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Basic Chemistry
Part One: Mental Chemistry
by Dana

Through some strange and powerful principle of "mental chemistry," which she has never divulged, nature wraps up in the impulse of strong desire "that something" that recognizes no such word as "impossible," and accepts no such reality as failure.

—Napoleon Hill

Honey Wheeler stared in frustration at her chemistry textbook. Currently, she was finding it hard to believe that she had actually enjoyed her general chemistry class last semester. This semester also had been going relatively well—until the section devoted to organic chemistry had reared its ugly head.

No matter how much Honey studied, reading and re-reading the material over and over again until she was ready to tear her hair out, she just could not seem to get it.

"Aldehydes and ketones and alkanes, oh my!" she muttered out loud as she violently flipped through the pages of her textbook. "I'm going to learn this if it kills me!"

And it just may kill me, she thought ruefully in the aftermath of her violent outburst. She had been concentrating so hard on the book in front of her that she hadn't even realized that she had inadvertently left the television on earlier. She crossed the room and switched off the awards show that was airing, thinking that although she hadn't noticed the background noise, maybe its absence would help her concentrate better.

She sat down and found the beginning of the section, taking a deep breath. "Okay," she said out loud. "Read this. Study this. Know this. Understand this."

She decided to use a technique that one of her first-semester professors had suggested: reading the material out loud to increase the number of senses used, which in turn increased learning and retention. She smiled as she remembered the professor telling the class that doing a little dance along with the reading would further help. "I don't think I need to go that far," she said with a giggle. Honey began to read aloud the principles set forth in the book, but after twenty minutes, she didn't feel as though she had learned or retained anything.

"I'd be just as well off sitting here reciting silly tongue twisters," she muttered. "Six sick slick slim sycamore saplings. Six sick slick slim sycamore saplings. I give up. I need help."

Honey thought of who she could call. Her friend and lab partner, Angela Christensen, was almost as hopelessly lost as she was and would be of no help. As a matter of fact, the two of them usually leaned on the lab partnership that shared their lab table, Ron Dewitt and Shane Roper. Ron, a handsome blond freshman, was extremely smart and played a mean game of

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tennis. He was a little lacking in social skills but very nice. Shane Roper was a rugged-looking freshman with dark eyes and dark hair. He was extremely smart but had been born with a healthy dose of social skills. He was quick with a smile or a joke and had a wicked sense of humor. He and Ron always knew what was going on in lab and were always happy to help out Honey and Angela when they needed it, which really was not that often. Until they had hit the section introducing organic chemistry. Both girls seemed to have a mental block when it came to aldehydes, alcohols, ketones, alkenes, alkanes, and hydroxyl groups. Shane and Ron had been happy to step in and help the girls with not only their lab assignments, but the accompanying classroom work as well.

Honey knew that she could call Shane or Ron for more help, but she already felt as though she had leaned on them too much in their shared laboratory class.

Her boyfriend, Dan Mangan, was also a student at John Jay, but he was a criminal justice major and had not been required to take many science and math courses; his classes were more social science and law based. She continued to wrack her brain, and suddenly someone came to mind.

Someone who was a patient teacher. Someone who was tireless in explaining things to others. Someone who had had almost four years of science classes. Someone who had aced all of his organic chemistry classes. Someone she had known for years. Someone who would help her at a moment's notice. Someone she was not sure that she wanted to be alone with.

That someone was Brian Belden.

Honey wondered if it was prudent to call him. She thought about her own relationship with Dan, and Brian's relationship with Lexi. On the surface, everything was as it had always been between them: friendly and light. Underneath it all, though, there was an undercurrent—an undercurrent of unexplored possibilities, of thwarted dreams. She and Brian had never discussed it, but she knew that they both felt it. It was there, between them, in the sudden awkward silences that would crop up.

This is stupid, Honey admonished herself. Why shouldn't I call my old friend for chemistry help? Who cares what used to be between us?

Lexi and Brian's story was well-known to all of the Bob-Whites. Even though it had broken her heart, Lexi had loved Brian so much that she had refused to let him sacrifice himself for her after she had moved back to California to care for her father after his stroke. Brian had never gotten over the loss and had made the grand gesture of traveling across the country on a train just before Christmas to make things right between them. Neither of them had forgotten the other during the year they were apart. Not the way Brian had forgotten Honey almost immediately after leaving for college...

Honey looked down at her chemistry textbook once again. All of those symbols for chemical bonds and charges and free base pairs might as well have been Greek symbols to her tired eyes and mind at that point. She needed to pass. More than that, she needed a good grade. Her academics were much more important than anything else. Besides, Brian had been her friend *first*.

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Not exactly feeling mature, and actually quite surprised at that last petulant thought, Honey stood up, determinedly crossed the apartment to the wall phone in the kitchen, and picked up the receiver. She needed the help, and her academic career was too important for her to not call him. As she looked at the list of Bob-White phone numbers that hung above the phone and began to dial Brian's, her heart suddenly started pounding. She realized that her body was suddenly in "fight or flight" mode, but she could not fathom why she was reacting this way to the simple act of calling an old friend.

"This is ridiculous. We're not going to talk about anything except for basic chemistry," Honey muttered to herself, as she defiantly put the phone to her ear and wondered why a vision of Dan suddenly flashed before her.

Honey and Dan shared a kinship that was surprising given the differences in their upbringings. One thread that ran through both childhoods, however, was abandonment. Dan was an orphan in reality, and Honey was an orphan in practice. Dan had lost his parents at a young age, his father to a jeep accident while he was stationed with the Army in Korea and his mother to a debilitating illness. Honey had been shunted from nurse to governess to boarding school to camp and had barely known her parents growing up. In some ways, Dan had been the luckier one, considering the close relationship that he had shared with each of his parents before their deaths. Each of the pair had essentially been loners growing up, Dan on the streets of New York City, and Honey, pale and sickly and unpopular with the other students at her camps and boarding schools. As a result, both treasured family and friends—and both Honey and Dan had found family and friendship in Sleepyside. The phoenix from the ashes, their relationship, was beautiful and real, no less real for the fact that it had not been expected by anyone, least of all herself, and no less real for the fact that everyone had thought that she and Brian would end up together.

After the second ring, Brian answered in a deep, confident baritone. After Honey identified herself, the tone of Brian's voice changed.

"Honey? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything is fine," she answered. "Well, sort of. I mean, nothing serious is wrong. I just don't understand my chemistry class. I mean, I was understanding it just fine up until recently. Then we hit the organic chemistry part of the class, and I've been having a little bit of trouble." Honey sighed. "Actually, a *lot* of trouble. Angela, my lab partner, isn't much better at it than I am, so we have been kind of muddling through it together, but she doesn't understand it well enough to really help me, and we've been having to get a lot of help from these two guys who share our lab table, and—" Honey knew that she was babbling, even more than usual, but she couldn't seem to stop. A torrent of what was affectionately called "Honey speak" was flying out of her mouth, even more rapidly than usual, and she was grateful when Brian finally interrupted.

"I got good marks in organic chemistry," Brian said, ignoring the fact that he had met his girlfriend because of that class, and the two had spent more than a little part of their early relationship together studying organic chemistry.

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"I figured that you must have," Honey said. "You always get good grades in every class you take, Brian, but I know how important science is to you, because you are going to be a doctor and all, and so I just assumed that you must have gotten very good marks in your organic chemistry classes, and—" Honey knew she was doing it again, but the torrent of words just kept coming, and she was powerless to exert any kind of control whatsoever over them. She was relieved to hear Brian chuckle.

"I can help you," he said simply.

"Thanks, Brian!" Honey gushed. "That's perfectly perfect, because I know how good you are at explaining things so that people will understand them."

Again, Brian had a mental image of himself explaining organic chemistry to Lexi and her friend the very night that he had met the two of them in the library. All three of them had taken refuge there to study for an upcoming test. Lexi's friend had recognized him from her section of the class and called him over to study with them. The rest had been history.

Now Honey wanted help...with organic chemistry of all things. He couldn't help but draw parallels between the two situations. When he had been helping Lexi with organic chemistry, he had been attracted to her, but he had not expected anything to happen between them. There were many reasons for this, but one reason was Honey herself. He had always thought, even while he dated other girls at college, that eventually he would end up with Honey. Everyone had expected it, and he had, too. After he fell in love with Lexi, however, he had known better—he wasn't meant to be with Honey after all. It didn't matter what his friends and family wanted and expected. All that mattered was the fact that Brian loved Lexi. Things had been awkward between he and Honey after that, but now Honey needed help. He liked to teach, and he liked to help out his friends. Here was a chance to do both. If Honey needed his help with organic chemistry, then he wanted to help her. Plus, maybe it could help them get past the awkwardness.

"When do you want to get together?" Brian asked.

"When's good for you?" Honey wanted to know. "You're doing this out of the kindness of your heart, so I want to be as little bother as possible."

"You're not a bother," he reassured her. "I don't have any classes tomorrow. What about you?"

"Ahhh, the life of a senior, being able to schedule entire days without classes," Honey teased.

"My last class ends a little after one, and I could make it up to where you live by two. Would that be okay?"

"Yep. Do you know how to get here?"

"I know you're on Broadway," Honey answered.

"Yeah, just south of campus. The building is located at the corner of Broadway and West 113th. It's on the northeast corner of the intersection, about four blocks or so from the 116th Street/Columbia University subway stop. Or, if you'd rather, I could meet you on campus, and we could go to the library." Again, Brian tried to dispel the mental image of himself and Lexi ensconced in the library, leaning over an organic chemistry textbook together.

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“Your dorm is fine. Unless...do you not want me to come to your place?” Honey asked and then nearly bit her tongue off. What had made her say that? Not only was it tactless, but it was also rather challenging.

“No,” Brian responded, sounding confused and unsure. “I was just trying to make things easier for you since the library is closer to the subway stop, but if you...”

“No, Brian, that’s fine,” Honey interrupted, sad to hear the bewilderment and even a touch of hurt in Brian’s voice. “I don’t know what made me say that. If you don’t mind, though, I would like to come see your dorm room. I’ve been back in the City for almost eight months, and I haven’t even seen where you live.”

“We’ll rectify that tomorrow,” Brian said.

“That sounds good,” Honey said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Brian. And I do really appreciate the help. Will Lexi be around?”

“No, she has a lab class,” he explained. He didn’t mention that he had purposely suggested that Honey come over at a time when he knew that Lexi would not be around. He didn’t understand why he felt the need to meet when he knew that his girlfriend was busy, and he didn’t want to think about it. Another thing that he didn’t understand was why he was suddenly nervous at the thought that Honey Wheeler was coming to his dorm room tomorrow. Why should he be nervous at the thought of spending an afternoon studying with an old friend? It wasn’t like it was a date.

“Okay, well, at least I will get to see you tomorrow then,” Honey said, completely oblivious to Brian’s turmoil, and herself trying to understand her own maelstrom of emotions, including the unexpected feeling of relief that Lexi wouldn’t be around.

“Okay,” Brian echoed. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Honey murmured thoughtfully as she hung up the phone and stared at the white wall of her kitchen. “Tomorrow.”

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“Tomorrow” dawned a beautiful early spring day. The weather was starting to become warm and balmy as it shook the chill of winter off. The sky was a little more blue and a little less gray, which fit Honey’s new mood. The thought of failing her general chemistry course because of one stupid section had been hanging over her head, much like a gray cloud. Now, knowing that she was going to get help from an old friend, she felt that the cloud had gone away and blue sky replaced it.

When she had awoken that morning to see that the sun was shining, she had been almost giddy. Feeling slap-happy, that morning in the shower she had talked to herself non-stop as she washed her hair. “Unfortunately, I’m failing general chemistry. Fortunately, I have a friend who can help. Unfortunately, things have been kinda weird between us. Fortunately, we’re good enough friends that that doesn’t matter. Unfortunately...” And so it had gone on, Honey playing a game with herself in her silly mood.

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After her last class, she had hurried to the subway to take the Uptown train toward Columbia. She now was walking down the street from the subway stop and watching the numbers on the buildings. As the numbers got closer to matching the address that she had for Brian, she was pretty sure that she could see the building in the distance. It was a newer building and rose fourteen stories above the bustling street below. It was light tan brick, and the frontispiece of the building held three archways above wide doorways. Each doorway was lined with a pseudo column on either side, and Honey had to admit that the effect was impressive. It was not how one would picture the average college residence hall, but Honey found that she liked it.

She entered the lobby and looked around. The entrance ceiling curved upward slightly above a floor of stone tiles. Like the frontispiece outside, the attention to detail displayed in the lobby also was impressive. Although Honey was surrounded in new and relatively luxurious surroundings in the Marymount Manhattan Apartment, she still liked this building, called the Broadway Residence Hall, and found it comfortable-looking and yet somewhat stylish.

Brian had promised that he would be waiting for her in the lobby, and as she looked around, she saw him sitting in one of the ubiquitous sofas that seemed to adorn the lobby of all New York City apartment buildings. They looked inviting, but still had the utilitarian, institutionalized look that public furniture always seemed to have.

Brian saw her then, stood up, and crossed the room with a quick step. "Hi, Honey," he greeted her. "Did you find it okay?"

Honey nodded. "I did. It's very convenient to the subway line, as you said." After an awkward pause where they both stared at each other for a moment, Honey finally spoke again. "So, it's good to see you," she said, meaning every word. "I haven't seen you since...well, since Christmas, I guess."

"That's when I saw everyone last," Brian said, and Honey knew that "everyone" referred to the Bob-Whites. "None of our spring breaks seemed to line up. Did you go home for spring break?"

"Mother and Daddy had some events here in town they wanted me to attend with them, so I stayed in the penthouse for the first weekend. Dan had a project that he was working on with some partners, so that worked out well. And then we both spent the week in Sleepyside after that. Dan stayed with Regan above the garage for a couple of days, because Regan asked him to. I think he wants him to be closer than Mr. Maypenny's when he comes home to visit now."

"I bet you like it when he's that much closer to the Manor House," Brian said with a knowing grin.

Honey laughed at that comment. "Well, it doesn't hurt." *But it's not like you and Lexi, staying under the same roof at Crabapple Farm when you go back to Sleepyside,* she thought, with a bitterness that surprised her. Out loud, she said lightly, "But no one can get as close as you and Lexi, seeing as how you are both under the same roof when you go home."

Brian looked a little uncomfortable at this statement, and Honey was puzzled as to why. It was certainly a true enough statement. After her father had died, Lexi had decided to rent out their little bungalow in Pacific Palisades, California, to help pay for the mortgage and school. As a result, during breaks and times that Columbia University dorms were closed, Brian's girlfriend

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stayed in the downstairs guest room at Crabapple Farm. As always, Mrs. Belden proved how stretchy the walls of her home were and had extended her legendary hospitality when she learned that the young orphan needed some place that she could call, if not home, then at least home base. At the time that Lexi had moved in, Honey had experienced a tinge of jealousy, which had confused her, given her solid relationship with Dan Mangan. In truth, that niggle of jealousy still baffled her.

Finally, Brian broke the awkward silence. “So, do you want to come upstairs?”

Honey nodded. “I do. I don’t think I’ve ever been inside the dorm room of a resident assistant. You’re big man on campus, huh, Brian?” She grinned up at him, and Brian found that he liked her good-natured teasing.

“Yep,” he said, pretending to strut and preen, “that’s me, BMOC. In fact, I’ve been tagged with the title, and that’s all they call me around here.” His dark eyes twinkled mischievously.

Honey giggled as the two of them headed toward the bank of elevators. “I bet they do,” she said as she watched Brian stab the “up” button. The two rode up to the eighth floor in companionable silence before stepping out of the elevator car and into a plainly decorated corridor. It was just a short few steps until they were standing in front of the room designated each year for the resident assistant.

Brian used his key, and soon Honey was standing on the other side of the door, thinking how much this room reflected Brian’s personality. She found it comfortingly reassuring that Brian had not changed so much in his nearly four years at school. Science and medical textbooks lined the shelves, and the room was done in dark blues. A wooden desk sat with an open laptop computer, some sort of essay displayed on the computer screen. Next to the laptop was a book that surprised Honey, as it was not medical or scientific in nature. She wondered why Brian was reading *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy*. She hadn’t known that Brian had an interest in the Navy.

Her eyes continued to roam about the room. A calendar was hung above the desk, presumably a calendar featuring sea life, as March’s picture was a pair of lobsters in their underwater habitat. Papers with chemical notations and formulas and still more papers with anatomical notations were scattered across the desk, a testament to Brian’s busy study schedule. A half-filled *Times* crossword puzzle was a testament that Brian’s relaxing pursuits were still of the scholarly variety.

Windows overlooked a busy New York City street below. Honey crossed the room, her footsteps quietly treading on a dark blue rug remnant, and looked out the window. Even from her remote viewing position of eight stories up, Honey could feel the hustle and the bustle of the thriving metropolis below her. In the distance, she could see the campus of Columbia University. Although the buildings of the campus did not look particularly academic, she could appreciate that they were hallowed halls of education steeped in tradition.

She turned and smiled at Brian as she gracefully slid her backpack off of her back and onto the floor.

“I like it. It’s very you.”

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“Very me?” Brian’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and Honey could not help but think how much he looked like his younger siblings when he did that, despite the difference in coloring.

Honey nodded. “Yes. Whenever I see this particular shade of deep, dark blue, I always think of you.” She lifted her hands in a gesture toward the shelves of scientific and medical books.

“And no room of yours would be complete without a collection of books devoted to science and medicine.”

Brian grinned. “I suppose that you could probably say that about any student about to enter medical school.”

Honey laughed. “Touché. But you know what I mean.”

Brian chuckled with her. “Yeah, I think I do.”

“By the way, I hear that you got accepted to the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. That’s really impressive, Brian.”

Brian blushed, and once again Honey was reminded of Trixie, who invariably blushed at compliments. “Thank you,” he said. “I was pretty happy to get accepted. Although, now that I am looking at the terrifying loans that go with medical school, I’m wondering if I’m crazy.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Honey said. “You’ll be able to pay them off when you’re a famous doctor. You’ll discover a cure or invent some new technique to do a heart transplant or something.”

“You have a lot of confidence in me,” Brian said.

“Yeah, I do,” Honey replied softly. The comfortable feeling they had been sharing suddenly fled, and awkwardness descended on them once again. The undercurrents running between them were palpable, and each of them wondered exactly what the other was thinking. Ever since Brian had started dating, there had been a white elephant in the room each time that they found themselves in the other’s company. This had been going on for far too long, and Honey briefly wondered why they had never bothered to clear the air before. Certainly, a friendship such as theirs deserved at least that. Honey was about to open her mouth and broach the subject, but Brian spoke first.

“So, do you want to get down to business?” Suddenly, Brian looked embarrassed at what he had just asked, and Honey was confused for a moment. “I mean, with the organic chemistry.” At those explanatory words, Honey realized what Brian must have been thinking, and a rosy blush tinged her cheeks as the room became suddenly uncomfortably warm.

“Yeah, with the organic chemistry,” Honey echoed as she slipped off her jacket and carefully set it over the desk chair, her back to Brian. It was then that she noticed the watch that she had given him a few Christmases ago sitting among the pile of papers. *Mementos of things past*, she thought. *Things long gone*. She took a deep breath to steady herself and then turned toward him. “So, do you, umm, want to study here, or should we go to a study lounge or something?”

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"I don't mind staying here and studying if you don't," Brian said. "The study rooms generally have a little bit of activity going on in them, and it always seems to be enough to wreck my concentration. There is more room there, though, if you want to go there."

Honey shook her head. "No. If you have to keep explaining things to me, then we would only be disturbing those in there who want it to be quiet. This is fine."

"Okay," Brian said. Both were keenly aware of the tension remaining in the room, but as neither one of them knew exactly what to do to diffuse it, they each swallowed their nervousness, spread their books and papers out on the floor, and began to tackle chemistry.

After two hours of Brian's tutelage, Honey was starting to feel like she might have a grasp, if tenuous, on the introductory organic chemistry material. She definitely had a grasp on the structure of aldehydes versus ketones and was beginning to get the nomenclature of organic molecules down cold. Even the various mechanism reactions were starting to seem a little less like Greek.

The two were sprawled on their stomachs next to each other on the floor, their books and papers strewn about around them, when Honey rolled away from Brian onto her back and stretched both her arms and her legs into the air. She finally settled down on her back and stared up at the ceiling.

"Had enough yet?" Brian said with a grin, trying to ignore how Honey looked in her low-rise jeans and tight-fitting green sweater.

Honey smiled in return. "I have, but unfortunately, I think I still need to keep going."

"How about a break then?" Brian asked. "I can get something from one of the snack machines if you want."

"I definitely could use a break," Honey agreed. "But I'd like to stretch my legs, too. Mind if I came with you?"

"Well, the kitchen with the snack machines is just across the hall, so it won't give you much of a chance to stretch your legs," Brian said.

"Well, what about if we took a longer walk?" Honey asked. "Maybe go to a kitchen on another floor?"

Brian's eyes strayed involuntarily to the clock, an action that Honey did not miss. The meaning of the glance was not lost on Honey, either.

"If you have some where else that you have to be..." Honey began.

Brian immediately shook his head. "No, it's not that at all. I just don't want you to have to go back home in the dark."

Honey smiled. Brian was always so thoughtful. Of course, he'd be worried about her getting home safe. "That's nice of you to worry about me, Brian, but I'll be fine."

"I know, I know," Brian said ruefully. "I'm worrying for nothing, acting like the voice of reason, the older brother and all-around party pooper of the Bob-Whites of the Glen. Of course you'll be fine. You grew up here, and you've been living here for the last eight months."

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“For one thing, I would never call you a party pooper. And being the voice of reason for someone like your sister is not a bad thing.” She grinned at that. “Actually, what I meant was that Dan is meeting me, and we’re going to go out to eat at a place that he really likes near here. So, I’ll be Dan’s problem, not yours.”

“You could never be a problem, Honey,” Brian said, even as he felt a small pang at the mention of Dan. He refused to stop and analyze why hearing the name of one of his best friends would cause such a pang. He was used to seeing Honey and Dan together. Plus, he was very happy with Lexi. Why should he care that Dan was meeting Honey for dinner?

“Well, tell that to Dan,” Honey said with a laugh, bringing him out of his reverie.

“I am most definitely sure that Dan does not think you are a problem,” Brian said, standing up. He held out his hand and helped Honey stand up from her prone position on the floor. She stood with her usual grace.

“So, do you want to take a walk around the residence hall?” Brian asked. “I could take you up to the fourteenth floor. It has a few different lounges and a kitchen, plus a pretty good view.”

“It sounds good,” Honey said, not bothering to explain that she lived on the 23rd floor of her building and had a pretty good view herself. She followed Brian out of the room to the elevators. As the two waited for the elevator to arrive, they made small talk about recent visits to Sleepyside and news from her brother and his sister, who were both attending college at Michigan State University. The topic of Brian’s graduation came up, and Honey found herself wondering if she would get to see her old childhood friend accept his college diploma. The elevator arrived, and the two stepped into the crowded space. It stopped on almost every floor, so it took some time for them to arrive on the fourteenth floor. Two students exited with them and headed toward the open lounge while Brian led Honey on a tour around the floor, including stops to look out of the windows to get their birds’ eye view of New York City.

Honey appreciated the simple décor in the rather new building, Columbia’s newest residence hall. It managed to be modern and classic at the same time, but no matter how well-appointed and tastefully done it was, the décor could not shake its institutional origins.

