

It's All About Forever

First of all, I am going to apologize for the length of these notes and the fact that I really wanted to put them up front before the story. I normally try to keep the author's notes short, but this time I've got a lot to say! And I want it to be said before the story.

First and foremost, "It's All About Forever" never would have been written if it weren't for the lovely Mary N., who gave a more-than-generous bid for a "Dana Red Star Story" during 2005's Jixemitri Horroreane FUNdraiser. She chose the couple to be featured, the circumstances of the story, and even chose the names of the featured couple's children (and she reserves the right to use the same names in any of her future fanfic stories). When I offered up the red star story for auction, I honestly thought I would be lucky to get a bid of \$10. Mary's generosity and faith in my writing absolutely bowled me over. Unfortunately, I did not repay her kindness very well, seeing as how long it has taken me to write this story. I am truly sorry for that, Mary. I would like to say that if I had known all of the curves that life was about to throw me right after the FUNdraiser that I probably would not have offered this story up, but when all is said and done, I *am* grateful that I did because writing it forced me out of my comfort zone (a good thing!) and took *Onyx Twilight* in ways I never could have imagined if Mary had not won the auction and provided me with her valuable input and inspiration. Thanks, Mary! {{{HUGS}}}

This is set in the future of *Onyx Twilight* and therefore contains spoilers to *Gethsemane*. If you do not want to read spoilers, please turn back now; I completely understand. It is a Happy Holidays 2005 Jixemitri CWP #2.3 (Hey! I'm only a year late!). It is also an entry to Leigh's Bob-White Engagement Wedding Challenge, Jixemitri Circle Writing Challenge #4.

Many thanks to Leigh for choosing the name of one of the invented characters when I was undecided. Thanks, Leigh! :) Many thanks to Mary C, whose Jix Summer Writing Challenge gave me the kick in the pants that I needed. The bulk of this story was written during that challenge. Thanks, Mary! :) More thanks going out to my sister who, when I described to her what I had written for a certain scene, told me it was completely backwards and helped me rewrite it. Thanks, Heather! :)

And, of course, many thanks to Susan for editing for me on short notice despite her own busy schedule. I didn't take all of her suggestions, so if you don't like the comma placement, blame me, not her. I just have a certain cadence going in my head and comma placement that may be technically correct for nonfiction just doesn't always work in fiction, for me anyway. So, like I said, blame me! ;)

This story (with all of the required elements) is yellow star (mild language and the beginning of some friskiness). Only the epilogue is red star. For those who choose not to read it or are not old enough to obtain the password, there are no plot points that will be lost by not reading it.

And now, I am "breaking the mold," so to speak. This will absolutely be my last red star story, and it is dedicated to the wonderful, fantastic, patient, lovely, beautiful, generous Mary N. Thank you, sweetie.



It's All About Forever
by Dana

August, Slightly More Than Eleven Years Ago
Sleepyside-on-Hudson, New York

Mart and Di strolled hand in hand through the streets of Sleepyside, the peacefulness of the late summer evening filling them to their very cores. Peacefulness, serenity, tranquility—none of these things had been abundant in Di and Mart's life the past few years. As a matter of fact, they had been downright rare until very recently.

Mart looked at the beautiful woman walking beside him and knew that it had been worth it. All of the pain, all of the sorrow, the confusion, and the misery had gotten them to where they were at that very moment. He would never wish for any of it to happen again, but he couldn't regret it, because without the hardships, there would not be this *peace*.

Without allowing Di to realize his intentions, he eventually managed to steer her toward their old elementary school playground. The place where it had all begun.

"Oh, look!" Di suddenly squealed, joy and excitement evident in her voice. "It's our old playground!"

Mart smiled. "What do you know?" he murmured as Di pulled on his arm.

"Let's go swing on the swings," Di demanded, already heading toward the swing set. Mart also sped up, seeing as how he had no choice with her dragging him along behind her. Swinging had long been a favorite playground activity of Diana's.

A few moments later, the two were settled on swings, Diana's shiny black hair flying in the breeze. Her full red lips were drawn into an expansive smile, and her violet eyes sparkled with happiness. Although Mart couldn't see her face clearly with her hair flying everywhere, he had watched her swinging enough times to know how happy she looked.

As he himself flew through the air, enjoying the cool breeze after the August heat, he pictured her as a five-year-old on these very swings. He still vividly remembered the day that he had watched his sister and her new friend on the swings. Diana, normally a shy and quiet girl, had come alive on her favorite playground equipment, giggling and shouting to Trixie, who occupied the swing next to her. Mart wondered if that was the very moment that he had fallen in love with Diana Lynch.

"Should I jump?" Diana asked, bringing Mart back into the present.

"That depends," Mart answered.

"On what?"

"On whether or not you want to break your big toe again!"

Diana laughed at the long-forgotten memory, although it had certainly not been funny at the time. From the time they were in first grade and allowed on the playground with the older grades, Trixie and Diana had often watched the fourth and fifth graders jump off of the swings as they reached their apex. Trixie, undaunted, had of course wanted to try immediately. It wasn't until the girls were in the second grade that the blonde had finally decided to do it. From her swing, Diana had watched, fascinated, as Trixie flew through the air and landed successfully.

"It's your turn, Di!" Trixie had called, a big grin splitting her face as she turned around and looked up at her friend.

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Diana had pumped herself back and forth a few more times to gain the courage and, finally, closed her eyes as she suddenly found herself flying through the air, initially unaware that her brain had made a resolute decision and ordered her body to jump. It had been an exhilarating and terrifying few moments, right up until the time she landed and pain shot through her toe and up her foot. But even as she lay crying on the ground and holding her injured limb, she had not regretted it for a second. It had been scary, but it had been brave and exciting, too. She remembered thinking that this was what Trixie must have felt like every day of her life.

As Diana thought back to that day, she suddenly remembered that Mart had been playing nearby. He had immediately been at her side, second only after Trixie, and he had been the one to rush off to find a teacher. Di had not really thought about it until now, but a sudden memory of Mart's face as he was bending over her surfaced, and it now occurred to Di how worried Mart had been that day. And how sweet he had been as she was convalescing, volunteering to sit and play jacks with her on recess because she could not run and play with the other kids. Even Trixie, her best friend, had not been as patient and solicitous.

The young woman turned to Mart and said, with a kind of amazement in her voice, "You were really worried about me back then."

Mart nodded. "I remember how scared I was when I saw you land so awkwardly and then heard you cry out."

The couple was silent for a few moments, each lost in reflections.

"You were really worried about me these last few years," Di said, her voice steady and matter of fact.

Mart took a while to answer, afraid that if he said the wrong thing, she might accuse him of trying to be her keeper, as she had done in the past. "I wanted you to be happy," he finally said. "And I was worried that you weren't going to be able to find that happiness."

"And are you worried now?" Although Di's voice was filled with genuine curiosity, there was almost an undercurrent of challenge in her words.

"No," Mart answered without hesitation. "When you came back from London, you seemed to have found what you were looking for."

Di nodded and continued pumping her legs, the wind on her face feeling like freedom. "I did find what I was looking for," she agreed. "And finding that made me realize that one of the things I was looking for had been there in front of me all along."

Mart remained silent, and for a long moment, the rustle of a slight breeze through the leaves of the giant oaks and elms that surrounded the playground was the only sound breaking the stillness of the quiet night.

Diana finally broke the stillness. "Thank you."

Mart didn't have to ask what she meant. He knew. "You're welcome."

Di suddenly grinned. "Last one down is a furry monkey!" she shouted to break the serious spell that surrounded them. Before Mart could even react, Diana was once again flying through the air, and he was eight years old again, holding his breath, simultaneously admiring her graceful beauty as she soared above him and anxious for her safety.

This time, she did land safely and turned toward him, a cheeky grin alighting her face. "Hey, furry monkey," she teased. "Come on down!"

Mart laughed out loud, and soon he was airborne, landing right beside her.

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"I love you, Diana Marie Lynch," he said, folding her into a hug.

"I love you, too, Martin Andrew Belden," Di said, feeling warmth spread through her as she leaned into his warm body.

"I had a speech prepared, you know," Mart said.

Di pulled back and stared at him, surprised. "About me jumping from a swing?"

Mart chuckled. "No, silly. It's not an accident that we ended up here, because this is where everything began. Where I met you, and where I'm pretty sure I fell in love with you."

Suddenly, Diana's heart was racing and her ears were filled with the tattoo of her wildly beating heart.

"And that's why I thought this would be the best place to ask you to marry me," Mart said, delighted at the look of astonishment on Di's face. In one fluid motion, he bent down on one knee and withdrew a small box from his pocket. He opened the box to reveal a three-quarter-carat, emerald-cut diamond flanked by a baguette on either side, all set in shining yellow gold.

"Diana Marie, would you do me the honor of being my bride?"

There was stunned silence for a long moment as Diana stared down at Mart, a hundred emotions flitting across her beautiful features. Suddenly, Mart was convinced that she was going to say no, and he felt like a fool.

"I don't deserve you, Mart," Diana finally said, her eyes glittering with unshed tears, "but, yes. YES! I'll marry you!"

With a great whoop, Mart jumped up and grabbed Diana, lifting her and twirling her around, nearly losing the ring in the process. The two laughed and cried and hugged and celebrated together. Mart finally set his fiancée down and settled the ring on her finger.

Di looked adoringly up at the blond man who held her lovingly in his embrace. "This ring is never going to leave my finger, and I am never going to leave your side."

"Sweeter words were never said, my dearest Diana."

~*~*~*~*

December 28, Ten Years Ago

Trinity Episcopal Church, Sleepyside-on-Hudson, New York

"Di," Honey Wheeler gasped as she stared at her friend. "You look amazing!"

Trixie stood beside Honey and nodded, speechless for once in her life.

Diana smiled at her two best friends. "Thanks," she said simply, turning back toward the mirror and trying to decide if it was really she who looked back at her, or an unknown fairy princess.

Her shiny blue-black hair was softly pulled back at the ears, the back hanging long and loose, lovely underneath her fingertip-length, handmade lace veil. The butterfly headpiece that held the veil was made of silk duchesse satin in natural white and featured exquisite pearl beading. Di's violet eyes, filled with happiness, traveled down the length of her dress, searching for any imperfections that might mar her princessly image, but there were none. The Demetrios wedding dress that her mother and she had chosen was "perfectly perfect," to quote one of her maids-of-honor.

