

This is (finally!) my contribution for Jixemitri Circle Writing Project #7. Please willfully suspend your disbelief about the housing situation at Columbia University—I had to backpedal from something I wrote in an earlier CWP (#4) before Brian decided to tell me his story. Why do these characters do this to me? ☺ Also, the restaurant Brian goes to near Columbia may or not be as old as I stated (but it does exist)—I claim dramatic license! And SIM, there's something in here just for you! Carryover items are listed at the end. The title is from the Aerosmith song of the same name. Special thanks to Susansuth and Mary who helped me make this more coherent! You guys rock!

I Don't Want to Miss a Thing by Dana

Brian Belden lay in his bed. Not in his bed in his dorm room at Columbia University. But *his* bed at Crabapple Farm. At *home*. The nineteen-year-old had just finished his sophomore year of college and was happy to spend his summer at the family homestead. It wasn't going to be a lucrative summer monetarily, but in terms of gaining experience toward his goal of becoming a doctor, it would be invaluable.

He had arranged with Dr. Ferris to volunteer part-time at the same hospital where his sister had been a candy striper for years. Brian would be accompanying the doctor on rounds, helping in the hospital laboratory, and even observing and assisting in the O.R. To round out his summer and earn some money, he had also secured a part-time job at Crimper's Department Store.

Brian's full scholarship to Columbia included room-and-board and tuition, but not books. Helen and Peter Belden were proud of their oldest son, as they were of all of their children, and would gladly have paid for his textbooks. But even used, Brian's pre-med texts were extremely expensive and this upcoming year there would be a second Belden in college to consider; Mart's scholarship to Cornell was only partial. And, although she hadn't said anything to him, Brian was sure that his sister Trixie would be looking at out-of-state colleges—in Michigan. That would be expensive. Brian knew that his younger siblings and their college expenses were not his responsibility, but that did not stop him from worrying about them.

So, although his parents had supported the idea of Brian volunteering full-time at the hospital, the young man had looked toward the future and decided that he felt the need to help his parents out. Hence, the part-time job at Crimper's.

But as he lay in his bed that balmy May evening, Brian was thinking of none of this. Instead, he was thinking of how complicated life had become. How life—and love—had seemed so easy once upon a time. How nothing was easy anymore. His thoughts drifted to her, to his sunshine girl, but those thoughts were still too painful. He had carefully kept them tucked inside the deepest recesses of his brain, not allowing them to escape. Instead of dwelling on the past and what might have been, he looked to the present. His mind filled with thoughts of another girl. A girl who could maybe take away the pain and the numbness he had been feeling.

He lay in bed thinking of Honey Wheeler.

She had looked so beautiful tonight in her form-fitting emerald green prom dress. Brian couldn't help but notice how happy she had looked as Mrs. Belden had snapped photo after photo of the prom-going foursome: Mart and Diana—and Honey and Dan. Even Trixie and Jim had been there to watch the festivities before Jim took his "sapphire girl" to dinner at the Inn. Brian had hovered along the edge of the group, taking it all in but not saying much. "Taking it all in" had included not being able to miss the very palpable look of love in Honey's large hazel eyes every time she looked at her boyfriend and the love that Dan so obviously returned.

Brian had stood on the periphery, the immature, primitive portion of his brain screaming, *But I saw her first!* Fortunately, the mature, logical portion of his brain had remained in control while the couple was in the house, but it had been an internal battle in Brian's psyche. Brian's body had physically slumped in relief when they left, but his brain had remained active. He had finally decided to go bed, feeling very transparent as he mumbled an excuse to Moms and Dad as he left the family room.

When had these feelings for Honey, the girl next door, surfaced? Had they always been there, lying dormant, and just been awakened as he watched her blossom under Dan's love? Was it some stupid male knee-jerk response to simply seeing her with someone else? Or was he just imagining these feelings after the rough year his heart had had? *Epecially in the face of three happy Bob-White couples*, he bitterly reflected. Suddenly, Brian was odd man out. The rest of the Bob-Whites seemed capable of sustaining relationships, so why couldn't he? Why couldn't Brian Belden, the one everyone looked up to, have what his younger siblings and friends had? What was wrong with him?