The two students eventually made their way around the top floor of the residence hall, and Brian led Honey into the kitchen, where they chose sodas from the soda machine and trail mix and Fig Newtons from the vending machine. Honey glanced at the bulletin board, which advertised summer sublets, book sales, local concerts, and a flyer for a residence hall fundraiser, which advertised a mock beauty pageant and a bachelor auction.

“You going up for auction?” Honey asked with a teasing grin, waving a delicate hand toward the bright pink flyer.

“Residents assistants are running the thing. I’m exempt,” Brian said with an answering grin.

The two decided to sit down in the closest lounge and eat their snacks rather than take them back to Brian’s room.

“There’s nothing better than a snack that mixes good sources of protein and iron with candy,” Brian commented as he threw a handful of trail mix, complete with candy-coated chocolate candies, into his mouth.

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“Oh, yeah?” Honey asked.

“Yep. Iron is a great source of energy, which helps you study, and the nuts and raisins are full of them. And who doesn’t want a little chocolate when they’re studying?”

Honey had to agree, and the two relaxed while finishing their snacks and sodas. Honey looked at her watch and realized that it was much later than she thought that it was.

“It’s almost five. I’d better get downstairs and get packed up so that I can meet Dan at the restaurant.”

“He’s not going to meet you here and walk with you?” Brian asked, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

Honey herself was surprised at Brian’s reaction. “No. Why?”

“Oh, well, it’s just that it’ll be dark out soon, and…” At Honey’s grin, Brian stopped and his own lips curved into a rueful smile. “Responsible and boring Brian at your service, huh?”

“No, I don’t think that you’re boring at all, Brian. Responsible? Yes. Boring? No. I like that you worry about your friends. It means you care,” Honey said.

“I do care, Honey.” The intensity of Brian’s declaration surprised them both, and Brian immediately backtracked. “I mean, well, all of the Bob-Whites of mean a lot to me,” he added lamely.

“I know we do, Brian. And, like I said, I appreciate that you worry about us. But I’ll be fine, I promise. The restaurant isn’t far from the subway stop, so it just seemed like a waste for Dan to walk all the way here just to walk all the way back. Plus, with Daylight Saving Time going into effect so early, it’s not so dark.”

“I know you’re a big girl, Honey, and that you can take care of yourself. Like I said, I know that you grew up here and all, but it *is* going to get dark out pretty soon.” Brian stopped his speech abruptly and said, “Anyway, would you mind if I walked you to the subway stop?”

“But, Brian,” Honey protested, “I’ve already taken up too much of your time. I’m sure that you must have a lot of homework and studying of your own to do.”

Brian shrugged. “Like I said yesterday, I don’t have any classes on Thursdays, so I was able to spend a good portion of the morning studying.” He grinned at her in a decidedly un-Brian way. “Besides, I think I have senioritis.”

Honey gave a shout of surprised laughter. “Brian Belden? Senioritis? That takes the cake. Well, I feel the need to encourage your senioritis for some perverse reason, even though I guess I should be talking you out of it, so I will accept your kind and generous and lovely offer to walk me to the subway stop.”

The two of them, feeling much more comfortable around each other after Brian’s senioritis confession, laughed companionably as they threw their empty soda cans into the recycle bin and their wrappers in the trash and headed back to the eighth floor. Once back in Brian’s room, Honey quickly gathered up all of her papers and books and hurriedly stuffed them into her backpack. Brian handed Honey her coat and shrugged into his.

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“Are you sure you want to walk me to the subway stop?” Honey asked as she pulled her long honey-colored hair out of the back of her jacket before picking up her backpack and hefting it onto her shoulders.

“Absolutely,” Brian assured her. “Plus, I can surprise Lexi outside of her lab class and walk her home.”

Honey did not allow her smile to falter at the mention of Lexi. “Okay, then. Let’s go.”

With his own smile, Brian followed her out the door thinking how nice it had been to spend a few hours with just Honey. Something he had not done in a very long time.

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Ron and Shane are homages to my two favorite lab partners from my days at Michigan State. Ron, who did play a mean game of tennis, was an invaluable help in organic chem lab. “Shane” was the best microbiology lab partner a girl could ever have—so much so that we remained lab partners for two whole years because we kept ending up in the same microbiology lab classes. My carryover items were: Fig Newtons (#2.1), a calendar (SA#5), an essay (#2.2), Daylight Saving Time (#2.3), and finding a sweet memento from someone’s past (#2.4).

This is a Jixemetri Circle Writing Project Special Anniversary #7 submission—in which the items were all added retroactively, so please forgive me if they stick out a bit. Oh, and I go the Thomas Jefferson route and capitalize “City” when it refers to New York City. *g* Many, many thanks to Susan, whose inbox is being inundated with fanfic as I try desperately to make my word count! She’s an awesome editor, although I don’t always take her comma advice. If you’ve got issues with my comma use, take it up with me, not her! :)

Basic Chemistry

Part Two: In Terms of Chemistry

by Dana

“How on earth are you ever going to explain in terms of chemistry and physics so important a biological phenomenon as first love?”

—Albert Einstein

As Honey and Brian approached, Dan was waiting at the subway stop, trying to ignore the raucous man nearby trying to hawk baby rabbits. He would never get over what you could buy at a subway stop in New York. Another slightly deranged-looking man was shouting some survey about God, sinners, the First Amendment, and wasabi peas to anyone who would listen, which, of course, was no one. Hardened city residents pushed passed him with obvious annoyance, while apprehensive tourists studiously avoided looking in his direction as they skirted their way around him. The icing on the cake, though, was the perfectly normal-looking twenty-something in neatly pressed khakis and a white button-down shirt trying to entice every person who exited the subway with the promise of “Come to the gutter—we have cookies.”

After putting up with the freak show for what seemed like forever, he had finally spotted his two friends making their way along the sidewalk. He saw them long before they noticed him, and he watched them intently. Honey was laughing at something Brian had said, and Dan was aware—not for the first time—that Honey and Brian looked very good together. They were

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both very attractive, and both had a...respectable quality about them. Although Dan had been told by more than one girl that he was attractive, he knew he did not have that wholesomeness that both Honey and Brian exuded.

Brian always wore a caring, concerned look about his face, even when he was full of mirth, as he was now. Something Honey had just said must have been particularly funny. His dark eyes also always had a warm but intelligent quality about them. They were not sharp and cunning like Trixie's eyes, but filled with a quiet wisdom. With his respectable bearing, intelligent gaze, caring features, and warm demeanor, it was easy to believe that he would become a very successful doctor.

Looking at his honey-haired girlfriend and the handsome man by her side, Dan felt a pang. In that moment, Dan forgot how compatible he and Honey were and only remembered the fact that everyone—himself included—had thought that Honey and Brian would end up together.

Maybe they still will, an awful voice inside Dan whispered cruelly.

Not if I have anything to say about it! The feisty side of his nature came back with a strong retort. *She's the best thing that ever happened to me, and I won't give up without a fight!*

Oh yeah? His insecure side taunted viciously. *But what if he could make her more happy than you could? Don't you love her enough to let her go and be happy? Are you that selfish, man?*

Dan's inner conflict caused his shoulders to visibly slump as he tried to silence the vicious little voice in his head.

Of course, I want her to be happy. I want nothing more than that. And if she truly thought that the only way that she could be happy was with Brian Belden, I would happily, okay, maybe not happily, but I would gracefully step aside and wish them the best of luck. Brian Belden is a good man, and he would treat Honey the way she absolutely deserves to be treated. But I know I can make her happy. And I would fight to prove that.

By this time, Honey and Brian had drawn much closer. Even the insecure imp within Dan could not miss the way that Honey's face lit up when she saw him standing there, a bright smile curving upward, bringing glowing happiness to an already pretty face. Inner war forgotten, Dan returned Honey's smile and opened his arms to accept her hug.

"Hi, Brian," he said with a grin at his friend over Honey's shoulder.

"Hi, Dan." Brian returned a smile of his own.

"Were you able to get all of those organic chemistry mysteries solved?" Dan asked. "When I used to help Trixie with her math after you and Jim left for college, I found that it helped to put things in terms of mysteries. Honey is wacky enough that the same thing might work with her, too."

Honey pulled back and swatted her grinning boyfriend playfully. "Wacky? Me? Surely, you jest!"

"I don't jest. And don't call me Shirley!"

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Honey giggled in such a way that Brian knew that, despite its corniness, this was a long-standing and comfortable joke between the two of them. He remembered a time when he and Honey had shared the same type of comfortable companionship and giggled over in-jokes that were silly and not really funny to anybody but them. He almost ached at the thought and felt more than a little like a third wheel.

“So, where’s Lexi?” Dan asked, and Brian remembered that *he* had the same type of relationship as Honey and Dan did, someone with whom he shared silly in-jokes that were funny to nobody but them.

“She has a lab class Thursday afternoons,” he answered, “but I’m going to head over to her building and surprise her. I wanted to make sure Honey got to the subway stop okay, so I’m more than halfway to Lexi’s building anyway.”

Brian looked down at his watch just then, and both Honey and Dan noted that it was the watch Honey had given him a few Christmases before. Honey remembered seeing it on Brian’s desk and realized that he must have put it on before they left without her noticing.

There was an awkward pause until Brian cleared his throat and said, “She’s probably going to be done very soon, so I guess I should get going. It’s good to see you, Dan.”

“You, too,” Dan returned, casually placing an arm around Honey’s shoulders and drawing her closer. To keep Honey warm in the rapidly chilling air, he told himself. *Not* as a blatant gesture of insecure macho male posturing.

Yeah, right! The obnoxious little imp inside Dan’s head spoke up.

“Thank you again for all of your help, Brian,” Honey said, the model of politeness as always. “I really do appreciate it.”

“No problem. If you think you need to go over those equations again, especially the oxidation-reduction ones, I have time this weekend. Just let me know if you need me,” Brian offered.

“Thanks. I just might,” Honey said with a shy smile.

With a final wave good-bye, Brian ambled away down the street toward Lexi’s building, and Honey and Dan, happily holding hands, skirted the line of people standing at the nearby bus stop and headed toward the little diner that Dan liked not only because of the good food, but because of all of the pleasant memories it held.

On the way to the restaurant, Honey described Brian’s dorm to Dan, and Dan filled Honey in on the events of his day. It wasn’t a long walk, and soon they had left the brisk air and stood ensconced in the homey warmth of the small mom-and-pop diner. Shirl, the owner’s wife, looked up from the table she was bussing, and a wide smile broke over her lined but pleasant face.

“Danny! Honey!” she greeted them warmly as she set her tray down and hurried over to greet them with big hugs. “How’ve you two been?”

Honey and Dan both returned her smile and hugs, and Dan answered, “We’ve been great, Shirl. How are you and Stavros doing?”

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“We been doin’ fine, just fine. Here, you kids sit,” she said as she motioned to an empty booth in the corner. Honey and Dan sat down, and soon she was back with two menus. “Today’s Southern special is an open-face meatloaf sandwich, covered in my special chili sauce, with a side of collard greens. The Greek special is moussaka with a side of Greek fries. Stavros also managed to get his hands on some early blue crabs this morning, but I don’t like the early crabs, personally.” She leaned in conspiratorially and lowered her voice. “Just, whatever you do, *don’t* get the stuffed grape leaves. Stavros, bless his little heart, has decided to try something new, and I’ve put out enough flaming grapes this evening!” Honey and Dan grinned at each other, and Shirl stood straight again and spoke in a normal voice. “Now, what can I get you two to drink?”

Honey ordered an iced tea, and Dan ordered a Coke. Shirl hurried off to fill their drink orders.

“You feeling like Greek or Southern tonight?” Dan asked his girlfriend as his eyes roamed the menu.

“I think Greek,” Honey said. “But not the moussaka special.”

“And I am definitely thinking Southern, but not the meatloaf special,” Dan echoed.

The menu was an eclectic but somehow pleasing mix of Southern and Greek food, a reflection of the owners’ backgrounds. Hoping to be a Rockette, Shirley Jean Bailey had come to New York City from a tiny little town in Mississippi. She hadn’t danced her way into Radio City Music Hall, but she had danced her way into the heart of Stavros Kouperakis, a Greek immigrant who had himself come to New York to make his fortune. After the two were married, they opened the unique diner, which served specialties from both of their home regions. The concept had worked, and the diner was still going strong after more than 30 years. Stavros and Shirl still did most of the cooking, making sure the food met their exacting standards and Southern and Greek traditions.

The diner was narrow one, with only a few small tables scattered about and three booths anchored to the wall. The walls were painted white, kept spotlessly clean by the Kouperakises, and decorated with old travel posters and calendars that featured enticing pictures of the Greek Isles and appealing images of Savannah and New Orleans. One wall adornment was a framed lottery ticket that Shirl had discovered between the pages of an old newspaper that had been tucked in a drawer in the kitchen of the diner the couple had just bought. Shirl thought it was god luck, even if it hadn’t been a winning ticket.

Honey had never imagined that the genteel old South could so effectively co-exist with the ancient ruggedness of the Greek Isles, but Stavros and Shirl made it work, just as they did their obviously loving marriage. The simple décor featuring the owners’ homelands set the mood for the place, and Shirl’s Southern hospitality and Stavros’ hearty warmth welcomed all who dined there. But Honey’s favorite aspect of the diner was that it was a piece of Dan’s past. His mother and father had occasionally brought him here for a good, old-fashioned Southern breakfast when Tim Mangan was feeling homesick. A transplant from Louisiana, Dan’s father had been stationed in Brooklyn at Fort Hamilton.

Honey loved that Shirl and Stavros had kept the little eating establishment alive. Dan had lost so many things in his short life—his father, his mother, and a little bit of his soul when he’d

been forced to survive on the streets of the City. But this diner, the place of so many fond memories and traditions, was still here, so Dan could recapture a little bit of his lost childhood.

Shirl returned then with their drinks, and Honey realized that she had been so lost in thought that she hadn't decided on what she wanted. "You go first," she urged Dan as her eyes returned to the menu in front of her. While Dan ordered some of Shirl's delicious fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and okra, Honey decided to try something new and ordered the lamb souvlaki.

"You want some tzatziki to go along with that? Stavros outdid himself today," Shirl tempted the young girl.

Honey nodded in response. "That sounds fantastic."

"Make it a double order, Shirl?" Dan asked as Shirl collected their menus.

"Tzatziki and fried chicken, Danny?" Shirl asked with a teasing grin and then hurried to greet the young couple that had just walked in.

Honey and Dan were engaged in small talk when the door opened several minutes later, and a familiar couple walked in. Honey noticed them first, and Dan instantly saw her expression change from casual happiness to uncomfortable surprise. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone who reminded him of a young Cary Grant, and he *knew* that Brian and Lexi had just entered the diner.

If they're just friends, why does she look so uncomfortable seeing them together? that imp inside his head asked. Dan ignored it and waved to get Brian's attention.

Brian, who had been looking unsure of himself as his gaze swept the restaurant, suddenly looked surprised as his eyes turned toward the booth at which Dan and Honey were sitting. Dan noted that it took a moment for Brian to bring a smile to his lips. He whispered something to Lexi, who was smiling rather nervously toward the seated couple, and the two of them made their way toward the booth.

"Fancy meeting you here," Brian said when they had reached the seated couple.

"If we'd known you were coming here, we could have all walked over to meet Lexi and come together," Honey said, and Dan could tell from her tone that it was tact and not a genuine desire to eat together that prompted her comment.

"Actually," Brian explained, "we didn't know we'd be coming here. I was in the mood to order pizza, but Lexi had heard about this place and thought we should try it out."

"You've never been before?" Dan asked. When both Brian and Lexi shook their heads, he thought, *Talk about coincidences They've never even been here, and yet here they are now.* Dan wondered why this should bother him so much, but then decided drop that line of thought.

"Well, you're in for a treat," Honey spoke up. "The owners, Shirl and Stavros, are two of the best cooks in the world."

Brian's eyebrows shot up. "You know the owners?"

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Dan nodded, and Honey explained, “Dan used to come here with his parents when he was a boy.” There was an awkward pause, and ever-tactful Honey asked, “Would you like to join us?”

Lexi started to shake her head, but Brian said, “Sure, why not?”

Dan noted Lexi’s reluctance to sit with them, and that little imp spoke up again. *Of course not. Why would she want to sit with her rival?*

Rival? Dan thought. Why would he even think of Lexi and Honey as rivals? *For Brian’s affections?*

For the second time in as many minutes, he stopped his train of thought abruptly as he watched Honey start to slide across the booth seat, clearly in an attempt to join Dan on the other side. Brian, however, was already sliding in next to her. Lexi gave the two old friends a resigned look and slid in next to Dan.

On the other side of the table, Honey tried not to react, but seeing Lexi sitting next to *her* boyfriend when she already had to watch her with Brian was too much. An irrational stab of jealousy swept through her body, and she quickly reached for her iced tea and gulped it down in an effort to regain control of her emotions.

Just then, Shirl returned to the table with warmed pita bread and tzatziki, a cucumber sauce made with thick Greek yogurt and seasoned with mint and garlic. “Well, I didn’t know y’all were going to have some friends join you!” she exclaimed. “I would have brought more!”

“They just happened to wander in, Shirl. We didn’t know,” Dan explained. “Shirl, these are our friends, Brian and Lexi. Brian, Lexi, this is one of the owners, Shirl Kouperakis.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet more friends of Danny’s. I’ve loved getting to know Honey,” Shirl said with a bright smile for the newcomers. “I’ll bring some more tzatziki and some menus.”

With a smile, Lexi watched Shirl leave, and then turned to Dan. “I heard this place has both out-of-this-world Greek and Southern food. Is that true?”

Dan nodded. “It is. My dad was born and raised in the South, and when he got stationed over at Fort Hamilton, he and some of his buddies, who were also Southern transplants, used to travel over here all the way from Brooklyn every Saturday morning for Shirl’s biscuits and gravy. That’s how good they all thought Shirl’s cooking was. My parents kept up the tradition after they were married, before they left for Germany. When my dad got orders back here again, I was four, and I got included in the tradition, too. After my dad died, my mom tried to keep up the tradition, until she just couldn’t afford the subway fare over here, let alone the price of the meal.”

Dan said this matter-of-factly, with no rancor nor any expectation of sympathy. It was just a fact of his life as far as he was concerned, but Honey noted that Lexi was particularly moved by the story. Suddenly, Honey realized that Lexi and Dan had some things in common: they had each had lost at least one parent at a young age, and they were both orphans.

And she had not and was not. She involuntarily glanced over at Brian and realized by the expression on his face that he recognized this very same fact. He turned toward her, and their eyes met. Honey knew they were thinking the same thing.

What if Dan and Lexi bonded with each other in a way that they couldn't?

Fortunately, Shirl returned then with a couple of menus and explained the day's specials to Lexi and Brian before returning to the kitchen to get more tzatziki and the glasses of water that both Brian and Lexi had requested.

Honey tried to forget her sudden uneasiness by digging into the tzatziki with more enthusiasm than she felt. Dan slid a piece of pita through the delicious appetizer and encouraged Brian and Lexi to do the same. After tasting it, Brian and Lexi agreed that the tzatziki was wonderful.

"So, what do you suggest?" Brian asked, attempting a conversational tone as he looked at the menu.

Dan decided that it was time to lighten up the mood at the table. "Stavros' moussaka covered with Shirl's mashed potatoes and gravy, with a bit of okra and lobster mixed in."

Brian and Lexi looked at Dan, grins on their faces, thinking he was joking. At his dead-pan expression, their smiles faltered.

"Seriously?" Brian asked.

"What? Don't you trust me?" Dan said, keeping in persona.

"Of course, I trust you, Dan, but that sounds ominous," Brian said, falling back on an old joke the Bob-Whites shared.

At that, Dan's face broke into a grin, and the ice at the table was officially broken. After receiving genuine recommendations from Dan and Honey, Lexi decided on one of Stavros' Greek salads, which included no lettuce, but was a hearty dish of tomato, red onion, cucumber, roasted red pepper, green peppers, and Kalamata olives topped with a large hunk of Feta cheese and smothered in his oregano vinaigrette. Brian decided to go the Southern route and chose barbecued ribs with a side of slow-baked molasses beans and corn bread.

"Good choice," Dan said, with a smile across the table toward his girlfriend. "Honey and I usually order something Greek and something Southern so that we can share."

Shirl arrived then to take their orders and then left the foursome to their conversation. Within a moment, they heard her yell back to Stavros, "Cow feed from the isles and a first lady with bullets and some Indian dough."

Honey and Dan grinned at each other, as they both loved listening to Shirl call an order back to her husband.

"We *are* going to get what we ordered, right?" Brian joked. "That code was worth one of Trixie's mysteries."

Honey laughed. "No worries. Stavros is fluent in Shirl."

"What did all of that mean, though?" Brian wondered.

Dan explained. "Cow feed is a salad, and Lexi ordered a Greek salad so it's from the isles, as in the Greek Isles. First lady is a pun because Eve was made from Adam's 'spare' rib, and bullets are beans. Native Americans are known for their cultivation of corn, and dough is slang for bread."

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“Very interesting,” Lexi commented and then asked, “So, how did this restaurant come to concentrate on both cuisines?”

Honey pursed her lips at the way Lexi so intently looked at Dan as she asked her question. Then, to hide her pique, Honey quickly reached for her glass of iced tea and took a large gulp of the icy brew as Dan answered Lexi.

“Stavros came over Greece. Shirl moved to the City from Savannah. Shirl thought she was going to be a dancer, and Stavros thought he was going to make a million on Wall Street. Instead, the two met and fell in love. Both of them were better at cooking than they were at dancing or trading, and neither of them were satisfied with the restaurants that supposedly cooked the kind of food they grew up on. So, after they were married, they decided to open up a diner specializing in Greek and Southern food. And it worked—this place has been here for ages.”

“What a great story,” Lexi said, and then silence descended on the group once more.

As Honey launched into a nervous account of something that had happened in her organic chemistry lab to break the silence, Dan covertly studied Lexi. She was doing pretty well keeping up with the Honey-speak, he thought. At least she wasn't showing any outward signs of confusion, as most people did at first. Lexi also did well at Bob-White gatherings. He knew firsthand that suddenly being thrust into the close-knit group of friends could be intimidating. Dan himself had first encountered the Bob-Whites when they had only been in their infancy, and he had felt like an outsider for quite a while. He could only imagine how Lexi felt, having grown up half a world away and meeting a tight group of friends that had grown up in the same place and had been friends for...well, forever.

Add the whole “everyone thought that Honey Wheeler and Brian Belden would be together forever” attitude that pervaded Sleepyside, and it could be downright daunting.

Now what made me think that? Dan wondered, even as he realized it was that insecure brat that had been rearing its ugly head all evening.

Honey was still chattering when Shirl brought four plates of steaming food to their table. Silence then reigned as the four of them attacked their food with gusto. Dan wondered if it was hunger or relief at having something else to concentrate on that made them so interested in the plates before them.

Dan was just wondering what he could say to ease the awkwardness at the table, when Shirl reappeared.

“How is everything?” She looked expectantly at each of her customers, and it was obvious that this was not merely a polite question. Shirl truly wanted to know what each of them thought of their meals.

After everyone had assured her that everything was fantastic, she looked around the emptying dining room. Most of the customers had left the diner, and there were only two other occupied tables.

“Well, now that everybody else has been taken care of,” she declared, “I have time for a visit.”

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She smiled at Brian and Lexi. “So, I want to hear all about Danny’s and Honey’s friends.”

