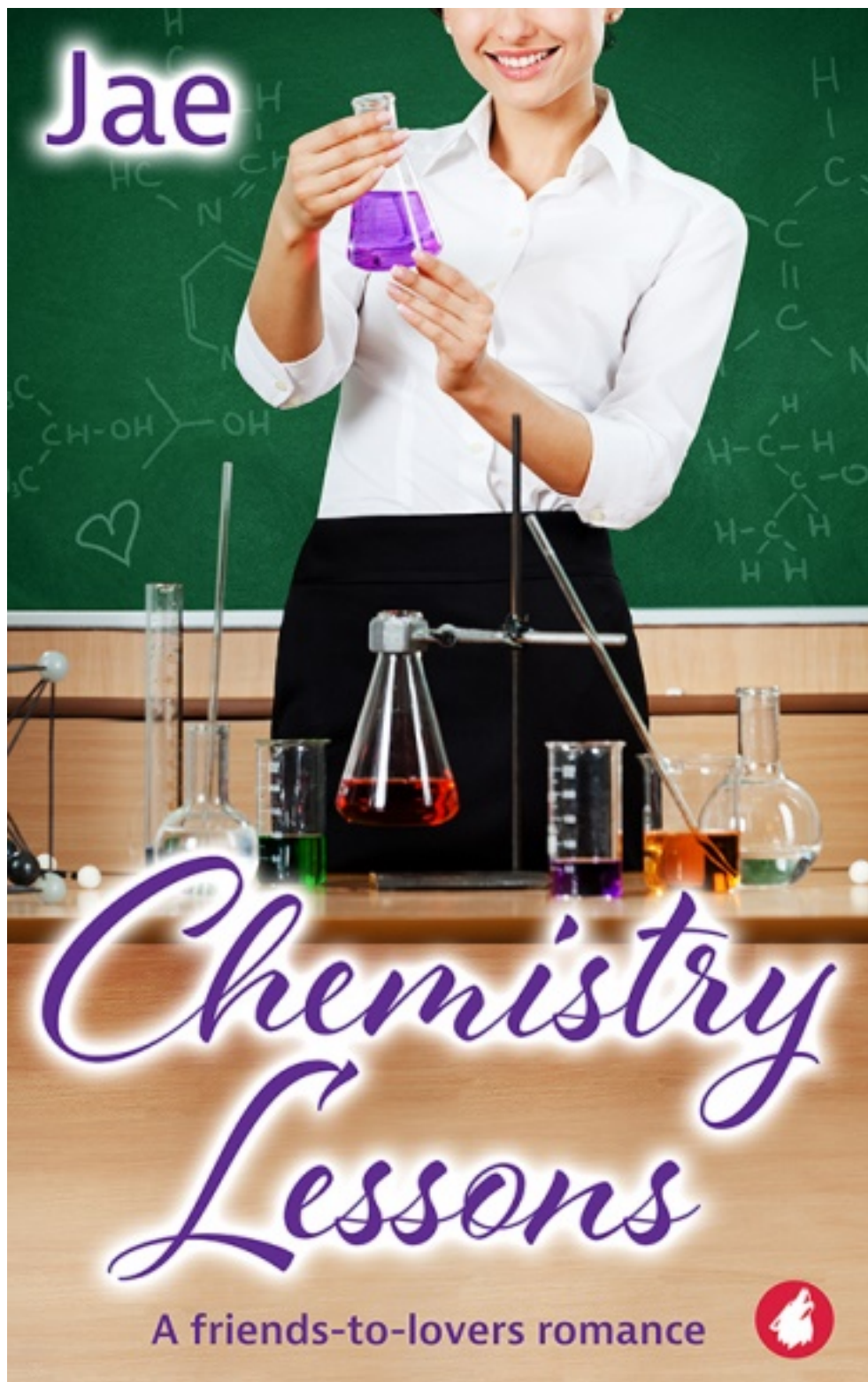


Jae



Chemistry Lessons

A friends-to-lovers romance



Chapter 1

WHERE ON EARTH WAS REGAN? A surprise party was hard to pull off when the unsuspecting guest of honor was late.

Kylie paced her room and checked the messaging app on her phone for the fifth time.

Still not a peep from her best friend.

Before she could text her again, her phone rang with the *Rizzoli and Isles* theme tune. “Regan! Finally! Where are you?”

“Whoa, hold your horses. I’m on my way.” Traffic sounds indicated that Regan was in the car and had her phone connected to Bluetooth. “Since when are you so eager to get to Home Depot?”

They weren’t going to Home Depot; that was only the excuse Ky had used so she could lure Regan to their favorite neighborhood restaurant, where their friends were waiting. “What can I say? It’s a lesbian thing.”

Regan chuckled. “Sorry to make you wait for your happy place. It really wasn’t my fault. Mrs. Kallmaker wanted to have a talk just as I was getting ready to leave.”

“You got called into the principal’s office?” Laughter bubbled up from deep in Ky’s chest, and every bit of tension fled her body. “Some things never change.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Regan said but didn’t manage to sound very innocent at all.

“Oh yeah? Let’s see... There was the time you talked me into replacing all the markers from the whiteboard with tampons, the time when you thought TP-ing the gym was a bright idea, and I lost track of all the times we ended up in detention for being late or passing notes in class.”

Regan laughed. “Okay, okay, I might have gotten in trouble a time or two.”

“A time or two?” Ky echoed. “Ha! The only reason you weren’t in trouble every single day as a kid was because you fooled everyone with those big, brown eyes, cute nose, and perfect-angel curls of yours! I still can’t believe you became a teacher, much less our district’s Teacher of the Year!”

“What can I say? Must be my big, brown eyes.”

Even without seeing her, Ky knew Regan was batting her eyelashes in an exaggerated fashion.

Truth be told, in Ky’s admittedly biased opinion, no one deserved that award more than Regan. She was an amazing teacher who cared deeply for her students and always went the extra mile for them. Maybe if Ky had had a teacher like that, she wouldn’t have almost dropped out of high school.

“You okay?” Regan asked.

Ky cleared her throat. “Yeah.” She left her room to grab her jacket. Since she lived only half a mile from Hamilton High School, Regan should be pulling up any second. Her roommate was lounging on the couch, headphones on, so Ky merely waved as she passed her. “So, what did Mrs. Kallmaker want? You aren’t really in trouble, are you?”

“Define trouble.”

Ky grinned. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. I just gave an interview to our school newspaper, and apparently, someone’s mom didn’t like my answer to one of the questions.”

