

Author's Notes: This is a Jixemtri 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 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!"

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?"

"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?"

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 deadpan 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.”

“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.”

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.”

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.

“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 à 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.

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.

Additional author note: 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).