

This story picks up immediately following "Home from Camp" and takes place during *The Gatehouse Mystery* while Trixie is at Crabapple Farm doing her dreaded chores. While I technically didn't plagiarize (okay one phrase about Miss Trask was, umm, borrowed), I did use the 1954 dustjacket edition as a reference. I finished this too late for one of Susansuth's fabulous edits, so all mistakes are mine. But thanks again to Susan for announcing this for me—she really is a true Bob-White. And another HUGE Bob-White thank you goes to Cathy for starting such a wonderful community and for supporting me in everything. You rock, Cathy!

A note about the dates. I decided to set my universe in 1954–1955. If you follow the days/dates given in the original books, however, *The Gatehouse Mystery* occurs in 1950, *Mysterious Visitor* in 1952, and *The Black Jacket Mystery* in 1954 (or 1960; considering it was written/published in 1961, that makes sense). So, because the books are inconsistent anyway, I decided to keep the original days/dates (minus the year) stated in the book and keep the year in which I wanted to set this universe. Which means that August 23 was not actually a Wednesday in 1954 (but, for the record, it was in 1950). Chalk it up to that Tainted Timeline, and please willfully suspend your disbelief!

A Many Faceted Friendship

by Dana

Wednesday, August 23, 1954

As Honey and Jim crossed the emerald expanse of perfectly-manicured lawns, the young girl couldn't help but think of the two boys she had just met. After all, Trixie was her very best friend in the whole world and these *were* her brothers.

Mart is so like Trixie! Honey reflected. *From the matching tow-heads, to the mischievous blue eyes, to the love of adventure, right down to the sub-conscious need for approval.* Honey could easily see how they had been dubbed the "almost twins." She wondered if Trixie and Mart realized just how alike they were, and not just in looks.

Her thoughts naturally drifted from Mart to Brian. Brian, so dark and handsome, looked very much like Trixie's father. Honey could also see how being the eldest of four had shaped Brian into the serious boy he had become. Not only had he obviously inherited his father's cool head, as well as his physical traits, but the added responsibility of keeping three boisterous younger siblings in line had also matured him. He was also smart, as the fact that he had skipped a grade attested to.

Honey was very drawn to all of these things, but what she really liked best about Brian were his eyes. The soft brown irises had held true caring in their depths. The teenager had noted that when she spoke, Brian appeared genuinely interested, his chocolate eyes never leaving her face. Until she had moved to Sleepyside, Honey had never felt that anybody had a genuine interest in what she said—certainly not a handsome and smart boy like Brian Belden.

As far as the young Wheeler girl was concerned, life couldn't get much better than it was in Sleepyside. She had a wonderful best friend, the brother she had always dreamed of, and now two more nice boys had been added to her ever widening circle of friends. *And one of those boys was so cute that maybe, just maybe...* Honey let her thoughts trail off, not even daring to dream of what could come in the future.

Jim was also quiet as the two approached the Manor House. Like Honey, Jim was grateful for the changes in his life that had occurred since moving to Sleepyside and meeting Trixie Belden. He marveled over the fact that he had a mother, a father, a sister, a roof over his head—and a handsome one at that—and never had to fear being beaten or tied up again. His,

well, Trixie was a swell girl and he had been having the grandest times hanging out with her and Honey. Adding Trixie's brothers to the mix made things so much the better.

Jim liked Mart's sense of adventure, but it was Brian whom he saw a close friendship developing with. Like Jim, Brian had skipped a grade, and was obviously an honorable sort of guy. He was just the sort of person that Jim would like to have as a best friend. Another thing the young Frayne liked about Brian was his protectiveness of Trixie. Brian was perfectly polite and nice to him when they were introduced, but the red-headed boy has seen the reserve in Brian's eyes. The other boy had been sizing him up, wondering just who the boy was who had been hanging out with his little sister all summer while he was gone. Instead of being offended, Jim found this very admirable.

As the morning wore on, Jim was glad to see the reticence in Brian's eyes thaw. He could tell that Brian was beginning to trust him, and he was grateful for that. Of course, Jim couldn't help but notice the way Brian had looked admiringly at Honey. And, well, if Brian was protective with his own sister, then turn about was fair play!

As they reached the front porch of the Manor House, Honey realized that they hadn't said a word during their entire walk. "So, Trixie's brothers are pretty neat, wouldn't you say, Jim?"

"Definitely. I think it's great that Brian wants to be my resident doctor—and Mart is so like Trixie, it's scary!"

Honey laughed and agreed before she went to find Miss Trask to ask her about swapping rooms.

Miss Trask was very agreeable to the proposal as she firmly believed that changes of one's environment were good for one.