His first semester as a sophomore had been wonderful. He had met another scholarship student last year and romance had blossomed. Due to a university wide dormitory housing shortage, the housing department at Columbia had authorized Brian and the other student to share a university apartment normally reserved for married students rather than give them the two single rooms their scholarships entitled them to. It was an unusual arrangement, but the university and both students were happy with the transaction. At least, he had thought they were happy. Brian had been shocked when, right before Christmas, his girlfriend had told him that the relationship just wasn't working. It had been working for him. They got along well, they enjoyed spending time together, they never fought. What was wrong?

Brian tormented himself. Because his girlfriend was never able to give him a concrete reason as to why she was calling things off, he blamed himself for the failed relationship. He must not have been romantic enough, not patient enough, not understanding enough. *Not good enough*. The thought was depressing enough, but then to realize that he had been happy when she had not been made him feel like a fool. How could he have not known what was going on inside her mind?

Suddenly, Brian found himself living in the dorms. The day after spending Christmas with his family in Sleepyside, Brian had returned to Columbia to move his belongings into a dorm room that had opened up when the previous tenant had decided to leave school after the first semester.

Brian hated the dorms. He wondered if he genuinely hated them or if it was just a reaction to losing his idyllic and romantic apartment life. But it didn't matter. Either way, he hated the isolation he felt in his tiny room despite living on a floor full of students. He hated walking into the floor lounge and seeing guys sitting there without pants, only in their boxers, like this was home or something. It wasn't home. Plus, during Christmas, it had been like a ghost town. It was during this lonely time of self-doubt that he had gotten to know Grace, a dynamic doctor who had guest lectured one of his classes. He ran into her by chance while visiting his professor, one of the few with office hours during the Christmas holidays. The two had chatted and Brian felt so comfortable that he had impulsively asked her out for the following evening, completely forgetting that it was New Year's Eve. But Grace, a widow, didn't have plans and actually agreed to go.

New Year's Eve with Grace was a sparkling memory for Brian. They had decided on a quiet evening and left the city for dinner at a countryside inn that Grace knew of. Brian smiled as he recalled the pleasant sound of Grace's bright red boots crunching satisfyingly in the snow and the sight of snow covered pumpkins on the inn's porch.

Brian and Grace never ran out of things to talk about as the evening wore on and midnight—and the New Year—approached. The beautiful doctor never tired of hearing his stories about Crabapple Farm, his mystery-loving sister, and their close-knit group of friends. He laughed through her stories about Jell-O wrestling for charity as an undergrad and the frisky, three-legged cat that she had adopted as a child. She was animated as she told him about the time the cat had single-handedly brought down the Christmas tree. Her eyes sparkled with remembered amusement as she told of ornaments and presents scattered throughout the living room and Inky sitting in the middle of his swath of destruction, tangled up in a slinky, staring up at the family with an angelic look on his face. Brian had tears running down his face as she finished the story. Then the conversation slowed as the band started its melodies and Brian led Grace to the dance floor. The couple had danced together, feeling completely relaxed and at home with each other. The kiss at midnight had been the natural next step.

But when the evening was finally over and the doctor dropped Brian off at his dorm, they both knew that too much stood between them. This would be a special night, certainly a night to remember for both of them, but a solitary episode.

Brian still remembered Grace's last words before he left the comforting warmth of her car. "Maybe another time in another universe, Brian Belden."

After that, the gray January days dragged by and Brian became a virtual recluse, consumed by his studies in an effort to salve the rough edges of his wounded heart. It was much easier to concentrate on calculus equations and organic chem formulas than it was to ponder why he was alone. Why he seemed to be doomed to the temporary.

But finally one day when Brian was studying in the library, the sun came out. That was the day that Brian met Alexandria Drayton.

Brian's thoughts drifted to that magical time...

* * *

Brian was intently studying his organic chemistry in his favorite corner of the library when he heard the sound of giggling. He sighed to himself and tried to ignore the sound as he studied the chemical formulas for aldehydes and ketones for an upcoming exam. The giggling quieted but excited whispers took its place. Brian really couldn't fault the girls responsible since they were whispering and this wasn't the strict silent section of the library, but everything got on his nerves lately, and this was no exception. Ignoring the girls became increasingly difficult and after scribbling the acronym for 1,2-dimethoxyethane with a force greater than necessary, he finally looked up to find the source of his irritation.

His dark, serious eyes immediately found two girls sitting at a table across the room. The one doing most of the whispering had dark, unruly hair, but the other girl—well, the other girl, she looked like an angel was Brian's first thought. *Stop! You're being corny!* was the thought that followed as the irritation ebbed out of his body. The girl's long, straight locks were almost white they were so blonde and Brian could see her wide blue eyes even from his seat several tables away. She had the last lingering traces of sun-touched skin, as though she had spent the winter break somewhere warm and sunny. Everything about her reminded him of sunshine.

