

Wannabe Author's Note: Yes, I have taken characters that don't belong to me and written this story, but I guarantee I treasure them more than Western Publishing does. I am still a starving grad student—meaning I have not made any money off of this story. So Western, if you want to sue, you are going to have to be satisfied with ramen noodles and macaroni & cheese, cuz that's all I have.

Shadows of the Past

by GSDana

Chapter One: Memories

Twenty-two-year-old Trixie Belden faced her mirror and braced herself, but instead she was pleasantly surprised. Blue had always been her best color, so she shouldn't have been too taken aback to discover that the blue cap and gown she wore looked pretty good with her shoulder length blond curls and bright blue eyes. Had she really made it this far? Was she really about to receive a college degree from Georgetown University? Trixie had always expected this day would be one of the happiest of her life, but too many worries hung heavily on her mind to truly be able to enjoy this day.

Jim. Jim Frayne. How had it come to this when they had been so close when they were younger? It had been so fun the summer she and Honey had discovered Jim in his uncle's run-down mansion.

"Shake. My name's Jim. What's yours?"

"I'm Trixie Belden, and I live down there at Crabapple Farm."

"Well, I never! You two tracked me down in less than a week, you sleuths, you!"

"You don't have to worry about Jonesy anymore, Jim."

"I have so got ambition. It's all settled. Honey and I are going to be private detectives."

"And call your agency Schoolgirl Shamuses, Incorporated, I suppose. I can just see your business cards. 'When the FBI gives up, we take over,' printed in red."

"You've got to admit that we were pretty smart about finding you, Jim Frayne."

They had shared so many adventures since then, and eventually they had shared a love Trixie had thought would last forever. She remembered the first time she realized how much she cared for James Winthrop Frayne the Second.

"It's for you, Trixie. I got it in Valley Park yesterday."

"It has your name on it, Jim. Put it on for me will you?"

"You know what it means don't you?"

"Tell me."

"It means you're my special girl, Trixie. As if you didn't know that already."

And now? Here it was, her college graduation—the pinnacle of her life thus far—and he could not even set aside their differences for one day to attend the ceremony with the rest of their friends and families. Wasn't he happy for her? Wasn't he just the least bit proud that the girl he had to tutor in math in high school had managed to graduate with honors from a prestigious university? She had swallowed her pride and put aside her differences to attend not just one, but

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both of his graduations from Columbia University. Last year when Jim had earned his Master's in Business Administration she had told her boyfriend that he could not travel to New York with her to attend the graduation. It would be too uncomfortable for all involved, she reasoned. Matt accused her of still being hung up on Jim and never forgave her for leaving him in Washington D.C. while she traveled home. It had been the beginning of the end of their relationship. And what had she gotten in return? To see Jim and his beautiful "flavor of the month" Jessica kissing and flirting all weekend.

Trixie had been hurt the previous evening when her bestfriend, Honey Wheeler, had broken the news that her adopted brother would not be travelling to D.C. Honey and their other bestfriend (and Trixie's sister-in-law) Diana Belden had driven down to D.C. together and were staying in Trixie's Georgetown apartment that weekend to celebrate Trixie's graduation. The rest of the Belden family, including Trixie's parents, three brothers and cousin Hallie, as well as Diana's and Honey's parents, were staying at a downtown D.C. hotel. Dan Mangan, another one of their closest friends, was able to make the trip down and was staying at the hotel as well.

It had been Honey's idea that the girls have a weekend long "slumber party—just like old times!!" Trixie had enthusiastically agreed to the idea as she missed her friends terribly during the school year and loved to spend time with them during vacations as much as she could. But after Honey had gently broken the news about Jim's decision to not come, Trixie hadn't felt very festive. Diana and Honey knew how upset Trixie was, but they respected her privacy, and instead of trying to get her to talk about it, they did the best to cheer her up and keep her mind off of Jim as much as possible.

Trixie scowled at the mirror and told herself to stop thinking about Jim. But then her mind wandered to her other problem. There was another matter that couldn't be ignored much longer, the matter of...

"Trixie?" Honey's sweet voice broke Trixie's reverie. "Trix, you almost ready? I'm going to break down that door soon!!!"

Trixie laughed and her mood was broken. Honey had unfailingly been able to cheer her up since they were both thirteen. For a brief moment, Trixie was transported back in time to the summer she had met her bestfriend.

"I'm Trixie Belden. My kid brother and I live in the hollow in that little white frame house—Crabapple Farm you know."

"How do you do. My name is Honey—Honey Wheeler."

"We'll go and look for Jim ourselves, Honey and I."

"It's a perfectly wonderful idea. We'll go in our trailer. Oh we'll have a wonderful time, won't we Trixie?"

"Come on in—it's open!" She called as she turned toward the door to greet her friend.

Tall and slim with honey brown hair and hazel eyes, Honey looked perfect in her emerald green summer dress. Following right behind her, beautiful Diana wore a pretty dress in her signature color of lavender which set off her violet eyes and shiny black hair.

"You look great, Trix," Diana complemented her friend.

"Yeah, tassles do wonders for you," Honey teased.

"You just wait, Honey Wheeler, it's your turn next week to get dressed up in this ridiculous outfit with a piece of cardboard on your head!" Trixie shot back with a smile.

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“I believe it’s called a mortar board and I am looking forward to it after four long, hard years at NYU! Of course, mine is purple and would look much better on Diana!”

“At least yours is an interesting color. Westchester Community College didn’t even have school colors—we all wore black when we got our associates degrees!” Diana retorted.

“Amazing isn’t it?” Trixie asked. “I mean when you think of how many graduations we Bob-Whites have gone through starting with Brian and Jim’s graduation seven years ago from good ole’ Sleepyside Junior-Senior High!”

“I know! It seems like we’re forever getting dressed up to go to someone’s graduation,” Diana agreed.

“Or a wedding,” Honey put in slyly with a side look at Diana.

“You know perfectly well that my wedding to Mart last June was the first wedding we’ve had since Hans and Julianna got married ages ago,” Diana protested. And not to be outdone she added, “And now that you’re graduating, Honey, maybe we’ll have another one to plan!”

Diana’s words had their desired effect—Honey instantly turned bright red. It was no secret that when she and Brian had gotten back together and begun seriously dating during Brian’s first year of medical school that they would someday be married. As Honey tried to stammer out an answer, Trixie quickly jumped in to change the subject—not out of tact as Honey would have done, but because she was in on Brian’s happy secret and she knew she didn’t have the willpower to keep quiet if the conversation stayed in this vein. “It really is unbelievable, all of the graduation ceremonies we’ve gone to.”

“Right, two years after Jim and Brian’s, there was Dan and Mart’s and then all of ours the year after that,” Honey eagerly put in, glad to have the conversation steered safely away from her and Brian’s romantic future.

Diana added, “And then the next year both Brian and Jim graduated from Columbia.”

“That was the same year we all flew out to Idaho to see Hallie graduate,” Trixie said immediately, trying to erase the image of Jim with Megan that popped into her head at the mention of that graduation.

Honey looked at Diana. “It was that next year that you got your associates in Art History and started working at the Sleepyside Museum, if memory serves. I believe that rock on your finger was your favorite graduation gift!”

Diana nodded and giggled at the memory of how nervous Mart had been when he asked her to marry him. Two monumental things had happened that day—he was so nervous that he had forgotten to use the biggest words he could think of AND he had hardly touched his dinner at the fancy restaurant in New York he had taken her to.

“Finally, last year, there were THREE graduations to go to,” Trixie ticked them off on her fingers. “Dan’s from NYU, Mart’s from Cornell, and Jim’s second Columbia graduation.”

Honey knew how talk of that particular graduation upset Trixie, so she gave her friend a hug. “And now yours from Georgetown! I’m so proud of you, Trix!”

Diana yelled “Group hug!!!” and the three dissolved into laughter as they all tried to hug each other.

When they were done laughing, Trixie grinned mischievously. “And next year we also have Hallie’s from NYU and Brian’s from medical school. Maybe I’ll go to grad school just so we can all do this AGAIN!”

Honey was indignant. “You’ll do no such thing, Trixie Belden! You are coming back to New York and we are finally going to open the Belden-Wheeler detective agency! Now let’s go and get you graduated!” Honey turned and left the room at this last remark and didn’t see the

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smile disappear from Trixie's face, a look of worry and guilt clouding her normally sunny features. Diana saw the look and wondered what trouble was brewing.

Trixie stood inside one of the air conditioned buildings on campus, waiting for the procession to get organized. She had wanted to be early, but now she realized she had arrived too early. It would be another 45 minutes before they would have to line up alphabetically, so she had time to just think quietly about her four years at the university she had come to love so much.

It had all started with a dream—the dream of escaping Sleepyside for just a little while. She knew deep down that she could never live anywhere else, but before she settled down to life in the quiet village, she wanted to explore, to see the world. The other Bob-Whites, for the most part, had been content to go to school in New York City, it was exciting and yet close to home, but Trixie knew that she needed to travel somewhere to satisfy her wanderlust. She looked at universities out in California, but she just couldn't picture herself as a "California girl." She thought about Big Ten schools, but knew she didn't want to spend four years in the Mid-West. Finally, she realized Georgetown was perfect. It was still on the East Coast, driving distance from Sleepyside, and Washington D.C. was such an exciting city: FBI Headquarters, the Pentagon, the Capitol, the White House.

She knew her family would miss her, she knew that Honey would be disappointed at not having her as a roommate at NYU, and she knew that Jim wanted her near him in New York, but she never doubted that they would support her in her decision to leave New York to go to school. She had pulled her grades up considerably since her freshman year and had no trouble getting in. Her acceptance letter had arrived in January of her senior year and she had sent her positive response immediately. True to her expectations, Trixie's family just wanted what was best for her, and if Georgetown would make Trixie happy, then so be it. Honey was sad at first, but never one to be selfish she also told Trixie how proud she was that she had gotten into such a first rate school and she promised to visit her as many weekends as her studies would allow.

It was Jim's reaction she had never expected. When he had gone off to college, she had missed him—things just weren't the same in Sleepyside without Jim and Brian. When he started to date, that had been hard on her too, but their friendship remained relatively strong. When Jim had come home after his first year at Columbia and told her that none of the girls he met compared to her and they began dating, Trixie had been on cloud nine! To have Brian realize at the same time what Honey meant to him, had made that summer extra special. Mart and Diana had paired off the year before, but now all of a sudden, Trixie and Honey had boyfriends too! That summer had been perfectly perfect.

For a year and a half, Trixie contentedly dated Jim, living for weekends and vacations when she could see him. And then she had decided to do something on her own. Jim had taken it personally—thinking that she was trying to get away from him.

"Why do you have to go so far away? Why can't you come to New York? I was looking forward to being able to see you more than just every other weekend. Haven't I been a good boyfriend?"

"Jim, you're the best and I love you with all of my heart, but I just feel like this is what I need to do."

"Why? I had plans for us, Trix."

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"I hope you still do. I just want to sow some oats before I settle down in Sleepyside and open the agency with Honey."

"Sow some oats? Like what? Dating other guys?"

"No! I don't want to date other guys. I love being your girlfriend, I want to remain your girlfriend. It will be just like it is now—D.C.'s not so far away. We'll be able to see each other almost as often as we do now."

"No, it's not the same. And it won't be the same."

"Jim, you're scaring me. Why won't it be the same?"

Jim had looked at her for a long time before answering, something heartbreaking in his green eyes. "It can never be the same because I'll always know that you left me not because you had to, but because you wanted to."

"Jim! I'm not leaving YOU, I'm just leaving New York for a little while. I'll be back, Jim, I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

Silence, seeming to last an eternity.

"There's no way I can talk you out of this is there? You have your mind all set, just like you always did when we were kids."

Trixie swallowed hard and wiped away the tears running unashamedly down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Jim, but my mind is made up. I don't know how to convince you that I'm not leaving you, but this is something I feel I need to do."

Jim nodded. "Fine, then let's not discuss it anymore. We'll just try to enjoy the months we have left before you leave."

Trixie was too emotionally exhausted to argue.

Trixie shook herself out of her reverie and looked around. More graduating seniors had shown up, and several faculty members were running around, trying to keep things organized. Trixie's watch showed she still had a half an hour before the processional. She debated going for a walk, but decided to just stay where she was. Trixie tried to keep her mind occupied with happy thoughts and banish thoughts of Jim from her mind. She remembered her first week in the dorms, how scared but how excited she had been. Her mind wandered to thoughts of all of the frisbee games she and her friends had played on the lawn of the mall, museums and monuments a backdrop to their fun. Thoughts of how stimulating her criminal justice classes had been compared to boring old algebra at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High, of long walks through Georgetown in the summer rain, of nights spent studying in the coffee house near her apartment and all night talking marathons with her friends in the 24 hour diner couldn't compete with thoughts of Jim and finally her mind succumbed to the memory of her last night in Sleepyside before she left for college.

Jim threw his chop sticks down. "Trixie, I can't do this!"

Trixie laughed. "Then just use your fork, silly." It was their last night together before Trixie left for Georgetown. She had chosen to go to a new Chinese restaurant the Hakaito brothers had just opened in Sleepyside. Although she was crying inside because she already missed Jim so much, she was determined to be cheerful on their last night together.

"No, I can't do this. Us. Long distance."

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Trixie froze. "What do you mean?" She was especially nervous because Jim couldn't look her in the eye. In all the years that she had known him, Jim had never not been able to look her in the eye.

"Trix, after you leave tomorrow..."

Trixie's mouth was dry but she managed to whisper, "Yes?"

"After you leave...I think we should make a clean break."

Shock and numbness descended over Trixie and she didn't even realize she had dropped her chop sticks.

Jim continued to talk, but she didn't hear a word he said. She had expected a lot of things when she decided to go to Georgetown, but never this. Jim had always supported her. She and Jim were meant to be together. Forever. She couldn't imagine a life without Jim. For an instant Trixie almost shouted, "Fine! If it means that much to you I will stay here. I will go to NYU. Just please don't leave me!" But then anger took over. She had a right to make her own decisions; she had turned 18 almost three months before. She was the one in control of her life. She was the one who had to live it. "Who was Jim Frayne to make her change her plans?" she thought angrily. "The man you love more than anyone on this earth," her unwanted conscience answered..

"Trixie? Trixie, will you please say something?"

"I'm not sure what you want me to say, Jim."

"Anything. I hate this silence. I hate hurting you."

"Well, you're certainly doing a damn good job of it!" Trixie spat out.

Jim's red-haired temper flared. "No more than you're hurting me by leaving!"

"So that's what this is about! You have this twisted idea that I'm leaving you, so now you have to get back at me by leaving me." Trixie stood up. "Fine, James Winthrop Frayne, you've evened the score. Happy now?"

With that she ran from the restaurant, ignoring the stares of the other diners, ignoring Oto's concerned "Miss Tlixie!," ignoring everything until she was down the block and in front of Town Hall. Hoppy looked down upon her, but for once Trixie didn't notice the grasshopper weathervane. She ducked into one of the doorways and held her breath until Jim ran by, looking for her. When she was sure he was gone, she finally let the tears come. Sobs wracked her body until she was spent and she finally found a pay phone and called Honey to come pick her up. She needed her best friend.

"Okay, places everyone!" A shrill female voice startled Trixie into the present. "It's time, graduates! Let's get organized and then commence, shall we?"

*Trixie looked around. Excitement was in the air and fortunately it was contagious. Trixie realized then that no matter what, today was *her* day. She had earned it and she was going to enjoy it. Enough of the last four years had been spent dwelling on a red-headed boy who obviously didn't care enough about her to even show up on her graduation day. From now on, she vowed, all of her feelings for Jim were dead. Gone. Forgotten. Commencement was a beginning and this would be the beginning of her adult life. The life where she would start a career. Pay her own way. Prove herself. Jim had just become ancient history as far as she was concerned.*

Sitting in chairs on the beautiful lawn in front of the centuries old Healy building, families and friends awaited the processional of the graduating seniors. It was a large and happy

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group that had gathered to watch Miss Beatrix Belden (Trixie to her friends) receive her Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminology from Georgetown University. Helen and Peter Belden sat amongst their sons, their niece, and family friends and felt very content. Helen smiled as she watched Mart lean over to whisper something to his wife, receiving Diana's lovely smile and a tender look in response. She enjoyed watching Brian and Honey sitting together, their hands entwined, as they sat and took in the graduation ambience. How wonderful it was that her sons had found such happiness with Trixie's bestfriends, two girls she had grown to love as daughters over the years. Even her only niece, Hallie, looked very content sitting next to Dan, laughing as she watched her boyfriend play rock, paper, scissors with 14 year old Bobby. When had they all grown up?

"Cobbett's Island isn't much more than three or four hours' drive from here...I won't need anything but my old blue jeans and those shirts we used for gym last year—and maybe a new bathing suit?"

"Why, Trixie, don't tell me you're interested in getting something new for a change. Is my girl growing up?"

"I just want to wash my face and hands and change my clothes. Moms, Janie is the bravest girl in the whole world."

"I have two brave girls, but, oh, Trixie, only my hairdresser will know and she'll touch up the Grey spots in my hair! You should leave that kind of exploit to the boys."

Just then, as if she could read Helen's thoughts, Mrs. Wheeler leaned over. "It's beautiful to watch them all grown up, isn't it?" Helen's eyes misted and she nodded her agreement. Mrs. Lynch caught their eyes and winked. All three women, surrounded by their families and closest friends, understood how blessed they were to share this special group. If only Jim had been there, it would have been "perfectly perfect."

Everybody quieted down as they heard the first strains of "Pomp and Circumstance" (Bobby still called it "The Graduation Song"—he had certainly heard it enough in recent years!) and watched the graduation processional as the seniors came out of the nearby building and crossed the quad. Peter Belden's heart swelled with pride as he realized his little girl, his only daughter, was about to graduate with honors from college.

"Now don't tease your sister, Mart. She just decided she has to have a new bathing suit."

"Well, I guess our princess wants to look her best at Cobbett's Island. I just hope she gets a blue suit. It's my favorite color."

"It's Jim's stepfather! Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"

"Where are you Trixie? The lights are all out, all over the house."

"He must have cut the wires!"

"Who? Trixie, pull yourself together. There, now, tell me—who cut the wires?"

"Jim's stepfather. We saw him. He came here to harm Janie. He was going toward her window! Oh, Daddy!"

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Peter had always been proud of his daughter—she was generous and kind, thinking of other's before herself, and also making the world a safer place to live while she was at it. She had accomplished a lot, but Peter could sit back, relax, and enjoy this moment—one of her safest accomplishments yet!

"Shake. My name's Jim. What's yours?"

"I'm Trixie Belden, and I live down there at Crabapple Farm."

"Well, I never! You two tracked me down in less than a week, you sleuths, you!"

"You don't have to worry about Jonesy anymore, Jim."

"I have so got ambition. It's all settled. Honey and I are going to be private detectives."

"And call your agency Schoolgirl Shamuses, Incorporated, I suppose. I can just see your business cards. 'When the FBI gives up, we take over,' printed in red."

"You've got to admit that we were pretty smart about finding you, Jim Frayne."

"It's for you, Trixie. I got it in Valley Park yesterday."

"It has your name on it, Jim. Put it on for me will you?"

"You know what it means don't you?"

"Tell me."

"It means you're my special girl, Trixie. As if you didn't know that already."

Sitting alone amid the graduation crowd, Jim Frayne watched the processional, his eyes searching until they found the beautiful, spunky blonde that they sought. Jim blinked back uncharacteristic tears and felt his heart fill with pride as he watched the girl he had loved for so long walk up to the stage and accept the degree that she had wanted for so long and had fought so hard for. His Trixie had finally come into her own.

More Chapter 1 Notes: Yes, I know the Hakaito Brothers are actually Japanese, but they just a thought a Chinese restaurant would do better in Sleepyside than a Japanese Steak House. ☺ Flashbacks are quoted (or slightly modified) from Trixie Belden Book #'s 1, 2, 3, 13 and 16. Yes, saying "Tlixie" might not be so PC these days, but I am leaving it in to be true to the original series.

Chapter Two: Dance With Me

Crabapple Farm had never looked better. Trixie stepped out of her Sahara edition Jeep Wrangler and looked around, taking in Moms' prized Crabapple trees in full blossom, the vegetable garden that had been the bane of her existence when she was younger, and the white frame farmhouse that even after four years away was 'home.' Sure, Trixie had been home to visit, but knowing that she would be back living here until she made some sort of decision about her future made everything around her look all the more beautiful.

Bobby came flying out the back door upon hearing Trixie's jeep drive up the lane, an aged Reddy following and doing his best to keep up with his master.

"Trix! It's great to have you home. You can help me study for finals!"

Trixie laughed. "Bobby, I just got done studying for my own finals—why would I want to help you with yours?"

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Bobby gave his sister a hug and grinned mischievously. "Because I'm your favorite brother and you would do anything for me!"

Trixie smiled and hugged him back. "Make that my favorite 'younger' brother and you've got an accurate statement! You know I'll help you with your homework—don't I always when I can?"

Trixie stooped down to hug Reddy. His coat was fading and he had gray 'eyebrows' and a gray 'beard' but he was still the same old Reddy, full of love and loyalty. "Hey, there, boy. How have you been?" She said as she rubbed his fur. He wagged his tail and wriggled, happy to have his mistress home. Even Reddy had missed Trixie while she was away at college.

Mrs. Belden came out of the farmhouse just then. "I thought I heard my daughter drive up!"

Trixie stood and ran to hug her mom. "Yep, Moms, you're stuck with me for a while now!"

"Well, I don't mind being stuck with you at all. C'mon in and I'll fix you something to eat. How was the drive from D.C.?"

"It wasn't bad. Not too much traffic on a Wednesday." Trixie entered the neat farmhouse kitchen and the smell of Moms' fresh baked bread made her mouth water. "Boy, I sure have missed the kitchen smells. Dorm food was not the best college experience, and when I lived in my apartment, cooking was not my number one priority!"

Moms smiled. "When was it ever?"

"Touché!" Trixie grinned as she moved to slice the fresh baked bread. A "Crabapple Farm Special" full of peanut butter and Moms' own crabapple jelly was just what she needed.

"Are you going to spend the night Friday night with Honey in New York?" Mrs. Belden inquired.

Trixie shook her head as she slathered peanut butter on the thick bread. "No, Brian is taking Honey out the night before her graduation. Just the two of them."

"Brian hasn't said anything to you about his plans for Friday night, has he?" Mrs. Belden's voice was just a tad bit too casual, and Trixie knew her mom suspected something was up with her oldest son.

Trixie tried to act casual too. "Just that they're going to that French restaurant that Honey loves near Times Square." She took a giant bite of her sandwich in an effort to delay further questioning.

Moms knew better. "I can tell by the look on your face, Trixie Belden, that you are privy to more information than you're letting on! I have my guesses as to Brian's behavior as of late, but since he's obviously sworn you to secrecy, I won't pry."

Trixie mumbled something and took another bite of her sandwich. Moms smiled knowingly and went to the door to tell Bobby to bring in Trixie's bags from her jeep.

Trixie was the only one who knew that Brian was planning on asking Honey to marry him Friday night. He had been planning this for months. When Trixie had been home at Christmas-time, he had dragged her to jewelers all over New York, getting her opinions on rings. He felt he knew Honey well enough to choose something for her, but he wanted Trixie's seal of approval as a woman and as Honey's bestfriend. He had been saving for almost two years now, right after he and Honey had gotten back together.

His freshman year at Columbia, Brian had watched Jim go on dates, but something had held him back from dating. Pre-med was tough and he wanted to do well, but he knew the real reason he had not dated was that, suddenly, his mind was on a certain honey-haired girl with the

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sweetest disposition he had ever met. That following summer, he had finally gotten the courage to tell Honey how he felt and was elated to discover that she felt the same way. They dated until Honey's freshman year of college when they started to drift apart. With his senior load of classes and stressing about his MCAT's and medical school admissions, he found less and less time to spend with Honey. In the meantime, college opened up a whole new world for Honey. At Christmas, they both realized it was pointless to continue the path they were headed on and parted amicably.

Over the next two years Honey and Brian each dated other people, but they had come to the same conclusion: they were meant to be together. Nobody could hold a candle to the other.

When they had gotten back together, no one had been as thrilled as Trixie. And when Brian asked her to keep this huge secret, she didn't know how she was going to do it, but she had. Moms was suspicious, though, and Trixie was relieved she'd only have to carry this around with her for two more days.

"Your mind is a million miles away!" Trixie suddenly realized her mom was talking to her.

"I'm sorry. What Moms?"

"I was just suggesting that you go unpack your things. I've invited Mart and Di over for dinner tonight for a little 'Welcome Home' get together. Hallie had her last final today so she and Dan decided to drive in from the city, too. She'll stay on with us. Honey has a final exam tomorrow and on Friday, so she sends her regards."

Trixie nodded, finished her "Special," grabbed her bags, and headed upstairs to get ready for dinner.

Two days later, Honey was entering the New York apartment she had shared with Hallie the last two years and gleefully throwing the contents of her back pack all over the living room. Her final final was over and she was graduating tomorrow! Honey wanted to dance, to shout from the roof tops, she was so excited and happy. She looked around and realized that after tomorrow, this apartment would no longer be home base for her. She was moving back to Manor House temporarily and Dan would be taking her place here in the apartment. *Well, that's what they say, but I know my room will end up turning into a den or something!* Honey chuckled to herself. Ever since Hallie arrived at NYU, she and Dan had been inseparable. Honey had jokingly asked Dan to start paying his share of the rent and utilities, he had been there so much. Not that she minded, she had been over at Brian's apartment as much as not.

Brian. Mrs. Brian Belden. Honey Belden. Honey sighed to herself as she thought about her beloved boyfriend. *Knock it off, Wheeler. You don't know he's going to ask you to marry him, just because his brother asked Di the night before her graduation, and he's taking you out tonight. Do not put 2 and 2 together and come up with 25!! But maybe...*

Honey laughed at herself and decided to spend the day relaxing in a luxurious bubble bath, getting beautiful for Brian.

Later that evening, Brian stood in front of the door to Honey's apartment. *Quit being so nervous, Belden. This is the girl you've been in love with since high school. Marrying her is what is going to make you the happiest man alive and you know she wants to marry you. Do I? Do I know that? What if she laughs in my face? She's not going to laugh in your face! She's going to look at you with those beautiful hazel eyes and say yes!*

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Brian continued to stare at the door. *Man, I'm losing it, I'm arguing with myself! Was Mart this nervous? Yeah, he was, Di laughs when she retells the story—he couldn't even eat! Okay, knock on the door and act normal or she'll know something's up.*

As he waited for Honey to answer his knock, he took a deep breath to calm himself down. He didn't have long to wait, because suddenly Honey was opening the door and he couldn't breathe.

"God, you look beautiful."

Honey's smile was breathtaking. "Thanks, Brian."

"Flowers, here's some Honey for you. I...I mean...I brought you flowers," Brian managed to stammer out, holding out a dozen red roses before him. *That was great, Belden. Way to go!*

Honey smiled sweetly and smelled the fragrant bouquet. "They're beautiful, Brian, thank you! C'mon in. I'm going to go put them in water."

Brian followed behind Honey, taking in her slim figure. She was wearing a dress he had never seen before. It was simple, made of midnight blue silk, but it showed off her figure to advantage.

"Do we have time for a drink before our reservations? Or do you want to go now?" Honey called from the kitchen.

"We have time. Do you have something special in mind?" Brian called as he took a seat on the sofa.

"We still have some of that Sangria Blush left from the other night—how about that?"

"That would be great!" Brian didn't condone the use of alcohol as a relaxant but he was so nervous he figured one drink might do him some good.

Honey got out two tall glasses and smiled. *I've never seen him this nervous before. This has to be the night!* She poured the blush wine concoction, ensuring that there was one lime slice, one lemon slice, and one orange slice in each glass.

She set the glass in front of Brian and sat down next to him. "I can't believe it's finally here! I'm a college graduate!"

Brian leaned over to kiss her. "I hope you know how proud of you I am."

"I know, I just hope you stay proud of me after I move back to Sleepyside and start the agency with Trix."

Brian smiled. "I know when we were younger I told you two to quit playing shamus, but that's just because I worried so much about you. It may not have seemed like it, but I always had faith in your talents, and my sister's. It may not be my first choice of a profession for you, but I can't imagine you as anything but a private detective. Just as I could never be anything but a doctor."

Honey smiled and kissed him. "Whatever would I do without you?"

"Let's not ever find out," Brian said as he began to kiss her passionately. Finally, he pulled back. "I know we haven't even touched our drinks yet, but if we don't get out of here now, we may never get out of here at all!"

Honey pulled away from Brian, tugged her dress down over her knee, and demurely took a sip of her drink. "Why, Brian, whatever do you mean?"

"Don't pull that innocent act with me, Miss Wheeler, you know *exactly* what I mean!" Brian grabbed his drink in an effort to cool the passion he felt rising in him as he kissed her.

The two managed to finish their drinks and leave for the restaurant. It was a lovely dinner, and the two chatted and talked all the way through dessert.

Shadows of the Past

"I've got an idea," Brian said as they were standing up to leave. "Let's head over to the Empire State Building."

Honey looked at him in surprise. "The Empire State Building?"

"Sure, you're ready to conquer the world tomorrow. Let's go get a good look at it from 102 floors up, shall we?"

Honey agreed and the two were soon standing in the tower looking down at the tiny city below under the night sky. "It's so pretty up here. I don't think I've been up here since we came with Ned and the Hubbell twins."

"At least this time we don't have jewel thieves chasing us," Brian said.

Honey turned to look at him. Her hazel eyes met his brown ones. "Why did you bring me up here, Brian?"

Brian returned her gaze and decided that the speech he had so carefully prepared was about to go out the window. "Because I couldn't think of a more romantic place to ask you to marry me, Honey Wheeler."

Honey stared at him, speechless. She had hoped and prayed, but now that this moment was actually here, she was overwhelmed.

Brian kissed the tip of her nose. "Will you do me the honor of becoming my bride? To have and to hold, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live?"

Honey felt tears welling up in her eyes and when she tried to talk she realized that she had a giant lump in her throat and she couldn't. All she could do was nod happily, throw her arms around Brian, and kiss him harder than she ever had in her life. Finally, when she felt as though she could talk again, she pulled away. "Yes, Brian, I will be your bride. And I will love and cherish you until the day I die, and then some."

Brian reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small jeweler's box. Honey took it with trembling hands and opened it. She gasped when she saw the 1 carat marquise diamond surrounded by smaller baguettes glittering on a band of gold.

"It's beautiful. Oh, Brian, it's perfect!" She breathed as he slipped it on her third finger. "It fits perfect! How did you manage that?"

"I had a little help," Brian admitted.

"Who—Trixie!! She was in on this?"

"Yep, can you believe she sat on this secret since Christmas?" Brian hugged his fiancé.

"No, I can't believe it. And she never even hinted!" Honey couldn't believe that her bestfriend had kept this from her, she knew it must have been torture for Trixie.

"Let's forget about my sister. I have champagne chilling at my apartment. I say we toast your graduation and our future."

"Brian, I couldn't think of anything better," Honey stated as she looked down at her hand. She was on her way to happily ever after. Now if only something could be done about Trixie...

Trixie was glad Honey had refused her father's offer of a large graduation party. There was just no way she could face Jim after the graduation ceremony. She was thankful that Honey had told everyone in advance that seating was limited in the Theater at Madison Square Garden where the NYU College of Arts and Sciences graduation was being held. There was no way that all of the Bob-Whites, Wheelers, and Beldens would all be able to sit together, so Trixie was spared seeing Jim. The University-wide graduation first thing that morning in Washington

Shadows of the Past

Square Park had been so large that each graduate had only been issued two tickets for that particular ceremony, so Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler were the only ones to attend.

Now Trixie was sitting at Honey's graduation surrounded by happy couples: her mom and dad, Di and Mart, and Hallie and Dan. It was no consolation that Brian and Bobby were alone because Brian had a permanent smile on his face due to his engagement to Honey, which the rest of the family still didn't know about, and Bobby was only 14 anyway. Trixie felt as though she was doomed to spend the rest of her life alone. But before she could get depressed, the graduation procession started and she was excited when she realized she was about to watch her bestfriend graduate.

When Honey's name was called, loud cheers resounded in not one, but two, areas in the theater. Honey looked out in to the crowd of friends and family, smiled and waved her diploma. Trixie knew she was too far away to see it, but she imagined she saw the glint of a brand new, sparkling diamond ring when Honey waved. She had never felt happier for her friend.

The following Friday, Trixie was in a dark mood and everybody knew it. They knew why too.

Everyone had been excited when Brian and Honey had announced their engagement. Both families and all of their friends had been waiting years for the two to get engaged. Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler had promptly decided to throw an engagement party at the Manor House, refusing to take no for an answer since Honey had declined a graduation party. And that party was tonight. Trixie knew she would not be able to avoid Jim anymore and she was very tense, to put it mildly.

Brian had time off between rotations and Hallie had a week before the summer session started, so both had been staying at Crabapple Farm all week. Mrs. Belden loved having a full house again. Mart and Di had decided to come by and spend some time at the farm before heading on to the Manor House, so the whole clan was under one roof, a rarity these days for the Beldens. Trixie had tried to be cheerful in front of everyone, but she had never been good at hiding her emotions. Mart finally cornered her.

"My dearest sibling," he began. "I can fully understand your agitation and disconcertion in the face of the cognizance that your ocular orbs will behold a certain James Winthrop Frayne the second this eventide, however—"

Trixie could take no more. "However, nothing, Mart. Keep your oversized vocabulary and your unwanted advice to yourself! Really, I always thought this ridiculous verbosity of yours was a phase. Outgrow it already!"

Mart got serious. "Listen, Trix, Brian is out of his mind with happiness over his engagement to Honey. Don't let your inability to control your emotions or to set aside your pride for one night interfere with our older brother's happiness."

"Inability to set my pride aside!" Trixie was incredulous. "Who swallowed her pride TWICE and went to see Jim when he graduated? Could he do the same for me? Do you know how hard it was to watch him with Megan when he got his Bachelor's? But I did it, didn't I? How dare you tell me I can't set my pride aside when it matters!"

Mart nodded. "Trix, I know how hard it was for you to go to both of those graduations, and I am proud of you. I was then too. All I'm saying is, and you know Jim is a friend of mine—heck, he's also my boss—but if he can't return the favor and see you graduate, maybe he's not worth it and you should just forget about him and move on."

"I have moved on!" Trixie protested.

Shadows of the Past

“Have you, Trix? Then why are you in such a bad mood at the thought of seeing Jim tonight?” Mart gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze and then left her alone to think things over.

Hours later, Trixie sat in front of her dressing table, applying her make-up. “Mart’s right,” she said to her reflection. “You are up here, with your hair done to the nines, sitting in a sexy dress that is definitely not you, and making sure your make-up is perfect. And why? Why did you not stop shopping until you had the perfect dress? Why are you spending more time getting ready than you ever have in your life? Because you want to knock Jim Frayne on his butt when he sees you. And why do you want to do that, Trixie? Because you still care about the creep!” Trixie threw her powder brush down in frustration.

“Okay, Belden, you have to get a hold of yourself. You are not going to let this guy drive you insane. You’re perfectly sane, aside from the fact that you are talking to yourself in a mirror, but hey, don’t worry about that! You have to make a decision. Are you going to let Jim make you miserable for the rest of your life? Heck no! Are you going to try to make peace with him tonight and let bygones be bygones?” Trixie hesitated and stared at her reflection for a long time. “Maybe. We’ll see how it goes.”

Trixie finished her make-up and stood up to look at herself in the full length mirror. Her hair was swept up, with just a few blond wisps escaping to frame her face. Her dress was form fitting and floor length, made of royal blue satin, which was stunning next to her lightly tanned skin. Trixie felt a surge of self-confidence at her reflection, something she was not used to, and decided that looking like this she could be benevolent and deign to talk to the likes of Jim Frayne.

That feeling quickly faded as she walked into the ballroom of the Manor House and immediately saw Jim surrounded by several pretty college aged women. One she recognized as Honey’s old roommate, the rest she correctly guessed were daughters of Matthew Wheeler’s friends and business associates. Diana gave Trixie’s hand a quick squeeze. “You have never looked more gorgeous, Trix. You can do this.”

Mart smiled at her as well. “My wife is quite right, Beatrix.”

Trixie smiled. Mart never could pay her a compliment without using her hated full name! Some things would never change.

Just then Honey looked over and saw the three of them standing there. She excused herself from the people she and Brian had been talking to and practically ran over to greet her friends.

“Wow! Trixie—you look fantastic! You’re not supposed to outshine me at my own party!” Honey laughed and hugged her friend.

“Silly! As if I ever could!” Trixie retorted, as she returned the hug.

Honey gave Mart and Diana quick hugs, too. “Di, you look terrific, too.”

“Thanks. Honey, you are positively radiant. I take it engagement agrees with you?” Diana smiled knowingly.

Honey nodded happily and then turned to Trixie. “I know you’re hurting, and I haven’t forgiven Jim for not showing up to your graduation, but you look so stunning that you need to go over and say hi to him.”

Trixie’s eyes involuntarily moved to where the handsome redhead was standing, laughing at something one of the girls said. “I don’t know, Honey. Things were really tense at Christmas

the last time I saw him, and his refusal to see me graduate indicates to me that he wants nothing to do with me.”

Honey shook her head. “No, Jim is full of stupid, stubborn pride. He’s the kind of guy who would know that if he went with all of us, it would be hard listening to all of us talk about you all day, and feeling a little bit sorry for him because we all know he belongs with you, and he knows he belongs with you, and he knows we know he belongs with you, and we know that he knows he belongs with you...” Honey trailed off and looked at the amused faces of her three friends. “Okay, so I’m doing it again—you’re all used to it by now. But what I’m trying to say is that Jim is the kind of person who would be there for you at your graduation even if he didn’t want to be with all of us.”

