

I can't believe it's been 11 years! I am so thrilled to be a member of Jix, and being able to share my love of writing is just icing on the cake! Many, *many* thanks to owners, former owners, admin, mods, fellow authors, members, readers, and lurkers who all make Jix feel as cozy as Crabapple Farm! Warning: This was mostly written over the course of 24 hours and is self-edited. Read at your own risk! :)

Tabula Rasa

by Dana

Prologue

June, Five Years Ago, Briar Hall, Upstate New York

“What do you suggest, Miss Trask?” Matthew Wheeler turned from the dejected form of his daughter to the woman she considered her hero.

The crisp, grey-haired woman knew exactly what she would suggest, but experience had taught her that speaking frankly to the parents of these privileged young women did not always end well. She turned from her honey-haired pupil and faced the strong man before her, the man so vigorous, confident, and healthy-looking that it was hard to tell that he was related to the pale, sickly, young waif lying in the bed before them.

Miss Trask was an expert at sizing up people, and in that moment, she sized up Matthew Wheeler. This was a man who liked the truth, no matter how unpleasant.

“Mr. Wheeler,” she began, “I believe that Honey is not as physically sick as she appears. It is more an...emotional malady. I truly believe that all that she needs is...” At that moment, there was a commotion in the infirmary corridor. Matthew and Margery turned toward the source of this commotion, and all of Margery's good-intentioned recommendations that Honey be brought to the country where she could live a more normal life fled.

A golden creature, a beautiful, delicate woman whom Honey would look just like in another 20 years, approached them, concern etched on her otherwise unlined brow. Miss Trask knew instantly that this was Honey's mother. Instinctively, she liked her...and yet, she immediately realized that she could not be as frank with this woman as she had been about to be with her husband.

“Madeleine!” Matthew hurried down the hallway and greeted his wife. He wrapped his arm around her and almost pulled her along the corridor, as if to shield her from the starkness of the Briar Hall infirmary and any bad news she might encounter there, bringing her to Honey's room and the spot where Miss Trask stood waiting.

“Madeleine,” he said, “this is Miss...” he paused only a second before remembering the name of Honey's beloved teacher “...Margery Trask. She is a teacher here, she teaches...” For this crucial fact, Matthew floundered for a moment and looked to the older woman. He chastised himself as his mind tried to grasp what she had told him. Usually he was so good with introductions, with facts, but in his worry for Honey...

Miss Trask smiled pleasantly and offered her hand to Mrs. Wheeler. “Math. I teach Honey math, and we've become rather acquainted over the course of the last semester.”

Tabula Rasa

Madeleine Wheeler offered what Miss Trask considered to be a rather strong handshake, considering. “And my daughter?” the woman asked, wide and fretful hazel eyes searching Miss Trask’s blue orbs before she turned them on her husband. “How is my Honey?”

“She’s fine, Maddie,” Matthew assured her with a pat on her arm, the private nickname—seldom heard outside of their private quarters—passing his lips unconsciously during this crisis with their daughter. “Miss Trask was just providing me with some advice.”

Miss Trask watched as intense and interested green eyes and devoted, but fragile, hazel eyes turned toward her. A young girl’s future health and happiness rested in *her* hands, and if the worried-but-strong emerald eyes had been the only ones gazing at her, she might have told her plans of a country home for Honey, but as it was, Mrs. Wheeler did not seem the sort to be able to hear that kind of assessment. The moment had passed.

Miss Trask took a deep breath. She could still help the young heiress. “I believe that it would be best if Honey was raised with you, away from boarding school. There are many fine day schools for girls in the City, and I think it would be best for her to attend one.”

Matthew nodded as he considered this. He would love to have Honey home with him.

“But we travel,” Mrs. Wheeler objected. “We’d hardly be around. At boarding school, she’d have constant companionship.”

Miss Trask coughed and bowed her head, thinking of the lack of companionship Honey actually had at Briar Hall. She raised her eyes to look into those of the Wheelers, saying confidently, “I know it can appear that way, Mrs. Wheeler, but sometimes boarding school can make the girls feel...*more* lonely. They need their parents’ guidance, which they cannot get in boarding school, no matter how highly respected and well-run.”

“But I was raised in boarding schools,” Mrs. Wheeler murmured, rather defensively and certainly reflexively.

There was a silence, so complete that Miss Trask could hear the hum of the fluorescent lights above, and then Mrs. Wheeler cleared her throat, and the math teacher swore that the petite, golden woman stood up straighter.

“My mind is made up,” Madeleine declared, much to Miss Trask’s surprise. “Honey will come home to the penthouse. She will live with us and attend day school in New York.”

She reached out and grasped Miss Trask’s aged hands in her smooth ones. “Will you come live with us, Miss Trask? Will you help us get to know our Honey?” she implored.

June, Five Years Ago, Sleepyside-on-Hudson, New York

“I just don’t see how,” Edward Lynch was saying to his wife, Olivia. “I want to stay here, too, but it’s just not feasible.”

The plump, normally jolly woman stared at her husband of 15 years. “But we met here,” she protested. “We went to school here, and fell in love here, and had our children here...”

Tabula Rasa

“I know, Liv, but I really need to be closer to the City,” he reasoned.

Olivia sniffed. “You don’t mean closer to the City,” she said shrewdly. “You mean *in* it.”

Edward smiled broadly in complete contrast to their serious conversation. “I do,” he admitted charmingly. “But we can afford it now. And...”

Olivia interrupted. “We’ve always hated the fact that we couldn’t afford more land, land where our kids could play, like the Frayne estate and the Beldens, you know, on Glen Road, and now that we can afford to give our kids an honest-to-goodness house and property and...and...*everything*...we’re going to pack them up and move them to *another* apartment?” she demanded.

Edward shook his head, taking his wife’s hands into his. “No, sweetie, not just another apartment. A *penthouse*. We’ll share the whole floor with just one other family. And by floor, I mean practically half of a city block. Not like the crowded apartments here on Main Street.”

He looked into his wife’s delphinium-blue eyes. They were wavering. He could see it. He only wanted the best for his family, and he knew his cause was right. Yes, now they could afford a fancy estate here in Sleepyside, but it was so...so...*provincial*. His five children could have the best education now, if they moved. They could grow up in a cultural Mecca, living among so many wonderful opportunities, opportunities that their sleepy hometown could not provide...if they moved. And he could see them more often...if they moved. After all, he’d be much closer if they lived in the same city in which he worked. He didn’t want his children to grow up without him while he was in Manhattan. He said all of this to his wife, ultimately making a passionate plea that she could not resist.

She finally smiled at him, squeezing the hands that held hers. Her mind was made up, if not her heart. “You’re right, Ed. New York offers so many opportunities that Sleepyside just doesn’t, now that we can afford it. And you *would* be closer to the office...”

Ed grabbed his wife in a bear hug, knowing this was the best decision for the Lynch family.

June, Five Years Ago, Rochester, New York

“You’re lucky, Mr. Frayne,” the doctor said, staring at his patient seriously. “I don’t know how she dodged this one”

Winthrop Frayne’s grin split from ear to ear as he slapped the serious man on the back. “We Fraynes are charmed, that’s how.”

