

1 THE BOY I'M NOT AT ALL COMPLETELY CRAZY ABOUT

I don't look at him. I don't need to; I know what he looks like. Instead, I focus my eyes on the finished worksheet in front of me and let my other senses wander. He smells like he just had gym, but in a good way, like he just got out of a cold shower—with a pine tree in it, and maybe a river. Something definitely smells like a river—like he wrestled a bear in a forest, built a fire, and went for a swim.

He grunts, and I almost look at him. Out of the corner of my eye, I make out movement. He erases something on his worksheet and readjusts how he's sitting. I still don't look at him. His brown eyes, dark hair, dark skin, square teeth, rocks-for-arms, little bump of a nose—I look at none of it.

Mrs. Diefenbacher doesn't allow us to have our phones out in class, limiting my ability to distract myself from him. I'd pull my book out and read it, but nothing says, "Don't ever, ever, EVER talk to me," like pulling out a book. Unless you actually don't want people to talk to you, then it works in reverse, but I'm running out of things to act interested in. I've spent as much time as possible pretending that my worksheet isn't done. I look around the room, hoping to find something novel, but it's like every other math class: grayish-blue linoleum floor, pro-mathematical-propaganda posters on the walls, and darkly tinted, large windows keep out any threat of natural light. We're even on the low-traffic side of the building, so there isn't much hope for a passerby. I could busy myself, and maybe draw his attention, by taking off

my sweatshirt, but it's so cold. It's never warm before noon in Goleta, even in May. Maybe I'll just look at him for a second. No! No—because that one time I did that, and at like, the exact same time he looked up, and it was the most awkward thing ever. I can't let that happen again—not a third time. And it's not like I need to check in on him. I'm sure he's still there in his Lakers jersey and dark-blue jean shorts. I can picture him in my head, something I do a lot when I'm not in math class; I don't need to look at him.

“Jolene?”

I look at him. Even across the table, I have to tilt my head up to meet his eyes.

“Hm?” is my brilliant response.

“Are you finished?”

I glance at my worksheet to check. Yep. Still done. “Nearly.”

Mrs. Diefenbacher has divided our class into small round tables. Our tables are our groups. She's big on group work, which in a math setting, or, to be fair, in any school setting, I hate. I hate the dynamics of it all: the power trips, the egos, the tangents, the wondering if this group is going to function or fail, or in either case suck. But Mrs. Diefenbacher, in typical math teacher fashion, seems to take pride in her ability to make us suffer. So, nearly every project is a group project. Every quiz is a group quiz. Every device of teenage torture is a group device of teenage torture.

“Did you get sixteen for number nineteen?” His eyes meet mine.

I adjust my glasses and try to focus on the problem on my paper. How on this green Earth did he get

sixteen? But how to break his mistake to him? He's way too hot to tell him he's wrong. I certainly don't want him to think that I think I'm smarter than him, even though—sixteen...

"No," I say. I try to sound like it's not a big deal, like it's maybe even funny. "No, I did not..."

"What did you get?" He scratches his upper lip.

One of our group mates, Danny, who balances his skateboard on his knee, has green hair, and often needs a bit of assistance with assignments, glances at us, abandoning the question he's on, ready to record my answer.

"Ninety," I say, still prepping up the tone at the end, almost like a question, as if I could be wrong.

"Ninety?" He completely says it like a question and erases his "sixteen."

Danny slouches back in his seat, not erasing his answer. Even he got it right.

"It's a vertical angle." I add another layer of softness to my voice. Anyone could make the mistake he did—my tone suggests. "So, it's the same as the other side..."

"I spent five minutes using fancy math, trying to solve this thing, and you solve it by looking at it." Amused astonishment fills Matt's low, deep, dream-fuel voice, the kind of warm voice you could sink into up to your neck.

"You would have gotten it..." I say, as if there's no chance in the world he wasn't seconds away from figuring it out. Even though—I ask you...

He writes in the new answer. "What would I do without you?"

My face grows hotter than the surface of the sun. I worry it shows or that I'm going to ignite and burn down the entire school. Danny would like that if he, you know, didn't die in the process.

Of course, Matt just means what he said in a friendly, math kind of way, but come on. He chose these exact words: "What would I do without you?" He's gotta know the connotations in there and the power they wield—he's a teenager. So, we're left with why. Why did he choose these words? As far as I can tell, there are only two reasons a high school boy would say these eight words in this succession. Either he, one, is leaving me a subtle clue—a peek through the window into the deep chasm of his undying love for me, or two, is an insincere flirt.

There's, of course, the third option, that he just plain and simply sucks at math and would literally fail without me, but I think we can safely disregard that. No one worries about their math fate enough to vocalize it.

After a moment, he looks up from his paper, leans back in his chair and spins his pencil around his fingers. His worksheet's finished. He must have gone back to double-check some of his answers, and good thing, too—honestly...