The off-the-shoulder neckline came to a gentle V, showing off her décolleté to advantage. The soft, silk duchesse satin was luminescent, the natural white color that Diana had chosen fell somewhere between ivory and white and beautifully complimented Di's Irish pixie coloring. The A-line silhouette of the dress was flattering, and the hand embroidery and beading that adorned the dress was stunning. Behind her,

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Diana's chapel-length train flowed gently, and Trixie stepped around it with a reverence that surprised her friends.

"Di," she finally breathed. "Gleeps!"

Diana and Honey laughed at Trixie's choice of expressions, a favorite one from their teenage years, and a sense of nostalgia swept over them. Each of them had grown up, moved away, fallen in love, had their share of heartbreak, and yet here they were, together after all of these years, celebrating Diana and Mart's love in a way that was totally *them*. Trixie wouldn't have been Trixie if she hadn't uttered some funny phrase, even as her clear, blue eyes filled with tears and reflected a kind of awe that Di had never before seen.

"Gleeps!" Di repeated, and the three dissolved into giggles, hugging each other and trying not to muss their dresses or hair.

That was how Veronica Lynch found them as she hurried into the dressing room after checking some last minute details out in the church. Although Ed and Veronica would have agreed to host Diana's wedding anywhere, including one of the elegant cathedrals in New York City, Di and Mart had chosen to get married in the simple country church that made its home in Sleepyside.

"Some things never change," Veronica said affectionately, her large, delphinium-blue eyes filled with happiness as she looked at her daughter and her two best friends. Veronica sometimes wondered if the members of the Bob-Whites knew how truly blessed they were to have found each other, remaining together through thick and thin for so many years. Di's mother could not be happier that her daughter had found such staunch and supportive friends in Trixie Belden and Honey Wheeler.

Veronica stood in front of her daughter, her eyes misty, and ran a loving hand over Di's luscious hair. "Three weeks ago, when you were wearing your cap and gown, I couldn't believe how grown up you were, and that my little girl was a college graduate. It didn't seem possible. But now, seeing you in your wedding gown, it's really hit me what a beautiful adult you've become."

Diana smiled and threw her arms around her mother. Honey quickly snapped a picture of the mother-daughter embrace. The click and flash made both Veronica and Diana look toward the honey-haired young woman.

"I'm sorry," Honey said. "I didn't mean to startle you or pull you out of the moment, but that was just too touching *not* to take a picture of."

"Don't be silly!" Mrs. Lynch assured her daughter's friend. "I can't wait to see it." Diana nodded her agreement, happy that her friend had caught the moment on film for posterity.

"Is everything going okay out there, Mummy?" Di asked, her mind returning to more practical matters.

"Like clockwork," Mrs. Lynch answered cheerfully, the spell of the moment before broken, and reached for the camera that she had placed on the table earlier. "I know that there will be lots of professional pictures of you all, but I want a nice, simple one with my camera. You three are the most beautiful sight I've ever seen!"

Trixie looked down at the simple floor-length, A-line dress of deep indigo Bella satin that Di had chosen for her bridesmaids—with their input—and back up at her friend's mother.

"For once, I *feel* beautiful," she said with a cheeky grin. There were the usual cries of protest at Trixie's statement, but after a few moments, the girls were in position and smiling, and Veronica had the picture she desired.

"Where are Rachel and Cassie? Were Brooke and Cécile able to find them?" Diana asked, wondering if she even wanted to know the answer. Her twelve-year-old sisters had been thrilled to be chosen as

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junior bridesmaids in their big sister's wedding, but, under the continual influence of their fourteen-year-old twin brothers and fifteen-year-old Bobby Belden, they were rather high spirited, as Honey liked to diplomatically say. The girls could be anywhere from playing hide-and-seek in the narthex or outside building snowmen in the newly fallen snow.

Veronica smiled. "Fortunately, Helen has taken charge of the little angels and has them helping with the guest book. She was going to bring them back in here in a few minutes, along with Ariadna."

Ariadna was Diana's cousin, the seven-year-old daughter of her Uncle Monty and Aunt Jane.

Just then, the door opened and two energetic twelve-year-olds burst through the doors, wearing less sophisticated versions of the satin and organza dresses that the older bridesmaids were wearing, and hurled themselves at their older sister. The deep V necks of the more mature dresses were replaced with innocent scoop necks, but both versions had empire waists with a band of delicately embroidered beaded trim. The older girls' V necks ended elegantly into the banded empire waist, and the band on the junior bridesmaids dresses just added a little something spectacular to the otherwise simple dress.

Following Di's younger twin sisters were two familiar faces: Brooke Callahan, Di's roommate her freshman year at Cornell, and Cécile Ouragan, a kindred spirit that she had met during her year abroad in Europe. Brooke's petite, blonde vivaciousness rivaled that of even Trixie's, providing a stark contrast to the elegant and willowy redhead at her side.

"Rachel! Cassie!" Veronica exclaimed. "What are you up to?" she demanded as the pair hurled themselves at Diana. There was a sharp intake of breath as everyone waited to see the damage done to the ravishing bride, but Di's tinkling laugh set everyone at ease.

She hugged her sisters tightly, not caring about potential stains or wrinkles or any other disasters that less even-tempered bridezillas worried about. What was a dress compared to her two sisters? If people noticed some crumpled silk on her wedding day, they weren't worth worrying about anyway.

"What *are* you two girls up to?" she asked affectionately, repeating her mother's question.

"Bobby and Terry and Larry reminded us that we should be in here with you," Rachel started.

"And not bothering *them*," Cassie put in.

"And then Mrs. Belden reminded us that we *needed* to be, not just *should* be, back here with you," Rachel continued.

"Because we're the bride's sisters," Cassie added.

"*Only* sisters," Rachel emphasized.

"And then we thought about how we're going to *lose* you," Cassie wailed, dragging out the word "lose" so that it seemed to have an infinite number of syllables.

"So we *had* to come right back here," Rachel stated.

"And give you a hug," the two girls finished together. As the two preteens gave Diana another hug, which was returned vigorously, the other women in the room looked at each other and smiled. There was definitely a shared laughter at the antics of the girls, but it was also clear that they had all been moved by the sentimentality of the moment.

Brooke was especially touched at this poignant moment, but the knowledge that Katie, her cherished younger sister, was sitting in this very church awaiting a beautiful moment in time, satisfied her to her very core. There had been times when she had wondered if her sister would survive the hand she had been dealt—never mind being happy-go-lucky, carefree, and wildly happy like Di's fortunate sisters—but over the years, she had learned what her sister had needed to cope, and she was happy to say that

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she believed that her sister had come through the tunnel and made it to the other side. Quiet, brown-haired Katie would never have the wild enthusiasm that the lovely black-haired Lynch twins shared, but she was going to be fine. And Brooke would be forever grateful for that.

The sound of the door opening made everyone turn in that direction. It was Trixie's mom, wearing a lovely, bright blue silk mother-of-the-groom dress that set off her blonde curls and china blue eyes, with a wide-eyed seven-year-old in tow.

"Ariadna was a wonderful help with the guest book," Helen said as she gently urged the shy girl into the room with the rest of the female half of the wedding party.

"I knew you'd be a special helper today," Di said, encouraging her young cousin to approach her. "Did you have fun?"

Ariadna, her black eyes shining, nodded happily, but she was still too shy to say anything in front of all of the pretty ladies in their fancy dresses. Even her twelve-year-old cousins, with whom she enjoyed rough-housing when they visited her family in Arizona, seemed somehow too grown-up and dignified to talk to or play with. She seemed to forget that just a short while before, she had watched the high-spirited girls darting about the church, urging Bobby to chase them.

"Are you excited to walk down the aisle with Bobby?" Di asked.

Again, Ariadna just nodded her head wildly, still refusing to speak. Then, once again, the doors opened, and this time Gloria Belden, née Duncan, entered the room carrying her three-year-old daughter, Chelsea, who was to be Diana's flower girl.

"What a good-looking crowd!" Gloria cried as she spied the all of them arrayed in their wedding day finery. Her eyes met Diana's. "Di, you look beautiful!"

Di smiled at her about-to-be cousin-in-law. "Thanks, Gloria. We're so glad that you and Knut could make it all the way from Idaho. And that Chelsea and Patrick could be in the wedding." Patrick was Knut and Gloria's six-year-old son.

"We wouldn't have missed it for anything. And we're just so excited that you wanted Chelsea and Patrick in the wedding!"

"They're such darlings, how could we not want them in the wedding?"

A knock sounded on the door, and Gloria turned. "Who is it?" she called. "Mart, if that's you clowning around..."

"Nope, it's not the groom. Just your friendly neighborhood photographer." The man chuckled. "Would the lovely bride like some pictures to remember this day by?"

"You bet!" Di said, hurrying toward the door as fast as her dress would allow. "Come on in!"

An older gentleman, his hair long ago turned grey, entered carrying a camera bag and equipment. "Just got done photographing that feller of yours," he said as he began to set up his gear. "He's a natural born entertainer, isn't he?"

"I'll say!" Trixie piped up.

The photographer looked up at her. "And you must be that sister he was talking about. Same bone structure, same blue eyes, same blonde hair."

Trixie nodded, having long ago accepted that she and Mart, the "almost twins," certainly could pass for the twins everyone thought that they were. "Yep, I'm Trixie."

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"I'm John," the elderly man said, his eyes sweeping over the room, finally resting on Helen Belden. "And you're the woman those two got their genes from."

Helen laughed. "That's correct, John."

"This is a lovely group," John said as he finished setting up his equipment. "I want to take the majority of the pictures in the church after the ceremony, but I think a few of the bride with her attendants helping her get ready are always nice, too."

So, the laughing group posed happily for pictures for the next twenty minutes, until John looked at his watch. "We've got fifteen minutes before the ceremony, so I am going to go set up in the main church," he explained. He smiled at Di and said, "You're a lovely woman, Diana, and Mart is a lucky man. Enjoy your day."

Di beamed. "I'm the lucky one. And I will definitely enjoy this day. It's been a long, hard journey, and I intend to make the most of it!"

"A lovely attitude," the photographer said as he moved about gathering lenses and lights and other photography equipment.

Veronica turned to her daughter. "Are you ready?"