“Oh, let me guess.” Ky left their ground-floor apartment to wait for Regan outside. “The article’s dramatic headline was ‘Popular chemistry teacher Ms. Romano is having a sordid fling with Kylie Wells, the irresistible lunch lady.’”

Regan’s booming laugh blasted through the phone.

Even after twenty-five years, it still amazed Ky that a laugh like that could come out of such a tiny person.

“No,” Regan said once her laughter had softened to a light giggle. “It’s been a couple of years since the school tabloid last wrote about our imaginary affair. Apparently, we’re old news.”

A honk sounded, and Regan’s Toyota Yaris pulled into the parking lot.

Ky trotted over, swung open the passenger-side door, and dropped onto the seat. She put the phone away and reached for the seat belt. “So if it wasn’t that, what got the mom’s panties in a twist?”

Regan pulled back onto Division and gave Ky a quick sidelong glance. Her dark, curly hair was even more tousled than usual, springing in every direction. “The students asked me how I got into chemistry.”

“Oh no. You told them about helping *Unonn* make his homemade wine as a kid, didn’t you?” Regan’s Italian grandfather had been a man of few words, but he’d made the best red wine Ky had ever tasted.

“I was talking about how much fun it was to figure out the right ratio of sugar and yeast for the fermenting process. Apparently, that’s promoting the abuse of alcohol among minors.” Regan threw up one hand and gestured wildly.

Ky nervously eyed the steering wheel, half expecting her to let go with the other hand too. “So are you in hot water with your boss now?”

“No. Luckily, she backed me up. I just wish some parents would pay as much attention to their kids’ behavior as they obviously do mine.”

“Don’t I know it. Remember the dad of the freshman with the dairy allergy from last week?”

Regan winced. “Yeah, that was bad. Miranda was on lunchroom duty that day. She said she could hear him shout at you from across the room, accusing you of contaminating the non-dairy area during lunch prep.”

Ky leaned forward in her seat so she could rotate her tense shoulders. “Guess what? Today, I caught Junior with a bag of cheddar chips on his tray.”

Regan let out a loud *tsk*. “Are you sure you want the promotion they offered you? As an assistant cafeteria manager, you’ll probably have to deal with parents on a regular basis.”

If Ky was honest with herself, she wasn’t sure at all. But now wasn’t the time to discuss it. This was Regan’s special evening, so Ky shrugged and focused on pulling off her surprise.

When they approached Washington Street, where Regan would have to turn right to take them to Home Depot, sweat broke out along Ky’s back. Of course she’d prepared an excuse to lure Regan to Stark Street instead, but could she manage a casual delivery? That was the one disadvantage of

having the same best friend since kindergarten: Regan knew all her lying tells.

Just as Ky opened her mouth to suggest a quick stop at the Bipartisan Café for Regan's favorite cookies, Regan pointed up ahead toward the next intersection. "Do you mind if we stop at the sewing center for a second? Denny asked if I could pick her up some sewing machine oil since we would be in the neighborhood."

Wow, that worked out great! If Ky remembered correctly, the sewing center wasn't far from the restaurant. She reined in a grin. "Oh, sure, yeah. No problem." She snapped her mouth shut before she could give herself away.

"Ooh, a parking spot!" Regan pumped her fist and made a quick left turn into SE Stark.

Um, wasn't the sewing center to the right? But Ky wasn't about to say anything because the parking spot Regan pulled into was directly in front of The Observatory. She couldn't believe her luck.

When Regan rounded the car to join Ky on the sidewalk, they were in the perfect position to spring the surprise on her friend, only two steps from the restaurant's front door. God, this was going almost too well.

"Surprise!" Ky yelled.

"Surprise!" Regan's louder shout nearly drowned out Ky's voice. "We're not going to Home Depot!"

They stared at each other.

What the hell was going on? Ky squinted down at her best friend. "We're not? I mean, I know we're not, but...how do you know?" If one of their friends had given it away, she'd kill them.

"What? Of course I know. It was my idea."

Ky shook her head, but that didn't help her see the situation more clearly. "What are you talking about?"

A mischievous twinkle entered Regan's eyes as she tilted her head and grinned. "I planned a surprise dinner to celebrate your promotion!" She swept her arm in a wide gesture toward the restaurant. "Ta-da!"

Ky gaped at her. No, that wasn't possible, was it? What were the chances of them planning a surprise party for each other—at the same time and day, at the same restaurant?

Regan nudged her shoulder. "You didn't suspect a thing, did you?"

“Hell, no! I thought I’d lured you here for a surprise dinner to celebrate your Teacher of the Year award.”

“Oh my God!” Regan burst out laughing, making the people at the sidewalk tables look over. “That’s why our friends gave me these weird looks when I told them to meet us here.”

They doubled over laughing and clutched each other’s arms until the glass door swung open and Eliza stepped outside in her trademark yellow sneakers. “Double surprise! I take it you realized you both had the same idea?”

Still breathless with laughter, Ky just nodded.

“Are you coming in, or are we throwing the confetti and putting on the party hats right here?” Eliza asked.

Ky glowered at her. “I said no confetti, no party hats, no balloons. Just food and conversation. You stuck to that promise, didn’t you?”

Eliza grinned and held the door open more widely. “Come in and find out.”

* * *

When the waitress slid the plate with the chicken curry salad wrap in front of her, Regan barely kept herself from salivating. “That looks great, thanks.”

The young woman leaned across the wood table toward Ky, who had claimed her customary seat next to Regan in the window booth. She placed the pulled-pork sandwich in front of Ky and gave her a smile. “Cool eyebrow slit.” She tapped her own brow next to the piercing she wore.

“Thanks.” Ky didn’t return the smile or tell her the gap in her eyebrow wasn’t a fashion statement. The scar bisecting her left eyebrow was a reminder of their childhood, when Ky had face-planted into the wooden top rung of the rope ladder leading up to the tree house Regan’s mom had built for them. Regan still felt guilty because she’d been daring Ky to climb faster.

Ky tugged the sideswept bangs of her otherwise short, brown hair over her eyebrow and brushed her shoulder against Regan’s as if sensing her moment of guilt. She gave the waitress a fleeting nod without making eye contact.

Regan bit back a smile. Her friend could be a tough nut to crack and showed her more goofy side mostly when it was just the two of them. She likely hadn't even noticed the waitress's subtle flirting.