Just then, she looked over him and he realized he was staring. He started to look away but she smiled at him and he found himself smiling back at her. Her dark-haired friend turned to look at Brian and he immediately recognized her from his organic chemistry class. She obviously recognized him, too, because she smiled and waved and before he knew it, both girls were approaching the table where he sat.

"Hi there," the dark-haired girl said. "I recognize you from organic chem. You studying for this week's exam?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I am," Brian replied, desperately trying to keep himself from staring at the blonde girl who turned out to be even more breath-taking up close. Her brilliant blue eyes almost mesmerized him.

"I'm Kim and this is Lexi, she's in the five o'clock organic class, so we're over there studying but unfortunately, we just don't get it. Are you any good? Do you want to study together?"

Brian was happy to study with the two girls. He knew organic pretty well, but he also knew he retained knowledge best by teaching it to others. That's why he had loved tutoring his younger siblings in high school. "I'm Brian. I'd love to study with you guys, let's find a study room and get started."

"Great!" Kim said and turned to collect her belongings from their table. Lexi gave Brian a beautiful smile that nearly stopped him in his tracks before turning and following her friend.

The trio found an open study room and Brian began to teach them the intricacies of the stereochemistry of cyclic compounds. Kim was slow to catch-on at first, but by the end of the evening the brunette seemed to have a pretty good grasp of the material. Lexi had caught on quickly and even seemed to enjoy the manipulation of the equations.

As they were returning their books to their backpacks, Brian offered to walk the girls back to their dorms. "Where do you live?"

Kim immediately answered. "I'm just across the street in Ruggles, you don't need to bother."

"And I'm just across the quad in Furnald, so I'll be okay, too," Lexi stated. Brian's heart skipped a beat—Furnald was his dorm.

"Non-sense, it's dark out and you two are heading in opposite directions so you won't even have each other." He turned to Kim. "Lexi and I can walk you to your dorm and then head back to Furnald—that's where I live, too," he explained.

"Well, if it's not any trouble," Lexi conceded.

Brian smiled. "No trouble at all."

The threesome left Butler Library and headed across West 113th Street to Ruggles. Kim thanked Brian for escorting her back to her dorm before the remaining duo turned and headed back toward Butler and, eventually, Furnald. The two shared small talk on the way back to their dorm and Brian learned that Lexi was originally from Pacific Palisades, California.

"California, that's got to be nice, all that sun and sand and surf," Brian said, wondering vaguely if he sounded like an idiot. "My friends and I were supposed to go to San Diego but that trip got canceled."

"That's too bad, southern California is a fun place to visit. It was a fun place to grow up, too."

"So, what made you decide to come out East?" Brian inquired.

"My mom went to Columbia before she moved to California and met my dad. I thought I'd come out here and honor her memory."

"Her memory?"

Lexi nodded matter-of-factly. "Yes, she died when I was only a baby. It's just been me and my dad all my life." Brian started to express his regret but Lexi seemed to anticipate what

he was going to say. "Don't say you're sorry. It's really okay. I guess it was easier since I don't remember her and my dad and I are so close. I'm curious about her, but I don't exactly miss her. I hope that doesn't sound callous."

Brian shook his head. "Not at all. I guess you can't miss what you never had."

Lexi flashed her breath-taking smile at him. "Exactly. Well, here we are, thanks for walking with me. I really did feel safer with you."

Brian smiled, his heart hammering in his chest, terrified of saying good-bye to this girl and never seeing her again. "I'm glad."

"So, I don't know about you, but I could use some more studying for that exam. Do you want to get together tomorrow?"

"Umm, yeah, that'd be great," Brian managed to stutter.

"Great! What room are you in? I promised a friend of mine I'd have dinner with him tomorrow, but I can come by when that's done and we can head over to Butler. Around 7:30?" Lexi looked at him with her wide, blue eyes and Brian desperately tried to come up with a response better than "umm, sure."

"Umm, sure. Sounds great," Brian stammered. *You idiot!* His brain screamed.

Lexi smiled. "Great, what room are you in?" she repeated.

"Oh, umm, 452."