Trixie looked surprised. “Are you telling me that Jim was at my graduation but didn’t want anyone to know?” Hope soared within her and she tried to ignore what that meant.

“No, I am not telling you that, because I don’t know that. It’s just a hunch I’ve had. I debated whether or not I should even tell you, because I could be wrong, but then I decided to anyway.” Honey gave her friend a pleading look. “Go talk to him, please.”

Di agreed. “Take your time, get comfortable, but please talk to him before the night is through.”

Trixie stared at Jim, trying to decide what to do, when suddenly he turned and their eyes met. Their eyes locked for several moments until Trixie finally smiled at him. Jim gave her a hesitant smile back then turned to finish his conversation with the tall brunette at his side.

“Yeah, he really wants to talk to me,” Trixie could not hide the look of disappointment at Jim’s reaction. “Honey, you need to go mingle with your guests and not worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

Honey gave her a hug. “I know you’ll be fine, but I want you to be *happy*.” With that she was off, greeting more newcomers to the party.

Trixie turned to Mart and Di. “Mind if I’m the third wheel? I just don’t think I can deal with this alone.”

Mart grinned at his sister. “Sure, if you think you can handle my outsized vocabulary for the evening, oh sister mine.”

Trixie laughed. “In that case, maybe I’d be more prepared to meet a whole roomful of Jims!”

Across the room, Jim was having a hard time concentrating on what Mindy was talking about, or was it Mandy? Did it matter? What right did Trixie have walking into the party looking like some blonde goddess? When he first looked over and saw her, he literally had the wind knocked out of him. He had been so stunned at seeing her, that he had barely been able to return her smile. It was then he realized that he had no idea what the brunette had been saying. And he also realized, he didn’t care.

He wanted to talk to Trixie so bad, but he wasn’t sure he had the courage. She didn’t know that he had made it to her graduation, so she must hate him. He should tell her he had been there. But how could he explain it? “I felt like a dork, Trixie, sitting with our families knowing that they pitied me for losing you.” *No, Frayne, you didn’t lose her—you threw her away. You were afraid of being hurt, so you took the pre-emptive strike. What an idiot! She has every right not to speak to you ever again.*

Meanwhile, Trixie circulated the party with Mart and Di, listening to Mart talk to Mr. Wheeler’s friends about managing the land and teaching at Jim’s school for underprivileged boys. It had opened on Ten Acres, the old Frayne property, almost a year before. Jim had

managed to acquire some of the neighboring land (easy enough to do as his adopted father owned most of it), and now he had over 50 acres of land for his school. Mart, with his degree in Crop and Soil Sciences from Cornell, managed the 20 acres of gardens that produced a fair amount of the food for the school. He had a small crew that helped him, which freed up some of his time so that he could teach the science classes.

Trixie began to feel more relaxed as more of her friends arrived. Mart finally ditched her and headed for the buffet table, but Trixie didn't mind, she just attached herself to her cousin and Dan. Old rivalries forgotten, she and Hallie were now able to laugh together and be friendly. The two cousins and Dan compared notes about their classes. Dan's degree from NYU was in criminal justice with a specialization in law enforcement. He had recently graduated from the Police Academy and was a rookie on the New York City police force. Hallie was just about to start her senior year in criminal justice-political science. Ever since she had been in on the Oliver Tolliver mystery surrounding Hans and Julianna's wedding and the mystery involving the Swishers and their try for Tank's gold so many years before, Hallie had wanted to work for the Belden-Wheeler detective agency.

Waiters carrying trays laden with glasses full of champagne began to appear among the guests. Trixie knew it was almost time for Matthew Wheeler to toast the happy couple, as she had been through this two years before at Di and Mart's engagement party. *I hope whoever I marry isn't rich. I just want an engagement barbecue at Crabapple Farm with a few close friends—none of this hoopla*, Trixie thought as she grabbed a glass.

Soon, Matthew and Madeline Wheeler were standing in front of their guests with Honey and Brian standing off to their side.

"We all knew this day would get here eventually," Matthew started his speech as everyone quieted down. "I have watched my daughter grow from a little girl into the fine woman she has become. I watched Brian grow from a high school kid with a beat up jalopy to the young man before me poised on a brilliant career in medicine. I have watched them flirt with each other when they thought I didn't notice." Honey blushed and looked at Brian upon hearing this statement, as a ripple of laughter swept through the crowd. "I pretended not to notice when they got into one of their rare arguments. I sat up and waited and fretted when they were out on their dates, as any good father will. But the thing I like best is that I have watched them prove an old saying true—'If you love something, set it free. If it loves you, it will return.' These kids realized that they were too young to settle down, went about the business of their lives, and then realized that they were meant to be, and found each other again. Watching the two of them over the years has been a beautiful experience for Madeline and myself, as well as for Helen and Peter. I am proud to be able to stand here tonight and officially welcome the Beldens into our family. I say 'officially' because the Beldens have always been a part of our family, but now Brian and Honey are going to make it legal. Here's to the happy couple and the wonderful life they have before them." Matthew raised his glass and shouts of "Hear, hear!" arose throughout the room as everyone toasted Honey and Brian.

The d.j. switched from the dinner music he had been playing to a romantic love song, and everyone cleared the way for the future bride and groom to share a dance. After a few minutes, the d.j. announced that everyone was to join in. Trixie looked around her as couples paired off: Mart and Di, Hallie and Dan, Moms and Dad, even Bobby had grabbed one of the Lynch twins, but Trixie was not sure if it was Kathy or Julie. Trixie saw Jim heading her way and held her breath, not daring to hope that he was coming to ask her to dance. Her heart hit the floor with a thud when she saw the beautiful brunette he had been talking to earlier stop him and ask him to

dance. Trixie turned her head and blinked back hot tears. *What made you think Jim would want to dance with you when he could dance with someone who looks like her?*

Just then someone tapped her on her shoulder. She turned to look and there stood Jim Frayne. Trixie thought he had never looked more handsome.

“Dance with me, Trix?”

More Chapter 2 Wannabe Author's Notes: MCAT's are the medical school admissions tests and the rotations that I mention Brian is between are (at least at the Medical School I attend) 6 week rotations in different areas of the hospital (pediatrics, family medicine, etc.) that third and fourth year medical students rotate through. Thanks and congrats to my wonderful Finnish friends, Tommi and Minna, who just got engaged at the top of the Empire State Building and inspired me to write Brian and Honey's engagement there as well.

Chapter Three: Choices

Trixie stared at the handsome redhead standing before her in his tuxedo and could not help but feel a little out of breath. A memory flashed through her mind of another time Jim stood before her in a tux; it had been her senior prom, and she had reveled in the feel of his arms around her as they danced, oblivious to everyone else. Suddenly, fiercely, Trixie missed that feeling.

“Of course, Jim,” Trixie managed to say, her heart in her throat.

Jim lead Trixie to the middle of the dance floor and, somewhat awkwardly, pulled her close to him. Neither said a word, too busy were they trying to think of the perfect opening line and feeling the stares of their friends and families. Finally, Trixie managed a hesitant smile and decided Jim's school would be a safe topic. “Mart says your school is doing well.”

Jim nodded, pleased that Trixie had chosen such a benign topic. “It is, but it's been a lot of work. Right now we have 26 boys between the ages of 7 and 15. I have one teacher who teaches the seven boys between the ages of 7 and 10 all of their indoor classes, like math, science, and English. Mart teaches the older kids their biology and chemistry classes. I have two additional teachers, one for math and one for English and history for the older boys. I teach all of the outdoor classes with the help of two assistants. Once a week Regan gives them in-depth training in riding and horsemanship.”

“Well, I'm glad it's worked out for you, Jim. You've wanted this ever since I've known you, and I'm glad you saw your dream realized,” Trixie said sincerely.

Not the dream I always had of us together though, Jim thought bitterly. Trixie noticed the change on his face and realized she had said the wrong thing, but she couldn't figure out what was so awful about what she'd just said.

Jim smiled then, willing himself not to bring up old wounds. “Now I just need your brother on staff as resident doctor.”

Trixie nodded, glad the conversation was going to remain amicable. “It will be a few years before he's able to join you, though. After this year he has his internship and residency.”

“That's true, but fortunately pediatrics isn't a long residency. If he wanted to be the house surgeon it be over 10 years from now before I could get my hands on him!”

They chuckled over this and then lapsed into silence.

“And you Trixie? Did your time at Georgetown prepare you to open the Belden-Wheeler detective agency with my sister?”

“It was really great training, especially the summer internship I attended last summer at Quantico.”

“That was with the FBI, right?”

Trixie nodded again. “It was tough, but I learned a lot.”

“Well, I’m glad it was worth leaving me for then,” the words slipped out of Jim’s mouth before he had a chance to stop them. He immediately wished he could take them back and opened his mouth to apologize.

But it was too late. “Are we going to have this argument again?” Trixie kept her voice down, but her body had gone tense and her eyes were blazing. “Can’t you get past this and grow up, Frayne. You’re acting like a spoiled brat who’s still bitter because, awww, poor baby didn’t get his way.”

The apology Jim was forming was forgotten as his well-known temper flared at Trixie’s words. “Right, I’m the spoiled brat—and you’re the frightened little girl who had to run away because she was too afraid to commit.”

“Too afraid to commit? That’s a load of bull—you were the one who was too afraid to commit to a long distance relationship. You need your admirers close by to stoke your ego,” Trixie’s infamous temper was also up.

Neither of the two noticed that the slow song had given away to a faster number and people around them were dancing, pretending not to notice the two of them standing inches apart and obviously in the middle of an intense squabble. Honey and Di both started over toward the angry pair, but Mart and Brian held them back. “They need this, believe it or not,” Mart admonished.

Brian managed a wry smile to try to relieve some of the tension. “Besides, I’ve got medical training if there are any casualties.”

“My ego? Trixie, I was heartbroken when you left me!” Jim was saying out on the dance floor.

“Oh yeah, I could tell just how heartbroken you were. You were dating Megan, what, like a week after I left? I’m glad it was so easy to get over me and move on with your life.”

“Just because I started dating Megan right after you left doesn’t mean it was easy for me.”

“You know, Jim, if it had just been a fling, maybe I could believe that. Maybe I could believe that you were just hurt and trying to get back at me or whatever, but you were with her for over two years. You were obviously able to forget about me and what we shared and build this great long term relationship with *Megan*,” Trixie said the hated name with all the bitterness she had ever felt toward the dainty blond girl who was everything she herself was not. Tears welled up in her blue eyes and she was angry—angry at herself for letting Jim Frayne see her cry. She had to go, she had to get out of there before she really lost it in front of him. “And I have lived with that every single day for the last four years.” With that she ran out of the ballroom, leaving Jim standing among a throng of dancers, ignoring the looks of pity he knew people were throwing his way.

Honey looked at Brian. “I’m going after her,” she called, already heading toward the wide, ornately carved oak doors. Diana immediately followed.

Brian and Mart exchanged looks. “Time to repair the damage,” Brian said as they headed toward Jim, still standing stock still in the middle of the dance floor.

Honey and Diana followed Trixie to the clubhouse, where they found her sobbing.

“Why? Why does he always do this to me? Make me cry?” Trixie asked rhetorically.

Shadows of the Past

Honey hugged her friend. “Because he means a lot to you, and people who mean a lot to us bring out strong feelings—it’s human nature, Trix.”

Diana sat down on the other side of Trixie. “It’s not always going to be like this. One of two things is going to happen: either you knuckleheads will finally realize what you mean to each other, or eventually the feelings and the pain will fade and you will find somebody who loves you and you love and you will move on.”

Trixie nodded at Diana’s words, knowing they were true. But as much as it hurt to fight with Jim tonight, the thought of finding love with someone else somehow hurt even more.

A knock at the clubhouse door startled the three girls. Trixie hurriedly tried to wipe the tears away before Honey went to see who it was. When Trixie saw Dan’s worried face peek around the door, relief mingled inside her with regret that it wasn’t Jim.

“Is this a girls only kind of thing, or can a Y chromosome enter?” Dan tried to joke.

Trixie chuckled. “Well, as long as you’re the bearer of the Y chromosome, it can enter!”

Dan moved to sit awkwardly on the table next to where Trixie was sitting on the bench. He knew he had wanted to come down here to comfort his friend, but now that he was here, he wasn’t sure what to say or do. Trixie seemed to sense this and looked up at him.

“Is my cousin driving you so nuts that you had to take refuge?” She joked.

Dan smiled. “Something like that. You okay?”

Trixie nodded. “Of course!” She said brightly, much brighter than she felt, and everyone knew it.

“Listen, Trix, I don’t know what Jim said to you, or what you said to him, but from a guy’s point of view, I’m telling you, you are a beautiful, feisty, loyal, fun woman who has a lot to offer a guy, so don’t sell yourself short.”

Trixie nodded and smiled, feeling a wave of exhaustion suddenly sweep over her. The anxiety that had been building all week, the emotional roller coaster of seeing Jim, and the fight had combined to take their toll on Trixie. All of a sudden, she didn’t even feel as though she could keep her eyes open.

“Thanks, everyone, for trying to make me feel better, but I guess all of the excitement has caught up with me and I just want to go to sleep. Honey, you need to get back to Brian and your party and you two,” Trixie looked at Di and Dan, “I have family members back at that party waiting for you who will scalp me if I keep you here.”

“Don’t worry about us, Trix,” Diana stated.

“No, don’t. Let Dan walk you back to Crabapple Farm so you can get some rest. You do look exhausted,” Honey observed.

Trixie smiled wanly. “I’ve been travelling up and down that path since I was a kid. Dan should go back to the party with you, I’ll be fine.” She saw the looks on her friends’ faces. “I promise!”

Hours later, Trixie, as tired as she was when she left the clubhouse, tossed and turned and fret, unable to sleep. *With all of this anxiety about Jim I haven’t even been able to formulate a coherent thought about my decision. I have to make up my mind soon, Honey and I are going to look at office spaces to lease tomorrow. What am I going to do?*

After a restless night of fitful sleep, Trixie was awakened the next morning by the sound of the telephone. No one seemed to be answering it, so she grabbed the bedside extension herself.

“Belden residence,” she said sleepily into the phone.

Shadows of the Past

“Trixie Belden, please,” a deep, masculine voice said. Trixie immediately recognized it.

“This is Trixie,” she stated.

“Trixie, it’s Alex.”

“Hi, Alex, I still have some time to decide you know,” Trixie said somewhat defensively.

“Hey, Trixie, I know but I haven’t heard from you in a while and that worries me,” Alex confessed. Twenty-eight year old Alex Barfield had been one of Trixie’s assistant instructors the summer before at her FBI training program at Quantico. The two had formed a special bond and had continued their friendship after Trixie returned to Georgetown for her senior year. Quantico wasn’t far from school and the two had managed to meet for dinner a couple of times during the year. The two had a solid friendship, but Alex had also seen something in his young protégé that he wanted develop. She was one of the brightest students he had seen, and when he investigated into her background, he had been quite impressed with her talent for solving mysteries, even at a young age. When he first read her file he had thought to himself, *Like a young Nancy Drew, but much spunkier and more real.*

He knew of Trixie’s desire to start the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency with her bestfriend, but he also knew that she would make a wonderful Special Agent and spoke to his friends in recruiting about her. They agreed with his assessment and had offered Trixie a starting position with the FBI; a position that excited Trixie, but that she was also reluctant to accept. It wasn’t just that she would be letting Honey down, but her dream was to be a private detective, not a Special Agent. Still, Trixie had to admit that she got a little thrill when she imagined pulling out her badge and saying, “Trixie Belden, FBI. I need to ask you some questions, sir.” *The X-Files* wasn’t one of her favorite shows for nothing!

In Sleepyside, surrounded by reminders of her childhood dreams, she suddenly found it hard to talk to Alex; she knew he expected so much from her. “I’m sorry, Alex, graduation and all you know.”

“I know, congratulations! Did you get my card?” Alex inquired.

“Yes, I did. Thanks. I was going to call you...” Trixie’s voice trailed off.

“I know, Trixie. I also know why you didn’t. I don’t want to pressure you, but at the same time I want you to realize the training you could get from the FBI. The kind of career you could have,” Alex coaxed.

Trixie sighed. “I know, but as I’ve explained to you, this is very complicated.”

“I know, but I don’t want you to get stuck in a little town handling menial private eye jobs when you could be involved in some really interesting cases,” Alex started to rationalize.

“I know you’re worried that I’ll be wasting my talents, but Honey and I are looking at office space in White Plains. That’s close enough to New York for some ‘excitement,’ as you’re always saying,” Trixie explained.

“You can always open your agency later, after you’ve gotten some great experience from the FBI,” Alex countered. “The boys are interested in your partner too, you know. It’s not like you have to abandon her.”

“I know, but Honey isn’t really cut out for the FBI,” Trixie started to say.

“What? The way you talked about your bestfriend, I thought she could walk on water!” Alex joked.

“No, it’s not that she couldn’t handle it, because she definitely could. But I don’t think she’d have the interest to really want to make a career out of it.”

“How do you know if you don’t ask her?”

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“Because I know Honey. If she did it, it would be out of loyalty to me because she would think that’s what I would want, but I want her to be happy in her career. She’ll be happy as a private investigator, but I don’t think she would be as a Special Agent,” Trixie clarified.

Alex debated if he wanted to say what was on his mind; it would probably anger Trixie. He decided to go ahead and say it, they were too good of friends to hold anything back. “Is this about Jim?”

Trixie sucked in her breath and started to lose her temper, and then suddenly she stopped. *Was it about Jim? Is my desire to hang on to my childhood dream, to settle here in Sleepyside, all about staying near Jim?* It was a sobering thought.

“I’m sorry, Trixie, I’ve crossed the line this time,” Alex was apologizing.

“No, Alex, it’s all right. You may have a point. I saw him for the first time in ages last night and it did not go well.”

“Worse than Christmas?” Alex wanted to know.

“Depends. Do you prefer frosty conditions or Fourth of July fireworks?”

“So I guess if there were ‘fireworks’ you two said more to each other than you did at Christmas,” Alex guessed.

“Said more, yelled more, you name it.”

Alex gave a sympathetic sound and decided to stop pushing—for now. “Well, Trix, I wish you luck with all you’ve got on your mind. Keep us in mind though, okay?”

“I will,” Trixie promised.

After she hung up, she pulled on her favorite Georgetown sweatshirt and a pair of cut-off sweats and headed downstairs to the sunny kitchen. The first thing she noticed was a large bouquet of roses.

“Dad’s such a sweetie to get you roses when it’s not even your birthday or anniversary!” Trixie declared as she grabbed bread to make toast.

“They arrived at the same time the phone started ringing this morning,” her mother explained. “But they’re not for me. They are for a certain Miss Trixie Belden.”

Trixie looked up at her mom in surprise. “Really?”

Moms nodded. “Really and truly. I take it the phone call was for you also since you didn’t call down for anyone. For someone who’s only been in town a few days, you sure are popular,” her mom teased.

Trixie stared at the roses. Could Jim be feeling so bad about their argument last night that he sent her flowers? She remembered the first flowers she had ever received—orchids from Jim before Di’s Valentine’s Party. How happy she’d been then!

Her mother noticed the look of confusion and curiosity on Trixie’s face. “There’s only one way to find out if Jim sent them, and that’s to read the card.”

Trixie flushed as she reached for the card. The handwriting on the envelope simply said “Trixie Belden,” and was written in an unfamiliar handwriting that looked feminine. *The florist must have taken the order over the phone and wrote the card herself*, Trixie mused.

The same handwriting on the card inside spelled out a cryptic rhyme:

*Over the years
Sometimes I’ve been blue
But that all stops
When I think of you*

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“Is it from Jim?” Moms wondered.

Trixie looked up. “I don’t know. If they are from him, he didn’t sign his name.” She offered her mother the card to read.

“Maybe he’s just being shy?” Moms tried to rationalize. “If it works, and you’re no longer mad at him, then he’ll own up to it. If you’re still mad, then he saves some face by not signing them.”

Trixie thought about that for a moment. “I don’t know, Moms. That doesn’t seem like Jim, but then again, Jim has done a lot of things I never expected him to do.”

“You could ask him.”

“And if they’re not from him? No, I’d just feel like a jerk. I’ll just wait and see if I can detect any clues from him that he’s the mysterious sender of the flowers,” Trixie decided.

Moms shrugged. “Suit yourself. Just enjoy them—they are a beautiful arrangement. Maybe they’re from Matt? Or another admirer?”

Trixie smiled ruefully. “If I have any admirers, Moms, they’re all of the secret variety. And Matt and I haven’t spoken since right after I got back from Quantico.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter. There’s nothing sinister about roses,” Moms said as she bustled about the kitchen.

Trixie stared at the card, willing its hidden meaning to reveal itself to her. *No, nothing sinister about roses.*

After a shower, Trixie was heading up the path to the Manor House to meet Honey. Trixie knew it was silly to go looking for an office to lease if she had the slightest chance of taking this offer with the FBI, but for some reason she was unwilling to unload her troubles on Honey just yet. She knocked on the door and smiled at the pretty maid who answered. “Hi Celia!”

“Trixie! It’s so good to see you! Honey’s upstairs in her room. Do you remember the way?” Celia asked with a twinkle in her eye.

Trixie chuckled. “I believe I just might!” As she passed by the library on her way upstairs, Trixie saw Miss Trask bent over the desk, attending to business. She wondered if the older woman was happy managing the affairs of the Wheeler household, or if she longed to run away to some tropical island with Mr. Lytell. Honey said that the two were still known to get together and play cards or watch television, but there had never been a hint of romance, not even a fond look or two.

On her way upstairs, she ran into Honey coming down the stairs. “I heard the door,” Honey explained. “I knew it had to be you.”

“You always were a great detective,” Trixie teased.

Honey played along. “You know, I believe you’re right. I think we’re going to have to call our agency the Wheeler-Belden Detective Agency!”

Trixie laughed out loud. “You’re forgetting something—it’s going to have to be Belden and Belden pretty soon.”

Honey smiled and involuntarily looked at her hand. “You’re right as usual, Trix.”

Trixie saw the look of pure happiness that came over Honey’s face as she thought of her future as “Mrs. Honey Belden.” There was no way for the FBI to fit into that. If that’s what Trixie chose, she knew she would be going it alone.

Honey grabbed the keys to her blue Saturn and the list of offices they were to visit and the two girls headed out the door and into the early June sunshine. The two friends chatted

happily on the way to White Plains, but Honey knew that Trixie had things on her mind. She also knew that there was more to it than just Jim, but she decided to bide her time and see if Trixie confided her troubles.

Neither girl was satisfied with the first four offices they saw and decided to take a break at a quaint little restaurant down the street from what used to be Manton's flower shop. When the two girls had placed their orders and were sipping their iced tea, Trixie finally broached the subject of Jim.

"Do you thing I'm hung up on Jim?" Trixie asked point blank.

Honey took a long time to answer. "I don't know, Trix. I guess it's only natural if you are. You've been in love with him for most of your formative years."

Trixie nodded and slipped back into thought. "Do you think if I hadn't started dating Matt when I did that Jim would have wanted to get back together with me?"

"I don't know, Trix. It broke my heart that after two years alone at college, you finally start dating someone, and then Jim and Megan finally break up right after. The timing was lousy, but I don't think that just because you were both unattached that you would have gotten back together. I mean, you were both unattached this whole last year, and you're not together."

Trixie nodded again; Honey really was smart about this sort of thing. "You know that Matt and I broke up because he thought that I was still hung up on Jim." Honey nodded. "Well, what if he was right? What if that's the real reason I didn't want him to come to Jim's graduation with me?"

"Honestly, Trix, deep down that could have been part of it, but mostly I think it's just because you are a considerate person. I mean, Matt went with you to both Dan and Mart's graduations, when you knew you were going to see Jim. But out of respect for my brother, you didn't want to bring him to Jim's graduation. Maybe you did have some deep-seated psychological motive, but I doubt it," Honey assured her friend.

Trixie debated whether or not to tell Honey the other reasons she thought she might be too hung up on Jim, but that would involve telling her about the FBI's offer. *Now is as good a time as any*, Trixie told herself.

"Honey, I don't know how to tell you this," Trixie began, just as their food arrived. The girls stopped their conversation long enough to rearrange their sandwiches and take a few hungry bites.

"I could tell you had something on your mind besides Jim, so out with it," Honey finally said between mouthfuls.

"You know me too well, Honey Wheeler. All right, here it is." Trixie took a deep breath before she explained. "Apparently I made quite an impression with the FBI last summer, because they offered me a job."

Honey, never one to think of herself first, felt a swell of pride for her friend. "It doesn't surprise me at all! Of course they want the best!"

Trixie smiled, relieved. "You're not upset?"

"Why would I be? Because you have a chance to do something really exciting that you would be good at and enjoy? Silly, you know me better than that! I can open up the agency with Hallie, and someday, after they've made movies about you and your FBI adventures, you can settle down to routine cases."

Trixie stared at her friend in amazement. Honey wasn't the least bit upset as far as she could tell, and she knew that Honey was just as excited about opening up their agency as she herself had been before this offer.

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Honey continued. "Don't think I'm not a little disappointed," she said as though she could read Trixie's mind," but I would never stand in the way of what I thought would make you happy. I want to open this agency with you, but, as I've said before, I want you to be happy more than anything else."

"They've offered you a position, too," Trixie informed her.

Honey didn't even hesitate. "No thanks. That's not for me, but I think you should seriously consider it. How long do you have to decide?"

Trixie shrugged. "There's not a definite time frame. I get the feeling they'd take me in five years if I wanted."

"Of course they would," Honey said loyally. "Well, I don't want you to open this agency with me and then regret it down the line. Take your time and think it through, but if the FBI is what you want, don't worry about me. Hallie and I can make a go of it. And it's not a mutually exclusive decision, you could start with one and then if you feel like you're missing out, switch to the other. You know Hallie and I will always welcome you at any time, and if the FBI have any brains, they will too."

Trixie felt the weight of the world lifted off of her shoulders. *Honey's such a great friend*, she thought affectionately. *I don't know what I would do without her*. "Thanks, Honey. You don't know what a relief it has been talking to you about this, but there's still one problem."

"I know, my brother."

"Alex, the FBI agent I told you about before, you know, one of the instructors last summer?" At Honey's nod, Trixie continued. "He and I have stayed pretty close over the year so of course he knows all about Jim. He says he thinks I might be hanging on to this agency dream as a way to stay close to Jim."

Honey thought for a moment as she munched her Monte Cristo. "I think that might be part of it. Whether you admit it or not, a part of you still wants to be with Jim. If you take this FBI job, you can pretty much count on your chances of getting back together being nil. Would you be located in D.C.?"

Trixie nodded. "At least for a while."

"I think Jim would see that as you leaving him twice to go the same place. I don't think he'd ever get past it."

"I know. This has been weighing on my mind like you wouldn't believe. I mean it is a wonderful opportunity and all, but my childhood dream was to open my very own agency. It's hard to give that up, even for a great opportunity like this. Plus, I didn't want to let you down, and I guess I have to admit that I didn't want to let Jim go," Trixie confessed.

"Maybe you two can patch things up," Honey said optimistically.

"Maybe," Trixie tone indicated the doubt she felt. "But I don't think I'm what Jim wants. I think he wants someone more like Megan."

Honey choked on her iced tea. "Are you kidding? He was miserable with Megan!"

Trixie stared. "Then why did he stay with her for so long. They were together for two whole years!"

"I don't know why they stayed together, nobody does. They were a completely mismatched pair from the get-go. She was all dainty and prissy, all lace and bows, kind of like I was when we first met except she *wanted* to be that way. I mean, she was nice enough, but she never wanted to do any of the things that Jim enjoyed so much, like hiking, biking, camping out, stuff like that. They kind of bickered most of the time they were together, and we all ignored it as best we could. I think Jim stayed with her out of habit or fear or pride or some stupid male

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reason you and I will never understand. It certainly wasn't because she made him happy, because I really don't think she did." Honey paused, studying her friend.

"Out with it, Honey, whatever it is," Trixie knew her friend.

Honey laughed. "Okay, okay. Megan is the one who called it off with Jim."

"Really? I thought it was a mutual thing."

"Oh, it was in the sense that Jim wasn't heartbroken over it or anything, but it was definitely Megan who called it off. And the reason? I believe the last things I heard her shouting at Jim on her way out the door was 'And I'm sick and tired of trying to have to live up to that detective girl you're still in love with.'" Honey chuckled at the recollection.

Trixie's jaw dropped. "You're kidding?"

"Nope, Megan was as insanely jealous of you as you were of her," Honey stated matter-of-factly.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" Trixie wanted to know.

"Because I never really knew until after they broke up. You had just started dating Matt three weeks before, so I certainly wasn't going to tell you then. I was excited that you were finally seeing someone instead of going on one or two random dates every few months," Honey explained.

"Wow! All that energy spent wishing I were more dainty and petite like Megan and less of a tomboy, all wasted."

Honey agreed. "It certainly was, and I tried telling you that at the time, but you wouldn't listen."

Trixie looked glum again. "I guess I just built her up in my mind as being the end-all-be-all, Jim seemed to be happy with her, so I assumed that was the kind of girl he wanted. Since then he's sure picked that type."

"Jim went through a phase after Megan where he took a lot of glamorous girls out on exactly one date. I don't think I ever saw him with the same girl more than two or three times, and that was a rarity. But since he moved back to Sleepyside and started his school last June, I don't think he's been on very many dates."

"Ugh. Honey, all of this knowledge is not what I need!"

"Well, I know what you do need: Girls' Night Out! I am calling Diana and Hallie and the four of us are going to do something fun tonight. Sound good?"

Trixie laughed. "It sounds like a plan, Wheeler, I'm definitely in!"

The two girls paid their check and headed back to Honey's car to prepare for a boisterous night out.

Jim opened the door to the cottage he had built as his living quarters on the school land, tossed his keys in the basket next to the door, and headed for the refrigerator.

It had been a long day and he just wanted to relax. He hadn't slept at all last night after his fight with Trixie, cursing himself for letting that stupid comment slip out and then allowing his pride to stop him from apologizing. He should have known that Trixie was just mad and saying the first words that came to her head and he couldn't blame her. He shouldn't have risen to the bait, but after so many years of bitterness and pain, it was easy to let his anger flow. It was easy to argue with Trixie; arguing was almost better than the silent cold war they had been engaged in for months. At least this was contact.

He sat down on his sofa with a cold soda, ready to turn on the television and blot out his muddled thoughts, when there was a knock on the door. He cursed under his breath and got up

to see who it was. When he opened the door, he saw Bill, head of the school's small maintenance crew, standing before him with a worried expression.

"What's up, Bill?" Jim immediately wanted to know.

"I thought you might want to take a look at that back barn that we only use in late summer for the orchard harvest. There are signs of an intruder."

Probably just kids, Jim thought as he grabbed his keys and locked the front door of the cottage. He followed the foreman down the path toward the barn. *Too bad Trixie isn't here, she'd be sure to find all sorts of clues.* Jim Frayne was starting to realize that maybe Trixie's 'detectiving' wasn't such a bad thing after all. Maybe he really did need Trixie in his life more than he cared to admit.

Chapter 4 Wannabe Author's Notes: I must admit, I shamelessly stole a restaurant from my recent trip to Colorado. I am quite a fan of microbrewed beer, and Fort Collins, CO is home to many fine microbreweries. For two years I have been told by all of my Colorado friends, "You must go to Fort Collins and sample the beers," so when the opportunity arose to give a scientific talk among the home of microbreweries, I jumped at the chance! C.B. & Pott's came highly recommended from my boyfriend and it did not disappoint—it boasted a wonderful Hefeweizen and a fabulous Belgian Doppel, so it is no surprise that the restaurant should suddenly move to Westchester County and find itself in my fanfic! Hopefully there is no law that says I can't move a great brewpub from Ft. Collins, CO to Westchester County, NY...well, excepting the law of physics, I guess.

Chapter Four: Secrets and Misunderstandings

Jim stared down at the pile of cigarette butts in the loft of the barn, evidence that there had indeed been an intruder. A worn, cheap cotton blanket lay near by, as well as several empty food cans. Whoever the intruder was appeared to have a fondness for refried beans and Spam. An empty tequila bottle also lay among the mess. Jim decided that it probably wasn't any of the kids after all—he didn't really think that any of them could get their hands on the tequila. Besides, the blanket made him think that the intruder was staying here; none of his boys had been missing from their nightly bunk checks.

If it was someone outside of camp, then he knew he shouldn't touch anything, for fear of messing up fingerprints. He wished Trixie were here—she could get so many insights from just studying the scene. *Well, she's not here, Frayne, you're a smart guy. You can study this scene just as well! How did Trixie do it when we were kids? Oh, yeah, that time at Cobbett's Island when we found the cigarette butts in Pete's toolshed, Trixie determined there were two people there by examining the butts.*

Jim bent down to examine the evidence, a look of distaste clearly showing on his handsome face. Cigarettes reminded him of the time Jonesy had burned down his uncle's mansion with a careless flick of his cigarette. This very barn and the summerhouse were all that remained of his uncle's original showplace, Ten Acres. Jim felt connected to this barn and certainly didn't want it burning to the ground on account of someone's nasty habit combined with carelessness. He looked around the barn and suddenly remembered the Dodge case the BWG's had solved one summer; little runaway Davy Dodge had hidden in this barn with Wicky, his pony. Trixie had been smart about solving that case, too.

Jim shook thoughts of Trixie out of his head and tried to concentrate at the task before him. Okay, one brand of cigarettes and all smoked right down to the butt. Jim thought he could probably safely assume there had been only one intruder. He turned to Bill, who was still standing, waiting for Jim to say something.

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“When’s the last time anyone was in here?”

“Well, none of the maintenance crew has been here since the apple harvest last fall. After we harvested the apples, made cider and applesauce for the winter for the school, and sold off all of the surplus, we locked this place up and haven’t been back here since. It’s been about six months, sir,” Bill admitted.

“So the tramp could have been here last night or last winter, we don’t know,” Jim sighed. “Well, we’d better start patrolling this barn to see if whoever it is comes back. My guess is that it was a tramp who spent a few days here last winter and then moved on.”

Bill nodded. “Do you want me to clean this up?”

Jim shook his head. “No, my sister is in the process of getting her private investigator’s license right now. I’ll have her come up here with her partner and take a look at this and see what clues they can dig up.”

Bill nodded his head in understanding and went to find his crew to set up a schedule of patrolling. This was a great job, and Mr. Frayne was a great boss, so he wanted to immediately get started with protecting the boss’s property.

Jim trudged back to his cottage. It was probably nothing; some tramp had seen the old barn at the back of the property and helped himself to a couple of night’s lodging. But why did he have this uneasy feeling about it? Halfway back to the cottage, he realized it was just as easy to take the path to the Manor House and talk to Honey in person as it was to call her, so he headed off in that direction. At the Manor House, though, he was informed that Honey had just left for Crabapple Farm.

Jim cursed. Should he call his sister there and risk talking to Trixie? Could it wait until morning? Then again, maybe this would be the perfect excuse to call Trixie and make it up to her for being such a dufus at Honey’s engagement party the night before. He made up his mind and headed for the extension in the den.

Mrs. Belden answered the phone at Crabapple Farm.

“Hi, Mrs. Belden,” Jim was suddenly shy. “It’s Jim.”

“Jim! Hi there!” There was nothing but warmth in Mrs. Belden’s voice and Jim was relieved. “We miss you here at the Farm.”

“I miss you and the Farm, too, Mrs. B. I haven’t yet been able to find anyone who can bake a pie like you do.”

“Well, tomorrow is baking day, so please come on over and have a slice of pie and catch me up with what’s been going on in your life.”

Jim hesitated, he would like nothing better, but he didn’t want to upset Trixie if she didn’t want to see him. Mrs. Belden understood his reluctance.

“Jim, she doesn’t bite. You are more than welcome to come over and I will ensure that my stubborn daughter won’t chase you out of the house!”

Jim laughed. “Well, when you put it that way, I’d love to come over tomorrow for some pie!”

Mrs. Belden smiled, knowing Trixie was going to kill her for her matchmaking, but not caring—it was time these two got back together! “Glad to hear it, Jim.”

“Is my sister there by any chance? Celia told me she headed over there a while ago.”

“Sorry, you just missed her. Hallie, Di, Honey, and Trixie met up here before heading out into town for a ‘GNO’ or something. I haven’t heard that much giggling since they were teenagers!” Helen smiled at the girls’ antics, glad that Trixie finally seemed to be a little cheered

up. She knew Trixie had a lot on her mind and she suspected not all of it had to do with Jim, but she knew better than to ask. Trixie would tell her when she was ready.

“Wow! That’s something no one needs to be a witness to, but at least you survived to tell the tale,” Jim chuckled.

“Yes, I did. Now I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon for some pie and conversation, right James Frayne?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Jim smiled as he hung up the phone. Maybe things could go back to normal after all.

Meanwhile, the girls had decided to try a new restaurant/microbrewery that had opened up halfway between White Plains and Sleepyside on Albany Post Road. C.B. & Potts had a casual appeal to it, the girls saw as they entered the brewpub. To the left of them was a more traditional restaurant, and to the right was a large area with lots of tall, round tables, each with four tall stools surrounding them. The bar sat at the back of the room, and seemed to have the only empty seats in the entire room. Laughter and chatter met the girls’ ears as they looked around, taking in the wood beams and railings. It almost looked as if they were in a log cabin. A hostess approached them then.

