

This is a Jixemetri Circle Writing Project #9 submission in celebration of four fabulous years of the best place on the 'Net—JIXEMITRI! A big hug and thank you to Cathy for giving me a place to call home and to Susan, who deserves the title “editor extraordinaire”—as well as “wonderful friend.” You ladies rock!

Dedicated to the memory of Ernst “Ernie The Can Man” Lucas (August 3, 1935 – January 17, 2004). Ernie appeared in an earlier *Sapphire Days* story for Jixemetri’s second anniversary.

Just Another American Folk Song

by Dana

*The days are getting shorter
The wind has found her teeth
I think I'm supposed to be somewhere back East
And I drive alone with my mind
Fighting thoughts of this kind
And in the darkness
Of these naked empty streets
I'm free to just breathe...*

Brian watched the darkness of the night sky gradually dissolve into a burst of colors as the sun rose in the distance. The rosy pinks and oranges welcomed him to California, and the young college junior began to relax. His impulsive cross-country trek was nearing its last leg.

The handsome dark-haired man still could not believe that less than three days ago he had been in New York, and now he was fast approaching the Pacific Ocean aboard an Amtrak Superliner. The student fare that Amtrak offered had been so low that he had easily afforded the upgrade to a sleeper compartment from Chicago to the Los Angeles station. And he had still paid far less than an airline ticket—especially a last minute airline ticket. Yes, it had taken him almost three days, but he had gotten to see the countryside and had even had enough time during his layover in Chicago to explore the city a little bit.

Boredom had never set in, between the studying he had done for his medical school admissions test and his worrying about Lexi’s reaction when he appeared on her doorstep. A small twinge of guilt had also been a frequent companion on his train ride west, as he thought about disappointing his parents with his sudden change of plans. He had to continually remind himself that Christmas was still over two weeks away, and he would return to the homestead in plenty of time for the Yuletide festivities, as he had promised Moms. His mother had promised to set the clay ornament he had made in elementary school aside so that he could hang it on the tree himself when he returned. She had also insisted on purchasing a return airline ticket in his name so that he was sure to keep his promise. Brian would be arriving back into the family fold via American Airlines on December 23.

Secretly, in his deepest wishes that he did not even allow himself to consciously realize, Brian hoped that he would not be returning alone.

*She said I'm the king of random phone calls
I explained it's just this time of year
These awkward conversations
These constant isolations
And this town
Is bringin' me down...*

Not for the first time, Brian thought of his last phone call to Lexi. She had sounded so lost and so desperate. Even when she had tried to tell him that she didn't need him, he knew that she *did* need him. How could she not? She was now suddenly alone in this world, dealing with responsibilities that someone so young should never have to deal with. Anyone's *help would be useful right now*, Brian reasoned. Of course, he was showing up on her doorstep unannounced, a move the politeness police of the world would probably frown upon, but he was full of good intentions.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The thought popped uninvited into Brian's mind, and he quickly banished it and lifted his eyes to the tiny window in his sleeper car. As he stared out the window, the desolate desert landscape became more and more urban. The train's rhythmic *hustle bustle* began to slow down and was gradually replaced by a sluggish *chugga chugga* sound, which could only mean that they were nearing L.A.'s Union Station. The realization caused Brian an instant of panic, but he composed himself and began to gather up his belongings. By the time the train pulled into the station, he was ready.

The young collegiate stepped off of the train and was greeted by a wave of pleasantly warm air. The air was not hot and muggy, but simply balmy and pleasurable, especially after the bitter cold he had experienced in New York. Brian made his way through the station, stepping around a large glob of chewed gum on the floor. His curious dark eyes took in the holiday decorations, from the plastic reindeer to the large, plastic white-bearded, red-suited man, whose flashing lights proclaimed, "Santa comes but once a year." The overhead speakers played the Beach Boys' "Little Saint Nick," which he thought was the perfect type of holiday song to be played in California. It may have not been the more traditional "Silent Night," but what was more Californian than the Beach Boys?