Both Lexi and Brian looked a little lost for words, so Honey smoothly stepped in. “Brian’s one of that group of friends Dan and I told you about. You know, that club we have back home?” At Shirl’s nod, she went on. “He’s Trixie’s brother—you know, the one who solves all the mysteries and I am going to be partners with some day? That is, Trixie is, not Brian,” Honey clarified in her usual scattered way. Then, although the jealous, insecure part of her wanted to ignore Lexi completely and continue to emphasize her shared history with Brian, both her tact and her innate goodness won out. “Lexi, here, is Brian’s girlfriend. She’s originally from California, but they met at Columbia.”

“So far from home,” Shirl commented. “Do you like it here? It took me and Stavros a long time to get acclimated to New York. Both Crete and Savannah are so much warmer than here!”

Lexi smiled shyly. “It took a little bit of getting used to, but my mom and dad both went to Columbia. And I knew that it was important to both of them for me to come out here and attend their alma mater.”

“Well, that’s nice. I think everyone should experience somethin’ different than what they’re used to. It’s the only way to grow,” she stated with an emphatic nod. She then turned her attention to Brian. “So, what do you do?”

Brian smiled. “I’m pre-med.”

“Oh, a doctor!” Shirl exclaimed. “I can tell by that caring look in those gorgeous dark eyes that you’re going to be a good one, too!”

“He will,” both Honey and Lexi declared at the same time. Two pairs of startled eyes met over the table. An awkward silence reigned, and even Shirl could feel the suddenly palpable tension, but she did not understand it, knowing how devoted Honey was to little Danny Mangan.

“Well,” the older woman said into the silence, “that obviously speaks volumes of your talent and your drive if these two pretty ladies are convinced of your success.” Her tone was light, and then she declared, “Well, I’ve visited long enough. Y’all enjoy those meals.” With a wink, she left the table and headed to the nearest occupied table to ensure they were doing okay, too.

Brian, taking another bite of his baked beans, said, “This really is outstanding.”

“I told you,” Dan said, a big grin splitting his face. “Shirl’s cooking is the best!”

“I don’t think I can say that without being treasonous,” Brian said, and everyone knew he was referring to Moms’ cooking.

Honey smiled knowingly. “Dan meant the best cooking you’ll ever get in a restaurant. He loves your mom’s cooking as much as the rest of us do.”

Dan nodded vehemently. “You know that, dude.”

Brian laughed. “I know that...dude.”

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This seemed to relax the charged atmosphere at the table, and the four finished their meals with companionable conversation. Honey and Dan encouraged Brian and Lexi to leave room for some of Stavros' delicious baklava, and after tasting it, they were glad that they had.

"This baklava is to die for!" Lexi exclaimed as she shoveled another bite into her mouth.

"This is the only dessert to get when you come here," Dan agreed. "Even Shirl says so."

"Except in the fall," Honey argued. "Shirl's pumpkin bread is the only thing to get then, especially since it's a limited-time deal!"

After dessert, the four said good-bye. Honey and Dan said their good-byes and headed for the subway stop. Brian and Lexi, who had a much shorter distance to travel, lingered over coffee.

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Brian's eyes lingered on the departing couple. Dan had placed his hand on Honey's back as he guided her through the door. As soon as they had both cleared the doorway, Dan placed his arm around Honey's shoulders, and she leaned into him. It was such a natural movement for her, obviously, that any fear that he had about Lexi and Dan connecting flew out the window. He turned back toward Lexi, about to smile at her, when he noticed that she was watching him carefully through narrowed eyes.

"Did you learn anything interesting with your thorough examination?" Lexi asked, hating that she sounded like a jealous shrew, but somehow unable to stop herself.

"What do you mean?" Brian asked, sounding confused, but the guilty look that flashed across his face was an indictment to Lexi.

"I just wondered why you needed to stare at them so intently when they left," Lexi stated, angry at herself, yet still under whatever spell it was that held her powerless to stop the accusations from spilling forth. "They look very happy and natural together, and I guess I'm wondering how that makes you feel."

"It makes me feel happy that two of my best friends have found each other and obviously have a really great relationship," Brian said, not only irked at this interrogation but at the unexplained guilt he felt. This combination left his temper much shorter than usual.

"Really?"

"Yes, *really*," Brian said, and there was no mistaking the irritation in his voice. "If you must know, when I realized that you and Dan had a common bond in that you both lost your parents...well...I started feeling insecure," he admitted, pausing. "Watching Dan and Honey together just now made me realize how stupid I was to be afraid that you and Dan would connect."

Lexi's face softened, and all of the previous anger and jealousy flowed out of her. She should have known that solid, dependable Brian was true to her and would never stray. She knew without a doubt that he loved her. He had taken an Amtrak train across the country to see her in her greatest time of need. What more proof of his love and devotion did she need? And yet, jealousy still had managed to rear its ugly, green head.

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"I'm sorry, Brian," Lexi said, meaning it. "I just...I know how close you and Honey are...were...and I got stupidly jealous. Please forgive me?" Her light blue-green eyes pleaded with him to understand.

Brian smiled tenderly at her, his own irritation gone as well. "Of course." He exhaled. "What a pair we are. I got all bent out of shape because I was convinced that just because you and Dan are both orphans that you were going to run away together or something. Isn't that stupid? And here you are, thinking that I still have feelings for Honey."

Lexi had been mollified up until that last statement. She didn't want to fight, and she did know that Brian loved her, but his use of the word "still" unnerved her.

"We are a pair," she agreed lightly with a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"A perfect pair," Brian murmured as he leaned over to give Lexi a sweet kiss on the lips, unaware of her inner turmoil. "Just perfect."

Perfect? Then why did Lexi feel so unsettled?

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Meanwhile, Dan and Honey were quickly walking toward the subway stop. The balmy late spring air had disappeared with the falling sun, and a brisk wind had sprung up while they were in the diner. Honey shivered a little bit, while Dan tried to drape as much of himself around her as he could to keep her warm.

"Are you sure you won't take my jacket, Honey?" Dan asked for the third time.

Honey grinned at him even as she hurried along. "I'm sure. We're almost to the subway."

Sure enough, within a few moments, she and Dan had reached the entrance to the subway and were barreling down the stairs to reach the warmth of the underground below. Their hurrying paid off, because they were just able to make a train before it pulled out of the station.

"Whew!" Honey said as they finally found two seats next to each other in the third car that they had walked through. "See? If I had stopped to take your jacket, not only would it have not done much good, but we would have missed this train."

Dan smiled at his girlfriend as he took her hand. "You're right *this* time, but it doesn't mean I want you to freeze."

Honey snorted, the inelegant sound a contrast to her generally refined demeanor. "I was hardly freezing, Dan," she said.

Dan smiled and then said, "I think we're going to have one more surprise snow before it's all over."

Honey looked at him in surprise. "Really?"

"It's just a feeling I have," Dan explained, leaning back into his seat.

"Well, if that happens, we should totally go back to Sleepyside and go sledding on the Manor House driveway!" Honey exclaimed, a wicked gleam of childish delight making her hazel eyes sparkle.

“Yes—*totally*,” Dan teased her.

Honey giggled and swatted her boyfriend. “Stop it! I think you’re wrong, though. I don’t really want it to snow anymore, to tell you the truth. I want spring to be here!”

“Spring fever already, huh? Happens even to the best of freshmen,” Dan said with a laugh. Honey leaned back in the seat so that she was even with him and playfully reached over and gently punched him in the arm.

“Whatever,” she said with a roll of her hazel eyes. “I remember your spring fever from last year. It hit right about the time I was shopping for my prom dress.”

“That was *not* spring fever!” Dan declared. He pulled back from Honey and prayed that his tone sounded teasing and light. Could she see the apprehension and anxiety in his eyes?

Honey’s eyes, however, were twinkling merrily; she clearly had seen nothing ominous in Dan’s eyes, instead seeing only a challenge. She knew that Dan liked to tease her, and Honey thought that it was one of his gifts—to playfully tease her and show his affection, but without crossing any lines. Normally, she just took it with a giggle and a playful slap or punch, an affectionate gesture. Every so often, however, Honey liked to give as good as she got.

“Really?” she asked, unconsciously imitating Hallie Belden’s drawl. She stared at him for a few moments, deliciously torturing him, knowing that drawing out the inquisition would get to him. “What would you call it then?” Honey knew exactly what his response would be, and she knew exactly how she would respond.

But she so delighted in giving him enough rope with which to hang himself.

“It was just...the desire to see you after a long year—our first year apart,” Dan said, trying to defend himself against Honey’s cruel merriment. “That’s *all*.” *As far as you know*.

“Oh, *really*?” Honey asked, still in that Idaho drawl. “That’s why you had a sudden desire to go shopping with me and Di? An overwhelming desire to see me?”

Dan knew he was defeated. He knew where Honey was going with her line of inquisition—and he knew that he deserved it for all of the times that he had teased her.

Teasing was a natural way for him to express his affection. He had seen his dad, Tim, tease his own mother, Aileen, in much the same way, and it had always given him a warm and fuzzy feeling, even when he was too young to understand the complicated orchestrations of an adult relationship. After he had lost both of his parents, it was a fragile—but carefully well-preserved—memory to which he clung. And, now that he had a love of his own, he understood the desire to tease, to play, to make the woman you loved more than anything smile that beautiful smile of hers.

But, despite the fact that he knew that he was defeated, he had to soldier on—make his dad proud. “Yes,” he said staunchly, sticking his chin out in such a defiant manner that Honey had to bite her lip to keep from laughing out loud.

“But, Dan,” Honey began, her huge hazel eyes made even more wide by the air of innocence that she was trying to portray. “I thought that when you desired to see me, you liked to see me alone. Not in a dress shop with Diana Lynch.” She looked up at him and batted her lashes in

such a non-Honey manner that Dan barely kept his laughter in check—but he could not let up the game early.

“I do,” he said simply, his dark eyes betraying nothing.

“Then what did you have in mind when you asked to meet me and one of my best friend’s in a dress shop, *Dan?*” Honey dropped her voice when she said his name and batted her eyelashes some more for effect. “Perhaps a *ménage a trois* in the dressing room?”

That was it! “You know why!” he finally said in an explosive voice.

“Why, Danny? Say it,” Honey commanded, her eyelashes still flopping around in a bizarre St. Vitus Dance.

“Okay! Fine!” Dan finally exploded. “You win! I *would* have much rather have spent a nice afternoon alone with you, but, yes, had it not been for the horrible freshman spring fever, I probably could have dealt with sitting in my dorm rather than spending an afternoon looking at tulle and chiffon and shantung!” *Well, that was most of the story, anyway.*

At his loud words, and his obvious knowledge of dress fabrics, several people stared at him, and Dan tried to ignore them. Honey might have won this round...

Honey burst out laughing. “You had such a bad case of spring fever that you actually learned the names of fabric!” she shrieked.

Honey wasn’t prone to shrieking, so Dan muttered, “Good Lord, it didn’t take us long to sink to the depths of depravity. A little dignity, modesty, and decorum, please, Honey.”

“Tulle, Dan?” she managed to gasp out between shrieks of laughter as she grabbed her sides. The other subway passengers either looked on in amusement or annoyance or tried to studiously avoid looking at the boisterous couple. “Chiffon? Shan... shan... shan—*tung!* There’s no way that you would know the names of fabrics if you hadn’t spent that day last spring with Diana Lynch. And there’s no way that you would have spent an otherwise perfectly good spring Saturday with me and Di shopping for prom dresses—and apparently learning the names of obscure and very decidedly feminine fabrics, I might add—if you had not been completely out of your mind with spring fever.”

Dan’s eyes wandered and he realized that an attractive woman was staring at him, the curve of her lips quirked up into a smile.

“She *is* right, you know,” the woman offered with a sly grin. “Someone like you should *not* know anything about chiffon. And shantung?” At that, she shook her head and clucked her tongue, sending Honey off into more gales of laughter, and Dan into deep shades of red.

“Thank you,” Dan said with a sour look at his girlfriend.

“Oh, don’t be mad, Dan,” Honey giggled. “Remember, we’ll always have parrots.”

Dan rolled his eyes at her quip. “I hope you’re happy now,” he said, trying to sound angry, but it was obvious that he wasn’t really mad at her. How many times had he done something similar to her? This was what they did—it was what made them a couple.

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Honey finally calmed down and nodded, although the mischievous twinkle in her hazel eyes did not fade. “A little bit. Remember the whole ‘full blooded adopted brother’ incident of March of last year? Or the ‘touchdown’ incident right after that? You can almost consider yourself even at this point!” she crowed triumphantly.

“Oh, boy,” Dan muttered under his breath, but he was hiding a grin inside. He loved it when Honey laughed so heartily, even if it was at his expense. And she was such a loving and kind-hearted person that she would never laugh at him in a malicious way. This was what they did. This is what made them the perfect couple.

~*~*~*~*~

My editor requested that I explain the term “St. Vitus Dance” in my author notes, so I am. *g* St. Vitus Dance is a disorder that causes involuntary muscle movement. There is a Wikipedia entry about it, if you’d like to read more. Bonus points if you can name the 40s’ girls’ series book from which I stole the reference! And, no, it’s not Trixie. *g*

I also want to note that the book title required for the CWP was woven into Honey’s speech, and not used as an actual book title. The book is *We’ll Always Have Parrots* by Donna Andrews.

My carryover items, although not required, were: food new to a character (#2.1), a calendar (SA#5), a bus stop (#2.2), pumpkin bread (#2.3), someone who feels like a third wheel (#2.4), lobster (SA#6), a battle (Dan’s inner war; #2.5), Cary Grant (#2.6).

This is a Jixemetri Circle Writing Project Special Anniversary #8 submission. Once again, all of the items were put in retroactively, so I apologize if they’re rather glaring. *g* Also, once again, a big Bob-White thank you to Susan, my favorite partner in crime. :)

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Part Three: Creating Chemistry

by Dana

“There’s no way you can create chemistry where none exists.”
– Michael Parkinson

While Honey and Dan were having their subway adventure, Brian and Lexi were settling their check at the diner and shrugging on their spring parkas. Although Lexi had accepted his apology, Brian still felt as though there was something between them—a tension that he was not used to, nor could he explain. And he somehow knew that he had put it there.

And it would be up to *him* to remove it.

On the heels of this thought came a wave of resentment. *Wait a minute*, his brain rebelled. *Why do I have fix it? What did I do?* He and Lexi had *both* been irritable at the table. He had offered an olive branch, which Lexi had appeared to accept, but then she had suddenly shrunk back into her seat and pretended to concentrate on her food.

Brian wracked his brain in an attempt to determine what it was that he could have said or done to upset his girlfriend. He had admitted to Lexi that he had been stupidly jealous. He had admitted that he had acted like a jerk. He had apologized for both of these things. The only thing he had done was be nice to his childhood friends.

Wait a minute, he thought again. He had been nice to Honey. Could Lexi be upset about that? Did she not believe that he was over her?

And then a new realization dawned on Brian. He had said “still.” He had said that he did not “still” have feelings for Honey. Which implied that he once had.

Had he? Did he have true romantic feelings for Honey that went beyond the comfortable friendship that they had always shared? At one point, he had certainly thought that he had feelings for the girl next door, but that had been when they were much younger. He had been a dumb-struck fifteen-year-old kid, newly home from camp, and she had been the new girl, energetically flying down the path between their houses toward him, her honey hair flying out behind her like gold ribbons catching the morning sun. Of course she had caught his attention, captivated him. But that was over. Kid stuff.

Wasn't it?

Oh, boy. Brian Belden, normally the most sensible, the most responsible person in any crowd— Brian Belden suddenly had two women on his mind.

Am I in trouble!

~*~*~*~*~

Later that night, Honey lay in bed, tossing and turning. She had thoroughly enjoyed her evening with Dan, especially the jovial subway ride to her stop. Dan had tried to insist that he needed to walk her from the subway stop to her apartment building, much like Brian himself had insisted that he needed to escort her from his dorm to the subway, but Honey had asserted that she was fine. Dan still had several stops and a subway line change before he made it back to his apartment, and she did not want him taking the time to walk her home before he continued his rather long journey.

She also had not invited him to spend the night, so after a rather sloppy, wet kiss, the two had parted ways. Usually, if they'd been out rather late, Honey invited him to stay at her place, but she hadn't this time. She told herself that the reason was that Dan didn't have a change of clothes with him, but deep down, she knew that wasn't the truth. The truth was that she was not sure why she hadn't invited him to stay over.

Honey tossed again, throwing her body violently over to the other side of the bed, facing that wall. She gave a deep sigh. Would sleep come? Would she finally be able to calm her racing mind enough for sleep to embrace her?

Embrace her like Dan would be right now if it was not for...

For what? *Brian?* Was spending time with her old friend the new factor throwing her ability to sleep right out the window? Or was it watching him with the sunny blonde from southern California?

Hadn't this been resolved two years ago?

What was *wrong* with her?

Honey again sighed violently and twisted her body in the other direction, her long, lean legs tangling with the sheets and frustrating her even more. Finally, she sat up straight and looked out her window into the darkened sky.

“That’s it!” she muttered to herself. “I need to do *something*.”

Suddenly, she knew what that something was. She threw the covers off and padded to the living room. Her black leather laptop case was where she had placed it when she had entered the apartment earlier that evening. It was a black shadow next to the unusually large tan couch, and Honey moved toward it. After she had retrieved it, she returned to her bedroom and sat down at the modest desk, getting the computer out and firing it up. As she waited for the computer to boot up, she thought about how perfect this type of outlet would be in this situation.

Honey hadn’t lived with her parents as a child, and as a result, she had become very good at correspondence. While she was away at boarding school or camp, she had written her mother and father long, detailed letters, describing exactly what she was up to and itemizing all of her activities in her childish script. She delighted in telling her parents the events that made up her life, thinking that this would bring them closer together despite their physical distance. But then, as she got older, she began to feel as though her parents didn’t love her. She convinced herself that her globe-trotting parents didn’t care a bit about her, and this conviction had been strengthened by an overheard conversation between two maids. With the doubts that she had already been harboring, it was easy to believe that her mother didn’t love her because she hadn’t been a boy. With those heavy thoughts, she also convinced herself that her parents didn’t want to hear from her and that her letters were nothing but a bore and a bother to her busy mother and father.

But writing had still been a part of her. She had done it too regularly and for too long to give it up instantly. So, instead of abandoning it completely, she transferred the practice to journals. In her eyes, nothing had really changed. No one read her diary entries, just as she was sure that no one had ever read her many letters from school and camp.

The regular journaling had continued until her family moved to the Manor House. There she had met Trixie Belden and Jim Frayne, and things had begun to happen. Pretty soon, she was too busy *living* life to write about it. With the exception of her annual journal entry on December 31, which summed up the previous year’s events, Honey hadn’t regularly journaled since those lonely days at Briar Hall.

But now, Honey decided, it was time, once again, to journal. The tools might have changed—her notebook computer and word processing software much more sophisticated than her old spiral notebook and ballpoint pens—but the feelings had not. And the feelings poured out onto the screen.

March 27

I feel really corny starting with “Dear Diary,” but that is essentially what this is. A dear diary moment. Meh! I haven’t really detailed my feelings in a journal for years—six to be exact. Every year on New Year’s Eve, I would write an annual entry about some of Trixie’s and my adventures. There wasn’t a lot of detail, though, as Trixie and I collected newspaper

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clippings of our exploits and put them into our scrapbooks, so I didn't write a lot about the things we did. I don't know why I felt compelled every year, on the last day of the year, to write a journal entry in my old notebooks. I guess it doesn't really matter. The point is, I wasn't journaling about my feelings, the way I had begun to before we moved to Manor House. Mostly that was because the reasons that I used to write—loneliness, boredom, as a way to pretend that my mother and father were like a real mother and father and actually cared about what their daughter was up to—disappeared when my dad bought the Manor House and moved us all up to Sleepyside. I wasn't lonely, not with Trixie and Jim and the rest of the Bob-Whites around, and I certainly wasn't bored with Trixie Belden as my best friend. As Jim once said, Trixie Belden was enough "extracurricular activities" for the entire State of New York.

The best thing about the move, though, was that I realized that my mother and father did love me. And that they had read all of the letters I had sent them over the years. They thought that just because I had stopped sending them letters that I had either outgrown it or had decided that I didn't care about them. What a silly bunch of idiots we were back then! Fortunately, Miss Trask saved us all from staying permanently damaged, and we became a real family. It didn't happen overnight, but it did happen.

Things have been really good ever since then. I made it through junior high and high school. I got to belong to the secret club like I always wanted to. We even had a clubhouse. I met a wonderful man and fell in love. And when he didn't want me, I fell in love with another wonderful man.

Except, diary, it didn't exactly happen like that. I met a boy, and I thought maybe I liked him. And then we all met this other boy. And we asked him to be in our club. We were all friends and hung around and traveled and solved mysteries. But then I got older, and my crush for the first boy grew. Meanwhile, the second boy was apparently developing feelings for me that I never knew about. And then the first boy went to college and met someone else and broke my heart. But it was okay, because this other boy, this second boy, was my friend, and we hung around a lot and had a lot of fun together. And then we fell in love.

And it was all good.

Until this afternoon. Oh, diary! Why couldn't I be good at organic chemistry? Or Brian be bad at it? Or live across the country from me instead of just across New York City? I spent time with him again today. Just the two of us. No Dan. No Lexi. Just us, like it used to be. And it felt really nice. And natural. And comfortable. Like it should have been that way all along.

But that's just wrong! I feel just as comfortable and natural and nice with Dan, and he loves me back, unlike Brian, so why do I feel this way? Why did I appreciate hanging out with Brian so much when Dan is the one who has my heart? And he does, diary, he truly does. He makes me feel like no person, including Brian Belden, ever has.

Are these just residual feelings? Leftover from when everyone thought that we were going to be together? Did I mention that, diary? That everyone—everyone!—thought that Brian and I would be together.

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So why aren't we together? And why do I care? Are these phantom feelings, like people who lose a limb but can still feel the pain long after the limb is gone? Or are they real? And if they are real, what do I do?

Oh, diary!

Honey moved her hands away from the keyboard of her laptop computer and sat, staring at the brilliant glow of the screen, a stark contrast from the darkness beyond her desk. She had decided that she needed to write, to pour out her feelings, to have that release that writing down her feelings gave her. She had forgotten what this felt like. Pouring your soul out to an inanimate object, be it a notebook or a computer or whatever, and knowing that it would keep your most intimate secrets. It had been a long time since she had confessed her feelings in such a manner, and, truth be told, she wondered if she was ready to do so now.

The words, staring back at her, were a black-and-white reminder of the jumbled thoughts that jumped around her confused and tired brain. These were bewildering thoughts. Thoughts that she was not ready to admit even existed. But here, in black and white, they *did* exist. They could not be denied.

And Honey wanted to deny them. Now that they were out, she wanted to take them back. To pretend that they did not exist. These words, wrought from her confused state in the middle of the night, should not exist.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at the digital clock on her nightstand. 3:24 a.m. She should have been asleep hours ago. If she *had* been asleep, these words wouldn't have screamed their way out of her head, through her fingers, and landed on the screen in front of her. They simply wouldn't exist.

Honey would make them not exist.

With a flick of her wrist and the tap of an elegant finger, the words were gone. And, with a little amnesia, she could pretend that they never had existed at all.

The feelings behind them, she was afraid, would not be ignored so easily.

With a sinking feeling, she powered off her laptop computer and closed the lid. The process of pouring out her feelings into this electronic diary was exhausting. Or maybe her mind had finally caught up with her body and realized how tired it was. At any rate, it was time to sleep. It was time to release her brain from its prison of awakesness and forget about the events of the day. Honey tried to reason with herself, reminding herself that there was nothing particularly remarkable about the day's events. She had gone to class. She had gotten tutored in organic chemistry. She had had dinner with Dan at their favorite diner.