Diana took a deep breath and nodded. "More than you know."

Trixie, unable to contain her happiness any longer burst out, "You're going to be my *sister*!"

"Diana Belden," Di agreed, a dreamy quality entering her voice. "I can't believe this day is here!"

One minute Di was surrounded by her attendants, all attempting to hug her and congratulate her, and then, in the blink of an eye, suddenly Diana found herself on her father's arm slowly walking down the aisle, Pachelbel's Canon in D Minor playing softly. As she walked down the aisle, her eyes moved to the left and right, happy to see her friends and family beaming at her. She returned their smiles with a brilliant one of her own. It was obvious to everyone that, no matter how hard the road had been to get to this moment in time, Diana was amazingly happy.

Diana's eyes moved to the front of the church, purposely avoiding Mart for a moment, knowing that once she looked at him, she would see nothing else, and she wanted to be sure she savored everything that she could in the church first, memorizing this moment in time that would be gone all too soon. She saw Trixie, in all of her blonde pertness, grinning at her, and Honey, in all of her brunette elegance, smiling softly at her. Brian and Dan stood on the other side, each looking darkly handsome in their tuxes. Brooke, Cécile, Jim, and Cooper Houghton, Mart's college roommate, rounded out the beautiful picture at the front of the church.

And then, not able to prolong the wait a moment longer, her eyes sought out her future husband. Mart was standing there with such a look of love and adoration on his face that Di's breath was taken away instantly. Suddenly, the music faded, the flower arrangements, bright with their holly berries that celebrated the Advent season, were gone, all of the people in attendance disappeared, and Mart Belden and Diana Lynch were the only people on earth.

In some ways, it felt like forever, and in other ways, Di's march toward the man she loved was over in the blink of an eye. When they reached the altar, Edward Lynch lifted Di's veil and kissed her on the cheek. "You'll always be my little girl, Diana," he said, his eyes moist.

"You'll always be my daddy," Di said, hardly able to get the words out, so emotional was she.

As rehearsed, Ed took Diana's hand and placed it into Mart's. "Take care of her," he said to his future son-in-law.

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"Always," Mart promised, staring into Diana's lovely eyes.

With one last smile, Ed took his seat in the front pew next to his own bride.

"I've always thought you were beautiful," Mart murmured to Di, "but I've never seen you like this."

Diana smiled. "You look pretty handsome yourself."

"Should we get married now?"

"Absolutely."

The couple turned, hand in hand, and walked the last five steps toward the altar together.

The pastor, who had known both Mart and Diana since they were small children, smiled at them. "It is my pleasure to welcome Mart and Diana's family and friends to this joyous occasion as we gather here today, in the presence of these witnesses, to join Martin Andrew Belden and Diana Marie Lynch in holy matrimony, which is commended to be honorable among all men; and therefore it is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, and solemnly. Into this holy estate Mart and Diana now come to be joined. If any person can show just cause why they may not be joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

After a moment of silence, the pastor continued, "Now, who supports this couple in their marriage?"

As rehearsed, Ed and Veronica Lynch and Peter and Helen Belden stood and said, "We, their parents, do."

The pastor nodded, and the Lynches and Beldens returned to sitting. The distinguished-looking man continued with the next part of the ceremony.

"This is the time that you have chosen to become husband and wife. We are here not only to witness your commitment to each other, but to wish you every happiness in your future life together. Marriage is founded on sincerity and understanding, which leads to tolerance, confidence, and trust. We believe that those qualities that have attracted you both to each other can be best developed during a life spent together. A happy marriage will enable you to establish a home with love and stability where your family and friends will always be welcome."

Mart and Di turned to smile at each other at the pastor's words. As the pastor continued with several passages about the institution of marriage, Diana had to blink back tears. She could hardly believe that after all that she had done, Mart still loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

"And now it is time for Mart and Diana's vows," Pastor Seltz said, bringing Diana's full attention back to the ceremony. "Diana and Mart, please face each other and hold hands," the pastor commanded. Diana turned behind her and handed Trixie her bouquet of white and heirloom midnight blue roses, the petals of which complimented the indigo bridesmaids dresses perfectly, and then turned back to face Mart. Mart happily took both of her hands in his.

"Martin, please repeat after me. I, Martin Andrew Belden, take you, Diana Marie Lynch..."

"I, Martin Andrew Belden, take you Diana Marie Lynch..." Mart's voice came out clear and strong as he said the words he had wanted to say for a very long time.

And Mart repeated the following vows:

"To be my wife, my partner in life, and my one true love. I will cherish our union and love you more each day than I did the day before. I will trust you and respect you, laugh with you and cry with you, loving you faithfully through good times and bad, regardless of the obstacles we may face together. I give you my hand, my heart, and my love from this day forward for as long as we both shall live."

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There was such conviction in Mart's voice, that there was no doubt in anyone's mind, least of all Diana's, that they would be together "until death did they part," as the old saying went.

"And now, Diana, please repeat after me. I, Diana Marie Lynch, take you, Martin Andrew Belden..."

The love and conviction in Diana's voice as she repeated the vows was apparent even to the guests in the very last pew.

After the vows were said, Mart whispered, "I love you," squeezing Diana's hands.

"I love you, too," Diana said, blinking back the tears that were threatening again.

The pastor announced a reading by the bride's father, who chose a passage from First Corinthians so commonly read at weddings, but so apropos, that began, "Love is patient, love is kind..." Mr. Lynch did a beautiful job on the reading, but it was also clear by the end of it that he, too, was overcome with emotion.

Next came a reading from Peter Belden, who chose a Shakespearian passage to complement the Biblical one that Edward had chosen. Peter's voice was strong and true as he read the passage from *Love's Labours Lost* that began, "But love, first learned in a lady's eyes, lives not alone immured in the brain..." And through it all, Mart and Di stared into each other's eyes and smiled like two giddy teenagers in love. As Helen looked up at the couple, she remembered when they *had* been two giddy teenagers in love and knew that the pair had come full circle.

Peter finished his reading and sat down next to his wife, taking her hand in his and reflecting that it wasn't possible that his children were old enough to take wives and husbands of their own. Although Mart was his second child, somehow it didn't surprise him that he was the first one to wed. And the fact that he was marrying his childhood sweetheart, whom Peter had come to love as a daughter many years before, made the moment all the sweeter.

"And now it is time for the couple to exchange their wedding rings. The circle of the rings symbolizes unity and eternity. Gold represents that which is precious and valued. As you give these rings to each other, our prayer is that your love will continue in precious unity forever. Wear these rings as symbols of your love for one another and of what you have pledged this day. Amen."

As he spoke, Diana turned to Honey, who gave her the simple gold band that would be Mart's wedding ring. Brian held out the gold and diamond band that matched Di's engagement ring.

"Diana, take this ring and place it upon Mart's finger and say to him, 'Today we have moved from I to we. Mart, take this ring as a symbol of my decision to join my life with yours until death should us part. I walked to this place to meet you today; we shall walk from it together.'"

Diana and Mart had practiced this ahead of time, knowing it was a long phrase to remember, and Diana said the words from memory as she placed the shining band on Mart's finger.

As Mart repeated the same vow, he gently placed the other shining band on Diana's finger, loving the way it looked resting on her finger and the very awesome bond that it signified.

Pastor Seltz continued, "Today, Mart and Diana come here from two different families. Out of these two families, a new family will be created in the Lord. At this time, I invite the parents of Mart and Diana to come forward and light the individual candles that represent the two separate families. The two individual flames, one representing each family, will demonstrate to us in a very beautiful way the symbol of two who become one. From now on, they will grow together as unique persons becoming a light to the world."

As the celebrant spoke, Edward and Veronica and Helen and Peter moved forward and, with gentle smiles at their children, lit the candles. A flutist played a soft and romantic love song that had been

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popular when Mart and Diana had been teenagers. It had been playing during their first kiss. After their parents had lit the candles and returned to their seats, and the last notes of the song were played, the pastor turned to Mart and Diana.

"The candle you are about to light is a candle of marriage. Its fire is magical because it represents the light of two people in love." As he spoke, the couple moved around the altar and stood in front of the candles, facing the congregation.

"This candle before you," Pastor Seltz continued, "is a candle of commitment because it takes two people working together to keep it aflame. This candle is also a candle of unity because both must come together, giving a spark of themselves, to create the new light. As you light this candle today, may the brightness of the flame shine throughout your lives. May it give you courage and reassurance in darkness, warmth and safety in the cold, and strength and joy in your bodies, minds, and spirits. May your union be forever blessed."

With this, Mart took the candle that his parents had lit, Diana picked up the candle that the Lynches had lit, and with motions that mirrored each other, the couple lit the main unity candle.

As they walked back around the altar to retake their places in front of the minister, Pastor Seltz continued the unity ceremony. "Let the light guide Mart and Diana and remind them to renew their vows each day as the memory of this joyous occasion reminds us:

The Way is Long—Let Us Go Together
The Way is Difficult—Let Us Help Each Other
The Way is Joyful—Let Us Share It
The Way Is Ours Alone—Let Us Go In Love
The Way Grows Before Us—Let Us Begin."

Honey and Trixie turned to share a look with each other, both of them unabashed as tears poured down their faces. For just a moment, a very slight moment, Honey suddenly had a vision of a different life, a life where she married Brian. Not because she still longed for Brian—she had managed to get that out of her system during her sophomore year of college—but because she had a sudden realization that if she had married Brian, then Trixie, Diana, and she would be real sisters. And then Honey shook her head.

What am I thinking? she berated herself, looking over where Dan stood on the other side of Mart, looking so handsome in his black tux. *Diana, Trixie, and I are real sisters, in every way that matters.*

Mart and Diana returned to the front of the altar, and Diana took her bouquet of roses back from Trixie. Following a closing prayer, Pastor Seltz said, "By the power vested in me by the State of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder." He smiled down at the lovely couple. "You may now kiss the bride."

Which is exactly what Mart proceeded to do—soundly—as their family and friends looked on, laughing and clapping.

"I now present to you Mart and Diana Belden."

Diana Belden. Di thought. *I am now Diana Belden.* And with adoration in her violet eyes, Diana smiled up at her new husband. And with love lighting his blue eyes, Mart looked deep into the eyes of his wife. Both of them were ready for their life together, and whatever it held.

