

Author's Note: 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.

“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.”

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—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 niggle. 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 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 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.