"452. Got it. I'm in 312, if something comes up and you can't make it or whatever, just leave a note on the door. Thanks for the help tonight, Brian." Lexi said and then was gone. Brian sagged against the nearest wall. If something came up? Uh-uh, no way. Come hell or high water Brian was going to keep this study date!

* * *

Brian did keep his study date that night—and every other night that week. The trio pulled an extra-long session the Thursday night before the exam and Kim fell asleep eventually, leaving Brian and Lexi to talk about subjects other than organic chem. Brian had already determined that Lexi was smart during their study sessions, but that night he saw her wonderful sense of humor and her sweetness. He even laughed at her two pigs in a bathtub joke. Brian knew he was falling hard and that he had never felt this way before in his life. He was determined to keep his distance, though. He was too afraid to allow himself to become close to someone after the pain he had experienced in the past.

But when, on the Wednesday following the exam, Lexi burst into his room and threw her arms around him in an excited hug, Brian knew keeping his distance was a lost cause. The sunny girl was ecstatic because she had received a 4.0 on her exam.

"And I owe it all to you!" Lexi was saying. Brian breathed in the fresh, citrus-y smell of the beautiful blonde in his arms and felt a warmth spread through his body that felt like coming home.

"Not even!" Brian managed to say. "That 4.0 was all you."

Lexi laughed. "Well, whoever it was, I say it deserves a celebration. Whaddya say we paint the town tomorrow night?"

Brian's heart skipped a beat. Could this wonderful woman really be asking him out? Better make sure. "Sure, what did you and Kim have in mind?"

Lexi's eyes danced with amusement. "Brian, I'm not sure if you checked the date tomorrow, but it's February 14th. I was thinking maybe we could make it just the two of us?" She looked up at him, her face a portrait of hope.

Brian's brain screamed, *Gleeps! Is she serious? Gleeps! Gleeps! What do I say? What do I answer? Quick! Brian, say something...anything!*

"That sounds perfectly perfect," Brian heard himself saying. *Perfectly perfect? Wha-at?*

But Lexi didn't seem to notice Brian's inner turmoil. Her body relaxed after his response and she smiled happily at him. "It's a date then. There's a great restaurant that my dad took me to when I first started school. It's been there so long it was actually one of my mom's favorites when she was here. My dad said she talked about it a lot." Lexi's smile turned shy. "I'd love to take you there."

Brian knew how much this restaurant must mean to her and was flattered that she would ask him there on the most romantic night of the year. His smile was evidence of the sheer happiness he felt right then. "I'd love to be taken there."

"Great. Meet here tomorrow night at, say, 6:30?"

"Perfect. I'll see you then," Brian stated, leaning down to give Lexi a kiss on the forehead.

Brian was touched to see that she actually blushed before she left the room. The sophomore sank into the chair near his desk and sighed. He had a date with Lexi Drayton!

* * *

Brian was a bundle of nerves getting ready for his Valentine's date with Lexi. He didn't want to dress up too much if the restaurant was casual, but he didn't want to be underdressed. *Darn!* He thought. *Why didn't I have the presence of mind to ask what kind of restaurant this was?* He tortured himself with self-chastisement for the next several minutes before deciding on khaki pants, a crisp white oxford shirt with Ralph Lauren's Polo trademark, and brown dress shoes. He picked out a navy blue tie, just in case. Brian stared in the mirror and was fairly satisfied with what he saw. It had been an unseasonably warm February for New York, so he figured he could get away with his light sport coat.

Brian looked at his watch and realized he had twenty minutes to kill before Lexi would be there. He sat down on his bed and looked around his dorm room for lack of anything better to do. His eyes fell on his desk and he grinned as he saw the cookbook Moms had given him at the beginning of the year. He still thought the title was a scream: *The (Reluctant, Nervous, Lazy, Broke, Busy, Confused) College Student's Cookbook*. Moms had grinned when she gave it to him and said that at first she couldn't decide between that one or the *A Man, A Can, A Plan Cookbook*, but she ultimately decided that she didn't want him eating out of cans all year. He had accepted the book gratefully and promised her he wouldn't eat junk.

