head. “Was he there when you and Dan got married?”

“No. It was last summer in Atlantic City, spur of the moment thing. Mart found out by accident. And he doesn’t know that *I* know, either.”

“Then how do you know that he knows?”

“Dan knows, and he told me that Mart knows.”

“I think I understand,” Sally said slowly, her blue eyes sparkling. “You and Dan both know, obviously. Mart knows, even though he shouldn’t know. Dan knows that Mart knows, and you know that Mart knows, but Mart only knows that Dan knows *he* knows, not that *you* know he knows, or that Dan knows that you know that Mart knows.”

Trixie said nothing for a moment, her mouth hung open in utter amazement. Then she burst into laughter and exclaimed, “Honey would be so proud of you, Sally!”

They heard Diana as she came down the stairs and Trixie quickly waved a hand to halt the conversation. “I promise I’ll tell you all about it later, but don’t say anything else. Diana doesn’t know. You and Mart, me and Dan. That’s it until after the wedding, okay? Then we’ll tell you the whole story.”

Diana came into the room then and presented Trixie with a long, narrow black box. “It’s new and blue, so you’re only halfway traditional.”

Trixie opened the box to reveal a diamond and sapphire ankle bracelet. “It’s like Honey’s bracelet,” she murmured. The Bob-Whites had all chipped in to get Honey a ruby and diamond bracelet for her New Year’s Eve wedding. Like that bracelet, Trixie’s new anklet had seven gems in all—four sapphires and three diamonds—to represent the seven Bob-Whites.

She had told herself she wouldn’t cry today, but she couldn’t help feeling a little misty as she thought about her six best friends and all they had been through over the years. “Thank you,” she said, standing up to give Diana a warm hug. She drew back and grabbed Sally’s hand as

well. "I've got old friends and new friends and a blue ankle bracelet, and to heck with borrowed."

"Except that you're going to have to borrow my handkerchief if you don't want to mess up your mascara," Diana teased.

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*"When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody,  
you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."  
Harry Burns, When Harry Met Sally...*

Dan paced inside the boathouse. This was no easy task, as the lawn furniture, swimming and boating paraphernalia, and even the picnic tables had been shoved inside in order to make room for the wedding. His pacing consisted of three steps to the window, a quick about-face, and three steps back to the door.

He wasn't pacing nervously, or even fretfully, but eagerly. He was more than ready to get this show on the road. *What's the hold up that we're running so late?* He checked his watch. *Oh, ten minutes to go. Never mind. Keep pacing.*

He had made a few more slow circuits of his cage, trying not to make himself dizzy, when his uncle knocked and entered. "You about ready, Dan?"

Dan grinned crookedly at him. "I've been ready since I woke up this morning."

"I've seen you when you first wake up, you know," Regan said with a derisive snort. "It wouldn't be a pretty picture for the official wedding photos."

Dan ran his fingers through his hair, adjusted his tie, and smoothed his hands down the front of his tuxedo jacket. "Do I look okay?"

Regan pretended to critically peruse him before gruffly conceding, "A far sight better than you looked when you first came to Sleepyside."

"Not again!" Dan groaned in mock dismay. "Is this lecture about my jacket? Or the hair?"

"The mangy jacket, the long hair, those ridiculous cowboy boots, the scowl on your face, and the fact that you were a scrawny punk."

"Maypenny's venison stew was kind of hard to come by on the streets," Dan said, only half joking as he remembered those lean days when *any* meals were hard to come by.

"Well, it sure didn't take you long to fatten up."

"I ate a lot of stew," Dan agreed with a chuckle. "And a lot of dinners with the Beldens."

"And Cook's fried chicken."

“And a whole lot of Wimpy’s burgers.” They both laughed and Dan added, “Thank goodness Edwin had all that wood to chop, or I’d have ended up weighing a ton!”

After a moment of awkward silence, Regan said in a low voice, “I’ll always be thankful to have you as my nephew, but after all that you’ve been through and where you are now, I’m glad to say that I’m also very *proud* that you’re my nephew.” With a sly grin, he added, “And I’m very happy and proud that Trixie’s my niece-in-law.”

“Almost,” Dan said with a grin and another quick glance at his watch. “About five more minutes ‘til we start.”

Regan didn’t respond and Dan stared curiously at him. His uncle looked like a redheaded cat with canary feathers hanging out of his mouth. “What?”

“Trixie’s already your wife, isn’t she?”

Dan’s dark eyes grew round and wide. “Mart told you?”

Now it was Regan’s turn to look puzzled. “No. Mart knows?”

“So, Trixie told you?” Dan was confused. He had no idea who knew what, or how or when or why.

“Trixie didn’t tell me. Nobody told me. I figured it out myself.”

“How? When? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Regan shrugged. “I figured you had your reasons for keeping it a secret. I’ve known since Thanksgiving.”

“Thanksgiving! How?”

With a grin, Regan held up his left hand, palm out, fingers slightly spread. With his thumb, he reached over to his ring finger and rubbed it. “You did this all weekend, like you were touching a ring that wasn’t there. Other than your mama’s Celtic cross necklace, I’ve never seen you wear any jewelry, not even a class ring, so it got me thinking. Of course,” he concluded with a wink at his nephew, “it was merely a suspicion until just now.”

Dan slapped a hand to his forehead and laughed helplessly. “This is the worst-kept secret in the world. I have no idea how we’re going to figure out who lost which bet.”

“You and Trixie made a bet on it?”

“Yeah, and so did Mart and I.”

Regan scratched the back of his head and said, “I guess you’ve still got some of the street-wise con man in you, after all.” His green eyes twinkled as he chastised his nephew. “But at least you have a decent haircut these days.”

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*"I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times, in life after life,  
in age after age forever."  
Rabindranath Tagore*

Her mother had already left for the lake, secure on her youngest son's arm, her rose-colored dress matching the flush in her cheeks from the lingering kiss he had bestowed upon her.

And now he stood, just outside the door of the guest room, and watched his only daughter as she fussed with the dainty strap on her dainty shoe, the sunlight catching on the jewels of her new anklet and sending prisms of color around the room as she turned her foot this way and that and enjoyed the effect.

Wasn't it just yesterday that he was holding her in his arms for the first time, his heart melting as she gazed up at him with eyes so trusting?

Brian's baby blue eyes had darkened quickly. Mart's went through several shades of blue and gray before settling on a shade much like his mother's. But Peter had always been certain that his daughter's would stay that brilliant delphinium blue. And they had.

She had been his little princess, daddy's little girl ... until she was old enough to start tagging after her older brothers. Then she became his little tomboy—independent, adventurous, and free-spirited. But when she crawled into his lap and pleaded with wide blue eyes for a story before dinner, it was just like she was his little princess again—never mind the dirt smudged on her face and the tangled mess of her sandy blond curls.

He and Helen had sent her off to school, their last little fledgling to leave the nest—or so they thought at the time—and she'd quickly learned to read all by herself, no longer bringing a book to him before supper, but sounding out new words with her mother at the kitchen table. But she still called him "Daddy" and kissed him goodnight. She still giggled when he'd send her off to bed with a "Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite. Nighty-night."

She still let him kiss her boo-boos and comfort her when she cried. He was the one she turned to with all the humiliation an eight-year-old can bear when she fell off the school stage in the paper flower costume that was too big for her. He had kissed away her tears, bandaged her skinned knee, and assured her that nobody was laughing at her. Then he had tugged on a blond ringlet and called her his little daffodil, and she was all smiles again.

But as she grew older, there were hurts only her mother could handle. For what teenage girl wants to tell her father about the cute boy in her history class who wouldn't give her the time of day? Or ask why all the other girls in class were wearing bras and she was still boyishly flat? Or bemoan her "sturdiness", which he thought was a compliment and turned out to mean—at least in her angsty teenage mind—that he thought she was fat?

But he was the one she came to begging for a horse of her own. Because that's what fathers do. They buy ponies for their little princesses. And he was the one she came to asking permission to go on a trailer trip with her new best friend. Because fathers settle the matter when mothers are undecided, or when mothers say, "Go ask your father."

She came to him asking advice about colleges and apartments and careers and finances and all the important decisions a young woman needs to make in her life. But the most important decision of all she made herself, and the most important question of all was asked not by her,

but by the dark-haired, dark-eyed young man she had given her heart to. The heart she had once given to him.

And they were engaged. And they were living together. And they were planning their wedding, their honeymoon, their futures. And it wouldn't be much longer, minutes really, and she wouldn't be his little girl anymore.

He would walk her down the aisle. He and her mother would give her away and his princess would become the queen of Dan's heart. Sure, he was gaining a fine son-in-law. Yes, they would always be around—holidays, weekend visits, summer vacations. And someday, he hoped, Trixie and Dan would present him with grandchildren.

But it would never be quite the same again. She'd go to Dan when she needed comfort and to Dan when she needed advice. She would kiss Dan goodnight and give Dan her whole heart.

He would never be "Daddy" again.

She touched his arm and he shook himself out of his melancholy, looked into those trusting blue eyes again and smiled, couldn't help but smile.

"What were you just thinking about?" she asked.

"If I told you everything that I was thinking right now, sweetheart, I'd make you late for the most important date in your life. And while I'm sure Dan is quite used to your tardiness," he added with a wink, "I don't think now is the time to test his confidence in your love for him."

Trixie giggled, and he turned and placed himself at her side, angling his elbow out for her to grasp. "Are you ready to go, my little daffodil?"

Her eyes were bright with wonder and affection as she said, "You haven't called me that since I was in grade school, Daddy."

Her smile was brilliant and his heart ached in his chest. For he knew there would always be moments like this, when he was her daddy again, and she was his little girl.

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*"May the wings of the butterfly kiss the sun  
And find your shoulder to light on,  
To bring you luck, happiness and riches  
Today, tomorrow and beyond."  
Irish Blessing*

Rows of white, wooden folding chairs had been gently arced on either side of a broad aisle that led to the arbor, which was festooned with daisies and other colorful wild flowers. In the first of many conscious decisions Trixie and Dan had made to not allow themselves to be shackled to the same tired old traditions, there was no "bride's side" or "groom's side", because her family was his and vice versa, and all their friends were shared friends. Everybody sat where they wanted to sit, saving the front row for immediate family.