“Hi! Four?” She asked. At their nods, she told them it would be about a 45 minute wait for a table, but they could sit at the bar.

“Can we order food at the bar?” Trixie asked.

“Sure,” the hostess confirmed.

Trixie looked at her friends. “Do you want to just sit there?”

When the other three consented, Trixie thanked the hostess and led the way to the bar. There were four empty seats in a row around a corner, so Trixie and Honey sat down on one side, and Hallie and Di took seats so that they sat at a 90 degree angle to the other two; this made for easier conversation than sitting all in a row.

“This place is pretty cool,” Hallie remarked. She had just turned twenty-one and was becoming quite a connoisseur of brewpubs; Dan had turned her on to the wonders of microbrewed beer.

“It’s obviously caught on pretty quickly considering it’s this crowded and they’ve only been open a month,” Honey noted.

“Brewpubs are catching on all over the country,” Diana said. “I myself prefer wine, but I must admit I did try some of that home-brewed stuff Dan made, and I really liked it. It has so much more flavor than Bud or Miller.”

Hallie nodded. “Dan can do some pretty good stuff.”

Trixie snickered. “And not just when it comes to beer-making, huh, Hallie?”

Hallie laughed. “Don’t get me started!!”

The four girls were laughing when the bartender came up to them and asked what they wanted.

Honey spoke for all of them. “Well, we’re pretty new to this beer brewed on the premises thing, so what do you recommend?”

“Well, we have six beers that we are brewing right now, three darks and three lights. What kind of beers do you like?”

Hallie spoke up then. “I like dark beers, but I think the rest of them would prefer something lighter. Do you have a Hefeweizen?”

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“We sure do. We also have a sampler you can buy—four 4 oz. samples for the price of a pint. Do you want to try that?”

“Sure, give us two samplers, with one of each of your six beers and make the extra two one Hefeweizen and do you have a Belgian?” Hallie wanted to know.

“We have a Belgian Doppel that’s new, but it’s been really popular,” the bartender explained.

“Sounds great,” Hallie told him.

After checking their i.d.’s, the handsome bartender went to get their samplers.

“Hefeweizen?” Diana wanted to know. “What am I going to be drinking?”

“It’s an unfiltered German style wheat beer. It’s really good if you like light beers, and very popular,” Hallie explained.

The bartender then placed the eight samples in front of them, explaining what each one was. Hallie was pleased to see there was quite a selection, from a blueberry flavored wheat, to an amber ale, to a darker Porter, in addition to the Hefeweizen and her beloved Belgian. The girls sampled each one, loving the change from mass produced tasteless beer usually served at college parties.

Finally, Diana and Honey ordered Hefeweizens, Trixie went with the quaint “Bluesberry,” as it was called, and Hallie was quite pleased with the Doppel and ordered that.

Drink orders taken care of, the girls opened their menus, and tried to make their next crucial decision: what to eat! All of the menu items sounded tempting, but they finally decided and placed their orders.

The four girls chatted happily as they waited for their food orders, and Honey was happy to see that this outing was having the desired effect: Trixie seemed to be relaxing. Diana and Hallie also kept a watchful eye on Trixie, they, too, were glad to see some of the old sparkle returning to her blue eyes.

“Hey, Hallie,” Trixie said in an odd voice and Hallie immediately wondered what was up. “I might need a favor from you.”

“Sure, Trix, anything for my favorite cousin!” Hallie said tongue in cheek, remembering that when they were younger, things had been tense between them. She was sincerely glad they had outgrown that phase of their lives and could be genuine friends.

“Well, I’ve kind of had this offer from the FBI, and if I decide to take it, you may be the main Belden in the Belden-Wheeler detective agency.”

“You’re kidding!” Hallie said at the same time as Diana exclaimed, “The FBI?”

Trixie nodded, laughing at the surprised expressions on her friends’ faces. “Sure enough. They’ve been recruiting me since I took that summer internship at Quantico last year.”

“Wow! That’s great, Trix. Do you think you’ll take it?” Di wanted to know.

“I’m thinking about it, but I have a while yet to decide. I mean, on one hand it’s a great opportunity but on the other hand, opening an agency with Honey has always been my dream. What do I do?”

Hallie turned to Honey. “What do you think?”

Honey took a moment before replying. “I would love to open the Belden-Wheeler detective agency with Trixie, but if she can get some valuable experience with the FBI and that’s what she wants, I think she should go for it.” Honey’s face suddenly took on a devilish grin. “I told her we’d take her back into the agency anytime she’d had enough playing with Mulder and Scully.”

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The girls all laughed at Honey's reference to the tv show Trixie had religiously watched for years now.

Their food arrived just then and the quartet dug into the meals with gusto. After her third bite, Trixie suddenly realized that the seat next to her had been filled with a rather handsome twenty-something. He had auburn hair, green eyes, and a build similar to Jim. He happened to look at her and smile right then and she noted that he had a nice smile.

She put her sandwich down after taking a bite and smiled back at him.

"Hi," the handsome stranger said. "I've never been here before. What do you recommend?"

Trixie wiped her mouth with her napkin. "This is our first time here, too, but I can definitely recommend the grilled chicken sandwich. It's great!"

"It looks good. My name's Scott by the way," he introduced himself, and held out a hand.

Trixie took it. "I'm Trixie, and this is my bestfriend Honey, my cousin Hallie, and my sister-in-law Diana."

The three girls waved at Scott, amused that he was hitting on their friend, and even more amused because they all knew he was flirting with Trixie, but Trixie probably didn't realize it. Trixie's self-image, given a beating when she was younger by always being called "sturdy" and by Mart's teasing, had never really improved, even though she had slimmed down. Therefore, now an adult, Trixie had a hard time believing a man could be interested in her.

"So, what do you and your friends do for amusement around here?" Scott wanted to know. "I just moved to the area recently."

"Where did you move to?" Trixie wanted to know.

"A town north of here called Sleepyside," Scott informed her.

"Really? That's where Di and I grew up, and Honey moved there when she was a teenager," Trixie exclaimed.

"Well then, I guess you really can give me the lowdown on the area," Scott said with his charming smile.

Diana spoke up then. "There's a lot of charm to Sleepyside, how long are you going to be here for?"

"At least for the summer. I'm going to be starting my third year of law school, and my uncle said that Sleepyside might be a good place to start my practice. I'm kind of here for the summer scoping it out," Scott explained. Trixie stared at him critically and decided that, besides Jim, he was one of the handsomest men she had ever seen.

"Where do you go to law school?" Honey politely asked between bites of her seared Mahi Mahi sandwich.

"Georgetown," came the reply.

Trixie jumped. "Hey, I just graduated from there! What a coincidence!"

Scott's smile broadened. "Really? What was your major?"

"Criminology," Trixie told him.

"That was my major in undergrad, too. With a minor in poli sci. Now my specialty is criminal law. Are you planning on law school?" Scott inquired.

Trixie shook her head and Honey jumped in to brag about her friend. "Trixie is being recruited by the FBI," Honey said, no small amount of pride in her voice.

Scott looked impressed. "Really? Wow, to be recruited by them must mean you're good."

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Trixie blushed and once again her friends jumped to her rescue. “She is good,” Di said. “She’s helped the police with a number of cases, some of them even involving international crime rings.”

Scott looked at Trixie. “I’d like to hear about them. You sound like an amazing woman.”

The other three girls were grinning delightedly as they watched this good looking man so obviously flirt with their friend.

Trixie laughed self-consciously. “I don’t know about that, but we’ve had our share of excitement in the past.”

Scott ordered food and the rest of the evening was spent companionably chatting amongst the five of them. Honey watched Trixie become animated as she and Scott talked about Georgetown and D.C., as well as one of Trixie’s favorite places, Old Town, Alexandria, Virginia, just a short subway ride from campus. As much as Honey wanted Trixie to be with her brother, Jim was being ridiculous, and this Scott guy seemed to have a lot in common with Trixie. Of course, this was just a chance meeting in a restaurant, but maybe something nice would come of it. If not, maybe some of Trixie’s confidence with guys would return. Ever since Matt and Jim, Trixie had been a little gun-shy when it came to dealing with the opposite sex.

When it came time to leave, Scott asked Trixie if he could call her. Trixie hesitated and involuntarily looked to Honey for guidance. Honey smiled and winked and pulled a piece of paper and pen out of her purse, pushing it toward Trixie, giving her tacit encouragement. Trixie took it, and with a deep breath, wrote her phone number down.

Scott stared at the piece of paper and then smiled at Trixie. “I’ll be using this soon,” he promised as Trixie smiled at him and followed her friends out of the brewpub.

On the way home, Trixie exploded. “Can you believe that?”

Honey, Di, and Hallie answered in one voice. “Yes!”

Trixie looked startled. “What?”

Hallie snorted while Honey explained. “Trixie, why must you think of yourself as a troll? You are a good looking, intelligent, funny woman. Of course guys are going to be attracted to you!”

“But giving him my phone number seemed kind of weird,” Trixie explained.

“Well, he seemed very nice and it wasn’t like this was some meat market dance club in downtown New York City. It was a chance meeting at a nice restaurant in the suburbs and you happened to have a lot in common, if you didn’t notice,” Hallie reasoned.

Trixie smiled. “We did, didn’t we?”

Diana piped up. “I, for one, am happy for you, Trix. Just do me a favor and don’t let my husband know that I condoned his sister giving out her phone number to someone she just met, kay?”

The girls laughed, for they knew that although Mart mercilessly teased his younger sister, he was also fiercely protective of her. She had been hurt too many times in the past for him to want to see it happen again.

“Or my boyfriend, who for some reason has always felt personally responsible for Trixie’s safety,” Hallie added.

“Or my fiancé, who has an even bigger big brother complex than Mart,” Honey added. *Or my brother, who despite the fact that he’s acting like a jerk, still loves Trixie, whether he knows it or not.*

The girls were silent on the way home, each thinking of the various men in their lives.

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The next morning, Trixie kept herself busy helping Moms with the housework. As much as Trixie hated dusting when she was younger, she didn't mind it that day. As full as her mind was with her decision and thoughts of Scott, she was glad to be able to keep her hands busy while her mind wandered.

The phone rang and Trixie yelled to her mom that she would answer it.

"Belden residence," she answered.

"Hi, is Trixie there?" A male voice asked.

"This is Trixie," she stated.

"Hi, Trixie. This is Scott. Scott MacGregor, we met last night at C.B. & Pott's."

"Hi Scott! You promised you'd call soon, I just didn't think it would be this soon!"

Trixie blurted.

Scott sounded amused on his end of the line. "Well, I don't believe in playing those stupid phone waiting games. I think if you want to call someone, you should call them without worrying if the current social game dictates that you wait two days or three days or until the next full moon or whatever!"

Trixie giggled. She had always thought playing dating games was stupid too. I mean, if you wanted something, then go for it. "I heartily agree."

The two chatted for a while about everything and nothing, and Scott finally asked her out.

"How about dinner and a movie next Friday?"

As much as Trixie enjoyed talking to Scott, she didn't feel she was ready to go out on a date with someone she just happened to meet at a brewpub. Her mind thought quickly and improvised. "Well, my brother is coming into town Friday and I was supposed to have dinner with him and Honey. Would you like to join us?"

Scott agreed and the two made arrangements for Scott to come by Crabapple Farm at seven o'clock the next Friday.

"But I don't think I can wait that long to talk to you again, so I'm sure you'll hear from me before then—is that okay?" Scott wanted to know.

Trixie smiled happily. "That's fine by me."

The two talked a little longer and then said good-bye. As soon as Trixie hung up, she dialed Honey's number.

Jim looked in the mirror before he left his cottage to head over to Crabapple Farm. His polo shirt and new jeans looked casual but nice, he decided. *Okay, let's go grovel before Trixie and ask for her help on this intruder business. Maybe she'll even let you take her out to dinner.*

Jim followed the trail from Ten Acres down into the hollow where Trixie's family's farm sat, wondering how many times over the years he had used this path. He felt so lucky to have grown up here, to have been adopted by the Wheeler's, and he owed all that to Trixie. How could he act the way he had to the girl who was responsible for everything that he had? Without Trixie there would be no Ten Acres Boys' School, no inheritance from his uncle, no growing up with a great family like the Wheelers. So she had wanted to pursue something on her own for a while—why had he reacted like that? Jim shook his head. Well, that was water under the bridge. He couldn't change the past, but he could definitely try to direct the future—*toward an 'us,' a 'Jim and Trixie' like it used to be*, he thought. *Hopefully, it's not too late.*

Jim walked up to the kitchen door and was about to knock when he heard Trixie on the phone. He knew it wasn't right, but something compelled him to listen.

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“Can you believe he called me already, Honey?” Trixie was saying.

Jim couldn’t hear Honey’s response of, “Of course I believe it! It was so obvious how interested he was in you.”

“It was not. What would some hot guy sitting at the bar be interested in me for?” Trixie asked.

Jim heard this with a mixture of feelings: incredulity that Trixie didn’t know just how attractive she was and with a sinking heart to realize that some lucky guy had obviously realized what just how attractive she was.

Trixie listened to what Honey was saying. “He’s not the only guy who finds you attractive, Trixie. I know Jim still does. When he looked over at you the night of the engagement party, he was definitely in awe.”

“Whatever. If he thought I looked so good at the engagement party, why did he pick a fight?” Trixie demanded.

“Because he has a lot of pride, Trix, but he thought you looked fabulous. Anybody could tell by the look on his face; anybody but you that is,” Honey stated.

“Well, he did ask me to dance, but we both know how disastrous that was. But in a way it was good, because I think I finally realize that things between us can never go back to the way they were, as much as I wanted them to,” Trixie said sadly.

Jim wanted to kick himself more than ever. Stupid temper! It had ruined things once and for all between Trixie and him. He wanted to throw open the door, run into the kitchen, and tell her that things could go back to the way they were—that if that’s what she wanted, than he did too. But she had used the past tense. She had said “as much as I *wanted* them to.” It was too late. Now she had this “hot guy” from the bar, and she certainly wouldn’t want some crazy guy who yelled at her for making her own decisions and tried to keep her wings clipped. *But, Trixie, it wasn’t because I didn’t love you, it was because I did. You are such a rare and beautiful specimen that I was afraid of losing you to the world. I was afraid you’d see that wonderful world out there, so shiny and vibrant, like you, and you would never come home to me. Oh, what have I done?* Jim’s brain screamed.

“So, he asked me out for Friday night, but I was afraid to go out with him alone, so I said I had plans with you and Brian and invited him along—puh-lease tell me you and Brian can go out to dinner with us next Friday!” Trixie sounded frantic to Jim’s ears.

Jim felt as though he had gotten the wind knocked out of him. It was finally over. Despite everything that had happened in the past, he had always just assumed that he and Trixie would get back together again, even when he was with Megan, even when Trixie was with Matt. They had always seemed meant to be. But now she had this “hot guy” from the bar. And now he, Jim, was out of the running. He left his post by the kitchen door and trudged across the lawn toward the path to Manor House. He would have to find Honey and ask for her help in finding the intruder. He couldn’t face Trixie right now.

All the way to the Manor House, Jim battled with himself. Should he pretend he didn’t hear any of the conversation? Should he try to subtly get information from Honey about what he had overheard? Or should he just throw caution to the wind and confront her straight out? *Since when does Honey just let some stranger hit on Trixie at the bar and get her phone number? The world is full of psychos! I thought Trixie and Honey had more sense than that!*

Each thought in this vein got Jim more and more riled during the short walk to Manor House. His frustration and jealousy were being channeled into anger about some unknown guy getting Trixie’s phone number at a bar. He tried to pretend that it was just brotherly concern that

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was fueling his ire, but deep down he knew it was because he had finally lost out. By the time he reached Honey's door and knocked, his famous red-haired temper was already inflamed.

Honey threw the door open and smiled at her older brother, but once she got a good look at the expression on his face, the smile disappeared.

"Jim? What's wrong?" Honey was concerned. She hadn't seen Jim looking quite like this since the day Trixie left for Georgetown.

"How could you let her do it?" Jim yelled, sorry that he was losing his temper, but too far gone to try to control it.

"What? Let who do what?" Honey was completely bewildered, the only thing she could think of was that Jim had found out about the offer from the FBI.

"Go out with some guy she doesn't even know!" Jim responded.

Honey was surprised. "Are you talking about Trixie and Scott?"

"Whatever his name is! You let some guy pick up Trixie in a bar? I thought you had more sense than that!" Jim was really on a roll.

Honey was distraught at seeing her brother so incensed. "Jim, I'm really sorry. Calm down, please." Honey begged, always the peacemaker.

Jim took one look at his sister's distressed face and relented. This wasn't doing anybody any good, and it was only upsetting Honey. He turned sheepish. "Honey, I'm sorry. I guess I was so worried about Trixie's safety that I kind of let my temper get away with me on the walk up here."

Honey was relieved to see him calm down. "How do you know about this at all?" She blurted out, curiosity getting the better of her.

Jim took a deep breath, ready to begin his confession. "Mrs. Belden invited me down to the Farm for pie and I needed to ask Trixie for a favor. I overheard Trixie on the phone with you when I got there. She doesn't know I heard."

Honey nodded. "I'm sorry, Jim. I know it must hurt to think of Trixie with someone else—"

Before she could finish, Jim interrupted. "It's not that! Trixie can date whomever she pleases, I'm just worried that it's some strange guy in a bar, that's all."

Honey knew better, but she also knew how to deal with male delusions. "Right. Well, it wasn't really at a bar. That new place, C.B. & Pott's, opened up on Albany Post Road, on the way to White Plains, and the four of us girls went there for a Girls' Night Out. It's not really a bar, it's more like a restaurant, and it's actually really quaint. This guy started talking to us, and he was really nice. He's a third year law student at Georgetown, so he must be rather respectable and upstanding. Georgetown Law is hardly something to sneeze at. Hallie, Di, and I were all there to protect her, and we all agreed—he seemed harmless."

Jim looked at Honey miserably. "I'm sorry I overreacted. I keep forgetting that Trixie isn't that impetuous fourteen year old anymore. She's a big girl who took care of herself in D.C. for four years. You're right, Honey, she can handle herself with some guy she met near Sleepyside."

Honey felt bad for Jim and reached out to give him a hug. "She would cancel her date on Friday night if she thought for a second you might want to go out with her instead."

Jim shook his head. "No, there's too much history for Trixie and I to ignore. It's better that she has a clean slate."

Honey decided to tell Jim about the FBI offer, before he heard about it from someone else. "I think you should know something—Trixie has had an offer from the FBI to take a

position down in D.C. She hasn't decided anything, but I didn't want you to hear it second hand and freak out or something."

Jim smiled ruefully. "I'm not going to freak, Honey, but thanks for telling me. What about you and the agency though?"

Honey explained to him that although she wanted nothing more than to open the agency with Trixie, she knew she had to let Trixie choose what was best for her. If she insisted that Trixie open the agency with her, and Trixie was too selfless to do anything but do that if Honey requested it, Trixie might end up resenting the opportunity she let slip away. Honey vowed that nothing was more important than the friendship she and Trixie shared, not even the childhood dream of the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency. Jim knew that Honey was not speaking only of the current situation, but also of Trixie's decision to go to Georgetown. He had let his dream of having Trixie by his side forever get in the way of her need to go to Georgetown. Too late he realized his mistake.

Honey saw the realization and misery mingle in Jim's eyes and knew that he had finally discovered his error. She hated to see the big brother she cherished so much looking so sad. "Jim, go to her. Please trust me—Scott will be ancient history if you just tell her what you are thinking. Tell her what you were thinking then, when she left four years ago. Deep down she understood where you were coming from, but she's just as stubborn as you are. Look at all of us, Brian and I, Mart and Di, even Hallie and Dan—we're all where we should be. And if you march yourself down to Crabapple Farm right now, you and Trixie can be too."

Jim looked at his sister. "Don't you see it's too late? If she were to start things with me now, there would be this question in her mind of 'What might have been with Scott?' That would always be between us, and it would never work."

Honey was incredulous. "After one night at a pub? Come on, Jim, you can't really believe that, can you?"

"Well, even if it wasn't on her mind, it would be on mine, and that's enough. With all of the other issues we have to get through, adding that on top of things is too much," Jim explained.

Honey stared at her brother and then finally relented. "Fine, but if things don't work out with Scott, will you promise me you'll try then?"

Jim considered it and then nodded. "I will. I miss Trixie too much to ever truly give up on her."

Honey nodded, not fully satisfied, but she knew Jim well enough to know that if this is how he needed things to be, then this is how they were going to be. "Okay, I have one more favor to ask."

"Anything for my favorite sister," Jim tried to lighten the mood.

"*Please* don't tell Trixie's brothers or Dan that Hallie, Di, and I let some guy pick Trixie up at a bar!!!" Honey laughed and Jim joined in.

"Okay, Little Sis, having this juicy piece of blackmail over the four of you is worth keeping the secret for!" At least Jim looked more like his old self, even if he was aching inside.

Honey continued. "All right, now that that's out of the way—what kind of favor were you going to ask Trixie for? Is it anything thing I can help with?"

Jim explained to Honey about the intruder at the school, and he and Honey made plans for quite a while. Plans that involved Trixie and her excellent deductive reasoning. Plans that involved a partnership between Jim and Trixie, working together to solve a mystery, and if something blossomed...

Chapter Five: Investigations

Monday morning Honey called Trixie, requesting her presence at the clubhouse. Trixie agreed to meet her friend there and called to her mother to let her know where she was going to be as she slipped out the back door of the white frame farmhouse.

Trixie tried hard to control her curiosity all the way to the clubhouse. *Fortunately it's a short walk or I'd never be able to contain myself!* Trixie chuckled to herself, knowing patience had never been one of her virtues.

When she opened the door to the clubhouse, she was surprised to see Jim sitting at the table next to Honey. Her first instinct was to run, but she quickly smiled and tried to act casual but friendly. "Hi. What's up?"

Honey looked at her friend, silently begging Trixie not to be mad at her for setting up this meeting. "The Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency has its first official client. That is, if you want to take the case."

Trixie looked at Jim, her curiosity definitely piqued. "Let's hear it. I assume you're the client?"

Jim nodded. "First, Trixie, I want you to know that I asked Honey not to tell you I was here when she called, so don't blame her. Second, I'm really sorry about the other night. I was way out of line. Can we be friends?"

Trixie looked at the pleading in Jim's green eyes and knew she could not stay mad at him. "I'm not mad at Honey or at you. We both lost our tempers the other night, but that's water under the bridge." She held out her hand in a gesture of friendship. "Truce."

Jim took her hand and smiled. "That's great, Trix. Thanks."

Trixie sat down at the table and pretended not to see Honey's cat-that-swallowed-the-canary grin. She knew that Honey's arm didn't have to be twisted to set this meeting up—Honey was forever playing matchmaker. *First she encouraged me to give Scott my number, and now she's encouraging me to talk to Jim, I wish she'd make up her mind! Just what is she up to?* Trixie vowed to ask her about it later, but right now she focused on the case before her.

"So, Mr. Frayne, what can we at the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency do for you? I assume Ms. Wheeler explained our fee structure," Trixie looked at Honey.

Honey did her best to keep a straight face. "Actually, Ms. Belden, I had not proceeded that far into negotiations with Mr. Frayne. I was waiting for your presence to negotiate a business arrangement with the client."

Trixie nodded, all business. "Fine. Mr. Frayne, we demand a \$100,000 retainer to take the case. Additionally, we charge \$3000 an hour for our services—that's each, by the way—and of course all expenses we may encounter in the investigation are your responsibility. Do you agree to the terms?"

Jim's face took on the look that he reserved for handling business arrangements connected with the school. "Well, Ms. Belden, I am quite sure that both you and Ms. Wheeler are worth those exorbitant fees, however, I feel the need to make a counteroffer. You take on my case and I won't tell your brothers about the time I caught you, Honey, and Dan skinny-dipping in the Wheeler lake!"

Both Trixie and Honey blushed red to the roots of their hair. The summer before Dan had left for college he had told both girls that although they were bold and adventurous, he didn't think they were gutsy enough to actually go skinny-dipping with him in the Wheeler lake. Both girls had risen to the bait, and that happened to be the night that Jim decided to take a moonlit

swim. He had not been happy to discover both his sister and his girlfriend less than respectable with Dan, but fortunately he had seen the humor in the situation. He had also seen the blackmail potential in the situation, as well. It was times like this that a gentle reminder kept both girls in line.

“That was years ago!” Trixie finally managed to respond.

“Well then, let’s go tell Brian and Mart about that evening, shall we?” Jim kept a poker face, but a mischievous glint sparkled in his eyes.

“How about I kick you in the shins instead?” Trixie said playfully as she did just that.

“Ow!” But there was more surprise than pain in his exclamation, and both girls knew it. “Now I *am* going to tell them!”

“Jim Frayne! You’ll do no such thing,” Honey was indignant. “And now that we’ve gotten this silliness out of our systems, let’s get to work.”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am,” both Trixie and Jim shouted in their best military voice. All three dissolved into laughter, thinking how good it felt to laugh with one another again. There may have been a lot between them, but both Trixie and Jim finally felt as though they were back on the road to friendship.

The three sobered up and were about to get to business when Dan came striding in the door of the clubhouse. “If I didn’t hear it and see it, I never would have believed it!” He exclaimed. “Trixie and Jim laughing together in the clubhouse. Have I gone back in time? Entered a parallel universe? Should we call Mulder and Scully and get them out here to solve this X-File?”

Trixie snorted. “If you feel the need, smarty pants. What brings you out here this morning—don’t you have a job in New York?” She grinned wickedly then. “Or at the very least some patrolling for Mr. Maypenny to do?”

Dan laughed, remembering that he rarely got to do anything with his friends when he was younger because he was forever out patrolling, or chopping wood, or working with troubled kids—all teaching him responsibility, keeping him out of trouble, and helping toward his goal of becoming a New York City policeman, of course. “Nah, I took the day off to help my uncle with some things he needed. You know how he is about driving a car and I haven’t taken a day off since I started with the force over a year ago, so I figured it wouldn’t hurt anyone. I was headed that way when I heard the unmistakable sound of insane laughter drifting through the trees. Now, it’s been a while since I patrolled these parts, but I wanted to make sure the property was free of those disagreeable hyenas. Imagine my surprise when I realized the laughter was coming from the clubhouse. I knew I had to investigate right away!”

By this time, the three friends were giggling again at Dan’s explanation. “Guilty as charged—we are the source of the insane laughter!” Trixie freely admitted.

“So what are you guys all doing here?” Dan inquired.

“Jim’s got some hot mystery he wants Honey and I to solve,” Trixie started to explain. “Do you have time to sit and hear about it, or does Regan need you right away?”

Dan took a seat. “I’m actually early. I was going to cajole Cook into making me one of her famous Western omelets.”

“Well, we can’t offer you brunch, but maybe you’ll be interested in the case,” Honey said. “Go ahead, Jim.”

So Jim explained what he had found in the barn, ending with an apology that he didn’t have a better time frame for the intrusion, except that it had to have been in the last six months.

“And you’re sure the boys couldn’t have done it?” Trixie asked.

Jim shook his head. “No, I’m not sure of anything, Trix. I doubt it, though, because it looked like someone was staying there—you know the blanket and empty food cans. If any of the boys had sneaked back there to smoke or drink, I don’t think they would have taken overnight stuff. I also think that they would have the brains to clean it up so it wouldn’t be discovered. They have more to lose than some tramp.”

Trixie nodded. “It sounds like good sound logic, and I have to agree with you, but before we rule out anything, are there any boys who are particularly attention seeking? Or just plain ornery?”

Again, Jim shook his head. “No, I got blessed with a bunch of great kids. I mean, considering their background, some of them might have had an ax to grind when they first came to live here, but they’ve been really responsive. I think they’re glad not to be in a foster home or an orphanage somewhere, or even worse. I’ve really tried to stress that this is their home and that we’re a family, as corny as that sounds. Some of the older ones sounded off when I first brought them here, but they all seem to be settling in great.”

“Okay, I’m convinced,” Trixie said. “We’ll keep that possibility at the back of our minds, but let’s go on the assumption that it was an unknown trespasser. Now we have to decide if it was an innocent case of a vagrant needing a place to get out of the weather, or a malicious break in.”

Honey broke in then. “Jim said he found quite a few cans, so I think that whomever it was stayed for more than just one night. And I would hope that whole bottle of tequila wasn’t consumed in the same evening, but you never know!”

“How big was the pile of cigarettes?” Trixie wanted to know.

“It was pretty big. I’d say at least two packs worth,” Jim speculated.

“Well, I tend to agree with Honey. Someone camped out there for a couple of days. Now we need to determine when.”

“Is the stuff still there?” Dan queried.

Jim nodded. “Let’s head over there. Do you have time to look, Dan?”

“Sure, I’ll just go tell Uncle Bill what I’m doing. He won’t mind if we delay going into town a little bit,” Dan headed off to tell Regan of the change in plans, while the other three headed over to Ten Acres.

Within a couple of minutes, Trixie found herself staring at the debris in the loft. “Well, we can try to ask Captain Molinson to have one of his men dust for prints, but if it was some hobo here during the winter he may have had gloves on. Hence, no prints. If it was recent, and it was just some tramp, chances are there are prints, but unless he happens to have a criminal record or served in the military, we probably won’t be able to id him. And there’s a third possibility,” Trixie hesitated, formulating her thoughts.

“What’s that?” Jim wondered.

“If it is someone who knows the area, and was camping out here to spy, he may have been smart enough not to leave any prints at all,” Trixie explained.

Dan climbed into the loft just then. Instead of joining them at their end of the loft near the window, he headed in the opposite direction, toward the darker end. Trixie watched as he stooped to pick something up, excited that Dan may have found another clue.

“What did you find, Dan?” She called.

Dan approached them, holding a plastic bag. “It’s a Wonder Bread bag, and the expiration date is next week.”

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Trixie was excited. "If that bag is from our intruder, that places him here very recently. I mean, bread's not usually not marked ahead more than a week or two."

Jim slowly nodded. "We may have even scared him away. I got Bill to have some men patrol here at night after this stuff was discovered."

Trixie thought of something. "Was this place locked up, Jim?"

Jim confirmed that it was. "I looked at the lock when Bill first told me about the intruder, and it looked as though the lock had been picked. If I hadn't been examining it for that specific reason, I never would have noticed it. But to the casual observer, the barn would have looked locked up."

Honey spoke up then. "If we're dealing with someone who can pick a lock without doing much damage, we're probably dealing with a criminal."

"And if we're dealing with a criminal, he probably has his prints on file," Dan carried the logic one step farther.

"Okay, the next step is to get Captain Molinson involved. I'm all for just taking this stuff to him, but you know how he would react to that one!" Trixie smiled ruefully. "Go ahead and give him a call, Jim. His men can analyze the scene, and take what they feel is the best evidence."

Trixie took one last look around the loft before climbing down the ladder. She then made a thorough inspection of the barn, but found nothing amiss in the lower portion of the structure. Jim headed to his cottage to call Captain Molinson, Dan toward Manor House to his waiting uncle, and Honey and Trixie took the trail back to Crabapple Farm, knowing that Jim would have better luck with the gruff policeman if they weren't present.

Despite the fact that Trixie was eagerly, and somewhat impatiently, waiting for the results of the fingerprinting, the week went by rather quickly. Things were settling back into the routine Trixie had grown used to as a teenager: chores and keeping her younger brother out of trouble. Even at fourteen, Bobby wasn't much easier to handle than he had been as a six year old, still demanding attention from his older sister. Trixie helped him with his homework and took him for rides in her jeep. Mr. and Mrs. Belden had agreed to let Trixie give him lessons in shifting on the little used, dead-end Louis Road, but Trixie wasn't sure her jeep was going to survive it.

Also, Scott had occupied her time by calling her everyday. Trixie enjoyed their conversations, about anything from criminal law, to D.C., to music, to movies, to whatever happened to catch their interest at the moment. Scott and she did have a lot in common and, unlike Jim, he seemed intrigued by her penchant for mystery solving, not once telling her to "be careful" or "start thinking." Trixie was actually looking forward to their double date with Honey and Brian.

Friday morning, as Trixie sat bemoaning the fact that four days had gone by with no word from Captain Molinson about the fingerprints, the doorbell rang. Trixie hopped up to get it and was surprised to see a flower delivery boy standing there holding a bouquet of roses. "Delivery for Trixie Belden."

"That's me," Trixie confirmed as she took the fragrant arrangement. She set the flowers on the table and grabbed her mother's purse to give the boy a tip. Her own purse was upstairs and she vowed to remember to replace the money as soon as she read the card.

After the boy had gone, Trixie examined the flowers. It was a simple arrangement of a dozen roses, eleven white ones surrounding one red one. Trixie took the card and again noted

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that the penmanship was distinctly feminine. And once again, the card held a rather cryptic note.

*I have you to thank
For my situation
And these flowers are
My declaration*

“What is up with this?” Trixie wondered out loud. “Could Scott have sent them before our date tonight? No, he would have signed his name, plus I got the other flowers before I even met him. Very weird.”

Moms entered the kitchen just in time to hear Trixie’s last remark. “What’s weird, Trixie?”

“These flowers,” Trixie stated simply.

“They’re beautiful. No name on the note again?”

Trixie shook her head. “No, Moms, and now I’m a little worried. I really don’t think it’s Jim and I haven’t been in town long enough to have a secret admirer.”

“Well, I know you haven’t talked to Matt in a while, but maybe you should call him,” Helen suggested.

“Call him out of the blue after nine months and say, ‘Hi, Matt, you’re not stalking me are you?’”

Helen chuckled at her daughter’s expression. “Well, I don’t know what to tell you, but at least ask Jim to be sure.”

“Moms, Jim and I are finally on speaking terms. I don’t want to ruin anything by bringing these up. The notes aren’t threatening, so I’m sure there’s no danger involved,” Trixie reasoned.

“I still don’t like it, Trixie. I honestly thought that Jim or Matt might have sent them to you, but now I’m not so sure. And with all the criminals you’ve put away over the years, who’s to say that one of them doesn’t want revenge?” Mrs. Belden was frankly worried for her daughter.

“A criminal who sends roses?” Trixie asked incredulously.

“It could happen. Trixie, I’m worried, even if the notes aren’t threatening. Call the flower shop and find out who they’re from.”

“Neither the envelope nor the card has the name of the florist and come to think of it, the delivery boy didn’t have it on his baseball cap either. He was just wearing a Detroit Red Wings cap, not one with the florist’s name. Do you remember what he was wearing last week?”

Helen Belden shook her head ruefully. “It might be the same boy, because I do remember the cap, but I don’t remember what was on his jacket.”

“Well, I could either call every florist in the area or wait and see if more get delivered and then ask the person who delivers them what shop they’re coming from,” Trixie said.

“There is only one florist shop in Sleepyside, so it shouldn’t be too hard. They would be the only one in the area to deliver to us, so that narrows your search down,” Mrs. Belden pointed out.

“Okay, you’ve made your point. I’ll go call,” Trixie stated with a sigh.

She pulled the phone book out, located the number, and dialed.

“Sleepyside Florist,” a cheerful voice trilled into the phone after three rings.

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“Hi, my name is Trixie Belden, and I just received some flowers. I was wondering if you could give me some information.”

“Yes, Miss Belden, my name is Alice and I remember both of your flower orders. What can I do for you?” Alice certainly sounded friendly.

“Did you take the order in person?” Trixie wanted to know.

“No, actually, I took both orders from two different stores in New York City. The person who ordered the flowers wanted them delivered to you, so the stores in New York put the information in the computer and sent the orders onto us for delivery. Is there a problem?”

“No, but as you know since I am assuming you wrote the card, there’s no name and I haven’t a clue as to who might be sending them,” Trixie informed the florist.

“Ooooh, how exciting! A secret admirer!” Alice exclaimed, not knowing Trixie’s penchant for trouble. Anyone else might be getting flowers from an admirer, but with Trixie’s luck, it could turn out to be something else.

“Does the order say what the person’s name is?” Trixie went on as though Alice hadn’t squealed right in her ear.

“Let me check the computer,” Alice said as she put Trixie on hold. Trixie only had to wait a few moments before Alice was back on the line. “According to this, both orders were paid for in cash and the gentleman didn’t leave his name.”

Trixie perked up. “But you’re sure it’s a man and not a woman.”

“Well, no, I just assumed...” Alice sounded a little flustered.

“Can you give me the names and phone numbers of the two shops, please?” Trixie requested, realizing she would get no more information out of Alice as to the identity of the mysterious sender-of-roses.

“Of course.”

After taking down the information, Trixie thanked Alice for her help and hung up the phone. She was even less successful in her quest for information at the flower shops in the city. Both were very large shops, handling many customers every day, and no one at either shop could remember any details of the transactions. Frustrated, Trixie hung up the phone, and reported the news to her mother.

Then she had to decide: Should she call Matt? This might be nothing and she’d hate to call him for nothing. While she was deciding what to do, her mind drifted back to the last time she had seen him. Matt and she had broken up in June, not long after Jim’s second graduation and right before she had left for Quantico. She had tried calling him a few times while she was at the FBI training camp, but had never gotten a hold of him. Finally, when she got back they had made arrangements to go out to dinner.

“Trixie, I don’t want to do this.” Matt had said over Thai food.

Trixie froze, thinking of how familiar this scene was. “What?”

“I thought I could stay friends with you, but it hurts too much to see you if you’re not my girlfriend,” Matt had said.

“Well, let’s get back together. I miss you, Matt.”

“It’s not that simple. You’ve got baggage that I thought I could deal with, but I’m sick of being in a relationship with two other people: you and Jim,” Matt didn’t say it to be mean, but the words angered Trixie just the same.