The black-haired doctor looked at him primly. “She’s still not out of the woods,” he said. His head flicked to the red-headed boy that dozed in the room’s only chair. “Had it not been for your boy...”

Win beamed at the sleeping form of his son. “Yes, I know. He wouldn’t take her nonsense and hurried her to the ER. My boy knows.” The sentence made it sound like James Winthrop Frayne the Second knew everything, and as far as his father was concerned, he did.

Tabula Rasa

The doctor wasn't so convinced. He glanced disinterestedly at the boy and then back at his patient's husband. "Yes," he said politely.

Win, noting the man's indifference, could not let it rest. Win was a proud father, and he never let a chance go by to brag about his son.

"He saved my life, too," he declared. This sweeping declaration caught the doctor's attention. Realizing that he had his audience hooked, the affable red-haired man continued. "I was having a heart attack. Even though Jim was only 10 years old, he knew something was wrong, and he dragged the veterinarian who lived on the next farm over to help me. Any other boy would have called the hospital or the police or some such nonsense, and they would have been too late to save me, you know, out on the farm where we lived." He looked over at his son with pride. "But Jim knew that a vet could help as much as a human doctor."

The "human doctor" gave Win a withering glance, but the redhead didn't even notice as he gazed at the delicate blonde in the bed before him. He was alive, and his wife was alive, and they would be able to raise their son together.

And that was all that mattered.

June, Five Years Ago, The Bronx, New York City, New York

"Mom," Dan Mangan said as he sat at his mother's bedside in a dingy hospital, grasping the hand of the woman who had raised him. It wasn't what he wanted for her, especially considering how ill she was, but his father was finishing up a tour of duty in Hawaii, and he had done his best just to get her to the closest medical facility. He cursed the fact that his mother had decided to move back to her old neighborhood from Hawaii almost two months before her husband so that she could get Dan settled before starting his new high school. If she hadn't, they'd all be together in Hawaii, and she'd be getting treatment at the Navy clinic in Kaneohe Bay or a nice, clean Hawaiian hospital. His dad probably wouldn't have waited to take Ailene to the doctor, and she wouldn't be so bad off. Dan hated himself for waiting.

Ailene Mangan remained unresponsive, despite her son's desperate pleas. His mother was strong, she was tough, she carried on no matter what—just like the wife of a Marine constantly deployed should be. She held the household—okay, apartment—together, no matter where in the world his dad was, fighting for their freedom, and she never complained.

She had never complained about the pain in her abdomen. When Dan had noticed her bent over, she had waved it off as indigestion. When she vomited the first time, she blamed it on Mrs. Esposito's burrito. The second time, she declared, in a barely audible voice, that it was just more of the same. The third time, after which she was barely conscious and running a fever, she groaned about the intense pain in her side, and Dan knew Mrs. Esposito and her infamous burritos weren't to blame. He had rushed her to the nearest hospital, as lackluster as it was, and prayed for the best.

The doctors had immediately declared that she needed her appendix removed, suspecting that she had delayed too long and it had burst, and rushed her into surgery. They hadn't said so in so many words, but Dan knew that if it already had burst, she would need some prayers.

Tabula Rasa

The young man had tried to contact his father to no avail, so he paced the halls by himself. This wasn't so different from the time he had dozed in a hospital waiting room, too young to understand all that was happening around him, half-watching his mother pace while she waited news of her husband after a jeep accident on base. That had ended well, and Danny, young and naïve, had just assumed that all hospital encounters would end so positively.

Now, he wasn't so sure.

He bowed his head in prayer as he gripped his mother's hands. He wished that Father Callahan was near. He always felt a sense of calm when he was in the presence of the priest.

"Danny..."

At first, Dan was sure he had imagined the voice, so weak was it. He didn't look up, continuing to pray.

"Danny..."

The voice was stronger, and he looked up to see those green eyes staring at him. He had seen them flash happiness, and anger, and disappointment—that was the worst!—at him, but never had he seen them so listless.

"Mum?" he said, hopefully, his head lifting as he gripped her hands tighter.

"Danny," she said. "Let go of my hands. Yer killin' me." Although she had been raised in America, she still spoke with a slight Irish lilt, courtesy of her immigrant parents and her upbringing in the Irish-American neighborhood of Woodlawn in the Bronx.

Dan gave a whoop. He let go of her hands, not because she asked, but because he was too busy throwing his arms around her shoulders to even consider what she had said. She was awake...that was all that mattered.

Ailene smiled. She wanted to hug her boy, but she was too weak. Instead, she laid in bed and reveled in the feeling of his warmth surrounding her as she tried to move her hands around his sides.

"You saved me life," she said when he had finally released his grip slightly, her Irish accent thickening because of her groggy state.

"No, Mum, God did," Dan said as he pulled back and stared at her, tears welling in his dark brown eyes.

"But y' did," she said, her softening of her vowels somewhere between Irish and American. "Knowing you were here, I couldn't leave, even when the white light was so pretty." She stared at her son, a grave look in her eyes. While he stared adoringly at her, so naïve, she grasped his hands with a strength that surprised both him and her. She repeated, "You saved m' life, Danny."

When he began to shake his head, she gripped his hands tighter, and he stopped the movement of his head, his attention full now.

Tabula Rasa

“I knew that I couldn’t leave you,” his mother said. “And when your dad had his accident, he said the same thing. He said he saw the white light, and it was so pretty and peaceful, but he couldn’t leave his boy, no matter how pretty it were. He didn’t want you to end up on the streets in some gang, and neither do I.”

Dan smiled at his mother. “Aw, Mum, that would never happen.”

Ailene looked into the earnest eyes of her son, and so intense were her next words that there was no trace of her lilting accent. “You saved my life, Dan. And your father’s.”

Connections

The Present

Trixie Belden always had the best intentions, no matter how they actually panned out. In this case, the college freshman sat violently alert, determined to write down every pertinent fact from every one of her professors’ lectures. It didn’t matter that this particular professor had not yet appeared—she was ready!

Not only did she want to do better than she had in high school, but now she could at least tailor her classes somewhat to her interests. Not as much as Brian or Mart could at their fancy universities, but Trixie was still happy to have some control at Westchester Community College. At least it wasn’t Sleepyside Junior-Senior High!

She was mostly trying to get her prerequisites out of the way. She was working on her associate of applied science degree. Quite proudly, she had declared her major as criminal justice. Within that, she had had to choose a specialization—corrections or police—and she had chosen police. After all, she didn’t want to *correct* criminals. She wanted to bring them *down*. Arrest them. Make them pay.

It was that innate sense of justice with which she lived, and she was proud of it, no matter what her almost-twin Mart had to say about it.

Trixie looked down again at her schedule as she waited for her professor to appear. There were way too many English and communications classes required for her comfort, and she was taking one of them this semester. *Mart* was the one who liked words. Trixie grimaced at the memory of her next-oldest brother offering to help her write her English theme for a dollar—even though the words were sure to be spelled wrong! Then again, among the government and introductory criminal justice classes that her advisor had recommended that she take during the next two years, there were also math and science classes. Trixie dreaded those, too. Brian, her oldest brother, would have been right at home in those, but not Trixie.