Even the beggars had gotten into the Christmas spirit. A rather scruffy-looking man held a large, hollow plastic candy cane out to passersby, begging for spare change. Kind-hearted Brian reached into his pocket and made his way over to the man. He dropped in a handful of change into the candy cane and said, "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, too. And bless you," the man said gratefully.

Brian smiled and continued on his way, his heart somewhat lighter.

*Just another American folk song
Written for another American girl
Just another American dreamer
Just another American fall*

As he walked through the station, trying to find an information booth, Brian wondered just what kind of a dreamer he had become. He had been solid, dependable Brian, never doing a spontaneous thing in his life, always so careful and controlled, and now, suddenly, he was this impulsive romantic, taking off across the country on a whim. But, he decided, Lexi was not "just another girl," and he was not just any old dreamer. As he thought this, his eyes alit on an information booth, and he trundled toward it, carrying his bags.

As he stepped up to the desk, the blonde woman behind the booth sneezed loudly, barely managing to cover her mouth in time. "Excuse me," she said at the same time Brian said, "Bless you."

She smiled ruefully. "Thank you. My annual Christmas cold. Just bad enough to make me miserable, but not bad enough to stay home and sleep. Happens every year at this time. But I'm babbling—how can I help you?"

"I need to get to Pacific Palisades. Is there a bus or something I can take?" Brian asked.

"You could take the bus, but it would take you forever, and you'd need to switch buses about three times. If you can afford it, I would really suggest a cab. It's a pretty straight shot to get to Pacific Palisades from here. We're not far from the Santa Monica Freeway, which will take you right to the Pacific Coast Highway. Pacific Palisades is just north of the Santa Monica Freeway off the PCH."

"Great, thank you," Brian said politely. "Where is the cab stand?"

The smiling blonde sneezed once again, apologized, and gave Brian directions to find the nearest cabstands.

"Thank you very much. I hope you feel better soon."

The blonde grinned. "Thanks. Me, too. Have a great stay in California!" she called before turning to a group of Asian businessmen who required her attention.

Brian quickly found a cab. After giving the driver his destination, he settled into the back of the cab and tried desperately to calm his jittery nerves.

*So drop me a line
Oh, if you can find the time
I'd love to hear just where you've ended up
Does happiness rest at your door?
Do you ever think about us anymore?*

Brian had to believe that Lexi still thought about him; that she would welcome him when she opened the door to find a very unexpected guest standing on her front porch. He looked down at his hands, ice cold in his lap, and realized that they were shaking. This was not good. To distract himself, Brian stared out the window, but the blur of cars and buildings going by suddenly made him sick to his stomach. He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

*So bogged down with this flesh and bone
I'm not supposed to feel quite this alone
Amidst the clutter
Watch me stutter, step, and fall
I haven't the strength to get back up
Cause I am empty, floating loveless
Cut me and I bleed only dust.*

Brian had been alone and longing for Lexi so long that he felt empty. His body was just a shell, his life a performance. Nothing was real. He would not feel whole or complete until he saw Lexi one more time. Even if it was the last time. When she had left the previous spring, he had not known it might be the last time he would ever see her. He had never had closure. Even if she kicked him out of his life for good this time, at least he would have gotten to see her one more time...

Brian opened his eyes when he felt the cab slowing as it exited the Santa Monica Freeway and transferred to the Pacific Coast Highway. The highway was legendary, and Brian

enjoyed the sweeping views of the Pacific. Soon they exited the PCH, and signs indicated that they were entering the city of Pacific Palisades. *Almost there.* His three days of travel were nearing an end. He looked at his watch. It was a little after nine on a Monday morning. He was hoping that Lexi was home and playing the odds that she was. As far as he knew, she didn't work. She was just trying to get through all of the legal matters that had accompanied the death of her father, and barring a meeting with her lawyer, Brian figured she would be home on a Monday morning.

The cab turned off of the main road and entered a modest neighborhood full of cute little bungalows. Brian watched as a grey-haired man carefully placed a plastic snowman on his green lawn while his wife wrapped holly swags around the porch rails. To Brian, the California heat and sunshine didn't inspire the kind of Christmas feeling he was used to, but he appreciated the sight of the charming old couple decorating for the holidays.

