

This is a Jixemetri Circle Writing Project #10. Tons and tons and TONS of thanks go out to Leigh and Susan. Their ideas and suggestions were absolutely amazing and moved my plot along in crucial ways. I can't thank you both enough for all the help you gave me on this story! And an added thanks to Susan (who is the fastest editor EVER!) for another one of her fabulous editing jobs, right smack in the middle of a certain house party! Thanks, baby! Title is from the Rolling Stones song of the same name.

Blinded By Rainbows by Dana

"Brian!" Helen exclaimed happily as she turned to see her oldest son standing in the bright, sunny kitchen of Crabapple Farm.

"Hi, Moms," Brian said, dropping his duffle to give his mother a hug.

As Helen embraced her son, she noticed her son's girlfriend standing just behind him, smiling shyly, but still looking rather awkward. In that moment, Helen Belden vowed to wipe out—for good—any awkwardness the young girl felt in their home. Lexi Drayton was now a member of their household, and she needed to accept that.

"Lexi!" Helen disentangled herself from her son and drew the timid, young girl into her arms. "We're so thrilled that you can spend Easter with us."

"Thanks, Mrs. Belden," Lexi said, returning the embrace and feeling some of her awkwardness slip away. "I'm happy to be here, too."

Brian helped himself to a brightly frosted cupcake from the counter, and offered one to Lexi, who politely declined.

"Brian," Mrs. Belden said somewhat reprovingly, "those cupcakes are for Bobby to take to school tomorrow. Now, what are you doing home a day early?"

"Well, I don't have any Thursday classes, and Lexi decided she could miss the one class she had tomorrow, so we left after my last class—and here we are."

Lexi felt a little nervous about Brian's frank admission that she was missing her calculus recitation the next day. "You see, it's just a recitation class, Mrs. Belden, and I've already done the homework, and I know I understand it."

Helen gave her a warm smile. "I'm not going to lecture you for missing a class, Lexi. I know you and Brian are both very responsible students, and I trust your judgment. Frankly, I am glad to have you here a day early."

The young blonde relaxed and smiled. "We were pretty excited, too. Brian can't stop talking about the honey-baked ham you'll have at your Easter open house."

"Yes, we're having quite the spread this year. In addition to the ham, we're going to have scalloped potatoes, ambrosia, marshmallow-fruit salad, a Jell-O mold, asparagus, hot cross buns, buttermilk biscuits, and for dessert, angel food cake *and* lemon chiffon cake. Miss Trask is having Cook bring a leg of lamb and her famous peach pie, too."

"It sounds wonderful," Lexi said.

Brian snickered. "Yeah, much better than that tofu you're always trying to get me to try."

"Hey, tofu is not only healthy, but convenient. I can't help it if the tofu revolution didn't make it from California to the East Coast!"

“Anyway, it all sounds great, Moms,” Brian said to his mother, recognizing a losing battle when he saw one. “And now you have two extra helpers a day early. We’ll do anything we can to help you prepare for the crowd.”

“Of course we will, Mrs. Belden,” Lexi chimed in.

“I appreciate it. With everyone off of school on Friday, I think that’s when I will put all of my children to work cleaning. Until then, just enjoy yourselves,” Mrs. Belden said as she returned to the homemade vegetable soup that simmered on the stove, emitting enticing smells. All of the vegetables in the soup were grown on Crabapple Farm, and the scent reminded Brian what he missed most about living at home. The best restaurants in New York City couldn’t compare with one of Moms’ farm-grown, home-cooked meals!

“C’mon, Lexi, let’s throw our bags in our rooms, and then head on down to the Wheeler Lake. Since it’s so warm for this time of the year, it’ll be fun to hang out down there,” Brian said as he finished the cupcake, grabbed his bag, and left the kitchen.

Lexi smiled at Helen before leaving the kitchen toward the first floor guest room that was now “her” room for all intents and purposes.

“Dinner in an hour,” Helen called to the retreating couple.

“Okay, Moms,” came Brian’s muffled response.

The quiet in the kitchen did not last long. Exuberant as ever, even as a seventeen-year-old high school senior, Trixie raced into the kitchen talking a mile a minute. “Gleeps, Moms! Is that Brian’s jalopy out there? Are he and Lexi home already?”

Helen smiled at her only daughter. “Yes, they came back a day early. They’re putting their bags in their rooms and then going for a walk by the lake. Did you find Bobby’s missing homework?”

Trixie rolled her eyes and sat down at the kitchen table. “Yes! I *knew* he left it in the clubhouse when he was down there allegedly helping us clean the other day. And he left the caps off of the markers—as usual—so now they’re no good!”