As she fidgeted in her seat, waiting for the class to start, she tugged an errant sandy blonde curl absent-mindedly. She took a deep breath.

I have five classes, she told herself. Just five. For a total of fifteen hours. Not thirty-six, like high school. Mart will help me get through English comp, and I’ll use a dictionary for the rest. Brian’ll get me through my science class—and my math class, too. I can handle the criminal justice introductory class on my own. And this one? It’s a speech course. I’ve always been

gifted in gab. And Brian will make sure that he writes something that won't embarrass his little sister.

Trixie chewed her lip.

I think.

As Trixie was considering all of this, someone sat down to her left, just before the professor entered and placed his briefcase on the table in front. Trixie briefly turned toward her neighbor, almost unconsciously noting his muscular forearms as he began to write in his notebook. Curious, she looked at his face and then smiled unconsciously as she took in his features. Those eyes, such an unusual color, seemed to go on forever. And those cheekbones...

Dark brown eyes ringed with gold met blue ones. As Trixie logged the color of his eyes, she also noted the way the outer corners crinkled as he smiled at her. She couldn't help but smile back.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," she answered.

In one motion, they both looked toward the front of the room, where the professor was clearly getting ready to speak, and then back at each other.

"Dan Mangan," the dark-haired boy sitting next to her said with a smile that could only be described as wicked.

"Trixie Belden," she returned with a decidedly pertinent air and then promptly turned her attention to the front of the room, where their professor had begun to teach

This could be interesting!

~*~*~*~*~

Honey Wheeler looked at her roommate with undisguised joy. "We're free! No more society luncheons or teas or empty penthouse apartments or parents who don't care!"

Di Lynch looked up from her packing long enough to give her friend a frown and a reproving glance. "Our parents care," she said.

Honey, normally so elegant and lady-like, snorted in a very undignified fashion. "Right! That's why Miss Trask brought me up."

The honey-haired freshman threw herself onto the twin bed in her new dorm room and tossed her pillow above her head absent-mindedly. She tried not to think about the time she had thought it would be different. Her parents had just fired Miss Lefferts and hired Miss Trask, whom Honey adored to this day. Her father had promised things would be different. There would be no more camps and no more boarding schools.

Tabula Rasa

And there hadn't been. But there hadn't been the parental company that she had been expecting, either.

Honey had been immediately transferred to the Spence School as a day student. Miss Trask was always there to send her off in the morning, welcome her home in the afternoon, help her with her homework, and wipe her brow after a particularly disturbing dream. Honey appreciated the attention, but she couldn't help but long for the attention of her parents. To be fair, Honey had to admit that her dad did his best to spend time with her when he wasn't busy at the office or on one of his frequent business trips. Her mother, however, as sweet as she seemed, was always so reserved around her. Miss Trask said it was shyness, but Honey had seen her mother mingle at society functions and her father's business gatherings, and "shy" was not a word that she would use to describe Madeleine Wheeler.

It was during a required drama class at the Spence School that Honey had met Diana Lynch. Di, unlike Honey, loved drama. She always got the lead female parts, and Honey knew that it was not just because of her shiny blue-black hair, high cheekbones, violet eyes, and resemblance to a young Elizabeth Taylor. Sure—there was *definitely* that—but Di had a vulnerable quality that played to audiences, the best combination of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe. Her flare for the dramatic and love of acting didn't hurt. It was Di who had noticed Honey, miserable in her corner, terrified of performing the required scenes, and had reached out to her.

It was Di's friendship that had brought Honey out of her shell. Whenever she would try to thank her, however, Di would just laugh and explain that she was paying it forward. Apparently, when she was in kindergarten in her hometown, she had been too shy to talk to anybody on the first day and some blonde tomboy had befriended her. Di had never forgotten that, even when her parents moved from Sleepside to the big city and enrolled her in the Spence School.

And now here they were—graduated from that privileged hell hole and on their own, sharing a room at an Ivy League college, happy that their respective parents had approved of it. It wasn't traditional and near the City, but each girl had pointed out the benefits of the university's liberal arts education to their parents. Neither set had needed much prodding, it *was* Ivy League, after all—even if it was in the middle of a "cornfield", as Honey's mother had put it—and the girls *were* doing what was expected of them.

Matthew Wheeler, for his part, had his doubts about the arrangement, as he thought his girl could do more than just get an "MRS" degree, but Madeleine seemed happy on the surface, thinking of what her own parents had placed before her—not realizing that she herself had an itch for something more.

Edward Lynch had concentrated so long on providing for his family that he had somehow gotten lost, only considering what money could buy, and Olivia Lynch had been so over her head within her new social status that she had listened to the advisors her husband had hired and trained herself to listen to them, desperately fighting her own instincts as she did so. They knew so much more than she did about having money, and so she tried to swallow her moral compass in the hopes that she didn't embarrass her husband among his "swanky" friends. She never realized along that way that she had somehow gotten so desperately lost.

Diana had taken her cue from her mother. She hated the intrusions of being rich—the prim and proper butler who hovered with his lace doilies, the nanny who wouldn't let her see her younger sets of twin brothers and sisters—but when her mother had apparently accepted these new realities without complaint, so had Di. It had never occurred to either one of them to speak up.

Tabula Rasa

Honey, being raised by governesses and nannies and barely knowing her parents, had had even fewer parental examples to emulate. She was afraid of her father's red-haired temper, despite the fact that he was actually the parent with whom she felt most comfortable, especially since she had overheard the maid long ago say that her mother had been disappointed that she wasn't a boy.

Honey and Di's friendship, and the support that they provided each other in the face of their unhappy home lives, was a match made in heaven.

Di could tell that Honey was in one of her maudlin moods as she watched her friend toss her pillow in the air repeatedly.

Diana, her belongings unpacked, was feeling restless. "Honey," she said, "I'm going for a walk."

Honey smiled. "Have fun!" she called, never breaking her monotonous pillow toss.

Di hurried from the dorm, almost as though someone was going to stop her. Once she had left the building and was walking along idyllic bush-lined cement walkways, she slowed down.

She was free! Like she had been in Sleepyside! Neither stupid Harrison nor Mrs. Bruger nor her mother were hovering over her! Di breathed in the fresh air as she walked freely along, reflecting for the millionth time in five years how much she hated her dad's money. Yes, it had made life easier in some ways. They weren't so crowded. Her mother had help with five kids. They lived in a nice penthouse in the City. But her father had not kept his promise that living closer to work would mean that he was home more; in fact, he had been home less than he had been before he had made his fortune.

The twins were too young to remember when they weren't rich, but Di did. Her dad worked hard, yes, but he made time for his family. Di remembered listening to her parents' conversation about leaving Sleepyside. Edward Lynch had persuaded his wife to move to the City because if he didn't have the long train commute, he could spend more time with his family. That had sounded legitimate, and Di was sure that her father had meant it at the time. What had actually happened, however, was that Edward Lynch had felt that he lived "so close" to the office that he began to work later and later. He began to go in earlier and earlier. And the money that had at one time just been a way to give his family the best became a way of life. Gradually, the Lynch family unit had virtually disintegrated, without any of them truly realizing it. They were still a family, but Di would never call them "close-knit." Not like she remembered the Beldens being.