After receiving permission, Jim and Honey went back down to the front porch of the Manor House to wait for Brian and Mart to arrive. Honey felt an unfamiliar fluttering in her stomach as she caught sight of the handsome dark-haired boy coming up the path from Crabapple Farm, Mart in tow. She tried to tell herself that it was just because she knew adventure was just around the corner and it had nothing to do with Brian's good looks.

Brian and Mart waved cheery hellos as they approached the front porch.

"I guess Trixie didn't convince your mom to let her off the hook for her chores 'just this once,'" Honey said with a grin.

Mart and Brian looked a little stunned at her words. "You know, I just realized that Trixie didn't even try to wheedle her way out of her chores!" Brian mused, awe in his voice.

"What peculiar circumstances have befallen our dear sibling that she has transformed, far exceeding expectations, in so short a period?" Mart wondered.

Honey raised an eyebrow and Jim grinned. "If you're asking how Trixie changed so much over the course of a short summer, that's easy. Honey here has been a very stabilizing influence." He winked as he nodded in Honey's direction.

Brian gave Honey a warm smile. "That's apparent. I like the change."

Honey blushed and felt warmth spread through her as she registered the fact that Brian's smile was just for her. Mart caught the exchange but said nothing.

Jim, however, was not about to let it pass. "Both of our sisters are pretty special, right, Brian?"

The dark-haired boy looked a little awkward, but caught Jim's drift. "Uh, yeah, right. Now, weren't you two going to show us some clues?" he asked, quickly changing to a safer topic of conversation.

Honey, glad to have the awkward moment pass, jumped in. "Yes! Let's go down to the gatehouse and we'll show you where we found the diamond."

The foursome chatted happily on the way down to the abandoned cottage. No loaded subjects were brought up and Honey learned that Brian had quite an herb collection that an old teacher had gotten him excited about. Jim was able to deduce that Mart liked to clown around to get attention. But he was as fun-loving as his sister, so his antics weren't annoying, but actually rather humorous.

When they arrived at the gatehouse and Jim aimed the flashlight at the floor, Honey was dismayed to see the footprints had been trampled on.

"Oh no!" she cried, disappointment apparent in her voice. "Who could have trampled all over in here?" Suddenly, the disappointment in her voice was replaced with excitement as she had a thought. "It had to have been the thief trying to cover his tracks!"

Jim laughed. "I hate to burst your bubble, Sis, but Nailor was down here mowing the lawn earlier. He probably just got curious and looked around."

Honey was instantly deflated. She had wanted Brian to see how smart she was. Instead, she just felt rather silly. What kind of impression was she making on him? Then she immediately wondered why she cared. *What does it matter if Brian thinks you're smart, Honey Wheeler?* she scolded herself. *And why am I not nearly as concerned if Mart thinks I'm smart? He's Trixie's brother, too.* But Honey refused to dwell on this for long and concentrated on what Jim was saying.

"Well, there's no use trying to analyze the footprints for clues since this is such a jumble."

Mart was looking around. "I don't know. Honey might have a point. Would Nailor have made this many prints if he was just taking a quick look around? It's almost as if the abundance of prints were made to cover the other prints."

Honey perked up and looked at Mart gratefully. She felt flattered that Mart agreed with her and she hoped that she had saved face with Brian. She snuck a look at him but he was looking at his younger brother with skepticism written all over his face. Once again, she felt inexplicably deflated that Brian didn't seem to believe her and Mart's theory.

Jim also noticed the skepticism on Brian's face, but he was reassured by it. He wasn't ready to believe that the thief had come down here with the deliberate intent to mess up some footprints. That Brian appeared to agree with his unspoken thoughts just solidified the feeling he had that the two of them were very much alike and would probably grow to be good friends.

"I don't know, Mart," Brian said. "That seems like a very deliberate act and we don't even know for sure that there is a thief."

"The diamond just planted itself here?" Mart said, a touch sarcastically.

"Well, no," Brian admitted, "but there could be a million explanations."

Mart looked ready to challenge his brother so Honey jumped in. "Well, either way, we should examine these. Jim, may I see your flashlight?"

After a few minutes of close examination with the flashlights they had brought, the tracks were no easier to discern. Unfortunately, the same was true about the footprints in the thicket where Trixie believed someone had stood and listened to her and Honey's conversation.

"Shall we check out the tire tracks?" Jim asked after the gang had determined there was nothing valuable in the thicket.

Brian and Mart immediately agreed and followed Jim and Honey toward the road. Once again, as they approached, Honey let out an exasperated groan. "The tire tracks are messed up, too! I give up!"

Sure enough, a car had driven over the clues by the road.

"Well, this was a bust," Mart said with a frustrated kick at a nearby pebble.