Of course, now that I'm back on the college meal plan that exactly what I'm eating, he reflected ruefully as he thought of the college dining halls. None of that tonight, Brian! He then told himself sternly. *Tonight you are going to have a wonderful meal with a wonderful young woman.* He shook his head. *Ugh! Who thinks like that? 'Wonderful young woman'—what are you, fifty years old? But then again, she is wonderful, and she is young, and she is a woman. STOP! Stop arguing with yourself over this. You're making yourself crazy! Breathe, breathe. Okay, think. How can you occupy yourself for 16 more minutes?*

Brian once again looked around his room. There was laundry to be done, but obviously this was not the time. He certainly wasn't going to crack open his calculus book or his physiology book. He never read pleasure books anymore, so he didn't have any of those lying

around. *What the heck?* He finally thought and grabbed the cookbook his mother had given him. *This should numb my brain until Lexi gets here.* He had gotten as far as the recipe for the Breakfast Pita when someone knocked on his door. He jumped up, tossed the book aside, and was across the room in two excited strides. When he reached the door, he put his hand on the knob, paused to take a deep, relaxing breath, and then opened the door with a smile on his face.

Lexi, dressed in a red-blouse and a black mini-skirt, stood before him. He was so stunned by how gorgeous she looked that he didn't even notice the strange object she held in her hands. "Hi Brian," she said, rather shyly.

"Hi, you ready?" Brian asked.

"Sure am," Lexi smiled up at him coyly. "Don't you want to know what I'm doing with a Mr. Potato Head?"

Brian's eyes dropped down to her hands and he realized it was a rather unusual object to be carrying. "Well, uhh, yeah."

She held it out to him. "Well, after you told me the sad, sad story of your sister losing all of the pieces to your Mr. Potato Head, I decided that you needed a replacement." She suddenly looked embarrassed. "I guess that's pretty goofy, huh?"

Brian laughed and took the toy from her. "No, it's not goofy at all. Well, it is a little, but a good kind of goofy. This guy will have a place of honor on my bookshelf." Brian placed the doll on his bookshelf and the two stood back to admire it. Brian looked down at the girl next to him. "I was very traumatized by the experience as a child, but now my life feels whole again. Thank you for bringing closure to my Mr. Potato Head deprivation."

Lexi laughed along with Brian. "Anytime, but is deprivation even a word?"

Brian shrugged happily. "Who knows? Who cares?" He then looked down at his clothes and remembered what he wanted to ask Lexi. "I wasn't sure what kind of a restaurant this was. Do I need a tie or anything?"

Lexi shook her head. "Nope, you look great just the way you are."

"Thanks," Brian said. "So do you."

Lexi grinned up at him. "Thanks! Now, how about we go eat?"

"Sounds good to me!" Brian shyly took Lexi's hand in his and the two happily left the dorm.

The restaurant that Lexi chose was very close to campus, only a couple of blocks away on Broadway. Brian had been somewhat uptight about the restaurant, not knowing what to expect, but he relaxed immediately as he entered Pertutti Café and saw the fresh and vibrant decor. It was romantic, but relaxed at the same time. Lexi gave her name and the two were immediately seated at a small, intimate table near the front of the restaurant. Floor-to-ceiling windows gave them a clear view of the bustling New York street outside.

Brian looked over the menu and was relieved to see that it was inexpensive enough that it would not break his budget.

"Make sure you save room for dessert. The tiramisu is to die for," Lexi advised.

"Thanks. I've never had tiramisu before, but I'll be sure to try it."

The waiter soon appeared for their order and after ordering the eggplant sorrentina that Lexi wanted and the chicken marsala for himself, Brian turned to his date. "I really did like the Mr. Potato Head. Now tell me, what childhood toy traumas do you have, Miss Drayton?"

Lexi laughed. “Well, actually, I have a couple. When I was a kid I read these books about this eighteen-year-old spy named Lucy Radcliffe and—”

“Really?” Brian interrupted. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt, but my sister is nuts about those, too.”

“Well, then, *you know*,” Lexi emphasized with a wink.

“Yes, I know that every female I know who reads those books seems to go a little overboard with the obsession,” Brian chuckled.

“Guilty as charged,” she said with a wicked gleam in her eye.

“But anyway, you were telling me your traumatic story.”

“Yes. I lent one of my beloved Lucy books to my friend Darcy as a child and she put it in her bag with her rain boots and managed to rip the cover off. I taped it back together, but it’s not quite the same.”

“No, it isn’t,” Brian agreed, an idea beginning to formulate in his head. “Which book was it?”

“*Escapade in Madrid*,” Lexi answered. Brian tucked that bit of information away for future use.

Their orders soon arrived and the two college students immediately set to eating. Brian was impressed with the large portions and the delicious food. “Boy, does this beat dorm food.”