Presently, the cab pulled into the driveway of a cute little white bungalow. Brian noted that, although it was rather small, it was well kept. Trim white rails enclosed the front porch, laid with red brick that contrasted nicely with the white house. A white wicker love seat beckoned invitingly. Trailing ivy encircled one of the wooden columns of the front porch, while two green bushes sat on either side of the single step up to the porch. To Brian, it looked rather idyllic, and he instinctively liked the house that Lexi had grown up in. It spoke of love and warmth and hospitality.

Brian slowly exited the cab and paid the driver most of what was left of his cash. He grabbed his bags and, with a deep breath, marched determinedly to the front door. He knocked loudly on the blue-painted door and reflected that his knock was nowhere near as loud as the beating of his heart.

It seemed like an eternity before the door opened to reveal a beautiful young woman, her white blonde hair framing her face like an angel. The sight of her stole Brian's breath away.

Lexi's face registered all of the gradations between confusion and shock, and then her lovely features finally settled themselves into an unusual mixture of resignation and sadness. "I'm losing it," she said as she started to shut the door.

Brian, confused himself, quickly put his foot in the door to keep her from shutting it. "Lexi, it's me," he said.

Lexi slowly looked down at his foot, solidly stuck between the door and the door frame, and suddenly realized that this was not a hallucination—hallucinations could not stop doors from shutting—and that this was very real. Brian Belden was standing on her doorstep.

She barely registered the joy that swept through her as she reacted without the least bit of thought and did exactly what her body told her to.

Lexi Drayton leapt through the door and threw herself into Brian's arms. A startled Brian barely managed to catch her and keep them both from falling. His arms wrapped themselves around her slim and fragile body, and he drew her close to him, inhaling the scent of her, and vowed never to let her go.

This was what he had traveled across a continent for.

Lexi eagerly ran her hands through Brian's thick, wavy hair and began to kiss him passionately. "Brian," she murmured, "thank God you didn't listen to me!"

Brian kissed her back, love and passion exploding inside of him. "Thank God you weren't very convincing," he mumbled back through the kisses.

Finally, they pulled apart and stared at each other. Each wore a look of wonder and a goofy grin. “Would you like to come in, Mr. Belden?” Lexi said rather saucily.

“I thought you would never ask, Ms. Drayton,” Brian said, picking up his baggage and following her into the bungalow.

The interior was as simple and well kept as the exterior, and Brian immediately felt at home. The living room was painted a cheery, bright yellow and decorated with wicker and rattan. Unlike Union Station, the house was devoid of Christmas decorations, but a Christmas card of a baby in a Santa suit was displayed on top of the television. An evergreen-scented candle burned on an end table.

Lexi showed Brian to a small study, lined with bookshelves and furnished with a single desk and chair and a convertible sofa. His eyes immediately fell to the shelf dedicated to Lucy Radcliffe and noted with satisfaction the copy of *Escapade in Madrid* that graced the collection.

Lexi’s eyes followed his gaze, and she smiled shyly. “I never thanked you properly for the book. I can’t believe you had the author sign it for me.”

Brian smiled at the lovely blonde. “I was glad to be able to do something special for you.”

“Thank you,” Lexi said simply and then took a deep breath. “I, um, well, would you mind staying in here, Brian?”

“This is perfect, Lex,” he assured her as he dropped his bags on the floor next to the sofa bed. “I certainly didn’t expect to stay in your room, and, well, I wouldn’t dream of using your father’s room, either.”

Lexi relaxed. “Thank you for understanding.”

“Hey, thank *you* for understanding. I’m the one who just showed up on your doorstep, remember? I’m lucky I’m not spending the night in a hotel—or in a cramped train compartment.”