I feel his eyes on me, so I pretend to go over my work. There's a problem I'm not sure of, but I don't ask anyone. The fourth kid at our table, the smart kid, is notoriously quiet and speaks only in mouse. He wouldn't give me an answer, not in our human tongue. Danny, even if he knew the answer, I couldn't ask him instead of Matt, it would send the wrong signals, but if

I ask Matt he might think less of me, and not know, but I can't concentrate on fixing any of my mistakes either—there are only five more minutes left of class, and then he'll be out of my life forever. Well, sort of, and maybe.

Tonight I find out whether I got accepted into L'Institut du Ballet de Paris, one of the top ballet schools in Europe. My grandma, or mamie, is on the board and encouraged me to send in an audition video for their next season. If accepted, I'll spend a year in Paris studying ballet, living with my mamie, shopping with my aunt Eloise, and sailing in Cannes with my uncle Cass. But if Matt doesn't ask me to Prom within these last five minutes of class, and if I'm accepted as a student, and spend the next year in Paris, he'll be graduated by the time I get back. I have to tell him I might be in Paris for a year. He has to dump his girlfriend and ask me to Prom, and we're running out of time.

I mean, why wouldn't he ask me out? I'm not horrendous. Dancing ballet has kept me somewhat fit. Braces throughout junior high fixed the teeth growing out the side of my mouth. My complexion isn't flawless, but whose is? I do have a nose, though. It's not huge, but it's there, where people can see it. But I know he at least somewhat likes me. I'm only in his group, at his table, because he invited me. Not that it's done any good so far—for my dating life or my grade. It's maddening, though. Why ask a girl to join you if you don't plan to ask her out and make her yours for all eternity? This is why guys are confusing.

"What are you doing this weekend?" he asks.

In surprise, I lift my head. But he's talking to Danny. I watch them and bite the inside of my cheek.

"Nothing," Danny says in his scratchy voice. "Not going to Prom." He chuckles slightly.

Matt fixes his eyes on me and smiles. "What about you, Stansen?"

Did he only ask Danny to make asking me seem less of a big deal? Is hoping so pathetic?

I swallow a lump that wasn't there a second ago, shake my head, press my lips together, and shrug. I can act like things are no big deals, too.

His eyebrows narrow, as if my lack of an interesting weekend displeases him.

"You're not going to Prom?" he asks.

I look at him for a split second, provide a blip of a smile, and shrug exactly one shoulder.

He frowns. "You don't know?"

His question makes me feel like a toddler. Of course I should know if I'm going to Prom this weekend. Of course, most people would have a date already. And of course he's already made plans with Caradine. I'm grasping onto air so thin it's anorexic. The only way he'll ask me is if he breaks plans with, and breaks up with, Caradine—Caradine, who is gorgeous, popular, rich, cheerleads, competes in, and wins, beauty pageants, and spends her summers in her native country of Italy. She's almost exactly like the heroine in the novel I'm reading right now, *Back From London*, except, obviously, in the book she goes to London. And her name's Ysenia, not Caradine.

"You going with Caradine?" Danny asks Matt.

Matt yawns a little bit. "Yeah. Her friends are making a big deal about it."

"Thought you broke up," Danny says.

"Nah. It didn't stick."

I hadn't heard they broke up. Please, for the love of grapefruit, Danny, ask him more!

"How long did it last?" Danny asks. Heaven be praised.

"About a weekend. Jason said Margot told him Caradine hoped Anthony would ask her out, but Anthony's my friend. You know? He wouldn't ask out my ex-girlfriend. But we're back together now, so..."

"You took her back after that?" Danny asks.

Matt shrugs, turns to me. "I thought you'd be going."

I'm worried, thrilled, and confused all at the same time. Worried he might have asked me if he didn't think I was going, thrilled he thinks a guy would have asked me, and confused why he would think that.

"You did?" I ask.

"You're a weird girl, Stansen."

What? How does not going to Prom make me weird? Now I'm a little offended. Worried, thrilled, confused and offended—and still hopeful. Maybe now that he knows I'm not going, he'll ask me, and dump Caradine.

If he doesn't, I'm not sure where to go from there. I guess France. Last year, Aunt Eloise and Mamie invited my sister Mary to join them in France for the summer. When Mary had gone, she was scrawny and weird-looking. When she came back, she was gorgeous. She had just a few months of Aunt Eloise's restyling, and it changed her entire look. People

underestimate the power of a good haircut. That—plus puberty and growing two bra sizes—goes a long way. She came back and went from kind of popular to JV cheer co-captain and sophomore class treasurer.

But he's not saying anything. He now knows I don't have a date, and he's still not asking me. Maybe I should tell him he might not get another chance. I might not be here next year. If he ever wants to go to prom with me, this could be it.

"I actually find out this weekend whether or not I'm going to study a year abroad in Paris. I'm one of the finalists for this ballet school, and if I get in, then I might stay there for at least a year, maybe longer..."

I feel my chest tighten. This is it. His response is everything.

He falls to the ground and clings to my leg.

"No!" he screams and wails. "You can't go! I'll never see you again!" We grow old and die on the same day in each other's arms. The End. Story over. Why are you still reading? Fine, but that's how it would go if my life was the ending of the last book I finished, *Timeless Love*, where Charlotte and Nicolas were with other people, but secretly liked each other their entire lives, only to find out in their thirties that they were meant for each other—after their spouses died of the plague.

