

Author's notes: 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 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?"

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."

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.

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."

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.

“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.