A mouth-watering scent rose up when Ky cut the ciabatta bun, piled high with pulled pork and coleslaw, in half.

Yum. Good thing Regan didn't have to decide between her two favorite dishes on the happy hour menu.

Without a word, she and Ky started their usual exchange. Regan deposited half her wrap on Ky's plate while Ky slid the slightly bigger part of the sandwich over to her.

Heather stared at them with her fork hovering over her sesame chili chicken salad and gave them a slow shake of her head. "God, that's so gay." She glanced around the table, first at Denny and Eliza, who were sharing the last piece of oregano fry bread they'd ordered as a starter, then at Miranda. "Do straight people do that too?"

Regan's colleague, the only straight person at the table, looked up from her veggie burger. "Do what?"

Heather waved her fork toward Regan and Ky. "Share food with their significant other."

Ky had been just about to take a bite from her half of the sandwich. Now she snapped her mouth shut with an audible *clack*.

Regan exchanged a look with her. *There we go again.* For some reason, their friends loved making remarks like that.

"She's not my significant other," they said in unison.

"Of course straight people do that. At least some of them." Miranda laughed. "Not me, though. If I tried to take half of my husband's food, he'd stab me with his fork!"

Had Miranda and the rest of the gang even heard their protest? Admittedly, with The Observatory's casual, lively atmosphere and every table filled, the restaurant was a little noisy.

Regan straightened her five-foot-two frame to catch her friends' attention. "She's not my significant other," she repeated. Then she grinned over at Ky and caught her familiar eyes. Their color defied description, especially in the fading light that filtered in through the skylight and the low glow of the star-shaped lamp above the booth. "I mean, this one's

pretty significant to me”—she nudged Ky’s solid thigh with her own—“but we’re not an item.”

Miranda shrugged. “Oh, whatever you want to label it. I might be straight, but I’m not narrow.”

Regan glanced toward the long bar and the bottles lined up behind it. Christ, she needed a drink—something stronger than the house red she’d ordered. Miranda had joined Hamilton High School as a social studies teacher in September, and they’d become fast friends. Had she assumed she and Ky were together the entire time?

“No, that’s not what I...” Regan sent Ky an imploring look. “Feel free to jump in any time.”

“She’s right,” Ky said. “We’re just friends.”

Regan scrunched up her nose. *Ugh*. She hated that phrase with the fiery intensity of a thousand supernovas. To her, friendships were as important as romantic relationships.

“Not *just*,” Ky quickly added before Regan could say anything. “I know you hate that phrase. I meant, we’re friends. Best friends.”

“Friends who tease, bicker, and share food like an old, married couple,” Eliza threw in with a smile.

Ky glared at her. With her serious exterior and her bold features, which were striking rather than traditionally beautiful, she could intimidate even the unruliest teenager, but Eliza’s grin didn’t waver as she leaned into Denny’s shoulder.

“Wait!” Miranda waved a parmesan-sprinkled garlic fry back and forth between Regan and Ky. “You mean you two are really not...?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Miranda actually looked disappointed.

Eliza reached across the table and patted her arm. “Don’t feel bad. I assumed the same when Heather introduced us last summer. It took Denny and me until Christmas to figure out they’re not an item.”

Seriously? Regan gaped at her. Granted, they had all known each other for less than a year. Heather had started working in the cafeteria for a couple of hours in between her runs as a school bus driver last May. As different as they were, Ky and Heather had instantly hit it off, and when they had introduced their friends to each other, it quickly felt as if they had all known each other forever. But maybe the gang didn’t know them as well as Regan

had assumed. “Why does everyone keep thinking we’re together? Why can’t two queer women be friends without everyone assuming they’re—”

Several people at surrounding tables looked over.

Damn. Had she been that loud? Regan bit her lip.

“Knocking boots,” Heather suggested when Regan didn’t continue.

“Making whoopie,” Eliza added.

Miranda grinned. “Sharing a carnal embrace.”

They all looked at Denny, the shyest person in their friend group, as if waiting for her to contribute something.

Regan used the moment to reach over and try to steal the pickle garnish from Ky’s plate.

Without even glancing at her, Ky batted her fingers away but then relented and handed it over.

Denny’s cheeks reddened, but she gamely added, “Doing the no-pants dance.”

Regan and Ky shared a why-are-we-friends-with-them-again look.

“We’re not doing any of that with each other.” Regan spoke slowly, as if explaining thermodynamics to the kids in the last row.

“Or anyone else,” Heather said. “It’s been ages since either of you went on a date. You even take Kylie as a plus-one to all of your family events and don’t even try to get an actual date.”

“So what? My family loves Ky. They would disinherit me if I didn’t bring her. That doesn’t mean we’re a couple. Why does everyone keep thinking we are?” Regan shoved most of the pickle into her mouth and chewed vigorously.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Eliza pointed at the pickle Regan was munching on. “Maybe because of the way you’re taking food off each other’s plates.”

“But—” Regan struggled to speak around the mouthful of pickle.

“—that’s what friends do,” Ky said for her.

“Or the way you finish each other’s sentences,” Heather added with a smirk.

Denny took a swig of her beer. “Or those book club meetings you had last year.”

“Why can’t two friends have a book club?” Ky asked.

“It’s not the fact that you had a book club. It’s that it was a two-person book club. It never occurred to you to invite anyone else to join you.”

Oops. Regan rubbed her earlobe. She looked at Ky, and they both shrugged.

When they'd been kids, her parents used to worry about them barely having any other close friends and playing only with each other, but Regan had never felt as if she was missing out. And now that she was an adult, she had made this wonderful group of friends—even if they wouldn't let go of this ridiculous idea of her and Ky as a couple.

"It's not because Ky and I wanted to be alone so we could whisper sweet nothings to each other or anything," Regan told them. "It's just that..." How could she explain it? Why did she even *have* to explain it?

Ky threw the French fry she'd been about to eat back onto her plate. "We—are—not—a—couple. Period."

"Too bad," Eliza said quietly. "You would be perfect for each other."

"Come on!" Regan gestured at Eliza and Denny. "Just because you two lovebirds are the poster children for a deliriously happy relationship doesn't mean everyone else has to pair up. Ky and I are great as friends, but we have no chemistry. None. Zero. Zip. Zilch."

"How can you be so sure if you've never tried it?" Miranda asked. "Um, I mean, gone on a date. Not..."

"A carnal embrace," Heather supplied.