Lexi agreed. “I can see why my mom loved this place so much when she was here. Close to campus, great food, low prices, great atmosphere—it really can’t be beat.”

“So, you said you had a couple of traumatic stories. What else?” Brian inquired after they had made significant progress toward eating all of the wonderful food in front of them.

Lexi grinned that grin of hers and Brian was instantly breathless. *If she only knew what she does to me when she smiles like that!*

“Well, there was an Etch-a-Sketch incident.”

Brian looked at her incredulously. “An Etch-a-Sketch incident?”

“But that’s probably best left undiscussed.”

“Whatever you say.”

The two ordered tiramisu for dessert. Lexi complimented hers with jasmine tea and Brian, feeling adventurous, ordered a cappuccino. Although Brian never considered himself an Aerosmith fan, “I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing” was playing on the restaurant’s sound system and Brian thought it was perfect for the moment. He wanted to know everything there was about this girl in front of him—and he *didn’t* want to miss a thing.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Alexandria,” Brian said, and then regretted sounding so formal by using her given name.

Lexi smiled at him, not her mischievous grin or her coy smile, but a soft smile of true happiness and Brian thought he would melt. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Brian.”

The two continued to smile at each other until their waiter returned with their desserts and brought them both back down to earth.

Brian didn’t have anything to compare the tiramisu to, but it was downright heavenly. And the cappuccino was not bad, either.

The two sipped their drinks slowly and chatted, both reluctant to leave the magic of the restaurant, but eventually they realized it was time to head back. Brian insisted on paying for the check even though Lexi argued that she had been the one to invite him out. Brian won in the end but Lexi vowed that the next time was on her.

Brian smiled. *Next time.*

The two strolled casually, hand in hand, back toward their dorm. Brian stopped along the way to buy roses from a street vendor. Lexi accepted them with her beautiful smile and Brian realized he would spend anything, do anything, to be rewarded with that smile.

When they entered their dorm, Lexi got a distressed look on her face.

"What's the matter?" Brian asked, concerned.

"Oh, I just don't feel like dealing with my roommate and her boyfriend right now. They were both too broke to go out, so they were going to rent movies and stay in tonight."

"I have a VCR in my room and some movies. You wanna come hang out in my room?"

"That'd be great. Let's go!" The distress left her face and was replaced with excitement. Brian wondered how she could get so animated about watching movies in his dorm room. But then again, the thought of cuddling up next to Lexi watching movies didn't exactly make him depressed.

Brian got some Cokes from the machine and the two eventually settled in to watch *Armageddon*. He didn't necessarily want to watch an action flick, but of Brian's meager choice of movies, that was the only one that she hadn't seen and she insisted on seeing something new. But as he was watching it he realized that the same song he had heard in the restaurant was the love theme from the movie. He smiled inside as he listened to the lyrics. Soon his thoughts were drifting and in his mind he was dancing with Lexi to the song. He was holding her close and she was wearing clouds of white and his family and her dad were looking on.

"That was so sad," Lexi said, tears streaming down her face. Brian was pulled back into reality. The movie was over and the credits were rolling across the screen, and what Brian now thought of as "their song" was playing.

"Well, she may have lost her father but at least she ended up with her true love."

"But that was so sad. I wish she could have had both." Lexi suddenly laughed through her tears. "You must think I'm a dork! Here I am sobbing over some silly action movie."

"I do *not* think you're a dork. My sister, who is the toughest girl I know, even got teary over the end of it."

"Well, I still think I'm a dork, but thanks for making me feel better."

"Anytime." Brian said, staring into her blue, blue eyes and finding himself lost. The next thing he knew he was kissing her and she was kissing him back. Brian knew he had never felt so good and nothing had ever felt this right. The kiss led to another and another and another and, before Brian knew it, it was very late.

"Lexi, don't you have an eight o'clock class tomorrow?"

Lexi glanced at the clock and sighed. "Yeah, I guess I should get going. But I'll see you tomorrow, right? Dinner in the dining hall?"

"Absolutely."

The two kissed a little more and then Lexi finally left. "Thanks for the wonderful time tonight, Brian."

“Thank you,” Brian said before kissing the tip of her nose. Lexi waved as she disappeared down the hall and Brian shut his door, leaning back against it and exhaling deeply.

Brian knew—without any doubt—that he was in love.