An eclectic mix of classical, jazz, and Irish folk music provided soft instrumental undertones as the guests arrived and were seated. When there was a noticeable pause between numbers, the remaining guests who were lingering in quiet chats found their seats and the ceremony began.

First, Bobby Belden proudly escorted his mother up the aisle to her seat. Next, in another break from tradition, Dan escorted Edwin Maypenny to his seat. He stopped to kiss Honey's cheek and shake Brian's hand—as honorary members of the wedding party they were dressed to match the rest of the bridesmaids and groomsmen, even though Honey was under doctor's orders to stay off her feet—then took his place next to Mart by the arbor.

In pairs, three groomsmen and three bridesmaids walked up the aisle, splitting at the arbor to take their places on either side of the minister—first Tad and Sally, then Jim and Renee, and finally Regan and Hallie.

The music changed and Debussy's "Claire de Lune" floated across the meadow. Diana and Honey had half-heartedly tried to change Trixie's mind about this musical choice, pointing out that the title of the piece meant "moonlight" and perhaps wasn't entirely apropos for a wedding that was taking place at ten thirty in the morning. But Trixie had insisted, her cheeks rosy enough to indicate to her friends that the song had special meaning.

When she and Dan had returned to their hotel after their first wedding in Atlantic City, "Claire de Lune" was the music that had been playing on the hotel radio, the music they had made love to as husband and wife, the music they had fallen in love with. Dan, the jazz aficionado, and Trixie, the pop princess, had both fallen in love with a century-old piece of French classical music. Dan had even called the station the next morning and requested the song so that she would wake up hearing the romantic music, its swelling overtures keeping time as they made love while the sun rose over the ocean just outside their window.

So "Claire de Lune" it was, and it seemed entirely appropriate now, as their very own goddess of the moon, Diana, descended the hill in a wispy tea-length gown of Riviera Sky blue, a bouquet of wildflowers in her hand, violet eyes sparkling with mirth as she winked at the groom.

Dan smiled charmingly at her, keeping his eyes on her just long enough to ensure she had safely made her way down to the head of the aisle before lifting his eyes up to where Trixie and her father were just cresting the hill.

He would have gasped if he had any air in his lungs, but as it always did, the sight of her took his breath away.

Her right arm was tucked securely in her father's, which was a good thing, since she wasn't watching where she was going—she couldn't take her eyes off her groom. He wanted to take in the details of her beautiful dress, her hair, her bouquet of daisies, but all he could see was the forever of her shining blue eyes as she and her father slowly descended the hill on carefully spaced steps of broad, flat fieldstones that blended in perfectly with the natural environment.

He was starting to feel light-headed and was just wondering why when he heard a soft chuckle behind him and felt Mart's finger poking him in his kidney.

"Breathe, Dan."

He took a much-needed deep breath and everything came back into focus.

And then, Trixie's worst nightmare nearly came true. Yet, in the magic of that day, that place, that moment, even it turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

So focused was she on her husband that she didn't pay the necessary attention to where she was placing her feet and missed a step. Stumbling off the steppingstone and into the grassy meadow, there was a soft, collective gasp from the wedding guests, and Dan felt his muscles instinctively coil up as he prepared to rush to her side. But her father held her securely, and as she looked down the hill at Dan with a sheepish grin and pinkish cheeks and regained her footing, it happened.

As she moved back to the path, her foot stepped into a cluster of wildflowers that suddenly came alive as dozens of pale blue and ivory butterflies fluttered up and around Trixie and her father, circling them in a scolding manner before fluttering off across the field. A second gasp came from the congregation below, this one of enchanted delight as they savored the fairy tale moment.

Her confidence in the beauty of the world—if not in her own natural grace—restored, Trixie smiled radiantly and continued down the hill, arm in arm with her father. When they reached the head of the aisle, the congregation remained seated—another break in tradition by Trixie and Dan's request—and the delicate piano melody of a contemporary version of "The Bridal March", that they both loved far more than Wagner's original heavy-handed version, brought Trixie and her father to Dan's side.

Peter's eyes were slightly glazed, as if he were far away. Dan's gaze drifted down to where he held his daughter's hand firmly. He wondered if maybe they should have told Peter and Helen that today was just a formality. No matter how much Peter had teased yesterday—practicing his five-word response to the minister's question over and over, testing each word for just the right inflection, pretending he couldn't remember his only line in this play—Dan could only imagine how he was feeling right now. He had a fleeting desire to wish for all sons before an image of a little girl with blond ringlets and bright blue eyes flashed across his mind's eye. He believed even Peter would say it was worth the ache of this moment.

He heard a whisper of muffled laughter and came back to attention. Trixie was elbowing her father gently. Peter grinned guiltily as he realized he had missed his cue, and with a voice that was clear and strong, he said, "Her mother and I do," before confidently placing Trixie's hand in Dan's and taking his seat next to her mother.

Dan squeezed Trixie's fingers as she stepped closer to him. She squeezed back and winked at him as the minister began.

"We are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony..."

*"Now join hands, and with your hands your hearts."  
William Shakespeare*

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## Part 2

*"Music is the key to the female heart."  
Johann G. Seume*

After the ceremony, the wedding party and the family of the bride and groom trooped up to the Manor House gardens for photographs while their guests dug into the appetizers and waited for their return. After numerous photos that included the bridesmaids and groomsmen, Trixie's family, Bill Regan and Edwin Maypenny, the photographer requested time with just Trixie and Dan, leaving the rest of them to return to the lake, much to the relief of Mart's stomach.

He was just finishing up his second helping of shrimp salad when he saw the bride and groom coming down the hill toward the lake. As they neared, he stood on the stage near the microphone and gently struck his fork against his water glass. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced with a broad smile splashed across his freckled face. "Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Mangan."

The crowd clapped and cheered as Trixie and Dan came to the dance floor. Mart hemmed and hawed for a moment at the microphone in jest. "I have something here the groom asked me to read for his bride before they begin their first dance ... if I can just put my hands on it." He reached into the left pocket of his jacket and mumbled, "No, that's where I kept the rings. You got those, right?"

Trixie and Dan held up their hands and let the sunlight glint off their matching, intertwined wedding bands.

Pulling a scrap of paper out of his right pants pocket, Mart glanced at it and said, "Oops, that's my grocery list." He dug in again and this time pulled out and unfurled a long strip of paper. "No, that's my best man speech."

Everybody groaned and laughed, and Uncle Andrew yelled out, "Get on with it, you clown!"

Finally, Mart pulled an index card from his inside pocket, studied it carefully, and said, "Oh yeah, here it is." Clearing his throat and looking as serious as he could manage, he caught his sister's eye and read, "My dearest Trixie." He stopped and scanned the crowd. "You understand this is from Dan, right? Not me."

Another ripple of laughter and Mart began again, "My dearest Trixie, never forget ... just how much ... I love you." Carefully, he tucked the card back into his pocket and as Trixie tilted her head and smiled curiously at her husband, Mart motioned the DJ to start the song for their first dance, which was not—as they had agreed—"For Your Eyes Only", but Barry Manilow's "Can't Smile Without You".

With a delighted giggle, Trixie threw her arms around Dan's neck and kissed him soundly. "I do love you so very much," she told him.

"And I love you, despite the fact that you love Barry."

"Come on, admit it," Trixie teased. "You like Barry. Just a little bit."

Dan made a face and shook his head, but as he pulled Trixie close and pressed his cheek against her hair, she heard him singing along with the music as they danced. Stifling a giggle, she pressed herself closer to him and laid her head on his chest so she could feel his heartbeat.

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*"A happy marriage is a long conversation which always seems too short."  
Andre Maurois*

Honey's romantic side was doing battle with the inquisitive desire to solve a mystery that her best friend had instilled in her so many years ago. It wasn't that she wasn't interested in hearing the story of how Rose Walker and her husband fell in love. It was just that her questions were intended to lead her to a final answer that was taking a long time arriving.

"Arnie proposed to me the day he met me," Rose was saying. "Of course, he was as drunk as a skunk at the time."

Honey giggled. "The day you met?"

"He was in New York on a weekend furlough from the Navy. I was working at what my roommate and I told our parents was a 'country club' when actually it was a seedy bar that happened to have a jukebox and about eight square feet of dance floor."

"Did you dance with Arnie?"

"All night long. I'm lucky I didn't lose my job. When he proposed, I wrote down my address on a cocktail napkin and told him if he could still remember my name the next morning, I'd consider it."

"Did he show up?" Brian asked. "And more importantly, did he know your name?"

Rose flushed, her smile making her look like a young girl falling in love all over again. "He came to my apartment the next afternoon. He had showered and shaved and put on some clean clothes. He tipped his hat and called me 'Miss'." Turning to her husband with an affectionate glance, she continued, "I thought he had forgotten my name."

Arnold Walker snorted derisively. "As if I could forget. She was engraved on my heart."

"What happened next?" Honey asked, a dreamy smile on her face.

"He got down on one knee and said, 'Rose, will you marry me?' When I asked him if he remembered my *last* name, he said, 'What does it matter? It'll be Walker soon.'"

Honey's eyes widened. "You got married the day after you met?"

Adamantly, Rose replied, "Of course not!"

"It was the day after that," Arnie put in helpfully, causing his wife to blush again.

"Arnie begged me to marry him before he left port, but I was too stubborn to say yes to his hurried proposal. By the time I changed my mind and raced to the pier the next day, his ship was already halfway out to sea."

Honey gasped, her hand to her mouth, as if she didn't know this story must have a happy ending.

“Lucky for her, I figured she’d come to her senses,” Arnie interjected, countering his gruff voice with the soft touch of his hand on the back of his wife’s hand. “I was able to finagle a spot on a dinghy heading out to meet the ship. Rosie arrived just in time to ride out with me.”

Smiling brightly, Rose continued the story. “We were married on that awful tugboat by this half-drunken captain who smelled like stagnant bilge water and belched after every other sentence he uttered. I didn’t even get a wedding night or a honeymoon until three months later.” Giving her husband a peck on the cheek, she concluded, “But I got Arnie for forty-two years and counting.”