Honey was particularly upset that the clues were no longer intact. She really wanted the boys, especially Brian, to believe in her and Trixie. How were they ever going to open the detective agency they had decided on if they couldn't even preserve their clues? She sighed and looked up, her hazel eyes meeting Brian's brown ones. A shiver went through her when he smiled.

"Well, we didn't learn much from these clues, but I believe that you and Trixie may be on to something," he said.

Honey felt happiness welling up inside her at Brian's words. "Thanks, Brian."

"Well, I never doubted you," Mart said emphatically.

Honey turned her thousand watt smile toward the blond boy. "I know, Mart, and I really appreciate it."

"Well, gang," Jim started. "Since there's nothing else to look at, we should head back up to the house and start the room swap. Do you two want to help?"

Brian and Mart looked torn. "Well, we'd love to, but we really should be getting back to the farm to help Trixie and Moms," Brian stated.

Jim nodded. Trixie may have tried to shirk her responsibilities every so often, but it did not surprise him that Brian would be very conscientious about his chores. "Well, would you like to see your little brother's equestrian abilities? I promised Bobby I'd give him a ride on Lady."

Mart raised his sandy eyebrows. "That's another thing I can't get used to—Bobby growing up and getting riding lessons!"

Brian agreed. "There *were* a lot of changes this summer."

Honey couldn't decide if Brian thought that was a good thing or a bad thing. "There have been a lot of changes, Brian, but I know Jim and I are grateful for the chance to live in Sleepside."

"Oh, I like the changes, Honey!" he said, giving her a warm look. "It just takes some time to get used to."

Honey returned his smile, surprised at the relief that flooded through her at his words. What was going on with her today?

The gang found Bobby "holping" Dick wash the Wheelers' sleek sedan. He waved a cheery good-bye as Bobby scampered off toward the stable to enjoy his ride.

Honey, Mart, and Brian lingered outside the corral to watch the equestrian demonstration. Honey was content to chat with the two brothers about the Manor House while Jim and Bobby rode Lady.

"I told Trixie that you must continue to treat the Manor House as yours—swimming in the lake anytime you want for the rest of the summer, sledding down the hill, and ice skating in the winter."

"Gee, that's great, Honey!" Mart exclaimed.

"But you'll be here to do all that with us, right?" Brian asked. Honey wondered if it was her imagination or if Brian seemed anxious.

"Oh, definitely. Mother and Daddy have agreed to let me attend Sleepyside Junior-Senior High this fall," Honey said happily. Brian's smile at her words was most definitely not her imagination and she once again felt all warm inside. What's more, she knew it wasn't the August heat making her feel that way!

When the ride was over, Brian and Mart informed Bobby that they were heading back to Crabapple Farm.

The six-year-old emphatically disagreed. "Won't! Jim promised I could help him and Honey move their rooms!"

Jim looked apologetically at the two older Belden boys. "I had to promise him something to get him to end the horseback ride."

Mart shook his head. "What was I just saying about him growing up? Scratch it!" He looked at his difficult younger brother. "Bobby, you need to come back home, not needle Jim until he agrees to do what you want."

Bobby looked up at his brother, an angelic look on his features. "But Jim needs me! He said so himself!"

Jim's green eyes sparkled as he shrugged.

Brian and Mart sighed deeply and knew that there was no way they were going to get their stubborn younger brother back down to Crabapple Farm until he had "holped" Jim. "Okay, Bobby, you can help for now. But when I come back to get you for lunch you have to come. You don't want to disappoint Moms, do you?"

Bobby shook his head. "Not 'pointing Moms, helping Jim!"

Mart rolled his eyes. "Okay, half-pint, go 'holp' Jim and we'll be back to get you later."

Bobby, having gotten his way again, was instantly all smiles. "Okey dokey, Mart."

"Well, we have to be going now, but we'll be back later," Brian promised.

Honey was sorry to see their time together end. *Silly, you'll see him later!* she reasoned with herself.

Brian and Mart waved as they headed down the path to Crabapple Farm. Jim and Honey looked at each other, smiled, and they each took one of Bobby's hands. He happily allowed them to lead him toward the Manor House.

"Those are some swell guys," Jim said conversationally.

Honey nodded her agreement. "They really are. You and Brian are a lot alike."

"You noticed that, too, huh?"

"I did. I think the five of us are in for some neat times ahead."

Jim wholeheartedly agreed as Honey suddenly thought of the sparkling facets of the diamond they had found and realized that the friendship the five were developing shined even brighter.

Honey and Jim looked at each other meaningfully, sharing the look of two people who had experienced loneliness and now knew that the hard times were past and good times were ahead. Brother and sister both reflected that the friendship they had created with the Beldens was of far greater value than any diamond. The future was bright indeed!