

Chapter 22 – The Trial by Existence

Part 1 – Trixie and Dan

April 20, 1999

Dan came home around four thirty that day. He hadn't been working but had been out and about most of the day, basically avoiding his wife.

Man, that sounds bad, he thought grimly as he parked his motorcycle and came around to the front of the duplex. He and Trixie were usually pretty open with each other, but it wasn't as if they hadn't kept secrets before. Trixie's career switch was one case in point. His career was the current case in point.

He had left early that morning, telling Trixie he had "work stuff" to do. She had accepted it without question, which was probably what had left him feeling so guilty. He had ended up spending some time in New York with Aidan, his old police academy buddy who had transferred to the NYPD the previous fall. Despite beers in an Irish pub following a testosterone-induced display of one-upmanship at the shooting range, he was still in a fairly tense mood and unsure how to shake free of it. Usually, he talked things over with Trixie, but in this case...

When he came in the front door he was pleasantly assaulted by an intoxicating aroma drifting in from the kitchen. Penny jumped up and put her front paws on his knees, whimpering frantically for attention. Trixie was on the couch, her new laptop—a graduation gift from her parents—perched on her knees.

"Hi!" she said brightly. "Get a lot done today?"

"Yes," he answered warily as he tugged affectionately on Penny's ears. "Are you ... cooking?"

"I *can* cook," she reminded him with a teasing grimace.

"I know you can cook, but you don't like to, and we usually go out to eat when we both have the same day off. So ... what cooks?"

With a mischievous smile, she answered his literal question rather than his figurative one.

"Roast beef, fresh asparagus, and Moms' holiday potatoes. I also picked up half a dozen yeast rolls from that restaurant you like so much near your precinct."

"What's the holiday?"

"Daniell!" she exclaimed with a chuckle. "It's your birthday, you lunkhead!"

"Oh, yeah." He grinned at her sheepishly. "I really did forget. Other things on my mind."

"Bad things?" she asked with a little frown on her face.

He pushed back the day's tension and instead thought about the look that would be on Trixie's face when he gave her her birthday/graduation/wedding gift. "No, good things," he said with a small smile. "What've you been up to today?"

“Wedding stuff,” she replied.

He noticed that she didn’t wince when she said it, and he was immediately suspicious again.

“I’m looking for gifts for the bridal party right now,” she continued, gesturing at the laptop’s screen. “I saved a few links for gifts for the groomsmen you can check out later. And Moms and I pretty much finalized the rehearsal dinner. Since we’re having a morning wedding, we decided we should rehearse in the morning too, when it’s cooler. Then we’ll have a big midday meal at the country club. You know how crowded they are on hot summer nights, especially on the weekends. We had no problems reserving some space for two o’clock, and it cost a little less, too.

“So then I was thinking about after. In my opinion, bachelor parties are sexist and stupid. I don’t need my groom nursing a hangover when we’re getting married the next morning. If you really *want* to have a bachelor party, you can, but plan it like a week or so before we get married. So anyway, I thought it might be nice if we—meaning the Bob-Whites, their significant others, Hallie, the wedding party, basically—went back to the farm and just relaxed. Talk, play games, watch a movie, whatever. Bobby will be more than happy to stay over with Larry and Terry and I figured you and I could use the money we save to pay for Moms and Dad to have a couple of nights to themselves at the Sleepyside Inn. You know, as a thank you for the wedding and everything. Maybe not the night before, because I’ll definitely need my mother the morning of the wedding, but maybe Saturday night and Sunday night.”

Dan raised one eyebrow as he listened to her efficiently rattle off the things she had managed to cross off Honey’s extensive wedding checklist while he was gone.

“Honey says we ought to have the wedding favors decided soon. I’ve been looking all day, but I haven’t come up with anything original. Not that unoriginal stuff would be bad, it just would be nice if we could think of something uniquely us, you know? So far, all I’ve come up with is your basic votive candles, personalized M&M’s, hand soaps, coasters, blah, blah, blah.

“Do you think it might be funny to have something related to Atlantic City? I don’t know, poker chips or saltwater taffy or something? I mean, once we’re married our bet is over and we might as well tell people. So, when they sit down at the reception and start asking what the deal is with the favors, we can tell them we got married in Atlantic City last year. On second thought, candy might not be a good idea. I don’t think having it sit outside all day in the August heat is gonna fly.”

She stopped and looked over at Dan, who was staring at her with his mouth slightly agape.
“What?”

“Who the hell are you and what have you done with my wife?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Trix, it wasn’t two weeks ago that Honey was wrenching decisions out of you like rotten molars. The wedding planning has been driving you crazy for months, and now all of a sudden you’re all gung-ho about it? And don’t even get me started on what’s going on in our kitchen right now!”

Trixie snapped her computer shut and put it on the coffee table. She looked like she was about to growl irritably at him, but as Dan continued to stare at her in amazement, he saw her compose herself and take a deep breath before turning a serene face up to him.

Quietly, she said, "It's been three weeks since graduation and I'm just feeling a little anxious, that's all. I went from being busy ten or twelve hours a day training and studying, to doing nothing but waiting to find out where I'm getting assigned, and I'm going a little stir crazy. I'm just trying to keep myself distracted."

Sitting down on the couch next to her and pulling her close, Dan murmured, "Trix, you graduated ninth in your class, not to mention the highest-ranked female in the class. I think you're pretty much going to have your pick of assignments."

He didn't see her anxiously chewing her lip before she answered cheerily, "Yeah, well, it's not like people will be fighting over Albany anyway, right? Not that it won't be great to work here, it's just that getting this office won't be as competitive as D.C. or L.A. or Chicago or—"

"Or New York," Dan put in.

"Right. And at least we won't have to deal with moving just a few months before we get married. We'll just stay here in Albany like we planned, and everything will go on more or less as normal."

"That's right," he answered resignedly. He'd just have to call Aidan tomorrow and tell him he wasn't going through with it.

April 28, 1999

Trixie and Dan sat quietly eating their dinner Wednesday evening. Dan was normally somewhat silent while he ate, but even his chatterbox wife enjoyed the comfort of a quiet, peaceful dinner with just the two of them, especially after a stressful day.

She hadn't said much tonight, not even teasing him for the copious amount of garlic he invariably put in the spaghetti sauce. That, and the deep furrow in her brow, told Dan that her day had been stressful for her. He wondered if she had had her assignment meeting with the Treasury Department yet, and if hearing from them or *not* hearing from them was what was causing her tension this evening. He knew better than to press her for details though. When Trixie was ready to share her problems, she would. Until then, he had to let her have her space to work through things on her own.

Finally, she laid her fork on her plate, put her elbows on the edge of the table and rested her chin on her clasped hands. Dan was in the middle of his final bite of salad and quickly swallowed, laying his fork down and giving her his full attention.

"They called me down to the branch office today," she began.

"Was it for your assignment meeting?"

She nodded.

“And?”

She smiled and said, “You were right. I’m pretty much going to get my first choice.”

Dan smiled back at her, though he felt the tiniest bit deflated. “So, we’re set then?”

She looked intently at him for a minute and then picked up her plate and glass and took them to the sink. “Yep. No moving stress or new job stress to add to our wedding stress. We can stay right here and you can keep working your way unfettered up the APD hierarchy until you make detective. Unless you had something else in mind?”

He looked sharply over at her, wishing she’d turn and face him, so he could read her all too readable facial expressions. “Something else?”

“How about Albany Police Chief Mangan? That has a nice ring to it.”

The mere thought of dealing with bureaucrats and paperwork and sitting behind a desk ordering other people to go do the real work made him grimace. “No thanks, I’ll stick with detective.”

He stood and brought his dishes to the sink, where Trixie was rinsing and loading the dishwasher. “You know, if we moved there’d be no guarantee our new place would have a dishwasher.”

Trixie giggled. “The horror! Now that I’ve had one, I don’t know how I’d ever live without one again!”

There was a companionable silence as they worked, but there was a prickly feeling in the air, as if there was something more to be said, an electricity hovering just below the layer of quiet.

“Dan—”

“Trix—”

“Sorry, you go,” they both said, and then laughed together.

“What were you going to say, babe?”

“What were *you* going to say?”

He breathed slowly in and out, in and out, while he thought. They supported each other. Their marriage was truly a partnership. On the other hand, he was pretty content in the Albany Police Department and if Trixie’s first choice was Albany... On the other hand, New York would be closer to her family—except for Mart—and his family, all two of them... On the other hand, just because she’d been green-lighted for Albany without hesitation, didn’t mean it would be the same for New York, a far bigger and more significant office...

“Dan?”

He looked into her bright blue eyes, looking into forever he called it, and smiled at her. The truth was, his job wasn’t as important as she was. He’d wanted to be a police officer for many years, but he really could do that *anywhere*. Being with her was the most important thing.

“Trix—”

“Dan, would you consider moving to New York?”

“What?”

Trixie groaned and walked away from the sink, wiping her still damp hands on her jeans. She continued on in a jumbled torrent that he understood only because he had known her—and Honey—for so long. “I know, I know! I’m such a pain to mess everything up like this—*again*. We get married and a month later I’m off to Georgia. I mean, we weren’t really *planning* on getting married, but we did. Then I drop out of school without telling you, apply to the Treasury Department without telling you, and run off and leave you to take my six-month training program. But what if ... just what *if* we went to New York instead of staying here? How bad would that be? I know New York’s huge and it’s nothing like living in Albany, much less Sleepyside. But we’d be closer to home and Honey and Brian are in New York and you already know someone in the NYPD. Maybe Aidan could tell you if there are any openings. I know moving would be a huge stress right now with everything else we’ve got going on but we could do it, couldn’t we?”

Dan didn’t know what else to do. He sank to the floor, put his head in his hands and laughed, helplessly and silently.

Trixie immediately dropped to her knees beside him. “I’m sorry, Dan. I know I’m the biggest pain in the butt that ever lived. We’ll be the first couple in history to get divorced before we’re married. I mean, we’re *already* married, but nobody knows it. So we’ll get divorced, call off the wedding, and I’ll just ask to be assigned to the office in ... Fargo or something. I don’t know how you ever thought you could love such a selfish person anyway. We’ll stay here, Dan, together or apart or whatever. I love you and I’m sorry I almost messed everything up again.”

Dan grabbed her, pulled her onto his lap and kissed her—a lengthy, intense, and thoroughly adoring kiss.

When they finally came up for air, Trixie gasped, “What was that all about?”

“Sometimes, it’s the only way to shut you up, Miss Nonsense of America.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“No, I’m just frustrated. Not with you, with *us*. When are we going to learn that keeping secrets from each other is pointless and just makes things more complicated?”

“I’m sorry, Dan, but it’s not really a secret. I *did* put Albany as my first choice, and they’ll assign me here, if that’s what we want. They just *offered* me New York. I don’t have to take it.”

“Do I have to kiss you again, or are you going to listen to me for a minute?”

Tentatively, Trixie smiled at him. “I wouldn’t mind another kiss.”

He gave her a quick one before saying, “Last week, on my birthday, when I was out all day? I went to New York to visit Aidan. There are spots open in his precinct and he was trying to talk me into moving to New York and joining the NYPD. Trix, it seemed perfect. We’d be close to

home, we'd be close to family, it would be a huge career move for both of us ... except I thought you wanted Albany. So I told Aidan to forget it."

Trixie stared at him, jaw dropped in astonishment. "You *want* to move to New York?"

"Not without you, sunshine."

"But / want to move to New York!"

"Yeah, I know that ... *now*. Like I said, we gotta stop keeping secrets. No good comes of it."

"Well," Trixie answered slyly. "I can think of one secret-keeping mission that's been fun."

Dan chuckled. "Okay, but it'll still come to no good for whichever one of us loses."

"You mean you."

Dan smiled at her, hoping it had a look of smug confidence. "You mean *you*."

They engaged in another time-consuming kiss to ward off the silly argument. Dan stopped momentarily to ask, "Where's the dog?"

"Outside," Trixie murmured, her lips buried in his neck.

"You know, we've never had sex on this kitchen floor."

"Well, if we're moving to New York soon, we'd better not let this chance slip away."

"That's absolutely right. See? We're already learning not to keep things from each other that might cause us to miss life-changing opportunities like this one."

May 1, 1999

Dan was sleeping peacefully when he felt a sudden heavy weight pressing on his stomach. Thinking it was Penny, he automatically reached up and gently shoved her aside. He heard the thump as she fell to the floor, followed by a muffled, "Ouch!"

His eyes flew open. He was almost certain the beagle hadn't learned to speak since last night. Rolling over and peeking over the edge of the bed, he saw Trixie sprawled on the floor. Well, part of her anyway. Her head and shoulders were under the bed.

Leaning over, he smacked her on the butt and barked, "What do you think you're doing?"

Trixie jerked her head out from under the bed, hitting it on the frame in the process and letting out another "Ouch!"

Then her bright blue eyes were looking innocently up at him from under a jumbled mess of uncombed curls. "What?"

"Is there a particular reason you're under our bed at seven o'clock on a Saturday morning?"

She shrugged and shook her head.

“You weren’t, by any chance, looking for your birthday gift, were you?”

She made a face. “So what if I was? I think I’ve shown remarkable restraint until now, and today *is* my birthday, after all.”

“Remarkable restraint? Weren’t you digging around in the closets Wednesday morning?”

“We’re moving in less than two weeks. I’m just trying to ... pre-pack.”

“Pre-pack?” Dan laughed in disbelief. “What about last night when I found you rummaging through the kitchen cabinets?”

“I was ... reorganizing.”

“Uh-huh. And Thursday afternoon you were reorganizing the dust bunnies under the couch?”

“Penny lost one of her toys.”

“Yeah ... right.”

Trixie jumped up on the bed and straddled Dan, pinning his arms to the mattress. “It’s my birthday and I want my present!”

“You’ve gotten awful spoiled lately, Mrs. Mangan. And if you don’t watch the placement of your knees, I can guarantee one present you’ll never be able to enjoy again.”

With a giggle, Trixie relented and rolled over to cuddle next to him. “Can I have my birthday present ... *please*? That is, of course, if you got me one.”

“Of course I got you a birthday present. What kind of a cad of a secret husband do you think I am?”

“Well, you didn’t get me a graduation present.”

“Sure I did. I just haven’t given it to you yet.”

With a coy, dimpled smile on her flushed face, Trixie asked, “What about the night of seven times when I came home from Virginia?”

Dan grinned. “That was *my* present.”

For a moment, they were caught up in the memory of that heated night—fondling, kissing, touching—but then Trixie’s persistence kicked in and she pulled away with an impish smile on her face. “My present, please.”

“You only love me for the presents, don’t you?”

“And the sex.”

Making a face and pushing her away, Dan got out of bed and pulled on a t-shirt and sweatpants. Tossing Trixie hers, he said, “Get dressed.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to take you *to* your gift and I’d rather the neighbors not see you in your skivvies.”

After she made herself reasonably presentable, he led her downstairs and told her to shut her eyes. She took a cursory glance around the living room before obeying. Dan made a few funny faces at her to make certain she wasn’t peeking, then quietly opened the front door. Penny launched herself outside with an excited yelp and Trixie asked in surprise, “We’re going outside?”

“Of course. Did you think I had the neighbors hiding out in the kitchen, waiting for a chance to see you half-naked?”

With frightening accuracy, she reached out and smacked him on the arm—damn, her internal radar was good—and he grabbed her hand and led her gently outside, talking her carefully down the front steps and toward the driveway, where he stopped and said, “Okay, you can open your eyes now.”

And there was that smile he’d been looking forward to seeing for almost a month. The pure delight and surprise that was ingrained in her inner child, and yet was so difficult to produce since she always seemed to know just what he was up to.

“It’s a car!”

“No, it’s *your* car.” He dangled the keys in front of her eyes and kissed her on the cheek. “Happy Birthday, Congratulations, and I hope you and your husband will be very happy.”

Astonishment and joy were clearly written all over her expressive face, and Dan’s heart soared as he ticked off the features of her new car. “It’s a Honda CRV, last year’s model, but it’s really low on mileage. It’s in great condition because it was under lease last year, so the dealer took good care of it. It’s big enough that I feel you’ll be safe on the road, but it’s not *too* big, which I knew you wouldn’t like. It’s got a CD player and air-conditioning and cruise control, and besides all that, I couldn’t afford an Aston Martin.”

Laughing, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely. “I love you.”

“I love you. *And* it’s blue. Submarine Blue Pearl, to be specific,” he teased.

“Well, it’s very pretty. I should’ve picked *that* color for the bridesmaids’ dresses.” With a wide smile on her pretty face, she said, “Let’s go get pancakes.”

She let go of him and turned to go back to the house, but Dan grabbed her by the wrist. Digging into his pocket, he pulled out her driver’s license and his wallet and waggled his eyebrows impishly. “We’re ready.”

Trixie laughed, Dan whistled to Penny, and the Mangans embarked on their first family trip in the new car, which Trixie promptly dubbed “Aston”.

May 2, 1999

“So, Dan suggests L-Ken’s,” Trixie said with a teasing scowl his way. “As if I want bacon grease and maple syrup all over my new car the first time I drive it.”

The Albany drive-in restaurant they’d gone to for breakfast the day before also had tables inside, but most customers came for the authentic 1950s carhop atmosphere. Dan had been looking forward to eating at his favorite pancake place without actually having to step out in public in his day-old sweats, uncombed hair, and unshaven face.

Their four lunch companions laughed and Mart said, “In view of the complete lack of dining grace that *both* of you possess, I’d say eating in the azure automobile will be permanently off limits.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” Sally purred, leaning over to dab a napkin on the front of Mart’s shirt, where a thin sting of mozzarella was stuck in a blob of pizza sauce.

Renee concurred. “Dad was considering switching to cloth napkins and tablecloths at the diner to be more environmentally friendly. Three little words was all it took to change his mind. Mart. Belden. Barbeque.”

Mart’s face was as red as Jim’s hair, but he laughed agreeably with his friends as they teased him. Jim, Renee, Mart, and Sally had driven down from Indian Lake to help Trixie celebrate her birthday and the six young people were having lunch at Trixie and Dan’s favorite Albany pizza parlor.

“I was just trying to get young Aston trained as quickly as possible,” Dan explained to his wife. “Between you and me, and all the rides I’m sure you’ll have to give Mart once his heap finally croaks, this car won’t be staying spotless. I’m only trying to break it in before we start filling it with Mangan children.”

“Children will wait until *after* you get married though, right?” Jim asked with a teasing grin.

Dan darted a glance at Mart, who was making some sort of fake coughing noises into his napkin to try and cover a snicker. Before he could respond though, Trixie was clasping his hand under the table, ready to share their news with their friends.

“We’ll be waiting longer than that,” she said. “We both have careers that are pretty consuming right now ... definitely on the way up.”

A very brief moment of silence was followed by Sally’s excited, “You got assigned! Here in Albany?”

“No,” Dan said slowly. He took a fleeting wicked delight in seeing the worry in his friends’ faces that they were moving to Los Angeles, or some other far-flung destination, before ending their agony. “We’re going to New York.”

He looked at their friends in a mix of bemusement and bewilderment. Renee’s quietly expressive face was congratulatory. Sally’s distinctive blue eyes twinkled in vicarious

excitement as she fairly bounced on her chair. Mart was grudgingly proud—he would probably miss his sister and his best friend living just two hours away. But Jim looked almost stricken, and Dan frowned worriedly as he stared at him. His friend’s green-eyed gaze caught his for just a second before flickering down to his plate, and his distress was lost in the enthusiastic babble of Trixie telling them about her new position, Dan’s hopefully imminent transfer, living near Brian and Honey as they brought the first second-generation Bob-White into the world, getting to spend more time in Sleepyside, and the general excitement of living in the largest city in the country.