“I’m sure he didn’t do it on purpose, Trixie. And, honey, your left shoe is all muddy. Can you please take it off before you track mud into the living room?”

Trixie looked down at her tennis shoes. “Gleeps! Sorry, Moms. I’ll clean this up.” Trixie took off her shoes, setting them on the back porch, and quickly wiped up the mud she had tracked onto the kitchen floor.

“Well, if it isn’t Cinderella,” Brian teased as he and Lexi re-entered the kitchen.

Trixie straightened up, a huge grin on her face. “Your teasing is a lot easier to take now that you live in the City!” she said as she tossed the mop aside and gave her oldest brother a big hug. “How are you?”

“I’m doing fine. Are you almost ready to graduate?”

“Am I ever!” Trixie said as she released him and then moved to hug Lexi. “Hi, Lexi! It’s good to see you! Now Moms and I aren’t so outnumbered! As a matter of fact, with Mart not coming in ‘til tomorrow night, things are pretty even around here!”

“Well, I’m glad to be here,” Lexi said as she returned Trixie’s hug. Her favorite thing about the Belden clan was their genuine, open friendliness. It certainly helped to heal the broken heart left by her father’s sudden absence in her life.

“Moms says you’re going for a walk by the lake?”

“We thought we would, since it’s so warm for March. Why?” Brian asked.

Trixie indicated Lexi’s black leather loafers. “Well, it’s been kinda rainy lately, and it’s muddy down there. You may want to put on some tennies.”

Lexi smiled ruefully. “Stupid me remembered my dress shoes for Easter and forgot my tennis shoes. This is all I have.”

“No worries. Mine should fit you reasonably well. They’re outside on the porch, next to my umbrella, if you want to use them. Just ignore that beat up plastic thing next to them—that’s Bobby’s bicycle helmet.”

“You really don’t mind?”

“Of course not! Go ahead and use them.”

“Thanks, Trix.”

Trixie smiled at her brother’s girlfriend. “No problem.”

Lexi quickly changed into the tennis shoes on the porch, and she and Brian were off on their walk.

“She reminds me a little of Janie, before we knew she was Juliana,” Trixie said. “She was so lost when she first came here, but she’s looking a lot better.”

Helen nodded as she kneaded dough for biscuits to go with the vegetable soup. “I agree, dear. I’m so glad you accepted her so easily into the house.”

Trixie looked at her mother, surprised. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, I always had the feeling that Honey liked Brian, even though she’s with Dan now, and I didn’t know how she felt about Lexi. And, you being Honey’s friend, well, I hope that didn’t put you in an awkward situation.”

“Gleeps, no, Moms! Honey is super-fabulously happy with Dan. She doesn’t mind that Brian has a new girlfriend. And I like having another girl around the house, even if it is only a weekend here and there.”

Helen smiled, glad that her daughter so gracefully accepted Lexi Drayton’s presence.

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As they made their way to the lake, Lexi commented, “Your sister’s really nice.”

Brian smiled. “I told you she’d love having you here.”

“I know. Your entire family is always so nice to me, and I see now what you mean by ‘stretchy walls,’ but I still feel...” Lexi groped for the right words. While she didn’t exactly feel like a guest in the quaint farmhouse, she certainly didn’t feel as though Crabapple Farm was “home.”

“I don’t know how I feel,” she finally admitted. “The house I grew up in is being rented to strangers, and Crabapple Farm is a wonderful place to visit, but the dorm seems to be my only true home now. And that’s pretty pathetic when you think about it,” she finished.

The couple had reached a small sandy area on the lake’s shore. Brian stopped and turned to face his girlfriend.

"It's not pathetic," he assured her. "You've experienced a lot of loss this last year and, unfortunately, the dorm is the closest thing you have to a permanent residence. I know that you haven't spent a lot of time at the farm, and I know it will never replace that cute little California bungalow that you shared with your dad, but after you spend this summer here, I know you'll feel much better."

Startled, Lexi looked deep into Brian's chocolate brown eyes. "Brian, I thought that you understood that I planned to stay in New York this summer. I've got two semesters to make up. I turned in the requirements to change some of my incompletes from last spring, but I still need to retake a couple of those classes. Not to mention the fact that I completely missed the fall semester."

Brian blinked. "Oh. I guess you're right. I just always return to Crabapple Farm for the summer, so I never really thought of doing anything else."

"I'd love to come back here to Sleepyside, but I really need to try to get back on track."

"No, you definitely should," Brian agreed. "I hate to think of you in the city alone, though."

