

## Cornu Copiae

This is the second installment of my alternate universe. I planned on posting it for Thanksgiving 2012...then Thanksgiving 2013...I'm just glad I'm finally following through! I stole exactly 450 words from Julie Campbell and Kathryn Kenny from the first editions of the *Secret of the Mansion*, *Gatehouse Mystery*, *Glen Road*, *Blinking Eye*, *Phantom Grasshopper*, *Castaway Children*, *Headless Horseman*, and *Midnight Marauder*, which are not included in my word count. I kept the published punctuation in the longer passages, even though punctuation rules have evolved since they were first published.

Many, many thanks to Julia and Susan for their edits, which have made this a much stronger piece. I tinkered a little after they edited, so any mistakes are mine. Since it's Thanksgiving, I want to stress how thankful I am to call them friends.

Happy Thanksgiving, my fellow American Jixsters! (And happy last week of November to my international Jixster friends!)

## **Cornu Copiae**

by Dana

### **Impulsivity**

*The Monday Before Thanksgiving, The Present*

Brian Belden opened the screen door and stepped into the cheery red and white kitchen of Crabapple Farm. Slung over his shoulder was his backpack full of books, and his grey duffel bag occupied his left hand. He was barely in the door when he dropped the bag to the floor and called, "Moms! I'm home!"

Jim Frayne, Brian's friend and college roommate in upstate New York, trailed behind him, noting the coziness of the Beldens' homestead. It reminded him a lot of the cozy residence that his own mother had created in New York countryside, halfway between Rochester and Syracuse.

His eyes took in the alternating white and red tiles that made up the backsplash behind the sink and the stove, walls with gleaming copper utensils, treasured china proudly displayed on plate racks and cup hooks, and the spotlessness that proclaimed that someone who worshipped the kitchen reigned in this space. A round polished maple table, surrounded by six matching chairs, sat on a braided rug, an inviting bowl of lemons and oranges placed in the center on a cheerful oval placemat in red and white gingham. The six matching placemats circling the table completed the homey picture.

The smell of fresh-baked molasses cookies wafted through the air. The kitchen was immaculate and yet inviting at the same time, much like Katje Frayne's kitchen. Seeing where Brian had been raised made Jim realize why they got along so well—they'd had practically the same upbringing.

"Moms!" Brian called again, stepping farther into the room.

Jim watched as a pretty blonde woman entered the kitchen and drew Brian into a bear hug.

"Brian!" she greeted her oldest. "You're home!"

Brian returned the hug. "You can't get rid of me that easily. Especially when it comes to your Thanksgiving open house!"

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Helen Belden laughed and then drew back to study her son, her small hands firmly gripping his shoulders. “You haven’t been eating well enough!” she scolded mildly.

Brian laughed. “I’m eating fine, Moms.” He turned and drew his friend toward them. “And this is my roommate, Jim.”

Jim started to extend a hand toward his roommate’s mother, but she let go of Brian and drew the freckled redhead into a warm embrace. “Jim! It’s so great to finally meet you!”

Jim grinned at Brian as he returned the hug. “It’s so good to meet you, too. I can’t tell you enough how much I appreciate Crabapple Farm’s stretchy walls,” he said to his hostess.

Mrs. Belden laughed as she released Jim. “So, Brian told you about our stretchy walls, did he?”

“I hear they’re going to be extra stretchy this year,” Brian commented. “Di Lynch is really going to be staying here?”

Mrs. Belden nodded, beckoning the boys to enter all the way into the kitchen. “Leave your bags for now,” she said with a dismissive wave toward the two nylon bags that littered the floor near the door. “They can wait. I just put the last of the molasses cookies I baked into the cookie jar. I’m sure they’re even still a little warm. Sit here and enjoy some before they cool completely.”

Jim and Brian obediently sat at the wooden table while Helen Belden bustled around her kitchen, setting a plate of cookies between the two young men and pouring them each a glass of milk. It reminded Jim—in a good way—of his own mother pouring him milk and placing a tray of freshly baked windmill cookies in front of him after his first day of kindergarten.

Brian took a bite of one of the cookies. “Your weekly baked-goods care packages are much appreciated,” he said between mouthfuls, “but nothing can beat them when they’re right out of the oven.”

Jim practically devoured his own cookie. “I couldn’t agree more, Mrs. Belden. These are fantastic.”

Mrs. Belden beamed as each of the boys reached for second and then third cookies. “I thought we could have fried chicken for dinner,” she explained, her mind already on the next meal. “I’m so glad that both of you get the week of Thanksgiving off. Both Trixie and Mart have classes on Wednesday. Mart says he’s going to leave in the early afternoon and should be here by dinner time.”

“How’s he getting home?” Brian asked as he picked up his fourth cookie. “He doesn’t have a car.”

“Apparently, Di’s roommate has a car,” Mrs. Belden explained. “It’s nice that your dad doesn’t have to take the day off to drive and pick him up like he did last year.”

“How’s Trixie’s car working out?” Brian wanted to know.

Trixie had saved her money her entire senior year of high school, knowing that she would need transportation to and from Westchester Community College. Brian was the resident automobile expert, so he had gone with her over the summer to choose the best, most reliable car that she could afford. The old Ford model that they had found had seen better days as far as cosmetic aspects went, but it ran well, and Brian had decreed it acceptable enough for his baby sister to

purchase. Trixie had been thrilled with her first major acquisition, and she was eternally grateful for her older brother's help and expertise, which she didn't mind telling him.

"Wonderfully," Helen responded to Brian's question, taking a seat at the table with her son and his roommate and helping herself to a cookie from the quickly disappearing mound. "It may not look like much, but it's been really solid and dependable. Your dad and I can't thank you enough for helping her pick out a good car so that we don't have to worry about her driving around in something that's going to break down any minute!"

"I was happy to help," Brian said, "and I'm glad it's been really reliable for her." He then grinned conspiratorially at his mom, who was familiar with her daughter's fiery temper. "Not the least of which because I'd never hear the end of it if it wasn't!"

"Trixie's temper can't be *that* bad," Jim put in.

"I'm sure you'll get to see at least one display of it over the next few days," Brian assured him and then turned back to his mother. "When's she getting home today?"

"She's working at Crimper's tonight, so she won't be home until after the store closes," Helen responded, rising from her spot at the table to refill the decimated cookie plate, which now contained only crumbs.