And feelings have been re-awakened today, her logical brain rudely reminded her. With that thought, Honey was once again wide awake. Even as she slid beneath the warmth of the flannel sheets, she knew that she would not be able to sleep. How could she sleep when her thoughts and feelings had the potential to make several people very unhappy?

It was not a pretty thought. And so, Honey lay awake, her hazel eyes wide open and fixed on the white ceiling above her, and waited for dawn to come. Maybe in the harsh light of day her feelings would seem ridiculous. They could not be comforted and cosseted and allowed to

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grow as they were here in the quiet stillness of the night. And, before she shut her eyes, dawn had broken on another day.

~*~*~*~*~

Meanwhile, Dan awoke that morning with an inexplicable feeling of unease that he was not able to brush off. Something was bothering him, but he couldn't quite place what. He and Honey had had a nice evening the night before at a place where the warm cocoon of childhood still wrapped him in its embrace.

Then why did he feel so unnerved? Although awkward at first, dinner with Brian and his girlfriend had actually been nice. It had been good to see Lexi again and to spend time with Brian, something he hadn't done in years and found that he missed. The train ride home had been a lot of fun, with Honey in rare form in one of her teasing moods. Despite the joviality and the fact that it had been rather late, however, she had not invited him to stay at her place.

He hadn't thought about that fact last night, but it had obviously simmered in his unconscious overnight, because he realized that this niggling thought was the source of his discomfort.

Honey usually suggested that he spend the night when they were out on a weeknight. His classroom buildings were much closer to her apartment than to his meager accommodations, so it was an easier commute for him. He had even packed a change of clothes and his toothbrush in his backpack just in case, although he hadn't mentioned that to Honey.

It wasn't a big deal, Dan knew. They spent the night apart more often than they spent the night together, so why was it suddenly a concern?

Because she had spent the afternoon with Brian.

That shouldn't make a difference, but Dan suspected that it did. Had something happened between the two of them? Dan immediately dismissed that notion. He knew his girlfriend, and he knew her well. Very well. She had an innate goodness about her that served as a strong moral compass and a conscience that would never let her keep anything so important from him. That, combined with her inability to keep a secret, convinced him that nothing had happened. Her hazel eyes had been warm and loving and clear when she had looked at him. Dan then remembered the look of pure delight and happiness that had swept over her face when she had seen him waiting at the subway stop. If anything untoward had happened with Brian, she never would have looked so happy and free of guilt.

Dan finally figured that he must be imagining things. Honey had probably not asked him to spend the night last night because she had assumed that he didn't have a change of clothes. Or something like that. It didn't matter.

Dan turned to look at his alarm clock and realized that he'd better get moving if he didn't want to be late for his first class. He had an eight o'clock class three days a week, as much as he had tried to avoid it when he planned his class schedule for the semester. To be a liberal arts major and be able to sleep in! Di always spoke of her afternoon classes at Ithaca College that allowed her to enjoy an evening social life with her artsy friends.

He dragged himself out of bed and crossed his bedroom. He grabbed the clothes that he planned on wearing that day and headed toward the bathroom. He needed to shower quickly,

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as his roommate would need the shower. Jason didn't have class on Friday mornings, but he had to be to his job at the music store early every Friday morning to catalog the Thursday afternoon shipments that the store received each week.

Once in the shower, Dan let the hot water run over his body, rinsing away the tension. Everything was fine with Honey. It was.

So why was he trying so hard to convince himself?

Dan finished his shower and quickly got dressed. Breakfast was a piece of toast slathered in chunky peanut butter, which was washed down with a glass of milk. Breakfast accomplished, Dan charged through the living room, unceremoniously stuffing a book he needed into his backpack and finally heading out the door. Dan lived on the fourth floor of a rundown building in a less-than-desirable section of the Lower East Side, and he knew that Honey was not thrilled about where he lived, but he needed as much of his college fund money as possible to go for tuition and books and not other expenses. So far, he had managed to get by with very few student loans, and he wanted to keep it that way.

When his mother and father had been alive, they had lived on a meager military salary only, without his mother working outside the home. Following the death of his father, he and his mother had scraped by in Hell's Kitchen, with his mother working two jobs to supplement the paltry military survivor benefits. He and his mother had survived because of their ability to live simply. After his mother had died and he was on the streets, Dan often didn't know where his next meal was going to come from or where he would be able to sleep. The frugality he and his mother had exercised seemed extravagant by comparison. Then, when he had moved to the woods outside of Sleepyside, he had led a very simple life with Mr. Maypenny. Despite the fact that he knew that Honey worried about him, he also knew that he had survived much worse conditions. Not having student loans hanging over his head at the end of his four years of college would be worth continuing his spartan existence for a few more years.

From time to time, he did feel a pang over Honey's concern. He didn't like that she worried about him, and he really wasn't happy that he had given her a reason to worry. He had assured her that he was just fine—and he was—but he had had to admit that he didn't live in the most desirable location when he had realized that he did not want Honey coming to his apartment by herself. It killed him that his girlfriend couldn't just drop by and visit him on a whim, and he knew that Honey wasn't very happy about this fact, either. Ever the good sport, though, she had respected his decision to save money and had agreed not to travel to his apartment by herself.

Dan quickly walked to the nearest subway stop to his apartment building. The stop was several blocks away, but this fact had allowed the apartment to fall within Dan's price range, and Dan had never minded walking. Once he was finally underground and on his way, he settled back into his seat and pulled out the textbook for his criminology class. He re-read the homework assignment from the previous class and felt fairly confident about the material. His assigned reading for that morning was finished, but he was still several stops from his station. He needed to read William Faulkner's *The Mansion* and write an essay for his Literature 233 class, but he wasn't in the mood to read a depressing Southern story. Instead, Dan noted that there

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were no women or older people who needed a seat and then closed his eyes, his head resting on the back of the seat with his longish dark hair spilling over the back of his jacket.

He listened to the elderly gentleman a few seats over loudly complaining to himself about the prices of various items he was finding advertised in his newspaper. “In 1948, I can tell you that a car didn’t cost \$50,000! Heck, a house didn’t cost that! What do these young whippersnappers want with a car that costs so much anyway! Madness! It’s madness, I tell you!”

Dan grinned to himself. There was nothing like the New York subway. He listened to the old man rail on about the prices of gas, coffee, and bread compared to 1948 before the man exited the train a couple of stops later. With no reading assignment or crazy dialogue to occupy his mind, his thoughts began to churn. Dan knew he was driving himself crazy thinking about Honey and Brian, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself.

Okay, he thought, if Honey is pulling away, it could be for a number of reasons. She’s stressed about her basic chemistry class, for one. Basic chemistry.

Basic chemistry.

Was *that* it? Was that what this was about? Brian and Honey had always shared a basic chemistry. Everyone knew it. But because Brian and Honey had not pursued a relationship, that basic chemistry had never been allowed to fizzle out naturally—and Dan was sure that it would have had the pair actually gotten together. If the chemistry had been too strong to ignore, both Brian and Honey would have acted on it a long time ago. If the chemistry had been so strong, Brian wouldn’t have gotten himself involved with two different women at Columbia and Honey would’ve been a lot more heartbroken on receiving Brian’s letter than she had been.

No, the only chemistry that had been too hard to ignore was between himself and Honey.

Of course, Dan knew that Honey had never been able to forget that she had once shared *something* with Brian. Brian probably felt the same way. Dan had always known, at some level, that these emotions, which had not been dealt with, were going to rear their ugly heads—and now was that time. He wondered if Honey even realized it yet.

This was actually a good thing, Dan decided. Before he and Honey could think about a future together, think about the things that he wanted to pursue with her—like marriage and a family—she needed to deal with these unresolved feelings. And so did Brian.

Dan could handle this. Honey and Brian may have shared some basic chemistry, but he and Honey shared a whole hell of a lot more than that. They had a deep, emotional connection with their own chemistry. The chemistry that Honey and Dan shared was more than basic.

Advanced chemistry? Dan thought to himself and then chuckled out loud. Now that he felt in control of the situation again, he relaxed. He would help Honey explore this basic chemistry with Brian. And in the end, their relationship would be even stronger for it.

Wouldn’t it?

~*~*~*~*

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Later that day, Honey sat through her afternoon class in a fog. The previous night's lack of sleep had caught up with her. Angela, her lab partner, shot her worried looks through the lecture, but Honey was too exhausted to notice. Instead, she was desperately trying to understand what her professor was saying so that she could make notes coherent enough to be understood later. At this point, however, she wasn't even sure that she would be able to read her own handwriting, let alone understand the underlying material the notes described.

At the end of class, she yawned deeply.

"Late night last night?" Angela asked lightly as she backed up her notebook, textbook, and writing utensils and placed them neatly in their appropriate pockets in her backpack.

"You could say that," Honey answered, stifling another yawn as she packed up her own materials.

"Oooh, yum," Angela said with a knowing smile as she slid into her dark emerald spring jacket.

Honey managed to laugh as she shook her head. She had just thrown the last of her things in her backpack and had slung the bag over her shoulder after putting on her own jacket. "No, it wasn't like that. I couldn't sleep, and then at 3 o'clock, I had the brilliant idea of getting up to journal about all of the thoughts that weren't allowing me to sleep!" Honey rolled her eyes at this last statement, remembering the regret that she had felt at allowing her thoughts to escape the safe confines of her brain.

Angela looked at her thoughtfully. "Something going on?" she asked casually as the two girls started weaving their way through the seats to the aisle so that they could walk up the stairs toward the exit.

Honey didn't answer at first. She hesitated, wondering exactly how she was supposed to answer Angela if she didn't know exactly what was going on herself. Also, she wondered if she really should share something so personal to her friend before she talked to Dan.

Honey's silence spoke volumes to Angela, and the redhead wondered what was going on with her lab partner. Honey was normally a very level-headed woman. She took everything in stride and had not had a very stressful adjustment period after she had started college. That was one of the things that had impressed Angela about her new friend. So many other freshmen seemed to go crazy when they were on their own for the first time, either taking their new-found liberties and freedom to a dangerous extreme or missing their old life so much that they were practically incapacitated and dropped out after the first semester. But Honey wasn't like that. Outside of class, she studied hard, visited Sleepyside and her friend Di at Ithaca College when her schedule allowed, and balanced the rest of her time between her boyfriend and friends she had made in her classes. Honey Wheeler was one of the most well-rounded, well-balanced people that Angela knew. If she wasn't so sweet, Angela would hate her for it.

Honey didn't look particularly troubled, Angela noted, just... perplexed. The redhead waited patiently for Honey to weigh her thoughts and make up her mind about what she wanted to say—or didn't want to say. The pair exited the classroom and made their way down a corridor filled with other students hurrying to their classes.

“Wanna go to Cosi and have some s’mores and tell me what’s going on?” Angela asked, hoping that Honey would take her up on the offer. Not only did she want to spend more time with her friend, but Honey looked as though she could use some enjoyment, and what could be more enjoyable than making s’mores over a Sterno can in downtown New York?

Honey hesitated, but then decided that it would be a much-needed diversion. “Yeah, s’mores at Cosi sound fun,” she agreed.

“Great!” Angela said, and the two girls exited the classroom building and headed to the nearby Cosi while Angela made small talk. She wanted to wait until they were settled in the coffee shop before delving into anything major with Honey.

Finally, after the two girls were sitting at a small table in the crowded coffee shop roasting marshmallows over the small heater, Angela broached the subject of what was bothering Honey again.

“I am not exactly sure what’s going on,” Honey finally admitted to her friend, placing her golden marshmallow on the chocolate and graham cracker she had waiting. “I spent some time with an old friend yesterday, and I have all of these...feelings that I don’t understand.”

Angela nodded, processing this. “What kind of an old friend? An old boyfriend?”

Honey promptly shook her head. “Not exactly,” she answered. “He’s Trixie’s older brother.” She didn’t have to explain who Trixie was because Angela had heard all about Honey’s best friend and had even met her during Christmas break. “I met him not long after I met Trixie. He and their other brother, Mart, had been at camp when I moved to Sleepyside. We had been there about a month or so before they came home. I still remember the morning that he and Mart came home from camp, the morning I met him...them,” she corrected herself, but Angela had already noticed the Freudian slip and the soft, almost dreamy quality on Honey’s face as she recalled the moment that she had met the older brother of her best friend.

“Anyway,” Honey continued, “we were all very young, very innocent kids. Country kids for the most part. It was clear that Jim and Trixie were going to end up together, and, of course, everyone knew about the attraction that Mart and Di had had for each other since they were, like, six. So, I think everyone just assumed that Brian and I would end up together. I don’t know if everyone felt that way because it was convenient to pair us off, or if people really thought that we were that compatible, like Jim and Trixie or Mart and Di. When you get right down to it, I honestly don’t know whether I felt we would eventually get together because it was easy or if I truly had feelings for him. At any rate, he met someone else when he went away to college. I don’t know exactly what happened, because Brian won’t talk about it, but I think she might have hurt him pretty badly. Jim implied that she was a hypocrite and a liar, but I don’t know anything for sure. Anyway, after that debacle, he started dating Lexi, and he really seems to be absolutely head-over-heels in love with her, and she *is* really nice and sweet and obviously loves him, too.” Honey finally paused to take a breath.

Angela, having eaten an entire s’more while Honey had been speaking, took up the story where Honey had left off, while Honey took a satisfying bite of her own treat. “So, you spent the day with him yesterday and all of these feelings that you’ve never talked about with each other—or

even acknowledged—are still completely unresolved, and because they’re still not resolved, they’re *there*, and you feel guilty.”

Honey swallowed the gooey bite and then sighed resignedly at Angela’s astuteness. “Yeah. That about sums it up.”

Angela continued, “And now you need to determine if you ever really had feelings for Brian or if these are just residual ‘don’t-mean-anything’ feelings that can be easily dealt with and then shelved forever.”

“That’s exactly it,” Honey agreed.

Angela, however, was not done. “And you’re afraid that these old feelings for Brian might be real and you’ll wreck a bunch of relationships.”

Having the situation stated in such blunt terms made Honey cringe, but she couldn’t fault Angela for such an honest assessment. “I wish I could say that I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Honey said ruefully, contemplating another bite of s’more.

“Well, it just makes sense to me. How many years did you, your family, and your friends think that you and Brian would get together?” Angela asked as she prepared another marshmallow for roasting.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Honey said as she considered Angela’s question. “Two or three.”

“That’s a long time. Do you know if Brian thought you guys would end up together?”

Honey shrugged as she finished her s’more. After a drink of iced chai, she said, “I don’t know. I assumed he did at the time because everyone around us was assuming, and so I just assumed that he assumed, too, you know?”

Angela chuckled. “I do know, because I’m used to how you talk after six months of listening to you. But six months ago, no, I wouldn’t’ve had any clue about what you just said,” she teased.

Honey grinned. “I know. Trixie and I practically had our own language when we were kids. The Bob-Whites got so that they could understand us, so we never thought much about it. I wonder if people at Michigan State are having as much trouble translating Trixie’s sentences!”

“Probably,” Angela said with an affectionate smile for her friend. “But that’s neither here nor there. Did Brian give you any indication that he thought that the two of you would get together?” Angela asked, getting the conversation back on topic.

“Things were kind of awkward between us, and I don’t think that I was the only one putting that out there. He was really nervous about telling me about his first girlfriend. Why would he be if he considered me just a friend?” Honey asked almost rhetorically, but Angela answered.

“Good point. I think he must have felt the same way. And you guys never dealt with it before. I think you need to. For everyone’s sake.”

Honey sighed. “You’re right,” she conceded, nervously chewing her lip at the thought of discussing all of this with Brian. Or worse—with Dan.

Basic Chemistry

Angela, seeing her friend's consternation and knowing that she had made her point, deftly changed the subject to a lighter topic. Honey and Angela finished their sweet treats while talking of less-loaded subjects than Honey's relationship with Brian.

~*~*~*~*~

After the two had left the coffeehouse, Honey headed back to her apartment. Once there, she sat down on her couch and just stared at the wall. Did she want to try journaling again? Write Dan a letter? Write Brian a letter? In the end, she decided to distract herself with television and peppermint ice cream, despite the fact that she had just devoured marshmallows and chocolate. Within a few moments, though, she realized that there was nothing on that she wanted to watch, and she threw down the remote in frustration. She finished her dish of ice cream and thought for a moment.

Against her better judgment, Honey decided to pull out the box of high school mementos from the closet of the spare bedroom.

She sat down on the floor of the room and methodically explored the contents of the box. She set aside a Magic 8 Ball and the key to the Ten Acres summerhouse that Jim had given her as a memento and then flipped quickly through her most recent scrapbook, which summarized some of the later exploits of the seven Bob-Whites. She giggled out loud when she came across a picture of the club members, each wearing a blue or yellow rain poncho. She and Trixie had forgotten to consult Mr. Maypenny's *Farmer's Almanac* before planning that particular event, but the rain had only added to the merriment of the afternoon. The picture on the next page detailed the two leaders of the club, Jim and Trixie, playing a rousing game of air hockey in the Lynches' game room. Much had been at stake that night, as the winner got to choose the evening's movie. In the end, Trixie had won, and the seven of them had settled down to watch a classic murder mystery.

Once she had finished looking at that scrapbook, she set it aside and pulled out another item from the box. Her hands brought out a sheath of papers, filled with the writing of seven different people. One night that they had all stayed over at the Manor House, the power had gone out. To entertain themselves, they had written a story together. Honey remembered how fun it had been to write a paragraph or two, trying to shield the hastily scribbled words from prying eyes while balancing a flashlight over the page. The notebook had then been passed on to the next person, who wrote another paragraph or two...or three or four, even. The story hadn't made much sense in the end, but it had been a fun way to spend a Bob-White evening in the dark. After re-reading the story and chuckling over its pleasurable absurdity, she set it aside and looked inside the box once more.

This time, Honey found the first scrapbook she had completed after moving to Sleepyside and perused its pages. Images of the *Silver Swan* and Di's red trailer, six Bob-Whites dressed identically in red jackets and devil masks, the clubhouse in various stages of completion, desert scenes, shelves filled with antiques, an ice carnival, Happy Valley Farm, the Ozarks, Cobbett's Island, and Mr. Carver's antebellum mansion filled her eyes as she turned the pages, remembering a more innocent time when the only thing that she had to worry about was getting kidnapped in an abandoned barn or being held at gunpoint on a deserted riverboat. In some ways, those were so much easier than navigating this thing called love...

Basic Chemistry

Filled with nostalgia, Honey put the scrapbook down and blindly grabbed for the next object in the box. Her fingers closed in on a soft object, and she pulled it out. As she looked down and fully grasped what her fingers held, she gasped out loud.

There, in her hands, was the gift that Brian had given her before he had left for college. She stared at it for several moments, and suddenly she knew her course of action. She got up and determinedly walked to the kitchen phone, only pausing a moment to look at the paper above the phone before determinedly jabbing in a series of numbers. She listened to the ringing on the other end of the line before Brian picked up the telephone, sounding flustered...or maybe just distracted, Honey decided.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s me. Honey.”

Suddenly there was a loud crash at the end of her words, and a frustratedly muttered, “Damn it!” Honey waited patiently, only slightly alarmed at what might be going on on the other end of the phone.

“I’m sorry,” Brian finally said into the phone.

“Is this a bad time?”

“No, not really.” Brian sighed.

“What happened?”

“Apparently, *someone* set a bottle of perfume on the edge of the desk near the phone and didn’t screw the cap on.”

Honey felt an inexplicable thrill soar through her at his obvious annoyance at someone who *must* have been Lexi.

Brian continued, “When I grabbed the phone, the cord tangled with the perfume and nearly knocked it off. I jumped to catch it and banged into the desk chair, stubbing my toe and managing to knock the chair over in the process. And then the perfume landed on the floor anyway and leaked out onto the carpet to boot.” Brian finished his narrative with a long drawn out, suffering sigh.

“I’m sorry, Brian. That really sucks that Lexi left her perfume out where you could knock it over,” Honey said, trying to console her friend.

“Oh, it wasn’t Lexi,” Brian said, still sounding very distracted over the perfume clean-up process.

“Oh?” Honey asked in surprise. Who else could have left perfume in Brian’s apartment?

“It was a fellow RA,” Brian explained, as if reading Honey’s mind. “She just got back from a spring break trip to the British Virgin Isles. She stocked up on this really cheap lime perfume, cologne, *whatever*, which apparently is all the rage down there. She’s been passing them out to everyone, and she thought that Lexi might like some. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I can’t stand the stuff and would *never* want my girlfriend to smell like that!”

Basic Chemistry

Honey giggled in spite of herself at Brian's indignation. "And now your poor carpet is going to smell like that," she commiserated with a rueful grin at her end of the phone.

Brian groaned. "Yeah, thanks for reminding me," he chided, but Honey was relieved that he was sounding more cheerful. "Anyway, you obviously called for a reason, and you don't need to hear about my carpet woes. Do you need more help with your basic chemistry stuff? Do you want to get together again?"

"Would that be a big deal, Brian? I don't want to be an imposition," Honey said, sidestepping the issue of what she wanted to talk about when they got together.

"It's not a big deal at all," Brian assured her. "Do you want to get together tomorrow? Maybe in the afternoon some time?"

Honey nodded as she spoke, despite the fact that he couldn't see her. "I'd like that, Brian. What time do you want me to be there?"

Brian paused, and Honey began to wonder if she had said the wrong thing.

"I've never seen your place," Brian finally said.

"No, you haven't," Honey said slowly, wondering what point he was trying to make. Was Brian asking for an invitation to her apartment? Did she dare read something into that? "Did you want to see it?"

"I'd love to. Would you mind meeting at your place instead of mine?"

"Not at all," Honey assured him. "I just don't want to be an imposition or a bother to you. Are you really sure that you want to travel all of this way to get to my place?"

"You did the traveling last time," Brian pointed out.

"I know, but I'm the one who needs help, so it's only fair that I do the traveling," Honey returned.

"I really would like to see where you live," Brian explained. "I...I don't know what any of the Bob-Whites' places look like, except Mart's," he rushed on, as though making a terrible confession. "It's weird, not knowing where my siblings and my friends live, and...and I want to change that."

Honey's heart melted at the sound of Brian sounding so lost. "It's okay you haven't seen anyone's place," she reassured him. "We've all been so busy, and no one holds it against you. I haven't seen Trixie or Jim's places out in Michigan. There's been no time for a road trip since school began. It really isn't a big deal," she finished.

"It still bothers me," Brian said in a quiet voice. Honey knew that voice.

"Okay," she said slowly. "You're welcome to come see my place, if that's what will make you happy. What time will you be here? I'll have to wait for you in the lobby, and you'll have to show a piece of identification to come up to my apartment with me."

"Is noon okay? Maybe we can order a pizza or something for lunch," Brian suggested.

Basic Chemistry

“That sounds good,” Honey agreed, hoping that Dan would not mind that she was essentially making weekend lunch plans that did not include him. There was no way that she could say what she needed to to Brian with Dan present. She gave Brian directions to her apartment building before hanging up the phone. Honey was ashamed at the giddy feelings that were arising within her, but she couldn’t help but thinking that maybe there was something to these feelings...that they might be real after all.

With a course of action decided, she was suddenly so calm and focused that she completed quite a bit of studying within the next hour or so. She even thought she might be getting the hang of this chemistry stuff.