After setting up the sofa bed for Brian to sleep on, Lexi continued her tour of the modest bungalow, ending up in the sunny kitchen that reminded him a bit of a Californianized version of the cozy and welcoming one back home at Crabapple Farm. Sunflowers seemed to be the main motif here, from the brightly painted pitcher that held a fragrant bouquet to the dishcloths and oven mitts decorated with the sunny yellow blooms. Along one wall, a collection of cookbooks stood. Brian instantly felt at home here.

Lexi opened the refrigerator. “Would you like something to drink? I don’t have any sodas, but I do have some milk and some eggnog that my next-door neighbor brought over. Or would you like some iced tea?”

“Iced tea is fine,” Brian said and watched as Lexi bustled around the kitchen, grabbing a glass from a cabinet painted a glistening white, pouring the iced tea, and even adding a slice of lemon.

She placed the glass in front of him. “I seem to remember you like lemon in your iced tea.”

“You remember right,” Brian said and then took a sip of his drink.

Lexi stared at him. “I can’t believe you’re here. It’s amazing.”

“I hope you’re not mad. I know you said—”

“Forget what I said, Brian. I wanted you out here more than you could possibly know. But I didn’t want you to sacrifice anything for me,” she explained.

“Lexi, I’m not sacrificing anything. I’m right where I want to be.” Brian paused and then decided to say what he was thinking. “I’m right where I belong.”

For the briefest of moments, the young woman looked blissfully happy, but a sadness settled over her features almost immediately. “Brian, you belong at Columbia getting your degree.”

“Maybe, maybe not. In any case, Columbia is on break, and right now, here is where I belong. Accept that and I won’t have to kick your butt while I’m here.”

Lexi grinned wickedly. “I’d like to see you try!”

“Oh really?” Brian said. He set his glass down and advanced toward Lexi. She continued to grin up at him, but slowly moved backward. Brian suddenly reached out and grabbed her, tickling her, delighting in her happy squeals. This was what Lexi deserved—to be a normal college student with no more worries and concerns than the average girl her age. Brian reveled in the sound of her peals of laughter and half-hearted pleas for him to stop tickling her.

Finally, when they were both out of breath, Brian pulled her to him. “I missed you,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers for a sweet kiss. Lexi responded, and Brian truly did feel as though this was the only place in the world he belonged.

* * *

Thursday evening, Brian sat in the pew of a local church and watched as Lexi lit a candle for her father, as she had done every week since he had died. It made Brian sad that, at nineteen, Lexi was alone in the world. She had never known her mother, and now her father was gone, too. A wave of gratitude swept over Brian as he thought of his patient father, loving mother, and wacky but lovable siblings. He had seen what orphans like Jim Frayne and Dan Mangan had gone through—even Honey Wheeler and Diana Lynch, despite their loving families, had endured emotionally hard times—and he knew the Beldens were a lucky bunch. There were no parents on earth like Moms and Dad, and nowhere he would have rather have been raised than Crabapple Farm.

Brian wanted Lexi to know that kind of warmth, too. He knew that she and her dad had been happy and close while she was growing up, but he also wished that she could have experienced the loving, boisterous family that he himself had been blessed with.

Not for the first time, Brian thought about how determined he was that Lexi would leave with him for Sleepyside on December 23. There was nothing left for her here in California anymore, but she had an interrupted education and him on the East Coast. Moms always said that the walls of Crabapple Farm were stretchy; he was sure Lexi would be welcomed there with open arms.

Lexi approached the pew where Brian was sitting silently, her youthful face etched with grief. She no longer cried each Thursday in church any more, but her pain was still fresh and close to her heart. Gary Drayton had been a warm, loving, kind-hearted man devoted to his daughter. She thought once again how unfair it was that someone as decent and principled as her father should be taken from this world early, when rapists and murderers and immoral and corrupt men still were allowed to breathe and wreak their havoc. *Only the good die young*, she thought for the thousandth time as she took her seat next to Brian.

“Thank you for coming with me tonight, Brian,” she said quietly. “I’m ready to go.”

The couple stood and Brian put his arm around her protectively, steering her through the place of worship and out into the gloaming. Brian opened Lexi's door and then slid behind the wheel of the sedan. "How about we pick up Chinese and watch television tonight? I saw that *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* were going to be on tonight. What do you say?"