Renee mentioned that she had never been to New York City and was looking forward to visiting, maybe the week after the wedding. Sally was thrilled because she would surely get more opportunities to visit her brother Simon, since two of Mart’s siblings and his best friend were all living in the same city now. And Mart quickly got over his sense of loss to make tongue-in-cheek remarks about a free place to stay that didn’t involve a squalling baby or the threat of having his privates surgically removed by an overprotective brother while he slept. When he asked about turndown service and breakfast in bed, Dan stretched one long leg under the table and kicked him soundly in the shin.

The conversation continued as the group finished their desserts—tiramisu for the Indian Lake couples and cannoli for Dan and Trixie. For some reason, the cannoli always made her rather amorous and Dan was determined to find out—before they left Albany for good—what edible aphrodisiac they put in it. For now, he tried to focus on the banter and not on Trixie’s hand fumbling awkwardly in his lap. He grabbed her hand and affectionately twisted the engagement ring around her finger. When they were amongst their family and friends, she normally wore her wedding band on a chain around her neck, and he took a look now to see if it was noticeable under the smoky blue-gray sweater she wore. The chain was visible around her neck, but the ring was tucked inside and thankfully, Trixie had never been one for low-cut tops.

Suddenly, a dinner mint hit him squarely between the eyes and Mart chided, “If you’ll stop staring at my sister’s chest for two seconds, Daniel, and pass me your check, please. Lunch is on me. Happy Birthday, dear *little* sister.”

“I’m not your little sister right now,” Trixie retorted. “Until next month, we’re twins!”

Dan said, “Since Mart and Sally rode over to the restaurant with us, Jim, do you and Renee want to ride back in the new car? That is, of course, if you trust Mart with your vehicle.” He ducked as the second mint came hurtling at him.

“It’s not a lack of trust,” Jim said. “It’s just that—”

“You have control issues,” chorused five voices in unison.

They all laughed as they paid their bills and made their way out to the parking lot. Even Jim joined in after he made a suitably appropriate face at his friends. “You can go in the new car if you want, Renee,” he said.

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I’ve been thinking of getting one of these mini-SUVs and I’d love to see what they’re like.”

“Of course he doesn’t mind,” Trixie answered. “I’ll even let you drive, if you want.”

“What?” Dan squawked in mock disgust. “You haven’t even let *me* drive it yet!”

“Just how did it get from the sales lot to our driveway then? Did you beam it over?”

Feigning a look of confusion, Dan answered, “It’s not a Beamer, babe, it’s a Honda.”

Trixie gave him a playful spank and Mart yelled out from the other side of her car, “Why didn’t you get her a BMW, anyway, cheapskate? Is that any way to treat your bride-*to-be*?”

Shooting him a glare, Dan grumbled good-naturedly, “I don’t need this abuse. I’m riding back with Jim.”

He turned toward Jim’s Explorer, but Trixie tucked her fingers into his jacket pocket and pulled him back toward her. “Find out what’s bothering him, okay?” Tugging him down for a kiss, she added in a sexy whisper, “You got some cannoli for later, right?”

Dan smiled and winked as he pulled free and got into Jim’s forest green SUV.

Fortunately, The Village Pizzeria was on the other side of the city from Dan and Trixie’s apartment. This meant Dan had time to grill his friend about his troubles, and he didn’t have to launch right into a prying interrogation—like Trixie might’ve done—but could gradually coax Jim into telling him.

Unfortunately, as he had discovered was happening more and more the last several months, his clandestine wife was rubbing off on him and vice versa. “So, what’s up?” he blurted, then wondered with a wry grin, *Why does she get subtle concern and I get in-your-face nosiness?*

Jim glanced over at him with a laugh that sounded oddly hollow to Dan’s ears. “Didn’t we just spend almost two hours catching up with each other over lunch?”

He grunted his acknowledgment, trying to let his Dan-ness regain control over the female shamus that seemed to be taking over his psyche.

It was no use.

“We told you we were moving to the city and you looked like we had just told you we were moving to Mars. What’s wrong?”

“There’s nothing wrong,” Jim answered immediately.

“That’s what you always say when something *is* wrong.”

“That makes no sense, Dan. What else am I supposed to say when nothing’s wrong?”

“It’s not *what* you said, it’s *how* you said it. When nothing’s wrong, you pause, look at me like I’m nuts, and *then* say nothing’s wrong. When something *is* wrong you immediately say nothing’s wrong and then you clench your jaw or your hands, or sometimes both.”

Jim looked down at his hands, clutched on the steering wheel as if he was driving a Ford Focus with bald tires on a sheet of ice in the middle of a raging blizzard. Unclenching his jaw, he said with a chuckle, “I should have less observant friends. I suppose this means Trixie noticed too?”

Grinning, Dan said, “Who do you think told me to talk to you?”

The conversation lapsed into silence as Jim negotiated the on-ramp and merged into the moderate Sunday afternoon traffic on I-787, the highway on the eastern edge of Albany that ran alongside the Hudson River.

Dan figured Jim wasn’t gathering his thoughts but was hoping Dan had dropped the subject. Unfortunately for his close-mouthed friend, Dan didn’t need to have any of Trixie’s perseverance rubbed off on him. He was plenty persistent all by himself when it came to his friends. “So, what’s going on, Jim? Are you pissed at me and Trixie for moving farther away?”

Jim gave him an eye-rolling glance. “I’m not pissed. First of all, I *chose* to locate my school where I did and secondly, why would I ever be pissed at either of you?”

Dan merely raised his eyebrows. Jim and Trixie’s breakup was four years in the past, but he had never quite gotten over the feeling that Jim still regretted it and somehow resented both Dan *and* Trixie for falling in love with each other.

Jim saw his dubious expression out of the corner of his eye and mumbled, “I’m not mad.”

“Then what is it?”

With a self-conscious shrug that said he was fully aware of his often ridiculous insecurities, he said, “New York City’s a pretty dangerous place. I guess I don’t have to tell you that.”

“Your sister and your best friend live there,” Dan pointed out.

“You don’t think I worry about them? Besides, neither of them is purposely looking to get involved with the criminal element of the city.”

Dan rolled that over in his mind for a moment before replying, “Last week, my partner and I got called in on a domestic dispute case. Turned out the husband had beaten his wife unconscious, then, thinking he’d killed her, stabbed his seven-year-old daughter in the chest five times before slicing his own throat. Mom and daughter are in the hospital. I think they’ll be okay. It was a nice neighborhood, Jim—upper middle class family with good friends and good values.” He paused, watching for Jim’s reaction before adding, “The point is, my job can be dangerous. It doesn’t necessarily matter where I’m working, or Trixie for that matter.”

Jim nodded grudgingly. Dan knew Jim was a born worrywart and there was nothing he could do to change that. Having lost both of his parents and then run away from an abusive stepfather only made the situation more complicated. He couldn’t cure Jim. He could only reassure him and find ways to ease his worries.

“Of course, the very next day we got called on a domestic dispute that turned out to be a young woman chewing her boyfriend out because he was making meatballs for dinner.”

Jim smiled tentatively, as if not quite believing his friend. He raised one rust-colored eyebrow, silently asking for elaboration.

Dan just shrugged and chuckled. “They were making a lot of noise screaming at each other and throwing things, and one of the neighbors called 9-1-1. I kid you not, it *looked* like a murder scene when we got there. Freakin’ marinara all over the damn kitchen.”

A short burst of laughter escaped Jim’s lips. Dan grinned, knowing he had opened the door to his friend’s more relaxed, easy-going side. He threw in one more comment to make sure that door would stay wedged open for a little while. “Maybe she was a vegetarian or something.”

Jim’s deep laughter floated through the car. “Maybe he turned the cat into meatballs.”

Dan shrieked in a high-pitched, girlish voice. “Steve, how could you? Fluffy, my precious!”

Both men laughed loud and long and Dan made himself a promise that he would do his best to always keep Jim informed of his and Trixie’s goings-on. If it would help him worry a little less, it would be worth it.

Part 2 – Brian and Honey

April 24, 1999

Brian trudged his way wearily into the apartment and automatically leaned over the couch to give his wife a peck on the cheek. He was ready to crawl into bed as most people were crawling out and heading to work. *No, not work*, he told himself, *it’s Saturday*. “How’re you feeling?” he mumbled, not really listening to her response as he turned to go to the bedroom.

“Like crap,” Honey replied. Brian didn’t even notice her unladylike language. “Brian, we need to talk.”

“Sweetheart, I really need to get a few hours of sleep. I’m not back at work until Monday and this weekend might be the last chance I’ll have to study for my finals. Can we talk later?”

Because he was tired and was already heading toward the bedroom, he didn’t see her wide hazel eyes filling with tears. That was probably a good thing. He might have brushed it off as hormones, which might have made her cry in earnest.

“Brian, you’re always at work and when you’re here, you’re not even here. I mean, you’re here, but you’re sleeping or studying. You’re not *here* ... for me, I mean. I can’t do this alone.”

The last was said in a whisper, almost a whimper, and Brian stopped in his tracks and sighed. Turning back to the living room, he sank down onto the couch and pulled his wife into his arms. “I’m sorry, Hon, but you knew it was going to be like this.”

Honey sniffled and wiped her face against his shirt. “I know, but I didn’t know I’d be pregnant while we were going through this. It’s just ... it’s just hard.”

“That’s why we weren’t going to start our family until after I finished my residency,” he reminded her gently. He didn’t mean it as an accusation, but that’s how she took it.

“I didn’t forget, Brian!” she snapped. “Sometimes, even the pill doesn’t work!”

"I *know* that," he said shortly, then stopped to take a steadying breath. They didn't need to be fighting about this, definitely not while she was hormonal and he was sleep deprived.

"It's been two weeks since we found out, and we haven't even discussed it," she went on.

Frowning, he asked, "Discussed what?"

She pulled away and turned to face him with a look of sheer incredulity on her pretty, though tear-streaked, face. "The baby."

"What's there to discuss?"

"I don't know," she answered with a weak shrug. "Don't couples have all sorts of things to talk about when they find out they're pregnant? Hospitals and names and whether it'll be a boy or a girl and if we should move to a bigger place and who the godparents will be and how we'll decorate the nursery. We haven't discussed anything at all and I guess I'm wondering if..."

She didn't complete her thought and for once, Brian had no idea what she was thinking. That realization alone unnerved him. He loved being able to read Honey's mind, and he loved that she could always read his. He *really* needed some sleep. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"Do you want to have this baby?" Her voice was so soft he almost didn't hear her. Almost. But he did hear her and as quietly as the question was presented, it sounded deafening in his ears.

"Honey, you can't seriously be thinking about—"

She pulled free of his embrace and stood, crossing to the window and wrapping her arms around herself for comfort. "*I'm* not," she said firmly. "I just didn't know if maybe you *were*."

He wanted to rush to her side but felt temporarily paralyzed by the mere idea of what she was suggesting. Finally forcing his legs to obey, he jumped up and in two quick strides was behind her, grabbing her gently by the shoulders and turning her to face him.

"Never even once," he said, carefully enunciating each word, his dark eyes penetrating into hers. "How could you even think that?"

It was too much for her and she put her face in her hands and began sobbing quietly. Only Brian's hands on her shoulders kept her from slipping to the floor in a tearful heap. He folded her up into his arms and brushed his lips against her honey-colored hair.

"I'm sorry," she cried. "It's just that, all your life all you've ever wanted to be is a doctor and now I've gone and messed everything up. I thought you were mad at me. I thought maybe you were mad at the baby and just wanted us both to disappear."

Closing his eyes in frustration, he held her closer. He let her cry for a few minutes and then put his fingers under her chin and tilted her face up to his. Kissing her on the forehead, he said, "Honey Wheeler Belden, this pregnancy is the most poorly timed thing I could ever imagine happening right now. This baby has most definitely messed up the responsible, well-planned schedule I had worked out for our lives."

Softening his intense expression, he whispered, "And I couldn't possibly be any happier."

Sniffing, she blinked away her tears and stared up at him in astonishment. He kissed her nose and smiled adoringly at her and she tentatively smiled back.

Pulling her close again, he added, "I'm going to have a baby with the one person I love most in this world. How could anything compare to that?"

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do. Yes, I'm shocked. I'm stunned, flabbergasted, astonished, and dumbfounded. I'm sorry I haven't been here to discuss samples and fabric swatches with you. I'm sorry I haven't been awake when you want to discuss names or when you need me to hold your hair back while you upchuck your breakfast."

That made her smile brighter as she tried to hold back a giggle.

"But I swear to you, Honey, that every morning when I wake up—or every middle of the night I wake up—wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, the thing foremost in my mind is, 'I'm going to be a father.' And it's amazing."

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her long and deep. When he finally broke away, his lips just inches from hers, he whispered, "You won't be doing this alone. I promise."

May 18, 1999

"Are you sleeping?"

Brian jerked to attention, his face flushing with embarrassment. "No, of course not. I'm—"

"Meditating?"

He turned his head to smile sardonically at the teenage girl beside him. "Meditating?"

"That's what my dad always used to say when we caught him—" She broke off abruptly and lowered her eyes to stare uncomfortably at the cracked blacktop of the ambulance bay parking lot.

Brian wished he could get India to open up to him, but she always clammed up as soon as she realized she was putting forth too much personal information about her past. With a sigh, he extended his arm toward her. "You want the rest of my sandwich?" He had already given her half of it, but he wasn't that hungry and he was too tired to even think about chewing anyway.

It physically pained him to see the hunger in her eyes and hear the forced nonchalance of her voice when she replied, "Only if you're not gonna eat it." He thrust it toward her to confirm that he no longer wanted it and purposely closed his eyes so she wouldn't feel self-conscious as she wolfed it down.

Letting his head fall back against the hard concrete behind him, he muttered, "God, these hours suck."

"You're almost done with school though, right?" India mumbled with her mouth full.

“Yeah, but then I start my residency.” He chuckled dryly as he added, “It’s not going to get any better, that’s for sure.”

“Where did you decide to go?” she asked, her quiet voice piercing him with guilt that he could leave her once again friendless. “John Hopkins or Massachusetts General?”

He managed a half-hearted grin, touched and amused that she remembered the things he had told her. “It’s *Johns* Hopkins, and if you really wanted to sound in the know, you’d call it *Mass* General.”

“Whatever,” she replied with a teasing roll of her eyes. “I ain’t no doctor. I’m not a doctor,” she quickly corrected, knowing he would if she didn’t. “So, which one?”

Brian pulled his head up off the wall and rubbed his hand on the back of his neck, as much as to support the crushing weight of his mental burdens as to soothe the kink in his neck.

Johns Hopkins and Mass General had both shown an interest in accepting him into their elite programs, but with the baby on the way, and Trixie and Dan now living in the city as well, he had decided the best plan for all of them would be if he and Honey stayed here. Maybe if she hadn’t been pregnant he *would* have chosen one of the other hospitals, but family was important to him—to them both—and he didn’t want his child growing up and only seeing his grandparents and aunts and uncles on holidays. Besides, doing his residency in New York City was hardly “settling”. Bellevue was among the top five hospitals in the country serving his chosen specialty—emergency pediatrics.

No, he *had* made the right decision. He was sure of it.

Turning his attention back to India, he said, “Neither. I’m staying here in New York. Bellevue.”

Her eyes brightened hopefully before they turned quizzical. “Why?”

He studied her for a moment. Her bright blue eyes, so much like his sister’s. Her bottled blond hair with hints of auburn roots at the top, crookedly chopped at the ends—probably by her own hand. The cheap cosmetics applied to make her look older, though she had told him more than once that it was her childlike features that made her an attractive purchase on the streets. Her clothing was just as cheap and tawdry and usually barely there, which was saying quite a lot since the frame it covered was thin and barely there, itself. He wondered again what it was about this street urchin that made him feel he could open up to her, tell her his secrets and know they were safe.

He knew she was on the list of reasons why he didn’t want to leave New York at this time.

Smiling, he said, “My wife is pregnant.”

She smiled back, her eyes glowing with pleasure. “Really? That’s way cool.”

He nodded and chuckled under his breath. “Yes, it’s definitely cool.”

“So that’s why you’re staying here? Aren’t women allowed to have babies in those other cities?”

He snorted at her smart mouth and shook his head. "I just wanted to stay near family, I guess. The next four years are going to be rough. I don't want Honey raising our child by herself in Boston or Baltimore. I want her to have family around."

"Well ... what does Honey want?"

"Of course she'd rather be close to her family."

"So, she said she didn't want to move to Boston, or wherever?"

Brian furrowed his brow and stared hard at India. What was she getting at?

Her gaze was level and penetrating, yet still maintaining the wide-eyed innocence that kept her from sounding combative when she asked, "You just decided, without giving your wife any say in the matter?"

He tried to glare at her, but the truth of her words sank quickly into his brain and he relaxed his features into something resembling sheepish guilt.

Thankfully, he was interrupted from having to explain himself to a teenage prostitute.

"Dr. Belden."

Brian grinned as the uniformed police officer made his way toward them. "I don't have my diploma quite yet, Dan."

He and India both stood up, though India's movements were jumpy and agitated, like a spooked cat with its back arched, ready to race up a tree at the first sign of the neighbor's dog. Instinctively, he grabbed her elbow before she could skitter away. "India, this is my future brother-in-law, Dan Mangan. Dan, this is India."

He had told Dan a little bit about the troubled runaway—what little he knew anyway—and Dan showed no surprise or judgment, but merely nodded and gave her a friendly smile. "India, nice to meet you," he said, and held out his hand in greeting.

She stared at it in suspicion, as if he might pull a pair of handcuffs out of the sleeve of his crisp blue uniform and haul her off to jail. Brian squeezed her arm in encouragement and she cautiously reached her hand out to shake Dan's. She didn't say anything though, but merely nodded and kept her eyes averted.

"Did you run your new partner off screaming for mercy already?" Brian asked Dan.

Dan smirked at him. "No, he's getting some coffee at that hole across the street. You don't eat there, do you?"

"Every chance I get. It's Jean-Georges compared to the slop we get in the cafeteria here."

"Dude, if you consider that dive four-star, I hope you're bringing your meals from home."

Brian laughed, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw that India was subtly inching away from the men. "India, you don't have to leave."

“Yeah, I do,” she said. “I—I just got things to do.”

“Have,” Brian corrected, his voice stern, but his eyes twinkling teasingly.

“Whatever. I’ll catch up with you another time.”

“Remember I’ll be leaving here soon. You know where to find me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, crazy hospital.” And she was gone before Brian could admonish her again.

Dan’s face was grim. “What is she? Fifteen?”

“She swears she’s older than that, but what’s the difference? She’s still too young.” Shrugging it off, or trying to at least, he asked, “So, how’s your first day going, rookie?”

Dan grinned. “Pretty dull, actually, but I can’t complain. So, you finally decided on Bellevue, huh?”

Brian grimaced at the remembrance of his recent realization. “Yeah ... / sure did.”

Dan raised an eyebrow in silent inquiry.

“It’s been brought to my attention that perhaps I was a tad autocratic in choosing my place of residency. In other words, I made a decision for my family without asking my wife’s opinion ... at all.”

Dan let out a low whistle. “Man, I’d hate to be you when Honey finds out.”

Brian raked a hand through his hair and made a face at Dan. “Thanks for the support.”

May 29, 1999

“Honey, you’re not listening to me,” Brian said. His voice was low, soothing, trying hard not to sound patronizing.

“Of course, I’m not listening to you,” Honey shot back. “You’re not even talking to me!” She was stalking back and forth between the closet, where she yanked clothes ruthlessly off their hangers, and the bed, where she flung them into the open suitcase that was laid out there.

Brian furrowed his brow. Just as he had last month, when he couldn’t read her mind, he felt the same unsettled feeling now because he couldn’t interpret her charmingly convoluted way of speaking. He wasn’t sure if it was her overwrought hormones, his lack of sleep, or a combination of both, but their normally symbiotic relationship was most definitely out of whack.