“The only one who puts Jim in this relationship is you!” Trixie had blazed. “You mention him more than I do. I don’t mention him at all!”

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"That's worse, because I know that you're thinking about him," Matt looked into her eyes, daring her to deny it.

Trixie couldn't.

"Someday, you'll go back to Sleepyside and be with Jim. Just you wait and see. Just wait and see what happens then, then you'll finally understand how I feel. All the frustration and hurt I've been carrying around."

Trixie hadn't understood what he had meant then, and he refused to explain it to her, telling her that she would find out in time.

I just thought he meant that he would be proven right and I would finally see that he was right when he nagged me about my feelings for Jim. I had chalked it up to nothing more than male ego, but what if it was more ominous than that? What if he's been tracking me and thinks that just because I've moved back to Sleepyside that I'm with Jim? Could the thought of me with Jim be so unbearable to him that he would snap and do something drastic? Trixie didn't like the possibility that a man she had been with for almost a year could be a stalker. But that doesn't make sense, does it? He had no contact with me at all throughout senior year, and never did I even get a hint that something was wrong. It can't be Matt. As far as I know, he's still in D.C. and these flowers were ordered in New York. Then a thought struck Trixie. But he's from New York City and his parents still live there. No, no, it can't be Matt. I refuse to even allow the notion that it might be Matt. Trixie tried to dismiss the thought, but it remained lodged in her consciousness. She decided to make a deal with herself. If I get flowers one more time, I will call Matt. No, better yet, I will show up on his parents' doorstep with the flowers and judge his reaction myself.

With this resolved, Trixie felt much better. She glanced at her watch and realized it was almost time to meet Honey for an afternoon horseback ride through the preserve. She said goodbye to her mother and hurried up the path to the Manor House.

Helen waited until her daughter was out of sight and grabbed the phone. She looked up a number and dialed, hoping to catch him in his office. She was in luck.

"Ten Acres Boys' School, this is Jim Frayne."

"Hi Jim, it's Mrs. Belden."

"Hi there! This is a surprise," Jim wondered why she might be calling him at work. He had already called to apologize for not showing up for pie last Sunday.

"Well, Trixie will kill me if she knew I was making this call, but I'm just too worried about her," Helen stated.

Jim was immediately on guard. What had Trixie gotten herself into now? "What's up?" Jim tried to sound casual, but his heart accelerated at the thought of Trixie in some kind of trouble.

"Well, I hate to put you on the spot, but have you been sending Trixie flowers?" Mrs. Belden asked.

The question took Jim by surprise, and it showed in his voice, convincing Mrs. Belden that he was sincere. *"No. I take it she's been getting some?"*

"Yes. A dozen white roses came last Sunday with a cryptic note and no name. This morning another dozen were delivered but this time one rose was red. And there was another cryptic note, a poem really," Helen informed him.

"What do the poems say?" Jim inquired.

Helen read the most recent poem to him, and recited what she could remember of the first one. “They’re not threatening or anything, but they’re not exactly a romantic tone you would expect with a dozen roses, either,” Trixie’s mother concluded.

“I don’t like this one bit,” Jim said bluntly. “What if she’s being stalked? Has she tried to find out who sent them?”

Mrs. Belden reported what her daughter had found out from the florist that morning. “That’s why I wanted to call you. Trixie felt strange asking you, but I had to know if it was you. And you know Trixie. I don’t think she’s taking this nearly seriously enough.”

“Well, I’m glad you told me, Mrs. B. It is most definitely not me, but I would like to get to the bottom of this. Is there anyone from school it might be?”

“I asked her if it might be the only boyfriend she’s had beside you, a fellow named Matt, but she insists they haven’t had any contact for almost a year.”

Jim sighed. He hadn’t had much contact with Trixie over the years, either, but that hadn’t stopped him from thinking about her, missing her, longing for her. Trixie was unforgettable. What if this guy had just been planning, plotting, making Trixie think he had forgotten about her? Jim remembered meeting him at Mart’s and at Dan’s graduations. He hadn’t liked him, he recalled. “Is this guy still in D.C.?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Belden admitted. “I do know that his parents live in New York City.”

“So he had opportunity,” Jim said before thinking.

“Do you think it could be Matt? He always seemed like such a nice boy,” Helen fretted.

Jim felt bad for thinking out loud and upsetting Trixie’s mom. “No, just a habit I picked up from your daughter—thinking out loud without stopping to think if I should be thinking out loud.” Jim laughed. “And apparently I picked up Trixie-and-Honey-speak somewhere along the line, too.”

Mrs. Belden laughed, glad that she had confided in Jim, even if Trixie might be angry. After all, Trixie may have felt funny asking Jim herself, but she had never said she hadn’t wanted Jim to know. And Mrs. Belden certainly didn’t feel funny asking Jim if her daughter might be in the slightest bit of jeopardy.

“I won’t let Trixie know you spoke to me. I’ll try to reason things out on this end, but you keep me posted, okay?”

Helen promised that she would and the two hung up.

Jim opened his desk drawer and pulled out a worn photo of Trixie. It was one of her senior photos from Sleepyside High and her blue eyes sparkled in anticipation of the exciting year ahead. It was one of Jim’s favorites; he had carried it in his wallet until he had gotten himself this desk when he opened the school.

Jim stared into those ocean blue eyes and wondered, *What have you gotten yourself into now, Trixie?*

Chapter Six: Hunches and More Mysteries

Halfway through her dinner date, Trixie finally relaxed. Despite the fact that Honey had urged Trixie to give Scott her phone number, now she seemed to have some kind of alliance with Jim, so Trixie wasn’t sure how Honey was going to react to an evening out with Scott. And having her older brother out on a first date was a bit unnerving, even if it had been Trixie’s idea. But Scott was getting along great with both Honey and Brian, and was obviously very intelligent

and charming. While Brian and Scott discussed the merits of med school versus law school, Honey leaned over to Trixie. "I think he's great."

Trixie beamed at Honey. She thought so, too. Even she and Matt had not had as much in common as she and Scott did. He might even turn out to be her dream man: handsome, intelligent, polite, charming, and without a tendency to lecture! Trixie could definitely see herself with this guy.

Scott looked over at Trixie just then and winked. Trixie blushed slightly and smiled back. She definitely was looking forward to a second date—this time without chaperones! She pushed the sudden thought of Jim from her mind—that boat had sailed, it was time to move on.

"So, after I finish up next year I have to decide," Scott was saying. "Do I strike out on my own or accept an offer at a large firm to gain some experience? There are certainly advantages and disadvantages to each, but I have a year yet to decide."

Brian nodded. "That's one decision that has been nicely taken care of for me. I don't have the agony of deciding to start my own practice or take a position with a hospital. That was decided years ago."

Scott raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Honey's brother recently opened a school for underprivileged boys in Sleepyside. When I've finished my residency, I'm to be the house doctor," Brian explained.

Scott looked impressed. "Well I think that's great. Honey's brother must feel lucky to have such a loyal friend come work for him."

Honey nodded. "Jim does feel lucky. Especially since Brian and Trixie's other brother is the school's resident agriculturist and science teacher since earning his degree from Cornell."

"What a family operation! You all must be very close," Scott commented.

Trixie smiled and explained that they all had been very close once. "So close we formed our own semi-secret club when we were kids. And now the members are getting married off, one by one. Or I should say, two by two!"

Honey and Brian laughed as Scott looked puzzled. "My brother married another club member last year, and now Honey and Brian are engaged." Trixie explained.

Scott smiled. "I see." He looked at Trixie, "You're not secretly married or engaged to another club member are you? Do I need to become a part of this club to ask for a second date?"

Trixie laughed self-consciously. "No, not at all," was all she could think to say. Fortunately, the waiter arrived just then to ask them if they would care for any desserts.

Honey spoke up. "I have been craving tiramisu lately. Can I get an order of that please?"

"Of course, Miss. Anyone else?" The waiter looked expectantly at the other three.

After the other three decided on their desserts, the waiter promised to bring them out immediately and left the table.

Talk at the table stalled for a moment, until Scott turned to Trixie. "Speaking of decisions, have you gotten any closer to making yours yet?"

Before Trixie could reply, Brian jumped in. "What decision is that, Trix?"

Scott looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I wouldn't have said anything if you hadn't known. Please forgive me, Trixie."

Trixie waved him off. "It's no big deal, Scott. I just haven't seen my brother lately in order to tell him, that's all." Trixie took a deep breath while Brian looked at her expectantly. "The FBI has offered me a job, so I guess I'm in the same kind of boat as Scott. I need to decide whether to take the position with them, or start the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency with Honey."

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Brian looked at Honey. "Are you okay with this?" As much as he hated the thought of Honey possibly finding herself in danger, he certainly would never even think of trying to stop her from pursuing her childhood dream. He never would have thought that it might actually be his sister who put a halt on their plans.

Honey nodded. "Of course, Hallie and I can open the agency if Trixie decides to go to Washington. I'm still going right ahead with obtaining my PI license."

Brian looked startled. "Washington? You mean it's not even a job at the New York field office?"

Trixie shook her head. "No, I would be moving back down to Washington for at least the next two or three years, if I accept. There may be a spot sometime down the line in New York, but for now I would be at headquarters."

Scott looked proudly at Trixie. "This woman must really know her stuff if they want her that bad. I'm very impressed with your sister, Brian."

Trixie blushed and tried to smile graciously; accepting compliments had never been her strong point. Brian, on the other hand, was starting to fully comprehend the fact that his sister had grown up, that she was already considered accomplished by specialists in her field, and that men, in this case Scott, saw her as a very attractive woman. *When did that happen?* Brian wondered.

"Brian, if you don't mind, I'm waiting to tell Moms and Dad about the FBI offer until later. And if I decide not to take it, I probably won't tell them at all, okay?" Trixie was saying.

Brian nodded. "I won't mention it to them. Does Mart know?"

Trixie shook her head. "I asked Di not to tell him until I had a chance to."

Scott looked rueful. "And here I shoot my big mouth off to your other brother. I'm really sorry, Trix."

"Don't be silly! I was going to tell him, I just hadn't gotten a chance yet. And if I was that worried I would have told you not to bring it up. Please don't worry about it anymore," Trixie admonished.

Scott looked relieved. "Your wish is my command," he said as the desserts arrived.

The four took one look at the tempting desserts and dug in with gusto, the conversation dropped.

After dinner, Honey suggested a walk through Sleepyside. The early summer night was balmy and the sky twinkled with stars. Trixie wanted nothing more than to stroll through town with Scott, and readily agreed. Honey took Brian's hand and the couple walked a few paces ahead of Trixie and Scott.

Scott took Trixie's hand. "I'm having a wonderful time."

"Me too," Trixie admitted with a smile. "Have you been able to see much of Sleepyside since you've been here?"

Scott nodded. "A little bit. I've seen Town Hall with its unique grasshopper weathervane."

"That's Hoppy. He was a gift from the same coppersmith who designed the one for Faneuil Hall in Boston. With one small exception, Hoppy has sat on townhall for over two hundred years," Trixie loved telling the history of the copper weathervane she loved so much.

"One exception?" Scott inquired.

"Well, two actually. He was brought down for recoppering at the turn of the century, and then a few years ago, he was stolen," Trixie explained.

"But the town got him back?"

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Trixie smiled. "The town got him back and he was recoppered before he was replaced on his perch."

Scott looked at her inquiringly. "Why do I have a feeling that you were instrumental in getting him back?"

"Well, it wasn't so much me as it was all of the Bob-Whites," Trixie said modestly.

"The Bob-Whites?" Scott looked puzzled.

"Sorry. The club we told you about earlier was called the Bob-Whites of the Glen."

"Ahhh, I see. And they were your partners in mystery solving when you were younger," Scott deduced.

"We did have a lot of great adventures when we were younger. Mysteries just seemed to fall into our laps. Then we all went off to different colleges and the mysteries weren't quite so frequent."

"But you managed to scare some up while you were in college?" Scott asked.

Trixie nodded. "Diana, who you met the other night, has an uncle who owns a dude ranch out in Arizona. He was having a little trouble with some sabotage so he invited us out to investigate one summer. Honey, Di, my brother Mart, and another club member named Dan all went out to help him out."

"And you caught the guy?" Scott looked intrigued and proud at the same time as he looked at Trixie.

"It was a competing rancher who was an amateur at being a criminal. He left all sorts of clues behind and it only took a very short time to gather the evidence and get him to confess," Trixie informed him.

"Interesting. What other kinds of cases did you solve?" Scott was curious as to how one woman had such a penchant for finding and solving mysteries.

"Do you mean in college? Or when I was still in high school?"

"College, high school, both, either. I guess your friends told me a few of your high school tales last weekend at the brewpub. Why don't you tell me some of your college adventures."

"Okay," Trixie agreed. "The most recent case was during my senior year. Someone was embezzling money from Honey's sorority. Everyone thought it was the treasurer, which would be logical, but it turns out it was the president, and she was framing the treasurer. She was pretty crafty."

"During our freshman year, Honey and I stayed at Cornell with my brother Mart during spring break. There were a lot of break-ins and thefts in Mart's dorm his sophomore year. Turned out to be the maintenance man who had a key, but tried to make it look as though someone was breaking in. When he was doing maintenance, he'd case the rooms to see which ones were worth robbing. Then he'd make himself busy in the hallway, pretending to do repair work like changing light bulbs and such, and wait for the kids to leave their rooms to go to class. Nobody really notices maintenance men working; they kind of become fixtures. As soon as they were gone, he'd take his tool box in, use it to carry out small but valuable stuff, like jewelry, and then make it look like the lock had been jimmied before he left. If anyone caught him in the room, he used his maintenance position as an explanation."

"And you went up there at your brother's request and figured it out," Scott stated, no small amount of admiration in his voice.

Trixie shrugged. "I was glad to help."

By this time, Honey and Brian had gotten far ahead. Scott stopped, right in front of town

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hall as it happened, and looked into Trixie's eyes. "I think you are an amazing woman, and I would like to see more of you, is that okay?"

Trixie nodded and then suddenly Scott's lips were on hers and she was enjoying his kiss immensely. Trixie got lost in the wonderful feeling of his soft lips on hers and the feel of his strong hands running through her hair. She could feel the electricity between them as the kiss deepened, a wonderful dizziness surrounding her. Too soon she heard someone clearing their throat nearby.

"I hate to break this up, but Brian has an early morning tomorrow, so we were going to head back to the car," Honey said, an amused twinkle in her eye.

Trixie was glad it was dark so that her friend and brother couldn't see the blush she knew was creeping into her cheeks. *Twenty-two years old and I still blush at every little thing!* She thought. Out loud she said, "Sure, Honey, we were just waiting for you and Brian."

Trixie walked back to the car, hand in hand with Scott, feeling happier than she had in a long time. The feeling followed her all the way home and into her dreams.

Saturday morning she awoke refreshed and happy. She entered the kitchen humming softly to herself and was greeted with the delicious smells of Mrs. Belden's cooking. "Do I smell sausage and waffles?"

Bobby piped up. "You sure do. Mart and Di and Honey are on their way to have a special breakfast with us."

Trixie looked at her mother. "What's the occasion?"

"Since Brian is in for the weekend, I thought it would be nice to have a big breakfast, just like it used to be, that's all."

"But Brian was here for a whole week just last week," Trixie stated.

Moms sighed. "Trixie, it may not be a big deal to you, but for the last several years it has been rare when I have had all four of my kids in one place. Just because it happens to happen twice in a row, doesn't mean I'm not going to be thankful or think it's not special."

"You win, Moms, I know you've missed us all," Trixie said as she headed to the refrigerator to get out the milk and orange juice for everyone.

Breakfast was a loud and noisy affair, and Mrs. Belden was glad to see all four of her "babies" around the table. As much as it had sometimes tried her patience when the kids were younger, she actually enjoyed their friendly bickering and bantering now. It was nice to have a full house again, even if it was temporary.

"Trixie, would you mind terribly if I left you with this mess? I just realized the time. Your father and I have to take Bobby into town for his dentist's appointment and run some errands," Mrs. Belden stated, after dishes had been cleared of waffles, sausages, hash browns, and fruit salad.

"Have I ever had a problem doing the dishes?" Trixie asked mischievously, a twinkle in her eye. "But you know, when I make my first million, I'm buying you an electric dishwasher!"

"That'll be the day!" Helen laughed.

The elder Beldens left with Bobby, and the gang all chipped in to set the kitchen to rights. Just as they had dried the last dish, the phone rang. Trixie went to answer it as everyone else headed for the large family room. Trixie joined them a few minutes later, disappointment in her eyes.

"What gives, Trix?" Mart wanted to know.

"That was Captain Molinson. The results of the fingerprints are in. Not one of the cans had any on them. There were two sets on the bottle of tequila—both of them belonging to

people who work at the liquor store in town. That's what took so long. Neither set matched anything in the database, so Molinson checked the employees at the liquor store on the off chance that it was actually bought there and the prints might match. One of the guys had a couple of days off, so they had to wait for him to come in to get printed. He was one of the matches, the other was the stock boy," Trixie told the group sitting at the table.

"So what does that mean?" Brian asked.

"Who knows. If the intruder had wiped the bottle clean to get rid of his own prints, he would have gotten rid of all of the prints, including the store personnel. It sounds as though he might have done that with the cans, since there were absolutely none on them, but I don't know how to explain the lack of the intruder's prints on the bottle," Trixie sat down, lost in thought.

"Could one of the store personnel be the intruder?" Mart asked.

"I doubt it. I asked that same question of Molinson, but he had done a little research. The stock boy lives with his parents and the clerk's wife says her husband has spent the night at home every night going months back. Plus, neither of them smoke. It just doesn't make sense. The bread wrapper indicates it was recent, but it certainly hasn't been glove weather recently. I could understand the lack of prints in the winter, but not in June!" Trixie concluded.

"We never were sure that the bread wrapper was from the intruder," Honey said.

"Jim asked around," Trixie informed her. "Bill insists that he was the only one who actually entered the building. Just to be sure, he talked to his crew, and they all denied bringing Wonder Bread to work at all, let alone to the barn. I also interviewed Bill and the crew myself and 'm convinced that it must have been from the intruder."

"What about the possibility that it was one of the crew?" Honey rationalized.

"That's a possibility, but I'm beginning to think that it was an outsider, not someone from inside the school, and that it was more than just a random event. Whoever stayed in that barn knew the area. And furthermore, I don't think they cared if it was discovered that they were staying there," Trixie said, almost to herself.

"What are you basing that assumption on?" Brian wanted to know.

"Mostly a hunch," Trixie admitted. "But if it was a random tramp, I think there would have been fingerprints. Whoever it was didn't want his identity known. But he didn't care to hide several days worth of cigarette butts and food cans, either."

"You have a point," Brian acknowledged.

"What's next?" Diana finally spoke up.

Trixie shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I'll head up to Ten Acres and talk this latest info over with Jim. Would he be at his office on a Saturday or at home?" She asked Honey.

"He's probably at the cottage. Do you want me to go with you?" Honey asked.

"No, that's okay. I can handle Jim on my own these days," Trixie said with a smile. She headed upstairs to change out of her sweats, knowing that she would probably be a topic of discussion as soon as she was out of earshot; she was right.

"So what gives with her and Jim, Honey?" Mart wanted to know.

"They're finally civil to each other," Honey answered.

"How did her date with Scott go last night?" Di asked.

Surprise registered on Mart's face. "Trixie had a date last night?"

Brian nodded. "Yeah, they doubled with Honey and I."

"You possessed erudition of this momentous occasion and retained said knowledge from thine sagacious, favored sibling, namely me?" Mart did his best to appear the wounded younger brother.

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“Yes, Mart, I knew and didn’t tell you. Scott goes to Georgetown Law, he seemed like a really great guy,” Brian informed the group.

“He is a really nice guy—and handsome, too!” Di grinned.

“*Et tu, Brutus?*” Mart pretended to clutch a dagger to his heart.

“Oh stop it! I met him last weekend, and he did seem like a great guy. Jim and Trixie were way on the outs, so we thought we should encourage a little romance in her life,” Diana smacked at Mart, willing him to be serious for once.

“But now she’s getting along fairly well with Jim,” Brian observed.

Honey smiled ruefully. “Don’t I know it! I thought that Scott could take her mind off of Jim and his distance and then bam! The day after she meets Scott, Jim does an about face! I’m getting very confused in my matchmaking strategies!”

Brian put his arm around his fiancé. “Why don’t you take a break from the matchmaking and let Trixie choose,” he said as he kissed her.

“What can Trixie choose?” Trixie herself wanted to know as she entered the room wearing her favorite white denim shorts and a snug light blue scoop neck top.

Everyone present jumped when they realized she was in the room.

Honey, never good at fibs, tried to stammer out an answer. Trixie knew exactly what they were talking about and decided to have some fun while they squirmed.

“What to do, what to do?” She said in a blasé voice. “Scott or Jim? Jim or Scott?” Then she laughed at the dumbfounded looks on her friends’ faces. “That’ll teach you to meddle in someone’s personal life and then talk about it behind her back. Serves you right!”

She was still chuckling as she walked up the path to Ten Acres, knowing her friends were wanting to discuss her, but probably convinced she had superpower hearing abilities and were afraid to get caught again.

She knew exactly why Honey had nudged her toward Scott. She didn’t even mind—she hadn’t had a date since her disastrous last dinner with Matt. It was fun to go out with Scott. *And as for Jim...* Trixie sighed, trying to sort out her muddled feelings. She enjoyed being with Scott, there was no history, no landmines to avoid, as there was with Jim. But Jim was...well, Jim was Jim. Despite the fact that not all of it was good, she loved having a history with Jim. She loved that she had watched him change from a scared runaway to a beloved son and brother to a sexy college guy to the upstanding school director that he was today. But their friendship right now was tenuous at best. They were getting along better, that was true, but if Jim wanted more than a friendship, he certainly wasn’t letting on. Why should she toss the possibility of something with Scott when she didn’t know where she stood with Jim? But what if her feelings for Jim got in the way of her relationship with Scott, as they had with Matt?

Argh! Belden, knock it off. One date does not a relationship make, and Jim has given you no indication that he wants anything more than a friendship. Take things day by day!

That resolved, Trixie walked up to Jim’s cottage and knocked soundly on the front door.

“Hey, Trix!” Jim greeted her when he opened the door. “I got off the phone with Molinson not too long ago. He said he was going to call you with the results, so I was hoping you’d show up. Come on in.”

Trixie stepped inside the entry hall and looked around. “This is really nice, Jim.”

“That’s right, I’d forgotten you’ve never seen the place. Would you like a tour?”

“I’d love one,” Trixie said simply.

As Jim took her through the homey cottage, Trixie couldn’t help but note it certainly didn’t look as though a bachelor lived there. Everything was neat and in order. The family room

was masculine, but not overly so, done in forest green and deep blue and Trixie fell in love with the kitchen, done in bright, sunny yellow. Copper pots gleamed above her head.

Jim saw the look of surprise on Trixie face as she looked up at them. "My mom, Katje, always had copper pots in her kitchen," he said almost shyly. Trixie nodded in understanding and they continued the tour. Jim's den, with its bookshelves filled with books, was impressive and the dining room was furnished with an antique table and chairs, as well as an antique china hutch. Trixie loved the character of the room.

Upstairs Trixie discovered a master suite complete with its own bathroom and walk-in closet. She loved the beamed ceilings and said so. Jim smiled, happy that she approved. The second floor also held another bathroom and two empty rooms, both carpeted in a rich forest green. Trixie looked in the rooms and turned to Jim, a question in her eyes.

Jim avoided her gaze and looked away. "You just never know when you're going to need an extra storage room or two."

Trixie smiled, pretending to go along with his explanation, but Jim had built this house with a family in mind, of that she had no doubt. She hated herself for thinking it, but the thought would not be stopped. *Was he thinking of me when he designed this house?*

"Well," she said a little too brightly. "Shall we sit down and discuss our next move?"

Jim went along with the charade. "Yep, we can have a cup of coffee in the kitchen, if you'd like, or we can take them outside onto the deck."

"It's such a beautiful day, let's sit out on the deck," she decided.

"Your wish is my command," Jim grinned and hurried into the kitchen to get the coffee.

Trixie wandered out onto the deck through the family room. *That's twice in less than twenty-four hours that I've heard that. Well then, I wish I knew what I wanted!*

Trixie sat down at the wood table that Jim had obviously built at the same time he built the deck, it matched the style so well it blended in with the deck in a harmonious fashion. *He's done a wonderful job with the house,* Trixie couldn't help but think.

Jim joined her then with two steaming mugs of coffee and the two began to plan.

"Have there been signs of an intruder elsewhere?" Trixie asked.

Jim shook his head as he sipped his coffee. Trixie took a drink of hers, realizing Jim had put in the exact amount of sugar that she required. *He remembers how much sugar I take in my coffee,* she thought with wonder, suddenly realizing that Jim was speaking to her.

"I'm sorry, Jim, what was that?" Trixie had to ask.

"I've had extra patrols going since we discovered it, and we've turned up nothing."

Trixie was silent for a moment. "Well, maybe my theory was wrong." She then explained the theory she had come up with about the intruder knowing the area and the logic behind it. "But if you haven't found any more signs of things amiss, than maybe it was just a tramp who needed a place to crash for a couple of nights."

Just then, Bill came up the deck stairs. "Morning, Mr. Frayne, Ma'am. Sorry to disturb you, but there's been more signs of the intruder."

Trixie and Jim looked at each other, startled. The timing of Bill's message couldn't have been eerier. "Where?" Jim demanded.

"Down in the school's boathouse," came the reply.

Trixie looked to Jim for an explanation. "Mom and Dad let me use their lake to teach the boys swimming and boating and for recreation. I built my own boathouse and dock, though, at the opposite end of the lake from where theirs stand."

“So, this intruder is on the Wheelers’ property, but in the school’s boathouse. Coincidence?” Trixie wondered.

Jim’s jaw tensed. “Let’s go find out.”

Once again there was a pile of cigarette butts, the same brand that was found in the barn, and more empty food cans. Most importantly, there was another Wonder Bread bag. “Dated next week,” Trixie proclaimed upon examining it. Trixie looked for other clues in and around the boathouse. She discovered that the lock was expertly picked, but other than that she could find no other clues.

She turned to Bill. “When was the last time this was used?”

“Summertime swim and boating lessons were due to start Monday. That’s why I came down here today, to get the place ready,” Bill stated. He had liked this girl immediately when they had first met the previous week. She was straightforward, intelligent, and obviously very capable. Bill wondered if the rumors were true that Jim and she had been high school sweethearts; if it was true, he thought Jim a fool for letting her get away.

“This says to me more and more that this person knows the school’s routine. He knew that other barn was only used in the fall and he appeared to know that this boathouse, despite it’s location on the Wheeler property, belonged to the school and wasn’t currently in use. Are you sure no one who works at the school could be doing this?” Trixie wanted to know.

Jim and Bill looked at each other. Both were good judges of character, for the most part, and both trusted the other’s ability to hire good help. Jim always consulted Bill before hiring anybody onto the crew, and Bill had faith that Jim wouldn’t hire anybody less than trustworthy. None of the crew appeared unhappy—Jim was a fair boss and paid his employees well. They had great benefits, too. Although it certainly wasn’t outside the realm of possibility, neither man had an easy time believing that someone at the school was doing this. Each man explained their feelings to Trixie.

Trixie herself had faith in Jim’s ability to judge his employees and she instinctively liked Bill from the first moment she met him. Plus, her gut was telling her that this was someone with an axe to grind with the school, but not an insider at the school itself.

“Well, let’s go call Molinson and get some more prints analyzed,” Trixie stated, heading back toward Ten Acres. “We’ll have to tell Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, since it occurred on their property. They might want to set up a patrol, but I doubt this person will return to the boathouse. I don’t think he’ll bother the Wheelers, either.”

Jim agreed, and the three walked back to the school grounds in troubled silence.

Chapter Seven: Complications

Trixie received the third bouquet of flowers the same day that Molinson called to tell her the results of the fingerprinting: once again, no prints. It was now Tuesday, and Trixie was becoming frustrated at the lack of clues to the intruder’s identity and to the lack of clues as to who was sending the roses with the peculiar notes.

Trixie stared at the bouquet, this time only ten of the roses were white, and two were red. As Trixie was pondering the significance of the increasing number of red roses each time, Mrs. Belden came into the kitchen.

“Who was at the door, Trixie?” She asked, stopping short when she saw the flowers sitting on the table. “Trixie Belden, you are going to report this Captain Molinson immediately!”

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Trixie looked up at her mother, trying to reassure her with a plausible explanation, even though she herself knew there wasn't one. "It's probably just Jim, Moms."

Helen shook her head emphatically. "No, I hope you don't get too upset at me, but after the last delivery I point blank asked him if he was sending them—he hasn't been."

Trixie's heart sank. Deep down she had known that Jim had not sent them, but at least having that possibility had allowed her some comfort.

"What does the card say this time?" Mrs. Belden demanded to know.

Trixie reluctantly handed her mother the card.

*The great detective Belden
Can't figure out who I am
Maybe your great skills
Are really just a sham*

Helen gasped as she read it. "The notes are getting threatening!"

Trixie tried to calm her mother down. "Mom, this is hardly threatening. Insulting maybe, but not threatening."

"Well, they're certainly not getting friendlier or romantic," Helen stated unequivocally. She tried to plead with her daughter. "Trixie, please report this to Captain Molinson. I'm really worried about your safety. I'd like you to try to call the flower shop again. I'm sure that you won't get much farther than you did last time, but at least it's something."

Trixie nodded, thoughts churning in her mind. *A sudden unknown intruder at Ten Acres and a sudden unknown 'admirer' for me, both appearing at the same time. That's a fantastic coincidence; what if they're related?*

"Trixie, what is going through that head of yours now?"

"Nothing, Moms. I'm going to call Captain Molinson and the flower shop now. I tell you what I find out," Trixie promised and headed to her bedroom to use her private extension to place the phone calls.

Trixie was glad to find that Alice was again working at the flower shop.

After identifying herself again, Trixie launched right into her questions. "How long is it before you receive the orders from the other shops?"

"It depends. The orders come in over the computer and I check the computer every couple of hours or so, to see if there have been any new requests," Alice answered.

"So by the time you actually see the order, it could already be a couple of hours old?" Trixie was not happy to hear this bit of information.

"That's right," Alice confirmed.

"Is there anyway to get the order while the sender is still in the other flower shop?"

"Only if I were to stand at the computer and constantly refresh the monitor. Even then, by the time I get the order it could be minutes old and the sender could already be gone."

"And how long after you get an order are flowers delivered?"

"It depends. If someone pays for a rush delivery we do our best to get the arrangement to the recipient that same day. Most orders are delivered the day after we receive them. There has been a specific request on all three of your orders to be delivered to you the following day," Alice informed her.

Trixie immediately deduced that that meant the sender wanted to ensure some time had passed between the order and her receipt of them. She tried one last thing. “Alice, I’m not certain that these flowers are a good thing. Is there any way at all to track the sender?”

Alice sounded sorry. “No, this person is really covering their tracks. After your call the other day, I specifically noted which flower shop sent the order this time. It was yet a different store this time, and all three are very large shops, the three biggest in the city in fact, virtually guaranteeing the purchaser will not be remembered. He, or she, is using a different one every time and paying cash, making it almost impossible to trace. I can put an alert out to florists in New York City, but that’s the best I can do.”

“If it’s not too much trouble, I would really appreciate it,” Trixie told the florist.

“No problem,” Alice assured her. “I’ll send a notice out to all of the flower shops in New York and its suburbs. Via our computerized system, it’s no problem at all. Hopefully, the next florist will be alerted to the problem and detain him.”

Trixie thanked the girl profusely and hung up. She dreaded the next call. Although Captain Molinson had finally come to have a grudging respect for her, Trixie Belden was still not on his list of people he enjoyed talking to more than once a day—and she had already used up her quota that day.

She was transferred several times until someone was able to find him.

“Captain Molinson? It’s Trixie,” she started.

“Already? Did something else happen after we spoke about the fingerprints this morning?” Molinson asked in his gruff voice.

“Something happened, but it has nothing to do with the intruder at Jim’s, well, I don’t know it has anything to do with that intruder...” At twenty-two, Trixie still got flustered talking to the abrupt policeman.

“Spit it out!” He barked.

Trixie took a deep breath and explained to him about the roses, recounting each poem, the information she had received from Alice, and concluding with her theory that the break-ins at Ten Acres might be somehow related.

When she was finished, she could hear the police chief’s heavy sigh. “Trixie, you haven’t even been back in town three full weeks and already I’ve got more grey hair! I’ll talk to a buddy of mine in the NYPD, maybe he can get the florists to remember more information, or view any shop surveillance tapes, if there are any. I’ll do the best I can in tracking this guy down, but until you are actually threatened, I can’t provide you with police protection.”

Trixie held back a laugh. Police protection! “Thanks, Captain. I wasn’t really asking for a bodyguard, just wanted to let you know that something’s not right here.”

“Well, thanks for letting me in at the beginning this time. It’s much nicer to get a call explaining the situation then it is to get a call requesting back up because you’re already in too deep!”

Trixie sighed. Some things would never change—she still had the picture that Nick Roberts had drawn of the then Sergeant Molinson lecturing her after the bike-athon the Bob-Whites had held to raise money for the art department. To this day, she still felt like that humble fourteen year old when she had to listen to Molinson reprimand her. “Just doing my civic duty, Captain.”

Molinson snorted. “I’ll look into this, keep me informed, okay?”

Trixie promised she would and hung up the phone. She sat and thought for a minute. Honey she definitely needed to talk to Honey about this. And Jim, if the intruder and mysterious

flower sender were indeed connected. And Matt. She had made a deal with herself about checking Matt out if she received a third set of flowers. She was still lost in thought when the phone rang.

“Belden residence.”

“Trixie? Hey, it’s me.” Trixie smiled when she recognized Scott’s baritone voice.

“Hi Scott. How are you?”

“Thinking of you and how it’s been way too long since I’ve seen you! Do you want to catch a bite to eat tonight?” Scott asked.

“I would love to! What did you have in mind?” Trixie jumped at the chance to have a relaxing dinner with Scott.

“Well, I thought we could return to the scene of the crime—C.B. & Pott’s. Sound good to you?”

“That would be great,” Trixie assured him.

“Okay, I’m on my way out the door now, but I’ll pick you up at Crabapple Farm at seven, okay?”

“I’ll see you at seven, Scott.”

When she hung up with Scott, Trixie didn’t even bother to put the phone in the cradle, she simply pressed the disconnecter and called Honey and then Jim. Both agreed to meet her at the clubhouse right away.

She went downstairs, reported her conversations to the florist and the police to her mother and then explained that she was enlisting Jim and Honey’s help and would be at the clubhouse.

Jim and Honey were both waiting by the time she entered the old gatehouse. Her tense face immediately alerted Honey and Jim to the fact that things were more serious than she had let on over the phone.

“What’s wrong?” Brother and sister asked simultaneously.

Trixie sat down. “I got more flowers today. Ten white, two red. The note is not threatening, but it certainly is insulting.” She pulled the three cards she had received out of her pocket and placed them on the table for Honey and Jim to read.

Honey looked up at Trixie. “Any ideas?”

“No,” Trixie moaned. “Moms thinks it might be someone I put in jail stalking me for revenge. I suppose it could happen.”

Jim’s face looked stark. “I know this isn’t your style, but can you take a vacation, get away from here?”

“No, Jim, I’m not going to run away,” Trixie said with determination.

“But if your life is in danger...” Jim raised his voice, and Trixie could tell he was about to start a tirade about her safety—one she didn’t want to hear after already dealing with Molinson that morning.

“Jim, please,” she pleaded. “No one knows my life is in danger. The notes aren’t threatening and it could be just some sick joke.”

“But if it’s not, Trixie, you really could be in danger,” Honey stated in what she hoped was a calm and gentle voice. She could tell that Trixie was already very frazzled.

Trixie gave a deep sigh. “I know. The only thing I can think of...” She broke off, not willing to talk about Matt in front of Jim.

“What, Trix?” Honey asked.

“Well, maybe Matt?” Trixie admitted out loud what she had been avoiding thinking since the receipt of the second flowers.

Honey was surprised, she had met Matt quite a few times and he seemed like a nice guy. He had obviously cared for Trixie. “You really think it could be Matt?”

“I don’t know,” Trixie sounded very confused and torn. “I’d hate to think that a guy I trusted, that I was with for a year, could be capable of something like this, but I just don’t know anymore.”

“Why do you think it’s Matt?” Jim questioned.

“Well, a criminal I put away sending me roses sounds too fantastic to me, no one I know is responsible for this, and an ex-boyfriend seems to be as plausible an explanation as any,” Trixie stated. “Since I only have two ex-boyfriends, and I think we’ve ruled out you as a sender, Jim, that leaves Matt.”

“Did he ever do or say anything that indicated he might be capable of something like this?” Jim tried to keep his voice neutral, but he was seething inside at the thought that this guy might have even hinted that he could harm Trixie.

Trixie hesitated.

“What did he do, Trix?” Jim insisted.

“He didn’t do anything. The last time I saw him, which was last August, he just said something rather...cryptic,” Trixie disclosed.

“Like what?” Honey was curious.

So Trixie related the conversation, and discussed her original feeling that Matt was just telling her that he would eventually be proven right. Trixie felt uncomfortable relating this information to Jim, since it concerned her feelings for him, but she needed his help, so there was no holding back now. Jim’s face did not give Trixie a clue as to how he felt about the revelation about her feelings toward him.

“Are you going to confront him?” Jim inquired.