Jim was disappointed at this information, and he told himself to stop acting so irrational over a girl he'd never even met in person. He'd spoken on the phone with her a few times when she had called for Brian, but the conversations had been fairly brief. Of course, even during those short exchanges, her vivaciousness had carried through the phone line. She wasn't the least bit shy about carrying on a chatty conversation with her brother's roommate if Brian didn't happen to be the one to answer the phone.

"Maybe we could go visit her at work and be really obnoxious customers," Brian said with a mischievous grin.

Helen gave her son a reproving look even as she smiled at him. "Brian," she pretended to scold while being delighted that her son couldn't wait to see his sister. Family was everything.

Brian stood, and Jim followed his lead. The boys swiped a couple more cookies, grabbed their bags, and headed toward the stairs.

"I thought Jim could stay with you, Brian, and the cot is already set up for you. Di and her friend will stay in Trixie's room with its twin beds," Mrs. Belden called after them as they disappeared. "Trixie'll stay in the downstairs guest room."

"Thanks, Moms!" Brian called back. "We'll set Jim up in my room."

"Thanks, Mrs. Belden!" Jim added.

After the two young men had stowed their bags in Brian's room, Brian said, "I wasn't kidding about visiting Trix. I thought that I could show you around Sleepyside, and then we could stop by Crimper's. It's a Sleepyside institution, so no tour would be complete without visiting the illustrious establishment."

Jim felt his heart speed up at the thought of visiting Trixie at work and tried to joke to cover up his confusing feelings. “Sounds great.” Jim took on what he hoped was a thoroughly haughty disposition. “I only frequent the most illustrious establishments, you know.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that about you ecology types,” Brian responded drily.

Twenty minutes later, Brian and Jim were in downtown Sleepyside. Even though they had just downed a bunch of Moms’ fresh-baked molasses cookies, Brian insisted that they needed to get chocolate milkshakes at Wimpy’s, the town diner housed in a converted train car.

Mike the counterman served them their shakes in to-go cups, and the two began a walking tour of Brian’s sleepy little hometown. Among other things, they walked past the First National Bank of Sleepyside, where Brian’s father worked, and Sleepyside Junior-Senior High, where Brian, Mart, and Trixie had all matriculated and Bobby would in a couple of years. Brian couldn’t believe that his baby brother, who was forever frozen at age six in his mind for some reason, was only a few short years away from high school.

After a tour of Main Street and its environs, where Jim noticed a quaint movie theater aptly named the Cameo, the two moved toward the common. The public library stood on the edge of the common. Brian showed off the town hall, which was a tall, narrow, two-story, white clapboard building. A cupola perched on top of a high-peaked roof.

Jim stopped along the commons and stared at the building. “Something’s missing from the cupola.”

Brian looked up at the cupola and sighed. The bell that had once hung in the old bell tower had been gone for many years, long before his time, so he didn’t even stop to consider that that might be the missing object to which Jim referred. He said, “Hoppy, the grasshopper weathervane, used to sit atop that cupola.”

Brian explained to his guest that Hoppy had been an antique copper weathervane, a gift from the same coppersmith who designed the famous one for Boston’s Faneuil Hall. He continued, “When Moms was a little girl, she and her mother always used to say hello to the weathervane when they passed the common. My grandmother said that it brought good luck. When Moms told Trix, she kept the tradition going. Then, when Trixie, Mart, and I were all in high school, he disappeared during a bad storm one night. He’s never been recovered despite the fact that the radio station manager offered a sizeable reward for its return.”

Jim stared at the empty space atop the cupola. His comment had been prompted by the fact that there was no bell, but he was saddened to learn that a copper grasshopper named Hoppy, such a valuable piece of the town’s history and Belden family tradition, had been lost. It also warmed him inside that Trixie had kept up her grandmother’s tradition, passed on to her by her mother. Traditions were important to the Fraynes, and this one sounded so homey and quaint. He almost ached over the loss of Hoppy and then told himself he was being silly. He had never seen Hoppy himself. Why did he feel such a sense of loss over a weathervane?

The two moved on then, and as Brian showed Jim the town in which he had grown up, the dark-haired Belden had a weird sense of not-quite-déjà-vu. It wasn’t quite that he was reliving experiences, but more like he felt as though he should be remembering experiences that he had never had. He knew the history of these buildings, and his own history with them, but he felt as though he should somehow have known a *different* history. Like the dog wagon or the Hakaito brothers’ produce shop should have been more important to him than they actually were. It was

a peculiar feeling that Brian could not shake throughout the afternoon. He wondered why he suddenly felt so different experiencing his hometown with Jim.

Finally, he told himself to snap out of it, and the two young men headed toward Crimper's Department Store in its old, two-story building. As they approached, the large plate glass windows offered Jim a glimpse inside the store. It looked respectable, safe, conservative, and unchanging. Jim appreciated that.

The pair entered the department store's wide front doors—Jim admiring the ornate scrollwork carved into the wood panels above—and then naturally headed up the main center aisle of the store. On either side of the main aisle stood heavy wooden counters, some of which were topped with glass. Brian peered around displays and throughout the racks of clothes, looking for a glimpse of his petite sister. Jim found himself also looking around for a head of tousled sandy-blond curls, the same ones that he had eyed in Brian's pictures. When they did not find Trixie among the clothing and shoe displays on the first floor, they headed toward the wide wooden staircase at the back of the store. Jim noted the time on a large clock on one of the store's dark-paneled walls.

Brian paused before they entered the staircase, pointing toward the ornate and creaking elevator, which stood next to the stairs. Jim followed Brian's gaze. The elevator's glass-fronted entrance doors offered a glimpse of the red velvet interior and polished brass handrails. It was quite a sight, an absolute relic from another time.

"Boy," Jim said admiringly, "they sure knew how to build things to last in the old days."

"I laugh every time I see that elevator," Brian explained, grinning. "It creaks like you wouldn't believe. Actually, it's so old that it's still operated by an old-fashioned lever to this day. No one really uses it anymore—it's really just for show, especially when the stairs are right here and so much quicker—but my brilliant younger brother and sister decided that they *needed* to try it one day."

Brian shook his head as he remembered, his dark eyes snapping with mirth. "They rode it up to the next floor, and it took *forever* as the thing jolted all over the place. Moms and I stood waiting up above, and Bobby was absolutely wild with impatience. He must have been about six at the time. Of course, as the baby of the family, it seemed like he was six for forever, so I could be wrong.