During the past week he had struggled inwardly to present the best possible case for his residency choice to Honey, while hoping to downplay the fact that he had made his decision without asking for her input. Unfortunately, while he was waffling and wrangling, Honey had inadvertently discovered—via a phone message he had neglected to delete from their home answering machine—that he had turned down Johns Hopkins. This didn’t sit well with her at all.

She claimed that he was sacrificing *his* career because of *her* unplanned pregnancy. And no matter how many times he told her about Bellevue's state-of-the-art pediatric emergency medical facility and the brilliant doctors he'd be learning under, all she could see was that she was ruining his life. He knew she was overly emotional right now, that in time she'd calm down and see the truth. Right now, though, she was *not* happy, and neither was he. When she wasn't happy, she became frenzied and disordered. When he wasn't happy, he desperately sought *more* order and balance, albeit in rather odd places sometimes.

"Honey," he began, watching as she haphazardly continued packing.

"What?" she snapped.

"It's just that—" He pointed at the suitcase.

"What?"

"Your dad and my dad ... and Mart and I ... we were planning on going golfing this weekend."

"So?" She was becoming more irate every minute. She seemed to be as upset as he was by the breakdown in their normally fluid non-verbal communication.

"Well ... my shirts ... you're—"

Honey glanced down at the once neatly ironed polos she had tossed carelessly into the suitcase. Bringing her stormy eyes back up to glare at him, she growled, "Well, maybe you can get the *little woman* to iron them for you once we get to Sleepyside." She picked them up, violently twisted them in her hands until they resembled crumpled dishrags, then shoved them forcefully down into the corners of the suitcase.

Brian sighed and put his face in his hands. Maybe the reason he and Honey never fought was because they did it so badly. Scooping his hands through his hair, he looked up just in time to see Honey shoving an armful of his sweaters into the already jam-packed suitcase.

"Honey!"

"What now?" she snapped back.

"I don't think I'm going to need six sweaters for a three-day weekend when it's almost June."

She scowled accusingly at the pile of clothes, almost as if he had been the one to pack them when she wasn't looking.

Gently taking her by the wrist, Brian said softly, "Can we just stop a minute and talk?"

"Trixie and Dan will be here soon," she grumbled.

"Trixie's late for everything. You know that," he returned with a teasing grin. "Let's talk."

But even his boyish grin wasn't able to soothe her today. "Let *us* talk? Or let *you* talk while I sit quietly and agree with everything you say, like the dutiful doctor's wife I ought to be?"

Still holding her wrist, Brian sank down onto the bed with a sigh. "You know I don't think of you that way, sweetheart. I value your opinion."

"Except where it concerns your career."

"I'm sorry, Hon. It's just that I've been planning my career for years, before we were married, before we had even met."

"Oh, I see," she said with a mocking light-heartedness. "Let's forget all this 'the two shall become one' and 'what's mine is yours' nonsense. Well, if that's way you want to do things, maybe I'll just keep all my pregnancy issues to myself then. After all, I've been dreaming about becoming a mother and having a family since long before I met you, Brian Belden."

Her anger caught in her throat as she choked out, "Never mind that the minute I met you, I realized I had finally met the man I wanted to share that dream with." With a sniff that she probably intended as indignant, but came out forlornly, she added, "I'm sorry you don't feel the same way about your dreams."

He opened his mouth to refute her, but was interrupted by a booming, "Hello? Anybody home?" from down the hall.

"You gave Dan and Trixie our key?" he asked quite innocently, though of course, she didn't take it that way.

"Of course I did! Trixie's your sister, my best friend. They're Bob-Whites! I'm sorry," she said, as her voice lowered dangerously. "Are you upset because I didn't *consult* you?"

Dan poked his head around the corner of the doorway, one hand covering his eyes. "You two decent?"

"Yes," Honey answered shortly. She pulled away from Brian and returned to her packing.

Dan dropped his hand and grinned. "Trixie sent me up. I'm not sure if she was worried about any 'ick factor' she might have encountered up here, or if she's downstairs daring any patrolling officers to try and cite her for double parking. I think she wants to see just how much clout her government ID has."

Brian forced a smile and stood, reaching out to shake Dan's hand in greeting. "We're just about ready. Go ahead and we'll be down in just a minute."

"Need any help carrying anything?"

"How about you grab my laptop and backpack? They're by the front door. Thanks, Dan."

Dan waved as he headed back up the hallway. Brian turned as Honey zipped the suitcase closed and reached his hand out to take it from her. "Can we talk about this later, please?"

Her eyes softened somewhat, but she didn't offer him one of her beautiful smiles. "Let's just try to enjoy this weekend, okay? We'll discuss it when we get home."

May 31, 1999

"I can't believe we're all here!" Trixie exclaimed, raising her voice to be heard above the approaching Sleepyside Junior-Senior High School marching band.

Dan put his arms around her and remarked, "And is it just me, or is it weird that it's *just us* again? The Bob-Whites, I mean."

"I wanted my sweet cupcake to come," Mart intoned with a wistful sigh. "But she and Renee had that spa weekend planned months ago. Otherwise, we could cuddle in the torchlight, dance to the music, sneak off behind the concession stands and—"

"TMI!" Trixie shouted.

"What? Like you and Dan weren't thinking about it?" Mart teased. "Why, you'd think you two were a dowdy old married couple alrea—ouch!"

"What's wrong, Mart?" Brian asked with his usual doctorly concern.

"Mangan's clown feet just squashed my toes," Mart whimpered dramatically.

"Oh, was that you?" Dan said dryly. "Sorry. The crowd, you know." He cuffed Mart on the back of his head and grunted as his best friend jabbed him in the ribs.

Brian rolled his eyes. "Even without Tad, you two are like the Three Stooges."

Tad had been called to the West Coast by a client at the last minute and hadn't been able to make it to Sleepyside for the holiday weekend. Nick Roberts noticed Diana's downcast expression and put his arm around her for a quick hug. "Well, I'm here and I'm not a Bob-White," he pointed out.

"No, but you were here the most memorable Memorial Day in memory," Honey said in her delightful double-talk.

"I'm just glad *you* were all here that day. Otherwise, I'm not sure what might've happened to my father's business," Nick said gratefully.

"Look!" Diana shouted excitedly, her momentary gloom forgotten. "There's Sunny!"

An octet of golden palominos pranced down the street, their coats gleaming. Their riders were decked out in fancy western show costumes in a rainbow of colors, waving and smiling to the onlookers.

"I'm glad I gave Sunny to Ruthie's little sister," Diana said. With a wistful little sigh she added, "I'm so happy that he's being loved and has something fun to do. Aren't they a great pair?" She waved to Rebecca Kettner, who caught her eye, waved back, and cued Sunny into a pirouette that made his silver mane and tail wave in the light breeze. The Bob-Whites all clapped, and Rebecca touched the tip of her bright blue cowboy hat and moved on with the parade.

"I hated to give him up," Diana said, "but it was just wasn't fair to let him be a fancy lawn ornament at my parents' house with nothing to do and no one to pay attention to him."

“Dad’s cutting back the Wheeler stable, too,” Jim said.

“He is?” Honey gasped. “I didn’t know that.”

Jim nodded and explained. “He asked me last night if I wanted to take Starlight and Strawberry up to Indian Lake. They’ll both make excellent schooling horses.”

“He’s not selling Susie, is he?” Trixie asked anxiously.

“No. Miss Trask still rides her pretty frequently, and he’s keeping Jupe and Lady for himself and Mother, of course.”

Brian noticed Honey’s eyelashes fluttering furiously, as if she was trying hard to hold back tears. Raising his voice in a cheerful tone, he asked, “Who’s up for funnel cake?”

Five Bob-Whites, and Nick, all raised their hands enthusiastically. “You need a hand?” Mart asked.

Brian stared pointedly at him. “I think not. Didn’t we learn not to let you go get the parade snacks a few years ago?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Mart protested. “It was crowded and somebody jostled me. The plates slid out of my hands!”

Everybody laughed, remembering the Memorial Day when Mart had been sent to get three large funnel cakes to share, only to return with one half-eaten one in hand.

“Honey and I will go. You stay here, Butterfingers Belden.” Brian took Honey’s hand and quickly led her away toward the concession booths.

Once they were out of earshot of their friends and clear of the throng crowded close to the street to watch the parade, Brian stopped and put his hands on Honey’s shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

She didn’t say anything, but simply sniffled and shook her head, keeping her eyes pointed toward the ground. Putting one finger under her trembling chin, Brian tilted her head up toward him and asked again, this time with his concerned, dark eyes. She was still blinking rapidly, for the moment effectively keeping the tears at bay. “Honey?”

“You’ll just tell me it’s my hormones,” she mumbled.

With a gentle smile, he replied, “Just because your hormones are intensifying your emotions, doesn’t mean you’re not feeling them. Is this about the horses? Or about us?”

Honey pressed her lips together, a secondary defense against the onslaught of tears that threatened to become public. After she had successfully regained control, she said, “When you grow up, there are certain changes you expect—going to college, moving away from your friends, getting married, having children. But I guess I always thought home was something to fall back on, a place where you could go for the comforts of your childhood.”

“Well, you know what they say. You can’t go home again.”

"I thought that meant things like the new skating rink outside of town or the fact that Wimpy's has three fast food restaurants to compete with now, not that Daddy would sell the horses!"

"Honey, he hasn't sold one horse. He's just relocated two of them to Jim's school. It doesn't make sense to keep them here when we don't get out to Sleepyside to go riding very much anymore. And besides," he said as he laid a hand affectionately on her still flat stomach, "you won't be doing any riding for awhile."

She placed her hand over his and tried to smile. "There's just something sad about knowing that we'll never go riding again. All of us together, I mean, here in Sleepyside. I have a lot of happy memories of horseback rides through the preserve."

Brian leaned in and kissed her forehead, letting his lips linger for a moment before saying, "I know I went about my residency decision all wrong, but do you see now why I did it, anyway? I want you to be close to family and friends, because they're so important to you. I didn't want to take that away from you, not when we're about to become three."

She tilted her head up and nodded. "I understand."

"Even though you think I was wrong?"

"Even though," she agreed with a smile. "Do you understand why I was so upset about it? It's just like Daddy not asking my opinion about the horses. I know it's *your* career, but it still affects me. You're the most important person in my life and I don't like to be shut out of decisions that affect *us*."

"I know. I'm sorry. I was a putz."

She giggled a little as she amended his apology. "A *big* putz."

Taking her hand and laying it up against his heart, he said solemnly, "On my honor, I will never shut you out of any important decisions that need to be made for our family ever again. Whether it's where we live, or buying a new couch ... or deciding how many funnel cakes we need to buy to feed seven normal people, and Mart."

A brilliant smile lit up her face, one of those smiles he carried in his heart as sunshine for his soul. "Three for us to share, and one just for Mart. We can even drop it in the crowd on our way back, if you want."

Brian waggled his eyebrows and, leaning close to her ear, whispered, "What was he saying earlier about going behind the concession stands?"

Honey giggled. "What about the funnel cakes?"

"I predict there was a *really* long line at the funnel cake stand. We waited *forever*. Sorry it took so long."

He continued murmuring false apologies as he led her back into the darkness behind the corn dog stand.

Part 3 – Jim and Renee

June 12, 1999

It was summertime—a schoolboy’s favorite time of year. No classes, no homework. Mornings for sleeping in and afternoons for enjoying the warm, early summer weather in the mountains. Only a small handful of boys stayed at Winthrop year-round. It wasn’t what Jim had originally hoped for, but his father had talked him into taking baby steps instead of plunging himself head first into his ultimate dream for the school.

It was Jim’s nature to dive into the deep end—to fill his days with work and his mind and heart with distractions. Never mind that he was too young, too inexperienced, and definitely unqualified to own and run his own school singlehandedly. Matthew Wheeler’s wealth and connections got around those obstacles. While the board had proprietary control of the school and Jim had to answer to them monthly on all major decisions concerning the school, he had day-to-day control and updated only the board chairman—his father—on a twice weekly basis. His father had helped significantly by surrounding him with an experienced and worthy staff and faculty, which made his job easier and the learning curve a breeze.

Still, he longed for the day when he had full control, when he could transform the Winthrop School for Boys into a year-round school/camp and not have his summers so quiet. So quiet, that the past could slip in to haunt him on a daily basis.

It certainly didn’t help that both of his birth parents had celebrated their birthdays in the summer and that they had both died in the summer, on the same day, exactly three years apart.

Thank heavens for the Bob-Whites and all their summer birthdays and summer adventures. Those endless summers in Sleepyside had usually managed to keep him focused on happiness and friendships and not on his tortured soul.

Yesterday would have been his mother’s birthday, and here he was still brooding about it. Here he was, shuttered away in his office on a beautiful Saturday morning, trying to find something to do to take his mind off the pain of wondering what his beautiful mother would have been like at age fifty.

He heard the outer office door open and braced himself for what was about to hit him.

“Holy crap, Frayne! You’re *not* sitting in the office working on a *Saturday*, when school isn’t even in session! What’s the matter with you, you freak?”

Offering his guest a grimacing smile, he said, “Hi, Jo. It’s lovely to see you. Would you like to sit down and have some tea?”

“No, I don’t want any freakin’ tea! I want you to go outside and enjoy that rustic wilderness you’re always raving about.”

“Have I mentioned how happy I am that you’re working in Albany this summer and are close enough to harass me in person?”

“You’re welcome,” she said smartly, completely ignoring his sarcasm. “Now go outside and ... smell a pinecone or something!”

Jim chuckled as he pushed his chair away from the desk and stood, stretching his arms over his head and flexing his stiff muscles. "I must admit, that's not a half bad idea. Will you be joining me?"

One plucked eyebrow jerked up sardonically. "Are you kidding me? The great outdoors and I are not pals."

"That's an ironic sentiment, considering where we met."

"Yeah, well, I never told you this, but I was running away that day because I was looking for the mall."

Jim came around to the front of his desk and leaned back against it, crossing his arms over his chest and feigning a stern expression. "Joanne Darnell, you've told me more than once how beautiful it is up here."

"It is. I'd just prefer to appreciate that beauty from your climate-controlled, bug-free apartment, rather than out on the trails with a smelly, sweaty beast of burden."

"So now you don't like horses, either?"

"I meant you," she retorted tartly, making a break for the door as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

Unfortunately for Jo, Jim's legs were much longer than hers and he had grabbed the back of her shirt before she got two steps into the main office. Entrapping her in a hard squeeze, he snarled playfully into her ear, "You're evil, you know that? I ought to lock you up in the barn for a few hours as punishment."

Jo turned her head, gave him a quick peck on the cheek and replied, "How about lunch, instead?"

Jim released her and with a resigned sigh, nodded his head. "Why not?"

"Wally's?"

"No, let's go somewhere else." He thought the pause before he answered was imperceptible, but Jo noticed immediately.

"You want to tell me why you're avoiding Renee?"

He gestured toward the door and gave Jo a gentle prod in that direction before answering. "Who said I was avoiding her? Maybe she's at work today."

"No, she's not. I saw her sitting on her front porch chatting with Caroline when I drove through town." As Jim winced, she added with a smirk, "Don't you just love small towns? You can't miss a thing."

Jim locked the office and the two of them proceeded down the dim hallway to the main entrance, their footsteps echoing behind them. Knowing his friend was just as tenacious as Trixie—if not more so—he decided to forego further evasion and freely admitted, "I'm not

exactly avoiding her. At least, I'm not purposely avoiding her in particular. I just wanted to be alone today."

"Hmm ... too bad for you that I showed up then."

"That's for sure," Jim agreed heartily, dodging to his right as she swung a half-hearted punch at him.

She stopped just inside the front doors, where the sunlight poured through the stained glass window that arched above the doors and cast a blue glow on her dark hair. "Why do you want to be alone?"

Jim stopped, staring down at his feet for a moment before turning to face her. "Yesterday would've been my mom's fiftieth birthday."

"Oh." Her expression softened and she reached out and took his hand, giving it a light squeeze.

For all her smart-mouth, overly assertive ways, she always knew when he was really hurting, when all he needed was her quiet friendship. So they simply stood there for a few minutes, not speaking, not moving, until Jim's stomach growled and they both started chuckling awkwardly.

Affecting a thick Brooklyn accent, Jo said, "I bet the Chinese food here is terrible."

Jim grinned broadly and replied, "It's actually pretty good, Ms. Tomei. How about we go pick up some take-out and bring it back here and watch *My Cousin Vinny*? We can eat in the climate-controlled comfort of my bug-free apartment. I even took a shower this morning, so I'm not sweaty or stinky, and if *you* carry the food, *you* can be the beast of burden."

"If I'm hauling, you're buying, right?"

"Hell, no!" he exclaimed, as he put his arm around her shoulders and walked with her out into the summer sunlight.

June 13, 1999

Jim came into Wally's early the next morning for some coffee after taking his morning run. He smiled wryly as he realized he was whistling. Joey had—as she invariably did—found a way to help him shake his blues. Her hair-raising tales of life at college—which always made him wonder what he had been missing with his nose stuck in books during his university days—and the bright intensity of her snapping cinnamon-brown eyes as she prattled on about her summer job, served not only to distract him but to lighten his heart.

"Good morning, Wally," he greeted, as he slid onto a stool in front of the counter. "Coffee, black, please."

Wally nodded shortly and turned to the coffee maker without further greeting.

Jim frowned. "Everything okay?"

“You tell me,” the usually friendly man mumbled, his back still toward Jim as he poured coffee into a styrofoam cup and carefully affixed a plastic lid on top. Clearly, Wally wasn’t assuming he’d stay for breakfast.

“Is Renee working this morning?” Jim scanned the small diner, still quiet before the after-church rush. When he brought his gaze back to Renee’s father, he was startled to see a decidedly *un*-friendly look in the short, stocky man’s normally warm eyes.

Maybe Wally didn’t *want* him to stay.

“Renee’s at the house. She’s working at the hospital this afternoon,” he said flatly as he handed Jim his coffee.

“What’s going on, Wally?”

Wally stared long and hard at him before answering. “When’s the last time you spoke to my daughter?”

Jim felt a little lurch in his throat and he had to clear it before he answered. “I had a friend visiting from out of town yesterday. I was ... tied up in the office on Friday, but Renee came over and visited with me before she went to work on Thursday afternoon.”

Wally’s hard expression softened as he saw that it was obvious that Jim really didn’t know what had him—or Renee—so upset. Softly, he said, “Yesterday was Renee’s birthday.”

Jim closed his eyes and emitted a low groan. He let the weight of the coffee cup drag his arm downward until the cup hit the counter with a soft thump. “I forgot,” he said ashamedly. “Is she mad?”

“She’s hurt.”

“Is it okay if I go over there right now?”

Wally nodded, his expression a mix of understanding—the bond between men who can’t remember dates so important to women to save their lives—and warning—the protective father who wouldn’t hesitate to take on the younger, taller, stronger man who would dare hurt his only child.

Coffee forgotten on the counter, Jim hurriedly exited the diner and started walking the short distance to the modest, but comfortable home Renee shared with her father. He had only gotten a few steps when he stopped and decided that if he came bearing gifts, it might go a long way toward Renee accepting his apology.

After a quick trip to the drug store—regrettably, the little town’s only establishment open that early on a Sunday morning—Jim made his way back to the Wallace house. The back door was open, so he knocked and called out her name as he peered through the screen door into the tidy kitchen. When she didn’t answer, he went inside and made his way to the front of the house, still periodically calling her name so as not to startle her.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs without finding her anywhere on the first floor, he took three steps up to the small landing and called her name again.

“Yes?” came the voice from upstairs.