Lexi smiled, loving Brian's concern for her. With her father gone, before she and Brian had gotten back together, Lexi had often felt adrift, with no one in the world to care what happened her. But Brian had never stopped caring about her, and she reveled in the feeling of having someone to look out for her. It wasn't that she *needed* Brian to take care of her, or wanted Brian to worry, but the feeling that she was connected to another human being, especially one as special as Brian Belden, almost made her forget that she no longer had either of her parents to care for her and love her. Well, she knew that her parents still loved and were caring for her from *out there*; death did not change some things.

"I'll be fine," she assured her boyfriend. "I can come visit you on the train every weekend. And Marcy wants to stay in New York this year, too, so we're going to try to find a cheap sublet together."

Looking at Lexi, Brian suddenly discovered that he no longer wanted to talk. He was standing with his girlfriend, on a beach—diminutive though it was—on a beautiful, early spring day, and he could think of better things to do than talk. He took a step forward, drew Lexi into his arms and pressed his lips to hers. He reveled in the feel of her silky hair as he ran it through his fingers. As the two lost themselves in passionate kisses, all thoughts of summer were forgotten. The couple existed only in the here and now—and in each other.

* * *

"I'm telling you, Honey, it's Oh-Shay, not Oh-Shee," Trixie said emphatically.

"How can you be so sure, Trix? They pronounce it both ways in Ireland. Besides, Marvin Appleton, a.k.a. Junie Capell, isn't Irish. He's very American, as you well know."

"They may say it both ways in Ireland," Trixie stubbornly argued, "but Oh-Shay is by far the most prevalent pronunciation."

"This one time, at Lucy Camp," Mart said in a falsetto voice, as he entered the living room, carrying a bowl of popcorn in one hand and a bag of marshmallows in the other. "You and your Lucy Radcliffe books, and your Lucy Radcliffe message boards, and your Lucy friends, and your Lucy Camps, and your —"

“Martin Belden, must we continually have this argument?” Trixie interrupted, frustration ripe in her voice. “Your Cosmo McNaught books –”

“I don’t obsessively visit message boards or have heated debates about how to pronounce a servant’s name with other people, just because they happen to read the same books that I do!”

“O’Shea’s not a servant; he’s the groom,” Trixie corrected crossly.

Honey jumped into the conversation before any more feathers were ruffled. “You know, it *is* kind of a silly argument when you think of it, Trix. But it is fun!”

Just then Lexi entered the room, followed by Brian. Each carried two Cokes. “You know, I always pronounced it Oh-She-Ah,” Lexi entered the conversation shyly.

Mart groaned loudly as he set the snack foods down on an end table. “Not another Lucy fan!”

Trixie grinned triumphantly, her previous pique completely forgotten. “I *knew* I’d love having Lexi here!”

Honey’s smile slipped ever so slightly at Trixie’s statement, but she quickly recovered. *Honestly, she scolded herself. This...jealousy you’re feeling is irrational and ridiculous. You love Dan, remember? And just because Trixie likes having Lexi around, doesn’t mean she’s stopped being your friend. Silly!*

She quickly jumped up from her spot on the sofa. “Does your mom need any more help?” she asked no one in particular and hurriedly disappeared into the kitchen.

Trixie swiftly got up to follow her. “That’s Honey,” she proclaimed. “Always ready to help out.” She, too, disappeared into the kitchen.

Lexi thoughtfully stared after them. Was it her imagination or was Trixie’s honey-haired friend uncomfortable around her? She didn’t know Honey very well, but she often thought she detected an...awkwardness between herself and Honey, although she couldn’t fathom why that might be. Any further thoughts on the subject were lost to Bobby’s sudden exclamation.

“There it is!” the ten-year-old exclaimed triumphantly as he pulled a Slinky out from underneath the sofa.

Brian ignored the typical Belden bedlam as he built a fire in the fireplace with the wood he had chopped earlier that day. It was Friday evening and, after a long day of making sure the house was spotless for the Easter Open House, the Beldens and their guests, Honey and Lexi, were going to enjoy s’mores and popcorn and Cokes as they watched a rerun of “It’s the Easter Beagle, Charlie Brown”. Snoopy was a favorite cartoon character of Bobby’s, but the whole Belden family loved watching animated holiday specials. Trixie only wished that Jim could get away from Michigan State to join them, but his spring break had ended last week, and he was back at school, hard at work to make his dreams come true.

“This is cute,” Lexi said as she picked up a crudely shaped construction paper bunny covered with cotton balls. A few spots were bare, attesting to the age of the decoration.

Brian glanced over his shoulder at his girlfriend’s statement and groaned as loudly as Mart had earlier. “That was my masterpiece from the first grade. Moms stubbornly insists on decorating every holiday with the lovely ‘works of art’ her children have graced her with over the years.”