Ky shook her head at them. "You're asking Regan of all people if she's sure about a chemistry thing? Of course she is. If anyone knows about chemistry, it's her. She teaches chemistry after all and has just won an award for it." Her fierce look softened into a proud smile. She lifted her wineglass. "Let's drink to that and stop this fruitless discussion."

As they clinked glasses, their gazes met over the rims.

"To you and your award," Ky said. "I'm so proud of you."

The look in Ky's eyes filled Regan with warmth. "Not half as proud as I am of you, Ms. Assistant Cafeteria Manager."

Ky lowered her head. "Um, about that... I—"

Heather reached across the table and nudged her. "That's our Ky! Modest as always."

Ky looked up. "Kylie," she said firmly.

"But *she* calls you Ky all the time." Heather pointed her fork at Regan.

"Yeah. I don't know why, but that's different. It feels wrong if anyone else calls me that."

Heather shook her head. “And you wonder why everyone keeps thinking the two of you are a couple...or should be one?”

“New rule, everyone!” Regan used her teacher voice to get their attention. “The next person to bring it up pays tonight’s bill.”

As they all hastily found other things to discuss, Regan gave Ky a satisfied nod. It wasn’t that she minded being mistaken for Ky’s girlfriend. In her opinion, the woman who finally took Ky off the market for good should consider herself lucky. But it wouldn’t be her. She and Ky were like two substances that didn’t react with each other, at least not in a romantic way. You could mix them together, but there would be no chemical reaction whatsoever.

Now the question was just: How could she teach their stubborn friends this simple chemistry lesson?

Chapter 2

SHIT, SHIT, SHIT. REGAN'S FLATS squeaked on the linoleum floor as she rushed down the hallway connecting the school's main building and the west wing, where her chemistry classroom was located.

God, she hated mornings—especially Monday mornings. Not the best trait for a teacher to have, but even after teaching for six years, she hadn't learned to embrace getting up at five thirty. Once she got to school, she was fine. Preparing for the day ahead and seeing the kids come in always gave her a jolt of energy.

Usually, she arrived at school at least an hour before the students did so she could get the materials together for class, but today, she had hit the snooze button one too many times. Okay, a few too many times.

Now she didn't even have time to stop at the teachers' lounge for a cup of coffee.

She skidded into her classroom. The bright fluorescent lights flared on as she hit the switch in passing. She didn't take the time to nod a good morning to Marie, Alice, Rosalind, and the other famous female chemists whose posters hung on the walls.

She forced herself to slow down as she gathered up the equipment—beakers, test tubes, and microspatulas—and then got the chemicals she would need for today's lessons from the locked cabinets in the prep room.

It only took her a few minutes to set up five stations in the lab area of the classroom.

A grin tugged on her lips as she cut a section of magnesium ribbon into pieces. She couldn't wait to see the kids' faces when the magnesium reacted with the hydrochloric acid.

They loved that kind of hands-on chemistry. Of course, their enthusiasm would fade quickly once they began the daunting task of writing down the chemical equations for the reactions they had observed. Regan chuckled.

Her stomach gave a loud growl as she set down packages of sugar on the last lab station. She'd rushed out of the house without breakfast. *It's not a snack*, she told her digestive system. Dissolving sugar in water was the experiment she used to show her students that not every two substances you put together had a chemical reaction.

Kinda like Ky and me.

If only there was an experiment as simple as the one she would show her students today that would convince their friends there really was no chemistry between them.

Regan finished her lab prep with five minutes to spare. *Damn. Not enough time to get a coffee.*

She walked over to her desk to turn on her laptop—then paused mid-step.

A gleaming silver travel mug sat in the middle of her desk, next to a cinnamon almond granola bar and a note.

Regan knew without reading it who'd left her this emergency breakfast. *Aww.* Ky was the best. She always had Regan's back, even if it meant she had to get to school earlier than her six-thirty start time.

With a groan of appreciation, Regan perched on her desk and reached for the note.

You stayed up too late and overslept, didn't you? it said in Ky's messy handwriting that only she could read.

Even though Ky couldn't see it, Regan nodded ruefully. She'd been up late, putting together a practice exam for her AP students and tweaking the worksheets for today's labs in an attempt to make the lesson more interesting for the kids. Over the past few years, she'd gotten better about carving out time for herself and not letting her job take over her life, but it still happened every now and then, and Ky seemed to have a sixth sense for when she needed coffee or a snack.

On paper, the rule about not eating in the chemistry classroom was pretty strict, and Regan always avoided doing it near her desk, which doubled as a demonstration table, so she took her bounty over to the bookshelf.

Eagerly, she ripped open the wrapper, devoured the granola bar in three bites, and washed it down with a big gulp of coffee. *Yum.* Ky had made the coffee exactly the way Regan liked it, strong and sweet.

Another sip of the lifesaving beverage, then she put it on the bookshelf and pulled her laptop and the stack of worksheets from her briefcase.

The top sheet fluttered to the floor.

As she bent and picked it up, her gaze landed on one of the questions the kids would need to answer.

Is there any evidence that indicates a chemical reaction?

Hmm. Evidence. Maybe that—or rather the lack thereof—was what their friends needed to finally believe there was no chemistry between her and Ky.

Grinning, she opened her laptop just as the first students filed into the room.

Yep. A little experiment might be in order...even though the results would be much less spectacular than those of today's lab experiments.

* * *

Steam rose as Ky stirred the marinara sauce in the forty-gallon tilt skillet with a huge stainless-steel paddle. She lifted her nose and deeply inhaled the aroma of tomatoes and basil.

Pasta day in the school cafeteria always took her back to her childhood, when she had spent more time at Regan's house than her own, fleeing her parents' constant arguing. Every Sunday, she had helped *Anonn* and later Regan's father prepare Neapolitan *ragù*.

Of course, the simple pasta dishes on the school's menu couldn't compare to the wonderful recipes Regan's grandmother had brought with her from Italy.

Ky often wondered what *Anonn* would think of her job as a cafeteria worker. Would she have been proud, or would she have crossed herself and been horrified at the paint-by-numbers cooking?

For sure she would have declared the canned tomato purée and the dried spices a heresy.

District, state, and federal rules and regulations limited what ingredients Ky could use, and she certainly didn't have the time to let the sauce simmer for six hours, as *Anonn's* recipe called for. But at least Hamilton High

School's cafeteria made some of their dishes from scratch or semi-scratch instead of just reheating pre-cooked frozen meals, like many other school cafeterias.

Ky dipped a spoon into the sauce to try it. The sweet-and-sour flavors mingled on her tongue, making her hum.