“And here’s to forty-two more,” Arnold concurred as he returned his wife’s gentle kiss.

Honey’s soft side was starting to win the battle. It shoved aside her clever segue about “spontaneous weddings” and responded instead with, “What a beautiful story!” Her eyes were watery as she reached behind her, knowing Brian would have a handkerchief ready and waiting.

“Please forgive my wife,” he teased. “She’s tenderhearted, romantic, and pregnant—a deadly combination.” He gave her a kiss on the top of her head as he stood. “Would you like something to drink, sweetheart?”

She nodded as she dabbed her tears away, and Brian and Arnold left together to get refreshments for their wives. She adored love stories and was dying to ask Rose more, but her investigative nature, having remained as patient as it could for as long as it could, wouldn’t tolerate any more smush. She could feel it poking at her shamelessly, insisting she get to the point.

“So, how do you two know Dan and Trixie?”

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*“How on earth are you ever going to explain in terms of chemistry and physics  
so important a biological phenomenon as first love?”  
Albert Einstein*

“You know you’ll always be my first love,” Trixie said softly as they swayed gently to the music.

Jim grinned down at her. “Great. Now I feel guilty.”

“Why?” Trixie asked, her blue eyes wide.

“Because you weren’t *my* first love.”

“Is that so?” Trixie huffed, a smile curling up the corners of her mouth. “Who was? And so help me, if you say Dot Murray...”

Jim laughed and held her a little closer. “Not at all. It was before I even moved to Sleepyside.”

Trixie stared at him a moment, waiting, but he didn’t seem inclined to offer any more information. “Well, come on,” she urged, “tell me.”

“Her name was Marcia and she had long, silky blond hair, almost to her waist. It would swish back and forth just like spun gold when she walked.” He seemed a little starry-eyed at the memory.

“Wait a minute ... Marcia *Brady*?”

Jim made a face at her. “No, not Marcia Brady. A real person.”

“Just checking,” she replied with an impish grin.

“Just sassing me is what you’re doing. I think I’ll go over to Dan, offer him my congratulations, and a ‘Good Luck!’ on top of it.”

Trixie giggled. “So tell me all about Marcia not-Brady, the great love of your life.”

Jim suppressed a sigh. *You’ll always be the great love of my life, Trixie.* “She lived down the block from me.”

Trixie rolled her eyes. “That’s insightful.”

“Well, what do you want to know?”

“Did you ever go out on a date with her?”

“Not exactly,” Jim hedged.

“Not exactly? What does that mean?”

“Well, she came to our house every third or fourth weekend, but we didn’t technically go out on a date.”

Trixie snorted. “There’s a surprise.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How long were you head over heels for me before you finally got up the courage to ask me on a date? One minute I’m getting orchids and bracelets and then I sit around for two years waiting for you to ask me out on a *real* date.”

“Trixie, you were only fourteen *and* you have two older brothers.”

She made a face at him. “Brian and Mart aren’t like that, and you know it. Besides, it’s not like you were some leech from the next town over or something. We were all friends. My brother was dating your sister, for crying out loud! He’s older than you and Honey is younger than me!”

Jim shrugged. He couldn’t explain the multitude of ways he felt intimidated and shy around Trixie the woman as opposed to Trixie his tomboy friend, Trixie the girl next door, Trixie his childhood crush.

“So, why didn’t you ask Marcia out?”

“Well,” he replied slowly, trying to keep his mischievous grin at bay. “It would’ve been kind of awkward.”

“Why?”

“She was fifteen and I was six, and she was my babysitter.”

She burst out into the musical laughter that always made his heart swell in his chest.

“And I was madly in love with her,” he asserted. “She’d fling that hair over her shoulder and her green eyes would twinkle like the stars and I was flat out enamored.”

“Whatever became of her?”

“I have no idea. Why? Are you suggesting I look her up?”

“Why not?” Trixie teased.

“Maybe I will someday. Maybe I will.”

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*“You should be kissed and often, and by someone who knows how.”  
Rhett Butler, Gone With the Wind*

“Are your lips numb?”

“I feel like I’ve been playing the trumpet for ten hours straight.”

Dan chuckled, brushing his thumb across his wife’s swollen lips. “Well, you definitely have that ‘thoroughly kissed’ look about you, that’s for sure.”

“I think having actual glassware for the reception wasn’t a great call.” It sounded like a caustic complaint, but since she wasn’t able to rein in her smile, it wasn’t having much effect. “When we decided on an outdoor reception, we should’ve insisted on plastic. Then they couldn’t—” She was interrupted by yet another delicate tinkling of silverware on crystal. Laughing resignedly, she finished, “—keep doing that.”

She and Dan both turned to glare teasingly at Diana, who merrily waved her spoon and urged them to follow through on the timeworn tradition.

“I don’t know why we’re complaining, exactly,” Dan said as he leaned down to plant another kiss on his wife’s waiting mouth. She slid one arm up around his neck and pulled herself closer to him, deepening the kiss and enjoying it as if it was their very first.

It wasn’t even close.

Since the reception had begun, all the Bob-Whites Plus had kept up a steady sonata of forks, spoons, and knives against their glasses, almost as if they had worked out a schedule the evening before.

Mart and Tad took great delight in setting off what Mart called their “carillon canzonet” whenever Dan and Trixie happened to be apart. Dan’s head would snap up like Pavlov’s dog as he scanned the crowd for his bride. And neither Mart nor Tad would settle for the bride or groom merely blowing kisses. They’d simply continue clinking away until Dan and Trixie came together and gave each other a proper kiss.

Diana, Sally and Honey all took the romantic approach. They would subtly clink on their glasses whenever they saw their blissfully wed friends in a quiet moment—talking, dancing, sharing a piece of wedding cake or a glass of champagne. They’d watch approvingly as Trixie and Dan joined in a kiss, then sought out their beaux so they could enjoy a kiss of their own as well.

Brian and Jim—overworked, overstressed, and enjoying a long overdue day of relaxation—played it randomly, or so it seemed. If they hadn’t heard glasses clinking in a while, they’d fill in for whomever was slacking on the job, usually not even looking for or at the Mangans, but continuing their conversations with family and friends or casually taking another bite of whatever they happened to be eating. Their nonchalance didn’t fool Trixie or Dan one bit, especially after they spotted Jim almost frantically signaling Brian from across the dance floor. Brian hastily grabbed the nearest piece of silverware he could find and knocked it against his beer bottle. It looked suspiciously like he had almost missed his cue, and Dan and Trixie had exchanged an affectionate eyeroll before dutifully kissing yet again.

Now Trixie somewhat reluctantly broke off their extended kiss and with eyes twinkling grumbled, “That ought to satisfy them for a few minutes, at least.”

“Wow, you’re a really good kisser,” Dan replied in feigned awe, his dark eyes suitably wide. “Who taught you to kiss like that?”

“Tad Webster,” Trixie deadpanned. They both burst into laughter and Trixie quickly added, “I’m just kidding. Diana and I used to practice when we were ten or eleven.”

Dan’s eyebrows shot up in interest. “Really?”

“Not on each other, pervert,” Trixie said with a giggle. As Dan leaned forward and touched his forehead to hers, another pealing of silver on crystal rang in their ears. “I’m going to be hearing that sound in my sleep, you know.”

“Then I guess I’ll be ready to be kissed in my sleep.”

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*"To love and win is the best thing. To love and lose, the next best."  
William M. Thackeray*

“So, who’s next?” Dan asked, as he walked up to Jim with two beers in hand, one of which he handed to his friend.

“Next to...?”

“Get married, of course. Trixie and I are going to do the whole bouquet/garter thing soon. We need to know who to aim for. Renee?”

Jim hastily took a couple hard gulps of his beer before answering, "Come on, Dan, we haven't been together all that long."

"Well, Mart's determined to finish school first, so it won't be him and Sally. And Tad's apparently trying to claim your vacated title of 'Slowest Courtship on the Planet', so it won't be him and Di either."

Jim grimaced. "Maybe I'd better tell him to step it up before he loses his special girl to someone else." He instantly regretted the words and darted a glance at Dan to see if he was angry.

But Dan was too blissfully wed to be upset. He simply threw his arm around Jim's shoulders and said, "No hard feelings?"

If he was offering his forgiveness for the rude comment sent his way or asking forgiveness for stealing Trixie's heart, Jim wasn't sure, but he made a mental note to make this his last beer. He grinned at Dan and changed the subject. "How about Regan?"

"Uncle Bill?" Dan's eyebrows shot up into his disheveled hairline. "The guy's a monk, Jim."

"You've seriously never heard him talk about any girlfriends?"

"Not since Joan, and none before her either."

"Do you think he's...?"

Dan reddened. "Hell, I'm not asking him that! And for the record, I don't think so."

"Don't think what?" Hallie asked as she joined the two tall, dashing men, a glass of champagne in her hand.

"Nothing," Dan mumbled, still red in the face.

"Dan and I were simply discussing the possibility of Regan being ... gay."

Hallie arched an eyebrow at Jim. "Are you drunk?"

Jim had to think carefully before replying, "No." Realizing that he probably wasn't far off it though, he set the half-empty beer bottle on the nearest table, slapped his hands against each other and spread them apart, declaring himself done with alcohol for the remainder of the reception.

"You don't think it's a possibility?" Dan asked Hallie warily. "I mean, the only woman I've ever heard him mention was Joan Stinson."

Hallie shrugged. "Maybe his heart's irrevocably broken. But he's not gay, I assure you."

Both men looked at her in shocked suspicion.

"No!" Hallie drawled. "I don't have personal, intimate knowledge of this. It's just that ... well, for god's sake, look at him!"

Jim said pointedly, "Just because a man is good-looking doesn't mean he's straight."

"I don't mean his good looks or his..." She gazed over at the rugged man, who was dancing with Helen Belden. "...his..."

"His what, Hal?" Dan asked, winking at Jim. "His cowboy boots?"

Hallie grinned wickedly at Dan. "Let's just say he's got a great seat ... on a horse, of course."