"I think it's sweet. Families need traditions like that," Lexi said, putting the fluffy bunny down and picking up a brown construction paper basket that had a few bits of plastic grass glued to it.

"Thank you, Lexi," Helen said as she entered the room and overheard the blonde's last remark. She carried more sodas, as did Trixie and Honey who were right behind her. "That was Trixie's."

Trixie snorted. "I'm not claiming any part of that!"

Mart snickered. "But, Trix, I do believe that is the magnum opus of thine body of artwork known as 'misguided childhood holiday art projects.' Why, it's even better than your felt and sequined-covered first grade Christmas ornament!"

Trixie turned up her nose at Mart's comment. "I still stand by my previous assertion that the use of too many polysyllabic words is definitely a symptom of immaturity!"

Before Mart could launch a counterattack, Brian hastily said to Honey, "I hear you got accepted to John Jay." John Jay was short for the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.

"I did. I just sent my acceptance back this week, in fact," Honey stated. "So, that's where I'll be next year. I also applied to SUNY at Buffalo, George Washington in Washington D.C., and Michigan State."

Brian's eyebrows raised. "Michigan State?"

Honey smiled. Despite his dark coloring, so like his father's, when he raised his eyebrows like that, his subtle resemblance to Trixie and Mart became much more pronounced.

"I thought it would be fun to be on campus with Trixie and Jim. But I really want to major in Forensic Science, and, as good as Michigan State's Criminal Justice program is, they don't offer Forensic Science as a major. Buffalo didn't excite me, and D.C. just didn't feel right. John Jay's Forensic Science department is rated one of the best in the country, so it really seemed like the obvious choice."

Trixie grinned wickedly. "And the fact that a certain Daniel Mangan is enrolled as a student there is just icing on the cake."

Honey gave her a Mona Lisa smile. "Exactly."

"Well, considering it is the feeder university for the NYPD, it's perfect for Dan. It sounds like it's perfect for you, too. Almost as if fate is determined to see you and Dan together," Brian commented.

"I like to think so," Honey responded, not sure she was comfortable with the direction the conversation had taken.

Lexi, not quite understanding the look that passed between Brian and Honey, suddenly and inexplicably felt an urgent need to change the subject.

"And you're headed to Michigan, Trixie?"

The blonde nodded vigorously, causing her curls to tumble onto her forehead. "Michigan State has one of the top C.J. programs in the country. And, I must admit, the chance to be with Jim was just too tempting to pass up." She aimed a grin at her best friend. "As much as Honey didn't want to be a third wheel at M.S.U., I didn't want to be a third wheel at John Jay."

"And this way, when Trixie and I open the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency, our different expertises will compliment each other perfectly."

"It is all perfectly perfect," Trixie agreed cheerfully as she popped some popcorn into her mouth.

Despite the happy mood, Lexi was sure that she was picking up a strange undercurrent flowing between Brian and Honey.

Stop being paranoid! she chided herself. *Honey is obviously very much in love with Dan, and you know Brian loves you!*

Still, despite the little pep talk she gave herself, Lexi decided that she would ask Brian about her feeling the first chance she got.

That chance happened the very next morning, when Brian decided to take Lexi for an early morning horseback ride.

Lexi, a beginning rider, had enjoyed her time on Susie, even if she had never left the paddock. She knew that Brian was probably bored riding in circles around the paddock on Starlight, but he was so patient as they rode next to each other. Several times he had offered her encouragement, or given her a tip to improve her riding skills, and she loved his attention and his patience with her. The more time she spent with Brian Belden, the more she realized that she had found someone very special.

The two stood in the stable, surrounded by the pungent smell of straw and horses, while Brian taught her how to groom Susie and clean the tack. A radio sat in the corner, softly playing "Blinded by Rainbows." As Lexi currycombed the small, black mare, she thoughtfully listened to the gentle, melancholy crooning of Mick Jagger's voice. As she listened to him sing, "Do you hide away the fear? Put down paradise as lost?" Lexi realized that at one time she *had* put down paradise as lost. Sometimes the memories of that time threatened to swallow her whole and drown her, but other times, times like today with Brian, the young orphan recognized that she could indeed have love again. That being with Brian was paradise.

But am I "blinded by rainbows"? she mused. Seizing upon the opportunity to speak to Brian away from the happy chaos of Crabapple Farm, Lexi finished brushing Susie and turned to Brian.

"Can we talk for a minute? Before Regan gets back?"

Brian hung the last piece of Starlight's tack and turned to Lexi. "Sure. What's up? You look so serious."