While being on the cafeteria staff wasn't her dream job, it was decent work, and the team was great. Dream jobs were overrated anyway. Her father had constantly strived for more money, more accolades, more luxuries, and in the end, it had cost him everything. Ky wouldn't make the same mistake.

Fran, the cafeteria manager, squeezed past her with a baking sheet of hot rolls, startling Ky out of her thoughts. "Is the sauce ready to go on the line?"

"Yeah." Ky held out a clean spoon. "Do you want to taste it?"

"No. You haven't poisoned anyone yet. Get it out there."

That was the biggest compliment she'd get from her no-nonsense boss. Ky checked the sauce's temperature, then turned the skillet off and hit the tilt button.

The back of the rectangular skillet lifted up toward her, emptying the sauce into a large container Ky had placed beneath it.

Lilia Fernandez, her roommate and colleague, came over with the pasta, and they mixed it with the sauce in several big hotel pans, then put the lids on. Together, they slid the pans into the serving counter.

Moments later, the lunch bell rang. The cafeteria's double doors crashed open, and a wave of chatter, shouts, and laughter swept over them.

Ky straightened her apron and school polo. "Here they come." She took her position at the serving station and braced for the onslaught of hungry teenagers.

Her lunch lady autopilot kicked in as she dished pasta onto trays, urged the kids to take some steamed veggies or a fruit cup, and kept an eye on the students with known allergies.

As one teen paused before her, trying to decide whether a scoop of broccoli would kill him, something made Ky look up and toward the end of the line, where Regan was just picking up a tray.

She was one of few teachers who occasionally braved the lunchroom, while most of her colleagues preferred to eat in their classrooms or the teachers' lounge. Ky couldn't blame them. Chairs scraped the floor, trays

clattered onto tables, and the kids created a noise level that rivaled an airplane during takeoff.

Having Regan come through her line was always special. If it had been up to Ky, she would have gotten to cook for her every day.

Regan laughed at something the kid ahead of her said. Her signature laugh boomed through the cafeteria, making Ky smile. She wasn't wearing anything special, just a pair of olive skinny jeans with her long-sleeved *Let's get chemical* T-shirt and what Ky called her teacher cardigan draped across her shoulders. The students surrounding her topped her height, but somehow, Regan still stood out.

When they made eye contact, a big grin spread across Regan's face. She mimed drinking, then bowed as if worshipping a goddess and mouthed, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Ky mouthed back. When they'd exchanged a few texts last night, Regan had still been up to her neck in lessons prep, so Ky had known she would stay up late, oversleep, and rush to school without having time for coffee.

The teenager in front of Ky cleared his throat. "Apple?" He drew out the word slowly, as if she otherwise wouldn't grasp its meaning—probably because he'd repeated it several times already.

Oops. Ky quickly put one of the shiny apples on his tray and returned her attention to the lunch line. While she served pasta and sauce, Regan's laughter drifted over a couple of times as she chatted with students.

Finally, Regan reached her station. "Has anyone ever told you you're a lifesaver?"

"Yeah, I think the quarterback mumbled something like that." Ky pointed a gloved finger at one of the round tables in the middle of the lunchroom, where some players of the high school's football team sat.

"Oh, did he get coffee and a granola bar delivered to his classroom too?"

"Nope. We reserve that kind of service for our Teacher of the Year."

"We, huh?" Regan's snub nose scrunched up as she grinned, making the smattering of freckles across it stand out even more. "Does that mean Lilia is going to start bringing me coffee too?"

"Only if you pay me," Lilia called from where she was refilling the fruit cups.

The kids in line behind Regan began to shuffle their feet and inch their trays forward.

Damn. Time to move on. “So, pasta?”

“What else?” Regan held out her tray, and Ky deposited a generous serving of spaghetti and sauce onto it, then spooned parmesan on top.

“Roll?” She held out one of the dinner rolls with a pair of tongs.

“Of course.” Regan gave her a playful wink and leaned across the counter to whisper, “You know I can never resist your buns.”

Jesus. Heat rose up Ky’s chest. Why did her best friend have to be such a flirt? The kids couldn’t know she was only joking around and had managed to resist Ky’s “buns” just fine all these years. She tugged on the collar of her school polo and peered at the students, who, luckily, were engrossed in their phone screens. As a punishment, she heaped green beans onto Regan’s tray, knowing she hated them, and handed it back with a grin. “Enjoy your meal.”

Regan wrinkled her nose. “Thanks. See you tonight.”

“Oh?” Monday wasn’t their Netflix night, and neither was it their usual time to play *The Last of Us*.

“Yeah,” Regan said while already walking away. “You’re coming over so I can make you dinner and tell you about an idea I had.”

A groan escaped Ky. She wasn’t sure what was more dangerous: Regan making dinner or having one of her infamous ideas.

Regan’s unruly locks bounced with every step as she marched toward the checkout, practically vibrating with excitement. Once she had punched her four-digit number into the keypad, she threw one last glance back at Ky and flashed her familiar troublemaker grin—the one that had gotten Ky grounded a time or two as a kid.

Oh shit. Ky had a feeling Regan’s idea would turn out to be more dangerous than her cooking.

* * *

If only dating had been more like hanging out with her best friend, Regan might have done it more often. There was no panicked last-minute cleaning and no need to dress up when Ky came over. They could just sprawl on the couch side by side like two sloths, sometimes even in baggy

sweatpants and no bras. Plus she didn't have to try to impress Ky by preparing a lavish meal.

Her movements had none of Ky's practiced elegance as she sliced the tomatoes, but thankfully, Ky never tried to chef-splain. After being on her feet all day, Ky seemed content to crash on the couch and wiggle her feet on the coffee table.

Regan peeked around the fridge and stuck her head out of her small kitchen so she could get a glimpse of her in the living area. The sight of Ky made her smile. She was the only person Regan knew who still wore boot-cut jeans, but she had to admit Ky wore them well. They emphasized her slim waist, broad hips, and sturdy thighs.

"What?" Ky asked without opening her eyes. "Want me to help?"

"No, I've got it." Regan slathered red pepper spread on two ciabatta buns and piled slices of ham on top. "I might not have inherited my family's cooking gene, but I can make sandwiches with the best of them."

Ky let out a grunt of agreement. "True. I never got why you can be a chemistry genius but have no talent for cooking. Our jobs are not that different from each other, you know?"

Regan chuckled and peered past the fridge again. "You mean they both pay like shit?"