Di had an inkling what she and her family had lost, though. As she walked along the paths, wishing for the simplicity of when the family had been poor, she remembered her old friends in Sleepyside.

It was these thoughts that convinced her that she was hallucinating when she saw a sturdy bond boy approaching her. Surely, it couldn't be...

She continued to stare as she strode closer to him, and finally the boy looked up. He smiled at her politely, and then his expression was almost comical. It moved from recognition, to shock, to...to something that Di wanted to claim but was unable to for fear of vanity.

She slowed, and the blond boy stopped completely in his tracks.

“Di?”

“Mart!”

Before she knew what she was doing, the black-haired beauty had fairly launched herself into Mart Belden’s arms.

~*~*~*~*~

Brian Belden reflected on his good luck. One week ago, he had thought that everything about his upcoming final year at Syracuse University was all set. Then, his roommate, who had been on the waiting list for a year abroad, had been offered a slot overseas from a last-minute cancellation, and he had bailed on Brian. He had promised to pay the rent on their two-bedroom apartment until Brian found a roommate, but Brian knew that Keith would be strapped for cash given the high cost of a year abroad. Not only did he feel guilty accepting any payment, whether or not Keith had signed a lease, he frankly wondered whether his roommate would even be good for it in addition to all of the extra expenses he was about to incur.

So, with the due date for the next month’s rent payment looming, Brian had tacked up signs at Syracuse University and the nearby State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF to those trying to save themselves a mouthful), not expecting that he would find anyone for quite some time, given that the semester was just about to start and most people had found housing ages ago. He had been shocked when someone had called him about the vacant room not two hours after he finished posting the last flyer.

He had been even more shocked when he realized that he really liked the level-headed guy on the other end of the phone after they had chatted for a while about the available room, rent, their majors, and other minutiae. The fellow was a conservation biology major at SUNY-ESF. Brian, a biology major focusing on the pre-med education that his Syracuse “health professions advisor” had prescribed, immediately appreciated that this potential roommate was also grounded in the biological sciences. It gave them common ground in Brian’s mind. He also thought it was cool that the guy wanted to be a naturalist and follow in his father’s footsteps. The two immediately arranged for Jim to come look at the apartment that evening.

Brian opened the door to a husky, six-foot-tall redhead who had an easy grin and relaxed air about him. The usually serious Brian instantly relaxed just being in his presence. “Jim, I presume?” he asked.

“Guilty as charged. I assume that makes you Brian,” the redhead returned.

“Also guilty,” Brian said, ushering his guest in. He showed the potential roommate the modest apartment, which included a small living room, galley kitchen, shared bath, and separate bedrooms.

“Keith moved out this morning,” Brian explained, opening the door to the empty bedroom, “so it’s all set whenever you’re ready to move in. If you decide to, that is.”

Jim’s sharp green eyes took in the orderliness and cleanliness of the apartment. He noted the bookcase in the living room, filled with a mixture of serious scientific tomes and bestselling fiction, many by the authors that he himself admired. He knew his decision instantly. If he

Tabula Rasa

couldn't continue to live in his family home, he couldn't imagine living anywhere other than this apartment.

"I think I've decided to," he said. "I just can't believe my luck, finding something decent after my parents decided to up and move to Holland at the last minute."

Brian nodded. "I know what you mean. I couldn't believe I was scrambling to find a roommate at the last minute, thinking everything was all set. I'm glad to find someone I seem to have stuff in common with." He grinned then. "Including the fact that those we thought we were going to live with for the next year are jetting off to Europe without us."

Jim laughed in response, but before he could say anything, Brian remembered the reason that his new roommate was looking for a place on such short notice. "I'm sorry to hear about your aunt, though." Jim had been very candid on the phone, one of the things that Brian really liked about him.

"Aunt Betty's a fighter," Jim said. "She'll pull through, especially with my parents there to take care of her."

Brian offered his hand to the redhead. "Well, it looks like we have a deal."

Jim took the proffered hand. "It looks like we do. I'll be sure to get you half of the security deposit by the first, as well as my half of the rent."

"Sounds great, and you can move in any time you like."

"I'll start this weekend," Jim said. "Fortunately, our renters aren't moving in until October first, so I have most of September to figure out what I need with me this year. Everything else will go into the storage unit my parents rented."

"Let me know how I can help," Brian offered. "I'm happy to help you move anything that you need."

Jim smiled gratefully. "Thanks. I appreciate the offer, but my parents hired a mover. As long as I have everything ready to go by the end of September, they'll move it into the storage place for me."

"All right, but if you need help moving anything here, just let me know. I'm on a work-study program at the library, but if I'm not working or studying, I don't mind helping you out."

"Great. Thanks."

The two ironed out a few more details about key exchanges and such and said their good-byes, each reflecting on his luck.

It wasn't until months later that Brian realized that he had never received another call about the available room. Suddenly, "luck" didn't seem to cover it. "Fate" seemed more appropriate.

Waxing Crescent

Tabula Rasa

With a week of college classes under her belt, Trixie had decided that she definitely liked college better than high school. Even though she still had to suffer through the indignities of math, science, and English, at least she had her criminal justice class to look forward to. Her speech class wasn't so bad, and she had Dan to keep her company. He had also ended up in both of her science and math classes, too. Like Trixie, Dan Mangan was a criminal justice major who had chosen "police" as his specialization. During the previous year, he had taken the introductory criminal justice class that she was currently taking, so he was helping her a lot, but he had chosen to delay the science and math classes until his second year. Trixie was happy to find someone who shared so many of her classes and who also could help her with her CJ class, but mostly she was happy that she had met someone with whom she really "clicked."

Not only was Dan easy on the eyes, but he had a really great personality, as Trixie had learned in a short amount of time. He was smart. He had a wicked sense of humor. He valued family. Trixie didn't have any facts to back her up, but she would bet that he was very loyal, too. He was from the Bronx.

With a campus of Westchester Community College being located in Yonkers, so close to the edge of the Bronx where he lived, he had ventured into "suburbia"—as he teasingly called it—for his first year of college. Trixie laughed whenever he called Yonkers suburbia. Being from Sleepyside, which was somewhat rural but close enough to the expanding metropolis of New York City to practically be classified as suburbia itself, she did not consider Yonkers to be suburban at all. Yonkers might as well be another borough of the City as far as she was concerned!

She and Dan loved to tease each other about their opposing points of view, but it was all in fun. The Yonkers campus, however, didn't offer all of the classes that he needed, so for his second year, he had chosen to venture "even farther into the rural areas" and attend classes at the main campus in Valhalla. He and Trixie teased each other about his classification of Valhalla as rural and her insistence that Valhalla was a major metropolis compared to the little village of Sleepyside.

If neither of them had to rush off to their jobs—Dan waited tables at his parents' Irish pub, and Trixie worked as a cashier at Crimper's Department Store—they would head to the library to study together. If the weather was nice, they would sit at a picnic table outside of the student center and practice their speeches for their speech class. Often, they would tell each other stories about their lives. Trixie told Dan what it was like to grow up on Crabapple Farm, tagging along after her older brothers because there were no other children close by to play with. Dan shared with Trixie his stories about growing up in New York City—mostly anyway.