"Anyway, it *finally* reached the second floor, and Mart stumbled out talking about how it 'wheezed like an asthmatic dowager.'" Brian chuckled. "I'll never forget the look on Moms' face! Mart was always trying out big words, but I don't think Moms ever thought she'd hear her teenage son talking about *dowagers*."

Jim genuinely laughed at his roommate's story. From everything Brian had told him, meeting Mart was going to be a trip. The redhead had spoken to the male half of what Brian referred to as the "almost-twins" on several occasions, and he had found that Mart was just as outspoken as his sister. Like Trixie, Mart could carry on a conversation with Jim for several minutes when he called for Brian. As an only child, Jim found it disconcerting, but he already loved all of the Beldens—even the ones he had not met in person. Given all of the stories that Brian had shared about Bobby, Jim was expecting—and looking forward to—meeting a little devil. Or a hurricane. Or a combination of the two.

After Brian led the way up the wide wooden staircase, the young men perused the small, old-fashioned dining room on the second floor, which Jim noted was filled with many senior citizens. Trixie was sometimes called to fill in as hostess, but a quick glance around the small space indicated that the petite young blonde was not there that evening. Brian led them away from the dining room and through the housewares and home furnishings departments, and that's where they hit pay dirt.

Trixie's back was to them as she straightened displays of silver, and Brian turned to Jim and placed a finger to his lips in a gesture of quiet. The two silently approached the teen, and right when they were just behind her, Brian said loudly, "Miss, I'm unhappy with the customer service I've received so far."

At first, Trixie jumped at the sound of the unexpectedly close voice. Brian next saw an intriguing mixture of irritation and contriteness in Trixie's profile as she registered the complaint. Then, as she turned to fully face him, there was nothing but pure unbridled joy on the teen's face as she finally recognized the voice as well as the person standing before her.

"Brian!" she fairly shrieked as she threw herself into his arms. "I've missed you! You're home!"

Brian had expected her to launch herself into his arms, so he was ready for the onslaught and caught her effortlessly. He laughed as he hugged her back, saying, "No, I'm at Crimper's!"

Instead of slapping him for his sarcastic comment, as she would have Mart, Trixie just hugged her oldest brother tighter. "Doofus!" she said. "You know what I mean!" She pulled back and looked at him. "Sarcasm does *not* become you!"

It was the pulling back that placed Jim in her periphery. She turned and took in the man with whom she had been chattily conversing on the phone for almost three months. She disentangled herself from Brian and screeched, "Jim!" as she flung her diminutive body against his husky frame. Like her mother, she forewent the formalities and headed straight into hugging territory. "It's so great to *finally* meet you in person!"

Jim had prepared himself for meeting Hurricane Bobby, but now he happily realized that Brian was also related to Hurricane Trixie—and she was in his arms.

It felt every bit as good as he had imagined it would.

"Nice to meet you, too," he managed to gasp out as he returned her squeeze.

"I was so excited when Brian said you'd be coming home, too," the blonde whirlwind said, withdrawing from the hug and sizing up the muscular young man before her. She found that he was nothing like what she had expected and yet was infinitely better.

In Trixie's head, her brother's roommate was a tall, suave blond. He had sounded so smooth and possessed on the phone that she had pictured a striking combination of a self-assured Viking and a laid-back California surfer-type. The fact that he was actually a tall, husky, ginger-haired man with intelligent green eyes made him so much more interesting. Of course, the fact that he had freckles, as she did herself, absolutely endeared him to her.

For a moment, Jim felt like a deer caught in headlights. Here he was finally meeting this wonderfully vivacious character, and the reality went far beyond the fantasy—Trixie Belden was more than he ever could have hoped for—and he could *not* think of a thing to say.

*Think, Frayne, think!* his brain screamed. *Trixie's going to think you're a dolt!*

As Trixie stood looking up at the redhead with piercing, expectant blue eyes, Jim's brain finally kicked into action and he said, "I was, too. Excited to visit Brian's home, that is." He hoped that his voice sounded relatively normal, despite his inexplicably pounding heart. Dear God! He hoped that she couldn't hear *that!* "Brian's told me so much about...Crabapple Farm." Jim caught himself and said the name of the generations-old Belden homestead rather than the word that he had intended to say—*you*.

He hurried on, ignoring the fact that he had lost his nerve and not said what he had meant. My parents have a similar set up in the countryside between Rochester and Syracuse, so I was really happy I'd be able to spend Thanksgiving in a place that feels so much like home." Jim thought that his explanation sounded lame, but he swore he saw Trixie's eyes reflect an unexpected empathy.

Trixie reached for Jim's hand and squeezed it. If she felt the same jolt of electricity that he felt upon contact, she didn't let on. "I'm so sorry that you're away from your family. I can't even imagine," she said with a sympathetic shake of her head and then released his hand. Jim wished that he could have held onto that small, soft, warm hand for longer.

"Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday," Trixie said. "And I love spending it with my family. I can't imagine spending it without them, so I'll do my best to fill in for your family. We all will."

"Thanks," Jim said, touched. "That means a lot to me."

Brian, not liking the attraction he was convinced he saw fairly flying in the air between the two, butted in as only an older brother can do. He slapped Jim on the back and said heartily, "We're *all* here for you, and we *all* want you to have a really great holiday!"

Jim smiled his thanks at the two siblings, and he truly felt accepted as a member of the Belden clan, completely oblivious to Brian's burgeoning older brother instincts. "I'm sure I'm going to."

Trixie gave him a brilliant smile and then said ruefully, "Well, this silver isn't going to straighten itself. I'll see you guys when I get home."

"Do you have an early class tomorrow?" Jim asked impulsively. "There's a movie out that I haven't had a chance to see. It's already come and gone from Syracuse, but when we walked by the Cameo, I noticed on the marquee that it's still playing here, and there's a late showing. Maybe we could all go see a movie after you're done working tonight?"

Trixie smiled excitedly. "I'd love that! I haven't seen a movie in ages. Which one caught your eye?" she asked before naming the two movies that she knew the Cameo was playing.

Trixie beamed when Jim named the action-adventure flick. "That's the one I've been wanting to see, too! I keep telling myself I'll go see it as soon as work and school slow down. I'd love to meet you guys after my shift ends and catch a movie!"

Jim turned to his friend and roommate. "You in?"