~*~*~*~*

My carryover items, although not required, were: any holiday between November 1 and February 1 (#2.1), someone collecting something (SA#5), essay (#2.2), scrapbook (#2.3), finding a sweet memento of someone’s past (#2.4), shower (SA#6), leader (#2.5), hockey (#2.6), something found in a stack of old newspapers or magazines (the summerhouse key was found in a stack of old newspapers in *The Secret of the Mansion*; CWP SA#7), relatives you don’t see often (Brian doesn’t see Mart or Trixie very often; #2.7), blue or yellow rain ponchos (#2.8), peppermint ice cream (#2.9).

I had planned on this being a story that was similar in length to most of the *Gethsemane* stories (“Closing Time” notwithstanding as it chronicles all three Bob-White girls’ freshman experiences). Then it grew into something else when I did NaNo. The five related stories I had planned to write during NaNo never materialized—*this* story became my *whole* NaNo. So, then I planned to divide it into three parts, and each one would be a Jixemetri Special Anniversary CWP (the required elements and non-required carryovers retroactively added). Umm, yeah, it’s too long for that plan. So, now that the monster is now being divided into lots of parts, more CWPs must be involved. So, this has now become a Jixemetri Fallin’ for Niagara CWP #2.8. Once again, many, many thanks to Susan! And happy birthday, sweetie! :)

Basic Chemistry **Part Four: Brain Chemistry** by Dana

“To think is to practice brain chemistry.”
—Deepak Chopra

Following her study session, Honey decided to try to read the book that Trixie had given her as a gag gift last Christmas. She’d been so busy that she hadn’t had a chance to do more than read the introduction. She did have to admit that some of her enthusiasm for reading the book might have been dampened by the title—*Niagara Falls Confidential: Murder, Mayhem, & Madness in the Honeymoon Capitol of the World!* Every time Honey looked at the cover, she rolled her eyes over the exclamation point in the title.

She had only read about three pages before her cell phone rang, and the display indicated that it was Dan. It was with a small amount of trepidation that the honey-haired girl answered the phone, reflecting that Dan had no idea how she was feeling about Brian these days. Despite her nervousness, however, she was able to sound normal when she answered the call with a bright, “Hi, sweetie!”

“Hi, babe,” Dan said, and Honey had to admit that she felt her insides melt a little at the sound of his voice. No one, not even Brian, made her feel that way. “Where you at? Home or out?”

“Home. I assume you’re on your way to your last class. Having a good day?” she asked.

“Now that I’ve got you on the line,” he said, and Honey could hear his smile over the phone. “What do you want to do tonight? Romantic, candlelit dinner at your place and then some snuggling in front of the television with a DVD that we won’t watch?”

Honey smiled at Dan’s wickedness, which she loved, but she also recognized that she couldn’t be alone with him. At least, not until she had talked to Brian. She felt that she needed to sort out her feelings and talk to Brian before she mentioned anything to Dan. If they spent an cozy evening together, she wasn’t sure that she wouldn’t blurt out her feelings and jumbled thoughts before she had a chance to talk to Brian and get his take on things.

“There’s that new movie,” Honey blurted, trying to think of anything they could do that involved a public place.

Dan sounded confused. “What new movie? I didn’t know there was a new movie out you wanted to see. Plus, if it just came out today, the crowds will be horrendous.”

“No, it’s not *that* new,” Honey said, trying to think fast. After a pause, she said, “I can’t think of the title right now,”—which was mostly the truth, as she couldn’t think of *any* plausible title right then—“but it’s that one with that girl.” Honey closed her eyes and prayed that years of listening to Trixie-and-Honey speak would keep Dan from being suspicious at the vagaries of that comment.

“That one with that girl? Oh, *that* one! I know *exactly* what you’re talking about,” he teased, clearly unsuspecting.

“You know...” Honey began, holding her breath and banking on the fact that Dan knew as little about new movies as she did. After all, neither one of them was really into movies. Their movie excursions while Honey had been in high school had been more for the Cameo’s balcony than any love of film. She decided to go for broke then and released her breath, as well as a rush of words. “It takes place in the Alps, with that girl who lives with goats and then goes to boarding school in Zürich and doesn’t fit in at first because she tells all of these stories about her goats and there’s this awful storm and half the city has a power outage and...” Honey trailed off, realizing that not only was she babbling, but that she didn’t like lying to Dan, however innocuous it might seem.

“Goats?” Dan asked, listening to Honey’s description of the movie and never considering that she was making anything up. Stranger things had come out of Hollywood, after all. As unsuspecting as he was, Dan *was* torn. If Honey wanted to go see a movie, he wanted to oblige, but he firmly reminded himself of the reason that he wanted to spend a quiet evening at home in the first place—he wanted to sit down and talk to Honey in a private place about her relationship with and feelings about Brian. “I don’t think I want to go to a crowded movie theater, though. I want a nice night in with my favorite girl.”

Basic Chemistry

Honey closed her eyes briefly at Dan's words and then quickly opened them. She wanted that too, but... "Okay, if that's what you want," she finally said, and then she could have kicked herself for how negative she had just sounded.

Her negativity only confirmed Dan's suspicions about her feelings for about Brian. Her favorite Friday night activity usually was watching television cuddled together on her couch. "Well, if you don't want to do that, then we don't have to..." his voice trailed off. Despite the fact that he wanted to pull her to him and hold on to her with all of his might and never let go, the last thing he was going to do was be too forceful and pressure her.

"It's not that I don't want to, Dan," Honey assured him, and that *was* the truth. She did want to be with him, but she just didn't want to accidentally blurt anything out. Dan knew her so well that he would probably be able to pick up that something was wrong if they had an intimate evening at her apartment.

Unless Dan already knows, her mind whispered. You are pretty obvious.

She ignored the persistent little voice and continued, "Come on over. Suddenly, the thought of battling the crowds at the movie exhausts me."

"Okay," Dan said, trying to ignore the niggling of doubt that tickled the back of his brain. "Do you want me to stop and get some food? Chinese or something? I kind of feel like steamed pork dumplings."

"Chinese sounds good," Honey said.

"Okay," Dan said, relieved that she had agreed to forego a movie that night. He promised himself that he would treat her to a matinee the next afternoon. "I still have one more class today, as you know, but after I'm finished, I'll head over to your apartment building and stop by that Chinese place around the corner and get some food. You want the sesame chicken again?"

"No, the orange chicken combo dinner this time."

"Brown rice instead of fried rice and a spring roll instead of the egg roll?"

Honey affirmed that Dan was correct, thinking how well he knew her. Brian wouldn't know to substitute brown rice or a spring roll. "I think I also want some egg drop soup. A pint, please. Unless you want some, too?"

"I'll decide when I get there. I'll get a quart if I do. I'll see you in a while, bearing Chinese food."

"Sounds good, sweetie," Honey said and hit the end button on her cell phone. Without closing the clamshell cover, she hit the speed dial for Angela, who picked up on the fourth ring.

"Hello?" she answered, sounding a little breathless.

"Hi, Angela, it's Honey. Everything okay?"

"Yep, just doing some aerobics, but I'm more than ready for a break."

"Aerobics? In your little apartment?"

"It was either that or watch Newt Gingrich or some documentary about crabs... Everything all right?"

Basic Chemistry

“Yeah, mostly,” Honey said, not surprised that Angela had honed in that something was up considering they had just seen each other a bit ago and normally didn’t talk on the phone all that much. “I just was thinking about what you said earlier, and I called Brian. We’re getting together tomorrow. I led him to believe that I needed more help with chem, but I’m actually beginning to understand it on my own, thanks to his help the other day.” Honey paused and then continued, “The thing is, I’m not sure that he wants to see *me*.”

“Oh?” was all Angela said, knowing that it would be enough.

“Yeah,” Honey said. “He started talking about how he hadn’t visited any of the Bob-White’s places, and he seemed to feel real guilty. I mean, it’s no big deal. We’re all in different places, you know? Then he said that he wanted to come to my place because he had never seen it, and that made him feel especially guilty because we lived so close. He seemed to think that it was unexcusable, which is ridiculous. So, even though I want him to want to be here because he wants to be with me, I can’t help but feel that he wants to be in my apartment because he has some weird cosmic check-off list, you know? I mean, if that’s what he wants, fine, but that’s not what it’s about for me. You know, just seeing a friend’s home because I think I need to to feel close to them. It’s about seeing a *friend*, you know?”

Angela loved her lab partner, she did, but even six months of listening to her hadn’t prepared her for this nonstop speech. How did Honey say so many words without taking a single breath? The girl must have the lung capacity of an ox. “So, why’d you decide to talk to Brian so quickly?”

“I guess mostly ‘cause I am so sick of having this hanging over my head. I want to get it out in the open. But I need to talk to Brian before I talk to Dan, and I don’t know how much longer I can keep hiding this from him.”

“It’ll be okay,” Angela reassured her friend. “Why do you think it’ll be so bad if Dan knows what you’re thinking before you talk to Brian? Everything you’ve ever said and that I’ve seen between you says he knows you better than anyone. I think it’s actually Dan you should talk to first.”

“Maybe,” Honey said thoughtfully, as she considered Angela’s words. Truthfully, they weren’t so far off from what she was thinking herself. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know why I’m being so stubborn about talking to Brian before Dan. I guess maybe I’m hoping that my talk with Brian will fizzle, and there’ll be nothing for me to even tell Dan!”

“Do you really think that’s going to happen?” Angela asked, trying to keep her voice neutral so that Honey didn’t hear how doubtful she really was about that possibility.

Honey sighed deeply. “No,” she said glumly. “But a girl can always hope, right?”

Angela chuckled. “Of course, a girl can always hope,” she conceded. “But what does your gut say is going to happen when you talk to Brian?”

“I don’t know,” Honey wailed. “My stomach feels perpetually churny and like a gazillion butterflies are flying around in there, so it’s a little hard to tell if my gut’s saying anything.”

“Okay, well, I don’t think that the situation warrants you to be so stressed. You need to calm down and get control of before you give yourself an ulcer,” Angela admonished her friend.

"You don't need any health issues," she added, pronouncing the last word as "iss-ooze" like their least favorite professor.

"I know," Honey groaned, not even reacting to the joke that she and her lab partner had shared since the second week of school.

This is bad, Angela thought fleetingly when Honey didn't take the bait.

Honey continued, "Trust me. All of the pep talks I've given myself don't help. I've tried, really."

"I'm sure you have."

"So, what's the next step?" Honey asked, trying to turn her attention to more positive things.

"Think about talking to Dan tonight. Why would that be so bad?" Angela asked.

Honey, who was staring out the window at the Italian slate mosaic that adorned the building across the street, closed her eyes and thought for several moments while Angela sat patiently on the other end of the line. Finally, she admitted in a small voice, "I guess my worst fear is that he'll get really angry with me and break up with me on the spot."

"And do you really believe that that's going to happen?" Angela asked gently.

Honey opened her eyes. "No, not really. But it's scary."

"Yeah, it *is* scary, but I think I know Dan. He's not that guy. Dan's my hero," she joked.

Honey smiled. "He's my hero, too. And I *know* he's not that guy. I mean, I know that with my mind." Honey paused. "But fear is a funny thing."

"I know it is," Angela admitted as she picked up her Twist o' the Mist floaty pen and turned it upside down and then right-side up. "Okay, what's the next worse thing that can happen?"

Honey drew in a deep breath. "That I'll hurt him," she said in a shaky voice barely above a whisper. "That's the worst. That I will hurt someone that I care for very, very deeply."

"That's definitely a legitimate fear, and it *may* happen. But he may also see your confusion for what it is and not be hurt at all," the other girl pointed out.

"I don't know about that," Honey said in a doubtful tone.

"Hey, we're just throwing out possibilities. And he may understand, Honey. You don't know. After all, wasn't he one of the ones who originally thought that you and Brian would end up together?" Angela asked, even though she already knew the answer.

"Yes," Honey admitted.

"So, do you think maybe this is something that occurred to him a long time ago that might happen someday?" Angela continued in that calming voice. Honey could see why she wanted to be a counselor for troubled youth. She had a real talent and passion for it. Angela had brought up a point that made perfect sense that Honey had never even considered. Dan, being Dan, probably *had* been thinking about this possibility for quite a while. Why had she not realized that before?

Basic Chemistry

"You know, that does make a lot of sense," Honey admitted, feeling a little bit better that she might not be blindsiding Dan with some out-of-the-blue revelation.

"I know it does, sweetie," Angela said with a chuckle. "I said it."

Honey laughed at her friend's joke and then asked, "So, you really think I ought to talk to him about this tonight? Before I talk to Brian tomorrow?"

"Are you going to have to explain that you made a lunch date with Brian instead of Dan? Or is Dan likely to assume that you guys will be eating lunch together?" Angela wanted to know.

"I think I'm going to have to explain it," Honey said slowly as she considered her friend's questions. "You think it's better if I explain everything instead of just blowing him off for lunch and making him worry and wonder?"

"Don't you?" Angela returned pointedly.

"Yes," Honey responded promptly. After a pause, she said, "Okay, you're right. I'll talk to him tonight."

Angela sighed in relief on her end, glad that Honey was beginning to step outside of her fear and realize that things were probably not as bad as she thought. The two friends chatted for a few moments longer before saying good-bye.

Honey stared at her phone a minute, remembering a telephone conversation that she had had with Di the previous fall. Diana had called her asking for advice about some unexpected feelings that she was having that would impact her relationship with Mart, and Honey had helped her through it. Now that Di was on the other side, maybe she would have some words of wisdom for Honey. She checked her watch and figured that if Di wasn't at dinner, she might be in her room. She quickly dialed Di's number and got Brooke, Di's roommate.

"Hi, Brooke," Honey said cheerfully. "It's Honey. How's it goin'?"

"Hi, Honey," Brooke greeted her. "It's goin' okay. How're things for you in the Big Apple?"

"Chemistry is kicking my butt, but other than that, things are going fairly well," Honey said.

"Ugh. Don't even mention chemistry to me!" Brooke exclaimed. "You want to talk to Di? She's next door, but I can go get her."

"If you don't mind, Brooke, that would be great," Honey said.

"No problem!"

A minute or two later, Di's voice came on the line. "Honey? How are you?"

"Good. How're you doing?"

"Really well. I've been spending a lot of time in one of the studios working on a sculpture for my Intro to Sculpture class. It's really hard, but it's a lot of fun," Di said.

"I'm glad you're enjoying your classes so much," Honey said.

"Me, too. This is so much better than high school!" Even in her enthusiasm, Di could sense the unsaid sentiments in Honey's statement. "Aren't you enjoying your classes?"

Basic Chemistry

"Mostly," Honey said. "Chemistry's even more tough this semester than last semester. I'm not really enjoying it very much right now."

"That's too bad," Di sympathized.

"Yeah, I had to get Brian's help with the organic part of it," Honey explained.

"Well, it's a good thing that you had someone who could tutor you. I know that Trixie missed Brian's help a lot after he left for Columbia."

"Yeah, I guess it's a good thing," Honey hedged.

Again, Di recognized the undercurrents that Honey wasn't saying. "It's not a good thing?"

"Well..." Honey began and then stopped. Sometimes, it was so much easier talking to Angela because she wasn't one of the seven Bob-Whites.

"Brian didn't help you?" Di asked.

"Oh, no, he helped me," Honey said immediately. "He helped me a lot."

"Then what isn't..." Suddenly, a thought struck Di. "Oh my God! Did...did something *happen* between you two?"

"No!" Honey exclaimed, and Di was glad to hear the vehement denial.

"Then what's going on?" Di demanded. Usually she was more patient, but Honey's attitude had her as curious as Trixie.

Honey sighed. Of course, Di, the sensitive Bob-White, would hone in on her thoughts right away. "Well, spending time with him brought up...feelings," she admitted.

"Feelings? What kind of feelings?" Di asked cautiously. *And are they the kind of feelings that could break up the Bob-Whites?* she added to herself.

"Confusing ones," Honey stated. "I keep thinking about how I always thought that we would get together and how disappointed I was when he started dating someone else at college. Hanging out with him the other day reminded me of how much fun we used to have together, and how comfortable it is to spend time with him. And I'm wondering if the feelings I used to have for him were really real, and if they are real, if they've ever really gone away."

"Are you attracted to him?" Di asked.

Honey thought for a moment. Brian *was* very handsome. He was also smart, caring, kind, responsible, and dedicated. All traits that she loved. But *was* she attracted to him? She thought about how she felt when he looked at her or the moments the other day that they had laughed together. She then remembered her giddiness of just a bit ago when Brian had agreed to meet her for lunch.

"Maybe a little," she finally said.

"Oh, boy," Di said.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Honey returned, her voice rueful. "I don't want to hurt Dan, but I don't know if I can just shove this down, either. It'll always be between us if I don't deal with it."

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“You’re right about that. Do you remember what you told me last fall when I was thinking about shoving down my feelings? You said that feelings aren’t right or wrong, and it’s what you do with them that counts. You said to follow my heart and be true to myself. And even though it killed me to hurt Mart, I realized that you were right. If I shoved my feelings down, it would have come between us anyway.”

“I talk too much.”

Di smiled. “No, you don’t. You were right. And you need to do the same thing. At the very least, you need to figure out exactly what it is that you feel for Brian and talk to Dan about it. ASAP. Dan’s an observer, and he’s bound to notice something’s up. It’ll be far worse if you don’t talk about it.” Di’s advice was very similar to Angela’s.

“I know, and I’ve decided to talk to Dan about it—tonight—even though I don’t really know what *I’m* feeling yet. I guess I just wanted some moral support.”

“You’ve got it, Hon,” Di said fervently. “I never would have been able to get through my break up with Mart without all of *your* moral support, and that of the other Bob-Whites. You know we’re all here for you, no matter what.”

“Even if I shatter us into bits?” Honey asked.

“You’re not going to do that. Remember what you said to me last fall? You said that we were Bob-Whites, and we’d always be friends, no matter what.”

“I talk too much,” Honey said again, this time with a grin.

Di laughed, happy to hear the smile in her friend’s voice. “Yeah, sometimes I really just wish I could get you to shut up.” The two girls shared a giggle, and then Di said, “Dan won’t break up with you. He’s not that guy. He’ll just be glad—” Di stopped at Honey’s giggle. “What? What’d I say?”

“I was talking about this to my lab partner earlier, and when I said that I was afraid Dan would break up with me, she said, ‘He’s not that guy.’ You’re channeling each other!”

Di laughed. “Well, your lab partner obviously has good sense! So, after you get the talk out of the way tonight, when are you going to talk to Brian?”

“We’re having lunch together tomorrow,” Honey admitted.

“Wow. You don’t mess around, do you? What are you going to say to Brian if you’re not sure what you feel?”

“I don’t know. I guess just try to get the elephant out of the room. I mean, it has felt weird between us ever since he started dating, and it’s gotten even weirder since he started dating Lexi. You know, because he’s so serious about her. And as much as I know that he *is* serious about Lexi, I still get these...vibes...from him. I don’t know how else to put it. So, I just thought we could talk about that—not necessarily talk about getting together or anything drastic. I just think we need to address the situation since it’s been going on for a few years now.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Di said. “Oops, hang on a second.” Honey heard indistinct chatter in the background and then Di say, “All right, thanks!” before Di returned. “Sorry about that,” she

apologized. “The gang is heading to dinner in a few minutes, but I don’t want to leave you hanging if you need me.”

“No, no. Go eat with your friends. I’ll be fine,” Honey reassured her.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely! We were basically done talking anyway, and Dan’s going to be here soon. As long as you promise to send me good thoughts while you’re out this evening, I’ll let you off the hook...this time.”

Di laughed. “I promise! Good luck, Hon.”

“Thanks, Di. Have fun at dinner!”

After the two girls had hung up, Honey decided to take a quick shower, knowing that the hot water would ease her tensions. Just as she was finished getting dressed, she heard the ringing of her phone and assumed that it was Dan calling her to tell her that he was close to her building.

Sure enough, when she answered the phone, it was Dan reporting that he was just leaving the Chinese place and would be at her apartment building soon. After promising to head down to the lobby to sign him in, she hung up, and that was when panic set in. Realizing that her boyfriend was so close and the hour of truth would soon be upon her, the butterflies that had been fluttering around her stomach for the last few days returned with such a force that she actually thought she was going to be sick.

She closed her eyes and breathed very slowly, remembering Angela and Diana’s words of wisdom and encouragement. She could do this. She opened her eyes, and although she could still feel adrenaline coursing through her, at least she didn’t feel like she was going to vomit any moment. She threw on a pair of battered mocs that she kept by the door just for when she had to leave her apartment to sign someone in and headed down to the lobby to meet Dan. She had to wait quite a while for the elevator, and when she entered the lobby, she was relieved to see that Dan wasn’t waiting for her. She hated to keep him waiting. In less than a minute, however, her boyfriend entered the building. As he stepped through the lobby doors, the wind outside followed him in, whipping his longish, black hair around his face in an appealing way. His chiseled cheeks were stained slightly red from a chilly breeze outside, and the black leather jacket that he wore—a stylish, bomber type with no gang graffiti painted on the back of it—made him look incredibly sexy. He looked like the typical bad boy that every girl wanted, one she could tame and try to turn good. Except, in Dan’s case, he already *was* good, with a good heart and a strong moral compass. Honey knew that she was with a man who had the whole package and fleetingly wondered why she was even thinking about Brian Belden at all.

Dan spotted her and headed toward her with a smile. She returned the smile and hurried forward to meet him, greeting him with a quick kiss. The two headed for the security desk to sign Dan in. The security guard that was on duty at the security desk recognized Dan and waved a greeting. After Dan was signed in and the two had exchanged pleasantries with the guard, they headed toward the elevators. Honey took one of the steaming, fragrant brown paper bags Dan carried as the two waited for an elevator to arrive.

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Honey breathed in deeply, an appreciative smile on her face. “Mmmm...this smells really, really good.”

“Good,” Dan said as he smiled at her. If only Honey knew how sexy she was when she looked like that. “I was in the mood for Chinese, and I was really hoping that you were, too.”

“I didn’t know I was until I smelled it!” Honey laughed as the elevator arrived, and the two rode up to her apartment, listening to a horrendous Muzak version of Stacy Q’s “Two of Hearts.”

As soon as Honey and Dan entered her residence, they got to work getting the meal ready. Honey took the other bag from Dan and headed to the kitchen to get out dishes, silverware, and two cans of soda. She quickly set the table, where she had already placed two tapered candles in simple crystal candle holders. Dan had mentioned a candlelit dinner, and Honey had taken him literally. While she was preparing the dining table, her boyfriend hung up his jacket in the closet next to Honey’s yellow rain poncho and then went to wash his hands.

Within minutes, the two were seated at the table and feasting on their Chinese food, the glow of candlelight flickering around them. Dan and Honey enjoyed a romantic dinner with no loaded topics, just the innocuous chatter of two people in love catching up on the events of the day.

After dinner, as Honey and Dan were clearing the dishes, the fire alarm went off. Honey and Dan’s eyes met.

“Probably just a false alarm,” Dan said.

“Yeah, but what if it’s not?”

Dan sighed, hating that his quiet evening with Honey might be wrecked. “I guess we’d better evacuate.”

Honey grabbed her laptop case with her laptop and a few other important things, just in case, and Dan also grabbed his own backpack. As they gathered their things, they could hear the hallway commotion of evacuating students. Mostly it was just the usual chatter of a lot of people in a small place, but one student had decided to loudly sing the “Oompa Loompa” song from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. Honey and Dan looked at each other and grinned.

“There’s one way to evacuate a building,” Dan joked.

The two left the apartment and joined the throng of students in the hallway. As they passed by another apartment, its door wide open, they heard someone say, “I don’t want to evacuate. Is there at least a window I can stick my butt out?”

Honey grinned up at Dan. “And there’s another.”