Ky's angular face softened as she laughed. "That too. But I meant mixing chemicals together is a lot like following the steps of a recipe, right?"

"Kind of, but when you're doing a lab, you'd better not..."

"...lick the spoon," they finished the sentence together.

An easy silence fell, interrupted only by the hum of the oven. That was another advantage of hanging out with her best friend: Regan never felt as if she had to make conversation, which was a wonderful change of pace after having to talk all day.

"Oh, I nearly forgot." Ky padded to the door, where she'd left her backpack. "I brought the salami you like. Want to put some on your sandwich?" She appeared in the U-shaped kitchen area and held up her offering.

"Where did you get it? It looks like the soppressata my parents buy for the restaurant." Regan took the salami, sliced off a bit, and popped it into her mouth. "Mmm. Tastes like it too."

Ky chuckled. "That's because it is. Your parents sent me a package of goodies last week."

Regan leaned against one of the honey-colored kitchen cabinets and stuck out her bottom lip in a pretend pout. "Why are they sending you all my favorite food stuff?"

"Probably because they know I'm the cook in the family." Ky paused and swiped her bangs from her wide forehead with the back of her hand while lowering her gaze to the tiles. "Uh, I mean..."

"Hey." Regan put the knife and the salami down and gently bumped her with one hip, but since Ky was taller and heavier, she didn't manage to move her even an inch. "Of course you're family."

Ky was like a sister.

She considered it for a moment. No, that wasn't quite true. Their relationship was different from the one she had with Mackenzie or Robbie, her older siblings, although Regan couldn't explain what made it different. It just...was.

Regan wrapped one arm around Ky and leaned against her. Pain and longing radiated off Ky like heat from a pizza oven. She returned the half-embrace more tightly than she probably realized. Regan cradled her carefully and tried not to stiffen up as she gritted her teeth. She could have killed Ky's parents for doing this to her.

Ugh. Good thing she hadn't said that out loud. It would have only reminded Ky that her mother was dead...and her father might as well be. Ky had barely spoken to him since he'd gone to prison when she'd been sixteen, not even after he'd been released.

Softly, she squeezed Ky's shoulder. "You know my parents consider you the daughter they never had, right?"

Ky peered up from the floor. "They have two daughters."

"They have three. And some days, I think you're their favorite."

"Am not," Ky grumbled, but a hint of a smile played around her lips.

"Are too, and you know it. Come on. Help me get these sandwiches into the oven, or I'll never get around to telling you about my brilliant idea."

Preparing food always seemed to cheer Ky up, and Regan hoped it would work this time too.

Ky squeezed back, then let go.

They worked together, shredding lettuce and slicing mozzarella and soppressata without getting in each other's way, even though the kitchen in Regan's apartment was tiny.

Maybe Ky had been right. Cooking could be just as much fun as chemistry—at least with the right lab partner.

* * *

By the time they settled down on the couch with their sandwiches, Ky had nearly forgotten her moment of weakness. With anyone else, she would have been embarrassed, but Regan had lived through all of the low points of her life with her. She'd been there when Ky's father had been caught embezzling money their junior year of high school, when Ky's mom had filed for a divorce shortly after and moved them halfway across the state, and when her mother had overdosed on Xanax and alcohol the day before Ky's twenty-first birthday.

Not once had Regan's support wavered, not even during the years they'd spent apart, with them finishing high school in different places, then Regan going to college while Ky had worked in fast-food joints and stocked shelves in supermarkets. She had always found a way to be there for Ky.

Regan bounced up and down on the couch next to her as if to jostle Ky out of her contemplative mood. "Stop thinking broody thoughts and eat. Your sandwich's getting cold."

"How do you know I'm thinking broody thoughts?"

"You get this deep wrinkle right here." Regan tapped Ky's forehead right above her eyebrow scar.

Ky reached up and touched the spot. She had a wrinkle there? "Really?"

Regan grinned and took a bite of her sandwich. "No," she said after barely having swallowed. "I just...know. Now eat, or I'll steal your sandwich as soon as I finish mine."

Ky knew it wasn't an empty threat. Regan might not have inherited her grandmother's or her father's cooking skills, but she definitely had their appetite. Ky held on to her sandwich more firmly and lifted it to her mouth. The melted cheese, the crispy bread, and the spicy pepper spread harmonized into a perfect symphony of flavors and textures on her tongue. "Oh my God." She let her head fall back against the couch and moaned.

“Forget what I said about you not knowing how to cook. I’d choose this over dinner at a Michelin-star-worthy restaurant any time.”

Regan swallowed another bite of her own sandwich. “I bet you say that to all the women who cook for you.”

“Women? What women? It’s been ages since I went on a date.” She had Regan, so her life felt complete, even without her dating.

“Um, yeah, that’s kinda what I wanted to talk to you about.” Regan put her ciabatta bun down and wiped her hands on a napkin. “I hate to admit it, but Heather was right about what she said.”

Ky paused with her sandwich hovering in front of her lips and squinted over at Regan. She couldn’t possibly mean...? Did Regan honestly think there could be any chemistry between them? Despite the warm sandwich in her hands, cold crept through her body, forming a lump of ice in her belly. Regan couldn’t suspect that once, many years ago, Ky had had a bit of a crush on her...could she?

Regan laughed. “Now you’ve really got a wrinkle there.” She rubbed at it with her index finger.

Phew. Ky slowly exhaled and batted her hand away. She was imagining things. Regan didn’t know. There *was* nothing to know. It had been just a silly teenage thing, and clueless adolescent fantasies aside, she had never seriously considered acting on it. Back then, she hadn’t even known Regan liked girls as well as boys. Hell, Regan hadn’t figured it out either.

And then Ky’s father had been arrested, and her whole world had collapsed, with only one constant remaining: Regan and her family.

Thank God she had been clever enough, even at sixteen, to never blurt out her feelings and risk her sanctuary.

Now that childish infatuation no longer mattered. She had gotten over it many years ago.

“I don’t have any wrinkles.” Scowling, she tugged her bangs down over her forehead.

“Well, you’re older than me, so...”

Ky snorted. “By one month and sixteen days.” She took a bite of her sandwich to settle her queasy stomach. “So,” she finally said, “what is it that you think Heather was right about?”

“It’s been longer than I care to admit since I...both of us...have been in a relationship.”