Because Dan's father was so frequently deployed even when he was stationed stateside, once she had a son to consider, Ailene Mangan had decided to make her homebase in New York City so that she and Dan could constantly be near family, including her brother and her in-laws. So, most of Dan's upbringing had been in the City, even while his dad had been stationed overseas or as close as Quantico.

His father, recognizing how important that it was that Dan had roots, especially since Tim was deployed much of the time no matter where he was stationed, saved up his annual and bonus leave so that he could spend as much time as possible each year with his family, and Dan had cherished those times. When his dad was home in the summer, family time was filled with trips to the Jersey shore. When his dad could make it home for Christmas, it was extra special.

Tabula Rasa

When Tim wasn't deployed or on leave with them, Dan's mom would take Dan down to Quantico, Virginia to visit on weekends, or his dad would drive up to see them. When Tim had gotten orders to Hawaii when Dan was eleven, Ailene had decided to relocate with him. There would be infrequent contact with Tim so far away, and who could resist paradise? So, Dan had attended junior high in Hawaii before coming back to New York for high school. In Trixie's eyes, that just added a little more to Dan's "cool factor."

After the tour in Hawaii, Tim Mangan had been eligible for retirement, and the elder Mangans had followed their dreams and opened an Irish pub in the Irish-American neighborhood of Woodlawn in which they had grown up.

So, it was the pub Trixie was thinking of when their last class ended and she turned to Dan, asking asked him if he needed to get to work.

"I happen to have the evening off. One of the waitresses is getting married soon, so she asked for extra shifts to help pay for her wedding dress." Dan grinned. "I volunteered mine."

"You offered your wedding dress? How noble of you," Trixie said with a snort, and Dan guffawed at her joke. She continued, "I also happen to be free. Shall we head to the student center or the library?"

"Let's sit outside," Dan decided as the two gathered up their notebooks and pens and shoved them in their backpacks. "It's supposed to be rainy for the next few days, and I have to work the next three days, so some time outside sounds good."

Trixie agreed, and soon the two were amiably strolling across the campus toward the student center, which housed the cafeteria and other offices. All of the picnic tables were full when they first arrived, but Trixie's eagle eyes happened to spot a couple that looked like they were clearing their lunch paraphernalia, and Dan and Trixie soon were ensconced at the table. They didn't have any speech homework, so they pulled out their math books and decided to get a head start on the math problems that they had been assigned.

After a few moments of silence as they each attacked the first problem, Trixie put her pencil down. "My head just isn't in this," she admitted.

Dan looked up at Trixie, and then he placed his pencil on the table and stretched languidly. "Mine isn't, either," he agreed.

"Tell me about your uncle," Trixie prompted him. "The one who works with horses."

Dan's dark eyebrows shot up at Trixie's abrupt change of subject. "Uncle Bill?"

Trixie nodded. "Yeah. I always wanted to learn how to ride," she said wistfully. "The summer I was thirteen I started saving to buy a colt, but then when I realized how expensive horses were to take care of, I gave up on that idea."

"Well, he's a groom at the Riverdale Equestrian Centre near the Bronx," Dan began, but he sounded unsure of what Trixie wanted to hear, and his voice trailed off.

"He grew up in the City with your mom, right?" Trixie asked.

Dan nodded. "Yeah."

"So, how'd he get into horses growing up in a city?"

Dan laughed. "Your curiosity really is insatiable!"

Trixie blushed. "If you think I'm prying, then—"

"Oh, no," Dan rushed to assure her. "Not at all. I think it's great. You'll be a great cop some day."

Trixie never was able to take a complement, and she looked down at her math book and fidgeted. "Well, um, thanks," she mumbled.

"And you're cute when you blush."

Trixie's head shot up, and she had to laugh when she saw the wicked smile on Dan's face. She knew that her own face had grown even pinker with that comment, but she knew it was in fun, so she shot back, "Too cute for you, Mangan!"

After their laughter had subsided, Trixie said, "Seriously. I don't mean to pry or anything, but I've always had a fascination with horses, and your uncle works with them, so..."

"So you thought you could pick my brain," Dan finished easily. "It's cool. It's good practice for when you're a cop interrogating a suspect."

Trixie stuck her tongue out at him. "I hope you don't think I'm giving you the third degree!"

Dan chuckled. "You? Never!"

"Anyway," Trixie said with a roll of her eyes, "did you get to spend a lot of time around horses at your uncle's barn growing up?"

"It wasn't exactly *his* barn, but yeah, with my dad gone a lot, my mom encouraged Uncle Bill to be a father figure for me, so I spent a fair amount of time around horses growing up. It was always a fun way to spend a Saturday. If the horses weren't rented out, sometimes I could ride them after I helped my uncle with the grooming or cleaning the tack. Sometimes my mom paid for me to rent a horse, just like a normal customer, but she was always really frugal about money, so that was rare. Fortunately, the manager didn't mind me using the horses for a short time when I helped out."

Trixie's blue eyes held a faraway gleam. "You're so lucky!"

"You want to head out there some weekend? I'm sure Uncle Bill would love to share his love of horses with someone else who loves horses."

"I'd love it!" Trixie squealed. "Don't you work weekends though? Not to mention that I seem to work a fair amount of weekends myself."

Tabula Rasa

“I am pulling a double shift this Saturday, but next Saturday I only have to work in the evening. If you don’t have to work, we could go in the morning.”

“I have next Saturday off, as a matter of fact,” Trixie said elatedly. “What if your uncle isn’t working, though?”

“If he’s not, Uncle Bill loves those horses so much that, if he doesn’t have plans, I’m sure he’d love to teach you to ride anyway.”

“I couldn’t impose on him like that,” Trixie protested.

Dan waved her concern away, literally and figuratively. “He wouldn’t consider it an imposition. Trust me. And, in answer to your earlier question, not even my uncle knows why he’s crazy about horses. Nothing specific ever happened. He just says he’s always loved horses since he was little. Working with them was all that he ever wanted to do with his life. He started volunteering at stables when he was still a teenager, and he even went up to Saratoga to apprentice. That’s where he met Aunt Joan.”

Trixie was beside herself with excitement. Math was completely forgotten as she thought about the prospect of actually, *finally*, being able to ride a horse.

~*~*~*~*~

Mart’s sophomore year at Cornell was shaping up to be one of the best years ever. Had Diana Lynch *really* walked back into his life? He had thought that he had been hallucinating when he had seen the raven-haired beauty walking down one of the pathways on Cornell’s campus. When she had launched herself into his arms, he had wondered how a hallucination could be so *physical*. When he had finally grasped that it was not some fantastical dream, he had been overjoyed to realize that Diana Lynch was in his arms. And not only was she in his arms, she clearly *wanted* to be there.

As he had tried to comprehend what was happening to him, Diana had been standing before him gushing about how glad she was to see him and how much she had missed him and the rest of the Belden family since leaving Sleepyside.

It had been a dream come true. His fairest Diana, as he always referred to her in his mind, whom he was afraid he would never see again, was at Cornell with him. Even though he hadn’t seen her in five years, he hadn’t forgotten the silky feel of her hair or the way her violet eyes had the ability to instantly hypnotize him. Di had explained that she had just moved to campus with a friend she had met at her school in New York City, and Mart had invited her to one of his favorite restaurants to catch up. She had immediately accepted, and the two had chatted during the entire walk off campus to the eating establishment. The dining spot had been exceptionally busy because of all of the families moving their children to campus, but Mart and Di had hardly noticed the wait as they continued to regale each other with stories about their lives since they had diverged.