That's not what happens. What he really does is, he gets quiet, looks at the table, sniffs, and congratulates me.

"You must be a really good dancer," he has the nerve to say.

He rubs his neck and picks up the pencil he had stopped spinning. He looks like he's about to say

something else when the fourth kid in our group—Tim, the smart kid, at least I think that’s his name, pushes his worksheet toward us and ruins it.

Matt and I look at each other, confused—oh! He must have finished checking and rechecking his work. Matt takes the paper and places it between us while Danny leans over for access.

“So, you’re not going to Prom, but you might go to France?” Matt erases an answer and fills in Tim’s right one.

“Well, if I go, I’ll be invited.” I instantly regret saying it. He might misunderstand and think I’m talking about Prom when I’m talking about France. I don’t want him to think I’m fishing for an invite. “To France, I mean.” But that’s not wholly true, because whether or not I go to the prom depends also on if a junior or senior—i.e.: him—invites me. So, I try to clear that up without putting bait on a line. “Or Prom, but I’ve kind of accepted—” Don’t admit defeat, you idiot! “It’d be a little late. Not that I wouldn’t...” Someone stop me. Hit me with a bat or something, anything to make me shut up.

“What about the rest of your weekend? No plans?” He looks up at the last part, then back at Tim’s paper. Why is he so curious about my weekend? Is he hoping I ask him about the rest of his? I don’t want to hear about his after prom plans. Oh, heck no. But am I obligated to ask now? Ugh.

“Ballet, church.” I brace myself. “You?” I ask dutifully, achieving sainthood in doing so—if there’s any justice in the world.

“Turn in your worksheets,” Mrs. Diefenbacher says, interrupting us. I take back my sainthood—Mrs. Diefenbacher should have it.

Without asking, Matt takes all of ours and places them on Saint Diefenbacher’s desk, as our table-mates grab their backpacks and wait by the door. I wait for Matt. He returns and lifts his backpack onto his shoulders with a look I can’t place.

“So, we might not be in the same math class next year?” he asks.

“I mean, not unless you take math through a study-abroad online program...” I’m not sure how I’ll keep up with my schoolwork while in France, but I’m sure it’ll be something like that.

“I don’t like it,” he says as I throw my backpack on.

“I probably won’t get in,” I say.

“Yes, you will.” He says it as though he’s the expert on how well I dance even though I’m pretty sure he’s never seen a ballet in his life, let alone one of mine. “How am I supposed to survive math without you?”

“You’ll still have Danny and... Tim?” His name’s either Tim or it rhymes with Tim. There’s a chance I’m thinking of a time when someone called him, “him...”

“Yes.” Matt places a hand over his chest and gazes at the ceiling sentimentally. “I’ll always have them.”

I can’t decide whether I should join him and flick a fake tear out of my eye, and risk looking more dorky than I already do, or laugh and risk being an audience-only contributor. Which one is something a fun girl would do, a girl you’d like to be your girlfriend? The time has passed, and if I did either, it would be

awkward, so I do nothing as we make our way toward the door where the rest of the class has gathered.

"I mean, even if I get in, there's a chance I might not take it," I say to the ground.

He stops walking and turns the full force of his unlawfully handsome face to me.

I'm paralyzed. This is it. Make or break. Do or die. He has seconds to confess his love to me and ask me to Prom. Tell me you love me, Matt. Say it. Say it!

"Why wouldn't you take it?" he asks. His eyes are big and soft, genuine and curious.

I suffer from internal sighing. It's not fair that I have to be the one to say I like him first. He's putting it all on me when I'm supposed to be putting it all on him. It's asking too much. It's asking me to have courage I don't have. I don't even know what to do. Do I admit everything and say, "Honestly, Matt, it's 100 percent dependent on you. I know that's pathetic because you're dating someone else, but I literally will not leave this country if you want me to stay"? Is that even true? Can I hint at it and see where it goes? See if he picks up on it—I give a little—he gives a little until we both solidly understand each other and can stop playing these stupid games?

"Well, it's a lot of time away from..." I trail off, leaving him to fill in the blanks for once.

"Yeah," he says. "But you'd be crazy to pass that up. I don't think I would for anything."

I feel like there's nothing inside of me. All my guts, bones, and organs have been scooped out, like a Jack-o'-lantern. Essentially, he wouldn't give up a year in Paris for me, and wouldn't expect me to either. It's my

answer. It's what I expected, deep down, but realizing your life isn't the ending of a young adult romance novel still hurts. A blow is a blow. My mouth gapes, and I can't stop blinking. I reel it in and speak to his chest instead of his face. Or I almost speak. Nothing comes out. I shrug, take off my glasses in case we have an "Oh! She's cute without her glasses" moment, and try speaking again.

"Maybe I'm just scared."

I glance up into his eyes. There's warmth and a soft smile.

"Of what? France should be scared of you." He scrunches up his features. "I mean that in a nice way. They don't know what they've got coming."

The sides of my lips slightly rise. At least it's a complimentary decimation of my entire being.