In all honestly, Brian would have rather hung out at Crabapple Farm, but there was *no way* he was letting Trixie and Jim go to the movies alone, even as he realized that he was being completely irrational. Not only did he trust both his sister and his friend, but he thought that

Jim was a great guy, and Trixie would be lucky to date a guy like him. So why was he suddenly feeling like the prickly and overprotective big brother?

“I’m in,” he said. Then he prompted, “Well, if Trixie needs to get back to work, we should probably get going.”

The two young college men said good-bye after promising to meet Trixie outside of Crimper’s at nine o’clock so that they could all walk over to the Cameo to see the late showing of their chosen movie. Trixie continued to straighten the merchandise in the housewares department the best that she could with all of the shoppers milling about. With Thanksgiving only a few days away, this department was the busiest in all the store, with men and women stopping in to buy roasting pans and assorted pieces for entertaining. Trixie was on the go for the rest of the evening, but she found that her thoughts were continually straying to Brian’s roommate.

Even the dark green SUNY-ESF sweatshirt that he had been wearing couldn’t hide Jim’s muscular frame, and there was something about the way he wore his jeans that Trixie found to be sexy. The dark denim emphasized his muscular legs. And his face! He was so handsome! Trixie recalled looking into those piercing green eyes. For a moment there, she had almost found herself tongue-tied as she stared into those emerald depths. She’d enjoyed chatting with him on the phone, but being face-to-face with his rugged good looks had been quite entirely something else.

She couldn’t wait to see him after work. She cursed the fact that she had school and work to think about during the next few days. She had taken Wednesday off of work so that she could stay home and help her mother prepare for their annual open house, but she still had class that day. She was excited to see Di Lynch again on Wednesday, too. Thursday would be a whirlwind of busy activity, and she was working a double shift at Crimper’s on Black Friday. She suddenly found herself wanting to spend more time with her brother’s roommate, and her week was already packed full.

As she went into the stock room to replace the gravy boats that were flying off the shelves, she realized that even though she would be busy helping her mother Wednesday evening and Thursday, at least she’d be home with Jim. She’d be able to get to know him better at Crabapple Farm. So, dreaming of opportunities to spend time with Jim Frayne and looking forward to seeing the movie with him later that night, Trixie didn’t even mind the busy work of straightening the retail displays.

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## **Connectivity**

### *The Day Before Thanksgiving, The Present*

“What if your sister doesn’t like me anymore?” Di asked Mart from the beige, leather-upholstered front passenger seat of Honey’s lunar blue metallic Mercedes E550 Cabriolet convertible. It wasn’t necessarily the most practical car for upstate New York, but Honey dearly loved her eighteenth birthday present from her parents.

Mart, sitting in the backseat of the luxurious vehicle, smiled indulgently at his nervous girlfriend. “Di, I’ve told you a thousand times. Trixie’s ecstatic to see you again. She missed you lots after you guys moved away, and she’s excited that you and Honey will be staying with us for Thanksgiving.”



“Sure, she likes the *old* me, but what if she doesn’t like the *new* me?” Di fretted.

“She’s going to love the new you. The new you isn’t so different from the old you. You’re still the beautiful, sweet Diana that you always were,” Mart reassured her.

“*I’m* the one that should be worried,” Honey said from behind the steering wheel. “She’s never met me. What if she hates me? What if you two bond over your shared history and you forget all about me?”

Di laughed. “Honey, that’ll never happen. Besides, you and I have just as much shared history as Trixie and I have. Trixie’s going to adore you. I should be worried that the two of you will become fast friends and leave *me* out.”

Mart groaned from the backseat. “Enough insecure female drama!” he said, although both girls knew that he didn’t mean it as derogatorily as it sounded. “You’re *both* awesome, Trixie’s going to love you both, the three of you are going to get along famously, and you’re all going to have a fantastic time! *I* should be the one worried about being left out!”

Di turned to grin at Mart while Honey smiled at him briefly in the rearview mirror before turning her attention quickly back to the Interstate. “You’re right,” Di finally decided, reassured by her boyfriend’s words. “Honey and I are being silly.”

“Yes, you are,” Mart agreed.

Di reached back and swatted him playfully. “You didn’t have to agree so quickly, Mart Belden!”

“Or at all!” Honey added indignantly.

“I can’t win!” Mart said with a groan.

Mart’s predictions did turn out to be correct. When they arrived at Crabapple Farm, Honey and Di trailed shyly behind Mart as he entered the cheerful kitchen. Trixie, Jim, and Brian were sitting at the table helping Moms with various dishes for her Thanksgiving open house. When Trixie looked up from the orange she was zesting for the homemade cranberry-orange relish and saw her brother and his two companions, she shrieked and jumped up, dropping the microplane onto the table with an unceremonious clatter in the process.

She flew across the room toward her brother. She passed by Mart, however, and threw her arms around her old elementary school friend.

“Di!” she cried. “I’m so glad you’re here! I missed you so much after you moved!”

Di looked relieved, embarrassed, and delighted all at once as she returned Trixie’s hug. “I missed you, too, Trix.”

Mart, meanwhile, stood there with an indignant look on his face. “It’s great to see you, too, sis!”

Trixie released Di from her hug and stuck her tongue out at Mart. “I just saw you!”

“Three months ago!” Mart exclaimed.

Trixie waved an airy hand and said something that sounded like “Eh” before turning her attention on the shy-looking young woman standing timidly in the doorway. The tall, slender girl’s pretty but pale face was framed in shoulder-length, light-brown hair. The vivacious blonde embraced her as well. Trixie never stood on formality, and to offer the girl a handshake never would have occurred to her.

“You must be Honey!” Trixie said. “Welcome! I’m so glad you could share Thanksgiving with us.”

“Hi,” Honey said, looking somewhat dazed at Trixie’s effervescent personality but believing that this blonde dynamo was truly glad to be sharing Thanksgiving with her. “Di and I are thrilled to be able to share the holiday with you, too. , especially when you have the opportunity to stay with such a great family,” she said shyly.

“Staying in the dorms on the best day of the year, a fate worse than death,” Trixie agreed cheerfully. She turned to where Jim and Brian stood, having gotten up from the table to greet the new guests. While Trixie had been hugging the girls, Brian had introduced Mart and Jim, who had shaken hands in greeting.