An hour later, the two were back up in Honey’s apartment, the building having received an all clear after it was discovered that someone had set off the fire alarm by accident.

Dan helped Honey wash the meager amount of dishes that they had used for their Chinese feast, and the two of them put them away together. After the dishes had been put away, Dan reached for the fortune cookies that they had not had a chance to eat before the fire alarm went off. He handed one to Honey and selected one for himself.

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Honey watched as Dan cracked open his cookie and withdrew the small scrap of white paper inside. Dan read out loud, “You will need to be patient in love.” He looked up at Honey and saw that she looked rather uneasy all of a sudden. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Honey said, hoping she sounded normal. “Why do you ask?”

Dan shrugged. “I don’t know. You just didn’t seem too happy with that fortune.”

“Well, I certainly don’t ever want to try your patience!” she said with a laugh meant to sound cheerful and unruffled.

Dan didn’t comment on the silvery, brittle laugh and instead asked, “What does yours say?”

Honey quickly looked down and pretended to concentrate on cracking open the cookie to hide the apprehension she knew must show on her face. One thing she had learned from past experience was that she always managed to get a fortune that uncannily reflected whatever was going on in her life at the moment. She planned on talking to Dan about her recent Brian dilemma after dinner, but what if the stupid fortune cookie outed her before she had a chance?

She delicately withdrew the small scrap of paper with her slender fingers. Dan loved looking at those elegant and delicate fingers, and even just watching her handle a fortune cookie was a worthwhile sight. Honey, completely unaware of Dan’s thoughts, was desperately wishing that the fortune would be innocuous.

“You have a difficult journey ahead of you.” As she started to toss the paper onto the counter, she realized that there was another scrap of paper behind that one. *Not another one*, she thought with a mental groan. “I’ve got a second one. ‘An uncomfortable situation will soon be eased.’”

Yep, as always, her fortunes had hit close to home. Getting two at once was a new experience, though.

She looked up, and guilty hazel eyes met troubled dark ones.

“So, you want to talk about it?” Dan asked.

~*~*~*~*

My carryover items were: Newt—in this case Gingrich (#2.1), health issues (SA#5), slate (#2.2), Muzak (#2.3), the balcony of the Cameo (#2.4), seven (mention of the seven Bob-Whites; SA#6), hero (#2.5), power outage (#2.6), crabs (SA#7), bad weather (2.7).

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I'm throwing in the towel. Not only would it be insanely hard to work in the elements from the CWP's I have left to do into the current story, I've officially run out of time, and I will be inactive if I don't get going and stop trying to retroactively add CWP elements! It was a good run while it lasted, but this story is just a story. :) Many, many, *many* thanks to Susan, who not only improves my writing but does it on demand. Thanks for the speedy edit, sweetie!

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Part Five: The Chemistry of Dissatisfaction

by Dana

"The chemistry of dissatisfaction is as the chemistry of some marvelously potent tar. In it are the building stones of explosives, stimulants, poisons, opiates, perfumes, and stenches."

—Eric Hoffer

"Talk?" Honey asked, her heart suddenly in her throat.

Dan noted her deer-in-headlights expression before replying, "Yeah. Those fortunes didn't seem to sit well with you. And don't forget that I know about you and fortunes. So, if you've got some kind of difficult journey or uncomfortable situation, then I think we should talk about it."

Wordlessly, her hands like ice, Honey headed for the small living room and sat down on the couch. Dan followed her and sat down next to her. She sighed deeply and tried to get up the nerve to broach the subject that had been foremost on her mind for several days...ever since she had decided that she needed Brian's help in chemistry.

"Honey, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Dan said as he watched the nervous wringing of his girlfriend's hands. "It's just—if something's bothering you..."

"Something *is* bothering me, and I don't *want* to talk about it, but I *do* need to tell you how I have been feeling lately," Honey explained.

"Are you okay?" Dan asked, concerned. Seeing Honey in distress was exactly what he had been afraid of. He did not want Honey feeling bad for wondering "What if?" in terms of her relationship with Brian. She was only human, and it was a very natural thing to do. But loyal Honey saw it as treason, of course.

"I'm fine," Honey assured him, but even as she said it, she realized she wasn't. What she was about to say was going to hurt the person she loved. She'd rather cut out her own tongue than hurt Dan.

She looked at her boyfriend, who was clearly doing his best to encourage her to talk. His dark eyes were caring and compassionate.

"What is it, Honey?" he asked gently. "You know you can tell me anything."

Honey nodded. "I know that I can normally tell you anything, but this is so hard. I'm so afraid of hurting you," she said. It was hard, but she was relieved that she was finally being completely open with Dan.

"Honey, I don't think that you could ever hurt me," Dan said. "You're loyal, honest, and caring. I don't see you ever doing anything to hurt anyone that you love. And I know that you love me."

"I *do* love you!" Honey blurted out. "That's why this is so hard."

"I hate seeing you like this, Honey," Dan said earnestly. "Whatever it is, it's not so bad that we can't work through this. We can make it through anything, you know."

Dan's thoughtfulness was more than Honey could take. Tears glistened in her huge hazel eyes. "I don't deserve you," she said.

"That's ridiculous!" Dan protested. "You're really starting to worry me, sweetie."

"I'm sorry," Honey said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. "I'm a mess. You're so wonderful and so supportive of me."

"That goes both ways, you know," he reminded her. "You supported me a lot in the past few years, sometimes when no one else did. When I first moved to Sleepyside, everyone was ready to write me off—even my own uncle—but you...you were different. You always gave me the benefit of the doubt, even when I walked around with that big ol' chip on my shoulder and never gave you any *reason* to give me the benefit of the doubt. So, don't ever say you're not good enough for me."

He gathered her hands in his as he stared deep into her eyes. "Madeleine Grace Wheeler, I love you, and I'm *not* going to be mad at you, no matter what it is that you have to say. I promise."

Tears slid down Honey's cheeks as she listened to Dan. She was an idiot to ever think that she and Dan weren't meant for each other—that there might be something between herself and Brian. What had she been *thinking*? Dan's words and his love gave her the courage to take a deep breath and finally say, "I thought, well, after spending time this week with Brian, I thought that maybe, well, I don't know, it was just like old times and...and there was this time, you know, before you and I started dating, before you even came to Sleepyside that everyone thought that, well, that, you know, that..." Honey often garbled her speech under the best of circumstances, and when she was nervous, it was even worse, but Dan understood perfectly.

"Everyone thought that you would end up with Brian," he stated, putting Honey out of her misery.

At his words, the tension eased out of her. "Yeah," she said softly, her eyes filled with tenderness as she looked at him. "I should've known you'd know. I mean, I was pretty sure that you would know, which—to be honest—is why I didn't want to spend any time alone with you tonight. I was so afraid that you'd guess what was wrong before I had a chance to talk things over with Brian, but Angela and Di reminded me of a few things, and they were right. I'm so glad that we talked this over first."

Despite Honey's jumbled speech, Dan was able to ascertain two things: She was going to talk to *Brian* before him. She had *already* talked to Angela and Di. Before him. He tried to reign in his temper. He had promised Honey he wouldn't be mad, but that was when he thought she was just confused over her feelings. It had never occurred to him that she would talk to other people before she had talked to him. And it certainly never occurred to him that she would talk to *Brian* first. Apparently, Honey didn't think enough of him or their relationship to talk to him first. Dan felt a strong surge of jealousy course through him at her words. He tried to keep his

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feelings under control, desperate to live up to his promise, but something in his face must have changed, because the look on Honey's face changed from relief to crestfallen.

Dan took a deep breath and tried to calm down. No matter how upset he was, he didn't want to see Honey looking that way.

"What?" Honey asked, a tinge of panic in her voice. "What's wrong?"

"You just admitted that you discussed our relationship with Angela and Di, and you were going to discuss this with Brian before you thought to discuss it with me, the boyfriend whom you supposedly love so much," Dan said in an even tone.

The lack of emotion in Dan's voice was almost worse than his words, and Honey looked stricken and drew back as if slapped.

"'Supposedly love'?" she echoed, sounding and looking very much like a lost and frightened little girl. "You don't think that I love you? But you just said..."

Dan ran a hand through his hair. Of course, he knew that she loved him. Why the heck had he just said that? And after he had promised her he would not get upset. He sighed. He really didn't deserve her. Maybe she *was* better off with Brian. That's what that damn little imp inside his head definitely wanted him to believe.

"I'm sorry, Honey. I'm a jerk. I *do* know that you love me. I don't know what made me say that, except I was really hurt that you would talk to Angela and Di about this when you obviously felt that you couldn't talk to me." Dan paused for a moment and then continued, "And the thought that you were going to talk to Brian before me, and the only reason you didn't is because people outside this relationship thought better, well..." He left his sentence unfinished and spread his hands wide in a gesture that indicated that he was speechless.

"Okay, first of all, since when am I not allowed to discuss things with my friends?" Honey demanded. Something inside her that she couldn't explain had just switched from scared and sad to irritated in the blink of an eye. "If you must know, I didn't have any grand plans to discuss things with Angela, but apparently, I'm a poor actress and she guessed that something was wrong. Instead of letting her worry about me, and to also try to gain some perspective because I was so confused, I confided in her. I'm sorry if that threatens you, Dan, but I do have friends other than you, you know."

Dan sighed again. "Okay, you're right. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I got jealous that you discussed this with others. It just hurts because it seems like you didn't feel as though you could trust me enough to discuss this with me first."

Honey's temper fled as quickly as it had appeared. She didn't want Dan to feel like she trusted others more than him, especially as that wasn't the case at all. "I'm sorry that you felt like I didn't trust you," Honey apologized. "I did want to talk to you, and I *do* trust you. I was just so darn afraid."

"But don't you see, Honey? If you were afraid that I was going to be mad at you or break up with you, then you don't trust me." Before she could protest, he went on. "You don't trust me enough to not lose my temper over something we could work on together." Dan looked at her for a long moment, something heartbreaking in his dark eyes. "Did you cheat on me with him?"

Honey looked appalled and gave him a resounding, “No!”

“Well, if you didn’t act on whatever feelings you’re having, then you should have felt like you could come to me and talk about them. Heck, even if you *did* act on the feelings, you should talk to me. I want us to be able to talk about anything and everything. And that includes the tough things. You have to trust me enough to talk to me about the tough things, too.”

“But it wasn’t like I never planning on talking to you at all. I just felt like I needed to get my head screwed on before I talked to you. And I thought that the best way to do that was to sort through what is in my head on my own—and also to talk to Brian about what’s going on in his head,” Honey explained.

Dan considered Honey’s words for a moment. He was trying to tamp down the unreasonable jealousy that coursed through him every time he thought about Honey talking to Brian about this before she discussed it with him.

“Okay,” he finally said. “I’ve got to admit that I’m really jealous right now. I’m jealous of you having this discussion with Brian before you had it with me. Just when was this discussion supposed to take place? How long where you going to avoid me?”

“I wasn’t going to avoid you,” Honey insisted. “I only meant that I was afraid that if we were alone together, you would guess that something was wrong. Angela did, and you know me loads better than Angela does. As for when the discussion is supposed to take place, Brian and I are getting together tomorrow.”

Dan again tried to control the jealousy that flared at the thought of Honey getting together with Brian. He was being ridiculous for getting jealous when he had been expecting this. Hadn’t he been expecting this for some time? Ever since he and Honey had begun dating, to be exact. Not to mention that Brian was a fellow Bob-White and someone that he trusted implicitly. So, where the hell was this jealousy coming from?

He asked, in a careful voice, “So, you’re going to sit down tomorrow and discuss this with Brian?” At Honey’s timid nod, he asked, “Does he know that you are going to discuss this?” Honey shook her head no. “He thinks you’re going to study?”

“We *are* going to study,” Honey said somewhat defensively.

“Fine, but he thinks studying is all you are going to do. He has no idea you have anything else on your mind, does he?”

Honey reluctantly shook her head and said, “No, he doesn’t.”

“You said that he could help you get your head on straight. What did you mean by that? What do you expect him to say?” Dan wondered.

Honey looked startled. “I don’t know what I expect him to say, honestly. I just kind of wanted to...” Honey paused, gesturing with her hands as she tried to find the right words. “Feel him out about how he felt.” As soon as they were out of her mouth, Honey realized that the words that she had finally found were *not* the right words.

Dan's eyes darkened, and his chiseled features, already very angular, went absolutely taut at her words. Honey blinked back tears. This was going just as badly as she had feared that it would.

"Feel him out?" Dan asked in a tight, controlled voice that was deceptively calm. But Honey knew that a storm was brewing.

"I didn't mean that exactly," Honey said, faltering.

"Then what did you mean?" Dan asked in a dangerous tone.

"I just meant that, maybe, well, maybe if Brian told me I was being silly, that the whole idea was stupid, I was thinking that maybe..." Honey's voice trailed off as she looked at the remote, icy expression on Dan's face. Dan stared at her, and Honey knew that he wasn't going to budge until she finished. This wasn't going to go well, but it looked as though she didn't have a choice, given the impassive look on Dan's face, so she plunged ahead. "...That I could just ignore it."

"Just ignore it," Dan repeated. "Ignore it as in, maybe you would never bring it up to me at all?"

Honey looked nervous. "I don't know, honestly. I was afraid of hurting you..." Again, her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Well, Honey Wheeler, you managed to do that any way," Dan said in clipped tones. "You were just going to discuss this with Brian, and if it turned out a certain way, you were going to sweep it under the rug and keep your boyfriend, whom you claim to love so much, completely in the dark and never tell him about these feelings. Feelings, I might add, that are perfectly natural, perfectly normal, and perfectly expected. But you didn't trust me enough to find that out. *Angela* apparently knows me better than you do."

Dan did not raise his voice, but the icy disdain that dripped from his words spoke louder than shouting ever could, and Honey shrank back.

Dan continued in an ominously low voice, "And if you spoke to Brian tomorrow, and he said that your feelings *weren't* silly and that he had them, too, then *what*, Honey?"

A flush crept up Honey's neck and into her cheeks, and Dan thought that he had his answer, but before he could react again, Honey spoke.

"I don't know. Dan, I wish I could tell you, but to tell you the truth, I honestly don't know," Honey said miserably.

"Would you kiss him on the spot?" Dan asked, the anger, pain, and jealousy he felt twisting his stomach into a knot.

Honey looked shocked. "Of course not!" she declared indignantly, and her anger flared. Two dark spots appeared on her cheeks, and Dan did not think that he had ever seen his girlfriend more angry.

Or more beautiful, he thought ironically as Honey continued, "And if you think for one minute that that's what I would do, Dan Mangan, then you don't know me as well as you think you do. And you most certainly don't know me as well as I thought you did." Her eyes narrowed and

her voice dropped a notch lower. “And you obviously don’t trust me. You talk about trust and say that I should have spoken to you about how I was feeling. You said that you wouldn’t get angry or upset. Well, guess what? Here we are, having the conversation I dreaded, and look! You *are* upset! And you *are* angry! You talk about trust and how I don’t trust you enough, when all along, if you think that I would cheat on you, then *you* don’t trust *me*! You hypocrite! And you know what? Not only would I not do it to you, but I wouldn’t do it to Lexi! And I wouldn’t put Brian in that position, either. But most of all, I wouldn’t do it to *myself*! I have more self respect than that, Daniel Timothy Mangan!”

Honey was shouting by the end of her tirade, and that it was so uncharacteristic of his girlfriend that it made Dan all the more miserable. He hated that they were fighting. He and Honey rarely fought, and certainly not like this. But, unfortunately, something inside of him was keeping him going. The jealousy he felt was tearing him apart with its intensity, and he did not know how to deal with it other than lash out, even if it was directed at the last person that he wanted to hurt. His feelings were all churned up inside, but he had to know the truth. He *needed* to know the truth, as awful as that truth might be.

“Fine,” he said, fighting to keep his voice even and his emotions under control. “You wouldn’t cheat on me. But if you decide that these feelings are real, are you going to break up with me if he breaks up with Lexi?”

Honey paused. She couldn’t help it. She didn’t know. It was one of the reasons that she had wanted to speak to Brian before she spoke to Dan. She couldn’t answer it now. The feelings from her fight were too painful, too raw. Just a few moments before, she was thinking that Dan was the only one for her and that he would never hurt her. But he had. Not only had he said that she “supposedly” loved him and then, knowing it would hurt her, followed that up with an accusation that she only “claimed” to love him, but he didn’t trust her—didn’t *know* her—if he thought that she would cheat on him with anyone, let alone one of his best friends.

Finally, after she had regained some measure of control over her emotions, she spoke. “Dan, I love you very much, no matter what you seem to think. It’s not just a *claim* that I make,” Honey said, throwing his word back at him. “I hadn’t gotten that far in my thinking. Right now, I’m so angry that I don’t want to answer that question.”

“Fine,” Dan said, standing up and looking down at her. “I think maybe it’s best if I leave.”

Honey stared at him. Part of her wanted him to leave, she was so angry, but another part of her wanted him to stay so that they could make up.

Which was the bigger part?

Honey made her decision and swallowed hard. “You can leave if you want to, and maybe that’s best so that we don’t say any more hurtful things to each other, but I don’t want you to leave.” There. She had said it. She closed her eyes, waiting for the rejection that she was certain was going to follow her admission, and was pleasantly surprised when she felt the couch sag next to her. She opened her eyes to see Dan staring at her, his expression contrite, his eyes begging for forgiveness.

“I don’t want to leave, either,” Dan admitted.

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The fight had gone out of each of them, and they clung to each other, afraid to think about the future.

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Honey and Dan had called an uneasy truce and did not discuss any more loaded topics for the rest of the evening. Dan learned that Honey was having lunch with Brian, so he did not suggest seeing a matinee together, as he had planned to. Honey wanted to ask Dan to have dinner with her, but she was too afraid to broach the subject. Dan spent the night at Honey's, but the cuddling, which usually felt so warm and brought them close together, did not feel the same for either of them. Brian Belden was between them now. Both Dan and Honey felt that.

The two slept in the next morning, and the fight of the night before was still their minds as they awoke. Both tried to pretend that it was not still between them, but each of them failed miserably. They made breakfast together, as was their Saturday morning tradition, but the usual easy laughter was noticeably missing. Dan scrambled the eggs and added shredded cheddar cheese, chopped tomatoes, and diced green peppers and onions. Honey heated a skillet for sausage and shredded potatoes for hash browns.

The two worked in the kitchen silently and efficiently, used to their Saturday morning ritual. Often they worked together in an easy and companionable silence, the comfortable silence of two people who did not need to talk to enjoy each other's presence. Today, however, it was a strained and tense silence, with both of them lost in thoughts of their fight the night before and Honey's impending talk with Brian. Honey and Dan both longed to turn back the clock and regain that sense of companionship that they so treasured.

Finally, the meal was complete, and the two sat down to eat it. Usually Saturday morning's breakfast was filled with chatter, but the uncomfortable silence still reigned.

Suddenly unable to stand the silence, Honey threw her fork down on her plate in an unusual moment of pique. "I can't take this any more!"

Startled at the sudden noise and Honey's uncharacteristic gesture, Dan looked up quickly, apprehension in his dark eyes.

Honey looked at Dan and continued, "It really sucks that stupid Brian Belden has wrecked not only our romantic Friday evening together, but also our Saturday morning!"

Dan was more than a little surprised at her language. He wasn't sure he had ever heard Honey assess anything as "sucking," but he did have to grin at Brian being described as "stupid."

Honey took his grin as encouragement. "I love you, Dan," she said earnestly. "And no matter what I feel for Brian, that will never change. Can't we get past this?"

Dan wanted to get past it more than anything, but he also didn't want to get lulled into a false sense of security, get his hopes up, and then realize that Honey truly loved Brian and was dumping him for her first love.

"I want to, Honey. I love you, too, and I will always love you no matter what. But I...I need to guard my heart right now," he explained. He then took a deep breath. What he was about to say was painful for him, but it was the absolute truth and had to be said. "If you want to be

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with Brian, I'm not going to stop you. I want you to be happy more than I want anything else, and if Brian Belden makes you happier than I can, then so be it. But it will hurt. A lot. And if you're going to go over to his place and decide that you want to try dating him, well, then, I need to protect myself."

Honey nodded slowly. "That makes sense, and I understand. And saying that you want me to be happy no matter what, even at your own expense, makes you the sweetest man ever." Honey's hazel eyes filled with tears. "You really and truly are too good for me, and I don't deserve you. And this makes me wonder all the more why I'm being so stupid about Brian!"

Dan reached for Honey's hand. "You're not being stupid, sweetie," he said gently. "You really aren't. You have all of these unresolved feelings that go back years. I suspect they go back to the very moment that you met Brian. You guys have never dealt with them, even when he started dating after he left for college, and they need to be dealt with. I've always known that. It's better that you're dealing with this now and not later, like say, if we were engaged or married or something. You need to resolve this, because we absolutely cannot go forward until it is resolved. I hope more than anything that the resolution makes us stronger as a couple, but if the resolution is that you and Brian need to..." He paused and swallowed, the next thought almost too painful to speak out loud. "If you and Brian decide that you need to explore these feelings together...well...there is really nothing that I can do, and I certainly will not stand in your way."

Honey's heart nearly broke at the sight of Dan sitting there with so much pain and courage and understanding openly displayed in his beautiful dark eyes. She squeezed his hand as tears flowed down her cheeks. She tried to smile and lighten the situation. "Subscribing to the 'if you love someone, set them free' theory of relationships, are we now?"

Dan smiled through his pain. "Yeah, I guess so. 'And if they don't come back, hunt them down and kill them.'" At that, the two shared a genuine smile, and the painful moment was over. They leaned toward each other and shared a sweet kiss.

As they resumed their eating after the kiss, Dan said, "So, I was thinking that maybe I could stay here while you go meet Brian? Be waiting for you when you get back?"

Honey looked uncomfortable. "Well, Brian was kind of freaking out over the fact that he's never been to visit any of the Bob-Whites except Mart. Apparently, it's really been bothering him that he can't picture where each of us lives when we all used to be so close, so he wanted to come over here." Honey shrugged as if to reassure Dan that it was no big deal. "I can kind of see his point. I mean, you and I visited Jim at Michigan State back when he lived in the dorms, but he's living off campus now, and Trixie's there, and with freshman year being so crazy, I've never gotten a chance to visit her, either. It is kind of weird to realize that I can't even picture where my best friend or my brother live."

Dan, however, had a different take on the situation. Was Brian really so concerned about where all of the Bob-Whites lived? Or just one in particular? Was he going to make a pilgrimage to every single domicile of each Bob-White? Or was he just going to check out Honey's apartment? Again, a niggle of jealousy tugged at him.

“Okay, so I guess I’ll leave,” Dan said, not happy about this new turn of events. He couldn’t help adding sarcastically, “I can use the time to go tidy up my place in case Brian decides he needs to see where I live, too.”

Honey looked at him. “I think he really does want to come see your place, Dan. I don’t think that he was using this as an excuse.” Her huge hazel eyes pleaded with him to understand.

Dan noticed her pleading look and sighed. “I’m sorry I’m so cynical, Honey. I know Brian, and of course, he’s the type to wonder about where we all live. The rest of us Bob-Whites are together, but Brian *has* been kind of isolated ever since his freshman year at Columbia. And now that you and I are in the City, of course he’s starting to realize how isolated he’s been.”

Dan looked at Honey and wondered if he should say what he was about to say. Honey noticed the look and asked, “What?”

When Dan didn’t immediately answer, she said, “C’mon. You have to tell me now, or I’ll just die of curiosity!”