Lexi's smile was rather wan, but genuine. "I'd like that," she said, leaning her head back against the seat and closing her eyes, as if she had used up all of her strength in the church. "There's a good place right on the way back, just off Sunset."

Brian navigated back toward Lexi's house, thankful for his good sense of direction so that he didn't have to bother her while she was resting. As he drove, he glanced over at the young blonde woman. His heart ached because, although she was leaning back in the seat resting, eyes closed, she did not look the least bit peaceful.

As they neared Sunset, Brian reluctantly spoke. "Lexi," he said softly, "where is this Chinese place?"

Lexi opened her eyes and looked out the window to get her bearings. "When you get to Sunset, make a left. It's about a mile on the right. Panda Chinese Restaurant is the name." She straightened in her seat and looked pensively out the window. Brian wondered what thoughts were occupying her mind, but he did not intrude and ask her. Instead, he concentrated on the traffic and turned left onto the busy road. Soon, his eyes spotted a sign up ahead that proclaimed he had found the restaurant.

After he parked the car, he turned to his companion. "Do you know what you want? I can order for you so you can rest."

Lexi smiled at him. "I look that bad, huh?"

"Of course not. You just look...tired," Brian stated gently. "Let me go in and order, 'kay?"

"For once, I'm too tired to argue," Lexi conceded. "I'd like the steamed scallops and mixed vegetables with lemon sauce and brown rice, please."

Before Brian even left the car, she once again closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. The young man was more determined than ever to bring her to the East Coast where she wouldn't have the grief and painful reminders that she experienced here. With Moms and the rest of the family there to help her adjust, maybe that fatigue and exhaustion would melt away. Brian fervently hoped so.

Twenty minutes later, he was back in the car, the Chinese food carefully placed in brown paper bags. Lexi awoke when he opened the car door and took the steaming food from him. "Thanks, Brian. My twenty-minute power nap really helped."

"Good," Brian said, looking at her as he turned the key in the ignition. He was relieved to see that she did indeed look less fatigued.

They were silent until they reached Lexi's small bungalow. They bustled around fixing the food on cheerfully-decorated sunflower plates and soon settled the plates on tray tables in front of the television. The two ate sitting next to each other on the couch in a companionable silence. By the time the Christmas specials started, they had finished their dinner and pushed the tray tables aside. Lexi was curled up in Brian's arms, and he had never felt so content as he was at that moment.

The pair giggled through the beloved Christmas specials, and soon Brian was telling Lexi stories of Belden Christmases past. She loved hearing stories about his boisterous clan

and their Christmas traditions—from their decking of the Christmas tree as a family, complete with hot spiced cider, eggnog, and homemade cookies to tales of Bobby and Reddy creating havoc with the presents on Christmas morning.

“I loved being with my dad growing up, and Christmas was always a special time for us,” Lexi remarked, “but it sounds like fun to belong to a big family. I wish I belonged to one.” Her voice took on a wistful tone. “Then maybe I wouldn’t be alone right now.”

“You’re not alone. And you can belong to one,” Brian said. He was concentrating so hard on doing anything he could to remove the wistful and sad notes from Lexi’s voice that he forgot to be self-conscious about wanting her to return to New York with him.

Lexi pulled herself up from where she was cuddled to look at him fully. “What do you mean?” Although Brian saw doubt in her eyes, he also saw something akin to hope. It gave him the confidence he needed to continue with his idea.

“I’ve told you stories about the people who’ve stayed at Crabapple Farm over the years, Jim’s cousin when we knew her as Janie, the Dodge family, and my cousin Hallie when she needed time away from Idaho,” Brian began, and Lexi nodded, remembering the tales of his sister’s mysteries that he had told her about when they had first begun dating. “Well, Moms always said that Crabapple Farm had stretchy walls. I know we haven’t talked about what you’re going to do with this house, or what you want to do about your future, but I was hoping that you’d return to Columbia. If you wanted to sell this house, I know that you would be more than welcome at Crabapple Farm. It would be a place to go during breaks and vacations. Moms would just love another daughter, and Trixie would kill to have another sister around the place, considering how much she always complains about having three brothers and no one to balance things out.” Brian was so excited about his idea that he didn’t realize just how fast he was speaking. He finally paused to take a breath and Lexi cut in.