~*~*~*~*

It's All About Forever

December 7, Eight Years Ago

Phelps Memorial Hospital Center Birthing Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York

"Push, honey," Mart encouraged his wife. "C'mon, you can do it."

"What the hell do you know?" Di grunted at him, her facial features contorted from the pain of childbirth. "You're not the one doing this."

"I know, sweetie," Mart said, keeping his voice as even and pleasant as possible, as he had been trained to do as his wife's birthing coach. "But I *am* here for you. You know that."

"Whatever," Di panted as the painful contraction continued to rip through her body.

"It's okay, sweetie," Mart said in soothing tones. "Push. Hold your breath and push."

"Screw pushing!" Di shouted.

Mart threw a panicked look at one of the nurses attending Di's birth, begging for support.

The nurse had seen that look many a time, from many a young father—heck, even the older ones—and she was able to keep a straight face, although she smiled inside. She gave him a reassuring look and turned to her patient.

"I know it hurts, sweetie," the nurse said comfortingly. "I've done this four times myself. But you need to listen to your husband and push. The more you push, the sooner this will all be over."

In response to the nurse's reassuring words, Di made a determined face and pushed. Mart gave the nurse a hurried look of appreciation before turning his entire attention back on his laboring wife.

The pain of the latest contraction subsided, and Di relaxed a bit, leaning back into her pillow and relaxing her death grip on Mart's hand. After too short of a respite, another contraction hit just thirty seconds or so later. Di tensed, but she did not lift herself off the pillow and begin pushing as she was supposed to do with each contraction.

The doctor spoke up then. "Di, I know you want to relax, but you can't just yet. There will be plenty of time for rest later. I really need you to push for me."

"I can't!" Di wailed.

Mart looked deep into the eyes of his exhausted wife. The contractions had started more than twenty hours ago, and she had been in hard labor now for more than an hour.

"Yes, you can, Diana," he said in a calm and steady voice. Di immediately reacted to the tranquility in her husband's voice, her spirits visibly perking up. Mart continued, "You know you can do anything you set your mind to, especially if I'm here. And I *am* here for you, sweetie. I'm right here beside you every step of the way."

Di nodded and renewed her efforts at pushing. Mart encouraged her softly as she pushed with all of her might and main. She grunted nearly continually and cried out several times, but she did not waver in her efforts to bring her child into the world.

Although it seemed like hours to Diana, it passed in the blink of an eye for Mart. One moment, his wife was straining with the pressure of childbirth, and the next, he was hearing the lusty wails of his daughter. Tears immediately sprung to his eyes at the sound, and his attention was finally pulled from his wife, his eyes traveling to where Dr. Sedgwick was holding the tiny, screaming newborn.

"Oh, God, Di," Mart choked out, his voice raw with emotion. "She's beautiful."

"Of. Course. She. Is." Di panted even as she continued to push, knowing that she could not stop yet. "She's. Your. Daughter."

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"Shh, sweetie, don't talk," Mart said, his eyes looking over to where the nurse was hastily clamping the umbilical cord so that the doctor could hurriedly cut it. This accomplished, the nurse placed the newborn underneath a heat lamp and began the process of cleaning out the nasal passages with a squeegee and placing silver nitrate into the eyes to prevent any infections.

"Mart's right, Diana," Dr. Sedgwick said encouragingly. "You still have a little work to do. Your other daughter would like to join her sister."

Di nodded, feeling positively renewed with the joy she felt at hearing one of her daughter's cries. She screwed up her face in concentration and began pushing again. Four minutes later, the first baby's mewling cries were obscured with the sounds of a hearty wail as the second twin joined the world.

Di finally threw herself back into her pillow, too exhausted to even cry at the sight of her two daughters. Mart looked at Di with awe and amazement, his face lit with pure unadulterated joy.

"Diana Marie Belden, you are one amazing woman. I love you so much."

Di tried to smile at him, but even the slight effort that it took to lift her lips into a smile was too much for her.

"Love. You. Too." She managed to gasp out.

"Dad," Dr. Sedgwick said. "Would you like to cut the umbilical cord on this one?"

Mart looked toward Di, who nodded. He immediately joined the obstetrician and proudly cut the cord. The second nurse took the second baby to join her twin.

After a few moments, they reported that the first baby weighed in at five pounds, one ounce, and the second baby weighed four pounds, fourteen ounces.

"For twins, those are respectable weights," the doctor reported, "but we still need to take them to the neonatal ward."

Di nodded. The birthing center staff had explained to them ahead of time that in the case of multiple births, the children were always taken to the premie ward even if they were full-term. Di had been expecting this.

"Before we take them, would you like to hold them?"

Di nodded again, still too exhausted to form a coherent sentence.

Each nurse brought a baby over to Diana and placed one in each arm.

"Do you know their names?" one of the nurses asked, standing back and smiling at the new family. They made a beautiful picture, and the husband's love and devotion to his wife were tangible as he stared down at her and the two children with complete adoration. Mart was thrilled to see that both girls already had full heads of thick, dark hair.

"The oldest is Charlotte Helen," Di finally spoke, the name rolling off her tongue in the most satisfying manner. "And her little sister is Caroline Veronica."

"Beautiful," the nurse murmured. "Just beautiful."

"Yes," Mart agreed. "They are. All three of my girls."

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It's All About Forever

Saturday Before Christmas, The Present

Glen Road Inn Garden Room, Sleepyside-on-Hudson, New York

Trixie Frayne sat back and impatiently flipped a loose blonde curl off of her forehead. "Tell me again why we decided to organize this party a few days before Christmas, the busiest time of the year?"

"Because Diana and Mart are family and this is a special anniversary for them and we love them and we would do anything for them. Even plan their tenth wedding anniversary party in the middle of the insanity of the Christmas season," Honey told her all in one breath, her words coming out as one long, run-on sentence, as she stepped back to look at the centerpiece of white and heirloom midnight blue roses that she had just arranged on the main table.

Both girls looked up as Brian, Dan, and Lexi entered the room carrying boxes of decorations. "Where do you want these?" Dan asked his wife.

Honey looked around the Glen Road Inn Garden Room, the banquet room that the inn used for private parties and events, trying to determine the best place for the candles and other assorted decorations. Finally, she pointed to a corner. "I guess just put them there. They'll be out of the way, but still convenient for unloading."

"Tell me again why we didn't just let the event planning staff of the inn do all this," Dan said.

"Because Diana and Mart are family and this is a special anniversary for them and we love them and we would do anything for them. Even plan their tenth wedding anniversary party in the middle of the insanity of the Christmas season," Trixie said in a sing-song voice as she threw a wicked grin and a mischievous glance at Honey.

Honey rolled her eyes. "Because we all agreed that we really wanted to echo the theme of their wedding reception, and the event planning staff wasn't there. *We were.*"

Lexi quietly set her box down and thought, *No, Honey, not all of us were.* She then looked up brightly, chasing the shadows from her mind. As she looked up, she caught Trixie's glance and the look on her face and realized that her sister-in-law must be thinking similar thoughts.

Lexi smiled at her sister-in-law and gave her a look that clearly said, "Water under the bridge. It all turned out all right."

Trixie returned Lexi's smile and turned her attention back to the task at hand: making the Garden Room of the Glen Road Inn look much as it had almost exactly ten years ago, but with some additions. Honey had insisted on adding touches of aluminum, the traditional tenth wedding anniversary gift that symbolized that a successful marriage needs to be flexible and durable and can be bent without being broken. The vases in which the flower arrangements were held were polished aluminum, modern and traditional all at once, much like Diana and Mart themselves. The traditional colors of the tenth anniversary were silver and blue, and the touches of aluminum and midnight blue roses echoed that tradition nicely.

As the traditional flower that represented the tenth anniversary was the daffodil, representing joy, cheerfulness, and happiness, Honey had added touches of white daffodils here and there. The white, trumpet-shaped flowers mixed nicely with the white and midnight blue roses.

Dan looked at Brian and grinned, an evil glint in his dark eyes. "Hey, at least they're not making us listen to Christmas music."

Brian groaned. "You *had* to mention it. Now they probably will!"

Trixie faced her eldest brother. "And what, pray tell, is wrong with Christmas music? Especially when it's only a few days until Christmas!"

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"There is absolutely nothing wrong with Christmas music," Brian conceded. "Unless you've been listening to it nonstop since Thanksgiving!"

Lexi looked indignant. "I did *not* make you start listening to Christmas music at Thanksgiving!" she protested.

"No, but it was during Thanksgiving that I pulled all of those double shifts so that I would be sure to have enough time off to celebrate Di and Mart's anniversary *and* Christmas *and* New Year's. Unfortunately, the head of the pediatrics ward thinks that listening to cheerful Christmas music will help the kids' spirits, so he starts piping it in the day before Thanksgiving. By the time Christmas comes, the staff and the poor kids who've been inpatients for a while are ready to go insane." He grinned at his wife. "And it doesn't help that when you come home, your wife has it going nonstop there, too."

"Well, I like it," she defended herself. "But I only start listening to it about two weeks before Christmas. That's definitely soon enough for me." She grinned at her husband. "At least I don't start listening to it before Daylight Saving Time just to get an extra hour of it in a year!"

Brian groaned. "Don't even joke!"

"Well, my wife *does* have it playing the day after Thanksgiving," Dan said with the sigh of a long-suffering husband, but the twinkle in his eye and the wink cast in his wife's direction made it clear that he really did not feel that way at all.

Honey managed to look regal as she responded, "At least the day after Thanksgiving is considered the official start of the Christmas season, so it's not inappropriate at all. I mean, they play all of that Muzak stuff that's supposed to pass for Christmas music to get shoppers in the mood for all of those after-Thanksgiving sales then." She threw a sly glance at Trixie. "At least I don't have it playing the day after Halloween, which is clearly a thoroughly inappropriate time to start listening to Christmas music."

At Honey's statement, everyone noticed that Trixie suddenly seemed to busy herself in a box of decorations as though the extra vases that were contained within were the most fascinating things on earth.

Brian stared at his sister. "Seriously?"

Trixie continued to paw through the box of decorations pretending to mutter to herself about vases and their proper placement on tables and the proper polish for aluminum versus silver.

"Trixie, seriously?" Dan echoed Brian.