“It’s Jim. Can I come up?”

He winced at the pause before she answered in the affirmative. It wasn’t like him to forget important dates, and she knew it. He’d really have to come clean on this one and open his wounded heart just a little more to her.

Steeling himself for the much too infrequent baring of his soul, he climbed the stairs and walked down the hallway to her bedroom. Renee was sitting on the bed, her book forgotten by her side. She didn’t exhibit any defensive or angry gestures such as crossed arms or thrust chin, but her normally somber eyes looked a bit more soulful than usual. Jim hesitated at the threshold, waiting for her invitation to join her.

After an uncomfortable silence, he pulled a single, long-stemmed rose from behind his back and stretched it out toward her. “Forgive me?”

“For what?” she asked, as if testing him.

“I’m sorry I forgot your birthday yesterday. I feel like a complete heel.” Cautiously, he made his way to her side and offered her the rose. She hesitated only briefly before taking it and Jim was encouraged to see the corner of her mouth twitch slightly, in what he hoped was a smile of forgiveness. Sitting next to her and gently caressing her knee, he added, “I don’t know how good my excuse is, but I’ll tell you if you want to hear it.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Yeah, I do. I owe you a birthday present.” He pulled his other hand from behind his back and handed her two rolls of candy.

She took the gift, offering him a small smile. “Necco wafers. My favorite.”

“And since I forgot your birthday, you don’t even have to share them with me.”

“You don’t like Neccos,” she reminded him. “You call them flavored chalk.”

Jim grinned. “Yeah, so *even though* I forgot your birthday, please *don’t* share them with me.”

They fell into another awkward silence for a few minutes. Jim tried to find his voice, sensing that Renee was waiting for him to speak. She had said he didn’t owe her an excuse, and he knew she genuinely meant it. But he felt he *did* owe her, not because he forgot her birthday but because she was his girlfriend, and you were supposed to be able to share things with someone you were in a relationship with.

It shouldn’t be this hard, he thought despondently.

“Joey came up to visit me yesterday. That’s not why I forgot your birthday,” he added hastily. “If she knew it was your birthday, she probably would’ve kicked my butt for forgetting. In fact, if you called her right now and told her, she’d probably be more than happy to drive back up here and kick my butt.”

She smiled at him and he tried to take encouragement from it, gripping the bedspread tightly, out of her line of sight, twisting it into a knot similar to what his insides felt like. Clearing his throat, he said, "Friday was—would have been—my mother's fiftieth birthday."

Instantly, her dark, somber eyes grew darker with sadness and understanding. She reached out and took his hand, the one closest to her, the one not caught in a death grip on the comforter. She didn't speak, but merely waited for him to continue.

He shrugged, not wanting to go back to that place after he'd so recently come back into the light. "I guess I was just in a pretty deep funk. So deep, I forgot all about your birthday."

"Do you want to talk about it? Talk about her?"

He shook his head, quickly and vehemently. "No, not really. I don't want to ruin your day."

"Jim, you wouldn't ruin my day. Don't forget, I lost my mother too. Her fiftieth birthday's coming up soon, also." She inched closer and put her arm around his waist. "I know birthdays are hard enough to deal with, significant birthdays are even harder. Maybe if you tell me about her, you'll feel better. Focus on happy memories."

It was too much. Just admitting what was bothering him in the first place was a big step and taking a second step wasn't going to happen. Not today.

He stood, still holding her hand, and smiled down at her. "Let's do that another day. I owe you a birthday. Why don't we drive out to one of those gorgeous lodges on the lake and have lunch?" Wagging his ginger eyebrows, he added, "Scandalize them by asking if they rent rooms by the hour."

She smiled, exhaling softly as she stood in response to his gentle tugs. He wasn't sure if she thought he wouldn't notice her forced smile and resigned sigh, or if she thought he would rather pretend he didn't. He did notice. He chose the latter course of action.

It really shouldn't be this hard, he thought again. But it is.

July 24, 1999

Jim rolled over with a groan and cracked open one eye to check the clock on his bedside table. It was past ten o'clock—good grief, when was the last time he slept that long? He felt miserable, and for good reason. Several times during the night he had had the same disturbing dream—a nightmare that woke him up at the same exact point in the dream each time. And each time, he had tossed and turned and struggled to get back to sleep, only to awaken again a few hours later.

With a heavy and weary sigh that seemed to come from a man carrying the weight of the world on his broad shoulders, Jim closed his eyes and remembered. Today was July 24th, eleven years since his mother had lost her fight with ovarian cancer—surrendered with hardly a struggle. She had mourned his father for exactly three years and had seemingly given up the will to live without him any longer.

Jim used to harbor a lot of anger that she could just die like that and leave him all alone in the world, that she wouldn't fight to stay with her son. But as he grew older, it all became very clear to him. Why would she want to stay around with a daily reminder of her dead husband always beside her? He was a carbon copy of his father and that must have caused untold grief for his heartbroken mother. He was the reason she had so hurriedly tried to wipe Win out of her memory by marrying another man barely a year after his death. He was the reason Jonesy came into their lives—and he got his just punishment for it after his mother's death.

Of course, this theory wasn't based on any sound psychological reasoning. It had literally taken months for his therapist to undo the damage he had done to himself with this line of thinking. Frankly, Jim was surprised it hadn't taken *years*.

So now he lay in bed as noon approached on the anniversary of not only his mother's death, but his father's as well, unable to muster up any energy to do any of the things he normally did on a bright summer Saturday morning. At least he didn't feel the urge to run away, as he so often did on this day. No, this year there was no one to run away from. Hallie was spending six weeks in Idaho with her family over the summer break. Mart and Sally had driven to Niagara Falls with her brother, Shawn, and his wife, Staci, for a long weekend. Trixie and Dan had moved to New York City more than two months ago. He had no doubt that Joey would give him a call today, but she had been so busy the last couple of months at her summer job in Albany that they hadn't had the chance to spend much time together, despite her closer proximity. That left only—.

"Jim?"

He kept his eyes closed for the briefest of moments, bemoaning his luck. Turning his head and opening his eyes, he gazed into the Renee's somber face and tried to smile.

"Are you okay? I've been knocking on the door for five minutes. I used the key you gave me. I didn't want to intrude, but I was worried. I'm sorry."

Jim waved off her apology. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and dry, which worked to his advantage. "I'm all right. I'm just not feeling well."

Renee's nursing instincts kicked in automatically, and she crossed to his side and laid her hand on his forehead. "You're warm, but not that warm. Do you feel nauseous?"

He shook his head. "Really, I'm okay. It's just a cold or something." He cleared his throat and closed his eyes again. "I probably just need to sleep."

"Do you want me to make you some soup?"

He kept his eyes closed, swallowing hard and forcing down the irrational panic that threatened to creep its way out. What he wanted was to be left alone, but how could he tell her that without sounding like a first-rate jerk?

"My throat hurts too much for soup," he managed.

"Well, I'm going to get you some water and some juice then. You know you should have plenty of fluids when you're sick."

Before he could argue, she left the bedroom, returning a few minutes later with a glass of orange juice and a large bottle of water, which she set on the bedside table. “You don’t need me to call or doctor or anything?”

“No, no, of course not. I’ll be fine.” He sipped gratefully at the water, his throat parched.

Renee crossed her arms and stared down at him with a disgusted look on her pretty face. “I thought men were always supposed to act like big babies when they were sick. I think they secretly like to be mothered.”

His heart constricted in his chest at her final word. He really needed to be alone. Rolling away from her, he mumbled, “Thanks for the water. I just need to sleep. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, I’m staying.”

He grimaced. He didn’t want her to stay. Forcing his voice to remain even, he said, “You don’t have to do that.”

“Nonsense. I’ll just go in the living room and read for a while. That way I can check on you from time to time. Get some sleep.”

She leaned over and kissed him on his temple, brushing back his sweat-dampened hair affectionately. He had a brief and painful flashback of his mother doing the exact same thing, and tears sprang unbidden to his eyes. He kept them tightly closed until he heard Renee carefully shut the bedroom door behind her, leaving him once again blessedly alone.

He wished he *could* sleep. Heaven knew he needed to. But he was afraid the dream would come back and he just couldn’t deal with it yet again, not today. He dozed off and on for about half an hour and was staring blankly at the clock when he saw his cell phone vibrating across the bedside table. He reached out to grab it and answer it before it could start ringing and alert Renee.

“Hello?” he whispered hoarsely, reaching again for the glass of water to soothe his throat.

“Hey,” Joey answered. “Just calling to check in with you. You doing okay today?”

“All right,” he whispered. “What are you up to today?”

After a pause, she whispered back, “Why are you whispering?”

“Renee’s reading in the living room and I don’t want to disturb her. She thinks I’m sleeping.”

“Why would she think you were sleeping this late? Doesn’t she know you at all?”

“I’m still in bed.”

Jo’s momentary silence was enough to tell him how stunned she was. “Why?” she finally managed, sounding as if she had some idea, but still couldn’t quite wrap her mind around the image of Jim Frayne “vegging” like a college frat boy.

“I told her I was sick, but I couldn’t get rid of her. She’s mother-henning me right now.”

“Why did you tell her you were sick?”

Her cross-examination was starting to irritate him. “Because she came over before I had a chance to run away. Is that what you wanted to hear?” he snarled.

“No,” she said softly, without snapping back at him, as he had expected. “I wanted to hear that you were doing just fine; that more than a decade after your parents died you were finally at peace. I wanted to hear you tell me a sweet, funny story about one or both of them—something you remembered that made you smile, rather than wanting to crawl into the back of your closet and die. I don’t like for you to be hurting, and I guess I was holding out hope that this therapist you’ve been seeing for almost a year now was making some progress.”

Jim sighed and rolled over onto his back, the phone still pressed up against his ear. “You know, for a cynical, smart-mouth, hard-ass lawyer-to-be, you definitely have a soft side.”

She snorted. “Yeah, don’t let that get around, okay?”

“Jim?”

He rolled his head toward the doorway where Renee was standing, peeking in at him.

“I’m sorry—you’re on the phone.” She smiled gently and teased, “I thought maybe your fever was worse and you had started talking to yourself in your delirium.”

He managed a grin for her, fake as it was, and said, “No, it’s ... my father. We have some school business to talk about. Hey, I think I changed my mind on that soup, but all I have is canned stuff. What’s your dad got on the menu today?”

“Chicken noodle, perfect for a summer cold.”

“Sounds great. Would you mind?”

She smiled as she shook her head and blew him a kiss as she left. Jim listened carefully until he heard the front door click softly shut as she left the apartment. Releasing some of the tension in his body, he turned his focus back to the phone, where Joey was continuing her interrogation.

“Your father? Why did you just lie to Renee about who was on the phone? Does she have a problem with you and me being friends?”

“Of course not. I just don’t want her to feel bad that I can talk to you and not to her.”

“Why would she feel bad?” Joey shot back in a biting tone. “She thinks you’re sick. She has no idea you’re depressed or what you’re depressed about, does she?”

Jim shook his head wearily. Of course, Joey couldn’t see him, but she knew the answer anyway, so what was the point of verbally answering her?

“So, why are you still in bed?”

“I didn’t get any sleep last night.”

“Why?”

“I had this recurring dream that kept waking me up and then I couldn’t get back to sleep again.”**

“What was the dream about?”

He sighed. “Damn, you’re annoying, you know that? You’re not my therapist.”

She laughed shortly. “I ought to have gone into psychology instead of law. I’d probably make a freakin’ fortune just off of *you*. Now, tell me what the dream was about.”

“I don’t remember,” he hedged.

“You *kept* having this dream, as in multiple times in the same night, and you can’t remember? Try again, Frayne.”

He draped his free arm across his eyes and reluctantly brought the images back to his mind. A tall, handsome red-haired man with striking green eyes. A pretty blond woman with a smile as brilliant as her blue eyes. A young boy, the very image of his father. A cozy home with a brightly-colored flower bed out front and a shaggy mongrel dog in the backyard. The picture perfect family.

But then the man got sick and Jim could feel his pain—his physical pain as the disease ravaged his once strong body, and his emotional pain as he had to leave his family behind, the pain he felt when he looked into the woman’s sad blue eyes and knew that he’d have to leave her.

“Jim?”

Hoping she would let it go, he tried to change the subject slightly. “So, do you want to hear a funny story about my mother? About the time the washer broke and my dad was out of town and she tried to fix it all by herself and nearly electrocuted the dog and drowned her eight-year-old son in one fell swoop?”

Jo’s gentle laugh brought a small measure of happiness back to his heart. “*Your* mother? I thought your mother was perfect, Jim.”

“Not when it came to anything mechanical, that’s for sure.”

He knew he’d feel depressed again when he finally hung up with Jo. He wondered what he’d say to Renee when she came back with the soup. He worried about going back to sleep and seeing those images again, watching his father die again, watching a part of his mother die again.

But for now, he could show Jo that his therapist *was* helping him. His pessimistic side said he would never be cured, but the happy memories were there and he could share them with the one person on earth who knew his painful secret, the friend who would carry his secret to her grave if he asked her to.

August 4, 1999

Jim ran his hand absently over the arm of the couch as his mind wandered. The sofa wasn't particularly high quality, but years and usage had worn the fabric soft and supple, to an almost suede-like consistency. How many countless others had rubbed their anxious palms along the surface, the same way he was doing now, he couldn't guess. It was soothing to stroke the rounded arm in much the same way he'd pat Saturn's velvety nose. Watching the nap of the rust-colored fabric subtly change from dark to light to dark again as he stroked it back and forth was gently mesmerizing.

The door opened soundlessly. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Jim. I had to take that call."

Jim smiled blandly. "It's not a problem."

Dr. Stanley Keyworth took a seat across from the worn couch where Jim sat and opened his notebook. "So, you're making a trip home this weekend?"

Jim started. He'd been seeing Dr. Keyworth for a year now, but he still couldn't get used to the idea that this virtual stranger seemed to recall even his casual statements flawlessly. "I'm sorry?"

"You asked if you could move our session up because you said you were going to Sleepyside this weekend."

Jim nodded, and Dr. Keyworth added, "What's the occasion?"

Jim stared at his therapist. Dr. Keyworth was in his late forties. His once dark hair was liberally streaked with gray—more salt than pepper. Though his eyes were warm and friendly, he seemed to wear a perpetual crease of concern across his forehead. And when he smiled, which wasn't often, it could go from "I understand your pain, my friend" to "Don't even think about bullshitting me" in the blink of an eye. Today, he wore crisply pressed gray slacks, a shirt and tie, and a navy blue sweater vest with a small argyle pattern. It was likely his socks matched the vest perfectly, but Jim didn't drop his gaze to check. Dr. Keyworth looked every inch the psychiatrist, but he always seemed to treat Jim like a friend who had dropped by for a cup of coffee. Jim had no idea why that annoyed him so much.

"My sister's birthday is Friday."

"Well, that sounds nice. Will Renee be going with you?"

Jim shook his head. "No, she has to work."

"How do you feel about that?"

Jim scoffed audibly. "What is it with shrinks and that question? Do you have a quota you have to reach or something?"

Without missing a beat, Dr. Keyworth replied evenly, "Yes, and I'm falling a little behind this week, so why don't you humor me?"

"She has to work," Jim said simply with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "No big deal."

“How long have you two been dating?” Dr. Keyworth asked. He flipped through his notes as if searching for the answer Jim was already sure he knew.

“A year. Almost a year.”

“Do you two have much opportunity to get a weekend away together?”

“The school keeps me pretty busy,” Jim answered hastily.

“Even in the summer?” Dr. Keyworth asked with a mildly bemused expression.

Jim’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Yes,” he answered brusquely, “even in the summer. In fact, one of the reasons I’m going home this weekend is to have a meeting with my father and a few members of the board. I’m giving them a yearly report before the new school year starts.”

“So you’ll be home all weekend. Any of your friends going to be there?”

“All of them, I believe.”

“Renee’s met them?”

“Yes, they all came to Indian Lake for a visit this spring.” He wondered where the doctor was going with this line of questioning.

“How about your parents?”

“Over the holidays,” he replied impatiently. Before Dr. Keyworth could ask another question, Jim took the opportunity to get in one of his own. “You know I hate it when you beat around the bush like this. Could you please get to your point?”

Dr. Keyworth indulged him with a slightly patronizing smile. “You and Renee have been dating one another exclusively for about a year. You’ve been intimate?” He pitched his voice just enough to make it a question, though he knew it was true. “She’s met your family and friends. Yet, she’s not going home with you this weekend for a family gathering.”

“She has to work,” Jim reiterated.

“What I’m wondering is, are you sorry she can’t make it? Or are you relieved you don’t have a four-hour drive alone with her? My guess is, you don’t tell her much about the things we discuss.”

“We don’t have that kind of relationship,” Jim almost snapped, instantly regretting both the tone and the admission.

Dr. Keyworth leaned back in his chair. “What kind of relationship would that be?”

Jim didn’t answer. He stared down at the arm of the couch, trying to find that soothing comfort he had found earlier in stroking the soft nap of the fabric. It wasn’t working. “I thought I was paying you an exorbitant hourly fee so that we could discuss my *feelings*, not my relationship with my girlfriend. I thought I came here so we could discuss the fact that I lost both of my parents at a young age and was abused by my stepfather, and that these events of my childhood conspired to make me compulsive and depressed and anxiety-ridden.”

“And none of that has any bearing on your relationship with Renee?”

“No,” Jim said softly, but firmly. “She’s not a part of that.”

“She’s not a part of that,” Dr. Keyworth repeated quietly. “She doesn’t know about your past?”

“She knows my birth parents died. She knows my stepfather abused me. But she doesn’t know the details, because I don’t—”

He didn’t complete his sentence and the quiet suffocated them as if the humid summer day had been brought indoors. Finally, Dr. Keyworth asked, “Because you don’t want her to know?”

“I guess you think it’s pretty idiotic that I can talk to you about these things, but I can’t talk to the woman I’m supposed to love.”

“You’re paying me an exorbitant hourly fee,” Dr. Keyworth said evenly. “I’m sure you’re just trying to get your money’s worth.”

Jim’s didn’t laugh. His face was taut with distress and his green eyes were dark and sorrowful. “Renee makes me feel relaxed. I enjoy being with her. We have a nice time together. I’m comfortable with her. I don’t want her in that dark part of my life. I don’t want her touched by it.”

Dr. Keyworth said nothing, but the look in his eyes was definitely of the “Don’t bullshit me” variety.

Part 4 – Trixie and Dan

August 2, 1999

Dan hadn’t been in bed long after his overnight shift ended when he heard the front door of the apartment creak open and the tags on Penny’s collar jangle as she rushed to greet the new arrival. He knew it was Trixie by the beagle’s anxious whimper of excitement, but instead of going to greet her, he closed his eyes and grinned mischievously. Stretching his arm across to her side of the bed, he let his hand fall open, wondering what part of her body he might be privileged to latch onto first.

He heard her come into the bedroom and with a murmured admonishment, shut the dog out. Penny whimpered once or twice before a quiet thump on the carpet told him she had taken up a post outside the bedroom door until her people were finished doing whatever it was they did behind closed doors.

The noisy old air conditioner clicked on and he had to strain his ears to figure out where she was and what she was doing. A crackle of static electricity as she pulled her blouse over her sure-to-be-tousled curls sent a wave of anticipation surging through his body. Cracking one eye half open, he saw her hopping first on one foot and then the other as she took her slacks off, mumbling a mild curse when she almost fell over backward. He sucked his cheeks in to hold back his laughter and quickly shut his eye again as she turned back to face him, clad now only in her bra and panties.

He felt the bed shift as she crawled in and over his still form. Twining her fingers with his, she leaned down until he could feel her breath against his face. She smelled like airplane peanuts and he had no idea why he found that so alluring at the moment. Absently, he twisted her rings around her finger, and she whispered in pleasant surprise, "You're awake."