“Brian, it’s one thing for a cousin to stay for a few weeks or even a family for a few days, but I hardly think your mother is going to allow me to stay at Crabapple Farm indefinitely. And how can you be so sure that Moms wants another daughter or Trixie a sister?” Lexi’s amused skepticism showed in the upward quirk of her lips as she looked at Brian. “I appreciate the offer, but Brian, it just doesn’t seem possible.”

“Then what are you planning on doing?” Brian countered.

Lexi’s face became serious as she contemplated her future. “I don’t know. I have an appointment with the lawyer tomorrow to discuss the options. The lawyer seems to think that there is quite a bit of equity in this house. I could sell it, find a smaller place, and then use the proceeds to live off of. My dad’s life insurance would be used for tuition.” A shadow passed over Lexi’s face as she thought of the dad she would never see again. “Or, if I want to hang on to this place, then I would need to use the life insurance to live off of while I find a job to then support myself. School would be out of the question.”

“Lexi, you know that school is important to you. Do you really think you can do that?” Brian asked.

Tears sprang to Lexi’s eyes. “I don’t know, Brian. I want to go to school, but how can I get rid of the house that was my father’s? It’s all I have left of him!” Lexi began to cry, and Brian held her tightly.

After a while, Lexi calmed down and looked at Brian ruefully. “I’m sorry. All I do is cry. I’m sick of it!”

“You have nothing to apologize for, and I think you know that. But you have so much more of your father than brick and mortar. You have memories of the wonderful man that he

was and the morals and values that he instilled in you. No one will ever be able to take that from you. And those gifts aren't tied up in a piece of property. They're in your heart, and they're with you always."

Lexi nodded. "I know that, on one level, but on another level I want to cling doggedly to this property. Pretty stupid, huh?"

"Not at all. But you know what? There may be a way to go to school and keep the property."

"How?" Lexi demanded, her face eager with the possibility.

"Move to Crabapple Farm and rent this place out. I'm sure that the way California real estate is you could easily rent it for three to four times what the monthly mortgage payments are. You can live off of that money, maybe even using some of it to pay your tuition, and you can go to school with the insurance money. During breaks and vacations, you can stay at Crabapple Farm."

"You make it sound so easy," Lexi sighed.

"It is."

* * *

Lexi tossed and turned in bed that night, the weight of her future clinging to her so tenaciously that she was unable to sleep more than fitfully. Brian's idea was so tempting, but Lexi didn't see how that could possibly work. When she had pressed him on the issue, he admitted that he had not even broached the topic with his mother. There was no way she would intrude on the happy Belden existence, no matter what Brian said about elastic walls and Moms' wonderful heart and spirit of generosity. It was so hard to believe that a family who didn't know her would just open their arms and embrace her as a part of their lives.

But then again, they did raise a fine, generous son like Brian, so they must be a wonderful lot. None of Brian's descriptions led her to believe the contrary.

Finally, seeing that Lexi was skeptical, Brian had tried to persuade her to at least come east for Christmas. Brian did not want her spending the holiday alone wallowing in her grief for her father any more than Lexi herself did. Spending Christmas in the warm folds of the Belden family was very appealing to the young woman, and she considered that as she tossed and turned.

When Lexi did sleep, it was only for short periods, and her dreams were filled with such nightmarish images, that she actually preferred being awake. As a result, she was bleary-eyed and more than cranky when the alarm went off, indicating her dreaded appointment with the lawyer was imminent.

"Of all the nights not to sleep! On a day when I actually have to get up in the morning," Lexi grumbled as she hit the snooze button. Nine minutes later, the alarm again insistently buzzed. A very irritable and depressed Lexi stumbled from her room to the bathroom and tried to make herself presentable for her appointment. She spent too long in the shower trying to wake up, and, as a result, was running late.