“Well, after the last flowers arrived, I vowed that if I got another delivery, I would take them and march up to his parents’ Manhattan penthouse and demand an explanation,” Trixie admitted rather shyly, “but I’m not feeling really up to doing that now.”

“Can’t you just call him?” Honey wanted to know.

“I could, but I thought it would better to see his expression and body language when he saw the flowers,” Trixie explained.

“Makes sense, but what if he is still in D.C.? You could call down there and rule him out immediately. Here’s my cell phone. Call him now,” Honey said as she dug her phone out of her purse.

“Honey,” Trixie started to protest.

“No ifs, ands, or buts about this, Trix. Call him,” Honey’s voice was gentle but firm.

“Since when did you become a drill sergeant,” Trixie grumbled, but she took the phone and dialed.

Jim noted that she still had his phone number memorized after all of this time. *Knock it off, Frayne, you know Trix was always good with numbers, until it came time to put them into equations that is.*

Trixie reached Matt’s roommate, Josh. “Hi, Josh, it’s Trixie...yeah, it has been a while...no, I moved back to New York after graduation...you are? Well, that’s pretty cool. Listen, is Matt still in D.C.?...He moved back to New York, too?” Trixie looked at Honey and

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Jim significantly. "Did he move back in with his parents?...I see...Thanks, Josh, good luck with your art...You, too. Bye."

Trixie hung up the phone and handed it back to Honey. "He took a job with a firm on Wall Street. He found an apartment, but he can't move in until the end of August, so he's staying with his parents right now."

"Motive and opportunity," Jim stated.

"We never determined motive, Jim," Trixie argued.

Jim looked sheepish; he had already gone so far as to proclaim himself judge and jury, trying and convicting Matt of the "crime" already. But even he knew he was letting his personal feelings toward Matt get in the way. It just drove him nuts to think about anybody with Trixie *that way*. The thought of someone else kissing those luscious lips, running their hands over the soft skin and warm curves of her body...*Stop it!* Jim yelled at himself. He rued the fact that Trixie had never allowed him to truly make her his; she had wanted to wait until she was older, more emotionally ready, and of course he had accepted her decision without question. But had she let Matt? The thought haunted him. *You didn't wait for her, why should she have waited for you?*

Jim tore his thoughts away from where they were heading and forced himself to pay attention to what Trixie and Honey were saying.

"So, we'll go tomorrow to his parents," Honey decided.

Jim broke in. "Why not now or later this afternoon? The sooner the better."

Both girls looked at him as though he were from outer space. *Uh-oh, what did I miss?* He thought.

"Jim, didn't you just hear Trixie say she has plans for later?" Honey asked in a slightly bewildered tone.

"Uh, no, I guess my mind wandered." Jim turned to Trixie. "What plans?"

Honey scolded. "Jim! Maybe Trixie wants some privacy. She doesn't need to file a flight plan with you."

Jim was momentarily confused by Honey's sarcasm. It was a simple, innocent question, why was she acting like he had given Trixie the third degree, complete with a bright light shining in her eyes? Suddenly it dawned on him. Trixie must have a date and that's why Honey was being so defensive. He looked at Trixie, watching her cheeks flush as she looked away from him. Yes, that was it. Trixie had a date. Wonderful.

"Sorry, Trix, I wasn't trying to pry," he said in a subdued voice.

"You weren't, Jim, it was an innocent question," Trixie assured him.

The three sat in an awkward silence until Honey broke it. "But, in case it's not Matt, we need to think up some alternate plans."

Trixie and Jim agreed. "I didn't want to do this," Trixie confessed. "But we need to start making a list of criminals that the Bob-Whites have locked up and check their status. Some of them could be getting out on parole right about now."

Honey pulled a pad of paper and a pen out of her bag. "Let's get started," she said practically.

The three sat and brainstormed, in order, who they had set away.

"Okay, let's start with when we met because that's when things started happening," Trixie said.

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“Well, the first criminal we were involved with was my stepfather,” Jim stated. “You didn’t put him away then, but you did later when he tried to hurt my cousin Julianna and steal her rightful inheritance.”

Honey wrote Jones at the top of her list in her neat handwriting. Trixie looked down at the piece of paper. “It’s a good thing you’re writing it, Honey, or we’d never be able to read it!”

Honey smiled. “The next case were those two trailer thieves...what were their names?”

“Jeff and Al,” Trixie supplied. “I don’t remember their last names, we’ll have to look those up in our newspaper clippings in our scrapbooks.”

“And then that phony chauffeur, Dapper Dick. Boy, Trix, he really had it in for you, he could be a real possibility,” Jim stated. He knew the extent of Dick’s savageness having been knocked out and tied up by Dick while out on a “driving lesson.”

“Di’s phony uncle was Tilney Britten,” Honey said, writing. And so it went until the three had made a long list of thieves of all kinds (“Of sheep, jewels, antiques, you name it!” Honey proclaimed), imposters, kidnappers, arsonists, smugglers, gunrunners, counterfeiters, embezzlers, horse race-fixers, and even several criminals who had performed as ghosts to throw the Bob-Whites off their trail.

Honey looked at the list. “Oh, whoa, this is a big list, Trix. How are we ever going to track all of these people down!”

“We’ll give the list to Molinson,” Trixie said briskly. “He can probably trace everyone in the computer rather quickly.”

“Well, we might as well drive to town and give him this list so that he can get started,” Jim stated. “I was going to take the younger boys to the lake for a swimming lesson this afternoon. Let me see if I can get Regan to fill in for me. He loves kids, I don’t think he’ll mind.”

“Jim, don’t disrupt your schedule for me,” Trixie begged. “Those boys deserve to spend some time with you, not some fill-in, even if it is Regan.”

“Nonsense, Trix, I manage to spend lots of time with all of the boys. I really want to do this,” he looked at his watch. “It’s almost lunchtime. Let me clear this with Regan and then we can have lunch at Wimpy’s and go talk to Molinson.”

Honey laughed. “We’re not teenagers any more and we’re still asking Regan for help in getting out of a bind.”

“Some things never change!” Jim said as he was out the clubhouse door. “I’ll meet you in 15 at the Manor House. Can we take your Saturn, Honey?”

“Sure, meet you in the car!” Honey called to Jim’s retreating back. He waved to let her know he had heard.

Trixie and Honey locked up the clubhouse and followed the path to the Manor House. “That was uncomfortable,” Trixie stated.

“Talking to Jim about Matt?” Honey asked sympathetically.

“Yep. Admitting that the reason that Matt and I broke up was because he was convinced that I still had feelings for Jim.”

“Well, you already know that Megan broke up with Jim for the same reason. She knew she fell in the shadow of a certain blonde firecracker with a penchant for mysteries and solving everybody’s problems!” Honey said with a smile.

“Maybe so, but he never told me that, you did. It was hard to have to say those words myself.”

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"I know it was, but you did and you survived," Honey reassured her friend. "And now maybe you can clear the way back to you and Jim. You guys were great together and I think you can be again."

"Maybe," Trixie said non-committally. "I kind of want to see where things with Scott go, though. He's so handsome and intelligent. And a great kisser!" Trixie said with a wicked grin.

"I could tell," Honey grinned back. "Do what you feel is best. I think Scott is a really great guy, but so is Jim, despite his tendency to be over-protective. That's not always a bad thing you know!"

Trixie sighed. "I know, but sometimes I feel like I would have to give up too much of myself to be with Jim. He wants a wife and a family. I'm not sure he could handle me being a PI. The idea seems to excite Scott, though."

"Well, take it a day at a time, that's all you can do, Trixie," Honey repeated what Trixie had already decided. *Great minds think alike*, Trixie thought as she looked affectionately at her bestfriend.

Half an hour later, Trixie was digging her teeth into a Wimpy burger. "Gosh, I missed these," she admitted between bites.

"They are good burgers," Jim agreed.

The three talked and laughed throughout lunch, but there was a definite undercurrent of tension. Someone was harassing Trixie, someone was trespassing at Jim's school, and things were still not completely fixed between Trixie and Jim, but despite these things, the three friends were able to enjoy their lunch at Wimpy's. Soon, it was time to head to police headquarters and make their request of Captain Molinson.

When Captain Molinson saw the trio enter his office, he didn't appear surprised. "I wondered when you would be down here," he stated. "What do you need now?"

Trixie looked at Honey for support, took a deep breath, and explained about the list they had come up with, and the favor they were asking of the Captain and the police department.

"Great," Molinson said. "I had already started doing some digging myself into the whereabouts of the criminals that you helped capture in the Sleepyside area, but I didn't know how to begin to look into those you had captured in other states or other countries."

"Well, here it is, Captain," Honey said in her sweetest voice as she handed the paper over to Molinson. His bushy eyebrows shot up as he looked at it.

"I hadn't realized the list was this impressive," he said as he turned the paper over to read the second half on the other side.

"We put the places they were captured at next to the ones that were not in Sleepyside," Trixie explained.

"Good work. This shouldn't take long to run through the computer. I'll put one of the rookies on it and make sure I have it to you within the next twenty-four hours. Do you think any of these are more likely to be harassing you than others?" Molinson wanted to know.

"That's what the stars are next to some of the names. We narrowed it down to my stepfather, Dapper Dick, the Thompsons, Sax Jenner, Oliver Tolliver, Diego Martinez alias Pierre Lontard, and the trio of Blinky, Pedro, and Big Tony. They were the hardest criminals, the ones who lost the most, and really seemed to have it in for Trixie, as well as nasty mean streaks," Jim explained.

Molinson nodded. "Well, check with me tomorrow around this time, if I don't get a hold of you first."

Trixie promised that she would check back the following day, and the three left his office. "That went smoother than I expected. I thought for sure I would get reamed for handing him extra work."

"He's not all that hard-hearted, Trix, and he really does care about your safety. Of course he's willing to do it," Honey was always quick to defend other people.

Jim grinned. "Plus, you heard him say he was going to 'give it to some rookie.' It really doesn't add to his personal burden at all."

"I guess not," Trixie agreed. "I'm just glad that things went smoothly!"

All three were silent during the car ride back to their respective residences. When Honey dropped Trixie off at Crabapple Farm, she promised to be ready when Trixie picked her up the next morning to take the train to New York.

That night as she was getting ready for her date with Scott, Trixie thought to herself, *Tomorrow I will have more leads and I will have ruled out several possibilities. Tomorrow I will be closer than ever to solving this thing. And maybe that will give us a hint as to who is trespassing at Jim's. But that's tomorrow. Tonight you have a date with a gorgeous guy, Trixie, so relax and have fun for a change!*

Trixie did relax and have fun, not allowing herself to think about the cases she was working on, even when Scott asked her if she was busy solving any mysteries currently.

She shook her head. "No, right now I am having a wonderful date with a cute guy." *Well, right now that is what I am doing*, Trixie rationalized her fib.

Scott looked around the restaurant, looking confused. "You are? Where is he?"

Trixie dissolved into laughter. "I'm looking at him!"

The two continued to joke and laugh through dinner, and Trixie could tell she was really falling for this guy. At his request, she snuggled up next to him on the drive back to Sleepyside. Trixie was content.

And when he dropped her off at her house, the kiss he bestowed upon her was just as sweet as their first, but this time with even more passion and urgency. Scott and Trixie sat in the lane at Crabapple Farm for quite awhile before Trixie broke away.

"I had a wonderful time tonight, Scott," she smiled.

"Me too. How about we do it again Friday night?" Scott asked.

Trixie nodded happily.

"Okay, seven o'clock, Friday night," Scott stated. "See you then, dearest."

With one last sweet kiss good-bye, Trixie practically floated into the house and up the stairs.

Ahhh, romance!

Chapter Eight: Determination

Honey was waiting at the bottom of her driveway the next morning. Trixie pulled her Jeep into the driveway and leaned over to unlock the door for her friend. Honey climbed in and smiled.

"Honey! Why didn't you wait for me up at the house?" Trixie wondered.

Honey shrugged. "Oh, I just felt like a walk this morning. It's no big deal," she assured Trixie.

"Okay, if you say so," Trixie sounded doubtful, but decided to take her friend's word for it as she backed out of the driveway and headed toward Sleepyside.

Honey looked at Trixie expectantly.

“What?” Trixie finally exploded.

“I want to hear about your date, of course!” Honey demanded.

“What date?” Trixie tried to act innocent.

Honey snorted. “You know perfectly well the date I refer to. How is the handsome Scott?”

Trixie smiled in spite of herself. “We had a blast! We went back to C.B. & Pott’s, as I told you we were going to, and it was a lot of fun. We just talk about everything and nothing. It’s just very...relaxing, hanging out with Scott. With Matt it was always so intense, in a good way of course, and with Jim...well, you know Jim. But I feel like I can say anything to Scott. That he’ll understand and not lecture me. It’s fun.”

Honey was glad to hear that Trixie sounded happy. “Well, I must admit that I wish you and Jim would patch things up, but I am really happy about you and Scott. I think he’s good for you.”

“Me, too,” Trixie decided. “I don’t feel like I have to hide my innermost dreams and desires with him, like I did with Jim, and I don’t think about Jim when I’m with him, like I did with Matt.”

“Speaking of Matt, are you sure you’re ready to face him?”

Trixie thought for a moment. “I think so. Truthfully, I missed him a lot right after I got back from Quantico, but once I got busy with classes my senior year, I never really gave him much thought.”

Honey glanced in the backseat at the pile of roses unceremoniously flung all over. “And you’re really going to march up to his parents’ penthouse carrying those?”

Trixie shrugged. “Why not?”

Honey smiled. “I could never do it.”

“Sure you could,” Trixie reassured her friend as she pulled the Jeep into the day parking lot at the Sleepyside Train Station. The two girls headed toward the ticket window to purchase seats on the train that would take them into New York City. This was the same commuter train that Honey and Di’s dads had been using to take them to their New York offices for years, but Trixie and Honey rarely had occasion to ride it themselves. They only had to wait for about five minutes before their train pulled into the station.

“Perfect timing,” Honey commented.

The two were silent on the hour long trip to New York. Honey divided her time thinking about wedding details and about Trixie’s problems, while Trixie’s mind was constantly turning over criminals in her past, thinking whom it might be that was sending her the roses.

“You know, Honey, I think the last time you and I rode this train together was when we were tailing Peter Ashbury,” Trixie mused as they were almost to Grand Central Station, and their destination.

Honey thought for a moment. “You know, Trix, I think you might be right!”

“That was some case, huh?” Trixie asked rhetorically.

“Weren’t they all?” was Honey’s reply.

The train pulled into the station and within twenty minutes the two girls were standing out front of a modern high-rise that was home to Matthew Lockhart, former boyfriend of Trixie Belden.

Shadows of the Past

Honey looked at her friend. Trixie was never one to shrink from anything, but Honey noted how her bestfriend's face seemed a little pale as she stared at the building. "It's now or never," she heard Trixie mutter.

The doorman looked at the two girls staring at the building, one with blond curls holding a bouquet of roses as if it were a snake and her honey-haired friend looking worried, and immediately wondered if something was amiss. There was something very familiar about the blonde girl, but he couldn't place just where he had seen her before.

"May I help you?" He asked politely as the pair approached the door. "Jack, you probably don't remember me, I was here with Matt Lockhart several times..." Trixie began, by way of explanation.

Suddenly, recognition dawned on Jack. Yes, she was a spunky one, this particular girlfriend of the Lockhart boy!

"Yes, I do remember you by sight," Jack informed her. "I'm sorry I've forgotten your name Miss..."

"Belden. Trixie Belden," Trixie said, suddenly feeling like James Bond introducing himself.

"Yes, Miss Belden, have you come to see Matt?" Jack wanted to know.

Trixie nodded in affirmation and Jack looked confused.

"Is he expecting you?"

Trixie shook her head. "No, this was purely a surprise visit while I happened to be in the city."

Jack looked at the roses curiously, but continued. "I'm sorry, Miss Trixie, but Matt left with his parents for Europe over two weeks ago."

Trixie's face fell, not with disappointment that she couldn't see Matt as the doorman assumed, but with the knowledge that he could not have possibly sent any of the bouquets.

Jack felt sorry for the disappointed girl, thinking she was here to reconcile a broken heart of some sort. "He'll be back in about three weeks, you can try then."

Trixie smiled gamely. "Okay, thanks. I appreciate the information."

Jack smiled at the two attractive girls as they disappeared into the crowds strolling along the sidewalk. *Such a pretty girl*, Jack thought. *I hope she and the young Lockhart boy can work things out.*

After they were out of earshot, Trixie turned to Honey. "Well, that lets Matt off the hook. It's got to be some criminal we put away years ago." The thought did not appeal to either girl.

"Let's call Jim and have us meet him at the Sleepyside Police Department and look into what the Captain has found out," Honey suggested as she pulled out her cell phone. Jim agreed to meet them that afternoon and, once again, the girls found themselves on a train, lost in their own thoughts.

This time neither girl could push aside thoughts about the criminals they had come into contact with in the past. With Matt in Europe, it was no longer possible to pretend that a criminal coming back for revenge was a far-fetched idea. The two sat and discussed various possibilities. Honey certainly hoped it was not Pierre Lontard. The ordeal of being tied up on that Mississippi riverboat had taken her years to get over. Even now, during times of stress she occasionally dreamed of the sinister gun-runner.

By the time the train pulled into the station, the two girls had not come up with a satisfyingly narrow list of possibilities: Trixie was just too good at what she did and there were

too many criminals that she was responsible for putting behind bars to narrow it down. They briskly walked from the train station to the police station. Jim was waiting in front of the Police Department as Trixie and Honey walked up.

"Been waiting long?" Honey asked.

"Not at all," Jim replied. The three made their way to Molinson's office, all feeling uneasy at what they might find. Molinson saw them and waved them in.

"Well, there are a couple of criminals on the loose," were the first words out of the gruff policeman's mouth. "But none of them are likely candidates."

The three waited expectantly for Molinson to continue. "As far as the ones you had starred, you were right, they had the most to lose and were the most treacherous, but as a result of their crimes, they are the ones still locked up tight. Not one of them is out of jail, or even close to parole." Molinson sighed, not wanting to be the bearer of bad news, but knowing it was his responsibility. Being a cop wasn't always pleasant. "There is one exception. Your stepfather, Jim..."

Jim stiffened. "Jonesy is on the loose?"

"No, not exactly. He's no longer in jail because, well, because he passed away last year, Jim," Molinson said softly. He knew there was no love lost between Jim and Jones, but he also knew that death was never easy to hear about.

Honey and Trixie both looked at Jim, their faces filled with concern, but Jim didn't seem to notice. He didn't look distraught, nor did either girl expect him to be over hearing the news, but they knew that this must be upsetting, despite the fact stepfather and stepson had always been at odds.

"How?" Jim said, in a tight voice neither Honey nor Trixie recognized.

"A heart attack," Molinson said, uncharacteristic concern softening his voice.

Jim nodded, digesting the news. Jonesy was gone. Jim had carried Jonesy with him for so long, ever since he was a young boy, that even though he hadn't spoken to him in almost a decade, he felt the loss. Not in a way that made him sad or sorrowful, but after carrying around the weight of his memories of Jones for so long, of course he would feel...*something*.

He had never told the Bob-Whites the full extent of what had happened to him at Jones' hands. When he had first laid eyes on Trixie and Honey, well, Trixie was a fresh-faced, innocent country girl who didn't need to know about the cruelties of the world and Honey was a timid, protected rich girl, afraid of her own shadow—how could he shatter these two girls' worlds by telling them the horrors Jones had put him through? And after time passed, and he realized the girls were tough enough to handle the truth, he no longer wanted to discuss it. It was a part of his past and he need to leave it there. The physical scars had healed and he was more than ready to let the psychological ones heal as well. And now, upon hearing the news of Jonesy's death, he felt as though he could finally lay his past to rest.

Realizing the three were staring at him in concern, Jim became matter-of-fact: there was still Trixie's well-being to consider.

"So, who is out there?" Jim said in a brisk voice. Honey and Trixie knew the subject was closed for right then, and turned to the Captain to hear his answer.

"Burt Mitchell and Jack Caridiff were released on parole about a month ago in Vermont, but they have been in constant contact with their parole officer. Jack is, ironically, working at a ski lodge, but Burt hasn't found a job yet. He might be a risk," Molinson concluded, referring to the two criminals who had played at being the "Ghost of Mead's Mountain."

“Slim Sanderson has been living in a halfway house in Missouri for about the last two years. He hasn’t left the state according to the official who runs the halfway house,” Molinson informed them. Honey briefly remembered how cruel Slim had been when he was their guide at Bob-White Cave, near Trixie’s Uncle Andrew’s cabin in the Missouri Ozarks. She was glad to hear that he had not left Missouri.

“Roger Higgins got out about six months ago. He’s moved in with his dad in Sleepyside. I hear Jeff Higgins is none too happy about supporting his felon son, but he doesn’t want him falling onto the wrong side of the law again, so he’s letting him stay. He’s trying to teach him the auction business, again, but he’s still a little nervous that something might happen, the way it did with the Dodge’s auction,” Molinson continued with his findings. Trixie thought back briefly to the case of a young child who thought he and his baby brother were castaways. Bobby was still friends with Davy Dodge, and Trixie had been pleased to see that he had grown into a well-adjusted teenager.

“According to the Idaho authorities, the Swishers were released about three years ago and have opened a Sasquatch museum that is actually doing decent business. They still report to their parole officers, but are considered low risk for returning to criminal activity,” Captain Molinson stated. “And that’s it, gang. Everyone else is still in custody.”

“Everyone?” Honey repeated.

“Afraid so. The only two plausible people are really Jeff Higgins and Burt Mitchell. He could easily drive down to New York City and back to Vermont without causing any suspicion with his parole officer, and of course Jeff is right here in Sleepyside.”

While Trixie thought about these revelations, Jim had a thought. “What if it’s someone who is about to be released, having a partner helping him from the outside. It would give that person the perfect alibi, but if they knew they were getting out soon, they could set it up so they were in on the finale.”

Molinson nodded. “I thought of that. I have a list of criminals either due to be released or up for parole in the next six months. Due to be released include Sam Adler, you remember him as Sammy, the fella who stole Hoppy, Nicholas Morgan, who tried to swindle Miss Trask’s brother out of their family inn, and Laura Ramsey.”

Trixie involuntarily looked at Jim upon hearing Laura Ramsey’s name. She still remembered the jealousy she felt when she thought Jim preferred the supposed daughter of a “missing millionaire” over her.

“Who is due for parole?” Honey wanted to know.

“Tilney Britten, Margo Birch, and Lewis Gregory,” Molinson stated simply.

“Lewis Gregory? Already?” Trixie was incredulous. He was an arsonist, an insurance fraud, and when he had tried to set fire to Lisgard House after pretending to be the Whispering Witch, it had been learned that he had actually pulled the same stunt before. She truly believed he would be locked away for a long, long time.

“He’s due for parole, Trixie, it doesn’t mean he’s going to get it,” the Captain assured her.

“Well, then, if these are my choices, my money is on Burt Mitchell or Tilney Britten. Jeff Higgins was no major league criminal—he was a dumb guy who got in over his head in a poker game with the wrong people—he isn’t capable of pulling this off and the rest seem to be pretty low risk,” Trixie reasoned.

Molinson looked at her. “I actually happen to agree with you, but before you dismiss anyone, remember that several years in prison can harden anybody—and make them vengeful.”

Shadows of the Past

At this revelation, Honey looked woebegone, Jim looked like he wanted to punch someone, and Trixie looked troubled but defiant. The three thanked Molinson for the information, listened to another lecture on keeping him informed, and slowly left the police station.

Trixie turned to Jim immediately after exiting the building. "Are you okay, Jim?"

Honey voiced her concerns also. "Yes, Jim, how do you feel?"

Jim headed for a nearby park bench and sat down, the two girls following him. For a moment or two he stared at the small park across the street and didn't say a word, collecting his thoughts.

"I'm definitely okay," he finally stated. "But it just feels...weird."

Honey nodded and patted her brother arm. Neither girl wanted to break the silence, waiting for Jim to speak again.

"Obviously, I was never close to that man, and now that he's gone I feel..." Jim thought for a moment. "Nothing. I feel nothing. And I feel guilty for feeling nothing. He was, after all, a human being. Even if I didn't like him, I should feel something."

Trixie disagreed. "That's not true, Jim. He was a horrible man who not only looked out for only himself, but who didn't mind hurting people to get what he wanted. And he treated you like some animal in a cage that he despised. Lesser people might even feel happiness at hearing about his death, but you're too honorable to feel that. You had no closeness with this man, no bond like you did with your father, certainly no good feelings or memories, so in the absence of feeling grief or sorrow at his death you simply feel nothing. You have nothing to feel guilty for. Heck, even if you felt happiness over hearing about his death, I don't think you should feel guilty."

Honey nodded. "I agree with Trixie, Jim. You're numb right now. Jonesy may not have meant a lot to you, but he did mean a lot to your life, if you know what I mean. He was an important force in it, he shaped a lot of what you did and how you acted. Ultimately, he lead you to Trixie and me. But I have always suspected that you never told me or Mother and Daddy or any of the Bob-Whites all of the horrors you lived through at Jonesy's hands, and I think if I knew the depth of what he had actually done to you, even I would feel gladness about hearing about his death. Don't beat yourself up. This is big news and you're bound to feel overwhelmed. Emotions, or the lack of them, are not right or wrong—they just *are*. Feel what you need to feel to deal with this, but don't *ever* feel guilty over your emotions."

Jim smiled at his sister and his, well, his Trixie, and knew they were right. He had survived, he had gotten out of the situation, and he had found Sleepyside and the Bob-Whites as a result. Jones' death was big news, but it needn't affect him so greatly. He hadn't seen Jones in almost a decade and the nightmares had long since subsided. "You two are right, as usual. Did you have lunch in New York? Should we hit Wimpy's again?"

Trixie and Honey agreed, glad to see that Jim was going to be okay.

Late the next afternoon, Thursday, Trixie began to wonder if she was going to be okay. She sat at the kitchen table staring at the message she had just written down. Alice had just called to say that another order of flowers for Trixie had come across the computer. Unfortunately, she had been at lunch when it came through so it was already well over an hour old when she found it. Instead of completing the order, she had immediately called Trixie to give her the information: one dozen roses, nine white, three red, ordered from a large florist in New Jersey this time, no request to delay delivery a day, and another poem.

*Roses are red
Innocents are white
Is our poor Trixie
Working herself into a fright?*

Trixie wrote down the dates the flowers had been sent. She studied the list and realized that a week had passed between the arrival of the first and second bouquet, four days between the second and third and two days between the third and fourth. "At this rate I'll be getting the next ones tomorrow," Trixie muttered as she pondered what the accelerated delivery dates could mean.

Suddenly, Trixie reached for the phone and dialed a familiar number.

"Alex? It's Trixie," she stated when she heard Alex's voice on the other end of the line.

"Trixie! It's so great to hear from you. How are you?" the FBI agent wanted to know.

"I've been better," Trixie stated as she went on to explain to him the situation with the flowers and the intruder at Jim's school.

"This sounds serious, Trix," Alex declared after she had finished. "I think you should come back down to DC for a while, lay low."

Trixie bristled. "I have never been one to back down from a mystery and I am certainly not going to start now!"

Alex admired her spunk, even if it did worry him. "I know, Trixie, but maybe you could do some detective work from down here."

"You have ulterior motives, Alex. I know that your reasons for wanting me down here are not all related to my safety," Trixie gently accused.

Alex sighed. Trixie's safety always came first for him, but maybe there was some truth to his words. "Trix, you know I care about your safety above all. Of course I want you to join the FBI, but you're acting like I'm trying to get you to join some cult!"

Trixie giggled. "Maybe I have been acting that way. It's not because I feel that way, but I am really torn by this decision. I've been thinking about it a lot, and when someone starts to push me, I get defensive. I'm sorry, Alex."

"No apologies, Trixie, that's human nature. But you have to understand how much I want you to come work for the FBI and it's hard for me not to push," Alex explained.

"Okay, we've got that out of the way. Is there anyway you can help me with my current situation?"

Trixie and Alex discussed several possibilities and Trixie hung up, satisfied with the knowledge that Alex was going to use his FBI databases to access records of prison activity among some of the criminals she had put away. He would try to determine visitors, suspicious behavior, and any other details that might prove helpful to this case.

With that accomplished, Trixie called Honey and told her about the latest development with the flowers. Honey took the news better than Trixie expected and urged her to meet her in the clubhouse in an hour. Trixie agreed.

One hour later, Trixie could not believe her eyes. How had Honey managed this? Trixie's confused blue eyes stared into the eyes of six concerned Bob-Whites. Honey had managed to get all of them together on short notice. Trixie knew that Jim, Mart, and Di were close, but Brian and Dan?

Shadows of the Past

Honey spoke first, her voice showing the nervousness she felt. “Trix, we’re here to have a bonified BWG meeting about this case, just like we used to in high school. Please understand.”

Trixie looked at the pleading in Honey’s hazel eyes and despite her initial astonishment and, yes, she had to admit, annoyance, at seeing so many pairs of concerned eyes, she knew that Honey had done this out of love and worry for her. “I’m okay. I...I guess I’m just a little surprised is all,” she managed to stammer.

“Admit it, Trix,” Dan drawled. “You’re not surprised, you are downright stupefied.”

Everyone laughed, breaking the tension. And Trixie admitted that Dan was right. Surprise at seeing a full assemblance of the Bob-Whites of the Glen on a Thursday afternoon could definitely land in the category of “stupefaction.”

Di spoke next. “Trixie, Honey has explained the details of your case, and Jim has explained the details of his. I know that I am not a full partner of the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency, but I am still worried about you. I would have loved to have been included up to this point.”

“My dearest Beatrix,” Mart began pompously, “thou must cognize that your comrades and kinsmen fully exist in apprehension of your vulnerability and that we would desire forewarning when—”

“What Mart means to say,” Brian interrupted, “is that we worry about you and we just want to know what’s going on with you. If you’re in danger, Trix, we want to know.”

Trixie started to protest, but Jim gently interrupted. “Trix, we care about you and we want to help you. We don’t want you getting in over your head.”

Honey looked at her friend and realized that they had pushed her too far. Getting the Bob-Whites together had seemed like such a good idea, but she had envisioned a brainstorming session on how to track this criminal down, not the well-meaning but misplaced lectures that Trixie had heard too often in her life. She started to say something to placate Trixie and ease the situation, but it was too late.

“Do you know why I left? Do you want to know why Washington DC seemed like such a great idea?” Trixie yelled. “Because of this!!!” She turned to Honey. “I know you didn’t plan on this. I know that you understand me better than anybody on this earth and you would never intentionally subject me to this. I’m sure your intentions were to get all of us together and hammer out a plan to catch the bad guy, but all I am getting is the same lectures I did as a teenager.” She turned to the group and all of a sudden everyone, including her brothers and Jim, understood that she had grown up from the impulsive teenager with the tousled blond curls that she had once been. “Well, let me tell the rest of you something. I can take care of myself! I took self defense and karate in college, I trained with the FBI for crying out loud—THEY think I’m good enough, worthy enough, to join them. Why can’t any of you give me any credit whatsoever?” Trixie looked as if she was about to say more, but suddenly she turned and ran from the clubhouse.

In the uneasy silence that followed, Mart finally found his voice. “Wow. I was just scared for her. Someone is stalking my sister and I feel helpless, I never meant to imply...” His voice trailed off.

Jim was looking as if suddenly a light had dawned on him. “*That’s* why she left...of course!”

Di looked troubled and Dan’s expression had gone back to the closed look he had when he first came to Sleepyside.

Honey looked at the group and took charge. “Okay, that did not go as planned but we can salvage this. Brian, please go look for your sister. Someone is stalking her and I would rather she didn’t wander through these woods by herself.” Brian looked startled at his fiancé’s tone, but he realized she was right and hurried to find Trixie.

“Jim—you have been acting like a first class ninny since we were teenagers. Trixie is a free spirit, she always has been. If you couldn’t accept that, you should have let her go a long time ago. Mart, you have always mercilessly teased your sister. Okay, so you had a complex because you were ‘almost twins’ for the month of May—get over it. She needs your support more than ever now. Dan, you gave Trixie more support than anyone when she was chasing a mystery, but you still let your fears from your past get in the way—trust her instincts a little more, will ya?” Honey finally laid it on the line to each of the men in Trixie’s life and she was not sorry for it. They needed to get together and act as a team for Trixie’s sake, not give her a seminar in “how to be a model sister, girlfriend, and all around peachy keen junior miss.”

“I called you all here not to lecture Trixie on how she needs to live her life, but to use our brains to get to the bottom of this. We are all just going to accept that Trixie has a sixth sense. Yes, it gets her into hot water at times, yes, it attracts trouble, but there is nothing we can do about that. She will always attract mysteries because she’s *Trixie*. And we love her for that. So just accept the inevitable and let’s get to the heart of the matter. We all love that girl and someone is trying to scare her, possibly worse, so we owe it to her to help her discover who is doing this so she can get down to the business of living her life.” Honey looked at the assembled group, all of them avoiding meeting her eyes, knowing that their honey haired friend couldn’t be more right. “Who’s with me?”

Everyone raised their eyes and looked into Honey’s hazel ones. “I am,” four voices said in unison.

“Good,” Honey’s voice was brisk and business like.

Trixie and Brian entered the clubhouse just then.

“Trixie, we overreacted,” Jim stated.

“We just love you so much that we get worried about you,” Diana said.

“Trixie, I don’t know if I’ve ever met anybody more capable of taking care of themselves,” Dan confided.

“Trix, I’m sorry,” was what Mart, the lover of words big and small, simply said.

Honey grinned at her friend. “Quit throwing a tantrum worthy of Bobby and sit down. We need to get to the bottom of this!”

Trixie smiled in return, her mischievous blue eyes sparkling. “My, Honey, when did you get so bossy?”

“I learned it from you,” Honey said flippantly.

And the seven Bob-Whites, feeling stronger than ever, began to brainstorm and plot, confident that their determination and devotion would eventually outsmart the rogue that threatened their beloved leader.

Chapter 9 Wannabe Author’s Note: I must confess I have very little knowledge of the process of legal appeals and parole, so if my description of Dick’s parole situation is incorrect and/or impossible, please willfully suspend your disbelief! © Thanks to everyone who has been so encouraging about this story.

Chapter Nine: Revelations

Shadows of the Past

At 6:45 the next evening, Trixie sat at the kitchen table at Crabapple Farm waiting for Scott to pick her up for their Friday night date. Trixie still didn't know where they were going, despite the fact that she had asked Scott several times. He just got a happy, mysterious voice and told her to dress casual and trust him to show her a good time. Trixie knew that Scott's refusal to tell her where they were going would worry her friends, so she simply told them that she was going out with Scott and left it at that. Diana and Honey were happy for her, but she could tell that none of the male members of the Bob-Whites completely trusted Scott. She also knew that Honey had apparently had some words with them because not one of them had tried to talk her out of her decision to go ahead with her date, even after receiving not just one, but two bouquets of flowers that day.

Trixie's mind wandered to this latest development. The stalker was getting clever. He had visited two large shops in Connecticut the day before and had paid extra to have her flowers delivered from Tarrytown, instead of sending the order to the Sleepyside Florist, where Alice was on the alert. Fortunately, this made him easier to trace, because the florists at both shops remembered the sender due to the special request. Unfortunately, he had obviously anticipated this because one florist described the sender as a young boy of about 17 or 18, with blond hair and blue eyes. The second florist described an older woman, about 50 years old, with gray hair. The boy had ordered a dozen roses, 8 white, 4 red. The woman had ordered 7 white roses and 5 red roses. The Tarrytown florist had been surprised to see two similar orders come in from Connecticut for the same person all the way in Sleepyside, but had figured that his job was to arrange and deliver the flowers, not question why. After speaking with both Trixie and the Sleepyside police, he was now aware of the situation, but everyone involved knew that chances were slim that the Tarrytown flower shop would be receiving any more orders for Trixie. Whoever this person was, they were being very careful about covering their tracks.

The cleverness of the "stalker," as everyone was now openly referring to him as, the escalating delivery of the flowers, and the increasing ominousness of the notes was now becoming truly frightening.

Trixie's thoughts inevitably turned to the most recent messages.

*Trixie thought she was so smart
Putting me away
Well now my little girl
It's your turn to pay*

*Plotting and planning
Calculating and scheming
Patiently waiting
Until I leave you screaming*

Trixie shuddered involuntarily, thinking of the bouquets slowly turning red. She had an idea what that meant, but she refused to let that thought fully surface. Despite the fact that the messages were threatening, she did feel grateful for the information that this was someone that she and the Bob-Whites had helped put away. That made her more determined than ever to learn every detail she could about every criminal she had ever helped send to prison.

She then wondered how that florist guy in Tarrytown could actually calmly write out those messages and send them to her. Was he that stupid? He already admitted that it was a

suspicious order, how could threatening poems not make him contact the authorities? Trixie briefly wondered if he might actually be in on the stalking, but quickly dismissed that idea. When she had talked to him she had gotten the impression that he hadn't been that bright to begin with.

Trixie saw Scott's car pull up the lane and vowed not to worry about the stalker that evening. She wanted a normal life, with a normal date, and she was determined to go out tonight and forget about the chaos her life was in. Her heart fluttered as she walked down toward Scott's car and watched him walk toward her. *He really is handsome*, she thought, not for the first time. She saw the grin light up his face when he saw her and could not help but smile in return. If anybody had the ability to make her relax and have a good time, Scott was definitely the one.

He gave her a quick hug and looked into her bright blue eyes. "I'd love to kiss you right now, but I'm sure those windows are full of prying eyes," Scott said tenderly.

Trixie gave him a devilish grin. "Then let's give them something to look at!"