“This is our older brother, Brian, and his roommate, Jim, down from Syracuse. Jim’s parents are out of the country like yours, so Moms stretched the walls of Crabapple Farm a bit more,” Trixie explained. “None of us Beldens would ever knowingly let anyone spend a holiday in a dorm room or an empty apartment. We’re thrilled you’re here!”

Trixie’s warmth and excitement had the effect of making Honey and Di feel at ease, and Jim, for his part, had long since settled into the household. Trixie grabbed Honey’s designer bag. “Mart, grab Di’s bag,” she ordered as she started out of the kitchen. She called over her shoulder to Honey and Di, “I’ll show you guys where you’re going to stay. Follow me.”

Mart did as he was told, and the two almost-twins led their guests toward the second floor. Jim had been about to display his usual gentlemanly honorableness and jump in and offer to take Honey’s bag, but Trixie was already out of the kitchen before he could say a word. He grinned as he watched her leave. He loved her independence. Then again, he’d come to love a lot of things about his roommate’s sister during the past forty-eight hours.

Meanwhile, the younger foursome was headed up the stairs. “Where’s Moms?” Mart wondered.

“She ran out to get the turkey and the ham for tomorrow,” Trixie explained.

Mart’s sandy eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Brian, our esteemed overly responsible elder sibling, didn’t volunteer to do that for her?”

“No, he did, and so did Jim,” Trixie said. “But Moms wanted to get out and about a little bit. She took Bobby with her.”

Mart whistled. “Our mother really is a saint! Heading out to the butcher on the day before Thanksgiving! And taking the little imp with her, no less!”

“Bobby’s not *that* bad,” Trixie said with a grin. They had reached the top of the stairs, and she opened the door to her room.

Before Mart could respond with more opinions about his youngest sibling, Di realized that she and Honey were effectively kicking Trixie out of her room. “Trixie!” she cried. “This is *your* room!”

Trixie disagreed with a gamine smile. “Nope, it’s all yours for the weekend!”

“Oh, no!” Di protested. “We couldn’t take your room!”

Honey vehemently nodded her agreement, looking horrified that she was putting her hostess out of her room.

Trixie waved her hand in a careless gesture. “Nonsense!” she said. “I’ve got twin beds, and it made more sense for the two of you to share a room than for either of you to share a room with me. I’m perfectly happy staying downstairs.” She leaned forward to give the two girls a mischievous grin and said in a stage whisper, “I’ll be able to sleep in an extra thirty seconds in the morning due to my shortened commute to the kitchen!”

Mart guffawed and said, “And she’s not even kidding!”

Trixie stuck her tongue out at her brother and turned her attention back to her guests. She pointed at the dresser. “I even cleared the top drawer out so you guys could unpack a little if you want to.” She then waved an airy hand toward the closet. “I cleared some space in the closet and put some empty hangers in there, too, if you want to hang anything up. Di, you probably still remember where the bathroom is. Feel free to put anything you want in there. The towels and washcloths are in the linen closet next to the bathroom, the door to the left. Grab what you need, and be sure to let us know if you need anything you can’t find.”

Di smiled warmly at her old friend. “I think that covers it. Honey and I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality.”

“Definitely. I already feel like Crabapple Farm is practically home!” Honey agreed impulsively.

Trixie chuckled. “Great! Then our evil plan is working!”

The two girls decided to get their unpacking out of the way immediately, and Trixie and Mart left them to do so.

“We’ll be down in a few minutes to help you guys out in the kitchen,” Di promised, and Honey nodded, even though the Beldens’ backs were turned and they could not see her gesture.

True to Di’s word, within fifteen minutes the six young adults were in the kitchen together working on Mrs. Belden’s list. Trixie was standing at the counter rolling out pie dough to make the pumpkin and walnut pies that were a Belden Thanksgiving tradition. Honey and Di were sitting at the kitchen table breaking up the bread that Mrs. Belden had dried in the oven. The bread pieces would become the base for the sage-and-mushroom stuffing that Moms made every Thanksgiving holiday to accompany the turkey.

Jim had finished the cranberry-orange relish that Trixie had abandoned in her excitement over her female guests and was now working on the potato salad that Mrs. Belden served during every Thanksgiving open house. He had frequently helped his mom prepare meals before she had moved half a world away with his father, so he felt perfectly at home helping out in the Beldens’ warm and fragrant kitchen. The fact that he got to stand next to Trixie, and their

shoulders kept bumping as she rolled out the dough on the counter next to him, was a happy bonus.

The two kept grinning at each other like idiots as they worked alongside each other, having grown close during the last couple of days. Jim loved the vibrancy Trixie exuded, and Trixie found herself drawn to Jim's calming steadfastness. They both loved the out of doors and had the same sense of humor. Trixie had never found herself attracted to someone so quickly before, but there was something about Jim that acted like a magnet, drawing her ever toward him. Although outwardly they were living in the here and now, each of them inwardly was disappointed to realize that their time together would be drawing to a close when Jim returned upstate.

Right at that moment, though, neither one was thinking of that. They were too busy preparing food for the next day's feast while simultaneously beaming at each other.

Meanwhile, with Jim and Trixie using the majority of the counter space for their culinary duties, Mart and Brian were using the kitchen table to complete theirs. Mart, who loved food and had actually become very handy in the kitchen, was impressing Di with his knife skills as he julienned the vegetables to go into the cole slaw.

Brian was stationed on the other side of Honey, using his mother's beloved big stand mixer to knead dough for the hot buttered rolls that Mrs. Belden would pop into the oven just before people started arriving, filling the house with the lovely and delicious aroma of fresh-baked bread. Moms loved serving her rolls piping hot to her guests. Batch after batch would go in the oven so that all of the guests, no matter what time they arrived, would be able to savor fresh rolls, hot out of the oven.

Mart and Di flirted with each other as they worked on their respective food assignments, having only eyes for each other, as usual, so Brian and Honey chatted companionably while they worked.

"So, have you declared a major yet?" Brian asked the honey-haired freshman.

Honey shook her head. "Not yet," she admitted. "To be honest, I don't think my mother and father expect me to do anything except for marry well, but I want more. I want to do...*something*. I just don't know what. I could probably get a business degree and work for my father's company—I think he'd be okay with that—but business bores me, and the idea of nepotism doesn't thrill me either."

"What kinds of things do you like to do?" Brian prompted her. "What subjects were you good at in high school?"