He didn't speak, but shook his head and pursed his lips in askance for her kiss.

Chuckling dryly, she asked, "Are you waiting for Prince Charming to come and awaken you with a kiss, Sleeping Beauty?"

Releasing her hand, he reached up and spanked her bottom. "Sass," he growled as he opened his eyes. "I haven't seen you in three days and the first thing you do when you get home is give me sass." Quickly rolling over and pinning her underneath him, he added, "Lucky for you, I love sass," before claiming her lips with his own.

Her hands reached up into his hair, seeking a hold in the short regulation cut. He had no such problems, threading his fingers through her most definitely tangled curls and winding the sandy blond locks around them.

They broke off their kiss and Trixie asked, as she always did when she came home, "Tell me about my family." It had become a routine for them from the first time she had asked the question, back at Christmastime. Whether she was home from a three-day business trip or simply a typical working day at the Treasury's midtown office, it always made his heart swell with a homey warmth.

With a casual shrug that was countered by a smile he couldn't at all contain, he said, "I got a promotion."

"What?" Trixie's blue eyes widened and twinkled with adoration. "You've been here three months and you already got a promotion? Are you a detective? Chief of police?"

Dan laughed. "Not quite. In fact, I don't have a new rank, just a higher pay grade. But it's a step in the right direction."

"I'll say!" Trixie agreed with a proud gleam in her eye. "At this rate, you'll make detective by next spring!"

Dan laughed again, delighted with Trixie's enthusiasm. "What about you? You make head of the FBI yet?"

"The FBI isn't part of the Treasury Department," she said with disdain.

"CIA?"

Giving him a light punch on the shoulder, she grinned and said, "Try again."

But instead he turned his attention to her bra, knowing he'd need to direct complete focus there in order to get the damnable thing off of her. As he fumbled with the front clasp, she gently laid her fingers over his to stop him. Raising his eyes back up, he couldn't miss the eager sparkle in her eyes. It was the same sparkle she had when she was on the trail of a mystery. She had something to tell him and wanted him to be focused on her and not her undergarments.

“What?” he asked. His tone was slightly suspicious, but a smile curled tentatively around his lips.

“I’m going to Beijing.”

“China?”

With a disgruntled look, she replied, “No. Beijing, Montana. Yes, China, you doofus.”

“Why are you going to China?”

Propping herself up on her elbows—Dan suspected only his weight on top of her kept her from leaping out of the bed in her excitement—she answered, “Vice President Hoynes is going to be there at the end of the month.”

“End of the month? Are you forgetting we’re getting married—again—at the end of the month?”

She waved a hand impatiently. “No, of course not. I’m going with the advance team. I’ll be back way before the wedding.”

“So you won’t actually be *seeing* the Vice President then?”

“Are you trying to bust my bubble, Mangan?”

Grinning, he lowered his head for a kiss and said, “Not at all. The truth is I’m very proud, and very jealous. Do you know I’ve never been out of the country?”

“You haven’t? Then why didn’t we go to Niagara Falls last summer instead of Atlantic City?”

“And miss the opportunity to get married by His Holiness, the Right Reverend Rajeeb Gunther O’Konski?”

Trixie giggled as she charitably unclasped her bra for him and saved him the agony. “Well, we should definitely go out of the country for our honeymoon then ... right?”

“Nice try,” he mumbled, as he trailed his lips down her throat.

“What?”

“I’m not telling you where we’re going on our honeymoon.”

Trixie pretended to pout, which Dan noticed wasn’t very effective in their current, mostly naked, situation. “You’re a brat.”

“My wife is a government agent and by nature, nosy and prying. Let me have a few surprises when I can get them, okay?”

The pout disappeared in a flash, as two pretty dimples punctured her cheeks. “Okay, but then maybe I’ll just have to surprise you, too.”

Dan couldn't help the shiver that ran down his spine, and it wasn't from the blast of cold air that shot out of the a/c window unit onto his bare back. "I'll look forward to it," he promised, as he pulled the sheets over their heads.

August 6, 1999

"Surprise!" The large clan of family and friends gathered in the Lynches' expansive walk-out basement family room clapped and cheered and threw handfuls of glittery confetti over the two women who had just walked in.

Trixie and Honey, rather than looking shocked, both had a broad smile of smug satisfaction spread across their glowing faces. Each of them was fully convinced she had pulled the wool over her best friend's eyes. Then, with increasing astonishment, they both took in not one, not two, but *three* festive banners that stretched across the wide back wall above the fireplace. "Happy Birthday, Honey!" said one. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Mangan!" said the second. And "Baby Belden on the Way!" read the third.

Turning to stare at one another with eyes wide, they both blurted simultaneously, "But I—. But you—. Diana!"

Their dark-haired friend was jumping up and down, clapping her hands as gleefully as a child at Disneyland. "I can't believe I pulled it off!" she squealed. "I actually fooled *both* of you!"

"This was supposed to be Honey's baby shower," Trixie accused Diana.

"No," Honey interrupted. "It's *your* bridal shower."

"It's both," Diana said, her smile bright enough to light up New York City. "And it's Honey's birthday party too, which is the only party really timed properly. The wedding shower's a little later than normal because we had a devil of a time planning around your work schedule, Trix. And the baby shower's a little *earlier* than normal because of the wedding and everything, Honey."

"So ... you told me I had to get Honey here to surprise her for her baby shower," Trixie said, as the plan started to clear itself in her mind, "then you told Honey to get *me* here for my surprise bridal shower?"

Diana nodded her head, her violet eyes twinkling merrily.

"And she threw in Honey's birthday party as her sly way of tricking the men into suffering through two traditionally feminine festivities," Mart griped good-naturedly, earning an affectionate smack from Sally.

"Is there food at this party, my love?" she asked in a dry tone.

"Yes. That's why I allowed you to drag me to it," he answered, leaning over to give her a kiss.

"Why weren't you and Brian part of the surprise?" Trixie asked as Dan came over to greet her.

"We *were*. We thought this was Honey's birthday party. It was only when we got here and saw pale pink and baby blue balloons and several stacks of gifts with frilly bows that we realized we had been duped. But let me say this for the record. I'm not playing any dumb shower games."

"Don't be too hasty, Dan-o," chimed in Tad. "We've got some pretty nice prizes here." He held up a package of edible underwear and waggled his eyebrows.

Trixie's face went bright red. "Where's my mother?" she mumbled, darting her eyes frantically around the room.

Dan chuckled, positioning his body as an effective blockade against her parents' line of sight. Taking the package from Tad's hand, he swatted him over the head with it and tossed it back into the prize bag.

While Honey and Trixie went off to greet their guests, and Diana dug through the prize bag and pulled out all of Tad's contributions, Mart took Dan to the kitchenette, presumably to get drinks. Dan was suspicious of anything Mart said or did these days, with only three weeks left until the wedding, and kept a close eye on him as he pulled soft drinks out of the refrigerator.

"Dan, are you and Mart going to play our game?"

Though Kristy and Kayla Lynch kept their hair cut much shorter than their sister did, and lacked her distinctive violet eyes, there was no doubting the blue-eyed beauties were Diana's sisters.

"I don't think so," he answered politely, casting a wary glance at the small jars of ... he had no idea what ... on the small round table. "I think I'll leave the shower games to the women."

Mart clapped his arm firmly around his friend's shoulders. "Aw, come on Dan. You don't want to disappoint such pretty girls, do you?" Kristy and Kayla giggled coquettishly as Mart winked at them and added, "I'm sure Dan would *love* to play this game. And I'll love to watch him. Tell us how to play."

"Well, it's easy," Kayla began. "You just take a taste of the baby food, guess what flavor it is, and write it down on this sheet." She held up a handful of pink and blue sheets with a dozen blanks on them, the numbers coordinating with the otherwise unlabeled jars on the table.

"Then you give the sheet to us and we'll tally the results a little later. Whoever gets the most right wins a prize from the prize bag," Kristy finished.

Flashing a charming smile at the twins, which elicited another high-pitched round of teenage girl giggles, Dan said, "If you'll excuse us for just a minute," and dragged Mart a few feet away.

"Baby food?" he growled under his breath. "It's bad enough you turn me into your personal slave every chance you get, but if you think you can just *randomly* torture me for no particular reason, you've got another think coming."

"All right," Mart replied with an unconcerned shrug. Taking a sweeping glance at the large gathering, he added, "It's convenient that everybody'll be here when your secret gets 'accidentally' spilled. Should I tell Trixie privately first, or make an announcement just before she starts opening her gifts?"

“You’re not telling *anybody* if you want to win the bet,” Dan reminded him.

With calculated dramatics, Mart held out the two unopened soda cans in the palms of his hands and carefully “weighed” his options. “Winning a motorcycle that Sally probably won’t let me ride anyway ... seeing the look on everybody’s faces when I let the cat out of the bag. Trixie making you her slave for a whole week—yeah, I don’t even want to know what *that* will entail ... getting to torture you myself right now. Hmm...”

“You know I’m going to be your worst nightmare when you and Sally are planning your wedding, right?”

Mart grinned impishly. “Tad’s going to be *my* best man, remember?” He handed Dan one of the cans of soda and prodded him back toward the table.

One of the girls was holding out a plastic spoon for him, but Dan couldn’t tear his horrified gaze—as one might stare at dissected frog innards in biology class—from the jars of what he hoped was actually food. “Do I have to taste *all* of them?”

“Of course,” Kristy answered. “How else can you win?”

“And I know you want to win,” Mart murmured behind him, “if for no other reason than to keep those edible undies out of my father’s hands.”

Dan shuddered. He held out his hand for a spoon and plunged it into the first jar before he could change his mind. It looked like applesauce, so maybe it would taste okay. He sniffed it tentatively. It smelled like apples. With a brave grin, he shoved the spoon into his mouth and breathed a sigh of relief. Applesauce. He wrote it down, carefully hiding his answers from his nosy friend, and turned the page facedown on the table. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“That’s because Di and Mummy both said we should put the easy ones first,” Kayla said.

“Great,” he drawled, tossing his used spoon into the small trashcan by the table and taking a new one from Kayla.

Mart picked up a jar much farther down the line. “Try this one,” he said gleefully.

Dan peeked in, reluctant to put his hands on the jar. Whatever it was seemed to be green ... sort of. He had to take a step back as the smell was rather overpowering. “It’s all actual *baby food*, right?” he asked doubtfully. “Because this smells like it might have come out the other end of a baby.”

Mart took a spoon and heaped it full of the pseudo-green concoction. Making airplane noises and baby talk, he said, “Come on, widdle Danny. Eat your yum-yums so you can grow up big and strong like Uncle Marty!”

Kristy and Kayla began giggling uncontrollably, which drew the attention of several other party guests who came to observe the fun. The number included, unfortunately, Brian and his video camera. With his friend’s attention diverted, Mart took the opportunity to shove the spoon into Dan’s mouth.

“Aw, gross!”

“Green beans?” Mart guessed.

“What’s the matter with green beans?” Tad asked.

“Dan hates green beans.”

“Not as much as I hate pureed baby food,” Dan grumbled. He took a quick swig of soda to wash down the foul taste and hastily scrawled down his answer. It was definitely green beans, and if that’s what they looked like going in, he could only imagine what they looked like coming out.

“Try this one,” Tad said, jabbing his finger enthusiastically at something orange. “Must be oranges.”

“You don’t feed babies oranges, you moron,” Mart said. “It’s gotta be carrots.”

“Could be squash,” Brian put in helpfully, his broad grin easily discernible, even hidden as it was behind the camera.

“I wouldn’t look too happy if I were you, Belden,” Dan growled. “You’ll be cleaning this stuff up in a matter of months.”

“Thank goodness for double shifts,” Brian responded, widening his grin.

“Brian!” Honey exclaimed in dismay.

“Just kidding, sweetheart. I promise not to take any more double shifts than is necessary...” When she smiled sweetly and turned away, he leaned toward Tad and continued in a whisper, “...to avoid diaper duty.”

Dan fleetingly thought about holding that remark over Brian’s head for future use, but decided that between Trixie and Mart, he had all the Belden secrets he could handle at the moment.

August 8, 1999

As Trixie and her mother went to the kitchen to discuss the wedding cake, Peter motioned to Dan to join him in his den.

Taking a deep breath, Dan nodded and followed meekly. He got along very well with Trixie’s father, but he had a suspicion what this talk would be about and if he had been asked, he wouldn’t hesitate to admit that it scared him right down to the toes of his socks.

Peter shut the door behind them and took a seat in one of the high-backed wing chairs by the window. Dan took the other chair and wiped his clammy hands against his jeans. He opted to wait and let Trixie’s father speak his mind first.

“So, you and Trixie are writing your own vows?” he asked, after a suitably dramatic moment of silence.

“Sort of. I mean, we’re going to use the traditional vows and then just add a few words of our own for each other.”

Peter nodded his approval, reaching his right hand out to grab the pipe that was perpetually waiting for him on the side table. Dan knew that he rarely smoked it anymore, and yet it was still as much a part of his character as Brian’s medical books or Mart’s ... sandwiches. He didn’t light it now, merely cradling the bowl in his palm as he spoke. “But you decided against counseling?”

Dan tried hard not to bristle. It was a fairly common practice for couples to receive marriage counseling prior to their wedding. He and Trixie had chosen not to get married in a church, but he had still pretty much counted on Trixie’s parents asking about their decision to forego pre-marital counseling.

“We discussed it, but with our work schedules it just didn’t seem feasible. If Trixie really wanted to, I happily would’ve gone along with it, but neither of us insisted on it.”

He thought he saw the slightest tightening of Peter’s jaw, but maybe he was just imagining it. He knew Trixie’s father held nothing against him or his past. So why did he feel so uneasy about this discussion?

“Trixie’s mother and I were married very young. I still believe if we hadn’t received the proper counseling beforehand, we might not have made our marriage last. It’s not about anybody being right or wrong, or about digging into one’s past. It’s about getting common issues that plague young couples out in the open and worked out before they happen.”

He held up his hand as Dan started to protest. “Let me continue. I know you love my daughter, and I know she loves you. But marriage is also about working hard to maintain a healthy relationship. You’ll have to deal with difficulties regarding money, your careers, children, health, and differences of opinion. Those things happen to all couples, regardless of the amount of love between them.”

“I know that, sir. And I agree that talking about those things before we get married is a good idea. Trixie and I have discussed them already. We’ve agreed, disagreed, and agreed to disagree.”

Peter nodded his approval once again, but said nothing. He seemed to know that Dan had more to say and for his part, Dan did his best not to sound defensive as he added, “I can’t help feeling that this is about my past.”

The dark-haired, dark-eyed man could’ve passed for Dan’s own father. Dan had an uncle, two best friends who were like brothers, and a guardian who was like a grandfather to him. But because of his intimate relationship with Trixie, it didn’t feel quite right to treat Peter Belden like a father figure, and that saddened him. He would be glad when Peter was his father-in-law for real—or rather, *knew* that Dan was his official, legal son-in-law, he thought with a half-amused, half-guilty grin.

Breaking into his thoughts, Peter cleared his throat and said, “Dan, I’m not going to lie to you. Your past does worry me. I know you’re an honorable young man ... now, and I know that Trixie loves you regardless. But you can’t simply pretend that your violent past didn’t exist. I know my daughter’s been in scrapes that would make grown men quake in their boots, but I

would still call her childhood somewhat sheltered. She doesn't know or understand the kinds of things you went through. And should any of it come back to haunt you—emotionally, or even physically, through any connections back to your old gang—I want to know how you'll handle it and how you'll keep my daughter safe through it.”

Dan lowered his head to stare at his hands, surprised to find them tightly clenched. He commanded his fingers to uncurl and laid them flat against his jeans, staring for a moment until the knuckles were no longer white. Without raising his head, he murmured, “I haven't shown any violent tendencies since I came to Sleepyside. What happened in the gang, and what Ray did to me—what we did to each other—will *never* happen to Trixie or our children. I swear that to you on my mother's grave.”

Smiling ruefully, he added, “And if I ever *did* hurt her, you wouldn't have anything to worry about, because Brian, Mart, and Jim would kill me before you even caught wind of what had happened.”

Peter allowed a small smile to creep across his face as they both nodded knowingly. Sobering, Dan went on. “I can't promise that my past won't literally come back to haunt me. We live in the city now, and I work with the police force trying to bring people like Luke and his gang to justice. And I've wanted to help kids who were in situations like mine for a long time now. That kind of darkness is probably going to be a part of my life, but it won't be a part of *our* life. I would die before I let anything or anyone hurt Trixie.

“Emotionally ... well, we'll have to let what happens, happen. I hate to bring this up, because he's one of my best friends and I know you think very highly of him and thought he'd be your son-in-law someday. But Jim couldn't let Trixie into that part of his past and that hurt her—it hurt them both. I don't blame him for wanting to keep it all locked up inside, for trying to erase it from his memory by never bringing it up again, but Trixie doesn't deal well with secrets like that. She needs to be one hundred percent a part of the man she loves. No matter how much it might hurt me, I'll never hide anything Trixie wants to know about my past. And if it comes back to fight me, it'll have to fight us both. I won't shut her out. I'm glad to have her on my side, because I know she's strong enough to face anything that comes at us.”

Despite his attempt to look stern, Dan could see a smile curling around the edges of Peter's mouth as he asked, “Even an overprotective father and brothers?”

Dan grinned broadly. “Like I said, I know *she's* strong enough for it, and I'm glad to have her by my side.”

August 16, 1999

It wasn't quite dawn when Dan came out of the subway, taking the steps to the street two at a time in his eagerness to get home. He should have been exhausted after his ten-hour shift—the August heat was a brutal work environment, and the tempers that flared throughout the city created more work for the police department than in more balmy months—but Trixie was home and he was anxious to see her again. While in China, she had tried to call or email when she could, but the hours were long and the work demanding, and he suspected the excitement was too much for even her to bear.

He reached the top of the concrete stairway and grabbed hold of the railing for support as he made a sharp pivot to head up the street in the opposite direction. His quick maneuver ran him right into another pedestrian, and he blurted a dismayed apology even as he instinctively reached out to grasp the smaller figure's shoulders to keep her from falling while she struggled to regain her footing. "India!" he exclaimed as he recognized the teenager.

She stared at him blankly and he could feel her tense up under his gentle grip. He immediately let go of her and she took a step back, apparently trying to figure out how she knew him. He imagined his badge was all she remembered from their first meeting some three months ago.

"It's Dan Mangan ... Brian's friend?"

She seemed to relax slightly, even as she kept a distrustful eye on him. She nodded and said, "Dan—Mr. Man—Officer Mang—"

He grinned congenially at her. "Dan is fine."

She nodded, keeping her eyes averted and darting only quick, skittish glances at him as he continued. "What're you doing out and about so early in the morning? The sun's just about to come up."

"I'm a hooker, not a vampire," she grumbled. She took another step back and he saw her swallow hard, as if terrified of what her admission would cause him to do.

Softly, trying not to frighten her, he said, "I'm not going to arrest you, India. I'm just on my way home to see my ... fiancée." He remembered that Brian had said he inexplicably trusted this girl, as if he could share secrets with her like she was a long-time friend or little sister. Dan had almost told her Trixie was his wife, so he supposed he knew just what Brian meant. Offering her a teasing smile, he added, "Hell, I'm not even on duty."

He saw her shoulders relax a little more and she even tried to return his smile, though hers was small and quickly disappeared. "I gotta go," she mumbled as she brushed past him.