Lexi was suddenly shy. "It may be all in my head, but —"

Brian waited, and when she didn't continue, he gently encouraged her. "You can tell me anything, Lexi. You know that."

"I know. It's just...I feel..." Lexi suddenly let out a rush of air and laughed at herself. "God, I am being such a *girl!*"

Brian joined in her laughter. "Trust me. I am very happy you're a girl. Seriously, what is it, though?"

Lexi took a deep breath. "Was there...ever anything between you and Honey?"

There. Like ripping off a band-aid, she had said it.

Brian let out a rather shaky laugh. "Why do you ask?"

Lexi immediately picked up the nervousness in his voice and his hesitancy to directly answer her question. Her hunch *had* been right.

“Last night, when you and she were talking...I don’t know. I just felt something weird.” She shrugged. “I thought maybe it was my imagination, but I also decided I needed to ask you about it. Knowing was better than not knowing.”

Brian ran a nervous hand through his thick, dark hair. He hoped she understood. Hell, he barely understood himself. “Honey and I...nothing ever happened between us. I think everyone—our families, our friends—was expecting something to happen between us, but it never did. And, to be honest, ‘everyone’ included both Honey and me.

“When we were kids, hanging out with our club, it just seemed natural to kind of pair off. Jim and Trixie, Mart and Di, and Honey and me. Even Dan had a convenient partner in my cousin, Hallie. It was never a pairing in a truly romantic way—we were too young for that—but in a comfortable sort of way.

“I know, as Honey got older, and she watched the other Bob-White couples pairing off for real, she wanted more than friendship from me. Whether she really wanted me or if it was a knee-jerk reaction to seeing Jim and Trixie and Mart and Di so happy together, I don’t know. But after I met you, well, I knew you were the only one for me. And then, at some point, Honey and Dan got together, and it all seemed moot.”

“Seemed?”

“Yeah, well, anyone can see Honey is very happy with Dan, and I *know* I am very happy with you, but sometimes...” Brian suddenly stopped.

“Sometimes?”

Brian paused to ensure that he got the words right. “Even though we both know we’re with the people we want to be with and are supposed to be with, sometimes the...possibilities, the thought of what might have been, surfaces. Not that we regret where we are or where we’ve been or anything like that, it’s just kinda *there*. But it doesn’t mean anything,” he assured her. “I’m sorry, Lex. You know I love *you*, right?”

She smiled softly. “I know, Brian. And I even understand what you’re saying. Unresolved possibilities are sometimes hard to deal with. Thank you for being honest with me and telling me about your history with Honey. It explains a lot.”

“It does?”

Lexi nodded. “I get the feeling that Honey is a little uncomfortable around me. I thought maybe I was just imagining it, but now I know I’m not. And now I know why.”

Brian simply nodded, unsure of what to say. Despite the fact that he and Dan were friends, sometimes he, too, felt...odd around his old friend.

The two silently joined hands and headed down the path to Crabapple Farm. As they approached the cozy farmhouse in the hollow, Lexi realized how picturesque and homey, almost Norman Rockwell-like, the Beldens’ existence truly was.

Suddenly, Lexi saw before her a vision of what growing up Belden might have been like. She imagined a young Brian riding his bike up and down the lane, while a tiny Trixie, as impetuous as ever, tried to entice her almost-twin to a game of hopscotch. A rainbow twinkled in the distance of her daydream.

Seen in this context, it was easy to accept that the little, dark-haired boy in her fantasy might grow-up believing in romance with the girl next door. But this was reality, and the grown man beside her was in love with *her*.

“You look pretty dreamy all of a sudden.” Brian smiled down at his girlfriend. “A penny for your thoughts.”

Lexi returned his smile with a truly happy one of her own. “I was just realizing that believing in the magic of rainbows might not be as bad as Mr. Jagger seems to think it is.”

Brian was confused for a moment before he remembered the song that had been playing in the stables. He stopped walking and took Lexi’s other hand, turning to face her.

“My eyes are wide open. I’m not blinded by anything. And I see the only woman who could ever make me happy.”

Lexi smiled as Brian’s lips met hers, completely secure in the love that they shared.

Carryover items include: Gleeps used three times (#1), BWG Banquet menu (#2), slinky (#3), two characters arguing over how to pronounce a name (SA#1), someone other than Dan chopping wood (#4), broken heart (#5), cartoon character (SA#2), the phrase “This one time, at Lucy Camp...” (#6), unseasonable weather (#7), convenience food from another culture—tofu (SA#3), wearing someone else’s shoes (#8), decoration by a character in elementary school (#9).