Scott obliged with a sweet kiss and Trixie could feel all of her worries slip away. "Now will you tell me where we're going," Trixie begged when the kiss was over.

Scott's melodious laugh filled the air. "Has anyone ever told you that curious might as well be your middle name?"

"A couple of times," Trixie grinned.

"I bet the suspense has been killing you," Scott teased.

"Yes, it has as a matter of fact!"

"Well, let's get going so that I can put you out of your misery," Scott placed his hand on her back and lead her to his car. Trixie turned and waved at the house, not seeing anyone, but knowing that Bobby, Moms, and Dad were probably watching her leave on her date.

Scott drove north on Albany Post Road, changing the subject every time Trixie asked where they were going. Just when Trixie was starting to get annoyed, and although she wouldn't admit it to herself, a little worried, Scott pulled his car into a local park.

He cut the engine and turned to Trixie. "We're here."

Trixie looked out the window. "A park?"

Scott unhooked his seatbelt and put his arms around Trixie. "Not just any park. I discovered this park the other day and knew immediately that I wanted to show it to you. It has a wonderful view of the river, so I packed a very romantic dinner that we could eat while enjoying the Hudson River."

Trixie was beside herself with contentedness. What a wonderfully romantic gesture! All she could do was lean forward to give Scott a long, lingering kiss. Kissing Scott was quickly becoming one of her favorite pastimes!

Finally, Scott pulled away and kissed the tip of Trixie's pert nose. "Let's go eat, Sunshine."

Trixie helped carry the picnic baskets and blanket to the top of a bluff overlooking the Hudson. "Scott, you're amazing! This is an incredible view and I never even knew this was here."

"Well, I was just driving around, trying to acquaint myself to the area, and quite accidentally came upon it. A pretty serendipitous discovery, wouldn't you say?"

Trixie nodded and began to set up the blanket on the soft grass that ran almost to the edge of the bluff. She was careful not to set it too close to the edge though, having learned how thin the shelf near a bluff could be when she was a teenager.

Shadows of the Past

Scott began unpacking the baskets and Trixie could not believe the feast that lay before her. There was Brie and crackers, grapes, a pasta salad with pesto and pine nuts that looked divine, a whole broasted chicken, croissants, and a bottle of chilled champagne with chocolate covered strawberries to accompany it. Scott had even thought to bring candles and was lighting them. “Wow,” was all she could say.

Scott looked pleased with himself. “I’m glad you like it. I had a hard time deciding what kind of menu would be perfect for a romantic, candlelit dinner overlooking the Hudson.”

“You did great!” Trixie said as she helped herself to a cracker covered with Brie.

Scott had even brought crystal champagne glasses, and poured each of them a glass. He gave Trixie hers and raised his glass. “To romance,” he said. Trixie raised her glass. “To romance,” she echoed, and the two sipped the bubbly liquid.

“Here, try a chocolate covered strawberry with your champagne. There is not a better tasting combination on earth,” Scott informed her.

Trixie tried it and agreed. The two ate their dinner slowly, savoring the wonderful taste and enjoying their conversation. Slowly, the sun sank in the sky as the two shared lovely talk and laughter, and more than a few kisses. Scott packed up all of the picnic gear and the two sat on the blanket next to each other, Scott’s arms wrapped around Trixie as they watched the golden orb finally sink below the horizon.

Trixie leaned her head on Scott’s shoulder. “I love watching the sunset with you, Scott.”

“I love doing just about anything with you, Trix,” Scott said. He pulled away slightly to face the blond woman he couldn’t stop thinking about lately. “Trix, this may be kind of rushing things. I know this is really only our third date, but we have so much in common and I love spending time with you, or even just talking to you on the phone. I...I’d really like it if, well, I was wondering if...”

Trixie smiled at Scott’s nervousness but also felt butterflies in her stomach, wondering what he was going to say next.

“Heck, I should just say it!” Scott laughed at himself. Trixie loved the richness of his laugh. “I was just hoping to make things exclusive with us. I know I don’t want to date anyone else, and I was hoping that you felt the same way.”

Trixie nodded and gave Scott a tender smile. “I do feel the same way. I love the time that we spend together too, and I would love to be your girlfriend.”

Scott smiled his thousand watt smile. “I’m so glad, Trix. I’ve never met anyone like you, and I don’t want to lose you.”

Scott drew her in for another kiss, and it was quite a while before either of them came up for air. Trixie felt like she was floating on cloud nine—not since Jim had anyone made her feel this way. The couple sat and talked until well past midnight. Trixie knew she needed to get home or her family would worry about her. Reluctantly, Trixie and Scott left the wonderful spot by the river and headed for Crabapple Farm. Trixie promised to save Saturday night for Scott as she kissed him goodnight and headed into the farmhouse. She lay in bed that night, thinking of the glorious evening she had just had, and Scott’s kisses, and not once did she think about the stalker before she drifted into pleasant dreams.

Unfortunately, she was reminded of the stalker once again the next morning. When Trixie came downstairs for breakfast, another dozen roses sat on the table, half red, half white. She looked at her mother, a question in her eyes.

Shadows of the Past

“They were on the front porch,” Moms explained. “Bobby found him early this morning when he went outside to feed the chickens and gather the eggs.”

Trixie realized what this meant: the stalker, or someone he knew or had paid, had been at Crabapple Farm. Trixie felt fear clutch at her heart at this realization. The tears in her mother’s eyes and the worried look on her father’s face indicated that they, too, had recognized the full import of the situation.

“I want you to go somewhere safe,” Moms said in a strained voice.

Trixie started to protest, but she caught sight of the no-nonsense look on her father’s face and kept quiet.

“Trixie,” he began, “you must consider your safety, for once. I know you’ve never been one to run and hide and, although that has given your mother and I some bad times over the years, it also makes us very proud of you. But in this case, it is just plain foolish. You’ve been lucky over the years, with more lives than a cat, but someday that luck is going to run out.”

Peter Belden got up from the kitchen table and crossed the kitchen to stand in front of his only daughter. He took her into his arms and, with great emotion, told her how much he loved her and feared for her safety. Trixie succumbed to her emotions and, tears running down her face, returned his sentiments of love and promised to find a safe place to stay.

She pulled away and moved to get a hug from Helen, who also had tears running down her face. “Thank you, Trixie, for being so reasonable. It won’t be forever, just until Molinson can catch this guy.”

Trixie smiled up at her mom and wiped her eyes. “I know.” Her thoughts returned to the flowers. “Did you read the note?”

Both Helen and Peter Belden shook their heads. “We were waiting for you.”

Just then, Bobby came inside the house with Reddy following behind him. He looked at everybody’s faces and knew immediately what had been discussed. “Are you leaving, Trixie?” Bobby’s fear, worry, and disappointment showed clearly in his voice. He was excited to have his big sister home from college, but he didn’t want her to get hurt, or worse, by sticking around here where someone obviously knew all too well where she lived.

Trixie nodded. “I’m afraid I am, Bobby.”

Bobby swallowed his disappointment and merely nodded. Boy, this stunk.

Trixie reached for the small card attached to the offensive bouquet. This time the message was typed.

*White roses are Trixie
Bloodshed is red
I’m having so much fun
Playing with your head*

Trixie looked up at the concerned faces of her family, unwilling to share the contents of this latest note, but knowing that they would never go along with that. She handed the note to her father and went to the kitchen extension. She dialed Alex’s home number.

When she heard Alex’s voice on the line she identified herself and immediately got right to the point of her call. “I know it’s only been a couple of days, Alex, but have you found anything out about what we discussed?”

“I take it you’ve gotten more flowers since we last spoke,” Alex’s voice told Trixie he was very concerned about her.

Shadows of the Past

“Yes, three more bouquets actually,” Trixie admitted.

Alex whistled. “Trixie, this is serious. You need to take some action—like getting out of Dodge.”

“I know, I promised my parents that I would,” Trixie divulged.

Alex was relieved. “Okay, great, I can book you on the next flight out of JFK into Reagan National and—”

“Alex,” Trixie interrupted gently. “I’m not coming to D.C. That’s too far away. If my cousin will let me, I’m going to stay with her at her apartment in New York. Her boyfriend, my friend Dan that I told you about, is a cop and very street smart. I’ll be safe there and still close enough to solve this thing.” *Not to mention the fact that this is Honey’s old apartment and Mr. Wheeler wouldn’t let his daughter take an apartment there until he looked into building security and found it to his liking,* Trixie added to herself.

Alex didn’t even try to hide his disappointment. “Okay, Trix, I know better than to try to talk you into something you’re not ready to do. Don’t you miss the heat and humidity of D.C. in the summertime though?”

Trixie laughed in spite of herself. “That is one thing about D.C. I must confess I don’t miss!”

“I don’t blame you,” with his try to get Trixie back to D.C. unsuccessful, Alex then turned to the important topic at hand. “Well, Trix, I was able to find out a little bit about some of the characters you put away. Most of the ones I checked into, and I haven’t had time to check into all of them yet, I started with the ones you told me were more likely, either haven’t had visitors at all, or have had the same visitors at the same frequency as they have since they were put away. The only two exceptions were Dapper Dick Simpson and Tilney Britten. Both are due for parole soon.”

Trixie was surprised to hear that. “Dick? Molinson told me he wasn’t due yet.”

“Well, this is a very recent status change. Apparently, his lawyer finally just won some sort of appeal and as of just two days ago, Dick is eligible for parole in just two months,” Alex paused to let Trixie digest this information. “He has had the same visitors, but the change in parole status threw up a red flag to me. Tilney Britten had very infrequent visitors up until about three months ago. Since then he has had a nephew visiting him like clockwork every Thursday. I’m going to check into the identity of this nephew and determine if he really is Britten’s nephew. First thing Monday, I’m going to order him tailed because whether it is or isn’t his nephew, he could still be doing Tilney’s dirty work.”

“Thanks for your help, Alex, I really appreciate all that you’re doing for me—especially since I’m kind of leaving you hanging on the other question,” Trixie said.

“Anything for you, you know that. I might point out that you did graduate four weeks ago today and that seems like a sufficient amount of time to decide,” Alex added humor to his voice to let Trixie know he wasn’t pressuring her, or at least not that much.

“Alex, I have had other things on my mind lately. I hate to admit to you that I haven’t been thinking too much about that, but I haven’t.”

“I understand, Trix. And I want your full attention on this situation anyway. I hate to be blunt, but you are obviously in danger and the last thing I want is for your mind to be elsewhere and have something unfortunate happen.”

“I know, Alex, thanks for understanding.”

“Your friends back home taking good care of you?” Alex wanted to know.

“The best,” Trixie stated.

“How’s Jim?”

“We’re getting along a lot better and he’s really helping me out with the situation. Being very supportive.” Trixie thought about telling him about Scott, but decided not to. She still wanted to keep some things private.

“Good to hear it. Well, give me until Wednesday to look into the other criminals on your very impressive list.”

Trixie smiled. “Okay, Alex, thanks again and take care.”

Trixie turned to her family, patiently waiting for her to hang up so that she could explain. “That was my friend Alex. He was one of the instructors at the FBI training I attended last summer. I called him day before yesterday after the fourth bouquet arrived. He was checking into the prison habits of some of the criminals the BWG’s have put away. He’s only gotten to the dozen or so I told him I was particularly worried about, but most of them have not had any change in status. There are two exceptions: Dick, who lost the diamond in the gatehouse, has had a change in parole status as of a couple of days ago. Apparently his attorney won some kind of appeal and Dick is due for parole in two months.”

“What does that mean?” Bobby, who once adored “Dicky,” asked.

“Well, it either lets him off the hook or makes him a suspect. If he honestly had no idea that he would win this appeal and his parole date would be moved up, he’d have no motive for stalking me at this point. But if he knew ahead of time from his lawyer that his date was likely to change, then he may have decided to be optimistic and put a revenge plan into action,” Trixie explained.

“And the other exception?” Her level-headed father inquired.

“Tilney Britten, alias Uncle Monty, has had infrequent visitors until three months ago. Suddenly, a nephew has entered the scene and is visiting him every Thursday. Alex is checking to see if the story that this guy is Britten’s nephew is legit and he’s having him tailed in the meantime. This one is sounding like a strong possibility,” Trixie said.

“What can we do?” Helen wondered, feeling helpless. Most of the times in the past she had found out about Trixie’s exploits after they were over and she was out of danger. She always had a vague worry about her precocious daughter, but rarely did she feel this gnawing fear.

“Moms, just keep your wits about you. I feel really bad about this, but I’m afraid that I’m putting all of you in danger, too. Everyone just please be really careful. I’ll call Hallie and Dan and see if I can intrude on them for a while. I can stay in touch with Alex and his FBI contacts and still be near Molinson.”

“Trixie,” he father said sternly. “Molinson can handle this case on his own. You stay safe in New York and let the police chase this guy.”

Just then the phone rang and Trixie was saved from making a promise she might have difficulty keeping. She was on the phone very briefly. She hung up and turned to her parents. “Someone broke into Jim’s office at the school last night. The alarm was deactivated, the window cut with a glass cutter, and his office torn apart, as though someone was looking for something. The only thing taken was an expensive Waterford pen and ten dollars that Jim had in his drawer, but the break-in indicates this guy is a real professional. I’m going to call Dan and Hallie and then head over to Ten Acres.”

Trixie was already dialing the number before anyone could even comment. As Trixie waited for someone to answer, she heard her mother, father, and Bobby start to converse in low voices. She didn’t want to think about what they might be saying.

Shadows of the Past

Hallie answered on the third ring. "What's up, cousin?" She said after hearing Trixie's voice.

"I just got a seventh bouquet of roses today and everyone has decided it's best if I head to parts unknown. Mind if I lay low at your place for a while?"

"Of course!" Hallie said immediately. "You can have Honey's old room for as long as you like."

"Great! Thanks, Hal. I'm sorry to be such a nuisance."

"You're not, Trix," Hallie assured her pert cousin. "Dan and I will enjoy having you here. And I know both of us will feel safer with you here. Dan hasn't said anything specific, but I can tell he's real anxious about your safety."

Trixie knew that Dan had always felt protective of her, like another older brother, so she wasn't surprised to hear this. "Well, now he can see for himself that I'm okay."

The two chatted a little longer and made arrangements. Hallie informed Trixie that Honey still had a key, so Trixie could get it from her. "Make sure someone drives you out here and make sure you're not followed."

Trixie promised to do so and told her cousin she would call right before she left, so they would know when to expect her. She hung up the phone and turned to her family. "Mission accomplished."

Half an hour later, after a quick shower and a bite to eat, Trixie was standing in Jim's office with Honey. Molinson's crew had just left. Molinson himself had accompanied them, and Trixie had informed him of the latest developments in the stalking case, including her decision to stay with Dan and Hallie.

"A wise idea. I've got to get back to the station, so Jim can explain to you why we think the break-ins at his place and your stalking are related." Molinson turned and was halfway down the hall before Trixie digested this latest revelation. The young blonde turned to Jim and saw an odd look on his face that she couldn't place. It seemed almost like embarrassment, but it disappeared before Trixie could assess it.

"What does he mean?" Trixie immediately asked.

"I wasn't completely up front with you about what was taken."

"There was more?"

Jim nodded and looked away, trying to get the courage to say what he needed to. Damn Molinson for not doing it himself! "I had a picture of you in my desk drawer, Trix. It's gone." Jim said as quickly as possible to get through the awkward moment.

Trixie's mind raced. Jim kept a picture of her in his desk drawer? How long had it been there? Behind those thoughts she immediately realized that some thief had a picture of her. It was a creepy thought to begin with, but the added knowledge that it might be in the hands of the person who was threatening her added another element of revulsion.

"What picture was it?" Trixie wanted to know.

"It was one of your senior pictures from Sleepyside High," Jim said, unable to look her quite in the eye. If the situation hadn't been so serious, Honey would have been amused.

"Oh." It was all Trixie could think to say.

"Trixie, you don't know how bad I feel," Jim's voice dripped agony. "Because of me, this guy has a picture of you to fixate on."

"Jim, don't worry about it. It may not be connected at all. Are you sure it's gone?"

Jim nodded solemnly.

Shadows of the Past

“Don’t worry about it,” Trixie repeated. “Even if it is the same guy, a picture of me isn’t going to change much. He’s bound and determined to get revenge whether he has a picture of me or not. And he may already have pictures of me from other sources.” It was not a pleasant thought, but one that had already occurred to her. She had been in the paper quite a bit and he could also be watching her with a camera and a telephoto lens. The revelation that Jim still kept a picture of her close at hand was a more interesting, and welcome, thought to Trixie.

The three had been cleared by Molinson’s crime scene team to clean up the mess, so that’s what they set about doing. None of them spoke, each lost in his or her own thoughts.

Trixie was trying to make sense of her confused feelings—feelings that had nothing to do with a stalker or a burglar. Last night she had told Scott that she wanted to be with him and only him, she had been excited at the prospect of being Scott’s girlfriend, but now the knowledge that Jim still kept a picture of her reawakened all of the feelings that she had been trying so hard to forget. *But did one ever forget their first love?* Trixie asked herself rhetorically.

Jim was thinking how embarrassing it was to admit to someone that you still carried her picture around—and had obviously been doing so for years. It might not have been so bad if he thought Trixie felt the same way as he did, but he knew from Honey that things were going well with Scott. He involuntarily wondered how their date had gone last night. Jim was also beating himself up. Some creep, whether it was the stalker or not, had a picture of Trixie, and that had to be an unsettling thought for Trixie. It was certainly unsettling for him.

Honey was desperately worried about Trixie’s safety, but glad that Trixie was beginning to realize that the feelings Jim had for her had never left. Maybe, despite Scott’s presence in Trixie’s life, there was still a chance for her bestfriend and her brother to find each other again.

After they had restored order to the mess, the trio discussed the latest developments in the case—both the break-in and the latest flowers. Honey felt that the Tilney Britten angle was a good possibility. Jim, having his own memories, decided that Dick was hot-tempered and had a big enough ego that revenge was a very real possibility.

“There’s still Jeff Higgins and Burt Mitchell to consider,” Honey pointed out. “I think it’s too soon for Dan or Mart to have found out any useful information about them yet.” At the meeting the other day, Mart had volunteered to follow Jeff Higgins and Dan was going to use his position on the NYPD to do some digging into Jeff and Burt’s pasts.

“I agree,” Trixie stated. “Now we have four real possibilities: Jeff Higgins, Burt Mitchell, Dick Simpson, and Tilney Britten. Alex is checking into Simpson and Britten, and Mart and Dan have Higgins and Mitchell covered. Di is looking into the florist angle again, although I really think the police have done all they can in that respect.”

“Trix, you keep mentioning this Alex guy—who exactly is he?” Jim asked, curiosity getting the best of him.

“Alex is a good friend of mine at the FBI. He was one of my instructors last summer,” Trixie explained.

“A good friend?” Jim repeated.

Trixie bristled. “Yes, just a friend.”

“I’m sorry, Trix, I didn’t mean it that way. I just wanted to make sure that you can trust what he tells you,” Jim apologized.

“Of course I can trust him. What makes you think I couldn’t trust the FBI?” Trixie demanded.

“I don’t know. It just seems like an FBI agent would have his own cases to worry about, and here he is using all of his FBI resources for you,” Jim said. He realized how bad the words

sounded as they were coming out of his mouth. Once again, Trixie had him flustered and he wasn't expressing himself very well.

"I suppose you think that's a waste of FBI resources?" Trixie said sourly.

Jim sighed, frustrated. "Of course not, Trix. That didn't come out right." Jim decided that the only way he was going to get out of this one was to be honest, as painful as that might be for him. "I guess I'm jealous of this guy, Trix. He's closer to a part of your life than I will ever be and I can't help but wonder if he has ulterior motives in helping you."

Trixie smiled. "It's possible he has ulterior motives, but not the kind you think, Jim. He doesn't want to date me—he wants me to join the FBI."

The surprise showed on Jim's face. "Oh." Was all he could manage to say due to the lump in his throat.

"I'll be honest with you, Jim, I am seriously thinking about accepting the Bureau's offer. Honey and I have talked it over and she and Hallie are willing to open the detective agency without me. But since all of this stalker business has come up, I honestly haven't given it much thought. Once I take care of this problem, I can really start to consider what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. We just have to make sure the rest of my life isn't so short that I won't be making any more decisions of any kind." Trixie sighed with the knowledge that if she made a wrong move, she might not have to make this decision at all. Suddenly, instead of feeling agonized over it, she welcomed the opportunity to make the decision when all of this was over with.

Honey jumped in, trying to ignore the crestfallen look on Jim's face. She knew that he felt like he was losing Trixie to D.C. all over again. "I think we agree that there is nothing more we can do right now, since we have people doing everything they can to help. Do you want help packing, Trix?"

Trixie nodded gratefully.

Jim thought of something. "Mart was only going to tail Jeff Higgins part time, but now that the stalker has actually visited Crabapple Farm, I think we should step up our efforts. I'll appoint someone from the grounds crew to temporarily take over for Mart and I'll hire a substitute teacher from Sleepyside's pool of teachers. That will free up Mart so that he can really tail Higgins. I'll tail him myself whenever Mart isn't, that way we'll have 24 hour coverage."

Trixie disagreed. "Jim, I can't ask you to disrupt your school and your life to help me out."

"Trixie, I'm not taking no for an answer. Your safety is more important than anything," the firmness in Jim's voice made Trixie decide not to argue.

"Okay, Jim Frayne, you win...this time. I really do appreciate all you are doing to help me."

Jim smiled. "Anything for my favorite schoolgirl shamus." Jim and Trixie shared a smile while Honey watched, smiling inside to see the deep, personal look that passed between her two favorite people.

Trixie, memories flooding through her, turned to Honey to break the spell Jim had over her. "Ready to head to the farm?"

Honey nodded.

"I'm going with you," Jim declared. "And if I had known when I called this morning that the stalker, or someone associated with him, was at your house, I never would have let you walk to Ten Acres alone this morning. Trixie, do you know what kind of a risk that was?"

Shadows of the Past

Trixie sighed, bracing herself for the lecture that she knew was going to follow. Jim saw the look on Trixie's face. *You've done it again, Frayne! Better back off.*

Honey, once again, jumped in to rescue her brother. "Let's just go get Trixie packed." Within minutes, the three were on the trail back to the farm. Jim walked the girls to the edge of Crabapple Farm, turned and started back up the familiar path.

"Wait, Jim!" Trixie called.

Jim turned around and saw Trixie running toward him. "What's up?"

Trixie was feeling very mischievous indeed at that moment, but she didn't care. "You were concerned that Alex was disrupting his work schedule for me because he had ulterior motives. What ulterior motives do you have for disrupting *your* work schedule?" With that said, she was hurrying back to where Honey was standing before Jim could say a word in defense.

He grinned at her audacity and at the fact that, if he deep down dared to admit it, she was right. He walked up the path with a spring in his step.

Trixie was having a hard time deciding what she might need to take since she didn't know how long she was going to be gone. Meanwhile, Honey was subtly trying to ply information out of her bestfriend while she grabbed some jeans from Trixie's bureau drawer.

"You and Jim shared a few good personal moments today, huh?" She tried to say casually as she laid the jeans into Trixie's open suitcase.

"Knock it off, Wheeler, you're not fooling me with your exaggeratedly casual voice. If you've got something to say—out with it!"

Honey grinned. "You know me too well. But Trixie, Jim just told you he's been carrying around a picture of you for years, don't you feel good?"

"Honey, maybe he stuck that picture in his desk drawer and forgot about it. I don't think it means what you think it does."

"If he forgot about it, he wouldn't have known to report it missing. Trust me, Trix, it means something," Honey stated matter-of-factly.

"Maybe," Trixie said in a non-committal voice, "but I have a boyfriend now, so it doesn't really matter."

Honey looked at her friend in surprise. "You what?"

Trixie smiled happily and laid down on her bed. "You will never believe what Scott did last night for our date." Honey sat down on the bed and listened to Trixie recap her date.

"He sounds very romantic," Honey said. "What a wonderful date!"

"Oh, Honey, it was. I was so happy thinking I'd found this wonderful guy. And when I told him I wanted to be his girlfriend because I didn't want to date anyone else I meant it. And then this morning I find out Jim keeps a picture of me in his desk drawer. It really may mean nothing, but just the thought that it might mean something—oh I don't know! Am I making any sense?"

"You are, Trix, at least to me. It must have been wonderful to get swept away in all that romance, but it couldn't have been easy to learn that your first love, whom you have never gotten over by the way, still seems to have feelings for you. Why else would he keep a picture of you, Trix?"

Trixie shrugged. "I don't know. Scott is really wonderful and romantic and I want to see where this goes. But on the other hand, how can I shut the door on another chance with Jim when deep down that's all I've ever wanted since we broke up?"

“I don’t know, but why don’t you use this time in New York to sort your thoughts out? You can get away from familiar things to neutral territory, away from the two guys, and as long as you’re careful not to do so much thinking that you let your guard down, maybe you can really get a grip on what you want. And that includes your career decision, too. You’ve got to reconcile your past, Trixie, before you can even think about the future—on all fronts. Even dealing with the stalker is about taking care of the past.”

Trixie nodded. Honey was always so wise that Trixie loved discussing her problems with her bestfriend—Honey always made her see things more clearly. “You are absolutely right, Honey. I will use this time away to get a new perspective on life.”

“Good—now let me call Brian to have him come pick you up. I don’t want you driving or taking the train into New York all alone and neither does anyone else who cares about you.”

Trixie agreed and went to the phone to break her date that night with Scott. She hated to do it, but some things were necessary.

Later that night as she lay in the unfamiliar bed in Hallie and Dan’s guest room she thought about the daunting tasks she had ahead of her: finding the stalker, choosing between Jim and Scott, and deciding between the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency and a position with the FBI. Honey was right about one thing—it all came down to dealing with the shadows of her past in order to find the light in her future.

Chapter 10 Wannabe Author’s Notes: We’re almost there!!! Again, I must declare my lack of knowledge about how to get a PI’s license in the State of New York. Please, I beg of you, if my scenario is unrealistic, willfully suspend your disbelief. Thanks! ☺

Chapter 10: Contemplation

Of course, Trixie reflected, sitting around doing nothing but contemplating your life is easier said than done. It was Wednesday afternoon and Trixie was sitting at the apartment waiting for Hallie to get back from one of the classes she had chosen to take over the summer and Dan to finish his shift. Boredom had definitely set in. She kept in close phone contact with her friends, but she had agreed not to leave the apartment alone. She began to resent her stalker for taking away her freedom. It might not have been so bad if Hallie hadn’t decided to take a full course load that summer in addition to her part-time job waitressing to pick up some extra cash. As a rookie, Dan also put in extra long hours. “Stir crazy” was a phrase Trixie was definitely becoming in tune with.

Di had called to say she had gotten no new information from the florists, as Trixie had expected. Di wanted so much to help Trixie, but didn’t know what to do. Trixie had jokingly stated that Di could help her stay sane by spending time with her. The black-haired beauty had quickly agreed and told her sister-in-law that she would take Friday off from the museum and spend the day with Trixie in New York. Trixie had protested, but Di was adamant. After she agreed with the plan, Trixie began to look forward to a day with Di.

Mart had reported no unusual activity with Jeff Higgins. He seemed to be honestly trying to make a fresh start with his life, and was attending night classes at Westchester Community College. Trixie had never thought that Jeff Higgins was behind her stalking, but as there had been no stalker activity at all in the past three days, she still couldn’t rule out Jeff as a possibility.

Honey was studying to take the test required to obtain a PI license in New York, which kept her pretty busy. Trixie felt guilty because she knew that Honey would be distracted from studying due to worry over her. To try to quiet her pangs of guilt, she had quizzed Honey on the

phone for over an hour the last two nights. Honey really seemed to know her stuff, and Trixie knew she would pass the examination with flying colors.

Alex had called an hour before to say that he had found nothing suspicious on any of the other characters that Trixie and the BWGs had put in prison. Tilney Britten's visitor was indeed his nephew, and the tail had found no suspicious activity. However, he could not be ruled out as yet for the same reason Jeff Higgins could not be ruled out—unless the stalker made a move that these two didn't, they were still suspects.

Jim had called several times, sometimes from his cell phone while he was tailing Jeff, something Trixie was eternally grateful for, and sometimes just to say hi. Neither of them mentioned Trixie's pertinent question about Jim's willingness to disrupt his schedule for her. Despite the fact that Trixie knew it probably wasn't healthy, these were the phone calls she enjoyed the best and looked forward to the most.

The phone rang just then and Trixie grabbed it, glad for human contact.

"Trix, it's your favorite older brother," a smooth voice said.

"You must have the wrong number, I don't like either of my older brothers," Trixie replied in a teasing tone.

"Well, in that case, I guess I won't be taking you out to dinner this evening after all," Brian chuckled.

"Dinner? Human contact? A trip out in public? Why, Brian, favorite brother of mine," Trixie laughed.

"I know how miserable you must be, Trix, and I have one of my rare evenings off, so I thought I'd take my favorite sister out to dinner."

"I love you, Brian Belden!" Trixie said fervently.

"Wow—you must really have it bad!" Brian exclaimed.

"You have no idea."

"I'll be leaving here in about an hour, barring any emergencies, so let me go home real quick, take care of some things, and then I'll be over. Say, six-ish?"

"That sounds great!" Trixie said gratefully. They said their good-byes and less than a minute later the phone rang again.

"What did you forget?" Trixie's voice was pert. There was a long pause and suddenly Trixie realized that this wasn't her phone and it might not be Brian. "Hello?"

"I don't know why you think you can hide from me, Trixie Belden." The line went dead and Trixie recoiled at the horrible, distorted voice on the other end.

"Calm down," Trixie said out loud, trying to ignore the sudden surge of adrenaline she felt and the racing of her heart. "You have to get a grip. You are thinking of becoming an official agent of the United States Government. You need to have a cool head. Okay. Remember *Scream 2*? 'Star-69 his ass!'"

Trixie hit Star-69. "We're sorry, that number is out of the service area. Trixie swore and continued to talk to herself. "Okay, it's four o'clock. At four o'clock, Jim is babysitting Jeff. Call Jim on his cell phone and see what ole' Jeffy is up to." With shaking hands, Trixie dialed Jim's cell phone number from memory.

Jim answered after the second ring. "What is Jeff doing right now?" Trixie tried to control her voice so as not to worry Jim, but she knew that merely asking that question would put Jim on alert. She was right.

"He just went into your dad's bank," Jim said, sensing something was wrong. His voice tightened. "Why?"

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"Is he near a phone?"

"No, I can see him plainly through the window of the bank. He's standing in line at the teller and he definitely has no cell phone."

"Well, then we can rule Jeff out or he has an accomplice."

"Trixie, *what happened?*" Jim's voice was anxious.

Trixie took a deep breath. "He knows I'm here."

"*What?!*"

"Someone just called and said 'I don't know why you think you can hide from me, Trixie Belden.'" Trixie shivered just thinking of the voice, although she knew it was done electronically. "Whoever it was used one of those voice distorters, you know, like in *Scream*? And his number wasn't available through star-69."

"I'm coming up there right now," Jim stated.

"No, you don't have to do that. Brian is on his way," Trixie explained.

Jim swallowed, trying to nurse his wounded pride. "Oh. I didn't realize you had called Brian first."

Trixie recognized the hurt in Jim's voice. "No, I didn't!" She quickly reassured him. "He called right before the stalker to tell me he wanted to take me out to dinner."

"I still want to come up there," Jim said

"No, Jim, I'll be fine," Trixie said gently, but firmly.

Jim sighed. "Okay, Trix," he said reluctantly, "you win."

A thought occurred to Trixie. "Jim, there's something I want to check out. Can I call you later?"

"Sure," Jim didn't hide the puzzlement in his voice. "Will you definitely call me later?"

Trixie promised she would and the two hung up.

Trixie called Crabapple Farm. Bobby answered. "Hi, Bobby. Have you been near the phone?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Any unusual calls the last few minutes?"

"How did you know?" Bobby asked. Trixie's pulse quickened.

"Just a hunch. What was the call like?"

"Well, it wasn't really *that* unusual. Some guy called asking for you. When I said you were out of town, he hung up. What's going on?" Bobby demanded.

"Nothing, Bobby. Thanks," Trixie said hastily as she hung up.

Her next call was the Manor House. Celia answered.

"Hi, Celia," Trixie said cheerfully. "Any calls for me?"

Celia sounded surprised. "Why, yes, Trixie. Someone did call a few minutes ago asking for you. I told him that you weren't here and he hung up without leaving his name."

"Okay, Celia, thanks." Trixie again hung up abruptly. She was starting to feel that her hunch was right. She dialed Mart and Di's number. Mart grabbed the phone on the fourth ring.

"Hey, almost twin, any calls for me?" Trixie again used a cheerful voice, but she knew that unlike Celia, Mart would probably see right through her.

"Yeah, a guy called a few minutes ago asking for you. When I said he had the wrong number he hung up, what gives?"

"Nothing," Trixie said and started to hang up. Then she realized that she could get away with that with Bobby and Celia, but not with her almost twin. "I've got to go, Mart, but call Jim on his cell. He can fill you in."

She hung up and pondered. This jerk had gotten lucky when she answered the phone. He must have realized that she hadn't been around Crabapple Farm lately and started calling everyone she knew, looking for her. She was willing to bet that Jim and Brian had hang-ups on their answering machines, unless the stalker had struck gold before calling them. Trixie swore again. *How could you be so stupid, answering the phone like that?* The young blonde berated herself. *You're supposed to be hiding out and you give your identity and location away. Great going, 'Detective' Belden!*

Hallie walked in just then to see Trixie staring at the phone as though it might bite her. "What's up?" she drawled, traces of her Idaho accent lingering even after three years in New York.

Trixie looked up at her gorgeous cousin with the long black hair and eyelashes to die for. *No wonder Dan flipped for her*, Trixie thought unconsciously. Out loud she said, "Our stalker has found me."

Hallie gasped. "No! How?"

Trixie smiled ruefully. "Well, from what I can gather, that's my fault." She recounted the stalker's phone call, as well as the information she had gained from the phone calls she had made herself.

Hallie sat down next to her on the sofa. "What next, cousin?"

Trixie sighed. "Brian called to say he wants to take me to dinner. I guess I'll just go home with him tonight and stay there."

Hallie shook her head. "No, this guy will probably camp outside the building and follow you."

"Do you think he could get here from Sleepyside that fast at rush hour?" Trixie asked.

"Trix, most of your flowers were ordered in New York," Hallie reminded her cousin. "What makes you think he's not already here in the city?"

Trixie looked at Hallie. "You're right," she said simply. It probably wasn't even safe to go have dinner with Brian now. That realization infuriated Trixie! She had been looking forward to having dinner with Brian, whom she barely saw anymore, and she would be damned if she let some...some...*criminal* stop her from enjoying time with her brother!

Suddenly she realized that Hallie was staring at her with an amused expression on her face. "What?" Trixie asked somewhat defensively.

Hallie laughed. "You look downright ornery right now, Trix. What is going on inside that head of yours?"

Trixie had to laugh in spite of herself. "I was so looking forward to this dinner with Brian but now common sense is telling me that I shouldn't go. And that makes me mad!" Trixie's long sandy curls bounced as she shook her head for emphasis. *Just like when she was fourteen years old*, Hallie thought.

"I don't care. I'm going!" Trixie knew she probably sounded like a spoiled brat, but feeling like a caged tiger the last few days did nothing to improve her temper.

"Trixie, was this supposed to be a special dinner, just you and Brian?" Hallie wanted to know.

"He didn't say that, but I was kind of looking forward to spending time with him," Trixie answered.

"What if Dan and I tagged along? There's safety in numbers."

Trixie thought. "I don't have a problem with that as long as Brian and Dan don't."

Hallie grinned at that statement. "Once Brian and Dan find out about that phone call, you know they'll agree instantly."

"Yeah, I'll never understand why the men in my life never believe I can take care of myself," Trixie stated.

"C'mon, Trix, they have come to your aid one or two times," Hallie chided.

"I know, but do I have to admit that out loud?" The two cousins shared a smile.

Hallie was right that both men would want to accompany Trixie out to dinner—after they realized that she was not going to be talked out of spending an evening outside of the apartment. Soon the four were seated at one of Brian's favorite restaurants, chatting and trying to pretend that there was no danger in Trixie's life.

"So tell me more about this FBI thing," Brian requested after the waiter had poured three glasses of wine, brought Dan's beer, and taken their orders.

"Well, Brian, right now there isn't much to tell," Trixie began. "I really enjoyed my time last summer at Quantico, and the idea of being an FBI agent is exciting, but my dream has always been to open up my own detective agency. I'm still torn."

"But you could get a lot of great experience with the FBI and still be able have your own agency later," Dan pointed out.

Trixie nodded. "I know, and that appeals to me, bringing a lot of government training and experience to the agency, but I'm still not sure that's what I want."

"You'll be great no matter what you decide," Hallie assured her cousin, "so don't make any hasty decisions."

Trixie smiled at Hallie gratefully. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Hal, it means a lot to me." Then she turned to Brian. "So, how far along on plans for the wedding have you guys gotten? I keep meaning to ask Honey, but every time I talk to her we ending up talking about her exam or my..." She broke off, unwilling to bring up that vile creature while she was enjoying an evening out with her friends and family.

Brian knew how she felt and jumped to answer her question about the wedding. "Well, we have definitely decided to have it in Sleepyside. Her parents were pushing for the wedding to be at St. Patrick's Cathedral followed by a reception at the Four Seasons Hotel, but Honey decided to forego all of the pomp and circumstance. Madeleine seemed a little disappointed, but of course she'll agree to whatever Honey wants. We'll have both the ceremony and the reception in the Manor House gardens."