Honey smiled at Brian. "Those are two very different questions. I can tell you that I was awful at algebra. That's how I got my current governess, who now really serves more as a manager for my parents now that I'm at Cornell. Anyway, Miss Trask was the math instructor at my old boarding school, and we got to be friendly, because I wasn't very good in algebra and needed special tutoring. I liked English. And French. I was always good in French. I'm taking French now at Cornell as an elective. I do enjoy it."

"There's so much you can do with a foreign language degree," Brian remarked.

"Really? I love languages, but it always seemed like a dead-end degree."

“There’s a big demand for people who are bilingual,” Brian stated. “Besides the obvious teaching or being a translator or working in travel, there are lots of opportunities in international business. Journalists working abroad find language skills mighty handy. Charitable organizations often need bilingual people to work with the recipients of their charity. Many government agents need to know at least one other language.”

Honey interrupted his list, her large, round, hazel eyes glittering with interest and enthusiasm. “Ooooh! A spy! That would be fun!”

Brian laughed as he removed the dough from the dough hook. “That wasn’t quite what I meant by government agents. And you sound like my sister!”

“There’s nothing wrong with that!” Trixie said over her shoulder. “Being a spy would be awesome!”

“Eavesdropper!” Brian teasingly accused.

“I wasn’t purposely listening, and you know it. But when I suddenly hear someone say being a spy would be fun, my ears perk up!”

“Of course, they do,” Mart said dryly. “As a matter of fact, you look just like Reddy.”

Trixie stuck her tongue out at him—for the umpteenth time—and tossed her sandy curls, as she retorted, “Whatever you say, *twin*.”

Mart groaned but didn’t respond directly to his sister, realizing it was a lost cause. When he turned his attention back to Di, Trixie turned her attention back to the pie dough. And Jim.

“So, your family has always lived here?” Honey asked Brian after the lively rivalry between the two almost-twins had died down. Mart and Di had already resumed their flirty conversation.

Brian nodded. “If you ask my mom, the Beldens have lived here for six generations. That’s what she swears my grandmother told her. Dad says it’s three. They’ve agreed to disagree,” he said, grinning. “I’d never tell my dad this, but I bet my mom’s right. She’s always been into family history. She swears she listened to all of my grandmother’s stories about the Belden family, and I believe her.”

Honey smiled shyly at her host. “Yeah, and no offense or anything, but men never seem to keep up with family history like women do.”

“No offense taken. I must agree with that assessment myself!” Brian admitted with a chuckle.

Honey wistfully looked around at the cheerful and homey kitchen. “It must have been nice to grow up here.”

Brian nodded. “It was.” He didn’t like the sadness that passed over Honey’s pretty features, so he said, “But it must have been exciting to grow up in New York City.”

Honey shrugged. “A lot of my early childhood was spent at boarding school or camp. I didn’t come to live with my parents in the city until I was thirteen. When I was little, my nurses never let me play in the dirt, not that there was so much dirt around, even in Central Park, where

they'd take me on outings. When I got older, I was never allowed to go any place by myself for fear of being kidnapped. So much for excitement!"

She smiled then, hating to be so gloomy in front of the handsome, dark-haired man she was seated next to. "I'm sorry. I guess being raised in Manhattan did have some benefits. Like the museums and public library and stuff."

Brian grinned. "The New York Public Library beats Sleepyside's library any day!"

Trixie had obviously overheard Brian's last remark, because she piped up, "The New York anything beats the Sleepyside anything any day!"

"Not Wimpy's!" Mart defended his favorite Sleepyside dining spot, other than Crabapple Farm, natch.

"That's true," Trixie conceded.

"I love Wimpy's," Jim put in.

"Brian initiated you in the wonders of Wimpy's, did he?" Mart asked.

Jim turned away from the potatoes he was chopping to look at Mart. "It was about the first place he took me to! And we've been back once since. The first time we only had their amazing chocolate milkshakes. We met Trixie for her dinner break yesterday, and I got to taste their incredible hamburgers and fries."

"As awesome as those burgers are," Mart, the food connoisseur, declared, "Moms' are much better."

"That's what Trixie and Brian told me. Your mother's burgers must be out of this world. Of course, everything I've eaten so far has been pretty out of this world."

"And Moms isn't even pulling out her best recipes," Trixie said. "She's been focusing on the simple stuff because of all of the other cooking she has to do for the open house."

"You know, Trix," Di said as she continued to break up the dried bread for the dressing, "I always loved your mom's Thanksgiving open house when I was a kid. We knew we were going to get lots of food, and fantastic food to boot, and it was so much fun to hang out with you guys. I always just took it for granted. But now that I am older, I've gotta say, your mom is *insane* to go to this much trouble and invite the whole neighborhood over!"

"Yeah," Honey agreed. "Most people freak out having to cook for a few relatives, let alone the whole neighborhood! How many people does your mom invite?"

"Dozens," Trixie supplied promptly. "She is insane, but she wouldn't have it any other way. Moms serves it buffet style, so it's not too bad, even though there's a lot of preparation leading up to it." She grinned. "I think she likes to have an excuse to use the chafing dishes she got for her wedding. It's the only chance she gets all year!"

Everyone laughed at that, but the laughter was interrupted by a knock at the kitchen door.

"Come in!" the three Beldens yelled simultaneously.

Dan poked his head in the door. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Dan!” Trixie exclaimed, dropping her rolling pin and running over to the door to pull him inside of the house. “Come meet everyone!”

Dan looked around at the various faces staring at him and smiled nervously. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” he repeated.

“Not at all!” Trixie reassured him. She took the large stock pot that he carried out of his hands and placed it on an open burner of the stove. “What’s this?” she asked, completely forgetting that she had just offered to introduce him to everyone and had failed to do so. Mart and Brian exchanged amused, knowing looks. They were happy to discover that some things never changed.

“It’s Irish stew,” Dan explained. “My mom insisted that we contribute to the buffet tomorrow, but we’re not sure what time we’ll be able to make it over, so my mom wanted me to bring it by today. I should’ve called first, but you’d said you’d be home helping your mom, so I figured it’d be okay.”

“Of course, it’s okay! And your mom didn’t have to do that!”

Dan grinned. “I know, but *she* didn’t feel that way. I talked her out of making champ. And there’s still two kinds of bread in the car!”

Trixie said to the others, by way of explanation, “Dan’s parents own an authentic Irish pub in the city.” She still hadn’t remembered that she hadn’t actually gotten around to introducing her college friend to the rest of the assembled group.