In the week since their chance encounter, Mart had continued to spend more time with Di. He had met her roommate, Honey, who seemed like a sweet, if shy and somewhat timid, young girl. Diana had spent some time in his dorm, and she swore up and down that she loved not only his roommate but also the crazy guys who lived on his floor.

Tabula Rasa

Mart had played pick-up basketball his freshman year and had really hit it off with a lot of the other guys who had also played. A bunch of them had decided to room together and request the same floor of the same dorm. As it turned out, their requests had been honored, so they had all ended up together. Mart already thought the world of the guys that he had spent so much time with during the last year, regardless of where they came from or what their major was, so it was gratifying that Di had given her stamp of approval without even knowing that they had chosen each other as floormates and not been randomly assigned. And realizing that he cared so much what Di thought made Mart realize that not only had he never stopped thinking of the beauty whom he had met when he had been in the first grade and she in kindergarten, but that he was still in love with her as well.

That realization only made Mart want to spend more time with Di, and fortunately, she seemed to feel the same way about him. After only a week, the two had become practically inseparable.

The two had just returned to Di's room after lunch in the cafeteria and had settled down on the futon to watch some television before studying. Di found a sitcom rerun on among the daytime talk shows and soap operas, and the two sat, shoulder to shoulder, just enjoying being around each other. As he watched the comedy unfolding before him on the TV, Mart took a few discreet deep breaths, willing himself to get his courage up to take Di's hand. So far, even with all of the time that they had been spending together, their activities had been completely chaste, but he had been dying to hold her hand. To kiss her.

As he sat there, he tried to make taking her hand seem like a casual thing, something natural since they were already sitting so close with their arms brushing against each other, but inside, his heart was pounding. There was nothing casual about the way that he felt about her. She was everything that he had remembered and more.

When he finally took her hand, Di turned and smiled at him. "I've been wanting you to do that," she admitted shyly.

"You have?" Mart asked, his sandy eyebrows raised in surprise.

Di nodded, her smile still in place. Her face was just inches from his.

"What else have you wanted me to do?" Mart said in a voice just above a whisper, shocked that he had the courage to say something so cavalier and daring.

Di's smile widened, and she leaned in toward him. "This," she whispered just before her lips met his. Mart closed his eyes and savored the feel of the kiss. Her lips were so soft, and it felt so right to be kissing her. He turned his body toward hers, releasing her hand so that he could grasp the back of her head to deepen the kiss. What started out as soft and hesitant intensified. Mart reveled in the heady feelings that he was experiencing.

The young couple was brought back to reality with the sound of the door opening. They broke apart and both looked up to see Honey standing in the doorway, her face a picture of embarrassment.

"I am so sorry, you guys," she said as she backed up and into the hallway. "I'll leave you alone. I didn't know."

Tabula Rasa

“No! Honey!” Di called just as Honey was about to shut the door. “It’s okay!”

“Speak for yourself,” Mart muttered under his breath, but his smile told Di that he was only kidding. Then he called out, “Honey, come on back!” Di gave him a grateful look mixed with apology as she vaulted off of the futon toward her roommate.

Honey had re-opened the door but had not yet come back into the room. Her cheeks were tinged pink, and she looked mortified.

“I’m sorry,” she stammered again.

“It’s no big deal,” Di assured her, taking her hands and leading her back into the room. “We were just watching TV,” she said with a wicked grin. This made Honey smile, despite her obvious discomfort.

“Yeah, that’s what it looked like,” Honey shot back. She paused for a moment and then explained, “I just need to grab a couple of books, and then I’ll leave you alone.”

As the honey-haired girl headed toward her desk, swinging her backpack off of her back, Mart said, “You don’t need to rush off on my account.”

“I’m not,” Honey assured him as she selected two books from her desk. “I have to meet some friends at the library, but I forgot these.” She waved the books before placing them in her backpack. Di and Mart looked on as she swung the backpack back over her shoulder and headed toward the door she had just entered moments before.

As Honey was leaving, she had clearly recovered from her surprise because she turned and gave them a mischievous smile. “Have fun!” she called in a sing-song voice before disappearing.

Di turned to Mart. “You *know* she’s not really meeting anyone at the library. I want to feel guilty. I *should* feel guilty. But all I can think is, ‘Where were we?’”

Mart reached up to pull her back down onto the futon with him. “Right here,” he said as their lips met again.

~*~*~*~*~

Brian and Jim each sat at the kitchen table studying. So far, the living arrangement was working out well. Jim studied just as much as Brian did, and each of them liked studying in silence, so it was perfect. The pair also liked to spend time outside and had played a few games of pick-up hoops with some other guys from their apartment complex. Brian had even realized that he had grown up next to Jim’s great-uncle. Jim had even visited Ten Acres when he was a child, but after his great-uncle lost his wife following a copperhead bite, he had become a recluse and shunned all family. Jim had told Brian that the last time that his father had tried to visit his uncle, he had chased Win away with a shotgun.

They had been poring over their notes and textbooks for more than an hour when Jim said, “I could use a break.”

Tabula Rasa

Brian looked down at the biochemical structure that he was trying to memorize. “Yeah, I think I’ve had all of the biochem that I can handle for one day.”

Jim grimaced. “Biochem. I’ve never even had a biochem class, but just looking at your notes makes me think *I’ve* had enough as well. Cell biology and genetics were enough for me.”

Brian chuckled. “It’s not so bad.”

“I’ll leave it to you then. Give me an ecology class any day.”

“Ecology would be interesting,” Brian said.

“It is,” Jim agreed. “I like learning about wildlife and marine habitats and stuff. Of course, a lot of what they teach in those classes my dad’s already taught me just by being out in the woods with him.”

“It’s nice to have a knowledge base like that,” Brian commented.

“Yeah, I’m really lucky my dad is the kind that’s really hands-on. Always taking me out into the forest and teaching me about my surroundings.”

Brian nodded. “My dad’s a banker, but there was an older guy in Sleepyside, Tom Delanoy, who was almost like a big brother to me. He taught me and my brother, Mart, to hunt. He knew the woods by us like the back of his hand.” He shook his head, thinking about Bobby. “It’s hard to believe that my younger brother is getting to be the age where *I* should be teaching *him* to hunt.”

“Does your sister hunt, too?” Jim asked. He had been intrigued by the stories that Brian had told him about his younger sister. She sounded like she’d be a lot of fun to hang out with.

“A little,” Brian answered. “She tagged along after me and Mart until Bobby got to be the age where she had to stay home and keep *him* from tagging along. But Tom taught her how to shoot. She’s pretty good.”

“And she wants to be a cop?” Jim prompted his roommate. He loved hearing about Brian’s family, being an only child himself.

“That’s our Trixie,” Brian said with a rueful smile. “She’s got this innate sense of justice, and she hates seeing people become victims or being taken advantage of. So, she’s decided that she’s going to do her best to stop that sort of thing from happening.”