* * *

As the days and weeks wore on, Brian did fall more and more in love with Alexandria Drayton. And what made him so ecstatic was the fact that she felt the same way about him. They shared the same interests, they never ran out of things to say to each other, they finished each other’s sentences—as far as Brian was concerned, life was pretty near perfect. He called her his sunshine girl and she basked in the warmth of his love.

Until the day that he was sitting in Lexi’s dorm room, studying physiology with her, and the phone rang. Lexi answered it and Brian immediately knew something was wrong by the way she stiffened. He sat up and put his arm around her shoulders as she said, “Oh my God. What happened?”

Brian looked at Lexi’s white face, pinched with fright, and a hollow feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t know how he knew, but something was wrong with her dad.

“Which hospital? Yes. Okay, I’ll catch the first flight out that I can.” Lexi hung up and Brian could tell she was in shock.

“Lexi, honey, what is it?” Brian said in his most comforting voice.

“My...my dad,” Lexi started. But then suddenly she was overcome with sobs that wracked her body. Brian held her and whispered reassurances into her ear but he felt helpless, knowing that this was all he could do for her right now, but wanting to do so much more—wanting to take the pain away.

Lexi finally calmed down enough to the point where she could speak. “My dad had a stroke. They’re still not sure how bad it is. They think they have him stabilized, but it could still be touch and go for a while,” Lexi looked at Brian, her blue eyes filled with sadness and despair. “What will I do if...I mean, I can’t...” She erupted into fresh sobs and Brian gripped her fiercely.

“Listen, Lexi, your father is going to be fine. Don’t even think of anything else. Now, listen to me, okay, sweetie?” Lexi nodded, willingly giving control over to Brian. “You start packing. I’ll hop online and look into plane tickets, and then I’ll drive you to the airport. You’ll get to California, you’ll see your dad, you’ll see he’s going to get better, and everything will be fine.” Brian prayed he wasn’t lying to the woman he loved. Lexi again nodded and moved about the room as if in a trance, gathering belongings and throwing them into a bag, but not really registering what she was doing.

Brian immediately found the cheapest last minute tickets he could and purchased them with the credit card Lexi gave him. “What about my classes?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything. You just get to California and see to your dad. You’ll be back before you know it.” Again, Brian wasn’t convinced of what he was saying but he fervently hoped he was telling her the truth. For his sake as well as hers.

Lexi was silent on the way to the airport and Brian didn’t want to intrude. He knew there was nothing he could say to make her feel better. He just wanted to be her rock to lean on in this time of need. He hugged her at the airport and made her promise to call him the minute she knew anything. And he promised to take care of notifying her professors.

Over the next two weeks, Brian rarely heard from his girlfriend. He tried to keep himself busy, but he found it very difficult to concentrate on his studies. More often than not, his mind was in California, with his heart.

One night, early in April, Brian lay in bed, unable to sleep. It was one a.m. but time had been irrelevant ever since Lexi had gone. The phone rang, startling him.

“Hello?”

“Brian, it's me, Lexi.”

“Lexi! How are you? How's your dad? When are you coming back?” Brian was so starved to hear from his girlfriend that he couldn't stop the flow of questions.

There was a pause on the other end. “I'm fine. Dad's making progress,” Lexi's voice was very strained, more so than usual, and Brian knew that this was not going to be a call that he wanted.

“Well, that's good. Is he home yet?”

Lexi shook her head and then realized that Brian couldn't see her. “Not yet. He still has some more rehabilitation to go. He's out of the woods, but he has to re-learn to speak, to walk, everything. It looks like it's going to be pretty rough.”

“At least he's going to be okay,” Brian said.

“Yeah, he's going to be okay.”

There was silence on the line for a moment.

“I miss you, Lexi.”

Tears streamed out of Lexi's eyes and she fought to keep her voice even. “I miss you, too, Brian.”

Brian could tell she was crying and wasn't sure whether to mention it or not. He decided to be matter-of-fact. “I have all of your assignments for you. You can make up the incompletes over the summer. All of your professors have agreed.”

“Brian—“

There was something heartbreaking in Lexi's voice and Brian rushed forward, unwilling to let her say what he feared the most. “And I can help you with everything. I've even been attending your political science class when I can to make sure that you have good notes.”

“Brian—“

“Everyone sends their love. Kim misses you. She can't wait to see you again.”

“Brian, please.” Lexi pleaded, her voice cracking. “Please don't make this any harder for me.”

Brian didn't know what to say. He didn't want to hear the inevitable.

“I can't come back. I'm all my father has. I have to stay here and take care of him.”