Dan turned. "India," he called, somewhat heartened to see her stop and turn back to him, rather than continuing on her way. He dug into his breast pocket and pulled out a business card. He supposed Mart and Tad would tease him for that. He had been so prepossessed with his business cards when he first got them that he had handed them out to almost everybody he knew. This wasn't giddy self-importance though. He really wanted India to be able to contact him if she needed him. He couldn't explain why. It's not like the streets of New York weren't filled with homeless, runaway teens in trouble. He ought to know better than anybody. Still, Brian was right. There was something about this girl that made them both feel the need to help her.

He scribbled his cell number on the back of the card and held it out to her. "That's my personal number." He flipped the card over. "That's the number at my precinct. You need anything, you call."

She stared at it but kept her hands at her sides. Shaking her head, she said, "I can't take that. If L.J. found out, he'd kill me."

"Who's L.J.?"

“He’s my boyfriend.”

Dan arched a cynical eyebrow at her. “Does your *boyfriend* know what you do at night?”

Her face flushed and at first he thought she was ashamed, but then he saw her narrow her eyes. A quick glance down showed him her small fists were balled up tightly. Her voice was defensive, even if he could barely hear her mutter, “L.J. takes care of me.”

Sure he does, Dan thought grimly. *Son of a bitch probably pegged you as a runaway the minute you hit the streets*. He thought about how quickly he had gone from being homeless and alone to feeling like he belonged when the Cowhands picked him up off the streets some ten years ago. It didn’t take long to realize that belonging to the Cowhands didn’t mean he was part of a family he so desperately craved.

Belonging to the Cowhands meant they owned him.

He dug into his pockets, looking for a scrap of paper without the NYPD insignia on it. “Let me give you my number. You can tell L.J. it’s from a ... customer or something.”

India snorted scornfully. “I don’t work for some high-priced escort service. I’m a streetwalker. I don’t get guys telling me they wanna see me again some time. Get real.” She waved him off as he finally found a crumpled receipt in his back pocket. “Don’t bother. I can find you if I want to, *Officer Dan*.”

Her snide tone made it clear she wasn’t planning to look him up anytime soon. Before he could say another word, she darted away and disappeared around the corner.

With a resigned sigh, Dan turned and headed back up the street toward his building. He and Trixie lived in a one-bedroom apartment in the East Village. It wasn’t exactly the swank flat Brian and Honey had recently moved to in Gramercy Park, but her father owned their building, and after Brian insisted on paying rent, Mr. Wheeler settled on a monthly lease far below the market value of the building—to celebrate Brian’s graduation from medical school, he said, not to mention the announcement that his first grandchild was on the way. Dan was envious of the apartment with its balcony that overlooked the private park, its spacious rooms, hardwood floors and large windows, but with a knowing smile on his face, he reminded himself that he and Trixie’s days in their cramped, utilitarian apartment were numbered. Maybe not in weeks or even months, but numbered all the same.

He shunned the snail-like elevator and bounded up the stairs to their fourth floor unit. As he approached the apartment, he heard Penny whining. He suspected she planted herself by the door the minute he got off the subway, several blocks away. He tripped into the apartment, not over the dog but over the suitcase his wife had left sitting just inside the door. Kneeling down to greet his faithful friend, he let his twinkling eyes scan the apartment, taking in the symbolic trail of bread crumbs Trixie had left in her wake.

The carry-on that contained her laptop was a few feet ahead, propped against the living room wall. Her suit jacket was draped carelessly over the back of the couch and she had tossed her purse onto the kitchen counter. One shoe had been kicked off near the head of the hallway, its mate a few feet farther along.

Dan chuckled and followed Trixie's trail of clutter toward the bedroom. The linen closet door was ajar, her empty gun holster hung on the outside knob. He released his own weapon and stashed it in the lock box that sat next to hers on the top shelf. "His and hers armories," Mart had wisecracked when he first saw them. He hung his shoulder holster on the inside knob of the closet and peeked into the bathroom. Trixie's slacks, socks, and blouse were in a heap on the floor. An array of barrettes and bobby pins were scattered across the counter by the sink where she had taken her hair down.

The trail ended in the bedroom, where she had dropped her bra on top of the dresser before slipping into her favorite nightshirt—one of his old t-shirts—and crawling into bed. Apparently, she had been too tired to pull the covers back, because she was lying on top of the comforter with only a light blanket covering her as she slept.

Dan crawled in beside her. She sighed contentedly and a smile played around the edges of her lips. He was thoroughly enchanted, wondering if she was dreaming about him ... or was she just feigning sleep? "Are you awake?" he asked in a seductive voice.

She shook her head and pursed her lips, asking for his kiss.

Chuckling, he leaned down to kiss her, murmuring, "I'm no Prince Charming, but you're definitely a Sleeping Beauty."

Her eyes opened drowsily. "You're a perfect Prince Charming. All you need is a pair of tights."

"Forget it!" he said in mock horror. "Tell me about my family."

"Hey, that's my line!"

"I know, but I want to hear all about your trip. Did you unearth any Commie spies while you were in Beijing?"

"This isn't World War II, Dan," Trixie said with a giggle, but her cheeks pinked up slightly and he guessed she had a good story to share.++ Before he could ask her about it though, she was jumping out of bed. "What time is it? Diana's in town. She and I are going shopping for wedding stuff, and then we're taking lunch over to Honey."

Dan held fast to her hand and tried to pull her back to bed. "You're always late, Trix. Diana won't care. Hell, she's shopping in New York City—she probably won't notice if you don't show up at all." He grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled her closer, trying to pull it over her head at the same time.

Trixie wriggled away and smoothed the shirt down until it hung just above her knees. "Dan, I've been thinking. I think we should abstain from sex until our wedding night."

"Little late for that, don't you think?"

"I mean from *now* until our wedding night," Trixie answered, crossing her arms over her chest in frustration. "It's supposed to make the wedding night ... special ... I guess. I mean, a lot of couples do it, even couples who've been living together."

“You don’t think our wedding night will be special?” he asked, cocking up one eyebrow skeptically.

“Of course it will. I just mean—well, it’s only twelve days. Not even two weeks!”

“But I haven’t seen you in *seven* days. That means it’ll be almost *three* weeks.”

“Dan, look how special it was when I came back from Virginia and we hadn’t seen each other in *seven weeks*. This’ll only be half that long.”

“So our wedding night will only be *half* as special?” Trixie gave him an annoyed look and he chuckled. “How about we have a little welcome home right now and *then* we can abstain until our wedding night?” She took a little step backward as he reached out for her, and he asked guardedly, “Are you on your period?”

“What? No. Why?”

“Why don’t you want to have sex with me?”

“I *do* want to have sex with you. I *always* want to have sex with you. You’re *very* hot ... and tempting ... and ... *good*. I just think ... maybe ... well ... we should just wait until our wedding night, that’s all.” When he groaned and fell back against the pillows, she added, “Humor me, okay?”

“Babe, I feel like I spend half my life humoring you.” When he saw the hurt expression on her face, he hastily added, “I’m just kidding. Of course we can wait.”

A bright smile, which only made him ache for her more, splashed across her face as she jumped onto the bed and gave him a grateful kiss. “You won’t regret it. I promise.”

“I’m already regretting it,” he grumbled, his dark eyes twinkling teasingly as he caressed her rear end. “We can never keep our hands off each other. How do you figure we’ll resist the temptation for two weeks?”

“Oh, I’m staying with Honey and Brian,” she answered matter-of-factly as she hopped back off the bed and began pulling clothes out of the dresser. “Moo yi tszen zhou.”

“Excuse me? You’re fluent in Chinese after only a week? What did you just say?”

“It basically means there’s no turning back now. What’s done is done. Suck it up, tiger.”

Dan muttered the only Chinese he knew. He had learned it years ago on the street from a sexy little firepot named Melanie. He wasn’t exactly sure what it meant, but he knew it was vulgar, and when Trixie called back over her shoulder, “I’m looking forward to it, pervert,” he had a few guesses what the translation could be.

Part 5 – Brian and Honey

August 6, 1999

Brian shot a glance over to the small couch in the corner where Jim and Trixie were quietly conversing. He hoped his best friend was talking some sense into his sister.

He instantly felt ashamed for thinking that. Trixie was a grown woman, a trained government agent. She wasn't about to run off on some hare-brained adventure like she had when she was a teenager. This was a genuine assignment for her legitimate career, and he should be proud that she had been asked to go along. And then he realized that he *was* proud, and that he should probably tell her that.

"Brian, your turn. A noun," Diana said.

"Onesies," Brian said with a smirk. Honey had cooed giddily over each of the seemingly dozens of onesies she had opened so far. How many of those did a baby seriously need? He gave his wife a kiss and went over to join Jim and Trixie, as Tad offered "smooch" as his verb for Diana's Mad Libs game, and then offered one for her. "So, what're our esteemed co-presidents up to? Planning another Bob-White fundraiser?"

Jim looked up, a tiny flicker of anxiety quickly replaced by a relaxed grin to assure his friend that all was well. "Trix was just telling me about her trip to Beijing."

"Hard to believe our little girl is going off into the big, bad world all on her own, isn't it?" Brian replied cheekily.

"I'm surprised you two haven't been giving me any grief about it," Trixie replied, batting her eyelashes innocently.

"As long as you don't go digging up any mysteries while you're there, I think we'll be okay," Brian said.

"I think she's going to be too busy for that," Jim put in.

"Oh, so that's it? We didn't keep her busy enough all those years ago when she was turning our hair prematurely gray."

Trixie crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. "You guys had just as much fun as Honey and I did, and you know it."

"Sometimes," Jim agreed cautiously. He seemed to think it over for a moment before deciding, "Virginia was fun."

"Cobbett's Island was fun," Brian added, a faraway look in his dark eyes.

"Arizona was fun," Jim said, flashing Brian an evil grin.

"You two!" Trixie exclaimed. "You only had fun when you were kissing girls or bossing girls around, is that it?"

"Well, we *are* men," Brian confessed with a caveman grunt, which Jim echoed.

"So, if I ask Mart, he'll say he had the most fun in Vermont, despite—or perhaps because of—the avalanche. And if I ask Dan..." she got a wicked glint in her eye as she finished, "...he'll say he had the most fun at Pirate's Point."

Brian narrowed his eyes slightly, not missing the fact that Jim did the same thing, despite no longer having the privilege of being a jealous boyfriend. "And which one of you girls was Dan kissing in the Catskills?"

Standing up slowly and fluffing her curls in a deliberately coy manner, she smiled and said, "I'll never tell."

Diana called out, "Trix, I need a mode of transportation."

"A ghostly galleon." She winked at Brian and Jim and said, "I'm going to go play Mad Libs."

Brian looked at Jim, who simply shrugged and said, "You're married to Honey now, and Dan's almost married to Trixie. What's past is past."

"And it's not killing you not knowing?"

Jim grinned. "Sure it is. We'll get Dan drunk at his bachelor party and worm it out of him."

"Worm what out of whom?" Honey asked as she came up to join them, having been given a reprieve from opening gifts.

"Oh, nothing," Brian said casually, with a surreptitious wink at Jim. "Just man stuff."

A chorus of laughter came the group listening to Diana as she finished reading the Mad Libs story. "And Trixie and Dan lived happily ever after ... in an igloo."

Jim slid over on the couch and patted the cushion next to him. "Why don't you take a load off, sis?"

Honey sank down gratefully next to him. "Thank you, honorable brother."

Putting his arm around her, he asked, "So how are things going with my little niece or nephew?"

Honey rested her head wearily on his shoulder. "Oh, fine. I'm tired all the time, but I guess that's to be expected. And my ankles are huge."

"You just think that because they were so small to begin with," Brian reassured her, giving Jim a gentle roll of his eyes.

In answer, she stuck her legs straight out so Jim could see them. "What do you think?"

"Grapefruit with toes," he said without hesitation, causing Honey to slap his hand, even as she giggled self-consciously.

"Thanks, Jim," Brian said dryly. "You're a big help. Almost as much as Mart, who was tactless enough to ask why she wasn't wearing her rings."

Jim picked up Honey's hand and looked questioningly at her, trying not to ask the same question. Brian was relieved to see that Honey didn't look like she was about to burst into tears this time, unlike when Mart had asked. She simply sighed and wiggled her fingers. "Too swollen. It felt like my rings were going to cut my finger right off. I really am way too fat for five and a half months, in my opinion."

Brian furrowed his brow slightly. He didn't want to go all know-it-all first-year resident on her, but she was gaining weight a bit too quickly for comfort. He knew she was eating right and still getting some moderate exercise, so it had to be something else. He mentally ran through the possibilities in his head, trying hard not to fall from know-it-all first-year resident to anxious hypochondriac first-time father. Honey had a check-up on Monday and he was definitely going to make sure she asked Dr. Jeffries about it.

"Brian?"

Brian started out of his reverie and looked askance at his wife.

"I was just going to ask Jim about..." She smiled knowingly at him.

Brian grinned back at her and nodded. It was so nice to be back in sync with her. He sat down on the ottoman Trixie had abandoned and took Honey's swollen feet into his lap for a gentle massage. Fixing his gaze on his best friend, he said, "Honey and I would like you to be our baby's godfather."

Jim smiled broadly. "That sounds like an offer I can't refuse."

Brian and Honey both winced, but Honey also had to cover her mouth to smother a giggle.

"You're my best friend and Honey's brother. It seemed like a natural fit."

"Well, I accept, thank you. I'm very honored. Does this mean Trixie will be the godmother?"

"Actually, we thought Trixie and Dan would like to be godparents together, so we'll give them a chance in the future," Honey responded. "We asked Margery."

"Trask. Miss Trask." Jim nodded thoughtfully. "My dear little sister, the revered Margery Trask is a perfectly perfect choice. Positively inspired."

"Well, she wasn't our first choice," Honey confessed, gazing steadily at her brother. "We thought about asking Renee, but you two haven't made any mention of any future plans, even though you've been dating for almost a year now, and we didn't want her to feel pressured or anything."

"Good thinking," Jim admitted, and Brian wondered fleetingly just who was feeling pressured in that relationship.

"And then we asked Hallie, but she turned us down," Honey continued with a frown.

"She did? Why?"

Honey shrugged weakly. "She was kind of vague about it. She said it's a big responsibility—which it is—and that a lot of people don't take it very seriously—which is true—but that she wanted to—which is good—and she didn't feel like she would make a very good godmother at this point in her life."

"We'll give her another chance in the future too," Brian said, giving his wife a reassuring pat on the knee.

"I hope you two rabbits won't run out of godparents," Jim said, arching one eyebrow in mock judgment.

"I can't believe I'm getting the what for from a single man at a baby shower," Brian growled teasingly.

"It happens to be my best friend's baby shower."

In mock horror, Brian leaned backward and raised one hand in protest. "No, no. It's *Honey's* baby shower. I'm just here to record the events for posterity." He picked up the small video camera he had laid next to the ottoman to make his point.

At an eruption of girlish giggles from behind them, Jim looked over Brian's shoulder and said with a chuckle, "Well, there's an event that's just begging for some posterity."

They looked over to where Mart was gleefully aiming a spoonful of baby food toward Dan's mouth as he made persuasive baby talk to his best friend. Brian let out a deep and sinister laugh and stood, holding out his hand to Honey. Wagging his eyebrows, he asked, "Shall we go gather some future blackmail material, sweetheart?"

August 9, 1999

The sight of a doctor hurrying down a hospital hallway certainly wasn't cause for any undue alarm. Other than a few visitors he passed on his way, nobody even turned to stare. But Brian Belden—Dr. Belden—wasn't rushing to an emergency, he was late.

Being a resident in and of itself was bad enough without also being a newlywed and a first-time father-to-be at the same time. He had missed more than one of Honey's prenatal appointments and even though she was more than understanding about his schedule, he still felt guilty about it. He wasn't going to miss this one.

He had been tied up in the emergency room during her last monthly appointment and that, unfortunately, had been the one with the ultrasound. Even though Honey had brought home a videotape that they had watched together, it just wasn't the same. Dr. Jeffries had been generous enough to schedule an ultrasound for this visit as well. She said she had a couple of OB residents who would jump at the chance to practice doing one, as long as that wouldn't make Honey uncomfortable. She wasn't at all. In fact, she was thrilled that Brian was getting a second chance to witness it "live".

He *wasn't* going to miss this one.

"Hello, Dr. Belden," the receptionist greeted with a warm, if automatic, smile. "You can go right in. Exam Two."

He nodded his thanks without breaking his stride and continued on to the examination room. He paused and knocked softly, entering when he heard his wife's voice calling him in. Grinning puckishly, he said, "Nice tack."

"What?" Honey asked with a bewildered smile.

He nodded toward the stirrups located at the foot of the examination table. “And you thought you wouldn’t get to do any riding this summer.” As his wife giggled self-consciously, he asked, “Did I miss it?”

“No,” Honey replied with a small—somewhat nervous, he thought—smile. “She did everything else first. But she *has* been out of the room for a while.”

Brian smiled indulgently at his wife. “And that’s making you a little anxious?”

She flushed and nodded. “You know me too well, Dr. Belden.”

He crossed to her and took her hand, brushing his lips across her fingertips. “Well, I’m here now,” he murmured soothingly.

“And that makes everything all right, *how?*” she teased.

“Because I know what you were *really* anxious about was the possibility of me missing another appointment and another ultrasound.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder and sighed contentedly. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Dr. Jeffries came in a few minutes later. Her expression was somber as she entered, and she seemed relieved that Brian had arrived. She shook his hand and said hello as Honey asked if she was going to do the ultrasound now.

“Honey, Brian, there’s something else we need to discuss.” She opened the patient file in her hands and studied it with a furrowed brow.

Brian felt a quick clenching in his stomach and another on his hand where Honey’s fingers pressed tightly against his.

“I’m afraid you have preeclampsia.” She looked into Honey’s eyes to determine if she knew what she was talking about.

“How serious is it?” Honey asked timidly. She and Brian had done their homework—somewhat of a crash course, as they hadn’t expected to be pregnant so soon—and despite the gravity of the situation, he was proud of her for remembering her lessons and reacting calmly.

Unconsciously, he tuned out Dr. Jeffries’ layman’s explanation to his wife as he tried to recall all he knew, as a doctor, about preeclampsia.

Preeclampsia—or pregnancy-induced hypertension—was characterized by high blood pressure and excess protein in the urine. It wasn’t an uncommon condition for first-time mothers. Thankfully, that was the only risk factor Honey had. She was not obese and had no history of high blood pressure. She wasn’t over the age of 35 and her ultrasound hadn’t indicated multiple pregnancies. However, he was chagrined to realize that he didn’t know the details of her family history. He knew Madeleine Wheeler had had a very difficult pregnancy, which is why Honey was her only natural-born child, but he didn’t know the specifics of the issues she had experienced.

He also knew that preeclampsia normally becomes evident in a woman's third trimester. Honey was still a few weeks shy of that milestone, which was both good and bad. Good, because they had caught it early and could take all necessary precautions to ensure the health and well-being of both her and the baby. Bad, because the earlier preeclampsia develops, the higher the risk of a premature delivery or more serious complications. He also recalled reading one study that indicated a higher risk of reoccurrence in subsequent pregnancies the earlier the condition had appeared. He and Honey wanted a big family and he knew this would weigh heavily on his mind. He hoped to keep that information from his wife as long as possible. And for now, he'd push it aside all together—Honey and this baby were first and foremost on his mind. They'd cross other bridges as they came to them—this bridge was plenty big enough to navigate on its own.

"Bed rest!" Honey exclaimed in dismay. "How long?"

"Because you're not yet in your third trimester," Dr. Jeffries said patiently, "I'm afraid your situation is fairly serious. We need to do what we can to keep your blood pressure at a manageable level, and that means no work, no stress, and no serious physical activity. How long will depend on how you and the baby are progressing and if there are any serious changes in your symptoms. For now, I'll want to see you two or three times a week to monitor your symptoms, and I'm putting you on bed rest for the next month. You can get up to use the bathroom and take *short* showers. Otherwise, you're to stay in bed."