Trixie looked up, her face a mask of innocence. "I beg your pardon?" she said, her voice a portrait of intended nonchalance. "I was busy ensuring that these lovely, modern aluminum vases that Honey chose were properly polished. I had a lot of practice polishing Moms' silver, you know, so I figured I was the most properly qualified individual to ensure that these adornments retained their fine luster."

Dan snorted as Honey and Lexi burst out laughing while Brian shook his head.

"I will never understand why you and Mart pretend to despise each other when you're more alike than two peas in a pod!" Brian threw up his hands and grabbed a nearby box of ivy, stalking across the room to the arbor that had been placed at the entrance, just as it had been ten years before. He began to entwine the ivy into the latticework to create a stunning effect.

With a knowing smile in Trixie's direction, Lexi wandered over to help Brian decorate the arbor. Honey realized that she had forgotten to bring the ivory-handled cake serving set in from her car and started after it. Dan volunteered to go instead and took off quickly. Honey then set about placing midnight blue taper candles into an elaborate aluminum candelabra on the main table. It had been nearly impossible

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to find an aluminum candelabra that was appropriate for the occasion, but Honey had succeeded and was extremely proud of herself.

Trixie ducked her head to hide her grin. Her ploy to distract everyone by talking like Mart had worked!

"I see that grin, Trixie," Honey said. "Don't think you're fooling anyone."

Trixie laughed out loud. "I don't care if I'm fooling anyone or not," she admitted. "All that matters is that I don't have a crowd of people around me demanding to know why I was listening to Bing Crosby and Johnny Mathis on All Saints' Day! Thanks a lot, *pal*."

Honey imitated Trixie's sing-song voice of a few minutes before. "'Because Diana and Mart are family and this is a special anniversary for them and we love them and we would do anything for them. Even plan their tenth wedding anniversary party in the middle of the insanity of the Christmas season.'"

Honey switched back to her regular voice. "We're even, *pal*."

Lexi, standing across the room next to Brian, looked wistfully toward the two old friends, who had just dissolved into giggles over something Honey had said. She wished she had a friendship as easy as the two girls had. She had friends, good friends even, and the Bob-White girls, especially Trixie, had always accepted her.

Well, mostly, she amended ruefully to herself. She had always felt welcome at Crabapple Farm and in Sleepyside, but she had never had a friendship that was as comfortable as the one that Trixie Frayne and Honey Mangan shared.

And then she looked at the tall, dark man at her side and realized that she was being ridiculous. She *did* have a friendship as comfortable as the one that Trixie and Honey shared, and she was doubly lucky that her best friend was also her husband.

Brian looked at her, concerned. "You seem a million miles away. Anything wrong?" he frowned.

Lexi smiled up at him, and Brian was instantly assured when he saw the glowing happiness on her lovely face. "There's absolutely nothing wrong," she said.

~*~*~*~*

Later that Evening

Glen Road Inn Garden Room, Sleepyside-on-Hudson, New York

"You guys are the best!" Di squealed as she gave Honey and Trixie enthusiastic hugs.

Honey and Trixie happily hugged her back. "Well, you *are* family," Trixie said, her blue eyes twinkling, "and this *is* a special anniversary for you and we *love* you and we would do *anything* for you."

Honey laughed good-naturedly. "Even plan your tenth wedding anniversary party in the middle of the insanity of the Christmas season!"

Diana smiled. "I know! What was I thinking, getting married between Christmas and New Year's Day?"

Trixie gave her a sly grin. "You were thinking that Mart promised to marry you when you graduated, and you had been graduated for more than three weeks by that time."

Honey laughed at Trixie's comment as Di smiled ruefully. "You're not far off on that!" she admitted cheerfully.

"Oh, please!" Trixie protested.

"It's true!" Di said, leaning forward conspiratorially. The sleek, crystal glass, half-filled with champagne, was a testament to her loose mood. "I was sure that if I waited until June, he would change his mind."

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"As if!" Honey exclaimed.

"Oh, please!" Trixie repeated. "Mart? Change his mind? About marrying you? Are you kidding?"

Di continued to smile, but her features changed slightly, reflecting the seriousness of her sudden thoughts. "Seriously. I was so afraid that he was going to wake up one day, remember how much I hurt him, and leave me."

Trixie gave her sister-in-law an impulsive hug. "Sweetie, that would never, *ever* happen. Mart was so thrilled that you agreed to marry him, that there was no way he was ever going to change his mind. He loves you—truly, madly, deeply—and he couldn't wait to walk down the aisle with you."

Honey nodded vigorously. "Absolutely!" she agreed vehemently, also feeling the effects of the champagne. "You two are perfect for each other. There was no way that either one of you were going to get cold feet or chicken out or change your mind."

Trixie added her nodding to Honey's. "And ten years and three bee-yoot-i-ful children later, it's even more obvious than it was then!"

"And that's saying something!" Honey giggled.

Di smiled. "You guys!"

And once again, the three old friends were hugging each other and laughing, almost as though the last eighteen years had not happened and they were thirteen years old again, giggling over Halloween parties or laughing over a shared joke.

Mart looked over and saw his bride, the mother of his children, sharing mirth with his sister and one of his oldest friends—three of his fellow Bob-Whites of the Glen laughing together—and he was overcome with such emotion that he lost track of what his sister-in-law, Rachel, was saying about her college English seminar. Suddenly, an overwhelming peace settled upon him, and he knew that all was right with the world. Di had not gotten cold feet, she had not changed her mind, and ten wonderful years later, he was still as in love with her as he had been as a teenager.

All was right with the world.

Di looked up then, and her violet eyes caught his blue ones. Her face lit up as a slow grin appeared on her face, the same grin that still turned his insides to jelly to this day. He smiled back and turned back to Rachel, who was giving him a knowing grin.

"I love that you love my sister like that," she said with an impish smile. "I'll never forget how sappy you both looked on your wedding day. I thought it was gross at the time!" she said with a self-conscious laugh, not believing that she was actually admitting this to her brother-in-law. "And after all of these years, you two still look at each other like...like Romeo and Juliet!" She looked over to where her sister stood with her two friends. "It makes me so happy that Di's happy."

Mart was touched at Rachel's admission, even the part about it being gross. He smiled at the lovely college coed. "It makes me happy that Di's happy, too."

Rachel smiled up at her brother-in-law. "I'm starving, so I know *you* must be. Let's go hit the dessert table, shall we?"

Mart glanced over at Di, who was in deep, whispered conversation with her two best friends, and, seeing that she was obviously busy, turned back to his sister-in-law and agreed. Rachel accepted the arm he offered, and feeling rather grown up, marched on over to the dessert table, which was filled with all sorts of glorious and scrumptious desserts. There was even a fountain flowing with melted chocolate

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for the guests to dip strawberries, pieces of pineapple, pretzel sticks, and pieces of pound cake into. Mart was in heaven.

"Honey sure does know how to pick out a dessert buffet!" he exclaimed, his eyes taking in all of the luscious confections in front of him. *Where to begin?* he thought almost ruefully as he stared, wondering which scrumptious morsel called out his name the loudest.

Rachel laughed at Mart's expression and immediately went for a chocolate swirl cheesecake. No indecision there!

Brian and Lexi walked by the dessert table, arm-in-arm, but both of them were still so stuffed from the elegant meal they had just eaten that they passed the table by with only a glance.

"How about some fresh air?" Brian asked as they continued to stroll past the dance floor where various couples were dancing to a current love ballad.

"It's freezing outside," Lexi protested.

"Just for a minute," Brian pleaded. "I think the stars will be gorgeous tonight, because it's so bright and clear, and I'll be there to keep you warm."

Lexi smiled up at her husband. "You *are* good at that," she said, a dimple appearing with her grin. "Okay, you've talked me into it."

Brian smiled happily as he led his wife toward the exit. He took off his suit jacket and draped it over Lexi's shoulders as they approached the door. In a few moments, the two were outside, and Brian was proven right. The stars shown brightly over the little village of Sleepyside. Of course, what once had been a small village had grown, but Brian still always thought of it as a little village. Ideas from youth sometimes never went away.

"It's so beautiful," Lexi commented. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to seeing how vivid the stars get on a clear, cold night. It's lovely in California, but the stars don't look so...sharp...in the winter."

Brian snorted. "Winter? Please!"

Lexi laughed. "Okay, during the months that most of the rest of the country calls winter. How's that Mr. East Coast?"

Brian stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her. "Much better, Miss West Coast."

"Miss? That's Mrs. West Coast to you, thank you very much!" Lexi scolded even as she leaned back into Brian's warmth and strength. Over the years, Lexi had come to associate Brian very closely with those precious commodities, warmth and strength.

"Well, no," Brian argued. "Now you're Mrs. East Coast," he pointed out. "You used to be Miss West Coast, and that's the person I was speaking to a minute ago, but now not only are you my wife, but you've also lived on the East Coast for most of the last decade and a half. Making you Mrs. East Coast," he finished triumphantly.

Lexi rolled her eyes. "You're the logical one. Whatever you say! Of course, I guess I should have called you *Dr.* East Coast."

The two stared up at the sky for a bit longer, and when the cold began to seep into their clothes, they decided to return to the party.

As they re-entered the hall, they ran into Brian's sister, who was apparently looking for them.

"There you are!" Trixie exclaimed, dragging each of them by the arm back into the Garden Room.

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"Whoa, little sis! What's the rush?" Brian demanded, shaking his arm free and coming to a halt. Trixie and Lexi stopped, and his sister gave him an impatient glare.

"The rush is that it's time for the Bob-White toast to Mart and Di and not all of the Bob-Whites are here! Sheesh!"

Lexi smiled at her sister-in-law's impatience and calmly took off Brian's jacket and returned the garment to its rightful owner. "You'll need this if you're going to get up in front of everyone," she said, only slightly jealous.

Trixie looked at her. "You're going up there with him," she said as if that should have been obvious.

"What?" Lexi asked, confused.

"You don't think we'd leave you out, do you? You're an honorary Bob-White of the Glen, you know."

"But.." Lexi started to protest, but Trixie was having none of it. The feisty blonde grabbed her by the arm and continued to lead her forward.

"No buts about it!" Trixie stated matter-of-factly. "You're Brian's wife—not to mention *my* sister—and you're going to be up there!"

Lexi didn't know if she imagined or not, but she could have sworn she heard Trixie continue under her breath, "It was bad enough that you weren't there the first time."