"Mmm-hmm," Jim responded. "And you're wondering how he rides, aren't you?"

Hallie blushed as the two men laughed at her expense.

"Wouldn't she be just *crushed* if Uncle Bill turned out to be as gay as an Easter bonnet?" Dan asked in an effeminate voice.

"He's not," Hallie insisted, as the DJ called out a ladies' choice dance, "and I'll prove it." She set down her champagne flute and strode off determinedly toward Regan and her aunt.

"Hallie!" Dan squeaked as he tried to grab her arm and pull her back but missed. "If she comes right out and asks him, I'll never be able to show my face in Sleepyside again," he groaned.

They watched as Hallie politely cut in on the dancing couple. Helen graciously stepped aside and sank down into a chair, fanning her flushed face.

"You think that's from the heat?" Dan asked.

Jim snickered back, "She's been happily married for twenty-five years. You wouldn't want Trixie getting all flushed over a redheaded stud in a tux, would you?"

Before Dan could answer, Joanne Darnell, fluttering her eyelashes coquettishly, came up to him and asked, "So, can I get a dance with tall, dark and taken?"

"How about tall, redheaded and single?" Jim asked hastily, darting a glance past Dan at another approaching woman. He quickly took Jo into his arms and spun them out to the dance floor, leaving Dan at Aunt Alicia's mercy, much to his dismay.

He glared at Jim over her out-of-style bouffant and Jim grinned wickedly back. He winked at Dan to let him know everything was okay between them and gave thanks yet again for having such good friends in his life.

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*"There are no secrets better kept than the secrets that everybody guesses."  
George Bernard Shaw*

Trixie took Diana's and Honey's hands in hers. "I just want to thank you two for making my wedding day the most magical, beautiful, perfectly perfect wedding day a girl could ever ask for."

Diana darted a furtive glance at Honey before asking, "Even better than your first wedding day?"

Trixie stammered, "Wha—what are you—what're you talking about?"

Diana merely smiled knowingly at her and waited for her friend to confess.

“Mart told you!” It wasn’t a question. It was obviously her big mouth almost twin who had spilled the beans.

“Actually, Tad told me.”

“How did Tad find out?” Trixie gasped.

“Mart told him,” Diana answered matter-of-factly.

Honey laughed gaily, and Trixie noticed she didn’t seem at all surprised by the revelation that her best friend had been keeping such a monumental secret from her. “Mart told you too?” Trixie’s eyes glared fiercely as she scanned the crowd for her brother. “I’ll kill him!”

“Mart didn’t tell me,” Honey gasped out as she tried to quell her laughter.

“Then who did? Don’t tell me Dan told you!”

“No. I do still have investigative skills, you know. Yesterday at the rehearsal dinner, when I asked how you and Dan knew the Walkers, *you* told me Rose worked at the law firm in Albany with you when you were in college, but *Dan* told me that the Walkers lived in your building in the city.” She giggled in delight as Trixie turned red with embarrassment. “So when the reception started, I asked the Walkers how they knew you, and they told me this charming story of a little chapel in Atlantic City with a preacher nobody could understand.”

Trixie slumped in her chair, trying to decide if she should fume, laugh, or cry. Scowling fondly at her best friend she muttered, “Well, if you know, then I guess that means Brian knows too.”

“He’s my husband, Trixie,” Honey said airily, even as her cheeks turned slightly pink. “We don’t keep secrets from each other.”

“And you can’t keep a secret anyway. So, who else did you tell?”

Honey flushed more deeply under Trixie’s unrelenting gaze. Finally, she threw up her hands and squealed, “I can’t be expected to keep a secret from my only brother, can I?”

“Great!” Trixie wailed. “So Jim knows, too?”

“To be fair ... he already knew,” Honey replied.

“How? Never mind, I’m betting it was Mart. Do you think he told our parents, too?”

“No, I’m sure he didn’t tell Moms and Dad,” Honey insisted. But when Trixie breathed a sigh of relief, she added, “I think Bobby told them.”

“*Bobby* knows?”

“Bobby knows what?” her younger brother asked, coming up behind them with a plate containing an extremely large slice of the wedding cake.

Trixie turned on him, irritated that her “little” brother now towered over her, when she really wanted to turn him over her knee and spank him. “You told Moms and Dad that Dan and I were already married? And how did you find out, anyway?”

With a shrug Bobby said, “Hey, I learned to eavesdrop—that is, *investigate*—from the best.” He shoveled a heaping forkful of cake into his mouth and continued in a garbled voice, “What’s the big deal, sis? It’s not like I told them you married Diana, for Pete’s sake.”

Diana nearly spit out her mouthful of champagne and burst into laughter as Trixie muttered, “Maybe you *should’ve* told them Di and I got married. Then the truth about me and Dan would actually be *welcome* news.”

“You and Diana are getting married?” Hallie asked as she came in on the middle of the conversation. “Now I’ve heard everything. First Regan, and now you and Di?”

“First of all, *not* me and Di,” Trixie insisted as Diana choked on her champagne again. “I’m quite happy with the dark-haired babe I already have. Second of all, *who* said Regan was gay?”

“Your dark-haired babe and *her* brother,” she answered, nodding in Honey’s direction.

“Uh-huh,” Honey said, shaking her head adamantly. “I can’t believe he’s gay.”

“Who’s gay?” Nick asked as he joined the group, handing Diana and Honey each a dish of wedding cake. “Besides me, I mean?”

“Ooh, Nick will know!” Diana said excitedly.

“Know what?” He looked at each woman in turn and then Bobby, who rolled his eyes and went off in search of more cake.

“Can you tell if a man is ... you know?” Hallie asked.

“You mean, do I have gaydar?” Nick asked casually. “Yeah, pretty much. Why? Who do you think is gay?”

Hallie nodded in Regan’s direction. Nick snorted disdainfully. “Bill Regan? Please.” When he heard the girls all breathe an unconscious sigh of relief, he chuckled. “Two of you are happily married. You,” he said, jabbing a finger in Trixie’s direction, “to the aforementioned hunk’s nephew, for crying out loud!”

Trixie wrinkled her nose at him. “Doesn’t mean I can’t look.”

“Well, if all you’re doing is looking...” Nick struck a dashing gigolo pose and made come hither eyes at the girls and they all burst into laughter.

“Nicholas, you’re mine,” Diana said possessively. “I already warned them to keep their paws off you.”

Trixie stood up and smoothed out her dress. “Well, I need to get my paws on my husband, so we can go tell Moms and Dad all about the secret wedding before anybody *else* finds out.” She stopped short and snuck a glance at Nick.

He waved her off. "I already knew."

Trixie rolled her eyes heavenward as if asking for clemency before she asked Nick, "Mart?"

"No, Di told me."

"Diana!"

"Well, I didn't think it was a secret *after* the wedding."

In exasperation, Trixie glared at Hallie and asked, "And did Miss Lynch tell you, too? You don't look very shocked either."

"Cousin dear, nothing you do shocks me. Anyway, Regan told me as we were walking down the aisle before the wedding. I commented that Dan didn't look nervous at all, and he was generous enough to tell me why."

"I can't believe everybody knew ... except Moms and Dad, apparently." She scanned the area, spotting Dan near the edge of the dance floor talking to Mart and Sally. "Well, time to bite the bullet. The rest of you can fight over Nick," she called over her shoulder as she hurried to join her husband.

"Hallie, why don't you dance with Nick?" Honey suggested.

"Please do, Hal," Diana encouraged. "He dances like a dream."

"Yes, yes, it's true," Nick agreed with a pronounced lisp. "All gay men dance divinely. We also have a great fashion sense and host the most *mah*-velous Academy Awards parties *evah!*"

Hallie let out a throaty burst of laughter as she took Nick's hand and they moved to the dance floor.

As they waltzed away, Honey sighed dreamily and said, "He's a doll, Diana."

"I know," Diana said, with an equally swooning sigh. "He's my best non-Bob-White friend."

"That wasn't even nice," Hallie called back, with an indignant toss of her silky hair over her shoulder.

"Sorry, I meant my best non-Bob-White *man* friend," Diana corrected.

"Well, *that* wasn't even nice," Nick retorted and with a toss of his head, swept Hallie across the dance floor as Diana and Honey burst into laughter.

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*"When children find true love, parents find true joy."*  
Anonymous

"Hello, husband," Trixie greeted as she ducked her head underneath Dan's arm and cuddled close to his side.

“Hello, wife,” Dan replied, wondering if the grin would ever leave his face. He tipped his head down to give her a kiss.

Sally slipped her arms around Mart’s waist and leaned toward him for a kiss of her own. “Married couples are so romantic,” she swooned.

“Yeah,” Mart scoffed, “sometimes months and months and *months* after the fact.” His blue eyes narrowed and his mouth curled into a tight smile until he looked like a cat about to pounce on a mouse, but Trixie didn’t take the bait.

“Give it up, Mart. Sally already knows. Apparently, *somebody* talks in his sleep.”

Dan and Sally both laughed heartily as Mart’s eyes flew open nearly as wide as his mouth.

“I should’ve known I had nothing to worry about,” Dan said. “The only time Mart’s mouth is shut is when he’s eating.”

“And sometimes not even then,” Trixie jabbed. “Though I suppose I should thank you for helping me win my bet with my secret husband.”

“Humph,” Mart snorted. “The only reason I confronted him instead of you is because you were in Virginia at the time.” He paused and added with a grin, “It was deliciously fun, though.”

“Well,” Trixie said to Dan with a hefty sigh, “I’m afraid we’ve got something *not* deliciously fun to take care of. Bobby somehow found out, and he’s the one who told Moms and Dad. I think we need to go over and explain and apologize.”

Dan shot a glance at Peter Belden, who was dancing with his wife, a contented smile on his face. “Do you suppose they’re mad?”

“I don’t think so. If they were, I think they would’ve hunted us down by now.”

“Thanks,” Dan mumbled, patting Trixie’s bottom as they headed out. “Instills me with a lot of confidence. He probably won’t let me call him Dad anymore.”