“Okay, *Trixie*,” Dan said with a chuckle, and Honey smiled. “I’ll tell you. That girl that he dated before Lexi, well, I think she was kind of a control freak, and she really isolated him. Jim and I were pretty worried about him, actually. We both really noticed a change in him, and it wasn’t for the better. After they broke up, he was pretty hurt and confused, but I could see a glimpse of the old Brian. Then, he started dating Lexi, but then *they* broke up because of her dad, and by that time, you and I had paired off. Brian came home for the summer, and Trixie and Jim were more solid than ever and in their own little world making plans for Michigan State. Mart and Di, as you know, were always their own little island. I think he felt isolated all over again. I noticed the change in him that summer, and I know Mart and Jim did, too.”

Dan paused, wondering if he should tell Honey something that he had kept hidden for nearly two years. Finally, he continued, “I never said anything, but remember how he was around when we were getting ready for my prom? I saw the look in his eyes as he watched you that night. I shouldn’t be telling you this now, especially given everything that’s going on right now, but there was definitely regret in his eyes as he looked at you. That summer, we had a lot of talks about Lexi and how he couldn’t forget her, so I pushed the memory of how he was looking at you the night of my prom into the back of my mind. But I’ve always known that he had unresolved feelings about you, too.” Dan looked down. “I think...I think that’s why I got so stupidly jealous last night. I’m just so afraid that...” Dan didn’t finish his sentence. He just looked up at Honey with a look so raw that Honey reached out and hugged him.

“I’m so sorry, Dan—so sorry we’re putting you through this. I hate myself for this. I really do.”

Dan pulled away at her and said fiercely, “Don’t you *dare* hate yourself, Honey Wheeler. Like I said before, what you’re feeling is normal. You have to do this, and we both know it.”

He gave her a rueful smile. “It looks like the Bob-White girls need to spread their wings a little.”

Honey knew that he referred to Di’s sudden need to break free from her old life and experience a whole new world. A need that included freedom from her boyfriend of many years—a boy that she had loved since kindergarten.

“This isn’t quite the same thing as Di,” Honey said quietly.

“No, I know,” Dan said. “You’re a lot more self-assured than Di ever was, so I don’t ever think you’ll need to go to quite the same extreme. You know, I spent some time with Di when you guys were all off together, and I got to know her pretty well. I wasn’t surprised by what happened once she went away. She was always Trixie’s friend or Mart’s girlfriend or the sudden-millionaire’s daughter or the big sister. She was never really able to be Diana Lynch, except when she was doing her art stuff. I’m not surprised that she needed to break free of all of that at college. I’m just sorry that Mart had to get hurt in the process.”

Honey nodded soberly. “I am, too,” she said. She looked at Dan for a moment and then asked, “So, why don’t you think I’ll ever do that?”

“Because even though you’re Trixie’s friend, you never allowed your self to be defined as that,” Dan explained. “You’ve always known exactly who you are, even while being friends with a hurricane like Trixie Belden. You’ve always known what you wanted, and you’ve gone after it. When you and Trixie decided to be detectives, you agreed with her because that’s what you wanted, too. You didn’t just agree just because that’s what Trixie wanted. If you weren’t genuinely interested in being a detective, Trixie never would have been able to persuade you, no matter how forceful her personality is.”

Honey smiled. “I’m so glad you believe in me.”

“Well, I’m not the only one,” Dan said. “Your brother and Trixie know how strong you are, too. Trixie told me a ton of times about how you were timid at first, but within a very short time, you were really brave and went forward in spite of the danger.” He grinned. “Like pretending you were a member of a trailer-stealing gang. I really wish I had been there to see that!”

Honey laughed. “It really was surreal. I was absolutely terrified at first, but then, looking down on Al and Jeff from the loft, it was like watching an exciting movie, and I forgot to be scared. Plus, we realized how close we were to Jim, so we were really excited and happy about that. Then, when it looked like Al might kidnap us, it just didn’t seem real. And when Trixie kicked Al and knocked him down, well, that was the highlight of that whole scene for me. You should have seen the look his face as he tumbled down to the ground!”

Dan shook his head. “I can’t believe the dangerous things you two got into when you were just thirteen years old.”

“I know. We must have had one heck of a guardian angel following us around,” she said with a smile and then sobered. “I know you don’t like to talk about it, Dan, but I know that you must have been involved in some dangerous situations when you were just barely a teenager, too.”

Dan’s face became gravely serious. “You’re right, Honey, and I hope that you will never have to know or experience such things.”

“But, Dan, I want you to be able to talk to me about these things. I want to know about that part of your life, because as awful as it was, it’s still a part of you and made you who you are today. And who you are today is someone I love very much. I want to know the details of how you got to be you, and I hate that you don’t want to share that with me, even if it is a misguided attempt at protecting me.”

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Dan sighed. “I *am* trying to protect you, Honey. But I’m also trying to protect myself, too. I don’t like remembering that Dan Mangan, and I don’t like thinking about it. I don’t want you to ever look at me and see that Dan and not me.”

Honey reached out to take his hand. “That would *never* happen. I’d never judge you. You talked yesterday about trust. Well, you need to trust the love that I have for you.” She smiled. “Even when you were the old Dan with that huge chip on your shoulder, I didn’t see that Dan.”

Dan smiled. Honey made a good point. She had seen the good in him, even when he had given her no reason to. “I know. And I will try to tell you some day. Maybe when I work through it myself. Okay?”

Honey nodded. She certainly wasn’t going to push him. “Okay.”

“So, do you want me to come back after Brian leaves? I’d like to. Unless you want some time alone afterward?”

Honey shook her head. “No, I don’t think I’ll need time alone.” At least, she hoped not. “But you don’t want to go all the way home and come back, do you?”

“I can head over to the library and get some studying in. You could call me on my cell when you and Brian are done,” Dan suggested.

“Are you sure?” Honey asked, looking at him critically. “I hate to think of you sitting in the library wondering about...well, about what Brian and I are talking about.”

Dan shook his head ruefully. “Honey, do you honestly think that I’m not going to wonder about that no matter where I am?”

Honey shook her head regretfully. “No, but I hate feeling like I’m kicking you out of my apartment, and I hate thinking of you sitting in an impersonal library. I like to think of you hanging out on your couch, just chillin’ and not thinking.”

Dan chuckled. “Chillin’?”

Honey giggled. “Yeah, chillin’.”

“You’re cute,” Dan said, as he reached out and tucked a strand of honey-colored hair behind his girlfriend’s ear. “Silly, but cute.”

Honey stuck her tongue out at him, and the two were relieved that if things weren’t perfect right now, at least they weren’t strained and tense anymore. Breakfast had ended much better than it had begun.

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After Dan had left for the library, Honey straightened her apartment. But, given her natural tidiness and the years spent at boarding schools and camps, there wasn’t much to straighten. At her mother’s insistence, Celia came to the apartment to give it a thorough cleaning once a month. The maid already came into the City to clean the Wheelers’ penthouse apartment, and it was no trouble to travel the two miles or so to clean Honey’s as well. Honey felt strange about this, but Celia and her mother kept reassuring her that it was no big deal.

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This meant that now that Honey had so much nervous energy and no ability to concentrate on her homework, there was nothing for her to do to keep busy. Brian was not due to arrive for another hour. She tried to turn on the television to occupy her mind, but nothing appealed to her. Honey clicked off the television in frustration.

It was then that she remembered how she had passed the time the other night when she had had the same kind of nervous energy. So, once again, Honey fired up her laptop and word processing program and stared with satisfaction at the blank page in front of her. She would fill that page with her words, and the black text on the white page would make her feel at ease again.

Dear Diary, she wrote.

This worked the other night when I was feeling restless. I deleted everything I wrote that night. They say that the truth hurts, and it really did hurt to see what was lurking in the subconscious recesses of my mind laid out before me in black and white. How could I be thinking this way? How could I hurt someone that I love very much?

Well, that someone assures me that it is normal, and that he's been expecting this for some time. I guess that makes sense. After all, Brian and I do have all of these unresolved feelings for each other, so of course they had to be dealt with at some point. And I guess that some point is today. Brian is coming over in a little bit. He doesn't know it, but I've decided that we need to talk about this. We need to get that stupid elephant out of the room, you know? And we have to decide if what we feel is leftover kids' stuff, or if it's real. And if it's real, then we need to decide how we're going to deal with it.

I love Dan, I know I do. But there is that "What if?" lurking inside of me. I realize that now. And I can never move forward with Dan if that "What if?" continues to lurk. Dan is right about that. Actually, Dan is right about a lot of things. He really is a smart guy. Wise, you know? Of course, part of me is sad that he is so wise, because I know that it came with great cost. Losing your mom and dad at a young age and then having to live on the streets is not something that I would wish on anyone. Not even Dot Murray or Laura Ramsey! :)

Anyway, I'm getting off track, as I usually do.

I have to look into these unresolved feelings. The question is, how far do I take it? What if Brian and I do realize that we have feelings for each other? What do we do then? Do we break up with Dan and Lexi? Do we pursue it? I just don't know what to do. But I also can not live my life wondering "What if?" It's not fair to me, and it wouldn't be fair to Dan, either.

Why does this have to happen? Why can't Dan be my first love? I mean, in most ways, he really is my first love, but I know what I feel for Brian is love, too. I'm not sure it's romantic love, but it is there. And I've known Brian since I was thirteen. Of course, I've known Dan since I was thirteen, too. But the thirteen I was when I met Brian was so much more...innocent than the thirteen that I was when I met Dan. It's hard to explain, Diary, but so much happened that year that it seemed more like a decade than a year. I mean, when Trixie and I met, we felt as though we had known each other for months and months when it had only been a few days.

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The time when I met Brian just felt like a more innocent age than the one in which I met Dan. I really can't explain it better than that. Clear as mud, right?

But the point is, when I think back to the time I met Brian, I think of crystal blue skies and clear sunny days. I remember seeing him for the first time at the bottom of the hill on the property of Crabapple Farm, his dark hair blowing in the slight breeze, the early morning sun shining down on him. It's a very romanticized memory. I met Dan on the school bus in the middle of winter, and Trixie and I were not very nice to him. Trixie said something tactless and thoughtless, and I was sure that he had heard her. It was all very embarrassing. Hardly a romantic moment.

I had just gone to Di's Valentine's Day party right before I met Dan. I had gone with Brian, and my head was all full of that. I felt very grown up. He didn't send me an orchid like Jim sent to Trixie, but he made it clear that he and I were there together, and that I was someone very special to him. Maybe that was kid stuff, but maybe it wasn't.

I know that I was awfully, awfully hurt when I first found out that he had met someone in college and started dating her. Jim had waited for Trixie, even though he was way off in Michigan. Why hadn't Brian waited for me? That was when I started to doubt things. I mean, if I had meant so much to him and was someone "special," then I didn't see how he could have feelings for someone else. Since he did, I figured that he must not have them for me.

But I realize now that that logic is very flawed. I mean, I most definitely love Dan and have feelings for him, but I also have feelings for Brian.

Why does this have to be so hard?

Honey stopped typing and stared at what she had written.

"Why *does* it have to be so hard?" she asked out loud.

The phone rang, startling Honey out of her reverie. Her eyes flew to her clock. It was a quarter to noon, so it was probably Brian, waiting to be signed in as a guest. Her residence was strict about visiting guests, and each one had to be signed in by a resident and show identification. It was indeed Brian, letting her know that he was only a few minutes away from her building. She quickly saved the document she had been working on and shut down her computer. No sense risking Brian seeing her confessional, she reasoned.

She threw on her battered moccasins, grabbed her keys from the hook on the wall next to the door, and hurried to the bank of elevators. Just before the elevator doors opened to release her onto the lobby level of her apartment building, Honey took a deep breath.

I can do this, she thought. When the elevator doors opened, she pasted a smile on her face and went to greet Brian.

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How fun it is not to have to list carryover items here! *g*



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This takes place concurrently with the latter half of Part Five. Susan rocks for her last-minute edit! *g* Oh, and with this story, I've officially made my word count!

Basic Chemistry **Part Six: Cold Chemistry**

by Dana

"There's nothing colder than chemistry."

– Anita Loos

Brian and Lexi also generally ate Saturday morning breakfast together, although it was not the companionable feast that Dan and Honey cooked together. Lexi lived in the same college residence that Brian did, so the two always headed down to the residence dining hall to eat breakfast together on weekend mornings. Lexi loved to cook, and had she known about Honey and Dan's Saturday morning tradition, she would have felt a small pang of jealousy and yearning. She would have loved to cook breakfast with Brian, but living in a dorm obviously didn't lend itself to that.

That particular morning, Brian had chosen a made-to-order cheese and bacon omelet, a halved grapefruit, and a cup of coffee. Lexi had chosen oatmeal that she had flavored with brown sugar, blueberry yogurt, and a slice of whole wheat toast. Instead of coffee, a cup of green tea sat in front of her.

Brian was rather quiet and only picking at his food, so Lexi knew that something was on his mind. She also had a hunch as to what that something—or rather *someone*—was.

"So, what's on your mind?" she finally asked after watching him take only a bite or two of his omelet. She sipped her tea, bracing herself for the answer.

Brian looked up from his barely touched food, somewhat surprised and feeling more than a little guilty. "What?" he asked.

"What's on your mind?" Lexi asked again, purposely keeping her voice light, despite the heaviness in her heart. "You look like you're a million miles away."

Brian looked at his girlfriend and knew it was time to come clean. "I guess I am, sort of."

At his words, Lexi felt her throat constrict ever so slightly in fear. Suddenly, she wasn't so sure that she wanted to hear what Brian had to say next. It was against her better judgment that she found herself saying, "You want to talk about it? You can tell me anything, you know."

"I know. It is just that, well, I don't want you to be upset with me." Brian distractedly used his spoon to pick at his grapefruit sections. Lexi noted that he had not even eaten the maraschino cherry that was sitting on top of the fruit, something he usually ate right away.

"I'll try not to be," Lexi said, trying to speak past the lump in her throat that was getting bigger every moment that Brian stalled.

"It's really not that big of a deal, so I don't know why I'm so worried," Brian said, almost as if he was trying to reassure himself more than Lexi. "Honey needed more help with chemistry, and she asked if she could come over and study some more. Plus, I've been thinking about how spread out the Bob-Whites are these days and how, with the exception of Mart, I don't even

know where any of them live. It made me feel sad, like we were growing apart or something, so I asked Honey if I could come to her apartment instead. It's just weird that I've never seen most of the Bob-Whites' places, and she is the closest, and..." His voice trailed off.

Lexi swallowed. *That's not so bad*, she told herself. *It could be worse. Much worse.*

"So, when are you going over there?" Lexi asked, gripping her mug of tea and telling herself she was ridiculous to feel so jealous. Then again, she couldn't help but wonder when Brian had started feeling nostalgic about the homes of his fellow club members. He hadn't expressed any such feeling to her, but he had obviously shared his feelings with Honey.

"This afternoon," Brian said. "If that's okay."

"As if you have to ask me for permission," Lexi scolded lightly. "Especially when you're trying to help out a friend. And I don't want you feeling like you're losing touch with your old friends, either. That makes me sad."

She refused to acknowledge that niggling voice in the back of her head that reminded her that Brian was not making a pilgrimage to see the residence of just *any* Bob-White—he was going to see *Honey's*. Lexi tried to stay positive. For all she knew, he was going to announce that he was also going to Dan's apartment. Maybe he was about to ask her on a road trip to visit Di in Ithaca or to Michigan to visit Jim and Trixie.

Brian smiled at his girlfriend. "I knew that you'd understand."

"Of course, Brian," Lexi said, but she couldn't resist the little devil sitting on her shoulder. "So, when are you going to see the rest of the Bob-Whites' places after Honey? Are you visiting Dan's, too, since he's so close?"

Brian froze at the suggestion of visiting Dan. It made sense, and he *did* want to see where everybody else lived, but for some reason, the thought of going over to Dan's felt somehow... intimidating to him. Which, of course, was ridiculous, since Dan was one of his oldest and closest friends. When had he started seeing him as an adversary?

The silence became more drawn out, and it was becoming a telling silence as far as Lexi was concerned. Finally, Brian said, "I want to, but I guess that depends on Dan and his schedule. I definitely want to see Jim and Trixie before they leave Michigan for the summer. Mart got to see where they lived at the beginning of the year, so I thought it might be fun to take a road trip out to see them. Would you like to come with me?"

Lexi smiled at him. "I'd love to head out there with you," she said happily, her fears allayed.

Brian returned her smile. "Good. I think we'd have a great time, and it'll be fun to visit Jim and Trixie. The Wheelers, the Lynches, and our family sent us to a lot of cool places when we were teenagers, but I've never been to Michigan."

"I went once, a long time ago," Lexi said.

"You did?" Brian asked, surprised. She had never mentioned that before, even though Trixie was now living in Michigan.

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“Yep,” Lexi said. “I was visiting relatives in Ontario, Canada. My mom had some cousins who lived in Canada, and they had a cute little summer bungalow on Lake Erie near Windsor. One summer, my dad took me on a trip to visit Mom’s relatives, to keep her memory alive and to introduce me to her roots and stuff. We started at my grandma and grandpa’s in upstate New York, and from there, we went to Windsor to stay with her cousin, whom she was really close to when she was a kid. I guess they were close in age and practically like sisters. Anyway, Windsor is across the river from Detroit, so we visited the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, which is in Dearborn, near Detroit. It was so long ago, and I was so young that I barely remember it. I remember some old cars and some old-fashioned houses, but that’s about it.”

“Wow, that’s really cool. Not only that your dad made sure to keep in touch with your mom’s side of the family, but visiting a place like the Henry Ford museum. Henry Ford was such a genius, truly way ahead of his time,” Brian said, and Lexi was amazed that he looked so star struck. Of course, Brian was a man of science with a very methodical and organized mind, and he admired genius and scientific thought. Henry Ford had changed the face of America with not only his product, but his method of assembly, so it was only natural that Brian would be fascinated. She only wished that she remembered it a little bit better to tell him more about it.

“Maybe we can stop there when we take our road trip out to see Jim and Trixie,” she suggested. “I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t be too far out of the way. I think it would be pretty interesting to see myself now that I’m old enough to really appreciate it. Greenfield Village, as I recall, is a village that’s preserved everything the way it was around the turn of the twentieth century.”

“That does sound really cool. Okay, we’ll do that. We could even cross through Canada and see Niagara Falls on our way. That’s gotta be better than taking all of the turnpikes on the U.S. route. What do you say?”

Lexi smiled. “That sounds perfect to me. I love doing anything with you, but traveling across the border and seeing Niagara Falls and Canada and everything else along the way sounds really nice.”

“Okay, then, it’s a date. I’ll call Jim and Trixie and see if they have any good weekends for us to come visit. I would hate to interfere with their exam times—or ours, for that matter.”

“That sounds like a plan.” Lexi hesitated. She wanted to get something off of her chest that was a little scary for her to admit. Finally, she said, “Brian, I’m really happy that we’re planning this trip. When you were so distant this morning, and then you were so nervous when you mentioned Honey...well, I have to admit that I was a little afraid.”

Brian put his spoon down and reached across the table to take Lexi’s hand into his own. “I’m sorry that I worried you, sweetheart. I have been feeling nostalgic about...about the Bob-Whites.” Lexi didn’t miss his pause and momentary floundering and wondered if he really meant Honey, but she didn’t say anything as he continued, “Ever since I spent that time studying with Honey, I’ve been thinking about the club and how things were in high school, but that doesn’t lessen my feelings for you at all.”

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Lexi relaxed and squeezed his hand. “I know, and I’m silly to be so worried. I love your friends, and I’m glad that you have such close friends who support you and love you. I know how important they are to you, and I would never begrudge you that.”

Brian squeezed her hand. “No, you’re not being silly. You know the history between Honey and me, so when I started spending time with her and getting nostalgic, it was only natural for you be worried. But I love you.” Brian at least could say that truthfully. He did love Lexi, no matter what he might or might not be feeling for Honey lately.

Brian had spent a couple of fitful nights of sleep pondering his current and former relationship with Honey, and he couldn’t take much more of the uncertainty. He planned on talking to Honey about it during their study session, and he hoped that it wouldn’t shock her too much. Once he had realized the depth of the unresolved emotions between them, he knew that he had to talk to her. He couldn’t go forward with Lexi if he was still thinking about Honey, especially if his jumbled feelings were born of something stronger than nostalgia.

Brian and Lexi finished breakfast under the guise of innocuous conversation. Brian avoided heavy topics because of his jumbled thoughts, and Lexi avoided them because she had seen the look that crossed Brian’s face when he spoke of Honey, and she had felt a shiver run up her spine. There was more to this Honey thing than nostalgia, she was sure of it.

The two bussed their trays and breakfast dishes, Brian’s with most of his meal uneaten, and headed up to their respective rooms. During the brief elevator ride they made plans for dinner together, and Brian gave Lexi a quick kiss before she stepped out on the sixth floor and then continued his way up to the eighth floor.

Brian entered his room and gathered up the materials he would need to study with Honey. Just as he reached the subway, he realized that he had forgotten to bring a book to read.

Great, he thought. Now I’ll have nothing to do other than sit and think, which is all that I’ve been doing for the last few days. Obsessively. About Honey. And it has to stop. It has to, he tried to tell himself.

He looked around, hoping to find a newsstand, but there were none in the vicinity of the stop. For a moment, he seriously considered going back to his room and getting the new medical thriller he had just bought, but then he decided that he didn’t want to be late, so he headed down the steps with their usual throng of people. He didn’t have long to wait before the correct train arrived, and soon he was on his way to Honey’s apartment. He knew the building, and he had even been by it a few times before. It was a new structure and had made news while it was being built because it was the newest, nicest building of its kind, providing college residences for those students who attended universities that did not have their own college residences, such as John Jay, where Honey attended. The building was owned and operated by Marymount University, but it had a lease agreement with other colleges in the city. The top floors had made news because they weren’t owned by Marymount College at all. A group of businessmen had built luxury penthouse suites on the top fourteen floors of the 46-story building, which had helped Marymount College to subsidize the cost of the college residence. The penthouses had a completely separate entrance from the college residences. It was a top-of-the-line building, and the arrangement was a win-win situation for Marymount University

and the businessmen who had invested in the apartment building. Brian would not have been surprised to learn that Matthew Wheeler had been one of the investors, virtually securing an apartment in the college residence for his only daughter.

Brian found a seat in a somewhat empty car near the front of the train and settled in for the ride. He leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes, trying to think of anything but Honey Wheeler and her sweet face, glowing hazel eyes, golden hair, legendary tact, and sweet disposition. Everything about her had earned her the name Honey, from the color of her hair to the sweetness of her personality. The more that Brian tried to avoid thinking of her, the more he found that he was not able to.

Trying to distract himself with baseball brought back the memory of the time that Honey and Trixie had been bickering over Honey's cousin, Ben. The two of them rarely fought, so it had been particularly upsetting for both of them. As a result, poor Honey had been so beside herself that she jumped up in the middle of a baseball game yelled, "Touchdown!" after a player had hit a home run. Honey knew well the difference between a home run and a touchdown, which showed just how upset she had been.

Trying to divert his mind by thinking of geography reminded him of the trips that he had taken with Honey. There was the Ozarks, where Trixie had found a cave in which the elusive ghost fish that a magazine was offering a reward for lived. Trixie had been so bound and determined to win that reward to help buy a station wagon for disabled children that she had put herself in danger. Brian would never forget standing under the ledge of the cliff with Jim, trying to keep dry in the sudden rainstorm, when suddenly Honey was struggling through the pouring rain, calling for him. She was drenched to the bone and visibly upset, but Brian remembered that even then the sight of her took his breath away, and it wasn't just because she was yelling that his sister was in trouble.