"A month?" Honey squeaked, managing to sound both frightened and indignant at the same time. "My best friend is getting married in three weeks. I have so much to do before then. I'm the maid of honor."

"Not anymore, you're not," Dr. Jeffries said firmly.

Instantly, her hazel eyes filled with tears and Brian heard her choke back a sob. As a husband, he wanted to get in Dr. Jeffries' face for breaking Honey's heart, but as a doctor, he knew a firm line was needed in a situation that could easily go from manageable to life-threatening.

He rubbed her back in what he hoped was a soothing manner, drawing a long, slow, cleansing breath and hoping she was picking up on his actions and doing the same. Turning to the doctor, he asked, "Can she attend the wedding, at least?"

Dr. Jeffries' expression softened somewhat. After a long pause, she directed her answer to Honey. "If you follow my directions to the letter *and* your condition doesn't worsen before then *and* you promise to stay off your feet as much as possible—which means no dancing—then I'll let you go to the wedding. But you're not to do any more work on the wedding. No more stress."

Brian tried hard not to laugh in the face of the serious conversation. "No stress and my sister are not compatible phrases, I'm afraid." His dark eyes twinkled as he winked at Honey, and she couldn't help smiling through her tears.

August 14, 1999

"You sure you don't want me to help you upstairs?"

“Course not,” Brian slurred with a wave of his hand. “Why?”

Simon Drake grinned devilishly, his blue eyes bright with amusement. “Well, for one thing, you’re using your car key to try to open the security door.”

Brian looked at the key in his hand. “Damn.” He chose another key and held it up to Simon. “Know what this one’s for? This here’s a special key. ‘S for the park. Not just anybody can get into the park, ya see. I can though, ‘cuz I’m married to a Wheeler.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Simon answered patiently.

“Can’t. No more Wheelers left to marry.” He looked up at the two Dr. Drakes in front of his bleary eyes. “I never get drunk,” he assured both of them.

“Never say never, Dr. Belden,” Simon replied, pulling the key ring from Brian’s hand and trying to find the correct key for the door.

“Surusly—shurish—seerlis—no, really, I don’t. I’m Boring Brian. I’m responsible Dr. Belden. I’m a husband, and I’m gonna be a father, too.” Draping his arm around Simon’s shoulders, he whispered in a conspiratorial manner, “Didja know Honey’s preggers?”

“You may have mentioned it once or twice,” Simon answered, getting the front door open at last and supporting Brian as they moved inside. “Which floor?”

Brian stared groggily down at the polished black and white art deco tile at his feet. “There’s one.”

“This doesn’t look like the kind of place where they’d appreciate finding a drunken tenant camping out in the lobby.”

“Mark Carstairs bathed here.”

“Who?”

“Former tenant. Doorman found him in the fountain out in the courtyard, naked as the day he was born ... except for the shower cap.”

Simon chuckled. “I take it he doesn’t live here anymore?”

“Nope. Moved to Disneyland, I think.”

“What’s your apartment number?”

Brian couldn’t remember his apartment number, but he didn’t want Simon to know that. He changed the subject, hoping Simon would forget about it. “Tha’ wuz a fun party, huh?”

“Yeah, I love watching people I barely know get drunk. Will your doorman know which apartment you’re in?”

“Doorman’s not on duty after midnight. Didja know my sister thought he was a spy?”

“Your doorman?” Simon looked highly doubtful. “Why?”

“Trix thinks everbuddy’s a spy. She said he looked ‘suspicious’.” He tried to make air quotes, but couldn’t maintain his balance and fell up against Simon.

Simon leaned Brian up against the wall and began skimming the names on the mailboxes for the Beldens’ apartment.

“Not everbuddy wuz drunk at that party,” Brian contemplated. “Dan din get drunk.”

“Guest of honor at his own bachelor party doesn’t get drunk? What’s up with that?”

Brian waved nonchalantly. “Danny’s gotta troubled past.”

Having apparently figured out where Brian and Honey lived, Simon came back to retrieve his charge. “He an alcoholic?”

“Dan? Nah. But his stepfather wuz. You an alkacolic?”

Simon grinned at him. “Nope.”

“How ‘bout your stepfather?”

“I don’t have a stepfather.”

“Then how come *you* din get drunk?”

“I’ve got surgery tomorrow.” Glancing at his watch, he amended, “Or today, actually.”

“Don’t wanna be drunk for *that*,” Brian agreed fervently as he stumbled along with Simon to the elevator. It was already open and as they stepped aboard, Brian leaned over and hit the button marked “9”. At least he remembered what *floor* he lived on. Hopefully, Simon knew which apartment it was. The light stayed dark. Brian hit it again. Nothing. He poked it a few more times with increasing bewilderment but no results.

“I think they’re activated by body heat,” Simon said, leaning over to touch the button. It lit up without hesitation and the doors closed.

“I got body heat,” Brian grumbled. “You think ‘cuz my wife’s on bed rest and we can’t have sex ‘til friggin’ January that I don’t got no body heat? I got heat, baby!” He vigorously rubbed his hands up and down his rumpled shirt before sliding them down the buttons, lighting up the control panel like a Broadway marquee.

Simon rolled his eyes and leaned back against the wall of the elevator. “Well, make yourself comfortable, Doc. We’re taking the long way home, now.”

Brian responded by slumping down to the floor. Solemnly, he said, “I’m not mad at Honey, you unnerstan’. S’not her fault she’s sick. Not her fault she’s pregnant. I’m not even mad about the sex. It’s just that everythin’s kinda ... messed up. Off kilter. Outta order. I’m ‘sposed to finish my residency *first*. Then we’ll celebrate with a secon’ honeymoon in ‘Ruba. *Then* we’ll have kids. First a boy, then a girl. Boy, girl, boy, girl, ‘til we have enough, ‘bout three years apart, each one. Ya think I’m OCD?”

Simon shrugged. “Not really. I’m not so sure about Jim Frayne, though.”

Brian managed a lazy grin. "Didja see him linin' up all the empty beer bottles on the counter?"

"With a precision I'd never have thought possible for someone that inebriated. Have to give him credit for that."

"Somethin's botherin' him," Brian slurred. "He dunt get drunk neither. Gotta find out wha's wrong."

"One head case at a time, please," Simon said evenly. "Do you think maybe the reason you're upset that things are so out of whack is not because you *want* it all ordered, but because you feel like you're somehow being irresponsible if you can't make things right?"

"Whadaya mean? Din you hear me say how responsible I am? Everbuddy knows it. Responsible Brian Belden. Responsible Dr. Belden. The responsible Belden boy."

"Shut up, Belden. Listen to me."

Brian stared with an unfocused gaze as the elevator door opened on the fourth floor, waited for nobody to get on or off, then closed again and proceeded with its slow climb upward. Fascinating.

"Your sister's in China and you can't do anything to protect her. She'll be married in a few weeks, and then Dan will be the one responsible for her. Your brother's four hours away in Indian Lake—and we all know how irresponsible *he* is." Brian glowered at him, and Simon grinned to show he was just teasing. "Your best friend is brooding about something and you don't know what it is, therefore, you can't help him either. Then there's this girl ... runaway ... prostitute from India that you can't help—"

"She's not *from* India. Her *name's* India," Brian said scornfully.

"Really? Weird name. Anyway, you can't help her and that's bugging you. Your wife got pregnant, despite your conscientious birth control measures, and now she's sick and you can't do anything about that either. Sounds to me like you're struggling with the whole responsibility thing these days. You're a doctor and you can't fix anything or anybody. It's enough to drive a man to drink."

"Simon's not such a great name," Brian mumbled. "Simple Simon met a pie man. Simon Says. Simon Legree. Not such a great name."

Simon shrugged. "I have three older brothers. They took all the good 'S' names."

"Whassa matter with Steven? Or Scott?"

"Shut up, Belden."

Brian thought about what Simon had said. Maybe he had a point. A stray lock of his thick wavy hair fell over his eyes as he squinted up at the towering blond doctor. "You a psychiatrist?"

Simon smiled broadly. "Nope. Psychiatry isn't big enough for my ego. I'm just very, very astute."

They finally arrived at the ninth floor and Simon reached down to give Brian a hand up. "Shoulda been a shrink," Brian told him as he lurched to his feet and moved out of the elevator and down the hall to his apartment. He fumbled with the key ring, put a key in the lock, turned it and heard the deadbolt slide back to welcome him home. "First try," he said with a smug grin.

"Home again, home again. Why don't you go inside and give your pretty wife a kiss and go to sleep? Maybe you can *dream* about having mind-boggling sex with her while you sleep off your drunken self-pity."

"Yeah," Brian answered unenthusiastically as the smile slid off his face.

Simon studied him carefully for a moment, then said, "You know, I had this professor in college. Great guy, smart as hell. He told our class that there would come a day—during med school or maybe while we were doing our residencies—when we'd realize that we couldn't actually save the world. He said it would be a huge burden off our shoulders and that from that day on, things would be easier."

Giving Brian a big-brotherly pat on the back, he turned back to the elevator. "Don't lose your idealism. Just add a healthy dose of reality to the mix. It *will* get easier, Dr. Brian. I promise."

"Simon?" Brian walked unsteadily up the hallway to the elevator and peeked in at the third-year resident. "When did you realize it? That you couldn't save the world?"

His smile was blindingly arrogant, his wink cocky. "I'm a surgeon. I can save anybody they bring into my operating room."

Grinning back at him, Brian said, "So it hasn't happened yet?"

"Shut up, Belden. Go have lewd dreams about your wife. Or one of the nurses at the hospital. Or maybe that stripper that came by Mangan's place tonight."\$\$

"Wife sounds good."

"Great, then *I'll* have lewd dreams about the stripper." Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a business card and said jauntily, "Or maybe I'll just give her a call."

As the elevator doors eased shut, Brian snarled good-naturedly, "Shut up, Drake."

August 16, 1999

"Hi! Where's Honey?" Trixie chirped, standing on her tiptoes to give her oldest brother a peck on the cheek, as her arms were too full for a proper Belden hug.

"She's in the bedroom. Did you bring lunch?"

"Yes," Diana replied, giving him a kiss on his other cheek. "But we didn't know you were going to be here," she added with a chagrined look on her face.

"That's okay. He can share my sandwich, if he wants," Trixie called over her shoulder, already halfway down the hallway.

Brian chuckled and shook his head. “Hasn’t she ever heard of jet lag? How can she possibly have so much energy after flying across twelve time zones?”

“She’ll crash and burn sooner or later,” Diana promised with a grin. “I’m just trying to help her with some last minute wedding things while she’s still on her feet.”

Brian took a couple of her bags for her and followed her up the hall to the bedroom, where Trixie had already unceremoniously dumped her bags on the floor and was perched on the edge of the bed, chattering away to her best friend.

Honey looked almost overwhelmed with joyful relief as Diana leaned over to give her a warm embrace. Brian knew his wife was very glad to see her friends. She was already bored silly by her mandatory inactivity. It had only been a week and he wasn’t sure what was going to happen next if she was prescribed bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy.

“What did you buy?” she asked politely.

“Well, first and most importantly, lunch,” Trixie said. She handed her best friend a brown paper bag. “Chef salad—fresh veggies, low sodium, just what the doctor ordered. I also got you some yogurt—Harvest Peach, your favorite. And to balance it out all that nauseating health food, I also got you a vanilla milkshake.”

Honey smiled as she pulled out the large salad and settled it on her stomach. “I don’t even need a breakfast tray,” she said, her brief moan of dismay turning into a giggle at the comical picture she presented.

As she opened her yogurt, Diana said, “Ooh, give me the lid. My friend Ronda in Washington is collecting them.”

“She collects yogurt lids?” Brian asked. “Does she have some kind of weird fetish?”

All three girls laughed, and Diana answered, “It’s for a good cause.” She settled herself at the foot of the bed and pulled out her club sandwich. “Trixie may think food is most important, but I can’t wait until you see the peignoir set she bought for her wedding night. It’s simply divine. Dan will be drooling all over himself when he sees her in it.”

“What’s the point of sexy lingerie if it’s just going to be ripped off two minutes after I put it on?” Trixie garbled, her mouth full of Philly cheesesteak.

“My baby sister,” Brian remarked dryly, leaning over her shoulder to grab a handful of fries.

“Are you sure you’re going to *fit* into your wedding night lingerie?” Honey teased.

Trixie made a face at her. “If I don’t, I’ll just wear your maid of honor dress.”

Honey laughed, but her face quickly clouded over and she had to fight back tears as she poked unenthusiastically at her salad. Brian’s heart went out to her. He hoped Diana and Trixie could cheer her up. Every time he opened his mouth lately, nothing but medical advice and husbandly concern poured forth. She had felt smothered and had reacted by snapping at him several times over the last couple of days. The enforced bed rest was definitely taking a toll on her sweet disposition.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Trixie asked.

"I can't be your maid of honor," Honey wailed. "I can't walk down the aisle or stand by your side or dance or anything! I'll be lucky if Dr. Jeffries even lets me go!"

Trixie put down her sandwich and slid over close to Honey's side, taking her hand and squeezing it tightly. "Of course, you'll get to come to the wedding. You've been as good as gold all week and nothing has changed, right?" She darted a glance at her brother, who shrugged slightly and wisely stayed out of the conversation.

Honey sniffled and nodded, and Trixie continued. "Anyway, Diana and I were talking about it while we shopped." Glancing hesitantly at her dark-haired friend she said, "We thought if Diana was my maid of honor, then you wouldn't have to worry about a thing and—"

Honey burst into tears in earnest this time, and Diana quickly abandoned her lunch to join her two friends and take both their hands. "Listen, Honey. It'll all be perfectly perfect. I asked Tad if he was upset not to be Dan's best man and he said the three of them had a round robin thing all worked out. Mart is Dan's best man, then Tad will be Mart's best man, and Dan will be Tad's best man. We can do the same thing, and then everybody will get a turn."

"That's right," Trixie agreed. "I've already been your maid of honor, now Diana will be mine, and you'll be Diana's."

Honey sopped up her tears with a napkin and said, "But I've been doing all this work for your wedding for months already, and Diana didn't get to do any of that."

Diana waved her elegantly manicured hand dismissively. "Oh, please! You did a fabulous job and besides, you put up with Trixie's bullheaded nonsense better than I ever could."

"Hey!" Trixie protested, but her blue eyes twinkled as she feigned her irritation, and she snuck a wink at Brian, who smiled gratefully back.

Diana continued on unabated. "And just think, when I get married, you'll have so much more fun. My parents will be sure to throw me the most extravagantly lavish wedding ever and I'm into all those girly, frilly things that Trixie spurns. You'll be able to fuss over me to your heart's content without having to listen to any grumbling."

"Hey!" Trixie said again, a little more forcefully this time.

"When you help me plan *my* wedding, I can almost assure you I won't be in government training, learning to shoot firearms, for heaven's sake! And I have no problems distinguishing the subtle differences between lavender, lilac, orchid, indigo, and plum, like other people might."

"Hey!"

Honey giggled, wiped away her tears, and joined in, dramatically pining, "Oh, Diana! If you only knew! She didn't know about embossing or thermography or anything! I thought for sure she was going to end up calling all her family and friends the night before the wedding and saying, 'Hey, Dan and I are getting hitched tomorrow. Wanna come watch?'"

Trixie crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. “When did it become tradition to heap abuse upon the bride? I haven’t been *that* bad!”

Brian quietly left the room as the teasing banter continued. Four years of medical school took a backseat as two of Honey’s dearest friends gave her the best medicine available.

Part 6 – Jim and Renee

August 6, 1999

“You’re a brave man, James.”

Jim smiled brilliantly up at the pint-sized government agent standing in front of him. “How’s that, Beatrix?”

“Coming stag to a baby shower slash bridal shower.” She teasingly shoved his feet off the ottoman where they were propped up, taking a moment to pinch him for calling her by her hated given name before taking a seat.

Jim laughed under his breath. “Renee had to work this weekend.”

“Still...”

“Hey, I walked into this party carrying the gifts she sent for you and Honey. Dainty little gift bags with bows and ribbons and wispy tissue paper in all manner of girly pastel colors.” He shuddered. “Now *that’s* what I call brave.”

Trixie giggled and gave him a mock salute. Leaning forward, she put her hands on his knees and looked directly into his eyes. “You heard I was going to China?”

“Yeah, Dan told me. Moving up fast in the world of protective service, aren’t you?”

Her face pinked up in a mix of modest embarrassment and contained excitement. “It’s just advance work. I’m not protecting anybody.” Holding his gaze steadily, she added, “There’s no danger involved.”

Jim hoped his eyes weren’t betraying him. He allowed a small quaver to drift into his voice as he replied, “Your plane could crash in the middle of the ocean.” He could tell she was struggling to keep her scornful annoyance in check for his benefit. He must have actually convinced her he was serious. He was struggling himself—to contain laughter, not annoyance—so he added, “Or you might get kidnapped by ninjas, or attacked by a pack of rabid Shih-Tzus.”

Trixie, realizing she had been had, sniffed indignantly. “I think you’re the little *shit*-zu. Will you ever stop teasing me?”

“Never,” he affirmed, reaching out to tug affectionately on one of her curls. “Now, tell me about this advance work.” The way her eyes lit up made his heart swell with pride. She had come a long way from the detective wannabe who sniffed out dangerous mysteries every time he had

his back turned. His Schoolgirl Shamus was a bona fide government agent now—trained, qualified, and from all accounts quite gifted.

Except that she wasn't *his* Schoolgirl Shamus anymore.

"Technically, it's a *pre-advance* assignment," she said, but the flush in her cheeks told him she was just as excited as if she had been appointed President Bartlet's personal bodyguard.

"*Pre-advance*?" he remarked with a chuckle. "That sounds redundant. What's the difference between advance and pre-advance?"

"Well, the pre-advance team checks out the hotel where the protectee will be staying and interviews the staff there, as well as at any other locations he or she plans to be for events or personal travel. We'll make sure all travel routes are laid out and studied, and any places where there will be crowds can be properly secured.

"The advance team goes in just a few days before the visit. They block off the floor of the hotel, secure exits and entrances, bring out the bomb-sniffing dogs, block off any dangerous sight lines, rehearse the protectee's movements, things like that."

"Sounds like a lot of grunt work."

"Well, it is," Trixie replied with a careless shrug, "but I've gotta start somewhere."

Grinning, Jim countered, "That's not what you said when you were filing Molinson's paperwork that one summer."

Trixie grinned back. "That's just because I knew I didn't really want to be a cop. I don't mind grunt work if it's working me *toward* something. And I'll be in Beijing. *Beijing!* That's just too cool for words."

"Yeah, Dan mentioned he was pretty green about the whole thing."

"Well, I'll bring him back something special from China," Trixie said with a sly grin.

"Great. So, Dan's going to get a shirt that says, 'My fiancée went to Beijing and all I got was this lousy t-shirt', right? How will you have time for any shopping, except maybe in the hotel gift shop?"

"I'll find time. I already have something in mind, anyway."

Jim made a face. "Something I don't want to know about?"

Trixie smacked him lightly on the leg. "Nothing dirty. But I could bring you back something, if you want."

"For *me*?" Jim asked incredulously.

Her blue eyes twinkled mischievously. "Yeah, for you to give to Renee."

"I don't think Renee's the kind of girl who would appreciate a gift like that."

Trixie leaned forward and patted him on the cheek. "You two are perfect for each other."

"Are you saying I'm a prude?" Jim asked in mild offense.

"Respectable," Trixie corrected. "Conservative."

"Prudish."

Trixie shrugged. "Your word, not mine."

Jim leaned toward her as if he had a big secret and, predictably, Trixie leaned forward eagerly, eyes bright. Lowering his voice in a conspiratorial manner, he asked, "Can you imagine how badly you would've corrupted me if we had stayed together?"