Trixie giggled and threaded her fingers through his to give him encouragement as they circled the dance floor, arriving at the other side to greet Peter and Helen Belden just as the music ended. “Moms, Dad, Dan and I have something to tell you.”

“Let me guess!” Peter exclaimed. “You’re getting married!”

Trixie choked down a laugh and shot a bemused glance at her mother to confirm that her father wasn’t tipsy—he rarely drank, and one or two glasses of wine or bottles of beer were his normal limit—but that her levelheaded, serious, banker father was merely being silly. “Um ... no. But it does have something to do with our getting married.”

Peter waved airily, both to indicate she should continue and that they should all follow him to a table. He stopped at the bar on the way to get glasses of champagne for each of them. They found an unoccupied table near the back of the reception area and sat down, and Peter took a sip of his drink before asking, “What’s this all about, Trixie?”

"We know that Bobby told you two about Dan and I getting married *last year*. We just wanted to say that we're sorry we didn't tell you."

"Then or now?" Peter asked with a wink.

"Well ... um ... both, I guess. But mostly I'm sorry that apparently the whole town of Sleepyside heard about it before you did."

"Except for Edwin," Dan put in. "When I realized the secret was out, I tried to pull him aside and tell him, but he's been too busy dancing with every available woman at the reception."

Helen chuckled as she scanned the dance floor. "Apparently, he's run out of available women to dance with. He's out there with Maddie now."

Trixie turned to stare in astonishment. "For a self-proclaimed hermit, he sure does make the most of his rare trips to the outside world."

"So," Peter interrupted, trying to get the conversation back on track, "were you attempting at any time to find and tell *us* as well? Or are we only finding out because everybody else already knew?"

"We *were* going to tell you. It's not like we were going to keep it a secret forever," Trixie insisted. She paused and softening her voice asked, "Are you mad? We've been married for a whole year without telling you, and you put out all this money for this fabulous reception—"

"Which we'll help pay for," Dan interjected.

Peter waved the suggestion away quickly. "Don't worry about it. After all, my little girl only gets married once—well, twice, I guess." He laughed boisterously before taking another sip of champagne.

Helen patted Trixie's hand and said, "Even if you had told us right away that you eloped, we still would've wanted to give you a nice reception to celebrate. But I am curious why you *didn't* tell us. Did you think we'd be angry?"

"No, of course not. It's just that ... well, Dan and I sort of had a bet going about which one of us would tell first."

"Who won?" Peter asked.

With a grin, Trixie answered, "I did."

Her father's dark eyes widened in mock surprise. "Really?"

"Dad! I can keep a secret."

"Not well, you can't. Your face gives you away. You get it from your mother."

Helen arched a dubious eyebrow his way before asking Dan, "Who did you tell?"

"Technically, nobody. But Mart found some incriminating evidence."

Peter asked, "So, what did you win, princess?"

Trixie's cheeks burned crimson as she gasped, "Dad! It's ... well, it's ... private."

Peter waggled his eyebrows and replied, "Lucky Dan." He grunted heavily as Helen elbowed him in the gut.

"How long has Mart known?" she asked her son-in-law.

"Since February. But, to get technical again, he wasn't the first to find out, even though it's *still* my fault, I guess."

"Get used to that, son," Peter said sagely. "If you can remember that phrase, all will go well for you in your marriage." He shifted over a seat so that his wife couldn't elbow him again.

"Go on, Dan," Helen urged, her blue eyes bright with interest.

"Well, Uncle Bill figured it out at Thanksgiving. He didn't say anything until today though."

Turning to her daughter, Helen asked, "Are you going to hold him to the bet on a technicality? Mart and Bill found out on their own, not because of anything Dan said."

"Of course I'm holding him to it!" Trixie exclaimed with a grin. "He would've done the same."

Dan gasped in exaggerated disbelief. "I would *not*. I would've graciously conceded a draw."

Helen nodded thoughtfully, but didn't say anything for a minute. Trixie glanced at her father, but he merely raised one shoulder a bit and took another sip of his bubbly. Finally, her mother said quietly, "Somebody knew before Bill Regan did."

Eyes wide, Trixie asked, "Who?"

Helen smiled knowingly.

"What? When? How did you find out?"

"Sweetie, mothers know these things."

Peter scoffed lightly, but said nothing.

"Moms," Trixie pleaded.

"When you and Dan came down for our anniversary in September, you had a certain ... glow about you."

"But we'd just gotten engaged!"

"No, it wasn't that."

"I had just gotten accepted to the U.S. Treasury Department's program."

"No, this was a different kind of glow."

"You didn't think she was pregnant, did you?" Dan asked, with a nervous glance at Peter.

"No, that's *definitely* a different kind of glow."

"Then how?" Trixie asked impatiently. "I just don't understand how you knew."

Helen shrugged, took a sip of her champagne and answered, "When you're a mother, you'll understand. Mothers know their children. There's a special connection, and no matter what you try to keep from them, they always find out."

"Also, she found your wedding ring on the bathroom sink that Sunday morning," Peter offered.

Dan choked on his champagne and erupted in laughter. Trixie put her face in her hands and groaned. And Helen made a face at her husband, even as he leaned over the empty chair between them and kissed her soundly.

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*"I think the best pictures are often on the edges of any situation.  
I don't find photographing the situation nearly as interesting as photographing the edges."  
William Albert Allard*

"The mothers would like a group photo," Brian said. "All the Bob-Whites and their significant others."

Renee shot an uneasy glance toward Jim, who carefully avoided looking her in the eye as he asked, "What about just all the Bob-Whites?"

"We can do both," Honey said, clapping her hands with joy. "When's the last time we had such a nice picture of all seven of us?"

Madeleine Wheeler had the photographer by the arm and was steering her toward them, explaining precisely what she was looking for in her efficient, detailed manner.

The photographer arranged Dan, with Trixie on his lap, in the middle, the Belden boys and their lovely ladies on either side of them. Brian grunted good-naturedly as Honey settled heavily on his lap, and she pinched his arm and giggled. Tad and Diana sat next to Brian and Honey, after Trixie urged the photographer not to let Dan, Mart and Tad all sit next to each other, and Jim hesitantly took Renee into his lap on the other end. They looked into each other's eyes solemnly, until Jim smiled pensively and rubbed a soothing hand along her back.

"If I could please get the bride to sit still," the photographer chided with a grin, and everybody laughed.

"It's not my fault!" Trixie insisted. "Dan's tickling me."

"Moi?" Dan exclaimed in feigned innocence, even as he dangled his fingers over Trixie's wriggling knees while she shrieked. "I'm not even touching her!"

She finally got him to lace his fingers with hers at her waist and they all smiled happily for several shots.

“Now, just the ... I’m sorry, what did you call your club?” the photographer asked.

“The Bob-Whites of the Glen!” the seven chorused.

The men relinquished their seats leaving the three girls to sit in front, with Trixie in the middle, and the four men, all looking devastatingly handsome in their tuxes, with their ties all undone, standing behind them.

“They are sickeningly gorgeous, aren’t they?” Sally asked in a dreamy voice. “I love a man in a tux.”

Renee swallowed hard and nodded, her somber brown eyes fixed on Jim. Sally took a step closer to her friend and under her breath asked, “Is everything okay?”

Renee shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

Sally threaded her arm through her friend’s and gave her an encouraging squeeze. Softly, she said, “I think we need to get out of here. Let’s go into the city and take my brother up on those theatre tickets, let the Bob-Whites have some time together. They won’t mind.”

When Renee didn’t object, Sally added, “Simon can’t come, so I thought I’d give that last ticket to Joanne ... if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course it’s okay with me,” Renee responded quickly. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Sally glanced over to where Jo and Jim were conversing. She had pulled his bow tie from around his neck and was trying to tie it neatly around her own neck. Jim was laughing at her awkward attempts and trying to offer his help. Sally shrugged and said, “You tell me.”

With a sigh, Renee said, “What happened—the problems between Jim and I have nothing to do with Jo. Truly.”

And she meant it. Of course she was jealous of Joanne—of the way she could make Jim smile, the way she could get him to open up to her when he couldn’t open up to Renee, or anybody else.

But part of her was also thankful Jim had somebody he *could* talk to.

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*"In the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures."  
Kahlil Gibran*

“Can you guys stay awhile, or do you have more urgent business to attend to?” Mart asked with a wicked grin on his face.

“Don’t you think you’re in enough trouble, blabbermouth?” Dan retorted, ping-pong an after-dinner mint directly between his eyes.

“I just thought it might be fun to have a Bob-White meeting, for old times’ sake,” Mart replied, picking the mint up off the table where it had fallen and popping it into his mouth.

“Renee and Hallie and Jo and I were all thinking about going into the city to see a show,” Sally said to further encourage them. “My brother got some tickets for me. I thought it might be something we could do, in case you Bob-Whites decided you wanted to spend some time together.”

“So, how do we get rid of you?” Dan asked Tad dryly.

Tad smirked at him. “Steve and I are doing some brotherly bonding. We plan on getting liquored up and then going into the city to try and score some hot chicks coming out of the theatre.”

“Hey!” Mart shouted. “Back off my hot chick, dude! You already stole Diana out from under me. Keep your paws off Sally.”

Tad shrugged. “Sorry, Mart, but if you can’t hold onto a beautiful woman...”

With a growl, Mart lunged at his friend and they were instantly wrestling on the lawn, as Diana and Sally rolled their eyes at one another.

“Hey! Hey!” Dan shouted. “Those are rented tuxes, you buffoons!”

Mart and Tad scrambled to their feet, wiping the grass off each other’s tux and apologizing like little boys.

“Sorry.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Sheesh!” Tad added in a loud aside to Mart. “The guy gets married and suddenly he’s Captain Responsible. Next thing you know he’ll be driving a minivan and complaining about property taxes. What a square.”

In the next moment, Tad found himself on the lawn again, as Dan tackled him and Mart gleefully joined in the fray.

“So,” Trixie said, raising her voice to be heard over the tussle, which she deliberately ignored, “where are we having this meeting?”

“Manor House,” Brian suggested. “It’s got a/c and I think Honey ought to get to bed early. It’s been a long day.”