Then there was that trip along the Mississippi River, when Trixie and Honey had been kidnapped by a ruthless gun runner. Brian still felt the icy tendrils of fear grip his heart at what might have happened, even so many years removed from the original event. When they had realized that Trixie and Honey weren't in their room, safe and sound as they had imagined... Brian hated thinking about that even to this day.

When he took a page from his brother's book and tried to distract himself by thinking of food, all he could think about was all of the wonderful potlucks and picnics that the Bob-Whites had had over the years. Picnics by the lake made him think of Honey emerging from the water in her bathing suit, dripping wet and cheeks flushed from racing Mart.

It did not matter what subject Brian tried to think about, all roads led back to Honey Wheeler, as they had since the day they studied together. Brian wondered why he was suddenly thinking of Honey so much. Truth be told, he had not even thought of her this much after he had first left for Columbia. At that point, he had definitely felt her absence more acutely than he had in the four years since, but he had also been experiencing a lot of new things at that time, too. He was overwhelmed by everything—his new living arrangements, his unfamiliar surroundings, New York being so starkly different from the sleepy little village where he had grown up, his new classes, his lack of parental supervision, his new course load, his new-found freedom...just *everything*. There had been so much going on that, although he missed his family and friends—

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particularly Honey—he never allowed himself to dwell on those feelings. He did not allow himself the luxury of indulging in such selfish feelings as homesickness. There was homework to be done and classes to attend. His days never seemed to end as he adjusted to the increased difficulty of his classes and doing things he had never had to worry about before, like laundry. His premed classes were hard enough, but he had also decided to take honors courses, which entailed accelerated learning curves. Soon, as he threw himself into his studies, he found that he missed everyone a little less. And that included Honey Wheeler. So, when he had met the girl who had eventually become his first real girlfriend, it was natural to date her, and the niggling at the back of his head that he was dating someone other than Honey was just that—a nigger. There had been no major feelings of guilt.

Then he had seen her with Dan the night of Dan's senior prom. He had been missing Lexi desperately at that point, and seeing Honey so sparkling and radiant had made all of the old feelings reawaken. He had to admit that part of what he had felt about Honey that night was because she was with someone else. What was that old saying about forbidden fruit being sweeter? Of course, because it was one of his best friends that she was with, he had stuffed those feelings back down, deep inside, and threw himself back into longing for Lexi. When he and Lexi had finally gotten back together months later, he forgot that those feelings had ever even existed at all and concentrated on nothing but his happiness about being back together with Lexi.

But those feelings had been exhumed, and he wasn't even sure why. Sure, he had been one of the many who had thought that they would end up together, in that mythical time called "someday." Those feelings had probably been somewhat real, despite how young he and Honey had been at the time. On the other hand, he knew that he had found true happiness and love with Lexi, feelings that *were* real. But did that mean his feelings about Honey *weren't* real?

Either way, these feelings needed to be resolved. He knew that he *and* Honey had both felt them, real or not, but they had never acknowledged them. They needed to be resolved before they moved on. He suspected that he was not the only one thinking along those lines. He had definitely felt a similar...vibe from Honey as well. Sometimes the silence was just awkward enough to indicate that both of them were feeling this...this whatever-it-was. The cold, hard fact was that he and Honey *did* share some kind of chemistry.

Brian sat in agony in his seat, his head leaned back against the window behind him. A lock of his dark brown hair flopped onto his forehead, much like the errant blonde curl his sister always battled.

I have to straighten this out, he thought. There was just no way around it. He had deep feelings of love for two beautiful women. He rued the fact that he couldn't just ignore this altogether and continue along blithely with his girlfriend. That was the coward's way out, though, and no one would benefit in the end from that. He needed to figure out exactly how he felt and how Honey felt about him. She loved him as a friend, for sure, but was there more? *And if there was, then what?*

Brian ignored that thought. He thought instead about how much Honey loved Dan. It was obvious that she did by the way she looked at him, the way her beautiful hazel eyes lit up

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whenever she was around him. Of course, that didn't mean that she didn't have feelings for *him*, too.

Was he hoping that she did?

He opened his eyes in surprise at this last thought. *Was* he hoping that Honey had feelings for him? Why? What good could come of that?

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and then leaned his head back against the seat once again.

It was going to be a long subway ride. And an even longer afternoon.



This is being posted in honor of my seventh Jixaversary. Can it be seven years already? Time flies when you're having fun! Many thanks to every single person in the Jix community who makes Jix what it is—my home away from home. {{HUGS}} And many thanks to Cathy for giving me such a great honor and a treasured gift this year when I truly needed it. {{HUGS}} Susan is the bestest Bob-White EVER for editing this so quickly and when she was exhausted. Thanks, sweetie. {{MORE HUGS}} What can I say, I'm a huggy person! :) I would also be remiss if I didn't thank all of the people who have encouraged me this last week to make my word by their wonderful feedback on this story. Thank you so much! {{HUGS}}

Basic Chemistry **Part Seven: The Chemistry of Happiness** by Dana

"Dancing and running shake up the chemistry of happiness."
—Mason Cooley

Honey gave Brian a quick tour of her apartment, and he was impressed. Even though it was still rather institutional and utilitarian, it was also new and modern. He especially liked the view she commanded from the twenty-third floor.

Brian thanked Honey for letting him see where she lived and explained that he and Lexi were thinking of taking a road trip to see Jim and Trixie's places before the end of the school year, and although she had a pang of jealousy that Lexi would be the one accompanying him to see her brother and best friend, she didn't say a word. In the awkwardness that followed Brian's disclosure, he suggested that they study.

Honey, however, didn't want to study, her head clouded with the impending discussion she knew she was going to have to initiate.

"How about lunch?" she suggested instead. "Are you hungry? I thought that we could order a pizza before we...we start anything serious," Honey said, faltering slightly. She realized that she had no intention of studying with Brian now. When she had first called him to set up this meeting, she had thought that maybe they could go over a few of the finer points of organic chemistry together, but she now understood that there was no way any studying was going to

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get done either before or after this conversation. And Honey, being Honey, couldn't force herself to say "study" when she knew that wasn't going to happen.

If Brian noticed her hesitation or her substitution of "anything serious" instead of "study," he didn't let on. "Pizza sounds really good. I never really did finish my breakfast this morning."

"How come?" Honey asked innocently. She hadn't meant to pry, but she immediately noted how Brian suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"I...uhh...Lexi and I were talking, and I guess I just never finished." Brian thought that sounded rather lame, but tactful Honey did not question him any further.

Her curiosity was definitely piqued, and she wondered what they were talking about and if it had to do with her.

"Oh, I see," she said lightly. "Well, then we definitely should feed you, you being a growing boy and all." Her hazel eyes twinkled merrily as she teased her old friend.

Brian snorted. "I think you're mistaking me for Mart. But I would appreciate a good piece of pizza right now."

"Well, if you want *good* pizza, we're going to have to walk to get it. If you'll settle for average pizza, we can order in," Honey explained. She waited for Brian to answer, unsure of exactly *how* she wanted him to answer. Taking a walk and being in public would ease some of this pressure she was feeling, but it wouldn't really give them a chance to have an in-depth talk, like Honey knew they needed. Little did she know that the same thoughts were flitting through Brian's mind.

Finally, Brian answered, "Let's order okay pizza in."

"Sounds like a plan. Are your favorite toppings still pepperoni and mushroom?"

Brian nodded. "They are, but I'm pretty flexible. I just hate ham and pineapple."

"What about Italian sausage?" Honey asked.

"I could do Italian sausage. In addition to the pepperoni?" Brian asked.

Honey shook her head. "No, instead of the pepperoni. For whatever reason, pepperoni hasn't been agreeing with me lately, but I can handle Italian sausage. As a matter of fact, I really like Italian sausage on my pizza now. It's how Dan always orders it, and it's grown on me the last few months."

"Sounds good," Brian said agreeably.

"Or we could order half and half," Honey suggested, trying to please, as always.

In the end, they ordered a large pizza with extra cheese, green peppers, and mushrooms on the whole thing, with pepperoni on one half and Italian sausage on the other half.

After Honey hung up the phone, she turned to look at the clock, noting the time. "They say it'll be ready in 45 minutes, so let's go down and wait in the lobby in 40 minutes. Or I can go down and you can wait here."

"That's okay. I'll go down with you. No reason for you to go down alone," Brian said.

"Thanks, Brian," Honey said with a smile. Brian was so thoughtful. There was another stretch of silence, as Honey groped for things to say. She didn't want to discuss anything significant before the pizza arrived, and all of a sudden, she was at a loss for a safe topic of conversation. Finally, she blurted out, "I didn't order triple cheese on the pizza."

Brian raised an eyebrow. He was used to abrupt changes of subject when talking to both his sister and Honey, but Honey's admission caught him off guard. "Triple cheese?"

Honey was kicking herself for how stupid she sounded, but she knew she couldn't let the silence stretch forever, so she went on, "Yeah. I love melted cheese. The cheesier the pizza, the better." A grin quirked her lips. "Although, I don't recommend ordering quadruple cheese. For whatever reason, the dough doesn't cook very well, and it is all raw and doughy."

Brian smiled and said, "I'll take your word for it. I don't think I'd ever be tempted to order quadruple cheese on my pizza. If you had ever had to milk a cow, you wouldn't be so fond of dairy, either."

For a second, Honey looked confused, but then she smiled. "Ah, that's right. When we were in the Ozarks visiting your uncle, you and Mart helped Mrs. Moore milk the cow, because you were such 'experts'."

Brian gave a short bark of laughter. "Yeah, and Jim got out of it because he said he didn't have as much 'experience' as Mart and I did. Instead, he threw a stick around for Jacob, Linnie's coonhound. What he failed to mention was that Mart and my sum total of experience milking a cow had been at a petting farm Moms took us to when I was about eight years old!"

Honey chuckled. "But Trixie was bragging about how much experience you'd had with cows when we were all at your uncle's farm in Happy Valley."

"Yeah, to this day, I don't know what the heck she was talking about," Brian said. "I think she just got caught up in the moment, what with the sheep about to give birth."

"Trixie? Caught up in some excitement? Never!" Honey said, pretending to be shocked. Brian laughed, and it was almost as if the last four years had not happened. Time had suddenly stopped, and they were still two teenagers in high school, sitting around joking and kidding with each other. Neither had been in a relationship with anybody else, and neither had ever had their heart broken.

But time, of course, had not really stopped, and as both of them came out of the past and back into the present, an awkwardness settled over them that they both felt. Honey cleared her throat nervously.

"So, do you want to see the rest of the building? I can give you a tour, and we can head down to the lobby to wait for the pizza guy while we're out and about. Does that sound good?" she asked.

"I'd love to see the rest of the building," Brian said, grateful for the suggestion. "This place made quite a bit of news while it was being built." He looked around at her apartment. "So, how'd you manage to avoid roommates?"

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Honey blushed and looked embarrassed. “Well, John Jay doesn’t have dorms, and Daddy insisted that I stay somewhere safe. He didn’t want me to have roommates, for reasons I still can’t fathom. I think he thought maybe they’d be a distraction or something. I don’t know. Then we found this place, and it seemed perfect, except it didn’t offer singles. I was fine with that, but next thing I know, he’s invested in the building, and I have a two-bedroom apartment meant for four people all to myself. It’s embarrassing!”

Brian gave her a sympathetic look. “I can imagine, but your dad was just doing what he thought was best for you, trying to keep you safe. That’s not such a bad thing. Plus, who really has to know that you’re living here alone?”

“My neighbors, for one. I’ve been afraid to approach them because I feel so self-conscious,” Honey admitted.

Brian shook his head. “Honey, you’re a wonderful girl, and you can’t let something like that stop you from making friends. Some of my best friends are people I met in the dorms, and I’d hate to think I might have missed out on some of those friendships out of fear or nervousness. So, your family has money. *You* are not a spoiled little heiress, and anybody who knows you for five minutes will figure that out. And if they can’t get past their prejudices, then that’s *their* loss.”

“Thanks, Brian,” Honey said with a shy smile. “I’ll try to remember that the next time I get all nervous and shy.”

“You’d better,” Brian said. “Now, let’s see what the rest of this building has to offer. I want to make sure your dad got his money’s worth.” Honey gave a shout of surprised laughter at this last remark, and Brian grinned at her.

“Okay, then, let’s go check out my dad’s investment!” Being able to joke about it, instead of thinking of it with embarrassment was such an improvement, and Honey was grateful for Brian’s encouragement.

They put on shoes and left the apartment, heading first for the rehearsal rooms, built for those students who were involved in liberal arts degrees and needed to practice music or acting scenes. The next stop for the duo was the game room, with its pool tables and other gear for leisure-time pursuits. She showed him the student lounges and the laundry room before heading to the convenience store that worked with college students who were on meal plans as well as those who weren’t. There was even an outdoor balcony for lounging.

Brian was impressed with the setup, although he also was living in a fairly new college residence himself. Although his building was only one year older than this one, Honey’s residence had a little bit of glamour that his did not. The fact that it was a forty-six story skyscraper with absolutely incredible views of the surrounding New York metropolitan area and had fourteen floors of penthouse apartments catering to the super-rich had a lot to do with that glamour. This building was more than a college dorm.

After the tour was over, Honey checked her watch. “The pizza should be here any minute, so we may as well head to the lobby.”

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They were in the lobby no more than two minutes when the pizza delivery boy showed up with their large pizza. Honey waved Brian's money away and paid for the pizza, tipping the boy well.

"Thanks!" he said gratefully, giving them a wave before he disappeared outside.

Lunch was companionable, with Brian and Honey making small talk about classes and living in New York as they ate their pizza. At some point, their small talk wandered into the realm of reminiscing, and the pair was reliving old memories together. The pizza devoured, the two moved into the living room and settled themselves on Honey's couch, still talking about old times.

"You know," Brian said, "I'll never forget the sight of you flying down that path that first morning I met you. You were so excited that you reminded me a lot of Trixie. Then, when you saw me and Mart, and boom! It was like a light switch and out came the good manners. That's when I knew you weren't exactly like Trixie after all!" Brian and Honey laughed. They both loved Trixie dearly, but knew that etiquette was not her forte.

"I remember that morning," Honey reminisced. "I was so mad when I woke up and realized that Trixie and Jim had left the Manor House without me. You and Mart weren't expected to be home for another day, so I had no clue that when I came running down the hill to Crabapple Farm that I would encounter anyone other than Trixie and Jim." She paused, realizing that it might be easier than she had originally thought to broach the subject of them and their feelings. "Do you remember asking me to the spring dance after that whole Midnight Marauder business?"

Brian grinned, remembering. They had been in the clubhouse, and he had realized that Honey had been in danger the night before as she had tailed the thief with Jim and Trixie. He had slept through it all and had been happy to learn that his sister and friends were safe. Not only that, but they had solved the mystery and cleared Mart's name. And the first thing he did on hearing that she was safe was to invite Honey to their school's spring dance. And in front of every member of their club, to boot.

"How could I forget? Did I tell you the night of that dance how pretty you looked?" At Honey's shake of the head, he explained, "I wanted to. But I was so darn shy. I really wish I had had the nerve to tell you back then."

Honey smiled. "It's okay, Brian. You told me now."

Brian also remembered how beautiful Honey had looked in her bridesmaid's dress during Juliana's wedding. He remembered wondering what she would look like if it was she who was walking up the aisle as a bride and not a bridesmaid. In his mind's eye, Brian was transported back to the Wheeler estate and the lovely garden in which the wedding was held. He remembered the lush green trees, the red brick path leading through the garden, the impeccably kept flower beds, the birdbath that served as the altar, and the life-like garden gnomes that appeared to flit in and out of the azalea bushes. And there was Honey in the midst of all of it, wearing the white lace dress with the golden ribbon circling her waist and her wide brimmed hat. A golden girl. Honey had always been a golden girl to him.

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Brian remembered standing there, star struck. When Honey walked up the aisle, everything else had faded. Honey Wheeler, a vision in white lace and gold satin, was the only person in the world to him at that moment.

What had happened to that feeling? When had that feeling of Honey Wheeler being the only woman in the world faded? Why hadn't he remembered how lovely she was, inside and out, before embarking on that disastrous relationship his sophomore year of college? Why had he thought that that laughable relationship was love? Had he just been lonely? Had he decided that someone, anyone, would be better than being alone?

A million questions and thoughts raced through his mind. If he hadn't started dating his first girlfriend, then Honey would never have gotten together with Dan. But then, he never would have gotten together with Lexi, and he could never regret that. Lexi was a wonderful person, and the feelings he had for her were not borne out of loneliness. They were real.

But the feelings that he had for Honey were real, too. He realized that now. These were not just feelings of nostalgia brought to the surface. These were real feelings, and it had taken a trip down memory lane, a nostalgic moment, to make him realize that he loved Honey Wheeler.

That was a problem. He had a girlfriend. She had a boyfriend. If Honey was even willing to pursue something with him, where could it lead except to heartache and pain? Could it tear the Bob-Whites apart? Even though the group did not see each other nearly enough anymore, the psychological presence of the group was a strong one. Anything that ripped the club apart would cause a terrible hole in the lives of each of its members. Their camaraderie was something good and strong, something that had made each of them who they were today. The thought that that could be gone, especially as the result of something that *he* had put into motion, caused Brian untold amounts of pain.

But to not pursue it would cause a different kind of pain. The pain of wondering "What if?" The pain of regret. The pain of untold stories and lost feelings. He also realized that now that he had set his mind on this path, there was no way that his relationship with Lexi would ever be the same again. He had already set something in motion with these thoughts, and now he needed to have resolution. He needed to talk to Honey about it.

As the two sat on the couch facing each other, the silence becoming longer as Brian became lost in his thoughts. Honey stared at him, saw the look on his face, and knew that that something had suddenly changed between them.

"Honey," he said at the exact same moment that she said, "Brian."

Despite the seriousness that they both felt surrounding them, they smiled.

"You go first," they both said simultaneously, eliciting self-conscious laughs this time.

"Ladies first," Brian said.

Honey nodded and took a deep breath. "Okay," she said. She closed her eyes briefly and then opened them. "I have to tell you that when I originally called you, I did want to study. I had ulterior motives, but I also did want to study. And then I spent a lot of time yesterday studying, and I'm pretty confident in my organic chemistry."

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Brian smiled and said, "Good."

Honey smiled distractedly. "Thanks. Anyway, I am understanding things so much better thanks to you. If it wasn't for the way that you explained things, I never would have been able to get as much out of it as I did by myself. So, thank you for that." Brian nodded but did not say anything, waiting for her to continue. "Mostly, I wanted to get together so that we could talk...about us. Ever since we spent time together the other day, I've kind of been remembering how things were, you know, when we first met."

Brian nodded, relieved to know for sure that Honey had been feeling the same things that he had been. "I've been feeling the same thing," he admitted.

"Really?" Honey smiled brightly. "I'm so glad I'm not the only one. I kept debating about whether or not to call you, and then I found something, and I knew I had to. I was looking through a box of mementos that I brought from home to have with me in case I got homesick, and I came across a velvet casing. Inside that casing was the music box that you gave me before you left for college."

Brian smiled. "The one that played the first song we ever danced to at Di's Valentine party. I wanted you to have something special to remember me by when I left."

Honey nodded. "It was an incredibly romantic gift...so meaningful. I thought for sure that it meant..." her voice trailed off.

"That we had a romantic relationship," Brian finished for her.

"Yeah. I was so confused when nothing happened, and then when you started dating someone else..."

Brian sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I know. I was stupid. I kept thinking that I didn't want to tie you down while you were in high school. I was so busy with college and trying to be perfect to get into med school. In addition to the grades, I needed to volunteer in hospitals and be involved in activities to make my application really competitive. Not to mention all of the studying for the MCAT. I didn't feel like I could offer you anything."

He sighed again. "And then I met someone who was also premed. Who I thought understood me. By the time I realized my mistake, you were with Dan."

Honey gave him a sad smile. "I thought that you thought of me as a little kid. Someone you couldn't be bothered with now that you were a big college man."

"Never," Brian said emphatically. "I am so, so sorry that I ever gave you that impression, Honey. It wasn't that at all. Honest. I didn't think that I was good enough for *you*, not the other way around." He paused and looked at her, needing to know something. "But you've...you've been happy with Dan? He's treated you right?"

"He treats me incredibly well, and I've been very happy." Honey sighed. "Until all of these old feelings started coming up again, and then I didn't know what to think. You sent me such mixed signals back when I was in high school! I also keep thinking about everyone's expectations, and whether what we felt for each other was what people expected us to feel. Does that make sense?"

“Yeah, it makes perfect sense,” Brian agreed. “I’ve been thinking along the same lines lately myself.”

Honey swallowed. “Have...have you been wondering if the feelings we had for each other were real or if what we felt back in high school was the result of being young and naïve and being swayed by our family and friends?”

Brian nodded. “Yeah, I’ve been wondering. I know I love you as a friend, and I know you love me that way, too. But is what we feel for each other romantic?”

“Exactly!” Honey exclaimed. “I mean, I know I love you as a friend, but I also know that I was a thirteen-year-old girl when I met you. Can a thirteen-year-old have truly romantic feelings? And when we went to the spring dance, I was only fourteen. But I also know that the eighteen-year-old me knows what a good person you are, and that you’re definitely worthy of romantic love.”

Brian hesitated. Should he tell Honey his revelation? What path would that send them down? It didn’t matter. In the end, he knew that he had to reveal what he had been thinking. “Well, from my perspective, I think I may have found my answer a little bit ago.”

“You did?” Honey asked, surprised.

“I think so,” Brian said slowly. “I remembered how you looked at Hans and Juliana’s wedding. You were so beautiful walking down that garden path, the brilliant greens and reds and yellows of the garden flora surrounding you, the clear blue sky above you, and the sun shining on you, making your hair so golden. The white lace you wore only emphasized your delicate beauty. I was awestruck then. I knew then and there that you were my golden girl. That has to be real, right?”

Honey considered this and then finally answered, “But, Brian, that was in the past, too. When you were a lot younger. Looking at someone when you’re seventeen and thinking they’re pretty, especially in a really romanticized setting, is not the same as being in your twenties and having someone with whom you share common dreams and goals, someone you can hold a conversation with.”

“Haven’t we always been able to talk, to laugh together? Haven’t we always had similar goals and dreams?” Brian asked earnestly.

“We have always had good conversations,” Honey began uncertainly.

“Exactly!” Brian interrupted. “Love is based on friendship. And we’ve *always* had friendship. Ever since that day you came flying down the path to Crabapple Farm, your eyes sparkling as brightly as that diamond that you were carrying around in your pocket.”

“Okay, we’ve established that we have a deep friendship,” Honey said slowly. “And we’ve established that we definitely both had a crush on each other when we were younger. But what we *haven’t* established is if those feelings were deep and true. Or that those feelings mean that we have what it takes to be a long-term, romantic couple. Or if exploring this is worth hurting two people we love very much in the process.”

“But we *have* established that we need to resolve this,” Brian stated matter-of-factly.

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“Okay,” Honey agreed. “But how do we do that?”

There was a long silence as each of them realized that there was one sure way to determine it. One that would wreak havoc on their relationships, and possibly even end their own friendship down the line. One that could tear apart their close-knit group of friends, the club that had been their pride and joy and source of support for many years.

They couldn’t risk that, could they? But how could they *not* explore this? How could they live with the “What ifs?” for the rest of their lives? How could they ever have whole relationships with anyone else if this remained between them?

“Where do we go from here?”

Brown eyes met hazel. Neither one had the answer.