“She sounds amazing,” Jim said.

Brian was quiet for a moment. “I guess I never thought about it, because she’s my sister, but, yeah, I guess she is. She may groan about it, but she’s one of the hardest workers I know. She’s really generous, too. She was always helping out with fundraisers and food drives and stuff in high school. She loves all kinds of sports, and she’s not afraid of anything.”

Jim didn’t say anything. The more Brian talked about his sister, the more that Jim wanted to meet her, to get to know her. He wasn’t sure why she captivated him so much, when he had never even spoken to her. Brian had a picture of himself and his siblings in his room, and

something about those blue eyes of Trixie's mesmerized Jim every time he looked at that picture. The four Belden kids were goofing around outside, and there were gorgeous crabapple trees in full bloom behind them. All four had bright smiles, and three of them looked so similar, with their blue eyes and blond hair. Trixie's eyes shone as bright as her smile, her curls attractively askew. Jim found the smattering of freckles across her nose adorable.

The redhead was brought back to the present by Brian's voice. "Since we're not going to study, you want to go see if anyone's playing hoops?"

Jim nodded. "Sure. That will hopefully clear my head. Maybe I can concentrate on invasive species after some activity."

And maybe then he could get the image of a certain sandy blonde out of his head, too.

Confluence

As it turned out, Trixie wasn't able to get her first horseback ride until near the end of October. As she and Dan neared the stables at the Riverdale Equestrian Centre, she was practically vibrating with excitement. Dan chuckled at his friend's enthusiasm.

"A little excited, Trix?"

Trixie grinned at the dark-haired young man. "Not at all."

After Trixie had paid for the horse rental, insisting that she pay for Dan despite his protests, they entered the barn, and Trixie immediately was drawn to a gleaming black horse. She sucked in a deep breath of the air that was fragrant with the smell of clean horses and hay and saddle soap. She moved closer and patted the gelding's satiny neck.

"Oh, you beautiful, beautiful thing," she crooned as the horse, whose stall said "Jupiter," nuzzled her pocket, hinting for a lump of sugar. "I haven't anything for you, darling, but I wish I had some apples and carrots for you."

"You speak a horse's language, miss." Trixie turned to see a broad-shouldered, pleasant-faced redhead. "Jupe understood every word you said."

"I *love* him," Trixie cried impulsively. "Do you think I could ride him today?"

"He's not easy to handle, Jupiter isn't." The groom cocked his head toward Dan, who was standing a few feet away, an amused expression on his handsome features. "My nephew here says you haven't done much riding."

Reluctantly, Trixie shook her head. "I've never even been on a horse," she admitted ruefully.

"Never even been on a horse? Jupe would know right off that you were a beginner, and would he take you for a ride." He slapped Jupiter's neck affectionately.

Trixie swallowed hard to keep from showing her disappointment. "But when I learn to ride, will you let me try him? Please!" she begged meekly.

Tabula Rasa

“That I will,” Bill Regan promised. He offered her a hand. “By the way, I’m Bill Regan, but everybody calls me Regan. You must be Trixie Belden.”

Trixie shook the redhead’s hand. “Yes, I’m sorry! My manners are awful. I tend to get ahead of myself sometimes, and when I saw Jupe here...” She looked back at the beautiful horse.

“No apologies necessary, Trixie. I can tell just by the way you act around Jupe what a horse lover you are, and I admire that! As a matter of fact, I have a horse over here who I think will be just perfect for you.” Trixie followed him to where a lovely dapple-gray mare whinnied from her stall.

“That’s the sweet girl,” Regan crooned as he slipped a halter over the horse’s head and led her out. “This is Lady,” he said as he gently placed a saddle on Lady’s back and bent over to buckle the girth in place. “I’ll have to tighten the cinch a bit after you get on. Lady has the habit of blowing herself up while she’s being saddled.” Regan led Lady out of the stable and pulled down the stirrups. Measuring the length of Trixie’s leg with his eye, he adjusted the leather straps accordingly. He held one stirrup iron for her. “Up you go,” he ordered.

Trixie promptly discovered that mounting a horse was not as easy as she had thought it would be, but after two unsuccessful tries, she found herself, breathless and excited, in the saddle. She was on a horse at last!

While Regan explained the basics of handling a horse to Trixie, Dan was happy to see that his favorite mount, Spartan, a handsome roan who actually could dance to music because of his past job in the circus, was available. Dan saddled him up and walked him around the ring a few times until Regan declared Trixie ready for her ride.

As Dan brought his roan next to Trixie’s mare, she grinned at him, her face absolutely alive with excitement. “Can you believe it? Me, Trixie Belden, on a horse! I hope it’s not the last time!”

As it turned out, it wasn’t. Dan and Trixie were able to go riding a few more times after class and on one Saturday. Trixie adored Regan, and Regan was impressed with how quickly Trixie was learning to ride. Because the riding center wasn’t too far from Dan’s parents’ apartment and pub, sometimes he took her to one or the other place afterward to eat. Trixie’s vivacious personality was a match for Ailene Mangan’s own vivaciousness, and the blonde and the redhead got along famously on those occasions. Timothy was quieter than his lively wife, but he was always welcoming when Trixie visited.

One day when she was visiting, eating shepherd’s pie at the bar of the pub while Dan ate fish and chips, the Mangans were discussing their plans for Thanksgiving. They couldn’t decide whether to close the pub for the day or not.

“We never have before,” Timothy was saying. “A lot of our regulars like coming here on Thanksgiving.”

“I know, Tim,” Ailene said, “but it would be nice to celebrate a traditional American Thanksgiving for a change.”

“You should come to our annual Thanksgiving open house,” Trixie couldn’t resist putting in. “You’ve been so wonderful to me that I’d love to be able to return the favor. We do it every year. Moms serves a buffet supper of ham and turkey and coleslaw and all. Our neighbors all drop in

Tabula Rasa

at some point during the day. Dozens of people, but they seldom stay very long and don't arrive all at once. I'd love it if you guys could stop by, and I know Moms would love it too. She's very fond of Dan." Trixie grinned sheepishly. "And she's afraid I'm going to wear out my welcome at your place, so I know she'd love to return the hospitality you've shown me."

Tim guffawed, and Ailene waved a delicate hand. "You'll never wear out your welcome, Trixie," Ailene assured her.

The Mangans discussed it further, but in the end, Trixie had apparently made a very persuasive argument, because Tim and Ailene decided to close the pub for the holiday and attend the Thanksgiving open house at Crabapple Farm. Trixie was excited that she could finally play host to Dan's family after they had been so hospitable to her.

~*~*~*~*~

As the days grew shorter and the leaves began to change colors and fall from the trees, the other friendships that had formed that fall grew stronger. Mart and Di were a solid, comfortable couple, and Honey and Mart had grown close, too. Mart appreciated Honey's tactful sweetness, and Honey admired Mart's sharp wit and obvious love for Di. Honey was happy that Di had found—or re-found—someone so perfect for her who cared for her a great deal. Honey had hit it off with a few boys from her classes and the dorm, but none of them inspired the feelings in her that Di had for Mart.