“Okay, but I have to go to the farm first and change out of my dress.”

“I can help you with that,” Dan offered, smiling lasciviously at his bride as he stood and brushed the grass from his pants.

“Do we have time to shower and change before we head to the city?” Jo asked Sally.

Sally nodded her assent and Dan said, “I can help you ladies with that,” which earned him a smack in the arm from Trixie.

“Well, I’m going back to Mr. Maypenny’s first,” Mart said, his fingers clawing at his neck. “I’ve got to get out of this monkey suit.”

“I can help—ew! No, no I can’t,” Dan said with a shudder.

Trixie leaned down to remove her shoes. “So, Manor House? Half an hour?” As she got to her feet, she moaned wearily and was immediately swept into her husband’s arms.

“Want a ride, my beautiful bride?”

They exchanged a languorous kiss, after which Trixie called back to the group, “Let’s make it an hour, okay?”

Everybody else groaned and Sally held up her hands and declared, “I’ll make sure they get up to Manor House in thirty minutes.”

“Shoot,” Tad drawled. “Dan hasn’t gotten any in three weeks. Won’t take him five minutes, tops.”

Diana and Sally both gave him a smack on the back of his head.

“Hey!” Tad protested to Sally.

“Sorry, Tad. It’s hard to tell you and Mart apart sometimes.” Sally stepped closer to her boyfriend and swatted him on the shoulder.

“What did I do?” Mart whined.

“Nothing yet, but I’m sure you’ll do something that deserves it. This just saves us some time.”

“But, alas,” Brian intoned dramatically, “it robs us of the pleasure of taking care of that matter for you.”

The Bob-Whites parted in laughter and sunshine. The ties that bound them had extended over the years to accommodate the different paths life had taken them on. They had branched off to include new friendships and new loves. But like the walls of Crabapple Farm, they remained stretchy, holding them together over the years through thick and thin, never to break.

*“But friendship is precious, not only in the shade, but in the sunshine of life; and thanks to a benevolent arrangement of things, the greater part of life is sunshine.”*  
Thomas Jefferson

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### Part 3

*“There is no disguise that can for long conceal love where it exists or simulate it where it does not.”*  
Francois de la Rochefoucauld

Renee had showered but was lingering in a robe, her hair still wet, when Joanne returned from her turn in one of the luxurious Wheeler bathrooms. “You seriously can’t wear that to the theatre,” she teased as she came into the room, towel drying her short no-fuss hair.

“I’m not sure I feel up to going,” Renee mumbled, not meeting Jo’s eyes.

“Why?”

Renee bit her lip, hesitating before answering, “Jim and I broke up last night.”

Jo lowered the towel from her head and stared at Renee. “What? He hasn’t said anything about it to me.”

“We didn’t want to say anything until after today, for obvious reasons.”

“But why? I thought you two were happy? You obviously care about each other.”

“That’s just it,” Renee said. Her voice was squeaking as she tried to keep from crying. “I know Jim cares about me but he doesn’t love me, and he won’t let me love him.” She got up quickly and crossed to the dresser, where she pulled a tissue out of a box and dabbed at her eyes.

Jo didn’t have a lot of girlfriends. Blubbering emotion wasn’t really her thing. She ran a brush through her damp hair and tried to come up with something sensitive, something a sympathetic girlfriend might say. Finally she said, “Renee, Jim’s my best friend, but I’m not blind to his issues. I’m really sorry you two couldn’t make it work, but I know him. If you feel guilty about it, then *he’s* going to feel guilty about it.”

“But I *do* feel guilty. Maybe it would’ve worked out. We were comfortable with each other. Maybe we could’ve *learned* to really love each other.”

“Jim’s nothing if not passionate. He doesn’t *learn* to love. He loves. Comfortable is how you feel with your best friend. Comfortable is how you feel with the person you’ve been married to for fifty years. Old tennis shoes are comfortable.”

Renee nodded her agreement, but the truth didn’t appear to lessen her heartache.

“Listen, I don’t think watching Eliza swoon about how she could’ve danced all night is the way to go tonight,” Jo said briskly. “It sounds to me like you need to get seriously shitfaced.”

“What?” Renee looked mildly shocked and Jo had the good grace to look contrite.

“Sorry.” She shrugged and admitted, “I guess I just don’t relate very well to women. A night out with the girls will probably do *me* some good, too. So let’s go get you good and ... inebriated, okay?”

“I’m not much of a drinker.”

“Good. Then you’ll get drunk fast. We’ll scalp the theatre tickets for drinking money. After you’re trashed, we’ll get Hallie good and drunk so she stops moping about her year-old divorce. Then we’ll get Sally good and drunk because ... well, she has to put up with Mart.” She flashed an elfish grin at Renee and was pleased to see her smile tentatively back.

“Then we’ll get me good and drunk because I can’t let you three have all the fun. Then we’ll crash at Sally’s brother’s place and whatever money we have left, we’ll give to him to pay for someone to come in and clean up all our vomit.”

Renee blanched, but still managed to come up with enough sarcasm to reply, “How can I say no to that after you’ve painted such a lovely picture?”

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*“To know that one has a secret is to know half the secret itself.”  
Henry Ward Beecher*

After a rousing game of Progressive Rum, which Mart was overjoyed to win, the seven Bob-Whites settled down in the family room to talk. Now spread out from Indian Lake to New York City to Chicago, working, finishing school, and starting families, they realized it would be harder to get all seven of them together as often as they had when they were teenagers, and they treasured their time together.

“So,” Dan began ominously, pulling Trixie down onto his lap, “now that everybody and their uncle knows the Mangans’ secret, what about the rest of you?”

“You mean everybody and *your* uncle, don’t you?” Brian ribbed.

“We already know your secret, Dan,” Mart snickered. “Remember?”

“Yes, of course I remember. I think *you* told everybody.”

“I didn’t tell a single Bob-White about your secret,” Mart protested. When Jim cleared his throat loudly, he added, “Not on purpose, anyway.”

Jim stretched out on the floor and put his hands behind his head. “Well, I for one am surprised that Trixie kept the secret so long. Neither she nor Honey—” The remainder of his comment was muffled underneath the pillow Trixie tossed over his face.

“I know you all know *our* secret,” Dan interrupted impatiently. “I’m talking about *your* secrets. Surely, Trixie and I aren’t the only ones with secrets. I think it’s confession time.”

“Yeah,” Trixie agreed enthusiastically. “I want every one of you to tell us something that none of the rest of us knows about you.”

It suddenly got very quiet in the Wheeler family room. Nobody met anybody else’s eye and there was some shuffling of feet amid the quiet contemplation.

“Well, Honey doesn’t have any secrets,” Brian said assuredly, pulling her swollen feet into his lap for a massage. “She tells me everything.”

“Not everything,” Honey mumbled and blushed deeply as her friends all turned to stare at her in astonishment. “Before we moved to Sleepyside, when I was in one of those horrible boarding schools, I ... I shoplifted from a trendy boutique in the city.”

“What?” Trixie yelled. “Madeleine Grace Wheeler *stole* something?”

Honey nodded. "We were on a day trip from the school and we were allowed one hour to shop on our own. My friend Jocelyn and I were in this boutique and she dared me to steal a necklace."

"You never take dares, Honey," Diana said in disbelief.

"I know and I wasn't going to. But the saleslady was coming over and I got all jittery and accidentally dropped the necklace into my purse. Then I was too scared to pull it out in front of her, because she'd think I was shoplifting."

"You *were* shoplifting, young lady," Mart scolded, wagging his index finger at her in a mocking reprimand.

"But I wasn't planning to! Jocelyn pulled me out of the store before I could change my mind and—"

"Ohmigosh," Trixie breathed, "My own partner a jewel thief! That would've gone over well in the agency."

"Oh, Trixie," Honey giggled, "It didn't have any jewels on it. It probably wasn't worth more than fifty dollars."

"I can't believe you never told me," Brian said, trying to look shocked and offended, though his dark eyes twinkled merrily.

"It's not like I was purposely keeping it from you. If you had asked me directly, 'Sweetheart, have you ever shoplifted?', I would've said yes."

Everybody laughed and Brian leaned across the couch to kiss his pregnant, shoplifting wife.

"All right, who's next?" Trixie asked.

After a moment of silence, Mart ventured, "Can it be something really big and semi-serious, or will you all be mad at me?"

"How serious?" Brian asked, his jaw suddenly a bit tighter.

"Moms and Dad know, but nothing came of it, so I didn't tell any of you." He paused to take a breath then said, "While I was in Africa, I almost got married."

Six pairs of eyes stared at Mart. Six mouths hung open in complete amazement. Nobody could think of anything to say, so Mart continued. "Her name was Abena and she lived in one of those tiny little villages I worked in while I was in Ghana."

Diana finally found her voice. "Was this before or after you and I broke up?"

"Shortly after, but it's not like I was in love with her, Di. It wasn't like that at all. She had a son—Kontar—who had a defective heart. They were trying to get Kontar to the United States to have surgery, but the costs were astronomical to send both of them and Abena didn't want to be separated from her son. There was all this red tape, just hideous amounts of it, to get them both into the States, so I offered to marry her and cut through all that crap."

Honey, her hand instinctively and protectively over her belly asked, "What happened? I mean, you didn't marry her, right? Did Kontar...?"

Mart smiled. "Doctors Without Borders got them to a hospital in Italy at reduced cost. Abena still writes to me from time to time and Kontar is doing well."

"So, did Doctors Without Borders step in before or after Abena had to turn down your sorry little proposal?" Dan teased.

Mart flushed but laughed good-naturedly. "Shortly after I asked her, lucky for her."

"Well, now I don't want to tell my secret," Diana said with a pretty pout. "Who can possibly top that?"

"Come on, Di," Trixie implored. "Dan and I actually *got* married. Our secret was way better than Mart's."

Diana laughed and said, "All right. This happened our senior year in high school. Do you remember that Friday in March when I was sick and didn't come to school?"

"Of course," Honey answered. "I only remember because you're never sick, Di. And that was the day of the big pep rally for the basketball team before they headed to the state finals and I knew you didn't want to miss it."