She couldn't leave without several important papers that her lawyer had given her to look over and sign, but they were nowhere to be found. The frustrated young woman could have sworn they had been on her desk and tore it apart frantically looking for the important documents. When she could not find them and realized that she was already fifteen minutes

late for her meeting with the attorney, it was too much for her fatigued mind to handle, and she collapsed in a crying heap on her floor.

Brian awoke to the sound of hysterical crying and hurriedly ran to Lexi's room, where he found the petite blonde in a heap on the floor. His heart leapt to his throat, and he ran to comfort her.

"Lexi? Honey? Are you okay?"

"No!" Lexi screamed. Brian was taken aback. Lexi had cried in front of him over her father, but he had never seen so many raw and angry emotions in the young girl. "I am *not* okay!" she continued to rail. "I am sick of this! I'm only nineteen years old, and I shouldn't have to worry about mortgages and escrow and inheritance taxes and life insurance policies and meetings with lawyers! I can't take it anymore. I want to be a kid. I want to be worrying about if the boy in chemistry likes me and if I'm going to pass my calculus test, not about all this crap that my lawyer has given me that I can't even find now!"

"Lexi, it's going to be okay," Brian said, more to have something to say than because he really believed it. How could everything be truly okay ever again? Her father was gone.

"That's a *lie*!" Lexi screamed. "I will never, ever see my father again. How is it going to be okay? How?"

Brian did not respond.

"Why? Why did he leave me? He knew that he was all I had in the world! How could he leave me like that?" Brian didn't answer, but just let Lexi get all of her feelings out, some of which she had denied even existed: her rage at her father for leaving her, her guilt for feeling that way, and, mostly, the guilt for being across the country when her father had obviously needed her. She had been three-thousand miles away when he had had his stroke, and she would forever wonder if there had been something more she could have done. Maybe if she had gone to school closer to home, she would have seen some sign of his impending stroke. Maybe she could have stopped it. All of the maybes and what ifs that had been plaguing her for months came tumbling out in a torrent of emotion.

Lexi's emotions, so carefully locked up behind the dam she had built, burst forth, and Brian was amazed that she had been able to function at all, given all that she was carrying around with her. Finally, when some of the pain had ebbed and Lexi was exhausted from the sheer effort of allowing the flow of emotions to escape her, the young girl's eyes drooped sleepily, and Brian gently laid her on her bed.

"Brian," Lexi whispered as he turned to leave and call the lawyer and explain the situation.

"Yes?" he whispered, returning to her side.

"Thank you."

"Any time."

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"I think you're right. I can't do this alone. I'd love to come home with you for Christmas. If you're sure your mom won't mind."

Brian's heart soared. "She won't. I promise."

“We’ll see about everything else you talked about, but I would love to spend Christmas at Crabapple Farm.”

“I’d love for you to do that, too.”

“Brian?”

“Yeah, Lexi?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Lexi.”

Brian watched as his girlfriend’s breathing became deep and even, and was thankful that she slept. He might have been a dreamer, but he was sure that he could make things easier for Lexi. After all, she was his girl.

*Just another American folk song
Written for another American girl
Just another American dreamer
Just another American fall*

The title of this story comes from the song “American Folk Song,” recorded for the show *American Dreams*. It appeared in the episode entitled “Heartache,” which aired on February 9, 2003. According to NBC, the song was written and performed by actor Warren Sroka. Lyrics quoted without permission.

My carryover items were: a bright yellow room (#1), ABC gum (#2), a dairy product (#3), mention of a Lucy Radcliffe book (SA#1), people putting up decorations (#4), a personal paper that is missing (#5), a tribute—Lexi lighting a candle for her father (SA#2); a layover (#6), cookbook (#7), the politeness police (SA#3), a train ride (#8).

Trixie Belden® is a registered trademark of Random House Books. These pages are not affiliated with Random House Books in any way. These pages are not for profit. Lyrics from “Just Another American Folk Song,” written and performed by Warren Sroka for the television show *American Dreams*, quoted without permission.