Lexi turned to Brian for help, but Brian just shrugged and followed the two women, a look of resignation on his handsome features. Everyone knew that once Trixie was determined to do something, dynamite wouldn't stop her. Many a criminal had found that out in the last two decades.

Trixie found the other Bob-Whites gathered near the front of the room, next to the head table. Each of them had a full glass of their beverage of choice, mostly champagne, and moved together to where the deejay stand was set up at the back of the dance floor. As soon as he saw her coming, the younger of the two deejays, a scruffy looking but handsome young man with longish brown hair, immediately grabbed the cordless microphone and offered it to her. Trixie eagerly took it and turned to the crowd.

"Excuse me," she said into the microphone. "Hey, everyone!"

The assembled guests quieted their conversations and turned to the blonde woman demanding their attention. In many ways, Sleepyside was still a small village, so most everyone present knew Trixie Frayne rather well, in some capacity or another.

"Hi, everyone," Trixie said brightly when she had the attention of the assembled guests. "First of all, I want to thank you all for coming. It means a lot to both my family and the Lynches to have everyone here celebrating Mart and Di's anniversary, especially during this very busy holiday season.

"Many of you were at the wedding, and so you know that we had a Bob-White toast to the happy couple. We'd like to keep up with tradition, so we're doing it again. And, since I have the biggest mouth, I'm going first." Trixie smiled as she heard a collective, knowing chuckle emanate from her audience. She took a deep breath, looked to where Di and Mart were standing, and began her mini speech.

"I've known Di *almost* as long as I've known Mart. I remember when I was a little girl—the only little girl saddled with three brothers, I might add—that I fervently wished that Di was my sister. She was so sweet and friendly and generous, that I just loved playing with her, and I knew, I just knew, that if we were sisters, we would have the most grand times staying up giggling all night at Crabapple Farm." Trixie chuckled. "Of course, we managed to do that fairly often as it was.

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"And when she and Mart began dating, it was obvious how perfect they were for each other, and I realized that some day Di *was* going to be my sister. It wasn't always easy, but Mart and Di's love for each other never wavered, and it brought them to where they are today." Trixie raised her champagne glass. "To Mart and Di. And Di, I'm thankful you're my sister."

Di's violet eyes were glittering with tears, and she blew Trixie a kiss to show that she was also thankful that Trixie was her sister.

During the applause, Trixie handed the microphone over to Honey, who smiled nervously at the crowd gathered before her.

"I'd also like to thank everyone for coming and celebrating with Mart and Diana and their families," she began. "I haven't known Mart and Di for nearly as long as Trixie, but I was able to see right away the respect and admiration that Mart and Di had for each other. It was so obvious that even a newcomer could see it. And, as I watched that respect and admiration blossom into something beautiful and lovely, like Trixie, I knew that Mart and Di would be together forever." She smiled, knowing that what she was about to say would be okay, because the past was in the past, and all of the pain surrounding Mart and Di's break up during her freshman year at Ithaca College had ebbed long ago. "Even when *they* didn't know it themselves."

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd, and everyone looked over at Mart and Di, who stood holding hands and looking slightly sheepish, even as they smiled, acknowledging the truth of Honey's statement.

"Here's to Mart and Di and a long and happy life together," Honey finished. Once again, the guests applauded. Honey turned to hand the microphone to Lexi.

"I'm not a Bob-White of the Glen," Lexi whispered, afraid to take the microphone. "I thought I was just going to stand here!"

Honey smiled reassuringly. "Nonsense. Di's your sister, too. Go ahead, take it," she urged her, pressing the cordless microphone into Lexi's hands. Lexi gave her a timid look, but Honey responded with an encouraging smile.

Lexi turned to face the crowd. "Unlike the Bob-Whites, I didn't grow up around here, but when I did move here, Brian told me that Moms always said that Crabapple Farm's walls were stretchy. He was right, and I was welcomed here with open arms. Di and Mart were especially welcoming. And I have to agree with Trixie and Honey that the love Di and Mart share is palpable. I remember watching them as teenagers and just knowing there was something *right* about them. Mart and Di," she addressed them, raising her glass, "congratulations and many blessings."

Lexi hurriedly gave the microphone over to Brian, relinquishing it as if it was a snake that might bite her. As nervous as she was and completely unprepared to give a toast, she had to admit that she had enjoyed being included in the Bob-White toast.

Brian smiled as he looked into the faces of his neighbors, friends, and family. "I guess we're all going to start sounding like broken records, but I just have to echo the girls in that it was obvious that what Mart and Di shared was going to last. I mean, who else was going to put up with Mart's appetite for food *and* inexplicably long words? Only someone with the patience of a saint, and that's our Di."

As everyone laughed, Mart pretended to be smote. "Mine own brother!" he exclaimed, a good-natured smile on his lips. Brian grinned at his brother and raised his glass.

"Mart and Diana Belden, may you grow old on one pillow."

Once again, the assembled guests showed their appreciation for the toast as Brian passed the microphone along to Jim.

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Jim, with a smile at Trixie and then over at the celebrating couple, began to speak into the microphone. "It's true what everyone has said so far, and that we all agree is a testament to the kind of love that Mart and Diana share, one that is strong, compassionate, passionate, faithful, and dedicated. One that is so solid, it is obvious to anyone who even spends only five minutes in their presence. Mart and Diana have been blessed to share in such a love and to have three beautiful children as a result. It is said that happy marriages begin when we marry the one we love, and they blossom when we love the one we're married to. Di and Mart have certainly proven that true." And with that, he raised his glass in a toast.

Finally, it was Dan's turn to speak. Much like he had done ten years ago, when he was preparing to make the best man's toast, he wasn't sure if he should go the comedy route or the sentimental route. Mart and Di both had wonderful senses of humor, but he also wanted to give a toast worthy of the awesome love that they shared. He took a deep breath and began what he hoped was a toast worthy of Mart and Di and their love.

"Hi, everyone. I'm also glad that you all could be here tonight. I was one of the best men ten years ago when Mart and Di married, and I remember how I agonized over the best man speech back then. I wanted a speech that would reflect not only Mart and Di's wonderful sense of humor, but would also be worthy of their love, too. Back then, I didn't really do as much research on best man toasts, but this time I did. The first thing I found out is what the ideal length of the speech should be. I was told, 'No longer than it takes the groom to make love.' So, according to Diana, I shouldn't be up here for more than 90 seconds."

Everyone burst into laughter, and Di looked shocked and amused at the same time. Mart turned to her, a look of amusement on his face. He didn't look upset or chagrined at all—he knew better than that.

After the room quieted down, Dan spoke again. "I'm just kidding, just kidding. She actually said three minutes." Diana shook her head and rolled her eyes but grinned just the same.

"In all seriousness, it was a pleasure to serve as best man ten years ago, just as it a pleasure to stand up here tonight and celebrate Mart and Di's love. Everyone else has already spoken of the uncommon bond that Mart and Di have always shared, and it's true. I remember what a clown Mart always was in high school, cutting up, trying to get people to laugh. His face always reflected that devil-may-care attitude, too." Dan paused. "Except when he looked at Di. When he looked at Di, even back in high school, all of the jokiness left his face. His face clearly said, 'This is someone special to me. This is someone I love.'"

"It was the same for Di. Di was always a lovely girl, but when she looked at Mart, her face just absolutely glowed. Even when he was annoying the rest of us with his outlandish vocabulary, Di never seemed to mind. She actually even seemed to admire it. Much to the chagrin of Mart's sister, Trixie. Looking at the two of them, you just knew that they were soul mates. Only soul mates could go through what they did and come out on the other side unscathed.

"Mart is an extremely lucky man. Diana is beautiful, smart, loving, warm, and funny. But, as Mart is the finest guy I know, it doesn't surprise me that he would attract such a wonderful person. I'd like to close with a combination of two traditional Irish wedding blessings, just as I did ten years ago.

"To Mart and Di,

May the road rise to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the sun shine warm upon your face
and the rain fall soft upon your fields
And until we meet again my friend
May God hold you in the hollow of his hand

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May God be with you and bless you
May you see your children's children
May you be poor in misfortunes and rich in Blessings
May you know nothing but happiness
from this day forward.

May the saddest day of your future
Be no worse than the happiest day of your past.
May your hands be forever clasped in friendship
And your hearts joined forever in love.

But rich or poor, quick or slow,
May you know nothing but happiness
From this day forward.
May the joys of today
Be those of tomorrow."

After he finished, he shyly returned the microphone to the Trixie and accepted Honey's arms around him.

"That was beautiful," she told him, her hazel eyes shining bright from tears of love and pride. "I knew you'd do fine."

"Thanks, sweetie," he said simply, returning her hug and smiling over at Mart and Di.

Trixie, meanwhile, was presenting Mart and Di with a group gift from the Bob-Whites, a beautifully made scrapbook that chronicled Mart and Di's life from grade school all the way through to the family portrait that they had just had taken a month before in honor of their upcoming anniversary.

"This is beautiful," Di said she accepted the gift, her eyes wet with tears. "Everything you all said was beautiful, and Mart and I cannot thank everyone here enough for celebrating with us. Thank you!"

Di handed the microphone back to the deejay, and the Bob-Whites gathered around, hugging Mart and Di.

"We really can't thank you enough," Di repeated, addressing her friends.

"Absolutely. And we also can't begin to thank you for organizing this party, right before Christmas no less," Mart added.

"I know the rest of the Bob-Whites helped you out," Di said, looking at Honey, "but I know that you were the driving force behind it." She looked around the room and made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "And all of your ideas were beautiful. I love that it looks so much like our wedding reception. And the added touches of the aluminum and the traditional tenth wedding anniversary colors was just a wonderful idea. Thank you so much, Honey."

"You know I'd do anything for you," Honey said, embarrassed as always to be receiving praise. She and Trixie had that in common.

"I know, and the feeling is mutual," Di murmured as she hugged her friend. If it hadn't been for Honey noticing how unhappy she was so many years ago, and doing something about it, Di might not have been here today.

Just then, the deejay spoke up into the microphone to get everybody's attention. "That was an absolutely beautiful series of toasts. It obvious that you all are wonderful friends, and I think that Di and Mart are lucky to be surrounded by such loving and caring people. And now, I would like to welcome the anniversary couple up for a spotlight dance, just the two of them. A little birdie told me that their

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first dance as a married couple was to 'Dream a Little Dream of Me' by The Mamas and the Papas, so I invite Mart and Diana Belden onto the dance floor to recreate that other magical moment."