"Well ... I wasn't exactly sick."

"Good grief," Mart groaned. "She's gonna get back at me for almost getting married by telling me she eloped in Atlantic City with some stud."

"No, that was Trixie and me," Dan countered with a grin.

"Hush, you two," Trixie scolded. "I want to hear Diana's secret."

"Well, that day I took the train into the city ... and auditioned for a Broadway musical."

"No way!" Jim shouted in surprise. "Which musical?"

"*Rent*."

"*Rent!*" shouted six voices.

"That's a huge hit on Broadway, Diana," Brian said. "I'm impressed."

"Well, it was only *off*-Broadway when I auditioned and apparently, I wasn't even good enough for off-Broadway."

"Don't sell yourself short, Di," Mart interjected. "Aren't there only like six people in the cast or something? I'm really proud of you for trying."

Diana's cheeks turned pink and she threw her arms around Mart in a grateful embrace. "Thank you," she murmured as she kissed him chastely on the cheek.

“All right, since Diana was so open about her failure,” Brian teased, “I guess I’ll share mine.”

Trixie snorted. “What? You got an A– on a pop quiz? You never fail anything.”

“Yeah, way to make your younger siblings look bad,” Mart joked.

“For your information,” Brian huffed, “it wasn’t an A–.”

“Egads!” Jim exclaimed in mock horror. “Was it a B+?”

“No ... an F. I flunked Biochemistry the first time I took it.”

“Brian! You never told me that!” Honey gasped.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly something to write home about now, was it?”

“There’s more to this story,” Trixie guessed. “Seriously, Bri, you *never* would’ve failed under normal circumstances. Tell us the rest of it.”

“Honestly, it was the hardest class I took all through med school. It didn’t even seem to apply to medicine at all while I was taking it. Anyway, I was squeaking by with a C or a C+ at best—”

“Gleeps!” Mart interrupted, slapping his hand to his forehead. “To think of all the times Trixie would’ve loved to be ‘squeaking by’ with that kind of grade in Algebra.”

“Shut up, Mart,” Trixie laughed. “Go on, Brian.”

“Even if I passed the class, I knew I’d want to take it again.”

“There’s the Brian Belden we know and love,” Jim chuckled.

“*Anyway*, near the end of the semester, a few of my classmates were having a party at their place. They all knew they were failing the course and decided to just blow off the final.” With a sheepish shrug, he concluded, “I let them talk me into it, so I flunked the class.”

“Do Moms and Dad know?” Mart asked.

“Watch out, Doc, he loves blackmail,” Dan warned.

“Yes, Moms and Dad know,” Brian quickly answered. “I told them *after* I graduated med school.”

“And what did you get the second time you took the class?” Diana asked knowingly.

“A B+,” Brian mumbled and everybody laughed at their overachieving friend. “I believe that leaves you, Mr. Frayne,” he continued, deflecting his embarrassment by turning the focus on his best friend.

Jim waved his arm nonchalantly before letting it fall across his face. “I don’t have any secrets. You all know every bit of my dark and dirty life.”

“Come on, Jim,” Honey pleaded. “You must have *one* secret.”

“Tell us one of them,” Diana implored. “Just one tiny, inconsequential little secret.”

With a resigned sigh, Jim raised himself up on his elbows said, “Renee and I broke up last night.”

The silence was even more noticeable than it had been when Mart spilled his secret. It was certainly far more uncomfortable. Finally, a tearful Honey asked, “What happened?”

Jim shrugged. “It just wasn’t working out. It wasn’t anything bad. We’re still friends.”

All was quiet again for what seemed to them all like an interminable amount of time. Finally, Diana got up off the couch and went to kneel down at Jim’s side. She gave him a fierce hug and said, “I’m so sorry, Jim. We all are.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry, too; I didn’t mean to ruin anybody’s evening. It’s been such a nice day. Let’s not talk about it. Let’s go back to a happier subject.”

After a brief pause, Dan said, “Okay, let’s get back to the secrets.”

“But we’ve already told all our secrets,” Honey said.

“We’ve told secrets that none of the rest of us knew. But what about a secret only *one* of us knew about? Perhaps a secret about ... Martin Harold Belden.”

“Dude, what’re you doing?”

“Mart, you spent the last six months torturing me. I changed the oil in your car. I changed the fan belt in your car. I washed and waxed your car at least three times. I helped you move. I brought that monstrosity of an 8 Ball table up to your house. I helped you paint. I *ate baby food* because of you.”

“You mean you didn’t do that willingly?” Trixie asked.

“Are you kidding me? Mart has been holding our secret marriage over my head since February. It’s time for a little payback.”

“Mart has a secret that only you know about?” Brian asked skeptically. “Bigger than almost getting married?”

“Maybe not bigger, but a lot more embarrassing, and a lot more enjoyable for me to relate.”

“Oh, I can’t *wait* to hear this,” Trixie said eagerly.

“The day after Mart gets back from Africa—”

“Dude!”

Dan quickly stood up and moved out of Mart’s reach. “He wants to eat at all the places he missed so much while he was overseas. So the first thing we do is go to Wimpy’s at eight o’clock in the morning.”

“Wimpy’s isn’t open for breakfast,” Diana said.

“Yeah, Mart actually *called* Mike and asked him, as a special favor, to open early for him. Mike fixed him a double cheeseburger with all the fixings, fries *and* onion rings, and a chocolate malt. At eight in the morning.

“Then we go into the city, presumably to do some Christmas shopping, but while we’re there, Mart has to have *two* Gray’s Papaya hot dogs for lunch, fully loaded of course, with about a gallon of soda to boot. Then he stops at a street vendor’s to get one of those pretzels that are bigger than your head. Lastly, and this is all before noon, mind you, he stops to get New York Cheesecake, only he can’t decide between strawberry or blueberry, so he gets a slice of each.”

“I hate to point out the obvious, but we all know the guy is a human garbage disposal,” Jim said dryly. “What’s so secret about that?”

“Oh, I’m not done,” Dan said wickedly.

“Yes, you are,” Mart said, lunging at his best friend.

Fighting off Mart’s attempts to silence him, Dan continued, “So, stuffed to the gills, Mart and I go to FAO Schwartz. He wants to get a present for this little boy from Ghana—Kontar, whose story I now know, so that was a really nice thing to do, Mart—but he gets a little sidetracked. Inside the store, because it’s Christmas and the kids are all bouncing off the walls anyway, is a giant inflatable moonwalk ... which Mart decides he needs to try out.”

Five Bob-Whites groaned and Honey and Diana covered their mouths in empathetic nausea.

“All right, they get the point. I don’t think we need to continue,” Mart mumbled, his face bright red.

“Oh, I think I do. I don’t think they quite comprehend the magnitude of your vomit.”

“I can’t believe you threw up on the moonwalk!” Trixie gasped, holding her sides as she collapsed on the floor in laughter.

“Not just the moonwalk, my wife. Your brother puked on at least two unsuspecting children as well.”

“I only puked on *one* little boy,” Mart insisted, pausing before adding sheepishly, “He puked on the other kid.” As everybody laughed, he glared at Dan and said, “You are now my *ex*-best friend, Mangan.”

Dan flung an arm around Mart’s shoulders and in a very loud stage whisper said, “At least I didn’t tell them that you also hurled in the Salvation Army bucket as you were being kicked *out* of FAO Schwartz.”

Mart made a face and nodded slowly as his family and friends continued laughing hysterically. “That’s fine. That’s fine. You’re all going to hell, but whatever. Daniel, you will pay for this, I promise you.”

“Yeah, I know. Revenge is sweet. And you know what? It really is. I could get used to this.”

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*"Love withers with predictability; its very essence is surprise and amazement.  
To make love a prisoner of the mundane is to take its passion and lose it forever."  
Leo F. Buscaglia*

Thank goodness Trixie was still in the truck. Thank goodness it was dark. Once again, Dan was channeling his wife and he could barely keep his feet still in anticipation of the surprise he was about to unveil for her. Blowing out as much of the pent-up energy as he could, he arranged his face in an expression of serious frustration and went back to where Trixie sat behind the wheel.

"I can't tell what's wrong with it. It's too dark to really see anything."

"Do you want me to come hold the flashlight for you?"

He loved how consoling her voice sounded. *Don't worry, Dan. Nothing will spoil our wedding night. We'll figure something out. I love you.*

"Nah. I saw a house about half a mile back. I'll just walk up there and see if I can use their phone to call Uncle Bill."

"I can't believe *both* of our phones are dead!" Trixie exclaimed, a trace of her frustration bursting free.

"Well, I can believe *your* phone is dead," Dan teased, reaching out to tug affectionately on her curls.

"Brat." As she reached for the door handle, Dan grabbed her hand. "What?"

"Why don't you stay here? No sense in both of us going."

"Stay here? Are you crazy? A broken-down truck out in the middle of nowhere? This is the perfect setting for a horror movie, and the one left behind *always* gets attacked by the homicidal maniac. You don't want to lose your bride on your wedding night, do you?"

He knew she was teasing, but her eyes were wide in feigned terror and she looked perfect for a part in the next *Friday the 13th* movie ... whatever numbered sequel they were on now.

"Seriously Trix, just stay here, 'kay?"

"And what if you fall and twist your ankle or something? Or what if they won't open the door to a strange man on their porch? You need somebody sweet and innocent like me by your side."

"I'm sure I'll be fine. I'm very charming."

She pulled free of his grasp and reached for the door handle again. "I'm coming," she stated firmly.

"No, you're not," he replied with equal determination.

"Dan, what's the matter with you? What's the big deal if I come or not?"

With most women, his plan might have worked, but he had to marry the most persistent, tenacious, doggedly stubborn woman on the planet.

With an exaggerated sigh of annoyance he asked, "How about you understand that I'm trying to give you a hint, stay here, and not mess up my surprise?"

"Your what?"

He reached out and tweaked her chin and grinned at her. "Do you really think I'd take you on our honeymoon in Uncle Bill's broken-down pick-up truck, when you've got a perfectly good, practically new car we could use?"

With a chagrined smile, she leaned back against the seat and said simply, "Oh."