"Have you set a date?" Hallie wanted to know.

"Saturday, the 19th of May at four o'clock," Brian said with a smile.

"Honey always did want a May wedding," Trixie observed. "Is Miss Trask helping with the arrangements? Stupid question, of course she is." Trixie answered her own question.

"Miss Trask is an amazing woman," Brian stated. "She's already found a baker that Honey loves as well as a florist. I think she's waiting for..." Brian stumbled and Trixie knew what he was going to say.

"Miss Trask is waiting for my life to settle down so all of us girls can go traipsing around looking for dresses."

Brian sighed. "Yes, Trix, but she's got enough going on with other details for the wedding and running the estate so waiting a little bit isn't really a big deal."

"I know, Brian, but that's not the point. All of our lives are being affected by this creep, not just mine, and that burns me up! Honey should be like any other bride, able to grab her

friends and go oohing and ahing over beautiful dresses. She shouldn't have to delay it because some psychopath is on the loose."

"Trix," Brian said gently, "Honey doesn't feel that way and neither should you."

"Oh, I know, Brian. I guess I'm just frustrated!"

"Of course you are," Dan spoke up, "but we're going to get this guy and make him sorry he ever went after you!"

Trixie smiled gratefully at Dan as the waiter arrived at the table with their food. No one spoke for several minutes as they enjoyed the scrumptious food.

Trixie broke the silence. "This sure beats kiwi fruit and egg rolls!"

"What?" Brian was clearly confused.

"Apparently Dan and Hallie are too busy to go shopping much. Just about the only things in their fridge are kiwi fruits and frozen egg rolls," Trixie explained.

"An interesting combination," Brian commented.

Dan spoke up. "Until you've tried them with fried chicken, you have no idea what you're missing!"

"I'll take your word on it," Brian said dryly.

During dinner, Dan spoke of being a rookie on the NYPD. He liked his job, but he couldn't wait to be eligible to move up to detective some day.

"Is it living up to your expectations, Dan? This is what you've always wanted, is it worth it?" Trixie asked, thinking of her own situation.

The look in Dan's eyes told Trixie everything she needed to know before he even spoke a word. "Absolutely Trixie. This was one dream that did not disappoint in reality. I worried along the way that maybe, even though this was all I ever wanted, when I finally made it, I would discover I didn't like it. But I do like it, Trix, I really do." Dan looked deep into Trixie's eyes and Trixie knew that he was telling her, with those expressive black eyes, to follow her dreams. He would never say it out loud, because he was Dan after all, the least likely of the boys to nag or lecture her. But he wanted her to know how happy he had been following his dreams, and that he wanted that for her as well. Trixie returned his gaze and gave him a smile to let him know that she had gotten the message.

Talk turned then to Brian's career. "Medicine is everything I ever thought it would be and more, especially this last year when I finally made it to my clinical rotations," Brian said, an undercurrent of passion in his normally steady baritone voice. Trixie heard that undercurrent every time he spoke about medicine, and she loved to hear it—Brian was a doctor to his very core, he always had been, and he always would be. She couldn't imagine him as anything else. The only time he had ever doubted his career was back in high school when he was working with Loyola Kevins on their Hudson River project—and that had been chemically induced and therefore didn't count, Trixie thought.

Trixie thought about the change in Brian's voice when he spoke of medicine, excitement edging into his normally steady way of talking. She supposed that she got that way herself when she spoke of a mystery or the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency. So why was she considering a job at the Bureau? *Because it was exciting, because the training was great, but it's still not the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency*, Trixie agonized to herself.

Trixie focused again on the conversation, realizing that Brian was telling stories about some of the kids he had gotten to work with during his pediatric rotation. It was interesting, and before anyone realized it, they had finished their dinner and were just waiting on the check.

"What next?" Hallie wanted to know.

“How about a walk through Little Italy? We can stop at a café and have one of those great Italian desserts and some cappuccino,” Trixie suggested.

Brian and Dan looked at each other. “I have a real early call at the hospital tomorrow, Trix, I’m sorry.”

Dan agreed. “And I have to be at the station early, too, Trix. We’ll do it another time, okay?”

Trixie looked at both of them suspiciously. She had seen the look that had passed between them and she knew that they were worried walking around New York with a stalker on the loose. She wondered if their excuses were convenient but genuine or if they had flat out invented them to avoid raising her ire by telling her that it was too dangerous to go to Little Italy. *Oh well, it doesn’t matter, Trixie thought, either way they are bent on protecting me, which isn’t a bad thing, but damn I hate having my freedom restricted!*

Trixie decided to go along with their stories. “Well, then we must get you two sleeping beauties off to bed,” she said lightly. Hallie knew what was going on and winked at her. Trixie swore she heard both men breathe sighs of relief.

Boy, memories of my teenage temper must still be pretty strong! Trixie chuckled to herself. She wondered how everyone was going to take it when she told them of her decision to go back to Crabapple Farm the next day. This psycho now knew she was at Dan and Hallie’s and rather than keep running, she had decided to go back to Sleepyside.

When they got to the apartment, Dan insisted on checking it out before he would allow Trixie and Hallie in the front door. After he deemed it all clear, Trixie and Hallie entered the cute little apartment, and Trixie announced she had phone calls to make. She thanked Hallie and Dan for accompanying her and Brian out to dinner and headed for the guest room.

She called Di to let her know that she didn’t need to take Friday off from the museum, but Di still insisted on spending the day with her friend. “I’ve hardly spent any time with you since you’ve gotten back from D.C. so we’ll find something to do, okay? I’ll meet you at 9 am, Friday morning?” Trixie agreed and the two girls hung up.

She called Jim, because she had promised she would. He didn’t take the news about her return to Sleepyside very well and they got into an argument that ended with Trixie hanging up the phone. She wasn’t proud of her action, but she had enough to worry about without trying to justify her actions to Jim.

She called Honey next, knowing she could count on her for support.

“Trixie!” Honey said when she heard her friend’s voice. “Jim told me about the call at Dan’s. How do you think he found you?”

Trixie repeated her theory that he had probably called around and just got lucky. Honey agreed with Trixie’s assessment upon hearing about the other calls to Manor House and to Mart and Di’s.

“So now that he knows I’m here, I think I’m just going to go back to Sleepyside. Can you come get me tomorrow?”

“Are you sure that’s wise? You could go to Brian’s you know.”

“I don’t want to keep running, Honey. I tried that once and it took him just a couple of days to track me down. True, I would be smarter about it this time, but I want to be back at Crabapple Farm,” Trixie stated. Honey knew that her mind was made up and that Trixie would take the train into Sleepyside alone if she had to.

Honey sighed. Why did Trixie have to be so stubborn all the time? “Okay, Trix, you win. I’ll be there around noon. Sound good?”

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“Great, Honey! I really appreciate this!” Trixie said gratefully.

“I’ll help you out, but just for the record, I’m not sure coming back to Sleepyside is the best idea.”

“I know that’s how you feel, Honey, which makes me even more appreciative of you helping me!”

The two girls chatted a few minutes longer and then hung up. Trixie immediately called Scott.

“Trixie!” Scott said enthusiastically. “It’s so good to hear your voice!”

“Scott, it’s only been a day since I talked to you last!” Trixie said.

“I know, but that’s one day too long. And it’s been way too long since I’ve seen you—almost a week now!”

Trixie smiled at the urgency in Scott’s voice. How great it was to have a guy who missed her when she was away. “We can fix that,” Trixie stated.

“When? How’s your cousin by the way?” Trixie had told Scott that her cousin was really sick and needed her help for a few days. She was still unwilling to bring up the stalker to Scott. She didn’t want to worry him, plus the only time she was able to just have a good time and forget about the stalker was when she was with Scott. She knew if she told him about this maniac, that would change.

“She’s a lot better, so I’m coming back tomorrow,” Trixie informed her boyfriend.

“You owe me a date for canceling the last one. Is tomorrow night good for you?”

“Tomorrow night is wonderful for me,” Trixie smiled. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too. But by this time tomorrow we’ll be together. How about I cook you dinner at my place?”

“That would be wonderful,” Trixie agreed. She talked with Scott for almost an hour longer before she declared that she was tired and needed to get some sleep.

“Pleasant dreams, my sweet,” Scott said softly as they said good-bye.

“You too, Scott,” Trixie said as she hung up. She lay on the bed and smiled contentedly. *Tomorrow I get to hold that gorgeous man and feel his fabulous kisses!* Soon, Trixie was drifting into sweet slumber.

Honey knocked on the apartment door promptly at noon the next day. Trixie opened the door with a huge grin for her friend but it faded fast when she saw what her friend held.

“No!”

Honey nodded grimly. “Yes.”

Trixie sighed resignedly and took the bouquet of 7 red and 5 white roses from Honey’s hands and looked for the card.

“How’d you end up with these?”

“They were delivered about five minutes before I got here. Charles remembered me of course,” Honey referred to the building’s daytime doorman, “so since he knew they were for my old apartment, he asked if I would mind delivering them to Miss Trixie Belden. I said no problem even though I wanted to toss the things into the nearest trashcan.”

Trixie did just that as soon as she pulled the card out. She looked at Honey. “It’s typed. He didn’t wire these from anywhere.”

*You must learn your lesson
You can’t run and hide*

*The excitement builds
It soon will be time*

"This guy is sick, Trixie. The excitement builds? This is some kind of game to him!"

"Of course it is. He loves this cat and mouse junk, and the longer it goes on, the more excited he gets. Well, before we head back I'd better make a few calls."

Trixie made four short, but not very sweet, phone calls to Alex, Molinson, Jim, and Dan. No one was happy that she was heading back to Crabapple Farm, but they all agreed that short of disappearing off the face of the earth completely, there weren't many other options they were truly any better.

Trixie then took a deep breath and called her mother to let her know what was going on. She hated to worry Moms with this, hated hearing the fear and exhaustion in Helen Belden's voice, hated the twisted maniac who was putting all of her family and friends through this. She was more determined than ever to find this guy. He would eventually make a mistake and when he did, Trixie and the rest of the Bob-Whites would get him.

Trixie told her mother when to expect her and left the apartment with Honey. Honey had driven into the city, not wanting to take a chance on the train. As soon as Helen Belden saw Honey's car drive up the lane, she ran out to the car and hugged her only daughter tightly, tears openly running down her face. Bobby and Reddy were also there for the reunion, adding a lot of confusion to the occasion, but nobody minded.

They all headed into the kitchen and Mrs. Belden made sandwiches for everyone. Trixie asked a lot of questions about what had been going on at the Farm, trying to keep everyone's mind off of unpleasant thoughts, but lunch was still a strained affair. After lunch, Trixie and Honey headed up to Trixie's room to go over the clues, frustratingly few that they were.

"Trixie, this person has been planning this for a long time. He hasn't made any mistakes. Yet," Honey added hastily at the look on Trixie's face. "I don't think it's anyone still behind bars. It's someone who's been released. That's my gut feeling and that's what the clues say. He would want to do this himself. He enjoys this too much to let someone else execute it while he sits behind bars."

"I agree with you, Honey, but who?" Trixie looked questioningly into Honey's hazel eyes. "Jeff Higgins is virtually cleared—he didn't make that call and he didn't send the most recent flowers. Alex said that Tilney's nephew definitely didn't do either of those things. That just leaves Burt Mitchell. Everyone else is still behind bars, dead, or in another state. I guess I'll have to ask Alex if he can put a tail on Burt."

"My gut says that it's not Burt," Honey stated. "It's someone we've overlooked."

"Like who?" Trixie asked. "We've had the Sleepyside PD, the NYPD, and the FBI looking into everyone we've ever put away."

Honey looked at Trixie thoughtfully. "What does *your* gut say?"

Trixie looked at Honey sheepishly. "That it's someone we've overlooked."

Honey nodded triumphantly. "I knew you had to feel that way too. There is some piece of the puzzle that we are missing. That we haven't looked at, or we haven't looked at in the right way. Let's go over everything again."

So Honey got out more paper and they made a list of everything they knew so far. They wrote down the details of the break-ins at Jim's, the times and dates of the flower deliveries, the clues they had learned from Alice and the other florists, but try as they might to find something, nothing seemed obvious.

Trixie looked at the clock. "Wow! I've got to start getting ready for my date with Scott."

"How are you getting there?" Honey demanded.

"Driving, of course."

"By yourself?"

"Yes," Trixie stated.

"And if you get car-jacked on the way?" Honey continued with her interrogation.

"Honey! Right here in Sleepyside? It's only about two miles to Scott's house!" Trixie protested.

"I don't care. I would follow you, but then you'd just have to drive home by yourself. I'm driving you," Honey declared. "That way Scott can give you a ride home and you'll be safe."

"And what explanation am I to give about my lack of a Jeep Wrangler?"

"The truth. Surely he's as worried about this stalker guy as we are!" Honey said. Trixie averted her eyes at Honey's words. "Trixie Belden! You haven't told him have you?"

Trixie shook her head, still avoiding Honey's eyes.

"Why not? Do you realize that if Scott doesn't know he's not being particularly vigil when you two are out? Do you have a death wish?" Honey was clearly upset at her friend.

"No, Honey, I don't have a death wish. Please keep your voice down or Moms will worry more. I didn't tell him because I didn't want him to get all weirded out. I can relax when I'm with Scott because he doesn't know about this guy."

"Trixie!" Honey said in an exasperated tone. "One—he has a right to know, especially now that he's your boyfriend. And two—him not knowing is dangerous! Will you tell him tonight? Please?" Honey pleaded.

Trixie sighed. "I'll think about it, but I make no promises."

"Well, if that's the best I can get from you, I guess I have to go along with it, but I am putting my foot down. Either I drive you or I get your dad or your brother or Jim or a combination of the three to drive you!" Honey knew that threatening to go to one of the male members of Trixie's life would do the trick.

"Okay, but you have to drop me off a few doors down. I'll pretend I decided to walk because it's such a nice night. I don't want him to know I have to be babysat. I'll make sure he brings me home safe and sound," Trixie gave into Honey's demand.

An hour later, Trixie was getting out of Honey's Saturn three doors down from Scott's house. "Thanks for the ride, Honey. Di and I are spending the day together tomorrow, but I'll take to you tomorrow evening, okay?"

Honey nodded and gave her a wicked grin. "Have fun tonight!"

Trixie matched her smile. "Oh, I will, believe me!" She shut door and headed toward Scott's house. Honey made sure she was inside safely before turning around and heading back to Manor House.

Meanwhile, Scott was showing Trixie just how much he missed her. Trixie let his strong arms encircle her in a warm embrace and felt her worries slipping away. Scott led her into the living room.

"Have a seat. Dinner's almost ready, do you want some wine?"

"Sure. Dinner smells wonderful by the way," Trixie sniffed the air appreciatively.

"Wait til you taste it!" Scott called from the kitchen as he poured himself and Trixie some wine. He brought the two glasses in and sat next to her on the sofa.

“A toast, to wayward girls who finally return to their boyfriends,” Scott said mischievously as he took a drink. Trixie laughed and took a drink as well.

“To understanding boyfriends who are never impatient waiting for their girls to return!” Trixie shot back, raising her glass and taking another drink.

Scott laughed. “Touché!”

A few minutes later Trixie looked at Scott. “Wow. It must have been more exhausting than I realized taking care of my cousin. I’m really tired all of a sudden.”

“That’s okay, you just relax here on the sofa while I check on dinner,” Scott said as he settled Trixie into a more comfortable position. She was having a hard time keeping her eyelids open.

“Scott, my eyes, they’re so heavy,” Trixie mumbled.

“It’s okay, just rest,” Scott said tenderly.

Soon Trixie was oblivious to the world. Scott stood up and picked up the phone.

“It’s me. Yeah, I gave it to her in her wine and she’s out like a light. Come on over so we can put the rest of our plan into action.”

More Chapter 10 notes: For those of you who didn’t read my ten year old scribbling, also known as the Disappearing Guest, the main character’s family eats a lot of weird foods. One such combination was kiwi fruit, fried chicken, and egg rolls. I couldn’t resist throwing it in here!

Chapter 11 Wannabe Author’s Notes: Okay, I don’t watch Cops or NYPD Blue so hopefully my handling of law enforcement agencies is semi-realistic. ☺

Chapter Eleven: A Villain Revealed

“Where’s the snoop car?” A gravelly, menacing voice growled as soon as the depraved looking man entered Scott’s rented house.

“She walked over,” Scott replied.

“Are you sure?” The newcomer demanded in a voice made hoarse from years of cigarettes and rough living. “That Bob-White outfit would never let her go anywhere alone with all of my fancy roses and well thought out prose coming her way,”

“You know how independent that girl is—maybe she never told them. She trusted me and she never told me,” Scott reasoned, his normally melodic voice taking on a somewhat whiny tone.

“Did you make sure she wasn’t followed?”

“Yeah, I did. I was watching from the window—I saw her walk up from down the street and she was alone. No cars drove by like she had an escort. We’re cool, Uncle, I know what I’m doing,” Scott’s voice was defensive, but his uncle didn’t care how defensive he got—he certainly wasn’t going to be careless now that he finally had what he wanted. He had sat rotting the joint because that...that *girl* had stuck her nose in business that wasn’t hers. He had been bitter and angry at first, but he knew that anger wasn’t going to get him anything so he had channeled that anger into revenge fantasies. Soon those fantasies had manifested themselves into plans. And now those plans were about to become reality. Yes, the Belden girl was going to pay and pay dearly.

Scott’s uncle had thought about going after that redheaded Frayne boy after he was done with Belden, but that would be more risky, adding elements of danger and a higher risk of getting caught. No, he could make that Frayne boy pay by merely carrying out his revenge on

that curly haired snoop. Jim was obviously still in love with her, the picture he had found in the desk drawer confirmed that. Taking her away from him permanently would be torture enough. Jim would live out the rest of his days knowing that he hadn't been good enough, smart enough, strong enough to protect her. An evil smile curled on the thin, crooked lips at the thought of that hotheaded kid pining away for his little detective for the rest of his life. Ahhh, revenge truly was sweet.

Scott interrupted his uncle's thoughts. "I've got her tied up in the basement—you wanna take a good look at her?"

"Yeah, I can't wait to see that little meddler helpless. Maybe I'll even take a few pictures for posterity. Maybe our friend Jim would like a copy to replace the picture I took from him." The two laughed as they descended the stairs to the basement.

Trixie was, mercifully, still sleeping, but Scott knew that the drug would soon wear off and she would be awake. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face when she realized her plight. Served her right. What made her think she should get involved in other people's business and send them to the slammer? It was bad enough that his dad had died when Scott was a young boy, but then she had to go and take away his uncle, the only other father figure he had in his life. By what right did she do that to him?

The two men stared at the helpless girl, her hands and feet tightly bound as she lay on the cold hard floor at their feet. "A pretty sight, huh, Uncle?"

"It's been a long time coming," was the reply.

Just then Trixie started to stir. Her eyelids fluttered and confusion set in as she tried to remember where she was and take in her surroundings. *Why can't I move my hands and feet?* She thought as she tried to shake off the grogginess and bewilderment that enveloped her. Her eyes finally focused on Scott and she started to smile, but then two things happened simultaneously: she realized why she couldn't move and she saw the man standing next to Scott. A tangle of emotions flooded her disoriented mind: confusion, anger, disgust, fear, dread. *This isn't possible, I must be dreaming*, the distressed girl thought. She blinked her eyes and realized that she wasn't dreaming, that this was horrifyingly real.

"You never should have come back here," she finally spat out at the stoop-shouldered man with the greasy black hair, crooked lips curved into a cruel smile showing teeth yellowed from tobacco.

"Oh, but I am having so much fun with my favorite little snoop," the man uttered in a gleefully evil voice.

"You should have died in prison. Better yet, you should have died in that fire you started at the mansion," Trixie looked at the only man she had ever truly hated, pure venom dripping from her voice.

"Now, Trixie, is that any way to welcome an old friend?"

"Jonesy, you are a vile human being and I hope you rot in hell for what you did to Jim," Trixie's anger was so powerful that she barely realized that, for the time being, she was helpless and that Jones was in control. She hated this man, she wanted him to suffer as he had made Jim suffer.

Scott spoke up then. "Jim? Why are you so concerned about him? I thought I was your boyfriend."

A wave of embarrassment and disgust at herself washed over Trixie as she realized that she had fallen for this creep and all the time he had been playing her like a fool. *How stupid could I be?* She groaned to herself. *How did I not see this?*

Shadows of the Past

There was only one way to salvage a little of her pride. She looked Scott in the eye and said the words that she had realized deep down for a long time but hadn't dared admit. "Jim Frayne is the only man I will ever love and he is a thousand times the man you will ever be."

Anger contorted Scott's normally handsome features until he looked truly ugly to the scared and angry girl on the floor. She actually thought Scott was going to hit her but Jonesy intervened. "You are quite right that you will never love anyone again—because you're not going to live very much longer I am afraid."

Trixie tried not to react at his words, putting on a brave face in front of her captors. "You don't think they'll come looking for me?"

Jonesy scoffed. "They can look all they want. They won't find you. And they'll never think I am involved since, thanks to some cash and a prison guard with a gambling problem, I was able to fake my own death." Jonesy allowed himself to gloat, after all, that was what this moment was about, showing that little snoop that she wasn't so smart after all and that he could outsmart her.

"You're obviously not as smart as you think you are, a few kind words, a little picnic by the river and you're ready to fall into this guy's arms. It was almost too easy!" Jonesy laughed. Trixie felt a rise of shame at his words but refused to give him the satisfaction.

"Maybe so, but I was much happier when he wasn't around and I was in Jim's arms," Trixie said coldly.

Scott, his male pride wounded, swore and took a menacing step toward Trixie. "Why you little..."

Trixie braced herself for the pain she thought was going to feel from Scott's curled fist, but Jonesy put out a restraining arm. "You know she's bluffing, don't let her get to you." He looked at Trixie. "I think that's enough out of your smart little mouth. Scott, go get a gag and shut her up."

"Gladly," Scott said through clenched teeth and went to find a suitable gag.

Jonesy leaned down so that his mouth was next to Trixie's ear. She could smell his fetid breath and it made her nauseous. "I'm going to have my fun with you, little girl. You messed with the wrong person when you sent me to prison." With that he stood and retreated up the basement stairs. Scott returned a few minutes later and tightly gagged Trixie's mouth.

"You know you were falling for me, don't even deny it." He looked at her helpless form, laying on the cold, hard cement floor and felt a surge of satisfaction at the sight. "Have fun." He chuckled cruelly and headed back up the stairs.

The light went off and Trixie was left in total darkness, trying to control the rising tide of panic and fear that threatened to engulf her. Tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of her friends and family, whom she might never see again. And she thought of Jim. She thought of the first time she had seen him sleeping in his uncle's mansion, she thought of their first kiss, the fight they had had the night before she left for Georgetown, and the years of loneliness and aching for him that followed. But one thought above all others sustained her. Trixie vowed to herself that she would somehow get out of this, and when she did, she was going to wrap her arms around Jim, kiss him like she had never kissed him before, and tell him how much she loved him. Suddenly, despite her predicament, Trixie felt a peace that she hadn't felt for a long, long time.

Helen Belden awoke at six a.m. with an uneasy feeling. She had meant to wait up for Trixie but had finally fallen asleep just after midnight. She quietly slipped out of bed and went

to the window. It was a peaceful dawn and the first signs of the sun were appearing on the horizon, casting a faint light over the rolling grounds of the farm. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of her prized crabapple trees. Trixie's jeep was parked in the lane and Helen breathed a sigh of relief until she remembered that Honey had driven Trixie to meet Scott.

Helen tried to reassure herself that Trixie had come in quietly, while she had been asleep, but the nagging feeling that something was wrong would not go away. Resolutely, she tiptoed down the hall to Trixie's door and looked in. Her heart quickened as her eyes caught sight of Trixie's bed—perfectly made and unslept in. Memories of times that she had checked in on her little girl as she was sleeping crossed Helen's mind and she ached to see her daughter's tousled blonde curls sticking out above the blanket.

Moms' mind raced, trying to determine what to do next. Trixie was a grown woman, she might still be out with Scott, having lost track of time. *No*, her mind stubbornly said, *Trixie would call. She wouldn't worry me unnecessarily knowing that stalker is out there.* Helen's mind came to the only logical conclusion: something was indeed very wrong to keep Trixie out all night without calling. She hurried back to her bedroom and awoke her husband. He rolled over sleepily and looked at her, confusion in his eyes.

"What is it, Helen?" Peter's voice, thick with drowsiness, asked.

"Trixie's not home yet and I'm sure something's wrong," Helen explained to Peter.

"What time is it?"

"It's already after six," Helen informed him, trying to control her voice, but feeling panic rising with every second that ticked by.

Peter said up, his mind trying to rationalize his daughter's absence. "Maybe she lost track of time. Trixie's always been a bit of a free spirit."

Helen shook her head. "Peter, I don't think so—she knows how worried we are with that lunatic sending her flowers. I just have a feeling that this is serious. I feel it in my bones."

Peter looked at the woman he had loved and lived with for over half of his life. He had learned long ago to trust Helen's instincts, just as he had learned to trust his daughter's instincts, knowing she had inherited her sixth sense from her mother. Unfortunately, Trixie's sixth sense seemed to get her into hot water a lot of the time. He nodded at his wife, got up, and headed over to his bureau drawers to get dressed.

"I hate to sound a false alarm, but we had better call Honey and Jim."

Helen agreed and was already picking up the personal phone book she kept next to the phone. She had the main Manor House number memorized, but she wanted to dial Honey on her private line.

It took Honey several rings to answer the phone and she sounded very groggy when she finally did. "Hello?"

"Honey, it's Helen, I'm so sorry to wake you this early, but Trixie hasn't come home from her date with Scott yet. Maybe I'm just being the overprotective mother, but I have a feeling that something is wrong. I just don't think Trixie would worry us like this if she could help it."

Hearing that Trixie hadn't come home yet drove the sleepy cobwebs out of Honey's brain. "She went over to Scott's to have dinner and watch a movie. Maybe they fell asleep watching the movie," Honey's mind, too, tried to grasp a logical explanation, unwilling to believe that something may have happened to her bestfriend.

"Do you have Scott's number so that I could call him?"

Shadows of the Past

“No, I’m afraid I don’t, Mrs. Belden,” was Honey’s rueful response. “Maybe information would have it.”

“I’ll try that. Thanks for your help, Honey.”

“Please call me back when you’ve located her,” Honey stated with more confidence than she felt. Helen was glad to hear Honey say when and not if.

“I will.”

But unfortunately, when Moms called information, she was told that Scott Mason’s phone number was unlisted. She hung up with a sigh of frustration.

“Scott’s number is unlisted,” she reported to Peter, who was finished dressing and stood before her, a worried look transforming his handsome features.

“I hate to call the police if she’s just fallen asleep on Scott’s couch,” Peter said, trying to ignore thoughts that crossed his mind of other pieces of furniture on which she might have fallen asleep.

Helen dialed Honey again, who answered the phone with a breathless, “Did you find her?”

“Scott’s number is unlisted. I hate to call out the Marines if she’s just fallen asleep on his couch, but I can’t ignore the fact that some madman is out there stalking my daughter,” Helen’s voice, filled with worry and indecision, tugged at compassionate Honey’s heart.

“Do you want me to drive over there?” Honey offered. “I really don’t mind.”

Helen thought for a second. “Would you mind terribly? It may be nothing, but if something has happened to Trixie, the sooner we act the better.”

Honey agreed and promised to head over to Scott’s as soon as she could dress. Helen thanked her profusely and hung up. She explained to her husband that Honey was on her way to check on Scott, and the worried couple started the long wait for Honey’s phone call.

Honey hurriedly dressed and headed downstairs, stopping in the kitchen where Cook was already busy with breakfast preparations.

“If anyone asks, I’ve gone to do a little errand. I should be back in less than half an hour,” Honey informed the cook, who nodded and promised to pass the information along.

During the short drive to Scott’s house, Honey tried to keep a reign on her thoughts, not allowing herself to think of any negative explanations for Trixie’s absence. As she pulled into Scott’s driveway, she took a long look at the small ranch-style house he lived in. Like most houses in Sleepyside, it was well taken care of. There were no lights on in the house to indicate anyone was awake, and Honey felt slightly regretful that she would probably be waking Scott up, but her worry for Trixie was stronger than anything else at that moment.

She climbed the steps to the porch and rang the bell. After waiting several moments, she rang the bell again. A light came on from a room toward the side of the house and she waited for Scott to answer the door. When he did, he looked very surprised to see Honey standing at his doorstep, and, Honey thought, extremely irritated. *Well, I can’t exactly blame him for being irritated at waking him up at this hour.*

“Honey?” Scott said in a friendly but puzzled tone, realizing he had better play the role of the concerned boyfriend or this girl would know something was up. “Is everything all right?”

“Hi, Scott, I’m really sorry to bother you, but Trixie’s mom is worried because she hasn’t come home yet. Is she here by any chance?” Honey’s voice was apologetic and hopeful.

Shadows of the Past

Scott shook his head, trying to come up with a story fast. “No, I’m sorry. Actually, Trixie called last night and cancelled the date we were supposed to have. I’m kind of bummed out, because she cancelled quite a few lately.”

Honey’s heart quickened as she realized that Scott was lying, and the realization of why he must be lying swept over her, but she kept her face neutral and didn’t let on that she had caught him in a lie. “Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me, since she’s told me she’s cancelled a few dates even though she didn’t want to. She’s had a lot of things on her mind lately. Well, sorry to have bothered you.” Honey smiled her warm smile at Scott. She would have rather kicked him in a sensitive area, hard, now that she realized that he must have been behind the threats to Trixie, but she knew it was important that he believe that she had accepted his story.

“No problem. By the way, how did you know where I lived?” Honey again detected annoyance mixed with the curiosity in Scott’s voice.

“Oh, Trixie pointed it out to me a while ago when we happened to drive by on our way to White Plains,” Honey held her breath, hoping that Scott would accept her answer. He couldn’t realize that she had driven Trixie over to his house last night or he would know that she knew he was lying about Trixie’s whereabouts.

Scott nodded. “Please let me know when you find her and I’ll keep an eye out for her as well.”

Honey smiled sweetly and said good-bye, seething inside. She got in her car and drove away, trying to decide who to call first on her cell phone—the Beldens, Jim, or the police. Molinson was always telling her and Trixie to involve them so they didn’t find themselves in so many scrapes, but what if she was wrong about where Trixie was? Scott had lied to her, and her mind had immediately jumped to the conclusion that Scott was lying because he was stalking Trixie, but what if she was wrong? Or what if Scott had already taken Trixie somewhere else and she wasn’t at the house? Or what if he had already... *No*, Honey’s mind screamed. *Don’t even think it. Trixie’s alive, wherever she is, she is alive.*

Honey then tried to find a motive for Scott to be stalking Trixie. The notes had definitely indicated that it was someone Trixie had helped send to prison, but she had never sent Scott to prison. *Either I am totally wrong, or Scott’s just the accomplice*, Honey told herself as she negotiated the curves of Glen Road with her Saturn. She hadn’t really thought about it, but suddenly she knew where she was headed. She continued her thoughts, but stepped on the pedal a little harder now that she had a concrete destination in mind. *We still don’t know who Scott’s accomplice is. It looks like Tilney Britten is ruled out because Scott has had not contact with him or the nephew. As a matter of fact, with all of the tails we’ve had on everyone we’ve suspected, not one has come across anyone meeting with Scott. Which puts us back at square one. Who is the maniac behind all of this?*

Honey’s nerves were frazzled as she turned onto the lane leading up to Ten Acres. It was already after seven and there was already a quite a bit of activity going on Jim’s boys’ school. She knew Jim would already either be in his office, or at the dormitory waking up the boys, as he liked to do on occasion. She parked her car near his office, taking the gamble that he would be there. She hated to go traipsing through the dorm as the boys were waking up and heading to the community bathrooms on each floor.

Luckily, she did find Jim in his office, saving her a search of the dorm and grounds. Jim looked surprised to see his sister entering his office so early in the morning and his heart stopped as he saw the look on her face.

“Jim, Trixie’s been missing since last night and I’m afraid that Scott may be lying about where she is,” Honey’s words tumbled out in a hurry to explain to her brother what was going on. Jim’s face went absolutely white with shock and fear as he heard Honey’s words. She continued to explain how she had taken Trixie to Scott’s house the night before, her promise to Mrs. Belden to check up on Scott after the worried early morning phone call, and Scott’s bald-faced lie to her when she asked him where Trixie was.

Jim’s jaw clenched. He was about to say something when Honey’s cell phone rang. She checked the caller i.d. on the small display. “It’s the Beldens,” she informed her brother as she answered the call.

“Honey?” Peter Belden’s voice was strained and she could hear Mrs. Belden sobbing in the background.

“Yes?” Honey said, her stomach plummeting. Something was very wrong.

“More flowers came this morning. This time the roses are all red,” Peter’s voice caught and Honey realized he was trying very hard to control emotions that threatened to overpower the normally composed banker. “And there was another note...”

Honey waited, as patiently as she could, as Peter tried to find the words to continue. “Blood is pure red, and these roses are too, your daughter the snoop, is never coming back to you.” Peter could no longer hold his emotions in, and a raw sob tore from his throat.

Jim stiffened when he saw the look of horror and shock on his sister’s face. “Mr. Belden, I’m at Ten Acres with Jim. Call the police, we’ll be right over.” She hung up the phone.

“What happened?” Jim asked in a terrible voice.

Tears welled up in Honey’s huge hazel eyes. “There were more flowers, Jim, it doesn’t look good. Let’s go.”

Jim quickly left a note for his secretary and the pair was soon racing for Honey’s Saturn. She told Jim the contents of the note on the short trip to Crabapple Farm. Jim said nothing. What could he say? *God, I’ve been a fool. I’ve loved her most of my life and my stupid pride got in the way. Why didn’t I tell her how I felt when she came home from Georgetown? What if I never see her again? NO! That’s not going to happen. I am going to find her and when I do, I am never letting her go again. God, please keep Trixie safe until I can find her. If you give me this second chance with her I will never ask for anything again. Please don’t take her away from me. Please.*

Honey pulled into the Beldens’ lane, followed shortly by two police cruisers. Molinson stepped out of one, and two uniformed officers stepped out of the other. Honey ran up to Molinson and quickly told him about her early morning trip and her theory that Scott had tricked Trixie and now held her captive. Mr. and Mrs. Belden joined the group on the lawn just in time to hear this.

Honey looked at Trixie’s parents; both looked as though they had aged ten years overnight. Worry ravaged their faces and it tore at Honey’s heart to see the couple she had come to think of as her second parents looking so destitute.

Molinson was radioing in the new piece of information about Scott’s possible involvement. “No, don’t send anyone out there yet. We need a little time to think things through so that we have the best possible chance of getting her out of there alive.” Mrs. Belden gasped at his words and Peter Belden put his arms around his wife to comfort her.

“What are we going to do to get her back?” Jim spoke to Molinson in a voice filled with determination.

Shadows of the Past

“Well, unfortunately, even with what Honey told us we don’t have probable cause to search the house. If we sent someone over there right now, Scott wouldn’t have to let them in and it would just tip him off. We’re going to have to get a search warrant from a judge before we can do anything,” Molinson informed the group.

“Well, then, let’s get going,” Jim said briskly.

Molinson gave him a look but did not comment. He simply got on the radio again and gave the details to the dispatcher so that the closest judge could be contacted to issue the search warrant.

“So now all we can do is wait?” Jim asked, a mixture of impatience and irritation in his voice.

Molinson look regretful as he nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

Mrs. Belden spoke up then. “Why don’t we all head into the kitchen. I’ll make some coffee.”

The sunny kitchen was in direct contrast to the somber group that gathered in it to discuss strategy. Bobby wandered down in the middle of it all and Mr. Belden lead him into the family room to explain what had happened. Honey used her cell phone to call Brian, Jim used his cell phone to call Dan and Hallie, and Mrs. Belden used the kitchen extension to call Mart and Di. None of the calls were easy.

After all of the phone calls had been made, Molinson looked at Honey. “You realize what this means don’t you?”

Everyone else looked confused, but Honey knew immediately what the Captain meant. “None of our tailed suspects is the culprit, and no one still in jail is likely to be the culprit.”

Molinson nodded. “So maybe it’s not someone Trixie locked away.”

Honey shook her head. “No, one of the notes she got plainly stated it was.”

“Maybe that was to throw us off of the trail.”

“No, I don’t think so. Who else would hate Trixie enough to do this? It was someone she put away and someone we haven’t been tailing,” Honey stated.

“But we’ve put tails on everyone in the area and not in jail. The only one we didn’t tail was Jonesy, because we couldn’t,” Jim stated. Honey’s hazel eyes made contact with Jim’s green ones and suddenly something clicked.

“Jonesy!” Honey and Jim exclaimed at the same time.

Molinson looked at the two of them as though they were crazy at first, but comprehension dawned in his eyes.

Honey grabbed her cell phone. Thank goodness she had had the foresight a few weeks ago to get Alex’s number from Trixie “just in case.” She speed dialed his home number and got his machine. She tried his office but when his secretary said he wasn’t in yet, she left an urgent message and hung up. “Damn! He must be on his way in to the office right now. He should call as soon as he gets the message though.”

Mr. Belden had returned with a very shaken Bobby. His wife explained to him that Honey had a hunch Jonesy was involved. “Could he have faked his own death?” He asked Molinson.

Molinson thought for a moment. “It’s possible. I’ll go ahead and call the prison and see what information I can get. It’s too bad Trixie’s FBI agent friend isn’t available. There will be more red tape for me to go through being a local law enforcement agent than he would have as a federal agent. Is there an extension where I could sit down at a desk and write?”