Di and Mart were surprised at this development but by the looks on their faces, definitely pleased. Mart bowed gallantly before Di and then swept her onto the dance floor. Di absolutely loved to dance, and Mart, to please his beautiful bride, had taken a lesson or two here or there over the years, so watching them dance together was a delight for everyone.

At first, Di felt slightly self-conscious dancing as everyone looked on, but in a just a few moments, she was caught up in the moment, looking into Mart's blue eyes, which showered her with adoration and love, and suddenly everyone else seemed to melt away. The only two people in the world were her and the man that she loved, the father of her children.

"I love you, Martin Andrew Belden," she said, her own violet-colored eyes full of love and adoration, as well.

"And I love you, Diana Marie Belden," Mart said, leaning down to kiss her soft ruby red lips, much to the delight of the onlookers. "Any regrets?"

"Not a one," Di said dreamily. "You?"

"Not a one," Mart repeated, agreeing. "I'd marry you over and over and over again if I could."

"And I would do the same," Di said, leaning her head against his shoulder and sighing happily, remembering the happy moments they had shared together: their first meeting on the playground, the first time Mart asked her out, their first kiss, dancing at his senior prom, dancing at her senior prom, the first time they made love, his proposal, their wedding, their fifth anniversary, when he had whisked her away to Paris for a long weekend, having started saving for the occasion right after they had gotten married.

Mart is such a romantic, she thought to herself.

"I'll never forget the moment that I first laid eyes on you," Mart said, proving Di's thoughts correct. "Trixie marched right up to me on the playground the first day of school, and you were right behind her."

Di smiled up at her husband of ten years. "I remember, too. Somehow, I just knew you were special, even then. I also remember that when we danced at your prom, the rest of the world just melted away, and it was just the two of us. It feels like that now."

"Whenever I'm around you, Diana, dancing or not, the rest of the world ceases to exist," Mart said, giving her a sudden twirl around the dance floor with a grace and finesse that surprised many of the people in the Garden Room of the Glen Road Inn.

Di threw her head back and laughed. What a glorious night this was!

Early Christmas Morning, The Present

Home of Mart, Diana, Charlotte, Caroline, and Daniel Belden, Sleepyside-on-Hudson, New York

"Is it too early to wake up Mommy and Daddy now?" six-year-old Daniel Martin Belden asked his big sisters, his eyes wide. Like his sisters, he had thick, curly, dark hair, but while their eyes were the same clear blue as Mart's, Danny's were a mixture of his parents' eye colors, somewhere between blue and violet.

Charlotte and Caroline had just turned eight, and they knew an awful lot about stuff that Danny didn't. Like what time was a good time to wake Mommy and Daddy up on Christmas morning so that they could all go see what Santa Claus had brought them during the night.

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"It's definitely too early," Charlotte, the more serious of the twins, declared.

Caroline, generally much more easy-going, nodded, agreeing with her twin sister. "I think we need to wait a little bit, Danny," was her analysis of the situation.

"But I don't think I can wait anymore!" the little boy wailed. Charlotte quickly shushed him.

"Shhh! Danny, if you wake Mommy and Daddy up now, they're going to be real mad, and then Santa Claus will come and take all of your presents away!"

The little boy's eyes widened. "Really? For real?"

Charlotte nodded solemnly, but Caroline seemed to consider it. "I don't know, Char. I don't think I've ever seen Mommy and Daddy *that* mad."

"Yeah," Danny agreed. "They'd have to be pretty mad to get Santa Claus to come back out here!"

"Well, maybe Santa Claus wouldn't come back, but one of his elves could," Charlotte reasoned.

"Is that the kind of parents you think we are?" Mart said from the doorway of the twins' room.

"Daddy!" the three children exclaimed, surprised at first and then definitely guilty.

"We didn't mean to wake you up," Charlotte hastened to explain.

"You're not going to get Santa Claus or one of his elves to take our presents back, are you?" Danny asked, his little face a mask of worry.

Mart shook his head, a smile on his face. "Of course not! Your mommy and daddy were kids once, too. We know how hard it is to sleep on Christmas morning when lots of presents await!"

General cheering ensued as the children hugged each other and then rushed for the stairs.

"Wait a second!" Mart called, causing the trio to come to a screeching halt. Three cherubic faces looked at him expectantly. "I'm sure your mom would like to head down with you. She's just getting her robe. Can you wait another minute?"

All three children nodded their heads vigorously and waited with a patience that clearly came from the Lynch, and not their Belden, genes.

A half-an-hour later, the family was gathered in front of the Christmas tree, which was twinkling under its soft Christmas lights. Danny was presently ripping open a small package, labeled from "Mom and Dad," while Charlotte examined her new board game, and Caroline dressed the Barbie doll that she had just received. Mart videotaped the scene as Di looked on, sipping a warm cup of herbal tea and nibbling on pumpkin bread, the recipe from her friend, Beth.

"Girl's underpants?" Danny said, holding up a small cotton garment with Barbie's face on it.

Mart turned to look at his wife, a guilty smile playing on his lips. "Umm, oops?"

Di laughed and took the gift from Danny's hands. "I'm sorry, sweetie. Daddy must have mixed up the labels on the package. These are for Caroline. One of Caroline's gifts must really be yours."

Sure enough, after they opened more gifts, they found that the book *Where the Wild Things Are*, meant for Danny, was labeled with Caroline's name.

After the gifts were all opened and the family room was littered with the torn remnants of brightly colored paper, the family ate a special Christmas morning breakfast and then showered and dressed. Mart and Di relaxed as they watched their three children play with the bounty they had received that morning, and then, before they knew it, it was time to get ready.

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The elder Beldens were having everyone over for Christmas dinner. "Everyone" included all four of their children plus spouses, significant others, grandchildren, and in-laws. Madeleine and Matthew, Edward and Veronica, even Terry, Larry, Rachel, and Cassie would all be present, with various boyfriends and girlfriends.

As Di was staring into the mirror, carefully applying blush, she reflected that Crabapple Farm must truly have the stretchiest walls in existence. She was smiling to herself when Mart entered the bathroom and stood behind her.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked as he put his arms around her and rested his chin on her shoulder.

"I was just thinking about stretchy walls," Di said as she put away her make-up.

Mart smiled. "Aren't Crabapple Farm's great?"

Diana turned around to face him, nestling herself in his arms. "The best," she agreed. "Manor House and my parents' place would have more than enough room to have everyone over, but everyone will be just as comfortable at Crabapple Farm *and* it will feel much more cozy. I don't know how your mom does it."

"Ancient Chinese secret," Mart said, nuzzling her neck.

Di giggled. "I'm glad the walls will be stretchy later this week."

For their anniversary, Mart and Diana were spending a long weekend at Mead's Mountain. Helen and Peter were watching the children while they were gone, but Di had no doubt that her own parents would be visiting frequently.

"Me, too. I love our kids, but I don't think you know how badly I want to get you alone," Mart whispered as he continued to nuzzle her neck.

"That makes two of us," Di said breathlessly, leaning into her husband, reveling in the attention he was lavishing upon her.

Mart's lips continued to travel their way up Di's neck until they found her ear lobe. He took her lobe into his mouth and gently sucked on it as Di let out a small gasp of pleasure. His tongue continued to wind its way around her ear until Di could take it no more and turned, catching his lips with her own. The kiss deepened, and their tongues explored. Mart's hands had found their way under her shirt when Mart and Diana suddenly heard a shout.

"Yeah! They're kissing again! We can play a little longer before we go to Grandma's!"

They pulled away from each other and grinned. That would have to be Charlotte, they both knew.

"What were you saying about not being interrupted?" Di asked.

Mart groaned. "Two more days," he said. "Just two more days, and I'll have you all to myself."

Di took her finger and removed the lipstick smudges from her husband's cheek. "I'm looking forward to it. Mead's Mountain, here we come!"

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*December 27, The Present
Mead's Mountain, Vermont*

Mart skillfully drove the rented sedan along the steep and winding road that led to the ski lodge. He was glad to note that the road, which originally had been carelessly cut into the mountain, had been widened and fixed so that there was less opportunity for erosion to occur. Soon, he was guiding the car

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along the driveway that ended at an Alpine-styled lodge nestled in a hollow at the base of a string of mountains. After Mart parked the car, the married couple looked at each other and smiled.

"We're here," Di said.

"And I have my bride all to myself for a glorious long weekend!" Mart said, leaning in to nuzzle Diana's neck.

"Mart!" She giggled. "We'll never get inside at this rate."

"What a shame," Mart murmured as his lips found Di's for a long and steamy kiss.

"Mmm..." she said as the kiss finally ended. "I never get bored of kissing you."

"I should hope not!" Mart said indignantly.

Mart and Di, both in very lighthearted moods, exited the car. As Mart gathered the luggage from the trunk, Di looked around at the rolling, forested hills that surrounded the lodge, her eyes drawn to Mead's Mountain. The impressive mountain gave off an aura of timelessness that enveloped Diana as she gazed at its rugged beauty.

"Whacha lookin' at?" Mart said as he slammed the trunk and hefted their bags. Diana reached for the carry-on case, and the two headed toward the lodge, where the double front doors beckoned them.

As they entered the spacious lobby with its cathedral ceilings, Di felt an overwhelming feeling of happiness wash over her. It had been a long time since she had been to the lodge that Honey's parents co-owned with their friend Peter Kimball's father—since just after she had learned she was pregnant with the twins, so that would be almost nine years—and the impressive lobby still managed to take her breath away and evoke memories of that first trip to the lodge when she was fourteen.

One entire wall was taken up by a fieldstone fireplace. The friendly reception desk sat opposite the fireplace, and the wall between them was entirely glass, showcasing a spectacular view of Mead's Mountain. Warm and cozy chairs and couches surrounded the fireplace, beckoning guests to come and sit by the roaring fire.

A pretty blonde girl smiled at them from the reception desk and greeted them warmly as they approached.

"Hi. Welcome to Mead's Mountain," she said with an infectious grin. "I assume you're checking in?"

Mart nodded. "Mart and Di Belden."