When she had received the letter from her parents that they would be out of the country for Thanksgiving, she had not been surprised. Her parents only spent about every other Thanksgiving in New York. International business didn't seem to consider American holidays, and her father usually had something he needed to take care of at his offices in London or Tokyo. Honey usually spent her Thanksgiving with Di's family or with Miss Trask and her sister. It wasn't ideal, but Honey was used to it, and she adored Miss Trask and Di's family, so at least she was spending the holiday with those she was truly close to.

It was a few days after Honey had received her letter that Di received a call from her mother. Honey was lounging on the futon reading an assigned classic for her English lit class and only half paying attention to Di's half of the conversation. When she noticed the pitch of Di's voice change, though, she looked up. The lovely features of her friend's face clearly showed that she was upset.

"Why can't you take all of us?" Di was asking. "We've never been apart on Thanksgiving."

Honey's heart sank. She knew what it was like to be cast aside on a holiday, and she wouldn't want her best friend to feel that distress for anything in the world. She tried to send Di a comforting look, but her friend was not looking at her. She had her eyes closed, and she looked like she was trying not to cry.

"Okay, Mother," Di finally said after a long silence. "Mart's here. I have to go." The fib glided off her tongue easily in her anger and disappointment and desire to end the conversation immediately, and she hung up the phone without hesitation and turned to look at her friend and roommate.

“I take it you’ve gathered we’re both now homeless on Thanksgiving,” she said dully, tears pooling in her violet eyes.

Honey got up off the futon and gave her friend a reassuring hug. “We’ve got each other,” she said. “What are the twins doing?”

“They’re going to stay with Uncle Monty in Arizona and have a dude ranch Thanksgiving. Mummy said I could go with them or stay in New York. The choice was mine.”

“What are your parents doing?” Honey asked.

Di gave a derisive laugh. “Apparently, there’s the opportunity to take a cruise to Polynesia that they just *can’t* pass up.” Honey hated to hear the bitterness in Di’s voice, but she certainly understood it.

“We’ll be together,” Honey assured her friend again. “We’ll have a grand old time.”

Di was just about to reply when there was a knock on their door. “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!”

Despite herself, Di giggled and crossed the room to open the door. “I think Rapunzel was a blonde,” she told her boyfriend.

“Yeah, but...” Mart’s voice trailed off as he took a close look at his girlfriend. “Are you crying, Di? What’s wrong?”

Di gave a deep sigh and stepped aside so that Mart could enter the dorm room. After he and Honey had exchanged greetings, Mart pulled Di into his arms. “What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“Honey and I are homeless on Thanksgiving,” Di said, letting her tears flow. “My parents are going on a cruise to Polynesia, and Honey’s dad has business in London.”

“You’re *not* homeless,” Mart stated. “You and Honey will come stay at Crabapple Farm for the Thanksgiving break.”

“Oh, we couldn’t put your family out like that, Mart,” Honey protested.

“Nonsense!” Mart said to the girls. “Moms always says that the farm has stretchy walls, and it does. Plus, she absolutely adores Di and has been bugging me to get her to come back to Sleepyside for a visit.” He turned to his girlfriend. “Trixie will be over the moon to see you again, too.”

“I don’t know, Mart,” Di began.

“No arguments,” Mart said firmly as he kissed the tip of Diana’s nose. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s settled.” Before either of the girls could protest, he used his cell phone to call his mother. When she heard of the girls’ plight, she insisted that they come and stay at Crabapple Farm. He hung up, a victorious look on his face.

Tabula Rasa

“It’s going to be a fabulous weekend,” Mart stated. Honey and Di thanked him gratefully, and now that she thought about it, Honey couldn’t wait to see what Thanksgiving at Crabapple Farm would be like. She was sure it would be something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, and she couldn’t wait to partake of such a cozy experience.

~*~*~*~*~

“So, what are you planning on doing for Thanksgiving?” Brian asked his roommate casually about a week before the holiday.

Jim looked up from the thriller that he was reading. “I actually hadn’t given it much thought.”

“As you know, I’m heading back to Crabapple Farm. I was wondering if you’d be interested in going with me?”

Jim didn’t say anything for a moment. He *had* been telling the truth when he’d told Brian that he hadn’t given his Thanksgiving plans much consideration, but the thought of spending a cozy family holiday at Crabapple Farm with Brian...and Trixie...*had* crossed his mind. He wanted to say yes to his friend’s invitation, but he was almost afraid. He had built Brian’s little sister up in his mind so much that he didn’t want anything to spoil the fantasy. Plus, there was the “Bro Code.” Sisters were most definitely off limits.

With all of this swirling in his mind, Jim opened his mouth to say that he’d be fine staying at their apartment over the long weekend. What he found himself saying was, “If your parents don’t mind, that’d be great.”

“They don’t,” Brian assured him. “I already called, and Moms said she’d be thrilled to have you. She’s always saying that Crabapple Farm’s walls are stretchy, and they’ll certainly get a workout that weekend. Mart’s also bringing home his girlfriend and her roommate. Seems both of their parents are going to be out of the country, too!”

Jim grinned. “Globe-trotting parents. It seems to be a regular epidemic.”

Brian laughed. “I don’t think I’ll ever have that problem.”

“You never know. I certainly didn’t think that I would!”

Brian sobered. “How is your aunt doing, by the way?”

“Much better,” Jim said. “Her treatments were making her super sick, but now they seem to be working, and she’s feeling a lot better. She hates it because she’s been pretty dependent on my mom, and she loves her independence. My cousin, Juliana, is helping out a lot, too. She wanted to take time off from law school, but her mother wouldn’t let her. I’m just so glad that my parents were in a position to be able to help.”

“I’m glad she’s doing better,” Brian said. “It’ll be nice for you to be able to visit them all over Christmas.”

“I am looking forward to it,” Jim admitted.

Tabula Rasa

Brian switched back to the topic of Thanksgiving. “Moms always has an open house on Thanksgiving. Lots of neighbors drop by, and she has a buffet with all of her awesome cooking. This year, Moms says that Trixie even invited some guy she met at college and his parents.” He laughed. “So, not everyone has world travelers for parents.”

Jim smiled, but his heart plummeted. In all of his thoughts about Trixie and the potential for meeting her during the Thanksgiving break, he had never considered that she might be bringing another guy. Jim kicked himself for developing feelings for someone he’d never even met, and kicked himself even harder for not realizing that, of course, someone as fantastic as Brian described would have a boyfriend.

It didn’t matter, though. He was still looking forward to the visit. As a matter of fact, seven young people were all counting the days until they’d be spending Thanksgiving at Crabapple Farm.

~*~*~*~*~

Don’t think Di (or Honey!) would have ended up at Cornell? Neither did I, until I read that one of the most prestigious girls’ schools in NYC (which happens to be Honey and Di’s alma mater in this alternate universe) feeds more graduates to Cornell than to any other university. Yeah, I know it’s known as an agricultural school, but it also is an Ivy League school. I was so excited to learn this little tidbit, because in my head, Mart can attend *nowhere* but Cornell—and I couldn’t fathom where he would hook up with Di again and was having fits about where I would send him. I love where a little research can take you!

Trixie Belden® is a registered trademark of Random House Books. These pages are not affiliated with Random House Books in any way. These pages are not for profit.