As far as Ky was concerned, relationships were overrated. None of them had ever lived up to her expectations—and she certainly never seemed to live up to her girlfriends' expectations either. “And that’s a problem why?” At least while they were both single, there was no one to nag them about how much time they spent with each other.

“It’s not,” Regan said. “Other than it’s making our friends think we should go out with each other.”

Ky stared at her across the length of her sandwich. “You want to get involved with someone just so they finally shut up about us?”

Regan jabbed her with her shoulder. “God, no. But when I set up the lab for my kids this morning, I had an idea.”

“Does it involve poison ivy?”

Regan flicked a bit of bread at her. “You’ll never let me live that one down, will you?”

“Nope.” Ky popped the piece of ciabatta into her mouth. “After all, I had a rash for weeks. Fran had to put me on bread duty, telling me to stay in the back, so the kids would stop staring.”

“It’s not like that this time. This idea really is brilliant. I think I know how we can get everyone to shut up about us once and for all.”

“All right, let’s hear it.”

Instead of blurting it out, Regan stuffed the remainder of her sandwich into her mouth and chewed it thoroughly.

What was going on? Regan wasn’t normally one to hold back. Ky waited none too patiently.

“You know what we do in science to prove that two substances don’t react with each other?”

“You’re asking me?” Ky tapped her chest. “I barely managed a passing grade in chemistry, despite all your tutoring.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you. We conduct an experiment.”

Ky nearly choked on her last bite of sandwich. What on earth was Regan suggesting?

Regan’s booming laughter filled the one-bedroom apartment. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Kylie Wells. Not that kind of experiment. In my chem class, we put two substances together and watch for indications of a chemical reaction. If there’s no heat, odor, gas bubbles, or any other sign, we conclude that there’s—”

“No chemistry,” Ky finished for her.

“Exactly. So if you and I go on a date and there’s no—”

“Odor or gas?” Ky threw in with a grin.

Regan glared, but with her pink cheeks, cute nose, and petite frame, she was the least intimidating person Ky knew. “If there’s no heat or any other changes...” She swept her arm as if presenting a magic trick.

Ky dabbed at a splash of pepper spread on her empty plate while she thought about it. Somehow, it didn’t sound like a brilliant idea. If something went wrong, it would burn much more than the poison ivy rash. “I don’t know, Regan.”

“Why not? The results of that experiment are totally predictable. We’ve had more sleepovers than I can count. We’ve bathed together naked several times.”

“In an inflatable pool when we were five!”

Regan waved her protest aside. “Hell, we even kissed!”

They both wrinkled their noses.

Okay, that one definitely wasn’t going down in history as the world’s hottest kiss. Mostly, it had been sticky, awkward, and kinda cute. “What did you expect? We were in first grade.”

“My point is that there’s never been any chemistry between us before. Why would that suddenly change just because we share a candlelight dinner or something?”

Yeah, why would that change? An unrequited crush that had long ago faded didn’t mean a thing. Ky was probably worrying about nothing.

Regan turned on the couch to face her more fully and studied her closely. “Unless you think it’s—”

“No, it’s fine. We’ve gone out to dinner a thousand times before. Nothing to it, right?”

“Right.”

It wouldn’t be a real date. They were only doing this to get their friends to shut up about them. It would simply be a pleasant evening with her best friend. Regan had seen her at her worst. Ky could relax and just be herself, not the carefully presented version she showed her regular dates. No airs. No pretense.

“So, we’re going to do it?” Regan asked.

Ky grimaced. “Yes, we’ll do it. Although that might not be the best choice of words.”

“Haha. I’ll have you know I’m not that easy.” Regan lifted her chin and playfully brushed her shoulder-length locks back over her shoulder. “It takes more than a little wining and dining to seduce me.”

With any other woman, Ky would have taken it as a challenge, but Regan wasn’t just any woman. Besides, she was only joking around. “Well, *you*’ll be wining and dining *me* anyway.”

“Oh, I am?”

“*You* asked *me* out, remember?” God. Of all the words she’d been sure she would never say, these topped the list.

Regan tapped one finger to the elegant Cupid’s bow of her upper lip—the one Ky had been fascinated with as a teen. “Hmm, you did say you prefer my sandwiches to a Michelin-star-worthy restaurant.”

“No, no, no. You think I’m that easy? Nope. You’re going to take me to a proper restaurant with a table that I didn’t help you put together after the longest, most embarrassing trip to Ikea in the history of womankind.”

Regan let out a groan. “You’re never going to let me live that down either, are you?”

“Nope. Never,” Ky said cheerfully. “So you’d better make sure you don’t do anything embarrassing during our no-chemistry date that I’d have to add to the already long list of stories I’m going to tell your kids one day.”

“Me?” Regan batted her big, brown eyes. “Don’t worry. It’s going to be the most uneventful date ever.”

Right. Completely uneventful. Nothing to break out into a sweat about. Ky wiped her brow. “So, *Rizzoli and Isles*?”

Regan reached for the remote and swung her feet up onto Ky’s lap. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter 3

“OH MY GOD, THAT’S SO cute!” Regan lifted the polymer clay charm off the table to study it. The tiny pizza looked amazingly lifelike, and the scent from a nearby food cart drifted over, adding to the illusion. “This is perfect for my dad’s birthday. How much do you want for it?”

Eliza took the charm from her and wrapped it in a piece of tissue paper. “I’ll give it to you at mate’s rates. Which means you get it for free.”

“No, no, no. Art shouldn’t be free. Even you and Denny can’t just live off love and air.” Regan looked around until she spotted a sign in the back of Eliza’s Saturday Market booth, saying *Small figurines and charms: \$5*. She pulled a five-dollar bill from her wallet, but her friend refused to take it.

“Why don’t you and Kylie come over tonight and bring a bottle of red, and we’ll call it even?”

Regan opened her mouth to agree, but then she remembered their plans for tonight. “Uh...” She glanced at Ky, who was at the other end of the stall with Denny, holding up a pair of Real Pockets jeans. “Actually, we’ve already got plans.”

“Book club?” Eliza asked.

“No. We, um...” Regan gave herself a mental kick. Why was she suddenly reluctant to admit it, as if it were a private thing she needed to protect? They were doing this to get their friends off their backs, so telling the gang was essential. “We’re going on a date.”

“I knew it!” Eliza threw her girlfriend a triumphant look. “Didn’t I tell you that waitress was flirting with Kylie?”

“Uh, no... I mean, yes, she was totally flirting, but that’s not what I’m trying to say.”