Trixie jerked back and stuck her tongue out at him, but then she grinned. Shifting gears, she asked, "Are you staying all weekend?"

"I'll probably head out tomorrow evening. I've got a lunch meeting tomorrow with my dad and some of the school's board members, including your dad, as a matter of fact."

Trixie caught her lower lip between her teeth briefly before asking, "Do you think you could meet me at the clubhouse after your meeting?"

Jim nodded, but before he could question her further, Brian was there.

"So, what're our esteemed co-presidents up to? Planning another Bob-White fundraiser?"

Jim looked up, a tiny flicker of anxiety quickly replaced by a relaxed grin to assure Brian that all was well. "Trix was just telling me about her trip to Beijing."

I'll have plenty of time later to obsess over what she wants to talk about, he thought with an inward sigh, and directed his attention to the Belden banter in front of him, eager to join in on the teasing.

August 7, 1999

"Do you think you could meet me at the clubhouse after your meeting?"

Jim tried not to hurry as he made his way down the Manor House driveway toward the footpath that would take him to the Bob-White clubhouse. His mind had been feverishly at work since Trixie's request at the party the day before, trying to figure out why she wanted to see him alone.

It was tough for his honorable side to admit that there was a tiny part of him that still held on to the ridiculous fantasy that Trixie would realize she loved him, not Dan. That she was waiting for him now, ready to confess her love for him. They could run away together, find happiness, and forget what their friends and family would think.

He slowed his steps and sighed. *Stupid, Jim! Just plain stupid!* Not only would he never dream of hurting his friends like that, but it was obvious how much Trixie and Dan loved each other.

He didn't begrudge them their love. He only regretted that he had ever let her go in the first place. Would they be happy now if he hadn't? Would they be planning their own wedding? Or would differences in their career choices and personalities eventually have caused them to break it off anyway? He knew he'd always wonder.

He ducked into the woods, cool and dark, sheltered from the hot afternoon sun by a thick canopy of leaves overhead. As he made his way up the path to the clubhouse, he tried to picture his own wedding. For years, it had been Trixie who had been standing by his side in that daydream. When she and Dan had announced their engagement, the picture in his head had become shadowy and blurred. He didn't know who that was standing by his side now. It wasn't Renee, and that thought made him wonder again what the future held for the two of them.

Trixie was already there when he opened the door to the snug little gatehouse. She was sitting on the loveseat that Tom and Celia had donated several years ago, when they finally moved from their cozy, but relatively small, trailer to the house they had built on the land Jim's dad had sold them for an extremely reasonable price. While the *Robin* was indeed luxurious, it wasn't nearly large enough to hold a growing family. In fact, it hadn't even been large enough for a full-sized sofa, though the young newlyweds had never minded cuddling on the loveseat.

Neither did any of the Bob-Whites, Jim remembered with a grin.

Trixie was sitting there now, her legs curled up underneath her. She was chewing her bottom lip fretfully and Jim's overprotective alarm went off before he could stop it. "What's wrong, Trix?"

She looked up and gave him a small smile. "Nothing, silly. Thanks for meeting me." But she went back to gnawing on her lip and Jim knew that even if nothing was truly "wrong", she was anxious about something.

"Keep doing that, you'll end up with a fat lip," he warned her teasingly.

She smiled brightly up at him and, as always, his heart did a back flip. "Like that time I had to have three fillings on the same day," she recalled with an exaggerated shudder.

"Yeah," he remembered with a chuckle. "You couldn't stop chewing on your lip after the dentist gave you the shot of Novocain. The next day, you looked like somebody had beaten you up."

"It just felt so weird," she replied, fingering her lower lip in remembrance.

"As I recall, you couldn't stop kissing me either. I take it that felt weird too?"

"Very," Trixie answered with a giggle. "But in a good way."

Their easy conversation ended with that memory and for a full minute, he could only stare silently at her, shifting restlessly from foot to foot. When he couldn't stand the oppressive quiet anymore, he said, "This is crazy. What could possibly be as bad as all that?" He winked and crossed the small room to flop down onto the sofa next to her. "I know you don't have cold feet, so spill it, Trix. What's up?"

“Cold feet?” Trixie exclaimed, then giggled nervously. “Oh, the wedding. No, of course I don’t have cold feet. I think that happens like the night before the wedding, anyway.”

“You and Dan can’t wait to be married,” Jim said assuredly. “Neither of you will get cold feet.”

She didn’t say anything, simply shaking her head so adamantly that her sandy blond curls bounced cheerfully. But he noticed with curiosity that her cheeks pinked up as if she had a secret.

Trixie leaned her head on the back of the loveseat, then sat up straight again. She dropped her bare feet down to the floor, restlessly shuffling her discarded sandals with her toes. “This is silly,” she finally agreed. “We’ve been friends forever. I don’t know what I’m so nervous about.”

“You can tell me anything, Trix,” Jim encouraged her. “You know that.”

He watched her bite her lip once again, nodding with determination before she dug into the pocket of her cutoff shorts. She pulled out a small, leather-bound box and thrust it toward him. He knew what was in it without opening it.

“I thought you should have this back,” she whispered. “It’s not right for me to have it anymore.”

Jim put his hand over hers and gently pushed back. “Trixie, that ring was a gift from a friend to a friend. I certainly wasn’t asking you to marry me when you were thirteen years old.”

Stubborn as he was, Trixie pushed back against him. “It belongs to your family and it should *stay* in your family,” she insisted. “Someday, you’ll want to give it to the woman you’re going to marry.”

Reluctantly, Jim allowed Trixie to release the box into his hand. With a flick of his thumbnail, he popped the lid open and they looked at the glittering antique engagement ring that had once belonged to his Great-Aunt Nell. A wistful look glazed his eyes. “Do you remember when you found it?”

“I’ll never forget it,” Trixie affirmed.

“Neither will I.”

Her laugh made his heart flip once again. “You weren’t even there!”

“No, but I remember you and Honey running into the family room at Crabapple Farm. You were both yelling at the top of your lungs. I thought maybe you’d found some pirate’s treasure or something.”

“I was just a kid,” Trixie said with a sniff. “It was the biggest diamond I’d ever seen in my life. I’m pretty sure I estimated its value around fifty gazillion dollars.”

Jim pulled the ring out of the box and turned it so he could see the inside of the band where his great-aunt’s initials were engraved. “It’s worth way more than that,” he murmured.

With a soft sigh, Trixie leaned her head on Jim’s shoulder. “That’s why you should have it back. You have so little in the way of family heirlooms or keepsakes as it is. It’s been in Dad’s safe

deposit box all these years. I haven't seen it in ages. It was just a souvenir to me, but it's your history, your heritage.

"Besides, I got two of the best friends a girl could ever ask for that summer. You and Honey are all the souvenirs I need."

Jim turned and placed a kiss on the top of her curly head. "And friends like you are worth way more than fifty gazillion dollars."

And in his heart, he knew it was true. Even if he never truly got over losing her as his special girl, he hadn't really lost her heart, or her love.

He knew he never would.

August 13, 1999

The Friday night gathering of 20-something males was rather ... rowdy. It was just what you might expect when most of the men are single, alcohol is involved, and someone (not to point any fingers, but ... Tad Webster) hires a stripper.

In other words, it was a bachelor party.

To be fair, the young men weren't unruly frat boys, but were a relatively mature group with few exceptions (not to point any fingers, but ... Tad Webster), and several were responsible enough to know that circumstances prohibited their imbibing too much. Dr. Simon Drake was scheduled for surgery the next morning. A couple of Dan's friends from work were going to be on duty the next day. They left the party early, as did Bill Regan, who drank nothing, apologized to his nephew for being so anti-social, and returned alone to Sleepyside. Dan himself, who knew all too well the effects of excessive drinking, had only a couple of beers.

On the other hand, several guests at his bachelor party (yes, Tad Webster, but also Mart, Ben, Aidan, and surprisingly enough, Brian and Jim) took it upon themselves to drink enough to cover the abstainers.

Now, not long after midnight, Tad, Ben, and Aidan were serenading the stripper, "a lovely dish with a mighty impressive rack", as Tad so succinctly put it. She seemed to be mildly amused by the off-key trio, but surely she was hoping for a better tip than that, possibly from the handsome blond doctor who was smiling at her from across the room. Mart had long ago fallen asleep on the living room floor, where Penny lavished sloppy wet kisses on him. Brian was reeling off every bone in the body in a semi-coherent attempt to prove that he wasn't drunk. Dan was listening politely, but since he didn't *know* every bone in the human body, he had no idea how accurate Dr. Belden's recitation was.

And Jim was leaning against the kitchen counter, lining up the empty beer bottles with meticulous care and wishing he had hitched a ride back to the Manor House with Regan. Even in his intoxicated state, he was clear-headed enough to realize why he didn't drink to excess, and, unlike Dan, it had nothing to do with his stepfather. Jonesy was mean enough without any alcohol in the picture. No, Jim didn't drink because when he consumed too much he became a reticent, uncommunicative, mopey drunk. Not the life of any party. Certainly not this one.

A brotherly pat on his shoulder caused him to jostle the end bottle out of place. With a half-scowl, half-pout, he carefully repositioned it—adjusting it perhaps a millimeter—then turned his attention to the two new empties Dan had put on the counter next to him.

“I’m cutting the good doctor off,” Dan said, “before Honey dispenses with her bed rest and comes over here and kicks my ass.” After scrutinizing his friend carefully, he asked, “What about you? Do I need to cut you off before she gives me a double ass-kicking for allowing her responsible husband *and* her honorable brother to get hammered?”

Jim shook his head, intent on his current task. “Haven’t had a drink in about an hour,” he murmured.

“All right,” Dan answered. “But you’re still crashing here tonight, okay?”

“Good ‘nuff,” Jim answered.

“So, what’s on your mind that you’re so uncharacteristically downing the beers, my friend?”

Jim shrugged. He crossed his arms on the counter in front of him and laid his chin on them, staring blankly at his platoon of beer bottle soldiers. “Stuff.”

Dan grinned. “Did you know that when you’re drunk you sound like a sullen teenager?”

“And I ‘spec you wanna be my dad?”

“If you need me to be. I’d rather just be your friend.” Dan pulled up the spare stool from the other side of the counter and sat down next to him. “What’s going on?”

Jim pondered the question a moment. Taking a breath, he confessed, “I’ve been seeing a therapist.”

If Dan was surprised, he didn’t show it. “How long?”

“‘Bout a year.”

“A year? You never told me.” He didn’t seem hurt, just curious.

“Don’t take it personally. I never told anybody, except my dad.” Talking about his past had never been easy for him, not with his parents, not with his sister, not with his friends. But if anybody could understand, maybe it would be Dan, whose troubled family history wasn’t terribly dissimilar from his own. “We’ve been talking about my past and how it’s still impacting my present. Deep stuff.” He tried to grin, but failed miserably.

“Is it helping?”

Jim shrugged again. “Guess so. Sort of.”

“Well, that sounds like a definite maybe,” Dan teased. Sobering, he asked, “Did he prescribe any medication?”

“No. He wants to, but I’ve been resisting.” With a little more success, he gave his friend a half-hearted grin and added, “Can you imagine me on anti-depressants *and* alcohol? Not a pretty picture.”

Dan didn’t joke back. “I can understand if you’re reluctant to take meds, but they *can* help, you know.”

“I know, but I don’t want to be chemically induced into happiness. I just want ... I just want to *be* happy.”

“Why do you think you aren’t?”

Jim pulled a bottle from the ranks and began peeling off the label. “Stupid, huh? I mean, my parents died a long time ago. I should be over it by now.”

Dan’s response was sympathetic. “You don’t get over things like that. You just learn to live with it.”

“Yeah, well I haven’t done that very well, either, and it’s wrecking my life.”

“You’ve got a good life, Jim,” Dan insisted gently.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve got great parents, even if they aren’t my birth parents. I’ve got a wonderful sister who’s going to make me an uncle in a few months. The school’s going great. I’ve got terrific friends who are all happy and successful.”

“You’ve got a wonderful girlfriend,” Dan put in.

Jim nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“So, what’s eating you?”

After a long pause, during which Tad, Ben and Aidan began their unasked for encore for the stripper, Jim mumbled, “I don’t like to talk about my past.”

“I don’t blame you. I don’t like to talk about mine either.”

In the stillness that followed, Jim sensed his friend had more to say. He put down the beer bottle and the remains of the label he had managed to peel off and reluctantly turned to face Dan.

“But when I *need* to talk about it, I do,” Dan went on when he had Jim’s attention. “When I need Trixie, or Mart or Tad, or Uncle Bill to understand why I’m behaving the way I am, or why I’m feeling down, it helps to talk it out.”

“You don’t think they pity you? Or look at you differently because they know your ugly secrets?”

“No,” Dan stated resolutely. “I’m not saying there might not be people who *would* do that, but you gotta know your family and your closest friends would never treat you that way, Jim. I never would.”

“Yeah, but you know what I’m going through.”

“Exactly. I should probably pity you *more* than anyone else would, because I know *exactly* what you’re going through, and I know it’s not fun.

“Listen, I know that first step is the hardest, and maybe the Bob-Whites are too tight for you to talk to just one of us. We don’t like to keep secrets from each other ... at least not bad ones.”

Jim noted that Dan appeared to be struggling to hold back a grin. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing,” Dan said, hastily waving it off and continuing, “But if you can’t talk to one of us, maybe you should talk to your parents, or Renee.”

Jim winced. Reluctantly, he said, “I don’t think Renee and I are ... in that kind of place.”

Dan nodded understandingly. Jim knew he really did understand what he meant, because it had only been a few years ago that he was in the same position—struggling to find someone who filled the empty places in his heart.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“For what?” Dan asked in bewilderment.

Jim thought for a moment, then shrugged sheepishly. “I have no idea.”

Dan chuckled. “Drunk people are so much fun.” He stood and began moving toward the living room. “Crash on the couch tonight. If you change your mind and want to talk to me, you know where to find me.”

That was one certainty in Jim’s life. He always knew where he could find a friend.

August 27, 1999

The mid-afternoon summer squall had broken the heat and the evening was blessedly cool, extending a promise of glorious weather for Trixie and Dan’s wedding day.

Following the rehearsal dinner at the country club, the Bob-Whites and their significant others had returned to Crabapple Farm for dessert—Moms’ famous apple pie with cinnamon ice cream on top. The inevitable game of Progressive Rum resulted in another win for Brian and as they were cleaning up the table, Jim noted that Renee had disappeared from the family room, where she and Sally had been chatting. He said his goodnights and went outside to look for her, finding her on the porch swing enjoying the quiet night.

“Hey,” he murmured, flashing her a gentle smile as she turned in response to his voice. “You ready to call it a night?”

She nodded, but made no move to get up, turning her gaze back to the ancient crabapple orchard, where fireflies continued to light up the night with their blinking conversations.

The screen door squeaked open behind them and Brian and Honey came out onto the porch. “You two want to ride back with us?” Brian asked, his arm protectively around his wife. Honey had been given the okay by her doctor to attend the wedding, as long as she stayed off her feet

as much as possible, and didn't try to do too much. Brian was making sure she wasn't, driving her back and forth the short distance between the Manor House and the farm and going so far as to stash a wheelchair, borrowed from the hospital, in the trunk of his car for the trips down the hill to the lake. Honey protested mildly, but let Brian fuss over her as much as he needed to.

Jim shook his head. "I think we'll walk back, thanks."

Honey and Brian said their goodnights and in short order, Brian had her settled in the car and was heading down the driveway to Glen Road.

"Want to take the long way back to the house?" Jim asked Renee.

She turned back to him and stared for a long moment without answering. He thought her mocha eyes looked pained and worried, but it was hard to tell because her expression was normally rather sober. Part of the reason he was always so comfortable around her was that she used words sparingly, deliberately, without idle chitchat. And yet he had always loved Trixie's chatter. He wondered what the difference was.

Finally, still without speaking, she stood and joined him near the top of the steps. He held out his hand to her and she took it, not unwillingly, and they descended to the grassy backyard, where Jim led the way up toward Ten Acres.

While they normally walked in companionable silence, tonight an air of tension hung between them. Part of Jim wanted to draw it out of her, but another part of him had an ominous feeling what she would say and he wasn't sure if he was prepared to hear it. So they continued on in silence, the chirping of crickets and the occasional hoot of an owl the only noises they heard.

When they got out of range of the well-lit farmhouse, Jim slipped a flashlight out of his pocket and clicked it on, walking slightly ahead of Renee to guide her. When they reached the remains of the old mansion he had lived in when he first came to Sleepyside, he swept the light over the area and pointed out a few items of interest to Renee.

"That's where the house used to be. It burned down not long after I first came here. Dad had most of the area cleaned out, but we left the fireplace and the foundation. I guess I thought I might rebuild someday. That was before I started the school, of course. The barn still stands over there," he gestured with the flashlight and chuckled. "Barely. I mean, I guess there's no real danger of a brisk nor'easter blowing it down, but it sure looks rickety, doesn't it? We had a few Halloween parties there over the years because it looked so spooky."

For the first time since they left the Belden home, Renee spoke. "Why are we doing this?"

Jim was an intelligent man. His head knew what she was getting at. But his heart was another matter entirely. Unwillingly to go down that path, he simply replied, "I thought you might like to see my family's old place. I'm sure I've talked about it enough."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Jim released her hand and walked off a few steps, running his hand through his hair anxiously. "I'm sorry I've been so—it's just been rough lately. I've been busy with preparations for the new school year. Two of my best friends are getting married. Honey's sick and I've been worrying about her. I'm distracted. I'm sorry I've been so distant this past month."

They both knew he was skirting the real issue.

“It’s been longer than that, Jim.”

She didn’t have any harshness in her voice. She was resigned. She was accepting. She knew he’d carry enough remorse and pain for the both of them. That knowledge alone was enough to get his guilt trip underway.

“I told you when we started dating that I had a lot of demons,” he began.

“And I told you we could fight them together, but you haven’t let me in,” she said simply. When he didn’t reply, she continued, “I know I’m not the only one you’re shutting out, but it’s not just that.”

She waited until he looked her way before saying, “Do you know that in the year we’ve been dating, you’ve never once told me you loved me?”

Jim swallowed hard. He knew it was true, and yet he still felt the need to mentally replay their time together in his head, to find evidence to disprove her statement—though he knew he wouldn’t find it. “Renee, I care about you very much.”

She smiled faintly at him. “I know you do. You’re a wonderful man, Jim. And I wish that you loved me. I wish ... I wish that you would let me love you. But it isn’t fair to either of us to keep on with this charade simply because we care about each other, or are comfortable with each other.”

Comfortable, he thought. He had told Dr. Keyworth that Renee made him feel “comfortable”. And suddenly he flashed back almost ten years to a school gymnasium in Iowa, when he had told Trixie that he liked her because she was “comfortable to be around”. He had been trying to convince her that the glamorous Dot Murray wasn’t his type, but in his heart he knew he was seeking a “comfort zone”—a place where there wasn’t the turmoil of teenage drama. He’d had enough turmoil to last a lifetime. He wanted peace, he wanted stability ... he wanted comfort.

“If we were a couple of college kids just in it for fun, I guess that would be enough,” Renee continued. “But you’re not that kind of man. If you were, you probably would’ve declared your love a dozen times over by now, knowing in the end it wouldn’t really matter.”

“Is that where we are?” he muttered. “The end?”

He watched as she took a small step toward him then hesitated, fighting her instincts. But in the end, she did come to him. And in the end, he did take her into his arms as she laid her head on his shoulder and sighed. In the end, they were together, under the moonlight at Ten Acres, wishing for something that would never be. Jim’s heart was breaking for something that never was, but he knew it would be the right decision.

In the end.

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