Dan looked at around the room, making eye contact with everyone. “I’m Dan, by the way,” he said with a friendly wave.

Trixie slapped herself on the forehead. “Duh!” she said inelegantly. “Everyone, this is Dan. I go to college with him. We have the same major. Dan, these are my brothers. The one on my left with the funny-looking crew cut is Mart. The other odd-looking creature is Brian.” She pointed to the dark-haired young man as she spoke the last sentence. “Next to Mart is Di, Mart’s girlfriend. Next to her is Honey, her roommate.” She turned to where Jim had come up behind her and was standing. “This is Jim, Brian’s roommate.”

Jim allowed himself a brief moment of wishful thinking that Trixie could introduce him as her boyfriend.

Dan waved at the girls and shook the offered hands of the three boys. Brian and Mart gave him appraising looks as they shook his hand, sizing up the guy that their baby sister had been spending so much time with since she had started at Westchester Community College. Jim also appraised Dan as he gripped the other man’s hand. As much as he wanted to dislike him for getting to spend so much time with Trixie on a practically daily basis, there was something about the guy that he liked instantly. He had a good, firm handshake and honest eyes.

“They’re all homeless for Thanksgiving,” Trixie was saying cheerfully, not the least bit worried that she might be offending those who were “homeless” for the holiday. “So, of course, they *had* to stay with us.”

Dan smiled. "You did tell me about Crabapple Farms' stretchy walls," he said.

"Those stretchy walls must be famous!" Honey burst out. "I keep hearing about them!"

Everybody laughed, and Dan explained that he had another bag full of bread in the car that he needed to run out and get.

"I can go get it," Trixie volunteered.

"No, that's okay," Dan said, moving toward the door. "I've got it."

After the door had shut behind the retreating young man, Di said, "He seems nice. Did you meet him in class, Trix?"

Trixie nodded. "We have a lot of the same classes being in the same major and all. He's a sophomore."

Dan returned within a few moments and handed the bread bag to Trixie, who took it and looked inside.

"What kind of bread is it, did you say?" she asked.

"Irish soda bread, which is the traditional bread of Ireland, and barmbrack. Barmbrack's sweeter, with currants and raisins. It's a traditional Halloween bread in Ireland, but Mom insisted that Halloween wasn't so long ago."

"Yummy," Trixie said enthusiastically. "I remember having your mom's barmbrack *at* Halloween. She's awesome for sending all this stuff along."

"Like I said, she wanted to make champ, too," Dan returned.

"What's champ?" Jim wanted to know.

"It's a potato recipe with butter and scallions." Dan gave a self-deprecating grin. "You know us Irish, in love with our potatoes."

Mart sniffed the air appreciatively. "Forget the potatoes, that Irish stew smells fantastic!"

"Mrs. Mangan's food is fantastic! And her champ is to die for!" Trixie explained enthusiastically. "I won't have time to get to the pub on Friday with my work schedule, but you guys should all go down there!"

"I've never been to New York City," Jim said. "That might be fun. It's too bad you can't come, Trix."

Trixie agreed, but she didn't want to make her disappointment obvious, so she just shrugged and smiled gamely.

"Where in New York is the pub?" Honey asked.

"It's in the Bronx, in Woodlawn," Dan explained, referring to the predominantly Irish-American neighborhood that housed his parents' pub and upstairs apartment.



“I’ve never been to the Bronx!” Di cried. “I mean, I’ve driven through it on the train, of course, but I’ve never actually *been* there, if you know what I mean. I’d love to go! I’m Irish, too, but we never really celebrate our Irish heritage. I’d love to have some authentic Irish food!”

Honey smiled shyly. “I’d love to go, too.” She looked at Mart. “If you didn’t already have plans for us for Friday.”

“I don’t have specific anything planned,” Mart said. “Sounds good to me.”

Trixie gave her brother a wicked grin. “Anything involving food always sounds good to you.”

Mart smiled unapologetically. “Guilty as charged.”

“It’s a shame you won’t get to go, Trixie,” Di said.

Trixie shrugged. “Friday will be tough working the whole day, but I’m looking forward to a nice paycheck. I could go Saturday, since I don’t need to be to work until the late afternoon, but Brian and Jim wanted to get on the road Saturday to beat the traffic back upstate. That would mean that they couldn’t go.”

Brian and Jim exchanged a look. “Now that I’m here, I don’t really want to leave Saturday, traffic be damned,” Brian admitted. “There’s nothing that says that we *have* to go back on Saturday.”

“Oh, then stay!” Trixie cried as she clapped her hands together. “We could all go down to the Bronx together on Saturday, as long as I make it back to Sleepyside by four.”

Jim was more than happy to extend his stay at the Beldens, especially if it meant that he could spend more time with Trixie. “If Brian’s in, I’m in. He’s my ride after all!”

“It looks like it’s all set then. Yay!” Trixie said without even waiting for Brian’s affirmative response, giving a little jump and clapping happily.

“Do you have to work Saturday, Dan?” Honey asked.

Dan grinned. “I do, but since I work at the pub, I’ll be there, too.” Everyone laughed at that. “We’ll just make sure to seat you in my section.”

“Sounds good,” Mart said. “We have a plan!”

Di, like Trixie, gave a little clap, too. “I can’t wait! Maybe I could even get some recipes from your mom and get our cook to teach me how to make them. I’ve always been intrigued by my family’s Irish heritage—even if my family isn’t!”

Dan grinned. “If you have some time Saturday, I’m sure my mom wouldn’t mind giving you a peek in the kitchen and teach you to cook something.”

“Would she?” Di asked, excited.

“If it’s too busy, I’m sure she’d be thrilled to give you private lessons next time you’re back in the city, like on Christmas break or something.”

“That’d be great!” Di cried. “I used to love cooking with my mom when we lived in Sleepyside. After we moved to the city and hired a cook, I never got to cook again.”

It saddened Trixie to hear the ways in which Di’s life had *not* changed for the better after her dad had made his money, so she quickly started talking up Dan’s parents’ pub and the Woodlawn neighborhood. Soon, the seven young people were excitedly talking about their plans, deciding what else they could see while they were in the Bronx.

“Besides the Bronx Zoo and the New York Botanical Garden, where they’re sure to have their annual holiday exhibition going, there’s the Edgar Allan Poe cottage. I’ve always meant to go there, but I never have,” Dan said.