"Now, Mrs. Mangan, I'm going to go 'get help'," he said dramatically, using air quotes to emphasize his words. "You stay here and I'll come back *very soon* to get you, okay?"

"O-kay," she responded in a smart alecky tone. "But hurry up, because I'm still worried about axe murderers."

Dan snorted. "Yeah, if I was an axe murderer, I'd be worried about *you*."

She stuck her tongue out at him and he pushed his head inside the cab of the truck to give her a kiss. "Be right back."

He was true to his word, fairly flying down the small footpath through the woods to the little clearing where everything was already almost set, thanks to the Webster brothers. All he had to do was get the small fire started and open up the tent that had been carefully zippered shut to prevent any little woodland creatures from making themselves at home on their wedding bed before they arrived.

Jogging back toward the truck, he wasn't at all surprised to see that Trixie, no longer able to contain her curiosity, was standing at the rear of the truck. She was peering over the tailgate into the truck bed, probably looking for clues that would tell her what her husband was planning.

Turning off the flashlight, he stepped onto the grassy shoulder of the road to muffle his footsteps and proceeded to sneak up behind her. He was almost to her when she spun around with a snarl. "Forget it, axe murderer! My husband will be back any minute!"

Dropping his voice an octave, Dan said hoarsely, "Oh, and you think he'll protect you from me?"

"No, I'm saying you can have him instead, if you just let me go."

Laughing, Dan leaped forward and pinned her against the tailgate, lowering his head to capture her lips with his.

After a long, thoroughly satisfying embrace, he pulled back and whispered, "Wanna come with me?"

"Always," she replied with a naughty grin that almost had him blushing at the double entendre he had unwittingly blurted out.

He handed her the flashlight and the duffle bag she had packed for their wedding night, and pulled out the small cooler he had stashed in the back of the truck. Taking her free hand, he led her down the footpath to the campsite.

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*“That’s the only place to live ... where the stars are so close over your head  
you feel you could reach up and stir them around.”  
Peter Warne, It Happened One Night*

As they cleared the trees, he heard her gasp slightly and sigh contentedly, squeezing his hand just a little tighter as she surveyed the scene.

The flaps of the tent were pulled back to reveal an interior more in keeping with a desert prince and his harem than a couple of New York City law enforcement officers. Soft blankets and a pile of colorful throw pillows were covered in white rose petals, and a soft glow from a camping lamp illuminated the scene. Outside, the fire crackled invitingly despite the heat of the summer night, and two canvas folding chairs sat close by with an ice bucket in between them.

Trixie let out a soft laugh. “So, did you bring champagne and strawberries or beer and corn chips?”

“Smart aleck.” He knew she was only joking, but he still asked hesitantly, “Is this really okay?”

Blue eyes wide in astonishment, she gasped, “Of course it is! It’s perfectly perfect!”

“It’s not the Ritz-Carlton, or Aruba.”

“No, it’s not. It’s perfectly *us*. And if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go get into something more ... comfortable.” She stood on tiptoe to brush her lips against his cheek and disappeared into the tent, zipping the flaps shut behind her.

He had taken the bottle of champagne out of the cooler—not beer, he thought with a chuckle—and placed it in the ice bucket and was staring contentedly up at the stars when he heard the zipper sliding slowly back up behind him. The rough metallic sound was unbearably erotic and his jeans suddenly felt uncomfortably snug. He turned around, not exactly certain what he expected to see, but laughing joyfully when he saw Trixie posing seductively at the tent’s entrance, dressed in one of his oversized t-shirts that came almost to her knees.

“Love the lingerie, babe,” he murmured.

“Well, I’m guessing we’re not spending our entire honeymoon in a tent?” When Dan shook his head in acknowledgment, she added, “I’ll save the wispy, innocent bride number for tomorrow night, then.”

“Well, you look good in my shirt, anyway,” he returned, tossing her a leering grin.

“And you know what? I’m not wearing *anything else*.” She laughed as his eyebrows shot up in interest.

He took a few quick strides toward her before stopping suddenly a few feet short of her side. “Before I get distracted...” he began. He glanced down at her bare, tanned legs, imagined them clutched around his body, and continued, “...really, really distracted, I want to give you your wedding gift.”

“I thought the car was my wedding gift?” she asked with an enchantingly curious tilt to her head.

“It was at the time. But then I got you something else ... something better.”

She frowned, her eyebrows knit together in the center of her forehead. “I got you a gift too, but it’s just a little gift. You got me a car and something *better*? That’s not right. Maybe I should get you a better present.”

Strengthening his resolve not to get distracted just yet, Dan closed the gap between them and took her into his arms. As he stroked his hands down her back and cupped her bottom—she most definitely *wasn’t* wearing anything besides his shirt—he touched his forehead to hers and whispered, “Trixie, *you’re* my present ... for the rest of our lives. I could give you the moon and the stars and it still wouldn’t compare to that.”

He watched as a smile spread slowly across her face, a smile of such pure and complete joy that he felt a shiver race down his spine as he flashed back to her senior prom, that night he first allowed himself to fall in love with her. And just as he had that night, he now took notice of every tiny detail of her face—the placement of each freckle across her nose and the little crinkles at the edges of her eyes as she smiled up at him and the one slightly crooked tooth in her lower jaw that hadn’t been worth the trouble to correct and the exact spot on her cheeks where her suddenly enchanting blush first appeared. As her gorgeous blue eyes misted over with tears of happiness, he brushed his lips across hers and murmured, “Happy Anniversary, Trixie.”

With just a trace of reluctance, unwilling to be parted even slightly from her, he stepped back and turned so that he was standing next to her. Sweeping his arm across the darkness before them, he said, “This is your present, six and a half acres of prime Westchester County real estate. You’re standing on Mangan property, my beloved wife.”

She tipped her head up to stare at him incredulously. “Really?”

He shrugged and grinned. “Well, technically, it’s the bank’s land. Actually, technically, it’s still part of the vast Wheeler holdings. But it’s ours in spirit.”

He gently tugged her over until she was standing in front of him, leaning back against his chest. He rested his chin on top of her curly head and explained. “Matthew Wheeler wanted to *give* us the land as a wedding present, but ... well, my manly pride couldn’t accept that. He understood. After all, a man takes great satisfaction in working hard to build a home for his family. So, we compromised. I’d *buy* the land from him, and allow him to cut us a really sweet deal as our wedding gift. When we get back from our honeymoon, we’ll all go down to the bank and sign the papers. That is, if you approve.”

“And we’ll build our house here,” she whispered, squeezing his arms happily.

“Well, that’ll take a little longer, but yeah. I figure in two or three years, we’ll have saved enough money to get started on it and by the time we’re ready to start a family, we’ll have our own little version of Crabapple Farm.”

He loosened his grip on her as he felt her start wriggling so she could turn and face him.

“You’re wonderful, you know that?” she asked, putting her arms around his waist and pressing her body against his. “My present is so dumb compared to this. I’m just going to have to make it up to you ... somehow.”

He waggled his eyebrows leeringly. “I’m sure you will, but I still want my present. Don’t back out on me.”

“I couldn’t,” she said with a teasing grin up at him. “It’s too late and very shortly, it’ll be obvious.” Before he could open his mouth, she said hastily, “No, I’m not pregnant.”

“Good,” he said with a chuckle, “because the house is nowhere near done.”

She pulled free, took his hand and led him into the tent. Taking her lower lip between her teeth, she looked up at him hesitantly, almost shyly, before releasing his hand and leaving him to cross over to the other side of the tent, where the camping lamp cast its inviting glow on her. Keeping her back to him, she slowly lifted the shirt up and over her head and well before it cleared her tousled curls, he saw.

Sucking in his breath, his dark, intense eyes were drawn instantly to the elegant, flowing lines of black ink tattooed at the small of her back. It was a Chinese symbol. He didn’t know Chinese any more than she did and yet it was alluring, captivating, and downright sexy. And he was certain it hadn’t been there the last time he saw her naked.

Which was when? His brow furrowed for a moment, and suddenly he understood why Trixie had been so insistent on “keeping their marriage bed pure” in the two weeks before the wedding. At first, he thought her parents had said something and then he thought she was just being ridiculous. Hadn’t they been living together, married even, for a year? And sleeping together for four? Now he realized she had wanted to keep her secret until just this moment.

He was so turned on he couldn’t move for fear of bursting way too prematurely.

Unfortunately, she must have misinterpreted his silence, because he heard her let out a long, shaky sigh as she turned to face him. “You don’t like it?” she asked in a small voice, doubt written in her wide blue eyes.

“God, Trix, no. Just the opposite. It’s incredibly sexy.”

A tentative smile crept back across her face. “Really?”

He nodded, almost too overcome with emotion for words. “What does it say?” he managed to croak out.

Widening her smile, she answered his question with one of her own. “What does yours say?”

She had been fascinated by the tattoo on his bicep almost from the first moment she had laid eyes on it. It must have been that spring or summer after he had first arrived in Sleepyside, when heavy outer layers gave way to short-sleeved t-shirts. Mr. Maypenny hadn't been very happy to see it. He thought it was a "gang sign" and had told Regan about it. Uncle Bill wasn't happy either, until Dan showed it to him. It had been a part of his history with the Cowhands, but when they wanted him to get a tattoo of a snake or a knife or something similarly menacing, he had chosen the simple Irish phrase "go deo" and pawned it off on his fellow gang members as meaning "Go to Die". But though his uncle had little in the way of training or practice in speaking his ancestors' native tongue, he knew immediately upon seeing the tattoo what it meant, and Dan had told him it was in tribute to his mother, Bill's sister, Cathleen.

And now it was for his bride.

"Forever," he murmured. She knew what it meant and he knew now that hers, though in a different language, meant the same.

He crossed to her and kissed her tenderly, caressing her lower back as together they sank to their makeshift bed and celebrated forever.

*"True love stories never have endings."  
Richard Bach*

*Trixie Belden ®, the Bob-Whites, and the rest of the canon series characters are being used here with much love and respect, but they do not belong to me. They belong to Random House. These stories are in no way affiliated with Random House and I am not making any money from them.*