Brian lay in bed, feeling as though he had been punched in the gut. This could *not* be happening.

“Lexi—“

“Brian, please, I know what you're going to say. You know that I have to stay here.”

“Fine, I'll transfer out to California at the end of the year. UCLA is a great school.”

“Brian, I can't ask you to do that.”

“You're not asking, I offered.”

“Brian,” Lexi said firmly, “I won’t let you do that. Your family is there. You’ve invested two years into Columbia. I’m not going to let you throw all of that away for me.”

“Lexi, I wouldn’t be throwing anything away. I love you! I want to be with you!” Brian knew he was sounding desperate but he didn’t care. He couldn’t lose this girl. He could *not* lose his Lexi.

Lexi continued to cry. “Brian, I love you, too. Damn. I wanted to be looking into your eyes the first time we said that to each other.”

“Come back here, or I’ll come out there, and I can say it looking into your eyes a thousand times.”

“I can’t, Brian. My life isn’t my own anymore. I need to take care of my dad.”

“I’m not asking you not to. I’ll come out there and help you.”

“Brian, you deserve so much more than this. I can’t be your girlfriend right now. I don’t know if I can ever be your girlfriend again.”

Brian was openly crying now, too. “Lexi, don’t say that.”

“Brian, I have just taken on the full time responsibility of taking care of my now-invalid father. I can’t be the girlfriend you deserve.”

“Lexi, I—”

“Brian, listen to me. I have to go. I have to. I have to do this and I have to do this completely. You deserve more. I can’t and I won’t ask you to wait for me, but maybe...someday...” Lexi let her sentence trail off. “It’s just like that movie we watched Valentine’s. Apparently I can’t have both, either. I love you, Brian Belden. I love you and I always will.” With a choked sob, Lexi was gone.

“Lexi? Lexi!” Brian refused to believe that she had hung up on him. But she had. Alexandria Drayton was no longer in his life.

Brian lay in his bed, quietly sobbing, and thought of what would never be.

The college sophomore was barely able to function the following day. Especially when he received a package he had arranged for before Lexi’s father had fallen ill. He opened the package to reveal a book and a letter from Marvin Appleton, writer of the Lucy Radcliffe series.

Dear Brian,

I’m sorry to hear your friend has been without her copy of Escapade in Madrid for so long! I have enclosed a copy of the book and signed it for her. I love hearing from you Bob-Whites and I always enjoy hearing about a fan of my writing. It makes me feel good to know others appreciate my work. I hope things are going well for you at Columbia. You’ll be a fine doctor one day!

*Regards,
Marvin*

Brian looked at the signed book he had been looking forward to surprising Lexi with and fought the urge to cry. He went to his girlfriend’s old room and gave it to her roommate to include with the things that were being packed up and shipped to Lexi in California. He then went back to his room and lay in bed, nursing his broken heart.

* * *

Brian lay in his bed at Crabapple Farm and thought of that day. The day that he had started to have to live without Lexi, without his sunshine. She hadn't called him again and he hadn't called her, as much as he longed to.

And, as Brian lay there, he realized two things. First, his face was soaked with tears just thinking about Alexandria. And second, he knew now that what he had been feeling for Honey Wheeler had been a reaction to his broken heart. He had pushed memories of Lexi deep down inside him, because it was too painful to think about, and when he saw the other Bob-Whites so happily coupled, he had longed for that, too. But tonight, allowing thoughts of Alexandria to run freely through his mind, he knew that he was not yet over her. And maybe he never would be. His feelings for Alexandria Drayton were anything but temporary.

But whether he ever got over Alexandria and found someone else or not, he realized that Honey Wheeler was absolutely perfect—for Dan. And, for right now, if Brian Belden could not be with Alexandria, he didn't want to be with anyone.

Brian finally drifted off to sleep, his dreams filled with a blond-haired girl surrounded by clouds of white tulle dancing in his arms, while their families looked on. *And I don't want to miss a thing.*

More author's notes: A special thanks to Meagan for letting me "borrow" Grace. Thanks Princess Meggie! ☺ The two cookbooks are real; I found 'em at amazon.com. My carried over elements were: the word gleeps said three times (#1), a joke (32), a slinky (#3), use of another author's character—Grace (#4), a broken heart (#5), the word "frisky" (#6), an acronym (SA#1), someone sitting without pants (SA#2). And yes—my niece's name *is* Lexi, what of it? ☺