Trixie said, “My dad once told a bunch of bankers in for a convention that if they stayed a week in New York, they’d see everything. If they stayed a month, they’d see *some* of the things they wanted to see, but if they intended to live in the City, they’d never see *anything*.”

“Your dad’s a smart man,” Jim said. “I think that’s true of living anywhere.”

Honey and Di agreed with nods of their heads, and Honey added, “I used to do a lot more things in the City when I was just staying at my parents’ duplex apartment between boarding school and camp. Once I started living there year round, I hardly did anything because it just felt like I always could. I definitely took it for granted.”

“The Poe house sounds fun,” Trixie said, her one-track mind going back to Dan’s suggestion. “His stories have always creeped me out, and I love being creeped out!”

Their planning session was interrupted by the return of Moms and Bobby, who enthusiastically greeted the four young people who had arrived while they were in town. Moms was happy to have her entire brood under one roof, thrilled to visit with Di again after so many years, and glad to see Dan and meet Honey. With Moms’ return, everyone set about their tasks with alacrity, and the rest of the day flew by, filled to the brim with open house preparation.

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Thanksgiving dawned a wonderful day. The sun shone brightly in a cloudless, powder-blue sky, and by noon, the temperature was forecasted to be a record-breaking seventy-two degrees.

The young people awoke early and immediately set to work with the last-minute items that they were not able to do the day before. They took turns hurriedly showering—with six of them now in residence it took a series of logistics to make their ablutions happen in an organized and timely fashion—and were all ready to help Mrs. Belden after a simple breakfast of hot oatmeal, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and lightly toasted homemade bread with butter. It was a simple meal, and Mrs. Belden had cooked the oatmeal in the slow cooker overnight so that there would be minimal fuss that morning, but it was a filling meal, and the six young men and women appreciated it greatly and told Mrs. Belden so.

From then on, they were so busy preparing for the onslaught of guests that they forgot about anything else, and the first guest arrived while they were still dressing for the party after their morning exertions. The first arrival was Mr. Lytell, the local shopkeeper who Trixie unrelentingly referred to as the “neighborhood busy-body.” Following his arrival, neighbors and friends continued to stream through the door. Mart, Brian, and Jim served as valets, supervising

the parking of cars so that people could get out whenever they wanted to leave and at the same time not ruin any of Moms' precious flower beds.

Dan and his parents arrived in the middle of the festivities, and Peter and Timothy hit it off quickly while Helen and Ailene bonded over their love of all things culinary. Trixie was in heaven, being surrounded in the embrace of family and old and new friends. Even as she rushed around, hurriedly dumping a big box of potato chips in the brass bowl on the butterfly table when she saw it was empty and refilling Moms' favorite Limoges porcelain bowl with potato salad, she was aware of how lucky she was, of the cornucopia of blessings that surrounded her.

It was eight o'clock before the crowd thinned. Brian, Mart, and Jim came in then, ravenously hungry. After they had piled their plates high with food and moved away from the table, Brian teasingly said to Trixie, "Hey, squaw. Bring me some hot buttered rolls."

Trixie grinned, and playing along, clenched her fist and shook it under his nose. "Get 'em yourself, Sitting Bull."

Brian grabbed her fist with his free hand, set his plate down on a nearby table, and impulsively gave her an affectionate hug.

Trixie released herself from his hug and stared at him, dumbfounded. "What was that for, Brian Belden?"

Brian shrugged, not the least bit embarrassed about his display of affection for his only sister. "It's Thanksgiving, and I'm thankful that I have you as a sister—as kooky as you are sometimes!"

Trixie rewarded him with a pertinent grin. "You wouldn't like me any other way! And I'm grateful to have you as my brother. Now go eat before it gets cold. And I'll get you some hot buttered rolls!"

Soon, the only people left in the house were the Beldens, their sleep-in houseguests, and Dan and his parents. Ailene Mangan had insisted on staying and helping clean up, even though Helen Belden had argued that she had a large group of able-bodied young people to help her.

As the Mangans were getting ready to leave, Trixie cried impulsively, "I wish you didn't have to leave, Dan, since everyone else gets to stay!"

Helen spoke up immediately. "Dan is more than welcome to stay. These walls are elastic. There's always room for one more at Crabapple Farm, isn't there, Peter?"

Trixie's father immediately agreed that Dan was more than welcome to stay if his parents didn't mind.

Ailene Mangan's green eyes twinkled as she looked up at her husband and then at the hopeful expressions on all of the young people's faces, including Bobby's. "It's fine with me. Timothy?"

"Absolutely, if the Beldens are sure these elastic walls can stretch some more."

It was Bobby who piped up. "Crabapple Farm's walls are the stretchiest."

"Well, then it's settled," Ailene declared among the laughter that followed the youngest Belden's statement.

Honey appeared absolutely delighted. “Why, it’s like a regular house party out of a book!”

Jim grinned, his eyes meeting Dan’s dark ones, and the two shared a knowing look. They seemed to be the only two that realized that no one had actually asked *Dan* about whether he wanted to stay or not. Dan grinned back at Jim. He was used to Trixie’s impulsivity, and the warm, friendly, inclusive nature of the Beldens, and he really did want to stay and hang out with everyone. He was glad Trixie had thought of it. He wasn’t surprised that she had made it happen.

There was a flurry of good-byes and thank-yous as the elder Mangans left for the Bronx. Soon after, the Belden parents and Bobby said their good-nights and headed upstairs, where their inviting beds awaited them after a long and busy day.

Tired but happy, the bevy of young people lounged in the low-ceilinged living room and picked up their discussion from the day before about where to visit before they headed to Dan’s parents’ pub for lunch on Saturday. Trixie, not surprisingly, continued to champion for Edgar Allan Poe’s cottage. In the end, the group decided to head to the New York Botanical Garden to experience the Holiday Train Show, an annual tradition that featured model trains zipping around landmark replicas in the conservatory. Trixie had good-naturedly agreed that it was better to see something seasonal than a cottage they could see year-round.

“But next Halloween, you’re all coming home, and I am dragging you to Poe’s cottage and the famous Woodlawn Cemetery! It’ll be a deliciously creepy way to spend the holiday!” she declared. Everyone happily agreed that it was “a date.”

The seven all felt a shared excitement at the prospect of spending more time together. Even though, as a group, they had only known each other for a short amount of time, the thought of being a bona fide club of sorts just felt right to all of them, as though it was meant to be.

As though they had been supposed to find each other all along and finally had.