Eliza probably hadn't even heard her since she'd been busy grinning at Denny and getting lost in her eyes. Now she tore herself away and turned back toward Regan.

"Ky and I..." Regan tightened her grip on the tissue-wrapped pizza charm. "We're going on a date."

Even the hustle and bustle of the busy market around them seemed to fade away, and silence descended on them.

Then Eliza laughed. "Jeez, for a moment, I thought you meant you two were dating. Each other." She held up her hands. "I know, I know. You've told us a thousand times. No chemistry. So, you're talking about going on a double date, right?"

"Oh God, no," Regan and Ky said at the same time. "It's not a double date."

"There's nothing wrong with double dates," Eliza said. "Denny and I go out with her sister and Matt all the time."

Regan scrunched up her nose. "No, thanks. No double dates for us. I'm still not over our one and only triple D."

"Triple D?" Eliza asked.

"Double date disaster," Regan and Ky answered in unison.

Ky groaned. "My date went on and on about her root canal for at least an hour."

"And the weirdest thing was that my date seemed totally interested. He hung on her every word. They ended up ditching us before dessert and left together." Regan laughed. "They're probably married and have three kids by now."

"Maybe we should do that as a side gig during summer break: the DDD Matchmaking Agency," Ky said.

They looked at each other, then shook their heads. "Nah."

"So you're going on separate dates?" Eliza asked. "Who are you going out with, Regan? Let me guess...the PE teacher at your school?"

"No." Regan grinned at Ky. "My date is way hotter."

A sound halfway between a laugh, a cough, and strangled choking escaped Ky. The pants she had held up against her hips slid from her grasp and would have ended up on the ground if not for Denny's quick reaction. "You're such a bullshitter, Regan Romano," Ky finally gasped out. "I've met

the PE teacher, remember? I bet she even has a six-pack, while I've got more of a keg!"

Regan reached over and playfully backhanded her across the belly. In her job, Ky had to lift thirty-pound cases of French fries and giant cans of beans all the time, so Regan encountered exactly what she'd known she would: a firm core under just the right amount of cuddly softness. "Nonsense. You look great. Besides, she's got more like a four-pack."

"She showed you her abs?" Ky let out a whistle. "The teachers' lounge is a lot more interesting than the cafeteria. The only four-packs my colleagues are flashing at me are packages of—"

"Wait!" Eliza thrust out one hand so forcefully that even the woman selling sea glass jewelry in the stall next to theirs looked over. "Are you saying...? You two are going on a date...with each other?"

"Don't look so baffled. You're the one who suggested it."

"I did? I mean, right. I did. I just didn't think you were listening." A pleased smile spread over Eliza's face. She let out a cheer and leaned across the table to high-five Denny. "Hey, maybe *we* should open a matchmaking agency! We've got our first successful match right here."

"Whoa!" Regan held up a hand. "You might not want to print your business cards yet. I said we're going on one date, not renting a U-Haul. Think of it as a science experiment. We're doing it to prove that there's no potential for a chemical reaction between us."

Eliza's smile turned into a frown. "Science experiment? Jesus, only a chemistry teacher would ever approach dating like that!" She raised her finger at them. "You'd better give this a real shot, or we'll keep badgering you for the next fifty years."

"Okay, okay," Ky said. "We'll even do the candlelight thing. Happy now?"

"Depends." Eliza sent Regan a questioning look. "Where are you taking Kylie?"

Apparently, Regan had been chosen as the head of Operation No-Chemistry Date. But it had been some time since she'd last wine and dined someone, and The Country Cat—the restaurant where their triple D had taken place—hadn't fared any better than that date and had closed a couple of years ago. "I don't know. I thought we'd have dinner at The Observatory."

“For a date?” Eliza shook her head. “The food is great, but it’s too noisy for intimate convos.”

The thought of Ky gazing deeply into her eyes while she whispered words of adoration caused a strange, unsettling feeling in the pit of Regan’s stomach. Only because it was so absurd, right?

A wrinkle formed above Ky’s eyebrow. Finally, it smoothed out, and she shrugged. “We’ll play it by ear. The setting doesn’t matter; the person you’re with does.” She made it sound like a teasing remark, but the look in her eyes was sincere.

“True,” Regan said. Their last few nights out had been get-togethers with the entire gang, and while she always enjoyed those, she was looking forward to spending tonight with just Ky.

Two women strolled up to the booth. One of them pointed at the banner hanging over Denny’s side of the stall. “Holy denim! Women’s pants with real pockets? Where do I sign up?”

Denny’s cheeks turned crimson, but she smiled at the enthusiastic reaction. “Right here.”

Regan slid her arm through Ky’s. “Come on. Let’s give the paying customers some space and go get some empanadas to tide us over until tonight.”

As they walked away, waving to their friends, Ky exhaled. “Phew. Saved by the customer.” She tugged Regan toward the line in front of PDX Empanadas. “You know you don’t really have to take me anywhere tonight, right? I mean, it’s not like either of us makes a lot of money. We can order pizza and—”

“No, no, no. We’re going to dinner, my treat.” As Regan slid the pizza charm into her pocket, an idea for the perfect dinner spot came to her. “You know what? Let’s drive down to Lake O. I know this lovely little Italian restaurant right on the lake.”

“Ha! Your treat, my ass!” Ky gave her a playful bump with her shoulder. “Your parents own the place, and they act like we’re insulting them any time one of us tries to pay.”

Regan stepped slightly out of line so she could study Ky’s face. “I’m not just being cheap. We haven’t seen them in a while, and Mom has started a campaign in our WhatsApp family group to get me to bring you down for a visit.”

“I know. She added me to the group, in case you forgot. I’m just wise enough to rarely speak up so no one remembers my presence.”

“Oh, we remember, believe me. We just let you think you’re flying under the radar so we can gang up on you when you least expect it.” Regan let her grin fade away. “If you’d rather go somewhere else...”

“No,” Ky said immediately. “I’d love to see them. I kinda miss, uh, your dad’s pizza.” She regarded Regan with a straight face.

That serious demeanor might trick anyone else, but Regan knew a softie hid beneath Ky’s tough exterior. She dug her fingers into Ky’s sides, making her let out a startled squeak. “The pizza. That’s what you miss. Sure.”

“What can I say? It’s really, really good pizza.”

It was. For the first time in ages, Regan was looking forward to a date—even if the only chemistry happening would be the yeast in the pizza dough breaking down the sugar into carbon dioxide and ethanol.

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CHEMISTRY LESSONS

BY JAE

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