"Belden!" the girl exclaimed. "Pat and Katie have been waiting for you. Do you mind if I call them and let them know you're here, or would you rather get settled first?" She grinned. "They've been up here every fifteen minutes asking if you've arrived yet."

The Beldens smiled. "Of course we'd love to see them as soon as possible," Di said.

"Great!" she said as she picked up the phone and dialed three digits. "I'm Angie, by the way."

"Hi, Angie," the two Beldens chorused and then waited as she told Pat that they had arrived. Di was happy to note that the same Carl Stevenson print of a sunset over the mountains, awash with every color of the rainbow, still hung above the reception desk.

When the desk clerk hung up the phone, she said, "They'll be down in a minute. In the meantime, I'll get you checked in." She started tapping away at the keyboard in front of her, viewing the reservation in the computer. "I see you're here for your tenth anniversary. Congratulations! You're going to be in the honeymoon suite, and there is an order to bring you complimentary champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries tonight whenever you desire."

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"Pat and Katie didn't have to do that," Di started to protest.

"Oh, yes, we did!" came an excited female voice from behind them.

Mart and Di whirled around.

"Katie! Pat!" Di cried, rushing toward the caretakers. After hugs and handshakes had been exchanged, the foursome stood excitedly chatting and catching up. Mart and Di told the older couple all about their three kids, including showing off their latest school photos. In turn, Katie and Pat told them all about what 23-year-old Rosie was up to.

"She got her bachelor's in resort management from Green Mountain College a few years back," the tall, auburn-haired Pat explained.

"And then she left us!" Katie lamented. "She got a fabulous job out in British Columbia helping to run one of the ski resorts out there."

"That sounds lovely," Di said, "but I am sorry that she's so far away."

"Well, we're hoping that she comes back at some point," Pat said.

"Are you going to turn this place over to her?" Mart asked.

Katie and Pat exchanged a look. "We've discussed just that with Matt Wheeler and Steven Kimball," Pat admitted. "We think we're going to be ready to retire in a couple of years, and Rosie loves this place. Plus, she's really qualified."

"That sounds great!" Di exclaimed. "It would be so nice to keep it in the family."

"We think so. We never expected to stay this long, but we just fell in love with it," Katie said.

"That's right," Mart said. "When we were here when we were kids, you guys were saving for a down payment on a farm."

Pat chuckled ruefully. "By the time we had enough for the down payment, we didn't want to leave. And I've never regretted my choice to stay. When we retire, we're thinking of investing in a CSA farm."

"CSA?" Di asked. "I think I've heard of that, but what exactly is it?"

"A community-supported agriculture farm. Basically, members of the community buy shares of the crops and get fresh deliveries each week of the growing season. It's really a win-win situation. Farmers have guaranteed customers, and consumers get farm-fresh produce."

"That would be a really cool endeavor," Mart, the agriculturist, enthused.

Katie smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. "We thought you might approve, Mart."

The two couples chatted for a bit longer before Katie insisted that Mart and Di finish checking in and get settled in their room.

Minutes later, after promising the O'Briens they would meet them for lunch, the Belden couple was doing just that. The honeymoon suite was luxurious and yet still in keeping with the simple, Alpine-style of the main lodge. Like the suite they had shared so many years before, this room had walnut-paneled walls adorned with gorgeous photographs of mountain scenes and two Stevenson prints of Mead's Mountain, one set in the summer with lush greens and deep blues, and one set in winter, the pale blues and grays capturing the mood of the mountain perfectly. A third Stevenson print was a wonderful still life of a pair of ice skates, laying on pale blue sheet of ice.

The carpet was an ice blue color, which was set off by the deeper blue curtains and quilt that adorned the bed. Another fieldstone fireplace took up one wall of the room, a comfy-looking chair and couch,

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also in a deep blue, sitting in front of it. A sliding glass door opened out onto the patio area and the outdoor pool. The bathroom was large with marble fixtures and featured a sunken tub with Jacuzzi jets.

As Di looked around, she commented, "No wonder that honeymooning couple never left their room."

Mart dropped the luggage near the oak dresser and crossed the room to put his arms around his wife.

"Yes, the Allesis definitely had the right idea," he said, kissing Di on the forehead.

"You remember their name?"

"Sure. I don't know why, but it just stuck with me. Maybe because they were the first honeymooning couple I ever met, and they inspired me to imagine what a honeymoon with you would be like."

Di looked up at Mart, surprise and love mingling in her violet eyes. "Really? Even then?"

"Even then," Mart confirmed, his lips once again meeting hers. The room and lunch were forgotten for quite awhile.

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Lunch was a hearty affair of thick beef stew with a side of buttered noodles, fresh, warm bread, and the company of the O'Briens and Linda Fleming, who still happily worked at the lodge, helping Katie and Pat run the ski operation. Afterward, Di and Mart were fitted with boots, skis, and poles and took one of the newer chair lifts up to the top of the mountain. The two took a moment to look down at the sparkling little town of Groverville far below.

"Why don't we come up here more often?" Di asked as she admired the beauty of the scenery below her, stretching out for miles.

"We really don't make it up here enough," Mart agreed. "It's really not all that far, and you and I don't ski nearly enough."

"I definitely think we should plan a trip for next year with the kids," Di said. "They'd love it up here."

"If a family trip to Mead's Mountain is what you wish, then a family trip back here next year is what it shall be," Mart declared.

Diana smiled at her husband and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I knew there was a reason I married you."

"Just one?" Mart pretended to sulk.

"Okay, maybe two," Di said cheekily.

The two continued their banter as they started off on the honeycomb of trails and old Indian paths through the forest, but soon, the two were quiet, just enjoying each other's company and the beauty of the nature surrounding them. They passed a frozen stream and were careful when they passed through a snow-covered field. The memory of Mart being buried in an avalanche, even though it had been eighteen years before, was still a vivid memory for both of them.

After a few hours of skiing, Mart had—predictably—worked up an appetite, and Di admitted that she could definitely use some sustenance. The two returned to the lift and made their way back down to the lodge. After freshening up in their room and changing into dressier clothes, they returned to the cozy dining room and ordered dinner.

As the waitress put their salads in front of them, she commented, "It's a good thing you got some skiing in today. Weather report says that we're in for a blizzard tonight."

Di looked crestfallen. "Oh, no! How long is it supposed to last?"

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"Just through the night. They say it should stop by tomorrow morning, so it shouldn't affect tomorrow's skiing. Actually, a fresh coat of snow will be a good thing."

"Thanks for letting us know," Mart said as the waitress walked away from the table with a smile.

The salads, crisp, mesclun greens topped with dried Vermont cherries, pecans, blue cheese, and raspberry vinaigrette were heavenly. The thick, juicy steaks that followed were cooked to medium rare perfection. Once again, the warm bread, fresh from the oven, accompanied the rib-eyes, as well as garlic mashed potatoes and a medley of winter vegetables. A bottle of Cabernet completed the meal. For dessert, they shared a chocolate fondue with pound cake, brownies, an assortment of fresh fruit, and small bites of cheesecake for dipping and took turns feeding each other the decadent confection.

The two enjoyed a slow and lazy dinner, talking about everything and nothing as a candle glowed between them. It was obvious to everyone in the restaurant that this couple was deeply and truly in love. Their soft and tender smiles to the other, the way Mart caressed Di's hand as she spoke, and the sparkles in their eyes were a joy to observe.

Halfway through the romantic dinner, Di had a thought.

"Your mom would call if something had happened to the kids, right?" she tried to adopt a light-hearted tone, but Mart could hear the slight anxiety in his voice.

"You know she would, sweetie," he said. "Moms knows our brood well."

"But what if she tried to call and we didn't hear the phone?" Di continued her worried train of thought.

In response, Mart fumbled in his pocket, withdrawing a small cell phone. He looked at the LED display, which indicated that no one had tried to call. He showed her the phone display.

"See, no one called," he reassured her, returning the phone to his pocket after his wife had leaned in and satisfied herself that no one had called.

"Okay," she said, obviously reassured but still slightly anxious and apprehensive.

Mart reached out his hand to take hers. "The kids are fine, sweetie. I miss them, too, but they are having the times of their lives at Crabapple Farm."

Di smiled at her husband lovingly. "You're right. Thanks."

Mart returned her smile. "You're welcome." He grinned. "Now, let's blow this pop stand. Chocolate-covered strawberries await."

Di, despite her intimate knowledge of Mart's appetite, looked shocked. "After all of that rich food? Seriously?"

Mart just smiled enigmatically, stood, and held his hand out to Diana. She smiled and stood, following him from the restaurant. The meal would be billed to their room, and they did not need to leave payment or sign a room receipt.

On the way back to the room, Mart stopped at the desk. "Hi," he said to the young man who was now tending the registration desk. "Angie told us that a bottle of champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries were waiting for us when we were ready."

Mart gave the attendant his name and room number, and he confirmed that champagne and the chocolate treat would be delivered to the honeymoon suite shortly.

"Don't you want to wait until our actual anniversary?" Di asked as they continued down the hall to their suite.

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Mart stopped outside their door and gave Di a look that melted her on the spot. "Our anniversary starts in three short hours. And when it does, I plan on toasting our love with champagne and making love to you until morning," he said in a husky voice.

Diana shivered in anticipation and wrapped her arms around her husband. "I can't think of a better plan," she whispered.

"Happy anniversary, Diana Belden."

"Happy anniversary, Mart Belden. I love you forever."

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Additional notes (Yes! There's more!): The words used in the wedding ceremony were adapted from a ton of different vows and wording that I found from a bunch of different ceremony suggestions on the Web. Dan's toast to the happy couple was modified from a couple of Irish wedding toasts that I found on the Web. None of the sites credited particular authors of anything I used. The description of Mead's Mountain, the lodge, and the O'Briens were heavily "borrowed" from *The Mystery at Mead's Mountain*.

The items for the Happy Holidays 2005 Jixemetri CWP #2.3 were: pumpkin bread; Muzak; mislabeled gifts; Daylight Saving Time; people discussing when it's appropriate to start listening to Christmas music; scrapbook; lipstick smudges; a blizzard or snowstorm; ice skates; trying to organize something big (an anniversary party, in this case) coming into the holiday season, when everyone is super busy; and the book *Where the Wild Things Are*. My carryover items were: Any holiday between November 1 and February 1 (CWP 2.1); sales (CWP 2.2); and a fifth anniversary (CWP SA #5).