Shadows of the Past

Mr. Belden showed him to the study, where Molinson promptly got to work making necessary phone calls. In the meantime, Mart and Di had shown up. Di looked distraught, Mart deeply worried as Honey filled them in on all that they knew so far.

Di sat down, dazed. "I can't believe Scott turned out to be such a creep. He seemed so nice."

Honey, who had her own feelings of guilt on that subject, agreed. The group sat in tense silence, each thinking of the best way to go about helping Trixie. Mrs. Belden offered to make breakfast, but nobody felt like eating. The sudden ringing of Honey's cell phone made everybody jump. Honey looked at the phone's display. "It's Alex!"

Upon hearing the full story, Alex immediately agreed to contact the prison where Jonesy had been incarcerated. He also promised to call the New York field office to get back up for the Sleepyside Police Force. Normally a local law enforcement agency would have balked at the FBI moving in so quickly, but Trixie was highly regarded by the members of the Sleepyside PD and this was, after all, a kidnapping case, part of the FBI's jurisdiction. Honey thanked him for his help and immediately hung up so that Alex could get the ball rolling.

Molinson came stalking into the kitchen just then. "The prison warden is being less than helpful. He doesn't want to tell me anything except that his prison is very cleanly run and nothing underhanded ever goes on with his upstanding prison guards. The good news is that I just got a call telling me that we have a search warrant for Scott's house. Has the FBI guy called back yet?"

Honey nodded. "He has. He's going to try to get any information he can from the prison. He's also sending over some field agents from the New York office."

Molinson thought for a moment and turned to Trixie's parents. "I have the search warrant. I can get my men and go search Scott's house now, or I can wait until the feds get here. It's up to you, whatever you feel most comfortable with."

Mrs. Belden did not even hesitate. "Go now. I know and trust your officers to do a fine job and I don't want to wait for the FBI to get here."

Molinson nodded. He, too, was confident that his men could handle this just as well as the federal agents and precious time was ticking away. He immediately got on the radio and started to bark orders. After he had finished, he turned to the worried and anxious group. "I'll be back soon."

Honey and Jim moved forward. "I want to go with you," they said at the same time.

Molinson sighed. He wanted to order them to stay put, but he knew he had little chance of them actually following his orders. He carefully weighed his options, deciding that it was better to let them go where he could keep an eye on them. "Fine, let's go."

Honey and Jim smiled weakly at those staying behind and promised to keep them informed. "Good luck," Mart called after them.

Within twenty minutes, a dozen policemen had the house surrounded. One was stationed outside of each window and two were at the back porch. Honey and Jim were waiting in a police van down the street. Molinson and two of his men approached the front door and knocked.

Scott opened the door and looked surprised when he saw policemen standing on his front porch. "Yes, Officers, how may I help you?" He asked very politely.

Molinson showed him his badge and the search warrant. "We have reason to believe that Miss Beatrix Belden is being held here against her will. This is an official search warrant to search the premises."

Scott opened the door wider. "Of course, come in."

Molinson hesitated. He had expected Scott to slam the door in his face and run, not invite him inside. Suddenly, he doubted if Scott was involved. The gruff police captain turned to his men and motioned them inside.

The ranch style house was small, and it didn't take the three policemen to search the first level and the basement. Frustrated and devastatingly disappointed, Molinson could only come to one conclusion.

Trixie was still missing.

Chapter 12 Wannabe Author's notes: Wow! What a wonderful sense of accomplishment completing this has given me! This labor of love has been a wonderful experience. MANY thanks to Zap for taking the time to post this story and all of the other wonderful stories at her site. Thanks to Misty, who's "The Song Remembers When" was the first piece of fanfic I read—it inspired me to want to write my own fanfic. Thanks to Eric and his essay on hostage rescue which helped a lot as I was writing this chapter. And a special thanks to everyone on this board—you have all been wonderfully supportive and encouraging as I was writing. Now, for some practical notes. Unlike Miss Trask and Regan I do not like watching wrestling or any of that kind of stuff, so my fight moves may leave something to be desired. If I didn't know the name of a particular move, I kind of gave it my own descriptive name—hopefully you all will know what I'm talking about! And, oh yes, for those of you paying attention, June 1st came and went without a mention of Mart's birthday—sorry for the oversight, that's one drawback of posting chapters as I complete them. By my calendar, June 1st was the day they all met in the clubhouse and Honey told everyone off, so pretend she yelled Happy Birthday at Mart. ☺ And now, without further ado, I bring you the last installment...

Chapter Twelve: Resolution

Honey and Jim waited impatiently in the white police van while Molinson's men searched Scott's house. They sat in tense silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Memories of Trixie floated through each of their minds, neither willing to face the thought that memories of Trixie might be all that they had left. Each second that ticked by seemed an eternity, and just when the two thought they could stand it no more, one of Molinson's men came to the side door of the van holding a baggy with a small object inside. Jim and Honey's eyes locked, unspoken questions in their eyes, wondering what this could mean.

"Do either of you recognize this?" The uniformed policemen asked them, holding the clear plastic bag out for their inspection.

Honey immediately recognized it as one of Trixie's barrettes and said so. "When I dropped her off at Scott's house last night, she was wearing this barrette in her hair." Honey stated. Fear gripped her gut; why was this man showing her Trixie's barrette and not Trixie herself?

Before either Honey or Jim could say anything the policeman spoke. "Unfortunately we didn't find your friend, but we did find this barrette in the basement. As you've identified it as Ms. Belden's barrette, we can officially declare her a missing person and bring Scott in for questioning."

Honey's face went white as she realized that her friend was still missing. Jim closed his eyes and told himself that this wasn't happening, that the girl he loved wasn't still missing. When he opened them he found himself still sitting in the back of a police van, the policeman hurrying away with Trixie's barrette to inform Molinson of Honey's statement, and his sister staring at him with fright in her eyes. Unfortunately, it was really happening.

Honey's cell phone rang then. It was Alex.

"Honey, any news?" Alex's worried voice asked.

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“Captain Molinson got a search warrant and they just searched Scott’s house,” Honey paused to take a deep breath, trying to swallow the lump in her throat that suddenly made it hard to say what she had to say. “Trixie wasn’t there, but the barrette she was wearing last night was.”

Alex drew in his breath sharply. “Are they taking Scott into custody for questioning?”

“I think that’s the plan,” Honey said, wiping away the tear sliding down her cheek. She couldn’t give in to her emotions, not when she had to stay calm to try to get Trixie out of this mess.

“Okay, I’ll call the agents on their way to Sleepyside and prep them for an interrogation of this guy. I think I have an indication that Jones may have been able to fake his death. The warden is not being too cooperative but I do have reports of a guard with severe gambling debts who was suddenly able to pay them all off right after Jones allegedly died. I have another pair of agents enroute to the prison to check into that angle, but it’s looking very likely that Jones is involved.”

Honey wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or not. She was glad to know that her suspicions had been confirmed and they finally knew who Trixie’s stalker was, but knowing that Jim’s stepfather was on the loose sent an icy chill through her heart. “Thanks, I’ll pass that on. Anything else?”

“Jones must have taken Trixie somewhere after you confronted Scott. You and Jim know better than anyone where he might take her. Think of every possible place he could have gone and keep Molinson’s men and my agents informed. I am catching the next flight out of National into JFK. I’ve arranged to have a helicopter take me to Sleepyside, so I should be there in a matter of a couple hours. I’m on my way to the airport now.”

Honey agreed to do what Alex said and told him how relieved she was that he could fly up to help Trixie out.

“Anything for that girl,” Alex stated. “Honey, we are going to find her alive. Don’t worry.”

Honey appreciated his confidence. “I know, Alex, thanks.”

Alex hung up his cell phone. *God*, he thought, *if you give me Trixie back alive I’ll be good and never pressure her to join the FBI again*. He could only hope he had been heard and that his prayer would be answered.

Honey turned to Jim after she had hung up and reported what Alex had told her. The look of pure hatred that crossed Jim’s face at the mention of Jones’ name pierced her heart. Jonesy had been responsible for enough misery in Jim’s life, she was going to make sure he paid for doing this to the two people she loved most on earth, besides Brian.

“I guess we should go back to the Farm. Everyone should be there by now and we can brainstorm together what Jones’ next move will be,” Jim reasoned. Honey agreed and got out of the van to go find Molinson. She stepped out just in time to see Scott being driven to police headquarters in the back of a squad car. She was glad to see Scott in such a miserable position, but the look of animosity and malice that he gave her made her uneasy. She shuddered to imagine what he was capable of and what he might have already done to Trix.

She found Molinson and reported the call from Alex. He immediately agreed that the best plan was to contemplate the possibilities of Jim’s stepfather’s next move and possible location. “Because of your statement, we can definitely report Trixie as a missing person. I just called in a request for a manhunt. We’ll have two person teams scouring every inch of the area.”

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The normally gruff policeman looked at Honey in what could almost be called tenderness. “We’ll find our shamus.”

Honey was surprised, but grateful, at Molinson’s unexpected compassion. She remembered the compassion he had shown for the Dodge couple when their castaway children had disappeared and decided she liked this man who could be rough when the job called for it, but tender when the moment required it. She gave the police captain her sweet smile. “I know we will. Trixie’s just too important to all of us to leave us. What would you do if you didn’t have her in your hair?”

Molinson gave a rueful smile. “A day without her interference would be a dull day indeed.” Then, in true Molinson form, the moment was over and he was back to the gruff policeman Honey knew best. “Now let’s going! Back to the Farm to brainstorm!”

During the seemingly endless ride down Glen Road, Jim borrowed Honey’s phone and called ahead to Crabapple Farm to let them know that Trixie was not yet with them. Mart took the call and informed the gathered assembly, which now included Brian, Dan, and Hallie, the latest news using very simple language, a sign of just how grave things were.

“They want us to try and figure out where Jones might have taken her, so let’s put on our thinking caps and give it our best shot,” Mart sighed as he sat down heavily at the kitchen table. Bobby ran to the study to retrieve a pen and some paper.

“Well, there are lots of places close by he could have taken her,” Dan said reasonably. “In the game preserve alone there are an unbelievable number of shacks and buildings. It’s really quite amazing when you think of all of the buildings that seem to appear back there.”

Brian spoke up. “Dan’s right. There’s the old schoolhouse for one. You know, the one that Jim, Trixie, and I got stuck in during that blizzard right before the antique show.”

“Not to mention that little shack where we found the hamburger meat that the Midnight Marauder stole from Wimpy’s,” Mart added, remembering how he had been a suspect himself during that case.

“And that barn on Glen Road where we met Nancy the goat when we were looking for the Dodge kids,” Di added.

“Then there’s the old abandoned farmhouse that Mr. Wheeler owns where Trixie caught those counterfeiters,” Dan said, looking at Bobby trying to frantically scribble all of the information down.

Jim, Honey, and Molinson entered the Belden kitchen in time to hear Dan’s last remark. “Good,” Jim said, “Honey and I were thinking along the same lines—all of the boarded up, abandoned places we’ve come across around here. There’s a lot of them floating around for such a small town.”

Honey spoke up, her worry less apparent now that she had a concrete task at hand to occupy her concerned mind. “What about that district of abandoned warehouses where we broke down that time in the model T?”

Bobby scribbled that down as well.

“What about all of the places that Jonesy broke into at my school? He may figure that we won’t look there again if we think he’s already been and gone,” Jim added.

The group had just finished the list of places they considered possibilities when Alex arrived, having been driven to the Farm by one of Sleepyside’s finest. He introduced himself and, despite their worries and the significant men in their lives, Diana, Hallie, and Honey couldn’t help but notice how attractive Alex Barfield was. His jet-black hair made a nice

contrast to his piercing blue eyes, and the khaki pants and white oxford shirt he wore could not hide the muscular frame beneath.

Alex looked over the list the group had compiled, trying to decipher Bobby's handwriting. Abandoned barn, abandoned shack, abandoned schoolhouse, abandoned warehouse—could this small town really have that many abandoned structures? He shook his head and looked at the group. “Which do you think is most likely?”

Everyone looked to Jim, unofficially making him the group spokesman. “Frankly, I don't know. And it's possible that he's taken her far away from here, too.”

Alex shook his head. “There are several reasons that I don't think he's gotten far. One, I think they were planning on keeping her in the area, possibly even in Scott's house. It was Honey showing up unexpectedly that may have prompted the move, in which case it would have had to have been somewhere close and familiar to Jones. Two, I've been in touch with some profilers, getting their take on the case. They feel that given the history between Jones and Trixie, and Jones' probable state of mind, he will keep her somewhere that has meaning to them both. Since the place he encountered her on the two previous occasions was Sleepyside, it stands to reason that he would keep her in the area. Three, and this will come as a relief to you. The profilers feel that Jones will want to draw this out. He has been planning this for many years and he will want to make it last. He will want Trixie to think things over for a period of time, just as he did in prison.” Mrs. Belden was quietly sobbing at this information, and everyone else looked at Alex with troubled eyes, not wanting to think of Trixie suffering and scared somewhere in Jones' hands. “As bad as that sounds, we have to keep sight of the fact that this is a good thing. It means that Trixie is still alive in all probabilities.” There was a collective sigh of relief at this news.

“Well, if that's the case, we know that Jones is familiar with Ten Acres, my school. We don't know how familiar he is with the other buildings on that list. But if he's been hiding out in the area recently, and we know he has, any of those could be a possibility.”

Alex nodded and turned to Molinson. “I've got my agents currently interrogating the suspect you picked up this morning. I understand that you have quite a manhunt going throughout Sleepyside right now. Inform the teams responsible for the areas which have these buildings on them to be particularly alert,” Alex spoke quietly but authoritatively. The police captain immediately did as he was told, thinking only of Trixie's well being and not once of his usual distaste for outside agencies “stepping on his toes,” as he liked to say.

Alex turned to Mr. and Mrs. Belden. “We are going to do everything humanly possible to get your daughter back. Trixie made quite an impression when she went through the training at Quantico last year. Not only are these men trained professionals, but they feel like Trixie is one of their own. They're not about to let anything happen to her.”

Mrs. Belden's eyes brimmed at Alex's praise of Trixie and she smiled gratefully at the handsome FBI agent. “Thanks, Agent Barfield. I appreciate all that you're doing.” Mr. Belden added his thanks as well.

“Please, call me Alex.” He then turned back to Molinson, who had finished radioing instructions to his men. “I've ordered the FBI Hostage Rescue Team. They should be in flight shortly and arriving in Sleepyside around noon.”

This news was greeted with awe and uneasiness from Trixie's assembled friends and family. “Do you really think that will be necessary?” Brian asked in a voice filled with emotion. Honey, standing next to him, leaned into him. Jim noticed Honey's action and briefly wondered if it was to give him support and comfort, or for her own support and comfort. Suddenly, more

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than ever, his arms ached to hold Trixie, to feel her feminine softness against him, and smell her hair, which he always equated with the warm smell of sunshine. He felt capable of killing his former stepfather right then for causing all of this agony.

The group sat in tense silence, some wandering into the family room, some staying in the kitchen, glancing at the phone every few seconds, as if willing it to ring. Looking at the door of the kitchen, desperately craving the sight of Trixie walking through it, announcing it had all been a big mistake and putting an end to this nightmare. Mrs. Belden busied herself the only way she knew how, by baking muffins and fixing a large breakfast that she knew one would eat. It didn't matter, she knew she had to keep herself busy or go crazy with worry. She served up plates filled with eggs and muffins, sausage and hash browns. Bobby half-heartedly ate his, while the others either toyed with their food or looked nauseated at the sight of it.

Dan and Hallie retreated to the sofa in the family room, holding each other and whispering unintelligible things to each other. Mart sat in Mr. Belden's favorite chair, holding Diana who was no longer able to hold back her tears. She and Trixie had planned to spend the day together shopping and relaxing—having fun together. Diana wished desperately that she and Trixie were even now happily browsing the stores of Sleepyside, saying hello to old Grandpa Crimper and eating ice cream cones.

Honey sat at the kitchen table and watched Brian shuffle the food around his plate. Alex had ensconced himself in the study by the phone. Molinson kept track of what was going on via radio, and Jim and Mr. Belden paced incessantly.

All of them prayed.

At noon, when the reports from the search party teams continued to come in that there was no sign of Jones or Trixie and that Scott wasn't talking, Jim couldn't take it anymore. "I have to get out of this house," he stated. His friends looked at him, sympathy for him mingling with their own fear. "I'm going to take a walk."

"Do you want company?" Honey volunteered.

Jim shook his head. "No, I'm just going to go for a quick walk to clear my head." He turned to Molinson. "Don't worry, I won't do anything to mess up the investigation." Molinson grunted in response but didn't object.

"Take my cell, so we can call you if there are any developments," Honey crossed the room and handed her brother the small silver object. Jim accepted it and headed out the door, not quite sure where he was headed.

As he walked, he tried to calm himself, but as the hours ticked by with no news, he found himself very agitated. He forced the thousand regrets out of his head and started to think about more positive things. He thought of his life with his mother, Katje, his life with Jones, and then his life with Trixie. During that horrible time with Jones he had told himself he would never again have it as good as when his mom was in his life. He knew he would get away from Jones and he knew he would survive, but he never thought he would find someone who brought out the best in him the way his mom did when she was alive.

And then he had met Trixie. Suddenly, there was sunshine in his life again, a reason to get out of bed again. With Trixie in his life he knew he would not merely survive, but thrive. She had such a buoyancy and vibrancy, such a passion for life, such spirit and spunk, that he felt himself coming alive again. The raw pain that he had carried around with him since the death of his mother started to subside and the joy of being with Trixie began to take its place. Little did he know when he awoke in his uncle's run down mansion that his angel of mercy, with the short, sandy curls and vibrant blue eyes, was standing looking down at him.

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And how had he repaid her? When that angel wanted to test her wings a little bit, he tried to clip them. And when that hadn't work he had turned his back on her. All of his old instincts had returned: protect yourself, strike out before someone strikes at you. But if he had stopped to think about it, he would have known that Trixie would never hurt him. From the moment she entered his life, encouraging him to open his boys' school and giving him that crushed, half-melted candy bar when he was starving, she had done nothing but be there for him, supporting him.

All of the emotions of late, the pride at her graduation, the sheer joy of seeing her looking so beautiful at his sister's engagement party, the happiness at showing her the house he had built with her in mind, the jealousy at hearing she was with Scott, and the fear of losing her to Jonesy's sick revenge fantasy, finally combined and took their toll on the handsome redhead. He succumbed to them and sat underneath the closest tree and sobbed, great heaves that wracked his body and finally left him exhausted. But when the last sigh escaped his throat, Jim realized how cathartic it had been. He took a deep breath, collected himself, and continued his walk. He wasn't ready to go back to the farm looking like this. Before his release, he had walked aimlessly, without purpose, but suddenly he had a destination in mind. Jim headed for the Bob-White Clubhouse.

As he approached it, he saw a movement in one of the windows. His heart pounding, he crept stealthily up to the window and peered inside. Adrenaline coursed through his veins when his mind comprehended what his eyes saw: Jonesy standing over a helpless Trixie. He ducked down and took several deep breaths. What should he do? Bust in there and take Jones himself while he had the element of surprise? Or call Molinson? It was also quite possible that the FBI HRT was already at the Farm and could be called in.

He recalled what he had read about how the HRT worked. A team would surround the hostage area composed of snipers with their rifles and spotters with their scopes to observe the situation. Depending on the situation, they might try to negotiate for the hostage, or they might just storm the place and recover the hostage that way. If they stormed the place, Jim recalled, they would try to disable the hostage taker by using flash-bangs or other methods to stun the culprit. Sometimes even a shattering window was enough. He also remembered that the human brain takes three seconds to respond to anything and so the goal of the entry team was to secure a hostage area in just two seconds.

Jim pondered this. It all seemed so unreal. What if something went wrong and Trixie got injured, or worse, from the HRT's efforts? They would be bringing guns into the situation after all, and possibly explosives. What if they weren't quick enough and Jones was able to carry out his ultimate revenge? Jim didn't know if he could trust these men with Trixie's life. The only person he trusted with Trixie's life right now was himself.

But they were trained professionals. They were the men trained to do this kind of thing, drilling over and over and over until they were perfect because anything less was not enough. He had a pure hatred of Jonesy to drive him on, but he had no training whatsoever in this kind of thing. What if he messed up? He would never forgive himself.

Jim crept up again to have another look in the window. Jones wasn't threatening Trixie with a gun, which was a relief. He seemed to be standing above her talking. Pride welled within Jim as he saw the look on Trixie's face as she gazed at his ex-stepfather: defiance mixed with disgust and revulsion. He was glad to see that Jones hadn't stamped out her spirit. His eyes shifted to the table that Mart had so lovingly refinished years ago; upon it lay a pistol that Jim could only assume was loaded.

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Jim knew what he had to do. Trixie's life was too important for him to try anything himself. He snuck away from the clubhouse and used Honey's cell phone to call the Farm.

Brian answered the phone.

"Brian, get me Molinson," Jim ordered, his voice low even though he knew he had moved far enough away from the clubhouse to be heard.

Brian heard the urgency in Jim's voice and immediately did as he was told, hoping against hope that his future brother-in-law had discovered something that would help Trixie.

Molinson's gruff voice barked into the phone. "Molinson. What's up?"

"Jones has Trixie in the clubhouse," Jim explained. "There is a 9 mm on the table, but when I left to call you he wasn't threatening Trixie with it."

Relief flooded through Molinson at the knowledge that Trixie was found. He was confident that the HRT that had just arrived in Sleepyside would be more than capable of delivering Trixie safely from that criminal Jones. "How does Trixie look?"

Jim allowed himself a chuckle. "Like our Trixie. She's spitting mad, but her feet and hands are bound."

Molinson smiled at the image of Trixie facing down her captor. Quite frankly, he didn't envy Jones. "Come back to the Farm. We'll get the FBI team in from Sleepyside and rescue her."

"No," Jim surprised the Captain with his firm objection.

"No? Now Jim," Molinson started.

"No," Jim repeated in a voice that left no room for argument. "I'm not going to leave her now that I've found her. She's going to stay in my sight until the team arrives. Don't worry, I will quietly move out of the way when the time comes, but until then, I'm looking out for her."

Molinson knew when to admit defeat. "Don't do anything until we get there!" He ordered and then hung up.

Jim silently crept to the other side of the clubhouse where he had noticed that one of the two windows on that wall was open. He stealthily crept until he was underneath it and could hear everything that his vile stepfather was saying with his cigarette roughened voice.

"Do you know what it was like sitting in that cell for all of those years?" Jones was ranting. "You stuck your nose in where it didn't belong and I'm the one who paid for it. All I wanted was what was owed to me. That property should have belonged to my wife, which meant it should have belonged to me. All I was doing was getting my share. A man has to make a living, you know, but you had to go and snoop and take it away from me.

"And why did I need the money from the sale of the marsh property to the furniture company? Because you were responsible for me not getting the inheritance that was by rights mine. I fed and clothed that lousy stepson of mine for years! Did he ever repay me? Did I ever get a cent from him? No! That old miser's money should have gone to me, for my troubles. But you took that away from me too!

"And now it's your turn to pay. You'll pay for the money you cost me, for the years of my life you cost me, for the stepson that you cost me. Sure, it was no picnic having that smartmouthed redhead around, but at least I had someone who worked hard on my truck farm. And you know what else you're going to pay for? It's because of you that my nephew grew up with no father figure after his dad died. It's because of you that he's sitting in some police station in Hickville getting interrogated. I'm going to have so much fun with you, that by the time it's over you're going to be begging me to kill you."

Jones took a long look at the girl sitting before him. She was gagged, but there was something in her eyes he didn't like. He stared at her and saw what Jim had, plus contempt, disdain, and scorn. That would not do, no that would not do at all. This girl was supposed to be down on her knees begging for his mercy, cowering in fear, and terrified out of her mind. His eyes narrowed and the evil temper that had been allowing itself to fester finally exploded. He directed it all at this arrogant girl. In a blind rage, he lifted his fist brought it down across her jaw.

Outside, Jim heard the sickening impact of the blow and realized what had happened. He crept to the other window and peered inside. He saw Trixie finally recover from the blow, her spirit not dampened in the least. He couldn't see the expression on her face, but he saw from the way she held herself that she was determined to take whatever Jones was dishing out. This enraged Jonesy even more and this time he clasped both hands together and gave her a double-fisted uppercut.

Jim reacted purely on instinct at seeing this. The thoughts of the Hostage Rescue Team even now racing along Glen Road vacated his mind as he saw his beloved Trixie hurting at the hands of this hateful man. It had been bad enough when Jonesy had turned his rage on him; Jim would be damned if he allowed Jones to do it to Trixie. Jim came crashing through the window, not even mindful of the cuts he might have been inflicting upon himself. All that mattered was getting to Trixie before Jones could land another blow.

Startled by the noise, Jonesy froze. He recovered his wits at the same time Jim recovered his balance and they both dove for the gun laying on the table. They both missed and the gun went clattering to the ground near Trixie's feet. Jonesy tried to land a punch at Jim, but Jim had much better reactions than the old man and easily dodged the incoming fist. Jim recovered and his fist connected with Jonesy's jaw. Jones howled in rage and blindly grabbed at Jim. He managed to get his hands around Jim's neck and squeezed. Trixie watched helplessly as Jim struggled to free himself from Jones' grip. Jim was surprised at the man's strength and then realized that Jonesy had had nothing to do for many years other than work out in anticipation of his revenge.

Trixie, in desperation, kicked the gun across the floor as a matter of distraction. It worked. Upon hearing the noise, Jones looked up and that's all Jim needed to throw the older man off of him. Unfortunately, Jonesy landed near the gun and grabbed for it. Jim tried to pounce but it was too late. Jonesy already had the gun. He leveled it at Jim's head with an evil chuckle.

Trixie jumped at the sound of a gun going off at close range. It took several seconds for her brain to register that it was Jones laying on the floor, red stickiness oozing from a clean gunshot wound to the head, and not Jim. Thank God, not Jim.

Then suddenly, Jim was standing before her, holding her. Grabbing her face with his hands and looking at her as though he would never be able to get enough of her. And he knew that he wouldn't. He quickly undid her gag and the knots binding her hands and feet, completely oblivious to the members of the FBI team that were busy taking care of Jones and sending short, cryptic messages over secured radios.

When Trixie was free the two just stared at each other for several seconds.

"I love you." The two laughed together at their shared words.

Jim pulled Trixie into his arms and hugged her so tight that she couldn't breathe, but she didn't mind. After a long time he pulled away again and just stared at her.

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“You have never looked this good to me, Trixie Belden,” Jim said tenderly. “Not even at your graduation from Georgetown.”

Trixie’s eyes widened as she realized the implication behind his words. “You were there?” She said, wonder and joy filling her voice.

“Of course I was there. I love you too much to have missed that.”

Tears of happiness at Jim’s revelation and pure relief of being safe escaped from Trixie’s clear blue eyes. “Jim, I’ve been a fool...” she began, but Jim tenderly shushed her with a single finger laid upon her lips.

“We’ve both been fools. This may be a heck of a way to learn our lesson, but I think we’ve learned it. Haven’t we?”

Trixie stared into the green eyes, moist with unshed tears, and nodded. “I know I have. I love you, Jim, and I never want to lose you.”

Jim looked tenderly at the woman he had loved for so long and knew he would love for an eternity. “I promise you, Trixie Belden, you will never lose me.”

At that moment, Molinson burst through the door of the clubhouse. “I thought I told you not to do anything until the team got here!” He bellowed.

Trixie smiled up at Molinson. “Aren’t you glad to see me, Captain?”

Molinson dropped his pretense of anger and smiled warmly at the young girl who had been both a pain and a pleasure to know over the years. “Yes, I am.” Then the smile vanished and once again the gruff exterior was in place. “There’s some people at your house you’d like to see you. Let’s get a move on!”

“Yes, sir!” Trixie stood and mocked saluted him. Her legs were stiff from being tied for so long, so Jim helped her to a nearby squad car to be driven to Crabapple Farm. No sooner had the squad car reached the end of the lane when a houseful of people ran out to greet Trixie. The young blond was carefully, and tenderly, passed from family member to friend and back again. Moms gasped at the sight of Trixie’s cheek, swollen and starting to turn purple, but she was too glad at having her daughter alive and in her arms to fret about it long. It could have been so much worse.

Honey grabbed her friend and hugged her hard. “I will never try matchmaking again,” she said tongue-in-cheek, hoping to make Trixie laugh. Trixie obliged.

“You didn’t think you were going to get out of opening the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency with me that easily, did you?” Trixie returned. Honey’s eyes lit up and she hugged her friend even harder.

When it was Alex’s turn to hug Trixie he whispered into his ear, “I made a promise to a higher authority that if I got you back alive I’d quit pestering you to join the FBI.” His eyes wandered to where Jim stood, watching Trixie with unmasked love in his eyes. “But I can see I would have lost anyway. I have a feeling you’ll be opening an agency around here.”

Trixie laughed. “Thanks for understanding, Alex. And thanks for coming to my rescue.”

Trixie looked at the group around her and had never felt more lucky to be surrounded by such a wonderful group of family and friends. Her clear blue eyes met Jim’s sparkling green ones and she knew the best was yet to come.

A couple more Chapter 12 notes: Yes, Trixie’s jaw would most likely be broken but she never would have been able to have that romantic conversation with Jim, so I exercised dramatic license. And I also realized that Miss Trask and Regan probably would have hurried over to the house if Trixie was missing but I decided to leave them out as there were already lots of people there. Sorry if anyone missed them too much!

Epilogue: Happily Ever After

Saturday, the nineteenth of May, dawned brilliantly. Trixie awoke and smiled when she realized what day this was and rolled over to look at the other twin bed in her room, where Honey still slept.

“Good morning, Sleepyhead,” Trixie called softly. Honey’s eyes fluttered awake and she, too, smiled upon remembering the importance of this day.

“Good morning,” Honey returned.

“Are brides supposed to lounge the morning of their wedding, or do they get up and start bustling around?” Trixie asked.

Honey thought for a moment. “I think I’m going to be the kind of bride that lounges for a little bit. What about you?”

Trixie grinned. “I think I will be too.”

For their last night as batchelorettes, Trixie and Honey had decided to have one last sleepover at Crabapple Farm. Honey, who had been living at Manor House, would be spending that night, her first night as a married woman, in Brian’s apartment in the city. They were still in the process of looking at houses in White Plains, near the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency, which had opened its doors three months before. Trixie, who had been living at Crabapple Farm for the last year, would spend her first night as a married woman in the lovely cottage at Ten Acres that Jim had finally confessed to building with her in mind.

“Can you believe we’re getting married today?” Trixie asked her dearest friend and soon-to-be double sister-in-law.

“It’s been a long time coming, Trix,” Honey said softly. “Are you ready for today?”

Trixie thought for a moment. “I’m definitely ready for today. I can’t wait to stand up there at that altar next to Jim and vow to spend the rest of my life with him in front of all of my family and friends. That you and Brian will be standing next to me doing the same thing makes it doubly special. Or should I say, perfectly perfect?” She grinned at Honey.

Honey eyed her friend. “But you’re nervous about after aren’t you?”

Trixie drew in a deep breath. “Yeah, a little. It’s been so many years overdue that I think I’ve blown it way out of proportion in my head!”

“Don’t worry. I think it’s great that you waited for Jim. And so does he.”

“But he’s experienced and I’m not—what if I make a mistake?”

Honey giggled. “Trix, you won’t make a mistake. Jim will be loving and tender and guide you through it. Trust me when I say that you’ll enjoy yourself.”

Trixie was about to make a wicked comment about Honey and Brian when the door opened. Moms walked in carrying a breakfast tray, followed by Bobby with an identical tray.

“Good morning, my two lovely brides! I thought you would both enjoy breakfast in bed before the day starts to get hectic.” She set the tray she was carrying down on Honey’s lap. “For my new daughter,” she said, tenderness and tears in her eyes. Honey and Trixie’s eyes also immediately welled with tears. Bobby saw the reactions of the females and groaned. “Oh, brother, quit being so mushy!”

Mr. Belden came in amid the laughter. “What’s all the merriment going on in here? You’d think there was a wedding going to happen today or something!”

Trixie, filled with happiness, merely laughed. “Oh, Daddy!”

Later that day, Trixie and Honey, dressing in Honey’s bedroom at Manor House with the help of Miss Trask, Mrs. Belden, and Ella Kline, stood looking out over the Manor House

garden, where guests were already beginning to be seated. Trixie laughed at the site of Kathy and Julie Lynch trailing after Bobby, obviously caught in the throes of a first crush. She saw Mart and Dan escorting guests to their seats, both looking handsome in their tuxes. The sun shone off of Mr. Wheeler's bright red hair as he stood talking to Mr. Belden.

Just then Di's voice rang out. "You'd better step away from that window, ladies, if you catch a glimpse of Jim or Brian it's bad luck!"

Trixie and Honey turned to see their shared maid of honor entering the room with Hallie. Both looked gorgeous in their matching bridesmaids dresses. Although Di usually favored lilac and Hallie favored red, the brilliant blue satin of their dresses looked wonderful next to their black hair.

"Wow! You guys look great!" Honey exclaimed.

"Us?" Hallie hooted. "What about you? I have never seen two more beautiful brides."

Trixie blushed, feeling like Cinderella. She had to admit, Moms' simple ivory silk shantung dress, with the sweetheart neckline, simple pearlesque beading, and long flowing skirt did make her feel like a fairy princess. Trixie thought back to her tomboy days and knew she had never dreamed of feeling like this.

Honey's dress was more elaborate, but Trixie didn't think it was anymore beautiful than Moms' fairy tale dress. Honey's dress was of pure white silk with a lace overlay. She wore layers of crinoline underneath the skirt and kept turning to check that she wasn't dirtying her five-foot long train. Her neckline was cut in a deep V that displayed the centuries old Hart diamond necklace glittering brilliantly around her throat. Her "something old."

The four girls chattered happily as Miss Trask made a few last adjustments and pronounced the girls ready. She looked at her watch. "And just in time, too! Girls, we must be going. Diana, help me with Honey's train. Trixie, can you manage the steps on your own?"

"I can, Miss Trask, thanks."

Mrs. Wheeler swept into the room just then. "Oh, Honey, my family's jewelry looks so beautiful on you. You look wonderful, my dear," her normally smooth voice was choked with emotion as she gave her daughter a hug.

"Thank you, Mother," Honey replied, returning the hug.

Mrs. Wheeler released her daughter and turned to give Trixie a hug. "My other daughter, how beautiful you look."

Trixie blinked back tears. "Thank you so much."

Then it was Mrs. Belden's turn to hug both girls and they were on their way through the house and down to the gardens.

The two brides stood behind a large flowering bush and peered around it at the guests assembled in the Manor House gardens. The pastor stood at the altar that Regan had painstakingly built, with Jim and Brian standing nervously in front of it.

Trixie and Honey smiled at the sight of the two handsome men waiting for them. Their hearts pounded in anticipation.

The organist started the wedding processional and the pretty Lynch twins started down the aisle throwing rose petals joyfully in the air. Bobby followed behind them, looking older than his fifteen years as he solemnly walked down the aisle. Hallie and Dan were next, followed by Mart and Di, both couples walking arm in arm. Mart and Diana were remembering their wedding of two years before and Hallie and Dan were toying with the idea of what ifs. Dan hadn't asked Hallie to marry him, yet, but the thought had crossed his mind.

Shadows of the Past

And then, suddenly, the bridal march was playing and it was Trixie's turn. She looked up at her father. "Ready?"

"To give you away? Never. But I can happily place you next to Jim and tell you how much I love you and how happy I know you are going to be."

Trixie's smile was breathtaking as she and her father walked down the aisle. Jim stared at the vision in ivory silk coming toward him and knew he had never seen a more beautiful woman in his life, nor would he ever. Peter Belden solemnly gave his beloved daughter's hand to Jim. "I know you'll take care of her."

"On my honor, Sir." Jim turned to look at his bride, as Peter took his seat next Helen. "You look so beautiful." Trixie smiled in return and then the bridal march gave way to Pachelbel's Canon and everyone turned to see Honey starting down the aisle on the arm of her handsome redheaded father.

Brian's heart was in his throat as he stared at the woman he was going to marry. What did he ever do to deserve such a wonderful woman? When Mr. Wheeler placed Honey's hand in his, Brian told him, "It's an honor to have the chance to take care of your daughter, Sir."

Mr. Wheeler smiled. "Her mother and I could not be happier at her choice for a husband." At that he took his seat between Helen and his wife in the front row.

Diana and Hallie looked on as both couples repeated their vows to each other and a sense of life coming full circle began to envelope them. Both girls looked across the altar at Mart and Dan, a sense of well being and peace filling them. All was right with the world.

Trixie loved the look of the gold band next to the diamond solitaire Jim had given her. When she looked over at Jim's hand, at the thick gold band she had placed there herself, she felt an overwhelming sense of contentment.

Honey, upon hearing the words "You may kiss the bride," realized that she was now Honey Belden and threw her arms around Brian for a soul-melting kiss. Jim pulled Trixie in his arms and savored the feel of her sweet lips upon his.

The two couples were still kissing when the pastor said, "May I now present to you Mr. and Mrs. Jim Frayne and Mr. and Mrs. Brian Belden."

Both couples looked toward their friends and family, who were applauding them, and smiled happily.

Honey and Brian started down the aisle under a shower of rose petals that the guests had been given to throw instead of rice. Trixie and Jim, laughing happily followed. Trixie, feeling like a princess out of a fairy tale, knew at that moment that happily ever could exist.